

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2009

Prophecy and hope

The Community as sign of prophecy and hope
Sister Regina Bechtel, Sister of Charity, New York
Motherhouse, 3rd June 2009

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SISTER REGINA BECHTLE, SISTER OF CHARITY, NEW YORK*“I will pour out my Spirit upon you”***The Community as a
sign of prophecy and hope**Motherhouse, 3rd June 2009**INTRODUCTION**

I am deeply honoured and grateful to be invited to your General Assembly, to be with you and with God at this sacred moment in the life of your Company. I bring with me the loving prayers and blessings and good wishes of my own Sisters of Charity of New York, and of the entire Sisters of Charity Federation – 12 Congregations based in the U.S. and Canada, who serve in more than 30 countries. Our 4,000 vowed women and 700 lay associates share with you the Vincentian spirit and mission of Charity.

Last Sunday – Pentecost – we heard that stirring reading from Acts, in which the Spirit fills the assembled company of believers and sends them out to preach the Good News in foreign tongues. Just after this, Peter stands up to address the crowd. These preachers are not drunk, Peter says, as he quotes the prophet Joel to interpret the meaning of this strange happening. No, he says, this is a sign that God is doing something new in our midst. This is a sign that the Messiah, the Christ, God’s anointed one, has come among us! God’s promises have indeed been fulfilled.¹ Look, see, says Peter, as Joel did before him, God is pouring out the Spirit upon **all** people. God is creating a beloved community. The time of God’s *shalom* has come, the time of harmony, of justice, of right relationships, the time when all will share in God’s abundance. The young will see visions and the elders will dream. It is a time for prophecy, a time for hope.

Here in this room, I see Charity alive and embodied – in you, and in all the poor whom you serve, and whose burdens you carry with you wherever you go. I feel the Spirit alive among you! I can sense your energy, even after 3 weeks of meetings! Your General Assembly is taking place within a vast field of Spirit-power, of energy. It is God’s energy, moving in and around you, transforming you, re-shaping you. It is the energy of God’s Spirit. It is the energy of the Charity of Christ, impelling you. I trust that it is your deep desire to be in harmony with this movement of Spirit-energy, and not to block it.

I imagine that these days of your General Assembly have been a rich experience of community (not without its challenges, I’m sure). Together, almost 200 of you, from every part of our planet, have been discerning where God’s energy is

¹ Cf. Acts 2; Joel 3:1

directing you, where the Charity of Christ is urging you on. You have been living in the light of prophecy and hope, and that in itself is a sign for the church and the world.

Today, you have asked me to reflect with you on “Community as a Sign of Prophecy and Hope.” In making the following observations, I want to support and affirm your own conviction that:

**now and everywhere,
in a world that is starving for connectedness and communion,
the Charity of Christ crucified invites you,
to accept the grace of community with renewed passion and purpose.**

Love - Love incarnate, Love in flesh and blood - invites you to embrace community, and the many levels on which you live it, as a sign of prophecy and hope.

1. EXPLANATION OF TERMS USED

Let me first say a bit about my understanding of the key words in the title of this presentation – “community, prophecy, and hope”:

The word “Community” speaks to me of places of belonging, places where God’s loving compassion becomes visible. I believe that we are called to live community on many levels.

There is the local community, the Sisters with whom we live, our “primary place of belonging” (C.34). But community is a much wider concept than that.

There is the larger community of the congregations to which we belong, and the community that is our Church.

There is the community that we find in our ministry – the colleagues who serve with us, the poor whom we serve, the streets of the city or village.

There is the parish or church community where we worship; the civic community of our village, city, state, department, or country; the global community of which we are all members, especially in a world connected by computers. We are truly “citizens of the world,” as St. Elizabeth Ann Seton said prophetically, 200 years ago.

And there is the fertile and fragile community of our planet Earth, in which we humans are learning to find our place and live in interdependence with all forms of life. Because we participate in all of these communities, I invite you to think about all of them as you listen to my reflections today.

2 The word “PROPHECY”-

Scripture scholars tell us that there are two types of prophets:
people who “tell it like it is,” who point out people’s unfaithfulness to God’s covenant and who challenge them to repentance; and

those who “tell it like it could be,” who are “called to criticise in God’s name because...[their] heart loves what God loves and [their] imagination sees how things should come to pass.”

I believe that St. Vincent and St. Louise were prophets in both these ways, and they used their prophetic gifts well, with rich and the poor people alike.

I would describe a prophet as one who has met God intimately and who, in the fire of that encounter, knows who she is and who she is not. As a passionate friend of God, the prophet embodies for others the memory of their true selves, the beloved ones that God created them to be.

From this place of heart-knowing, the prophet looks with contemplative presence at the reality of their time and place in history, and seeks to discern the new thing that God is doing, even when things seem to be falling apart. The prophet offers new vision where others can see only darkness, new hope where others can see only loss. She offers an alternative reading of reality and a fresh way of seeing and designating things. She awakens in others the possibility that there is a way to move beyond the present situation, hopeless though it may seem. The prophet cherishes her roots within her people, her community, her church, her country, but she is free enough to challenge them in love, if the Spirit calls her to do so. ²

3 “HOPE”

What is **hope**, “the hope that comes with our call”? (Eph 1:17-18)

Pope Benedict XVI gave his second encyclical the title, Spe Salvi (Saved by Hope), 2007). He reminds us that Christian hope, hope in things unseen, saves us both as persons and as community. U.S. President Barack Obama, in his memoir, The Audacity of Hope (2008), would agree with the Pope that hope is the power that moves communities beyond narrowness and individualism to action in service of God and others. ³

What is hope? Ask the disciples in the upper room before Pentecost, as they gathered in community, waiting, praying, believing that the risen Jesus would pour out God’s Spirit upon them. Ask the leper who begged Jesus to heal him, or the woman with the haemorrhage, trusting that she would be cured if she only touched Jesus’ cloak. ⁴

Hope is another name for the “not-yet” place where we hold fast to a promise without yet seeing its fulfilment. (And isn’t that the place where we live most of the time?) Hope opens the door, hope welcomes possibility, hope spurs us on. You see that prophecy and hope go hand in hand.

² Cf. Nancy Schreck, OSF, “The Rock From Which You Were Hewn,” Proceedings of National Conference of Vicars for Religious, 2005; Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination (rev. ed., 2001), Hopeful Imagination (1986). A prophet can “speak truth to power about injustice, thus creating possibilities of resistance and resurrection.” This and the earlier quote in the text are from Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, Friends of God and Prophets (1999), 41.

³ Cf. Maryann Cusimano Love, “The Common Ground,” America, Feb. 16th 2009.

⁴ Cf. Mk 1:40, 5:25

II. ALL OF IT IS GOD'S WORK

Let me begin with a statement – a conviction – that may sound like an ending. It is, but I want to say it at the beginning of my presentation: **Community, Prophecy, Hope: all these are the work of the Spirit.**

I mean the work of breathing life into communities, the work of releasing their energies of prophecy and hope for our world that knows such pain, the work that consumes us.

My Sisters, **God is already there. God is already doing this work in us and around us.** Isn't this good news? God's Spirit has **already** given us the communion we long for. The Spirit of Jesus has **already** unleashed the power of prophecy and the spark of hope, in us and through us and beyond us – and perhaps even in spite of us! Isn't this the message of the great feast of Pentecost that we have just celebrated?

God has already showered us with the Spirit's power. In this post-Easter time, the Scriptures erupt with the story of power – power unleashed, power let loose, power that transforms, overturns, sets free, makes new. Power given, shared, extended to all peoples and all nations. Power that comes from God and returns to God. It is the power of a God in love with all that the Creator Spirit has fashioned.

Our task is to place ourselves at the service of God's desire, to let the Spirit harness our gifts and use them in service of God's great purpose -- and not to get in God's way! God is **already** in the midst of our communities, at all levels of them, inviting us – impelling us – to prophetic ways of living, to hope-filled deeds and words. Can we believe that **Christ is already there** waiting for us?

Our task is to let God's power take over our whole being. Christ, the one prophet, the source of hope who never disappoints, is **already** in the midst of our communities, summoning us to follow him. Can we believe that **Christ is already there**, with power to transform us into prophets and move us into hope?

So we hear the call to live community in a way that frees us to be bearers of prophecy and hope. We glimpse the challenge of being signs of prophecy and hope to the communities to which we belong. And we also remind ourselves that **God is there already**, breathing life into all our communities, releasing their energies of prophecy and hope.

I'd like to move now to the next parts of my talk. In the following three sections, I will be asking several questions.

1. If God's Spirit is already creating prophetic, hope-filled communities, where can we find them? Where should we be looking? ⁵

2. How will we know them? By what signs will we recognise them?

⁵ Here I wish to do something similar to what Pope Benedict XVI did in his encyclical on hope, when he described some concrete "settings" in which we can learn about hope.

3. What practical things could we do to grow as communities of prophecy and hope?

I will end with some reflections on the questions, “How do we measure our progress? How will we know if we have succeeded?”

**Part I:
_WHERE DO WE SEE THE SPIRIT CREATING COMMUNITIES OF
PROPHECY AND HOPE?**

By way of answer, I would like to offer you four examples and four images.

1. THE TRINITY: COMMUNITY AS IMAGE OF GOD’S LIFE (Picture of the Trinity icon)

Let me draw on a familiar image to focus this part of my reflections on community -- the icon of the Trinity by the 15th century Russian artist, Rublev. I suggest to you that this icon gives us a glimpse of the very life of our God, of who God is and how God lives, and that life is a life of **profound communion**. At the very heart of God, in other words, we find **Community**. We find a ceaseless, dynamic movement of giving and receiving, a total self-giving that doesn’t diminish identity but enhances it. The Trinity offers us an example of what we might call ‘mindful mutuality’ in community.

St. Louise, to be sure, never saw this beautiful image of the Trinity, but she truly understood the meaning of the symbol of the Trinity. She understood that you and I are created in the image of a God who is **always in relationship**. She understood that community is our human way of living God’s own life.

In 1655, St. Louise wrote to three Sisters in Warsaw, Poland. She was sending three more to join them in the mission. She reminded them that “...*although you are three persons, you are but one in heart; in the name of the most Holy Trinity..., I beg you to open wide this heart to allow our three sisters to enter into this cordial union...*”⁶

Vincent, too, borrowed this comparison. He wished the Sisters to show such respect for each other that observers could not tell which one was the Sister Servant. In their communities, he wrote, the Sisters “*should be the image of the Most Holy Trinity; and even though they are several, they should form but one heart and one mind.*”⁷

Many people today who write about secular organisations and groups say the same thing, even without using religious language. (I find that a sure sign of the

⁶ Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac, ed. & trans. Louise Sullivan, DC (1991), 478 (hereafter cited as SW).

⁷ Council of June 19th 1647, in Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al, 1-10, 13a & 13b (1997), 13b: 274. Hereafter cited as CCD.

Spirit!) Listen, for example, to a noted counsellor from my country, Margaret Wheatley:

*What gives power its charge, positive or negative, is the quality of relationships. Those who relate through coercion, or from disregard for the other person, create negative energy. Those who relate to others and who see others in all the fulness of their potential, create positive energy. In organisations, then, love is the most potent source of power we have available.*⁸

Because we abide and live immersed in the awesome, fertile, loving mystery of communion which is God's own deepest life, we seek to mirror that life in community – even if faintly. Because we are caught up in God's work of creating, Jesus' work of healing and teaching and reconciling, the Spirit's work of renewing and energising, we seek to mirror that in our ministry.

Gazing on the Trinity, we see that the same 'mindful mutuality' that describes the community of God's inner life marks the way that God relates beyond the Divine self, to creatures like us. Self-giving love within bursts forth in self-giving love to others.

And so it must be for us, too. Our inner life cannot be separated from our external life. Our desire to live in right relationship with ourselves, with others, and with the world that we serve comes from the one wellspring of longing for communion – which is the deepest longing of God's own heart.

St. Louise, as you know so well, gave us the legacy of her **prophetic pragmatism**. She could speak in lofty terms about imitating the life of the Trinity, but then she could draw out the implications in very concrete, practical terms, for example: Sister Marguerite, get rid of your dog! *Ma soeur*, stop leaving the house without telling anyone where you are going! *Mi hermana*, refrain from complaining about your sister behind her back!

As I contemplate this image of the Trinity, I hear our founders saying, "**The quality of your relationships is crucial. Model your life in community on the open and cordial union that you see in the Trinity.**"

Where do we see the Spirit bringing together a community?

II EARTH: THE COMMUNITY OF CREATION (Image of the blue planet)

We spoke of the energy of the Spirit, the energies of Sts. Vincent and Louise, our founders. In our day there are even larger forces, **cosmic** energies, at play, and we are part of them as well. We are called to welcome, discern and find our place within them.

⁸ Margaret Wheatley, quoted in Bennett Sims, Servanthood: Leadership for the Third Millennium (1997)

Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry speak of the “Deep Story” of the universe. Joanna Macy describes this time of transition and transformation as “the Great Turning Point” Whether in our individual bodies or in our life as planetary citizens, whether we are reconfiguring provinces, or harnessing the forces of globalisation, or becoming a world Church, there are cosmic energies we need to be aware of.

What does the Spirit tell us as we contemplate the community of creation? ⁹

First, the creation-community tells us that **everything is connected**. Scientists tell us that inter-being, inter-connection, is the basic song of the universe. Every creature is linked with every other, and each is connected with its environment. Mount Pinatubo erupted in the Philippines, and the temperature of the entire planet dropped. That eruption affected flooding of the Mississippi River in the U.S. and drought in Africa’s Sahel region. Cars in North America emit a high level of carbon dioxide, and polar ice caps melt.

Community is the way things are, the way nature is. We seek to build community because we are in touch with a fundamental dynamic of the universe, from the design of the Mystery who created it. In weaving connections, we seek to live more deeply, more intentionally, how and what we are supposed to be. In religious language, this profound interconnection speaks to us of God’s outpouring generosity and life-giving, boundless charity.

Second, the creation-community tells us that **all life seeks to give life**. One of the purposes of energy in all living things is to seed the future. We live towards a future, and our genetic composition – our very identity - changes to make that possible. For example, over many years, female baboons tend to choose mates who have qualities of tenderness in preference over those who don’t. They choose those who will bring the species forward in a certain way. Everything that lives has been made in such a way that it serves the common good and is best for the survival of the species.

These two principles -- interconnection and commitment to the future of the species, or what we might call “the common good” -- are well expressed in the Earth Charter. You may be familiar with this document, proposed in 2000 and endorsed by more than 4,500 groups worldwide, including many governments (and my own SCNY congregation). Let me read just a few lines from the Preamble to the Earth Charter:

“In the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny....We must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities....Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and all other forms of life .”
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⁹ Creation, according to Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, is “the primordial sacred community that is the fruit of the Spirit.” (“The Banquet of Faith,” address to the 2008 LCWR-CMSM Assembly, <http://www.lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/ejohnson.pdf>, accessed 3/7/09)

¹⁰ <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/> (accessed 3/7/09)

What if we took this seriously, as God's prophetic Word to us in the Company of Charity? I hear creation saying, "**Model your life in community on the dynamics of the universe, where all things are interconnected, and where all things renounce themselves with a view to the future, the common good.**"

Where do we see the Spirit gathering a community?

III.THE POOR: COMMUNITIES WHERE ALL BELONG (Image of Vincent at table).

Those who know how to "do" community best are the poor. I'm sure I don't need to convince you of that fact. Those who have almost nothing are often the most willing to share the little they have with their sisters and brothers. You see that every day in your work among refugees, among those who suffer from HIV/AIDS, among hungry children, among people who live on rubbish heaps, among victims of natural disasters, among the sick, the elderly, the dying.

God's poor often have a clear vision of God's dream: communities where all belong, tables (like the one where Vincent sits with his friends), where all have a place and a voice. Simple, ordinary folk understand well that we are one family. In my country last year there were terrible floods on the mighty Mississippi River. As the waters rose and threatened to engulf the towns all along the river, ordinary people left their small homes and farms to work together and try to shore up the levees.

The poor know their own. Sister Eileen Storey was a member of my congregation who was a brilliant professor of French, a dedicated advocate for peace, a gifted teacher of prayer, and a passionate friend of the poor. She was noted for her simple dress; actually, she would take surplus clothing that others gave away for the poor, and wear it, whether or not it was her size! Sometimes she looked rather strange. One night she was coming home late from teaching a class at the university. As she rode the subway train, she saw a woman with all her belongings wrapped in plastic bags. Assuming that the woman was homeless, Sr. Eileen asked her if she had a place to stay. "Oh, yes, I do," the woman replied. Then she looked at Eileen and asked, with some concern, "But what about you?" Eileen would call that experience "communion".

Julia Esquivel, the Guatemalan poet, writes: "*The eyes of the poor - are two mirrors, we need not be afraid to see ourselves in them.*"

Another one of my sisters is Sister Dorothy Gallant, who works with homeless men and women on the streets of New York City. Sr. Dorothy uses the model of the Latin American base communities. Every week she goes to people who are homeless in 8 city shelters, two drop-in centres and one HIV/AIDS residence. She invites them to come together to pray, to share their faith, to reflect on their life experiences in the light of God's Word, and to learn ways of changing their lives and their society. Sr. Dorothy believes that forming faith communities with people provides them with support, a sense of belonging and safety. The weekly gatherings reach an average of 200 people. The work is carried on by a team of 12 people, a community in ministry, that Sr. Dorothy has formed and empowered. Many of her team members were once

homeless themselves. Sr. Dorothy says very firmly that her role is not to speak for homeless people. “They have their own voice,” she says; “we just help them to find it and use it.”

You could substitute any number of your own Sisters for these examples. In his powerful meditation on the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jean Vanier of L’Arche reminds us:

*We are no different from those we try to serve;
We, too, are broken and wounded like them;
We are truly together as brothers and sisters;
We are a wounded people;
We can love each other, forgive each other and celebrate together our oneness.*¹¹

I hear the poor saying, “**Model your life in community on the freedom of people like us, who have everything to share, because we have nothing left to lose.**”

Where do we see the Spirit gathering a community?

IV THE SCRIPTURES: COMMUNITIES BORN OUT OF CRISIS (Image of the Pentecost community gathered around Mary)

The Scriptures can be understood as a story of the Spirit who gathers communities, over and over again, as signs of prophecy and hope. But notice that this usually happens in times of chaos and crisis! This is what the Scriptures tell us.

- Out of the darkness of the void, the **CREATING SPIRIT** called forth an interdependent and fruitful community of creation
- From a band of poor slaves in Egypt, trapped in their oppression, the **Liberating Spirit** shaped an Exodus **Community of Covenant** with God and with each other.
- At the time of the Exile, stripped of their identity, when God’s promise seemed sterile and the dream had almost died, the **renewing Spirit** gathered together a **community of hope**.
- When the exiles returned home and had to rebuild their lives from nothing, the **sustaining Spirit** reminded them of their deepest identity as a **community of faithfulness** to God and to each other.
- Into the turmoil and poverty of Roman-occupied Palestine, the **befriending Spirit**, through Jesus Christ, incarnated God’s deep desire for a **community where everyone belonged**.
- And after Jesus was killed and this shattered the disciples’ hopes and turned their world upside down, the **empowering Spirit** gave birth to a **community of mission**.

I repeat: it seems to be the Spirit’s style to enter into chaos and crisis and there create community. Allow me to apply this insight to the community we call Church,

¹¹ Jean Vanier, The Broken Body (1988)

“that particular community of disciples who carry forward the presence and mission of Jesus through history.”¹²

In recent years in North America, Africa, and in other countries, the sinful side of our church has been much in the news with instances of sexual abuse by clergy, cover-ups by bishops, and so forth. Often I wrestle with St. Elizabeth Seton’s words (which St. Teresa of Avila spoke, long before her): “Be children of the Church.” We are indeed children of the Church. We are adult daughters of a Mother that is no stranger to abuse, oppression and blindness. At our moment in history, our Mother the church is increasingly broken, divided, polarised, and without credibility. We bear its burdens, but we are not defined by them.

Our very struggles to be and act as a Body, to live in community, are part of our call to be public persons in our church. The primary service that consecrated persons give to the church and to the world, suggests Fr. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, is the witness of life together in community. “Only in this way,” he says, “is the question of the world’s agony answered.”¹³

We know that the church – like us who are its members – is both human and divine. It is called to be a sign of “divine communion turned toward the world,... a community of equal persons related in profound mutuality, pouring out praise of God and care for the world in need.”¹⁴ This hope of ours for the church that we love is not always realised. But we continue to live in hope, trusting that the Spirit who continually creates community out of crisis will re-create our church – and ourselves – in the image of God’s “inclusive and compassionate love.”

I hear the Scriptures calling us to prophecy and hope, saying, “**Model your life in community on the stories of those who trusted that the Spirit brings life out of chaos.**”

Part 2 SIGNS OF A COMMUNITY OF PROPHECY AND HOPE

May I suggest three signs that mark a community filled with the spirit of prophecy and hope. I am sure that you can add many more to this list.

A. Such a community speaks of RECONCILIATION and FORGIVENESS .

You may be aware that the United Nations has declared 2009 the World Year of Reconciliation. I believe this is a particularly crucial sign of community for us who follow the way of Vincent and Louise, those bridge-builders *extraordinaires*.

To keep the door open to those with whom we disagree, to take the first step toward those who have offended us, to stretch out our hand and not turn away from those who have spoken harshly against us, and to do it over and over again, seventy

¹² Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, “The Banquet of Faith,” address to LCWR-CMSM Assembly, 2008

¹³ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “What is Religious Life? – Ask the Scriptures,” Supplement to Doctrine and Life

¹⁴ Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, Quest for the Living God, (2007), 223

times seven, with the generosity of forgiveness – these are Spirit-filled gestures. They are actions as prophetic as casting out *demons*.¹⁵

It is also a prophetic act when we bring to light the places where people are practising forgiveness.

For example: two and a half years ago, in October, 2006, in a small rural town in the state of Pennsylvania in my country, a disturbed man burst into a schoolhouse in an Amish town, killed five young girls and shot five others, then killed himself. The world watched in wonder as the families forgave this man who took their daughters from them. Members of the Amish community went to his burial service. A year later, the whole community donated money to the killer's widow and her three young children. The painful scars still remain among the Amish, but they give profound witness to the power of a forgiving community.

A second example: Groups of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land, have been meeting for years, teaching peaceful conflict resolution to children, learning to work out their differences with words, not guns.

Community as an agent of reconciliation and a school of forgiveness -- is this not a prophetic sign for our world and our church, so divided and so polarised?

II. Such a community BEFRIENDS DIVERSITY.

Community may also be our place of martyrdom! Often we experience it as the hardest aspect of our life. It may be easy to see the face of Christ in our neighbour who is poor, but, no matter how young or old we are, it is always harder to see Christ wearing the disguise of the companion at our elbow -- disagreeable, annoying, opinionated, too rigid, too free, so different from me! And yet, our baptism into Christ and our vocation in the Company of Charity call us to befriend those who are different from ourselves, whether they are poor persons on the streets or our Sisters in community. Why? Because in welcoming the other (small “o”) we welcome the Other (capital “O”).

The Spirit’s movement is always from “I” to “we,” from isolation and self-sufficiency to communion, inclusiveness, interdependence and mutuality. The current President of the UN General Assembly said in an interview last September, “We have to move together from the logic of ‘I and mine’ to the logic of ‘we and ours.’ The whole of life is about this transition from selfishness to love.”¹⁶

We long for this transition, this movement from “I” to “we,” but we also resist it strongly, don’t we? We resist it because it feels like losing something precious: our

¹⁵ In one of her meditations, St. Elizabeth Seton wrote: “*God commands us to love one another even with all our faults – say nothing, do nothing then to pain any one, carry those who give you pain in your heart before God, and think of their virtues instead of their faults.*” Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings, ed. Regina Bechtle, SC and Judith Metz, SC; mss. ed., Ellin M. Kelly, 4 vols. (2000-2006), IIIa: 386. Hereafter cited as CW.

¹⁶ Miguel d’Escoto, MM, quoted in America, Sept. 8th 2008, p. 21

very selves. It may be hard for each of us, for each local community, to admit that we aren't self-sufficient, that we don't have all the answers ourselves.

The paradox is that in giving over, handing over who I am and what I most cherish, I find an even deeper identity in the communion of persons, the community "called and assembled" for mission by the God of Charity. When we give, we make space to receive, so as to give even more. What feels at first like loss becomes gain, treasure beyond price, abundance beyond imagining.

All our communities are grappling with the call to look beyond ourselves, to be inclusive, to embrace diversity. A young Dominican theologian friend of mine says, "God, the source of all our unity, delights in diversity. Then why do we have so much trouble with it?"¹⁷

Yet we know and believe, in theory at least, that the actions of any one of us affect the other, that we need the gifts of one another, that there is nothing we can do alone. None of us alone has the courage or strength to pursue our longing for God. This is what we proclaim by our life in community.

A community filled with the spirit of prophecy and hope welcomes diverse ways of living community. Vincent and Louise provided different rules for Sisters in different ministries. So too, the different circumstances of our ministries, and the different cultures in which the charism of Charity takes root, will affect the way we live community. There is no one perfect or ideal way.

But to befriend diversity among us does not mean that we should accept everything uncritically. You and I are well aware that not every aspect of culture is healthy. Therefore, our communities may need to be prophetic in challenging these oppressive or narrow aspects, for example, the divisive individualism that is the norm in some societies, or the stifling conformity that marks others, or the fear of questioning the status quo in other places.

Is dealing with diversity challenging? I don't have to tell you that it is. Look around this room. The unity of mind and heart that our holy founders praised doesn't come without hard work and lots of bumps and scrapes! This is especially true for your Company, which embraces over 90 countries. Surely, you could write a book on the way that globalisation puts new strains on people's capacities for openness, reverent listening, deep curiosity, and yes, the capacities of giving and receiving forgiveness – on our ability to deal with diversity.

C. Such a community is able to be TRANSPARENT AND VULNERABLE.

What does it mean to be transparent? It may mean making private pain a public issue, challenging injustice in the service of the poor, the 1.2 billion of our sisters and brothers who live on less than \$1 a day.

¹⁷ Personal conversation with Sr. Colleen Mallon, OP

Transparency may also mean allowing others to glimpse our personal and communal areas of poverty and brokenness.

Your Constitutions call you to “*live together as friends who love one another deeply, to talk, to plan together so that your common energies may be channelled in creative, practical service of the poor.*” Community invites you into a place where you are secure enough in your love to let yourselves be vulnerable to each other.¹⁸

Part 3. **PRACTISING PROPHECY AND HOPE:** **SOME PRACTICAL WAYS OF DOING THIS**

How do we practise prophecy? How do we practise hope? How do we foster communities as signs of prophecy and hope? Let me offer a few simple suggestions that are by no means original. In them, you will hear the echoes of our founders’ voices, I am sure.

I. LISTEN

Listen to each other’s stories and the story of those you serve. The voices of the poor, of Earth, of women and children, are usually the ones least heard. Listening is certainly a difficult discipline, but we know how healing it is when someone takes time to listen to our story.

In your homes and communities, receive the daily bread of each other’s lives, and become the sacred story that is Eucharist. Communal conversations, shared with **simplicity**, can bring out the best in us.

Listen to the wisdom of the elders among you, those who carry the community’s memory and story, and its **hope** for future generations. Listen to the enthusiasm and vision of the young among you. Their dreams carry the seeds of **prophecy**.

Each story that you listen to is a sacred story. So, practise being a **community of listening**, and draw upon the virtue, the power, **of simplicity**.

II LEARN

Try to learn more than you teach, especially from those whom you find different or difficult.

I know that I am not self-sufficient. I do not know all truth. I do not have all the answers. Neither does my community, my country, my church. It takes deep **humility** to admit this. Differences are meant to teach us. Is this not a prophetic message -- that we need each other more than we can imagine?

¹⁸ Excerpt, letter of Robert Maloney, CM & Sr. Evelyne Franc, DC, introducing new Constitutions, 2004; cf. Iain Matthew, *The Impact of God*, (1995), 73-74.

What have you been learning from each other these days? How are you being called beyond the boundaries of province, of nation, of culture, of language? There are provinces suffering diminishment; what do they have to teach those provinces that are experiencing growth and abundance? What wisdom can you learn from each other?

So, practise being a **community of learning**, and draw upon the virtue, the power, of **humility**.

III.LET GO

Let go of hurt, suspicion, anger, annoyance, complaining. Let go of all the stuff of daily living that can drain and suffocate us. We are human; we expect so much of ourselves and of each other. Yet, we disappoint each other, a thousand times a day. We fall short of what we want to be, and others fall short of what we wish they would be. What do we do with that?

Can we admit our mistakes, can we allow each other to make mistakes, can we ask for and give forgiveness? We can be very harsh on each other in community, can't we? Maybe it's because we can't bear the fact that we aren't always the perfect, thoughtful, peaceful, generous, loving persons we would like to be. Maybe seeing the less-than-perfect ways of each other reminds us uncomfortably of our own. And, because we can't embrace the wounded parts of ourselves with compassion, we judge ourselves harshly, and it ripples out to others.

St. Louise can teach us much about accepting our own failings and letting go of judging others. How often she would write to the Sisters disarmingly: "*Admonishing you of your faults has brought my own before my eyes.*"¹⁹

Community life takes the rough edges off, a wise woman once said to me. It wears us smooth, if we let it, if we allow God to work on us through those with whom we live.

To stand in the truth of who I am before God is to know that my life is bound up with yours. The words of Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara stir my soul: "*We are food and drink for one another. We are one another's body and blood. We are one another's salvation.*"²⁰ What if we truly believed that we are one Body – that we are one another's salvation?

Perhaps that awareness might help us look at our lack of charity, whatever form it takes – coldness, hypercriticism, belittling, unwillingness to speak the truth in love, inability to forgive or ask for forgiveness. Imagine if we chose to replace all the negative energy these attitudes generate, with the positive energy – the **power** of God's love!

So, practise being a **community of letting go**, and draw upon the virtue, the power, of **CHARITY**.

¹⁹ Letter to Srs. Barbe Angiboust & Louise Ganset, 26th October 1639, SW, 20

²⁰ Longing for Running Water (1999)

IV LIVE IN THE PLACE OF “BOTH-AND”

The place of balancing “BOTH-AND” is truly a place of grace for the Vincentian family: **and** is a key Vincentian word.²¹ Our founders were people who lived at the extremes and chose to hold them together. They believed that real life happens in the in-between, in the connections. They built a bridge between places that we would consider opposites:

Rich and poor	Action and prayer
Solitude and community	Head and heart
Now and not-yet	Charity and justice
Service that is material and spiritual	

St. Vincent, St. Louise, St. Elizabeth Seton, Blessed Frederic Ozanam, Blessed Rosalie Rendu – they were driven by one passion, one love: love of God **and** love of neighbour. They knew, as Jesus did, that there was only one commandment that united both of these great loves. They found their energy in the “**both-and**”.

And they knew that we lose our sense of balance when we resist the work of integration and opt for one side to the exclusion of the other. They understood that it is the work of a lifetime to remain in the middle, to live inside the dilemmas we face every day. Like them, we constantly have to struggle to keep connected, to live a life that is integrated, whole, and holy, and not simply to rest on either end.

Is it easy to live in this place of “both-and”? No, indeed! For, as the Franciscan Richard Rohr reminds us, “*When you try to hold two sides of anything, in a ‘both-and’ stance, you end up like the crucified Jesus.*” But he also tells us that this stance of holding opposites together describes a key aspect of what it means to be contemplatives today.²²

So, practise being **a community of both-and**, and draw upon the virtue, the power, of **CONTEMPLATION**.

The last practice I would suggest is:

V.LET YOURSELVES DREAM – TOGETHER

We need community to nurture the gifts of hope and prophecy. As Dom Helder Camara wrote: “*When we are dreaming alone, it is only a dream. When we are dreaming with others, it is the beginning of reality.*”

“*Prophetic action,*” says Precious Blood Sister Mary Whited, “*will flow out of dreaming together about the mission of Jesus....And dreaming together is especially needed in places where people have forgotten how to dream....We need one another to nurture our dreams. Even more, God is in need of our dreaming together.*” This

²¹ Cf. Hugh O’Donnell, C.M., “Vincentian Discernment,” *Vincentian Heritage* 15, 1

²² Richard Rohr, OFM, “On This Holy Mountain,” address to 2008 LCWR-CMSM Assembly

too is a prophetic role, to “*keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring up and proposing future alternatives.*”²³

We need each other’s wisdom. We need each other’s good example, even the example of our struggle to be faithful to the demands of our life. We need and pledge each other our mutual support, as we commit ourselves to be there for each other, in good times and in hard times. When the early Sisters dreamed together, St. Vincent imagined that it was like a blazing bonfire: “*Each Sister shared her thoughts sincerely,*” he said, “*and it seemed to me that they were like sparks igniting a huge fire—like one candle that was lighting the others.*”²⁴

So, practise being a **community of dreamers**, and draw upon the power of **each other’s sparks to light the huge fire of charity.**

CONCLUSION:

Prophecy and hope are powers, energies, strengths, that the Spirit stirs to life in us. Great Spirit-energies don’t just happen. They take time to grow; they must be tended with love and wisdom. The topic that I was asked to address suggests to me that you believe **community is the place where the energies of prophecy and hope are born. Community is the place where prophecy and hope find a home, where they are nurtured and encouraged.**

At this Pentecost time, we are privileged to see the Creator Spirit poured out anew upon all people. In your days of Assembly, you have come to experience, with renewed certainty, the beloved community, the time of *shalom*, that God is creating. As you prepare to gather the fruits of your time together, you desire to embody prophecy and hope in all the communities to which you belong.

And how will you – we – know if we have succeeded? How will we know if our communities truly become signs of prophecy and hope for all to see? How will we know if they burn with a fire that all can recognise as kindled by the Gospel?

St. Vincent asks the question in this way: “*And where do you think God dwells on earth?*” His answer speaks to us of community, for he says: “*In hearts filled with charity and Companies that are always united.*”²⁵

How will we know if we have succeeded? Perhaps we will never know. As the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, most of our ancestors in faith died without enjoying the fulfilment of God’s promise. “*They did not receive what had been promised but saw it and greeted it from afar.*” (Heb. 11)

After all, we follow One who ended his life in humiliation, whose followers fled, whose mission seemed to crash and burn in his face. By all human benchmarks, Jesus Christ was a total failure.

²³ Mary Whited, CPPS, in *At the Edge of Tomorrow*, LCWR, 2008; Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (2001), 40.

²⁴ Conference on Holy Communion, 22nd January 1646, *CCD*, 9:186

²⁵ Conference on Cordial Respect, 1st January 1644, *CCD*, 9:125

Except for the God who did not let death have the last word, in Jesus' life and in ours. Except for that unpredictable Spirit, that Pentecost energy of wind and flame, the Spirit that Jesus' total self-surrender released upon the world, initiating a new creation.

How will we know if we have succeeded? Perhaps when we have experienced the cost of surrendering ourselves as signs of prophecy and hope. Perhaps we will know if we have succeeded when we embrace the same fate as the poor we serve, the same fate as the Crucified One whom we follow.

Perhaps we will know by the simplest – and most difficult – marker of all: if others look at us and marvel, “See how they love one another.” Our Vincentian companions in the communion of saints stand with us, cheering us on in our audacious hope.

With St. Louise, let us open ourselves to the transforming light of hope, the *lumière*, that God's Spirit kindles in us this Pentecost.

With Blessed Rosalie Rendu and Blessed Frederic Ozanam, let us foster community as reconcilers, bridge-builders, “both-and” people.

With St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, let us not fear to be vulnerable and tender with each other.

With St. Vincent, let us go to the school of the poor to learn about community, about prophecy and hope.

“Love invites, love invents, love intensifies, love impels!” In the spirit of all of our holy founders and friends, let us recommit ourselves to a love that invites, that invents, that intensifies, that impels us ²⁶ to create communities of belonging, communities of prophecy and hope, wherever we are sent. And so, the Spirit will release, through us, the energy of affective and effective love – the energy that is our heritage and our calling - upon our world.

Sisters, our loving God has called and assembled us as Filles de la Charité, Hijas de la Caridad, Figlie della Carità, Filhas da Caridade, Siostry Miłosierdzia, Daughters and Sisters of Charity. With you, I pray that that same God, giver of all gifts, may make us faithful friends of the poor, servants of community, and prophets of the great hope to which we and our communities are called, now and everywhere!

Sister Regina BECHTLE
New York Sister of Charity

²⁶ This mantra was composed and sung for the 2008 meeting of the Sisters of Charity Federation Leadership, in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.

INTER-ASSEMBLIES DOCUMENT 2009-2015***Open to the Transforming Spirit*****Introduction**

My dear Sisters,

May the Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be always with us!

The pressing appeal launched by the 2009 General Assembly, for us to be open to the transforming Spirit, wellspring of prophecy and hope, invites us to commit ourselves with a new impetus and courage on the path that will take us through the next six years.

This Inter-Assemblies Document *Open to the Transforming Spirit* was developed through a process of prayerful reflection, patient work, and constructive dialogue that engaged the members of the Assembly as they focused on the four themes proposed for study by this Assembly. An Editing Commission of three Sisters brought together the underlying intuitions, points of convergence, appeals and most significant orientations to create a draft document that was approved by the Assembly.

Using this draft as a base, the Editing Commission continued its work in collaboration with the Coordination Commission and the General Council.

So this document is the fruit of our discussions. It seeks to express in a simple way our joyful experience of listening to the Spirit in communion of heart, in an atmosphere of prayer and discernment, along with cordial and sisterly openness, respect and freedom. The document transmits our profound union with Christ the Servant and our desire to follow Him according to the charism of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. It expresses our love for the women and men of our time, especially those most marginalised, and our commitment to seek them out where they are, in order to be witnesses of God's tender love for them. As you see, the document is divided into three parts:

1. An introduction that sets before us the reality of the world in which we live, and from there describes the deep longings of our hearts, represented by the symbols of fire and thirst;
2. The appeals launched by the Spirit, which were the focal points that marked the pattern of reflection in Assembly;
3. Responses to be made that will motivate and energise our lives;

I hope that you will feel joy and gratitude as you receive this message that the 2009 Assembly places in your hands. Consider it as a gift, a sure guide by which the Spirit will lead us along our way.

As we approach the Jubilee year in which we celebrate the 350th anniversary of the death of our Founders, we confide our journey to them. Through their intercession, we ask the Lord for the grace to live the charism of Charity, serving persons who are poor “with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows” (cf. Saint Vincent, *Coste XI*, p. 32) with a love that is humble and simple.

May Mary, the Mother of the Company, watch over us, help us to face the future with confidence, and be with us on our missionary way, so that like her, we may be transformed by the Spirit and be agents of ***“prophecy and hope, now and everywhere”***.

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

“OPEN TO THE TRANSFORMING SPIRIT”
Wellspring of prophecy and hope

The General Assembly, inspired by the breath of the Holy Spirit, brought forth deep thirsts, ardent longings, and pressing calls. We have been enkindled by the fire of a new Pentecost for the Company.

We instinctively recognise our globalised world as:

- a world where poor persons are becoming poorer;
- a world that is losing its values and points of reference, that is afraid and risks turning in on itself;
- a complex, diversified, technological world...

We are witnesses of the Spirit at work, releasing new energy, because we also see:

- women and men who live in solidarity, offering the best of themselves for a more just society in which people recognise one another as brothers and sisters;
- young people and adults driven by the search for meaning in their lives, for spirituality, and for God;
- people from various backgrounds who join forces to witness to truth, the value of life, human dignity, and the true meaning of freedom.

God loves this world and invites us, also, to love it deeply, to see the world as God sees it (cf. Gn 1:31; Jn 3:16). The charity of Christ urges us to see the world through the eyes of our Founders, recognising the most vulnerable persons as priority.

May the Spirit come to quench our thirst, and to satisfy our longing for truth and consistency so that we may be bearers of hope in this world. We are thirsting...

- thirsting to be more rooted in Christ, to enter into an intimate relationship with him;
- thirsting to live in deeper communion with our Sisters and in proximity of life and heart with people who are marginalised;
- thirsting to respond with creative charity to the appeals of persons living in poverty and to carry out our service as a mission entrusted to our local community;
- thirsting to deepen our sense of belonging to the Company and to share our charism;
- thirsting for active solidarity in order to take care of the Earth created by God for the good of all.

Let us allow the Spirit to touch us, the Spirit who wants to make all things new and who, today, wishes to renew the very depths of our hearts and heal our wounds and those of all humanity.

Yes, let's open ourselves to the transforming guidance of the Spirit of God today! Let us be fired by the power of the appeals upon which we have reflected deeply during our Assembly.



1- **BECOME EVER MORE DEEPLY ROOTED IN JESUS CHRIST, “THE SOURCE AND MODEL OF ALL CHARITY”** (Common Rules, I, 1)

- Give the Word of God a central place in our lives of faith:
 - recognise that God speaks to us through Scripture, the Church and life's events;
 - rediscover the power of the Word at work in us.
- Deepen together our understanding of the message found in the Word of God, in Church teachings and in our Vincentian heritage.
- Contemplate Christ and discover his action in the heart and life of those who are poor and allow ourselves to be evangelised by them (cf. C. 10).

"If you remain in my word, you are truly my disciples" (Jn 8:31 b)

2- ENHANCE "LIVING TOGETHER IN GREAT UNITY AND CORDIALITY" AS A PROPHETIC WITNESS OF LOVE AND A WAY OF HOPE. (cf. Spiritual Testament of St. Louise, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 835).

- Deepen a "spirituality of communion among ourselves" (cf. *Vita Consecrata* 51) and build communities where loving and trusting relationships flourish.
- Make of our local communities, communities where we really share our experiences of faith (cf. Lk 24:13-35), communities that are welcoming, joyful and open in view of the mission.
- Adopt, in the midst of a consumer society, a lifestyle that is simple and balanced and that respects the environment (cf. S. 8 d).

"Everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."
(Jn 13:35)

3- SERVE BY "COMING AND GOING" WITH COURAGE AND CREATIVITY TO MANIFEST GOD'S LOVE TO PERSONS LIVING IN POVERTY. (cf. Light of Pentecost of Saint Louise, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 1)

- Renew our ways of responding to the challenges of new forms of poverty exacerbated by the global crisis and dare to take prophetic stances against injustice.
- Enhance our availability and our servant attitude, offering our time with joy and generosity, in free and unconditional ways.
- Witness to the love of Christ through our service, our lives and our proximity to persons living in poverty (cf. C. 16 b).

"Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream"
(Am 5:24)

"Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Mt 25:40)

4- DEEPEN OUR SENSE OF BELONGING TO THE COMPANY AND TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE "COMPANY OF THE FUTURE" (cf. C. 59)

- Nourish the flame of our charism, live as joyful and faithful members of the Company, and promote growth in our vocation of Daughters of Charity.
- Give new impetus to the missionary spirit of the Company in order to proclaim, by our words and our lives, the love of God the Father manifested in Jesus Christ (cf. C. 25).

- Revitalise youth and vocation ministry in order to enhance young people's awareness of their responsibility in the life of the Church and encourage their commitment to serving those who are marginalised.
- Intensify a Vincentian spirit of collaboration at all levels (cf. S. 9).

"Enlarge the space for your tent, spread out your tent cloths, lengthen your ropes and make firm your stakes." (Is 54:2)

Trusting that the Spirit can do more in us than we can dare to imagine, we let the prophecy of Joel resonate within us:

*"...I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young people shall see visions,
and your old people shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit..." (Joel 3:1-2)*

RESPONSES

to be lived out wholeheartedly

Guided by the Word of God, with a passion for the world into which we are sent, together we commit ourselves to respond to the calls of the Spirit today.

1- BECOME EVER MORE DEEPLY ROOTED IN JESUS CHRIST, THE "SOURCE AND MODEL OF ALL CHARITY"(Common Rules, I, 1)

- Cultivate a life of prayer that is creative and nourished by the liturgy and the sacraments.
- Learn to discern together the action of the Spirit and reflect anew on our lives through the lens of Scripture.
- Rediscover silence that fosters attentive listening to God and one another.
- Seek formation in the Word (biblical studies, *lectio divina*). Share the Word with one another in community, and when possible, with all those present in our lives.

- Readjust the rhythm of our lives in order to nurture our being as Daughters of Charity.
- 2- ENHANCE “LIVING TOGETHER IN GREAT UNITY AND CORDIALITY” AS A PROPHETIC WITNESS OF LOVE AND A WAY OF HOPE.** (cf. Spiritual Testament of Saint Louise, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 835)

- Be open to each Sister, with a faith perspective that accepts differences as enriching.
- Courageously and honestly address the challenges of community life, availing of the benefits of reconciliation.
- Recognise in our sick and elderly Sisters a real source of vitality for the mission.
- Intensify the quality of our community sharing, in particular apostolic reflection, in an atmosphere of dialogue and listening to one another.
- Enrich our provincial and local community plans to include:
 - prophetic ways of being and acting in our service to persons living in poverty,
 - concrete choices relating to simple life style and greater proximity to people living in poverty,
 - being consistent in our actions with regard to our use of the Earth’s resources and protection of the environment.
- Revitalise participation and co-responsibility to promote at all levels an ongoing attitude of discernment in view of decision-making.

3-SERVE BY “COMING AND GOING” WITH COURAGE AND CREATIVITY TO MANIFEST GOD’S LOVE FOR POOR PEOPLE (cf. Light of Pentecost of Saint Louise, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 1)

- Develop missionary priority plans in the Provinces as we continue the revision of works and ministries.
- Commit ourselves to discerning new ways to respond to the appeals that come from today’s realities of poor persons (migration, human trafficking, AIDS, all that threatens life...).
- Help persons living in poverty to be agents of their own promotion and to make their voices heard.
- Renew our involvement in ministry to families and in education

- Collaborate with associations and organisations working to combat the root causes of poverty, in order to promote justice, peace and respect for life.
- Cultivate ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue within the framework of collaboration in serving persons living in poverty.

4- DEEPEN OUR SENSE OF BELONGING TO THE COMPANY, AND TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE “COMPANY OF THE FUTURE” (cf. C. 59).

- Make better use of the writings of the Founders and be rooted in the Vincentian mystique in all our relationships.
- Support formation at all stages and an accompaniment of Sister Servants in their service of community animation.
- Revitalise the missionary vocation of the Company beginning with initial formation and continuing throughout our lives.
- Share our human, material and spiritual resources to a greater extent and enhance interprovincial exchanges to strengthen communion among us and improve the quality and efficacy of our service. Continue our efforts to learn other languages.
- Intensify our networking in the Company, the Vincentian family and the Church.
- Revitalise youth and vocation ministry in collaboration with the local and diocesan Church.
- Welcome others into our local communities to experience prayer and the service of persons in poverty.
- Promote new forms of collaboration with lay people and support their formation in the Vincentian charism.

By engaging in personal and community reflection at various levels, we commit ourselves to developing ongoing formation opportunities in our Provinces to assist us in responding to the calls of this Assembly. In this way, each one of us and the Company throughout the world will be signs of prophecy and hope now and everywhere.

Led by the Holy Spirit and
strengthened by the love of Mary our Mother,
we welcome her invitation with joyful gratitude and take it to heart:

“Do whatever he tells you.” (Jn 2:5)

*PHOTO OF VIRGIN OF THE GLOBE

FATHER JAVIER ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

FINAL DOCUMENT OF THE 2009 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

“Open to the transforming Spirit”

I have often heard it said that whenever a General Assembly draws up a final document, the members of the Assembly frequently have the impression that many interesting things that were debated at that Assembly get lost along the way. It is true that the document reflects, to a greater or lesser degree, the content of the dialogues and the debates, and presents these in a more polished form of language and with expressions that are more carefully worded and precise but no document can present life's whole range of colours, sounds and textures. This being said, we have to add straightaway that this dynamic document of the Assembly is of the utmost importance for the Company. In the person of its 184 representatives, the Company has prayed about and reflected on proposals and suggestions sent in by all the local communities and Provinces, it has shared experiences and anxieties and has tried to practise discernment by listening to the Spirit telling us what God wants of the Company in the six years ahead. This is the way we have to look on this document if we are to keep in mind this God-given grace.

The first thing we have to do is to get to know its contents, to read and reread it, reflect on it, meditate on it, see which elements or aspects of life are given particular emphasis. Because it is only by this close study of the document that we will be ready to gradually incorporate its ideas into our life and into the different projects. The document is not meant to change anything but rather to colour everything over the next six years in a particular way. After that there will be another document just as others have been drawn up before the present one. Each one has its distinctive tone, its nuances, its new features and its new points of emphasis. We know that all the members of the Assembly have contributed to updating the charism by emphasising one or other aspect in keeping with our own times. We are confident that the Company will give this present document the welcome it deserves.

“LET US BE OPEN TO THE TRANSFORMING SPIRIT”

One of the strongest convictions that came across, right from the outset, was that the members were not acting on their own but were accompanied and sustained by the Holy Spirit. The Opening Mass, as well as the many references and prayers to the Holy Spirit throughout the whole time of the Assembly, must surely have contributed to reinforcing and nourishing this conviction. The final document opens with these words, *“The General Assembly, inspired by the breath of the Holy Spirit...”* (p.5).

These words also explain the title of the document. The many references to the Holy Spirit found at the beginning or the end of each chapter reinforce this idea so we can be certain that the contents of this document are not just the fruit of dialogue and human debate. Someone else has intervened in the proceedings following the same path with us.

“*Being open to the transforming Spirit*” means that it is the Holy Spirit who has the most important part to play. Without Him we can do nothing; we cannot even say that “*Jesus is Lord.*” (1 Cor 12,3) We have to avoid simply doing what we want because this means that people become locked in self-complacency and this makes them believe that they themselves hold the key to progress, perfection and truth. Without the help of the Holy Spirit there can be no conversion, transformation or renewal. Neither institutions nor individuals can do without Him.

Reading the gospel account of Pentecost against the background of our Christian faith today, we immediately come to the conclusion that these men who shut themselves away in the Cenacle out of fear, were not transformed by any theoretical knowledge of the gospel or even the material fact of Christ’s resurrection, but by the action of the Holy Spirit. The same thing happened to St. Louise on that Pentecost Sunday of 1623. If the Holy Spirit had not come into her life her doubts, complexes, fears and anxieties would have continued.¹ The fruits of the Holy Spirit are “*love, joy, peace, tolerance, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, simplicity, self-control*” (Gal 5, 22-23). This, according to St Paul, is the transformation worked by the Spirit. Of course there can be no transformation without cooperation on the part of the individual. God knocks respectfully at the door of each person’s heart but he will never break into anyone’s dwelling place because he always respects the person’s freedom. Being “*open to the transforming Spirit*” is something that is entirely the responsibility of the individual person, they have to create the necessary conditions for the Spirit to do his work. Article 13 of the Constitutions speaks specifically about some of these dispositions.

“APPEALS” AND “RESPONSES”

The main part of the document is set out under these two headings. There are no specific boundaries between “appeals” and “responses” but there is an obvious continuity between the two. The four themes that are repeated in the two chapters ensure the unity of the document.

This framework of “appeals” and “responses” reminds us of examples in Scripture of people being called by God. Everyone who had this calling has followed this line of action in spite of doubts and hesitations like those frequently expressed in the chapter on “responses.” We have all followed this path as we discerned our individual vocation. We had to listen to the call and then make our personal response. So we are familiar with this pattern of events. In the document the appeals are those made by the Holy Spirit and discerned by the Assembly. And the same is true of the responses. The appeals are more of a general nature; the responses more specific. The former are set out in the infinitive form; the latter use the first person plural, as if to urge us to action and commitment.

¹ Cf. ST. LOUISE DE MARILLAC, *Letters and Writings*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca 1985,

At first sight the four appeals-responses don't seem to offer anything particularly new, especially the first three. The religious life has always been structured round these three points. *Vita Consecrata* does likewise by setting its reflections within the framework of three important chapters: *Confessio trinitas*, *Signum fraternitatis*, and *Servitium caritas*. However, experts who analyse the consecrated life all point out that its renewal or refoundation will not take place without these three elements. This leads us to see that the Assembly's intention in producing this document was simply to help the Daughters of Charity to focus on what is fundamental in their lives.

1. "Rooted in Jesus Christ"

We cannot possibly nourish our spiritual life without Christ. For more than 40 years now, with the publication of the decree *Perfectae caritatis*, this has been set out in very strong terms. Constitution 8a points us in the same direction and at the same time reminds us of the distinctive features of the Vincentian Christ. The document speaks of "being rooted", a phrase that has a deeper meaning than just "following". It means putting down strong roots that will become deeper and wider so as to keep us well nourished and healthy. We are all familiar with the image of those leafy trees that grow along the river banks and solemnly move in time to the rhythm of the wind, and which are always ready to cover with their shade everyone who needs to stop and rest. We find this striking image in psalm 1 verse 3 and in Jeremiah 17,5. We cannot live or work with enthusiasm and we cannot keep alive the ideals of our vocation unless we are deeply rooted in Jesus Christ. The consecrated life, and that of the Company will change in ways that are difficult to predict but we can be certain that being rooted in Christ will always remain an essential element of this life. Let us now reflect on the means suggested by the Assembly.

SCRIPTURAL FORMATION

The Document also speaks of "*giving a central place to the Word in our lives*"(p.9) "*deepening our understanding of the Word*" (p.9) and "*sharing it with others.*" (p.9). A whole pedagogy has been drawn up with regard to the Word, no doubt in response to the Synod that took place in Rome in October 2008. The Assembly, too, states its conviction that anyone who does not become deeply immersed in the Scriptures will find it hard to fall in love with Christ. Books on spirituality are to be recommended, especially books about Vincentian spirituality; however, nothing can take the place of the Word of God. Nobody can deny or call into question the impact and transforming power this has. It creates a place of renewal that crushes the old wineskins of mediocrity and want of audacity. The Word is continually generating something new. So we should be looking for ways of getting to know the Word better in order to make our own its secrets and its insights. I think this is the first time that the Company has recommended the "*lectio divina*" as a way of deepening our knowledge of Sacred Scripture. This is something that the Congress on the Religious Life that took place in Rome in 2004 recommended for all consecrated people.

"CREATIVE PRAYER"

. What is significant about this phrase is not the call to prayer, something that we need to stress will always be necessary, but in the adjective “creative.” This word criticises in a very discreet and gentle way a form of prayer that is just routine and monotonous, a duty to be fulfilled. If during our times of prayer (Eucharist, the liturgy of the Hours, meditation) we do not find fresh water, or in other words, we do not renew our desire to continue to dedicate our lives, then something is wrong. Prayer that is languid and lethargic can maintain the outward appearance of prayer but it is not stimulating because it scarcely touches on life. “Tell me how you pray and I will tell you what kind of person you are.” Creative prayer is both personal and communal.

Striving to make each encounter with the Lord something new and different, going to the chapel, not because we have to do this to comply with the horarium or because we are obliged to go but because we feel the need to do so, battling with the difficulties which come with prayer....these are some means of praying in a creative way. Saint Vincent insisted on this aspect of prayer more than once though he used different words to describe it.

The community must also strive to be creative. Some years ago, Fr Maloney said the same thing and we all remember his words, “Communities should try to make their prayer *“something that is beautiful for God and which people find pleasing.”* Of course creativity is not to be sought at any price, or in any way we fancy. The Assembly reminds us that creative prayer *“should be nourished by the liturgy and by the sacraments.”*(p.19).

A CALL FOR SILENCE (p.19) and a CALL FOR REVISION OF LIFE STYLE (p.20)

The Daughters of Charity have always been exposed to the temptation to put so much emphasis on the service of the poor that other aspects of their vocation could be somewhat overshadowed. This has been called, and is still called “activism”. It continues to operate in our own times and is perhaps even more encouraged now than in earlier days because of so-called “professionalism”. This means that the person looks on vocation in professional terms and can identify so much with the work that they tend to forget the One in whose name they are doing it. Psalm 19 offers us a timely reminder, *“Some trust in chariots and some in horses but we put our trust in the name of our God.”*

A lack of balance in our lives can lead to a loss of vocation. Doctors tell us that our physical health depends on the balance achieved between the various parts of the body. Any disturbance in this balance leads to illness and vice versa. Lack of balance in our vocational life will sooner or later result in fragmentation. So it is very important to emphasise positive silence, contemplation and reflection which allow us to listen to God and to be in touch with Him and with others. Maybe this is more urgently necessary in our times because now absolutely everything is inundated with noise, images and words. Too much noise prevents us from seeking the ineffable presence of God, it makes us content with the outward shell of things, it drains and alienates us. Sometimes it is an inner clamour that produces this vertigo. In short there is the danger of too much noise. Insisting on silence is more appropriate now than ever.

2. Promote "living together in great union and cordiality"

In this second chapter the appeals have been considered from two basic perspectives, the divine and, more particularly, the human. Here, too, there are some references that immediately remind us that the foundation of community life can only be Jesus Christ. If this were not the case, we might have the impression that we were talking about a group of friends, not a community. Phrases such as "*deepen a spirituality of communion among ourselves*" (p.11) or "*make of our local communities, communities where we really share our experience of faith*" (p.11) stress the fact that the community is not simply some human group.

Having emphasised again the community mystique, the Assembly insists on the human aspect of community as a family place. Some phrases used could not be more warm or cordial; "*build communities where loving and trusting relationships flourish*", "*communities that are welcoming, joyful and open in view of the mission.*" (p. 11). It may be that in the past, community formation was marked by a certain formality in relationships. So much emphasis was placed on personal responsibility that it was difficult to achieve maturity in relationships with others and to communicate with others and show affection. Today the sisterly and affective aspects of community life are very important elements of it and even essential ones. Young people, for example, find it difficult to tolerate communities that are cold, rigid and formal. They are looking for (and how strongly they say this!) warm-hearted communities where they can dedicate their lives and live out the demands of their vocation. The Assembly is asking the Company to change to a way of living that stresses human warmth, respect and close relationships, one where people feel at home and where small acts of thoughtfulness are important.

Of course we have to keep in mind the Company's objective: "*in view of the mission*" (p.11) and make sure that local communities do not become too inward-looking, too concerned about their own well being and circumstances. The community is *for* the mission. It must devote most of its resources and concerns, not to thinking about itself, but about the mission entrusted to it. This Vincentian idea of community is in no way a contradiction of what was said earlier about fraternal life. On the contrary, it is easy to establish a balanced relationship between a sisterly community and one that is actively engaged in the service of those who are poor. Unfortunately, experience teaches us that the opposite is also true.

In accord with the rationale of the Document, the "responses" are meant to put into effect what the appeals are asking for. This interchange can lead to some repetition but rather than being a drawback, this can help us to understand better the points that the Assembly wishes to emphasise. In general, the responses tend to be specific but they will be even more so when they are implemented in concrete ways on the ground and in accordance with the different cultures where the Company is present. It will be the responsibility of the Provinces and the local communities to put this into practice. When they are revising their Plans, the Provinces and local communities will try to incorporate this Document into them. I will comment briefly on some of the "responses" that can help to build up community.

As with the appeals, the first response speaks about the important basic foundation of fraternal life: *“Be open to each other with a faith perspective”* (p. 21). In the document *“At Jacob’s Well”* the 1991 General Assembly used a similar expression, *“We want to receive each Sister as a gift from God.”* It is good to remember that each member of the community was called by God to carry out a mission with the other members. Today there is a sort of “naturalism” in communities which makes us accept people who are congenial to us and to be indifferent towards those we don’t like. Only faith can help us to overcome this tendency and the difficulties of community life. Other factors such as similarity of temperament, having similar ideas, doing the same work or having common insights can help to build a sisterly community but these will never be the foundation for it. The Gospel reminds us that we have to build on the “Rock” otherwise the edifice will crumble. (cf Mt. 7, 26-27).

Most societies where the Company has a presence are becoming increasingly pluralistic and tolerant. It may be that consecrated life, and that of the Company, has not participated to the same degree in this process of adapting to differences and to being open to new and pluralistic situations among the local people. The Document asks us to *“accept differences as enriching”* (p.21). This is the situation in our communities now: different ways of thinking and of working due to differences in formation and differing sensitivities. It is very probable that such differences will increase in future. This could lead either to ongoing conflicts that express mutual rejection or to opportunities for mutual enrichment where we see other people’s point of view as complementary to our own.

It is in times of community sharing that the enrichment that comes from plurality can flow most easily. The Document asks us to *“intensify the quality of our community sharing”* (p, 21). I think that the impact of this phrase comes from the word “quality”. This “quality” comes from careful preparation for sharing: it should not be improvised and Sisters should be motivated to participate. In this way we will have “quality sharing” and Sisters will be able to communicate at a deep level. That is what we must aim at. This communication is harder to achieve in our ordinary activities given the many demands made by service. Community sharings are times when we can get to know one another better and more deeply. This knowledge leads to sisterly love, respect, acceptance and mutual enrichment. The *Directives for the Sister Servant* express this very well, “to know someone means to contemplate the beautiful interior landscape that the Holy Spirit has fashioned in their heart.”² When communication gets to this level there is suddenly produced an atmosphere of trust, spontaneity and transparency which makes for happy relationships. In the final synthesis of the 2004 Congress in Rome, one of the conditions for “rebirth” was *“seeking deep and inclusive relationships in the community one lives in.”*

3. Serve by “coming and going”

What are the guidelines presented in this third aspect of the Document: service of those who are poor? First of all, two important qualities of service are emphasised in the phrase *“with courage and creativity.”* (p.13). These two words are part of the most authentic Vincentian tradition and at the same time, both words are a response to

² *Directives for the Sister Servant* p.39

the demands of our own day. We have to be continually revising the service we offer so that it will always be relevant and not lose its prophetic force. Revising our works also means reanimating the dynamism of our vocation, given the link between “doing” and “being.” I think this is the reason why the Assembly insisted so much on apostolic reflection (p.21).

On a personal level, we are reminded of the need “*to be available*” to have the “*attitude of a servant*” and to be able to “*offer our time with joy and generosity*” (p.13). This is a whole programme for revision of life and without it all community and Provincial service would be paralysed. The Provinces and local communities can discern and organise (envisage) services that correspond to situations of present day poverty in fidelity to the charism but if Sisters do not make themselves available these plans will not work. Being available means giving up one’s own small projects in order to be open to those of the local community or the Province. Even more than this, it means taking up common projects, be these at local or Provincial level, as though they were our own individual plans. This does not mean that we have to renounce our individual creativity because this is necessary for updating service as we mentioned earlier. I think it is very useful to stress the need for availability because in our day there is a very strong tendency towards individualism and choosing work that is more in accordance with our own personal tastes than the real needs of the poor.

At local community or Provincial level, the Company is asked to respond to the challenges posed by new forms of poverty, in particular migration, the trafficking of women and children, AIDS and anything that is a threat to life (p.23). The Company has to listen to these new forms of poverty and be sensitive to them. Living in the midst of people enables us to hear the new cries of the poor. The Company has the ear and the heart of a mother and that is why it is there whenever a new aspect of poverty emerges. It follows to the letter Saint Vincent’s recommendations about service “we should run...as though to a fire.” That is a something that constantly happens in history; it repeats itself and will continue to do so. It is the most important dynamism for renewal that the Company has had at its disposal right up to our own times and one that we will continue to use. In short, it is the poor who save and will continue to save the Company; it is the poor who will renew it. History assures us that the more the Company is focused on poor people, the more vibrant and relevant it will be.

There is a phrase in the Document which deserves further comment; the Company should “dare to take prophetic stances against injustices.” (p.13). We know from Sacred Scripture that the prophets challenged those in power when these did not respect the rights of defenceless people. So Nathan denounced King David who had unjustly caused the death of Uriah (cf. 2S 11-12), Elijah defended the poor man Naboth against Achab who unjustly took over his vineyard (cf 1K, 21, 1-29). Other prophets denounced injustice in general and the prophet Habakkuk gave this warning, “*Trouble is coming to the man who grossly exploits others for the sake of his house, to fix his nest on high and so evade the hand of misfortune.*” Saint Vincent did the same on several occasions. We may recall, for example, how in an interview with the Prime Minister, Richelieu, he openly asked him to bring the war to an end.³ He also publicly opposed Cardinal Mazarin’s policy of exploiting the peasants and even asked

³ Cf. L.ABELLY, *La vie du venerable serviteur de Dieu, Vincent de Paul*, Paris 1664, vol1, p. 169-170

the cardinal to resign and leave the country.⁴ “*Your Eminence, throw yourself into the sea and the tempest will be calmed.*” This bold prophetic utterance earned him 5 months exile from Paris.

When the Company takes up a prophetic stance against injustice it is following in the footsteps of the prophets in the Bible or Saint Vincent in his time. The service of poor people requires measures such as these. It is true that in denouncing injustice we need to reflect carefully and discern all the relevant factors so as not to risk making the situation of those who are poor worse, or of putting the Company in a difficult situation. This form of service is less developed in the Church and in the Company than that of giving assistance or promoting people’s welfare.

4. “Deepening our sense of belonging to the Company”

It is not hard to guess why the Assembly recognised as a priority the theme of belonging to the Company and saw this as something to be emphasised in the coming years. Individualism is a counter-value from the post-modernity that has permeated all aspects of society. With the internet and other advances in modern technology a person can create a world to their own specifications and other people have restricted access to it. This ideology has penetrated consecrated life, and consequently the Company, though in a milder form.

Today, individualism in the Company can show itself in a certain independence of life style, in the desire to carry out personal projects to the detriment of community ones, and in a partial adherence to the Company, adopting its easiest and most agreeable aspects while rejecting its more difficult side. Insisting on belonging to the Company allows us to oppose this negative influence which, in the long term, could short circuit everything relating to a community style of living or to acting in common with others. Of course, belonging to the Company does not mean ignoring the dignity of a person or the climate of freedom necessary if the person is to develop and mature, but it means adapting these to the community aspect of our life.

The second part of the fourth two-word phrase “appeal-response” “*take responsibility for the Company of the future*”. can come as something of a surprise. The Company is a chain of events that happen over time. Each generation sows and reaps. It reaps what others have sown in the past. What we sow today will be reaped by others tomorrow. Today we are laying the foundations of what the Company will be like in the future. This is how we are to understand the meaning of the phrase. It is meant to remind each Sister that she is responsible for the Company now and for the future. Of course we cannot see this phrase as expressing an absolute because many other factors, not dependent on our personal and collective responsibility, will figure in the way that the Company will evolve in the future. Good seeds do not necessarily produce good harvests. Rain has to fall at the right time and this does not depend on the sower.

Belonging signifies the emergence and visible signs of deeper values which make the Company vibrant. If we see a tree that stands upright we all know that this is because of its roots which cannot be seen. Which values, according to the

⁴ Cf. Letter to Cardinal Mazarin dated 11th September 1652, Coste IV, p.473-477

Document, signify belonging and reinforce this? *“Feeding the flame of our charism”, “living in joyful fidelity”, “promoting growth in our vocation as Daughters of Charity”, “being rooted in the Vincentian mystique in all our relationships”* (p.15-25). In general we can say that the roots of belonging to the Company are found in our vocation. For Sisters who live their vocation to the full and who love the charism of Monsieur Vincent, it is not difficult to belong to the Company. The charism naturally leads to the institution even if these two are not to be confused. They should not be regarded as completely independent realities. The charism needs an institution in which to be implanted, to be made visible and to be put into effect. The institution, for its part, is at the service of the charism and must let itself be moulded by it.

The Document goes on to propose some means for revitalising the values that can strengthen our feeling of belonging:

- *“Initial and ongoing formation, the writings of the Founders”* ... (p.25-27).
- *“The accompaniment of Sister Servants”* (p.25): a very important means. By their mission Sister Servants can encourage their Sisters so that community may not be just a temporary abode but a home where each one can identify with the Vincentian Plan according to article 34 of the Constitutions.

Finally, the Document mentions some other things which are more or less new, such as collaboration with lay people, networking with the Vincentian Family, opening up local communities so that young women can share in certain times of prayer or some forms of service, carrying out youth and vocation ministry in collaboration with the diocesan Church (p.16-26). I think that the Assembly is trying to stress the fact that the Company today cannot remain apart from other groups that have similar objectives. Keeping to oneself leads to impoverishment and inevitably the work becomes less effective. The popular saying, *“Union is strength”* seems more true today than ever. Constitution 25 and Statutes 9 and 42 ask the Company to work in collaboration with other institutions.

Working with other groups does not mean losing your identity or affect your belonging to the Company. The opposite is very much the case: when charisms unite they begin to shine out with greater brilliance. Today, working with lay people, be these Vincentians or not, is very important. The Rome Congress of 2004 declared, *“Lay people make us realise that our charisms are gifts for all people, for the Church and for the world.”* The Congress appealed to everyone in the religious life to *“develop the ecclesiology of communion and the theological foundations of relationships between religious and the laity.”* (Passion for Christ, passion for humanity.)

If lay people participate and accept co-responsibility in a constructive way they can be a source of enrichment for us. For our part, we may need to overcome some past apathy with regard to their collaboration. We are not making a concession to lay people, collaboration is their right. We need them, not just as collaborators but as people who are co-responsible for the mission of serving and evangelising. They need to be there when the work is being carried out but also at times of decision making. Vita Consecrata no. 54 recognises that *“a new chapter, rich in hope, has begun in the history of relations between consecrated persons and the laity.”*

CONCLUSION

A NEW IMPETUS IN RESPONSE TO VOCATION

What are these four “appeals-responses” trying to express? I can only see it as a strong invitation to all Daughters of Charity to give a new impetus to the vocation they have received and this at every level: personal, the local community, the Province and the Company in general. When we read the Document carefully we can see that some points are particularly addressed to each Sister personally, while others are meant for the local community or the Province. The four “appeals-responses” are like rails for suggestions that can direct and orientate conversion and renewal. Without these, all renewal would seem to be superficial because how can we imagine renewal for the Daughter of Charity without taking into account the three dimensions of her life? If renewal were to alienate a person from her vocation, would it be authentic renewal? As we can see, the reference point for the whole Document is truly our Vincentian vocation even if this is not explicitly stated in the text. It is to give a new impetus to that vocation that the Assembly presents us with the four “appeals-responses”.

Each two-word phrase is developed in a similar way, in four or five points. The implicit message is that any renewal in the life of a Daughter of Charity calls for balance. If we make the service of the poor too important it is practically certain that the two other aspects (being rooted in Christ and community life) will be weakened. In such situations vocation is considered less of a priority. Vincentian spirituality makes us see that every aspect of the life of a Daughter of Charity must be geared towards service but that does not mean in any way that the two other dimensions can be neglected. The three dimensions are closely interwoven and all three contribute to giving us a balanced response to our vocation. What God has joined together, let not human beings put asunder.

Throughout the entire text it is easy to see an outlook for the future which has in it a good dose of hope. It is as if someone is whispering in our ear, “Take heart! We can become more deeply rooted in Christ, we can have a deeper understanding of the Word of God that brings light to our life, we can develop loving and trusting relationships within the local community, we can be aware of new forms of poverty, etc.” The Document is a drawn bow with an arrow pointing forward. The Assembly did not spend its time making pessimistic analyses of the social situation which are of no practical use. It preferred to open up pathways and trace out routes to be followed based on a balanced view of reality.

The Document, too, shows openness. So, in the chapter on belonging, we are asked to find new ways of collaborating with lay people, to reinforce our networking with the Vincentian Family and with the Church; to make a greater effort to share our material, human and spiritual resources (p.25-26). With regard to the service of poor people, the Provinces are asked to discern new appeals within the framework of Revision of the Works and not to be afraid to collaborate with organisations that combat the root causes of poverty and promote justice (p.23-24). With regard to community life, the members of a local community are urged to see differences as enriching, to revitalise participation and co-responsibility, and in the service of the poor, to create new forms of prophetic ways of being and acting (p. 21-22).

The image of thirst is developed at length in pages 7-8 of the Document. The imagery is very compelling and biblical. Thirst drives a person to go in search of water. *“As the deer longs for running streams, so longs my soul for you, my God. My soul is thirsting for God, the God of life.”* (Ps 41). When a person is thirsty and suffering from lack of water, they can dream about it, organise themselves to go and search for it and even walk very long distances to find it. The self-sufficient person only needs a comfortable armchair. The image of thirst clearly shows us the key to finding this document beneficial. As the document says, in order to *“be open to the transforming Spirit”* we must first of all hunger and thirst for Him.

**TO HELP YOUR PERSONAL REFLECTION
AND/OR COMMUNITY SHARING**

- Which of the “appeals-responses” in the Document do you think are the most important at the present time on each of these three levels: personal, local community and provincial?

- The Document is certainly positive in tone and full of hope. Which phrases reflect this?

Father Javier Alvarez,
Director General

15th August 2009

SISTER EVELYNE FRANC, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

To all Daughters of Charity

My dear Sisters,

May the Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be always with us!

Happy feast of the Assumption! May the Virgin Mary, who has now entered into the glory of God, be our model of faith, our guide in humility and the source of our hope!

In this traditional 15th August letter, I wish, above all, to thank you for your warm good wishes and to give you some news of the Company.

Once again, your letters on the occasion of this feast of the Virgin Mary have been both interesting and moving. Thank you for the various echoes of your communities and service, for the accounts of your preparations for the 350th anniversary of the death of our Founders, and your plans and projects for youth ministry. For some time now, we have noticed that in certain Provinces of the Company where vocations have been scarce in recent years, there is a slight revival of interest among young people who are seriously reflecting on the possibility of becoming Daughters of Charity. Let us confide this hope to the intercession of Mary!

No country is spared the present economic crisis, and in your letters you describe its effects on all those around you. You mention the attitudes and decisions of solidarity that you have adopted in order to live in communion with those who suffer most. This is a path we can follow, personally and in community, so as to become more detached and live more simply. In fact, the crisis obliges us to reconsider certain aspects of our lifestyle, to be aware of our dependence with regard to the media which can have an influence on our perception of society and of the human person as such. (cf. *Caritas in Veritate* No. 73).

I am grateful for your promises of prayer for the Company and for your willing acceptance of the information from the Assembly, which the Visitatrices and delegates have shared with you. We are truly called to allow ourselves to be transformed by the Spirit in order to put into practice in our Provinces and local communities the aspirations, “thirsts”, desires for truth and consistency that emerged so clearly and with such unanimity in the course of our General Assembly. Our world expects this of us, this world which is so complex, diversified, and technological. In his social encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI lists the following as conditions for the integral development of the human person: *“attention to the spiritual life, a serious consideration of the experiences of trust in God, spiritual fellowship in Christ, reliance upon God's providence and mercy, love and forgiveness, self-denial, acceptance of others, justice and peace.”* (No. 79)

After the tremendous grace of this Assembly, we have now returned to everyday life. The life of the General Council has resumed and we have met three times already since 13th June. We have been able to have the necessary quorum, that is, the presence of at least five General Councillors, owing to the presence of the newly-elected Councillors who live nearest, that is, Sister Rosa Maria Napolitano and Sister Françoise Petit. Our first special Council is scheduled for 23rd to 25th September. I think all the members of the General Council will be able to be present for that, as the visa applications for Sister Iliana Suarez, Sister Kathleen Appler, Sister Madeline Hara and Sister Neghesti Michaël are well on the way or even completed.

On 3rd August, Sister Ester and Sister Toyin of the Province of Nigeria, accompanied by their Visitatrice, Sister Francesca Edet, left the International Mission Centre at the Mother-House for the new mission in Burkina Faso, in the diocese of Nouna, a mission that has been confided to the Provinces of Nigeria and North Africa. A third Nigerian Sister, Sister Felicia, joined them. Let us place in Mary's hands this new missionary implantation of the Company on the continent of Africa.

As I informed you some time ago, Sister Anne Marguerite Fromaget will officially assume her service as Archivist of the Company on 1st September. She will succeed Sister Claire Herrmann who, for the past twelve years, has shared with countless Sisters and other members of the Vincentian Family her knowledge of our Founders, her enthusiasm for the Company and her love of our vocation. Our gratitude and prayers reach out to both Sister Claire and Sister Anne Marguerite.

Sister Rita Ferri, Treasurer General, will return to her Province of Turin at the end of this year when she completes her six-year term of office. I am extremely grateful to her for all she has accomplished as Treasurer General. She has combined

fidelity and dynamic energy in the conscientious management of the goods of the Company, and in the help she has given to the Provincial Treasurers. Sister Pia Humbel, Provincial Treasurer of Switzerland, has been appointed to succeed her and has very generously accepted this call of the Company. To both Sister Rita and Sister Pia, and to their Provinces of Turin and Switzerland, a heartfelt thank you!

I am sure that you are well aware of the natural disasters that have recently struck the Philippines, Taiwan, China (the Chinese Province) and Japan. The news of our Sisters is reassuring, but the damage is overwhelming especially in the southern region of Taiwan. We shall be sending help to the three Provinces and I have promised the Sisters our prayers.

The solemnity of the Assumption is celebrated in many countries with the enthusiasm and joy that we reserve for a person who is well-known and much-loved.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,
Now and at the hour of our death.”

We address this request to the Virgin Mary many times a day in our own name and in the name of very many people, known or unknown. Sometimes it resounds as a trusting appeal, sometimes as a cry of distress. The figure of Mary, her purity of heart, mind and body, have a special place in our hearts. She leads us to God and brings us to the foot of the altar.

For me, the feast of the Assumption is a response to the Psalmist’s question: “Who shall climb the mountain of the Lord? The person with clean hands and a pure heart”. The life of the Virgin Mary was an utterly faithful response to the Lord. Her role was that of a humble servant whom the grace of God allowed to cooperate in the work of Salvation through her availability, her faith, her hope and her charity, from the time of the Annunciation to the offering of her Son on the cross. Not through any personal merit but by virtue of divine grace, Mary already experienced the final destiny of those who belong to Christ and have risen in him.

As Saint Louise recommended, let us be fervent in celebrating the feasts of the Virgin Mary, and let us implore her each day “*to help us to render to God the service we have promised Him, and to be as submissive as she was in accomplishing His holy will*”. (Writings, p.787)

May our Marian devotion place us in the school of Mary, the humble servant of the Lord, the woman who lived the Beatitudes to the full, the Eucharistic woman, the woman with clean hands and pure heart who climbed the mountain of the Lord and who has entered into the glory of God!

With loving good wishes and the assurance of my devotedness and prayer,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

SISTER EVELYNE FRANCO, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Letter of 26th September 2009

To all Daughters of Charity

Dear Sisters,

Happy feast of St. Vincent! Let us in a spirit of fervour enter this jubilee year which commemorates the 350th anniversary of the death of our two founders!

On your behalf, I thanked Fr. Gregory who, with the help of the different commissions, organised the preparation of this anniversary for the Vincentian family. I know that you are benefitting fully from the possibilities offered; furthermore as I get news from the Provinces, I am aware that the time of the feast of St. Vincent and the months following will be celebrated locally with joyful creativity.

One important question that we may ask ourselves is, how can this jubilee year profoundly influence our lives as Daughters of Charity, how can it give new impetus to the Company?

In celebrating the jubilee year we are giving thanks for the charism received from St. Vincent and St. Louise, as well as for the spirit of the Company which expresses it today; we are deepening our joy at belonging to the Company; we are giving thanks for the love of Our Lord who chose us and gave us the beautiful name of Daughters of Charity and in His mercy has kept us faithful to this day. It means we are overflowing with joy in the Spirit who transforms us and we will respond with our Sisters to the calls of the Inter-Assemblies Document. To celebrate such an anniversary means to rejoice in the Lord for His presence in our lives, in the lives of our Sisters and in the life of each person.

Throughout this year we will have many occasions to interiorise and to own our Vincentian heritage. We will be able to savour anew the freshness of the great intuitions of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, their burning desire to come to the aid of those who are suffering, their ingenuity in soliciting help to alleviate misery. Let us hope that this jubilee year will bring forth in us a renewed availability, a radical commitment in service and openness to missionary priorities.

I ask the Lord to obtain for us the grace to radiate Charity and live the Mission with greater audacity wherever we are sent. St. Vincent says to us “It is the nature of our heart to love” (*Coste IX, 368*) and Saint Louise wants us to be “filled with a great love which will immerse them so sweetly in God and so charitably in the service of the poor” (*Spiritual Writings, 75*) The jubilee year is a splendid occasion to proclaim

by our lives the immeasurable love of God and to express it with joy in our service of those who are poor.

The General Council has just finished its first Special Council meeting (23rd-25th September) focusing in particular on the follow-up from the General Assembly, that is to say the evaluation of the process and the study of the proposals confided by the Provinces and by the Assembly itself to the General Council. We will have the opportunity to share on these points during the next months. These three days were very full, spent in a climate of listening, simplicity and mutual respect.

Happy jubilee year!
With assurance of my prayers and my affectionate devotion,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

NOMINATIONS

PROVINCE OF NORTH INDIA: Sister Christokumari SINGH was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Grace MOOLAN , December 19th, 2008.

PROVINCE OF FORTALEZA: Sister Ana Amélia Guedes da CUNHA was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sœur Raimunda Corina SOUSA BASTOS, December 30th , 2008.

PROVINCE OF BELGIUM: Sister Tress CASTELEIN was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Christiane VERCAUTEREN, January 21st, 2009.

PROVINCE OF SEVILLE: Sister Maria Pilar RENDON DE DUENAS was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, January 27th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF NAPLES: Sister Maria Rosaria MATRANGA was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Victoria CAMIOLO, January 27th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF SARDINIA: Sister Clementina DESSI was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, February 15th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF NORTH AFRICA: Sister Edwige LIFERAMARY was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Josefina REMIREZ, March 6th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF RIO OF JANEIRO: Sister Jeny Borges da SILVA was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, March 11th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF PARAGUAY: Sister Maria Elisa ORTIZ BENITEZ was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, March 11th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF JAPAN: Sister Madeline HARA was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, March 11th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF WARSAW: Sister Stanislaw KOKOSZA was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, March 11th, 2009.

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PROVINCE OF ROMANIA: Father Viktor KUNAY was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, January 16th 2009.

PROVINCE OF THE NEAR EAST: Father Semaan JAMIL was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, January 29th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF CRACOW: Father Marcin STASIOWSKI was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, March 24th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF LOS ALTOS HILLS (USA): Father Andrew BELLISARIO was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, April 13th 2009.

PROVINCE OF MADAGASCAR: Father Miguel Jesus GUTIERREZ AMARO was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, April 13th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF CUBA: Father Gilbert WALKER was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, April 13th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF GIJON: Father Juan VELASCO ROBLA was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, April 13th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF SEVILLE: Father José Maria LOPEZ MASIDE was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, June 3rd, 2009.

PROVINCE OF MADRID ST VINCENT: Father Fernando CASADO CASADO was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, July 3rd, 2009.

PROVINCE OF AMAZONIA: Father José Carlos CHACOROWSKI was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, April 13th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF BELGIUM: Father Daniel MARTELLO was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, July 6th, 2009. Father Théo JEURIS was reappointed Sub-Director for three years, July 6th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF SLOVAKIA: Father Jozef GARAJ was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, July 22nd 2009.

PROVINCE OF TURIN: Father Michelangelo SANTIA was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, July 22nd 2009.

PROVINCE OF SARDINIA: Father Italo ZEDDE was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, July 22nd 2009.

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Bogota

Jubilee of the Bogota Province

15th March 1959-15th March 2009

*For seeds sown,
For sorrows shared,
For so many lives given to the service of the Kingdom:
"I will celebrate your love for ever, Yahweh." (Ps 88)*

The Company of the Daughters of Charity took root in Colombian soil on 18th May 1882 thanks to the arrival of the first 4 Sisters who came to take care of poor sick people in the hospital at Popayan. Like a tiny grain of mustard, the seed grew at a marvellous rate to become a fine big tree whose branches spread over a large part of the country. That is why, 77 years later, a second Province was set up to ensure that good quality service would be offered to the poor.

On 15th March 1959, in the quiet way that is so typical of the works of God, the Province of Bogota was created. It comprises 408 Sisters who make up 52 local communities. The 260 Sisters who joined the Community in Heaven, also had a share in our celebration.

In thanksgiving for this happy event the Visitatrice and Provincial Council announced that there would be a Jubilee Year starting on 15th March 2008. The aim of this Jubilee Year was **"To revitalise our vocational fervour and foster local communities that would be more prophetic and bearers of hope in the service of the poorest of our brothers and sisters."**

The Ongoing Formation Commission proposed that the programme be organised in these 4 stages:

1st stage: **Rediscovering the fervour of our first call** by enthusiastically celebrating the feast of the Renovation of the Vows and actively participating in the meetings arranged for the different vocation age groups. 95% of the Sisters in the Province took part.

2nd stage: **Living out the 8th Provincial Assembly as a jubilee, letting ourselves be convoked, renewed and sent out by the Spirit.**

3rd stage: **Strengthening our sense of belonging to the Vincentian Family in union with the Church.** The most important times for doing this were the

celebration of Sacred Scripture Month and the feast of Saint Vincent, sharing these with different groups from the Vincentian Family. Local communities celebrated this Jubilee Year with the Christians of their parish.

4th stage: **Thanking God for his faithfulness which makes all things new.** This stage took place during Lent 2009 with days of Pardon and Reconciliation. These were our immediate preparation for the Jubilee celebrations.

These 4 special times were an opportunity for us to recall the history of the Province, to recognise the Lord's action in it and to celebrate the most important stages in the Province's journey with poor people, as Daughters of Charity coming to the aid of persons suffering from all forms of poverty, and as members of the Church in Colombia.

The Formation Commission boosted our sense of belonging to the Company and created a spirit of close union among us by sending out at the appropriate time a celebrations kit for each Vincentian feast of the year in accordance with the liturgical seasons and with the jubilee in mind. So an underground current of life and renewal irrigated the Province and prepared us for the **Marillac Week** which was the climax of our Jubilee celebrations.

At the end of February 2009 Sister Evelyne and Sister Blanca Libia Tamayo joined us to celebrate the Jubilee of the Province. Their simple and sisterly presence was the crowning point of this Jubilee Year. Sister Evelyne made an appeal for conversion and told us, *"It is only by leaving on the shore everything that prevents us from moving out into deep waters, that we can be instruments of God's Goodness and Mercy."*

The closing of the Jubilee Year took place from the 8th-15th March 2009 with the Marillac Week presided over by Father Javier Alvarez, Director General. He marked our Jubilee celebrations with constant references to our holy mother Saint Louise, since it was on 15th March 1959 that the Province came into being.

The Sister Servants, the local communities of Bogota and the surrounding districts, our elderly and sick Sisters, the young Sisters of the Province, the Vincentian Family, our collaborators and those we work for, all assembled together day after day to celebrate our Jubilee with joyful hearts. Neighbouring Provinces: Cali, Ecuador, Venezuela, Cuba and Chile came and with their affectionate and sisterly presence shared our joy.

A particularly solemn event was the Eucharistic celebration in the primatial cathedral, presided over by the Apostolic Nuncio, Monsignor Aldo Cavalli. A huge number of people attended including many Vincentian priests from the Colombian Province and members of religious communities in the archdiocese. 25 Sisters joyfully celebrated the anniversary of their vocation and 6 new Daughters of Charity joined the Seminary.

*PHOTO

Today our Province is overflowing with joy and gratitude and we bless and glorify the Lord for this year of grace that marks the arrival of the Sisters and is a starting point for a new vocational and missionary springtime. This moves us to make our lives a **permanent Jubilee** so that we can proclaim to our brothers and sisters whose dignity and human rights have been trampled on, that the Kingdom of God is close at hand and belongs to them.

Sister Genoveva NIETO GUERRERO,
Daughter of Charity

PREPARATION FOR THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY JUBILEE YEAR

Saint Louise de Marillac

XXth century

History, remembrance, meditation

In literary works published in the 19th century, the authors focused their attention on the personality of Monsieur Vincent, often overlooking his faithful collaborator Louise de Marillac. Bishop Baunard commented on this in a brief edition of his book and wrote: “Those who saw her as merely a passive instrument in the great work of Saint Vincent de Paul did not know her very well. However, the double and triple veil of humility that enveloped her should not hide the greatness of her role, as it was she who had the major part to play in this establishment. She was the one who received from on high the concept, or even what might be called the vision, of this completely unprecedented creation. It was she who urged action when M. Vincent was hesitating...”

Even after her canonisation, people knew relatively little about Louise de Marillac although in every respect she deserves to be known in view of the work that she founded, one which had as its aim “to do what the Son of God did when He was on earth,” as Saint Vincent said.

After World War II, several Vincentians and Daughters of Charity wanted to make the personality and works of Louise de Marillac more widely known; she was someone who placed her confidence more in God’s love than her own possibilities. The following texts have been rearranged under the unpretentious title: history, remembrance, meditation.

SISTER VINCENT REGNAULT

Sister Regnault, known in community as Sister Vincent, was responsible for the Echoes of the Motherhouse, and in 1974 she wrote a book entitled *Louise de Marillac ou la Passion du Pauvre*. (English translation: *Louise de Marillac Servant of the Poor*).

In 1960, the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the death of the Founders was the occasion for more in-depth study of the life and works of the Founders, especially Saint Louise. Father Slattery, in his preface to the book of the Writings of Louise, called in French the “grey book”, noted that this book was one of the precious fruits of these celebrations in honour of Saint Louise. He also emphasised that Father Fiat had the work of Gobillon published in 1886 in four short volumes, which included a biography of Saint Louise, her spiritual writings and some of her letters. That edition was no longer in print.

The endearing character of Saint Louise was to be given its rightful importance in a different style of writing, for until that time her mission had only been understood in reference to her collaboration in the charitable works of Saint Vincent. It was a pleasant surprise, Father Slattery wrote, to discover a spiritual doctrine based on theology, a deep interior life nourished by meditation on the mysteries of the life of Jesus and Mary, with her special talent for governance.

Through the work of Sister Regnault, the “grey book” provides access to the correspondence of Louise with M. Vincent, the Sisters, Abbe de Vaux and others. This “grey book” of one thousand pages, written before the Second Vatican Council, brings together meditations, thoughts and advice from Louise, and allows the reader to become better acquainted with Louise in her relationship with God and her neighbour.

VINCENTIAN ALMANAC OF 1967 (EPHÉMÉRIDES)

On May 26th 1914, Father Fiat, Superior General, prefaced a book of more than 500 pages called *Historical Almanac (Ephemerides) of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity*. The content was diverse and included notices, significant events in the Company, edifying facts, each one classified according to the day of the month and the year in which it occurred. Fr. Fiat specified: “*in this way, each day we can...have a short reading about the Congregation which, being better understood, will be loved more and served with greater dedication.*”

An introductory note specifies that the text includes information about the life of Saint Vincent, short notices on notable missionaries, events of the Company, and privileges as well as favours accorded to the double family.

The Daughters of Charity had the custom of reading from this Almanac each day at the beginning of meals. The life of Louise de Marillac was scarcely mentioned, although there was a detailed description of the beginning of the Company on November 29th, 1633, as well as the transfer of the body of Louise, first from the Saint Denis district to 91 rue du faubourg Saint Martin, then to rue des Maçons-Sorbonne. Following this, her remains were transferred to rue du Vieux-Colombier on May 4th 1802 and finally, to the Motherhouse on rue du Bac on June 28th 1815.

In the new edition of 1967, Sister Regnault included her research on the Sisters and gave a retrospective account of the history of the Company. This was a way of introducing an Almanac of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. In the preface, Mother Guillemin emphasised the importance of this updated document: *“The purpose is to help us to better understand and appreciate this great Community of which we are its members, inheritors of the past and builders of its future. The manifestations of God’s Plan for the Company, and the often heroic examples of those who have gone before us will help us, I hope, to better grasp the spirit that should be ours so that it will permeate our entire lives.”* This Almanac was presented in the form of short notes: a Vincentian text of a spiritual nature, an event in the history of the Company, and an incident in the life of a Sister or a Province. Louise de Marillac also had a significant place in this book: it included extracts from her correspondence with Vincent and her Marian spirituality, particularly relating to the Immaculate Conception (which developed long before the apparitions of 1830 and those of 1858 at Lourdes.)

All these writings and others no less significant move us to be grateful for this treasure that is ours. This almanac provides us with a means of taking a shortcut towards a “return to the sources”, something stressed by Vatican II.

1974: “LOUISE DE MARILLAC OR PASSION FOR THE POOR, YESTERDAY AND TODAY”

In the preface written by Father Jamet to Sister Regnault’s book *Passion for the Poor Yesterday and Today*, we read: *“the Company is such as Saint Vincent wanted it to be, and as Mademoiselle Le Gras fashioned it.”* Father Jamet continued: *“If we want to once again make contact with the charism of the Company, it can be done through the teachings of both founders, but it is found even more so in their lives and in the lives of the first Daughters of Charity. And this is also a source of hope, for what grace accomplished in the first “country girls” is possible today, on condition, though, that we discover once again the **vitality** and the **inspiration** that Saint Vincent and Saint Louise inculcated in their daughters: passion for the poor person...”*

The book is presented in two parts, the first of which focuses on the actions of Louise in her contemporary setting, her discovery of the social conditions of her time, the dreadful material and the spiritual poverty that existed, as well as the inner turmoil in her heart. In the face of every form of distress and poverty, she encounters a call from God for “some good to be done,” and this universal experience of poverty gives her “inspiration and wings” for the foundlings, the galley convicts, sick people, young people in poverty, assistance to be given during times of war, elderly people, mentally ill persons, and even forms of poverty outside of France, in response to requests from Marie Gonzague, the Queen of Poland. Vincent and Louise were not content to “do some good”; rather they did it together and with other people.. For example, the Ladies of Charity visited those who were ill and the “Rural Charities” were set up. These works were not without their problems but all was done in a spirit of ongoing collaboration. The source of their actions was Jesus: *“...we must continually have before our eyes our model, the exemplary life of Jesus Christ. We are called to imitate this life, not only as Christians, but as persons chosen by God to serve Him in the person of His Poor”*, as Mademoiselle Le Gras wrote on August 29th 1648.

In the introduction “Today as well as yesterday, listening to the suffering of humanity... in the footsteps of Louise de Marillac” Sister Regnault reminds us that in the 17th century it was human suffering that brought together Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, giant figures of charity, as Blessed Pope John XXIII called them. But what about today? Today as in the past, the creative spirit of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac continues to inspire charity. Today, just as in the past, those inspired by their spirit continue to work in collaboration with others, to respond to human suffering. The names change, but the meaning remains the same:

- Service to children deprived of a loving family life
- Service to young people in distress
- Persons who are blind, deaf, mute, adolescents with problems etc. in France and other countries. Ministry is not limited to alleviating poverty and suffering in France, but extends to every country that experiences suffering, especially among migrant peoples. Simple testimonies tell of Sisters’ actions in times of disasters: floods, earthquakes, etc.

There is no end to the list. Charity is not a garment that is re-cut to adapt to a particular period in history. Charity looks and sees “in advance”. Charity is a fire that lights the way. “The Passion for the Poor” reminds us about what we are committed to: *“God’s affairs are accomplished gradually and almost imperceptibly and His spirit is neither violent nor tempestuous.”* (February 9th, 1642, Coste II, p. 257)

SISTER MARGARET FLINTON

1957: LOUISE DE MARILLAC, SOCIAL ASPECT OF HER WORK.

Dissertation defended at the School of Literature and Language at the University of Paris for a Doctoral Degree at the University – Honours in Literature, by Margaret Flinton, Province of Emmitsburg (USA).

Bishop Jean Calvet, rector emeritus of the Catholic Institute of Paris, wrote the preface, while the author, Sister Margaret Flinton, gave a brilliant introduction, with a focus on the social aspect of Louise de Marillac’s work in the service of “people of all ages and places in their struggles against every type of suffering.”

All the organisational genius of Louise de Marillac is revealed in her charitable activities and foundations, notably that of the Daughters of Charity. Louise is the one who deserves the credit for the spirit and impetus of the Company through the inspiration of Saint Vincent. With “her Daughters” she would come to the aid of the many forms of suffering in the 17th century, choosing the poorest from among those in misery, a choice that the Company must always be ready to adapt in accordance with contemporary needs.

This dissertation was an occasion for Louise de Marillac to be honoured at the Sorbonne, and in this way, the Vincentian spirit penetrated the “intellectual world”. In order to understand more clearly the expression “social aspect”, the author explained how Louise communicated to her daughters her personal love for poor persons, the source of which was the love of Christ. She inculcated in them the practice of honouring God in the poor person in whom God dwells.

The book begins with a summary of the origins of the Company, the personality of Saint Vincent and of his undisputed collaboration with Louise de Marillac in this “social aspect of service”. Several pages recount the formation of the servants of the poor in order for these to pass from the “social” to the “spiritual”. These pages, enjoyable to read, show us Louise’s convictions with regard to service, her respect for life and for individuals. “To serve the poor is to serve God”; poor persons are their “lords and masters” and the daughters would be called: “servants of the poor”.

The issue of abandoned infants

The author traces the history of abandoned children from feudal times, and then describes the situation in the 17th century. Saint Louise was troubled by the dire prospects for these abandoned little ones. She was disturbed when she learned about what was happening at the establishment called La Couche. With Saint Vincent, she appealed to the Ladies of Charity to visit **La Couche**. “*This aristocratic society had a heart, but it was far removed from misery, and had no idea of the horror of it,*” as Bishop Calvet noted in his biography of Louise de Marillac.

Here Vincent, Louise and the Ladies joined forces to address this scourge afflicting society. Not long afterwards, Louise de Marillac and the Daughters of Charity would take charge of correcting this situation. They found a building, sought foster homes and recruited wet nurses. Little by little, Louise formed the Sisters for this new mission.

There was no shortage of difficulties. Vincent heard the cries of distress from his collaborator, but was not willing to give up and abandon the mission: “*The work of the foundlings is in the hands of Our Lord.*” Vincent himself contributed to resolving part of the problem of housing the little ones by building a group of thirteen houses on the Saint-Laurent field near Saint-Lazare. These were twentieth century cottage-type nurseries in miniature.

The ignorance of poor youngsters

Under the direction of Vincent, Louise understood that charity should be accompanied by instruction.

In a very moving account several pages long, we discover Louise behind the work of forming her daughters to be teachers, as Saint Vincent had requested: “*Mon Dieu! how I wish your Sisters would make an effort to learn to read and that they might really know the catechism you are teaching*” (Coste I, p. 305).

The first of these teachers who came to be formed at the school of Louise de Marillac was Marguerite Naseau. Speaking of Marguerite’s previous formation, Vincent declared that she “*never had any other master or mistress than God himself.*” After consulting Monsieur Vincent and asking him if it would be a good idea to open a school, she did this

At the Motherhouse, Saint Louise organised a “Little School” that provided free classes, the first “Little School” under the direction of the Daughters of Charity. In accordance with the custom of the time, from May 29th 1641, Louise received authorisation from the Chancellor of Notre Dame, and would have put at the door or a window a sign reading:

*“There is a ‘Little School’ in this building.
Louise de Marillac,
school mistress, teaches young children:
Divine Service, reading, writing, composition and grammar.”*

Should we apply in today’s context the words Saint Vincent addressed to the Sisters about learning the truths of religion? *“Holy Scripture states that well-regulated charity begins with oneself, and the soul must be preferred to the body. Now, the Daughters of Charity must teach poor persons the things necessary for their salvation; therefore, the Sisters themselves have to be instructed first before being able to teach others.”* (Coste X, p. 503)

The misery of galley convicts

“Be mindful of prisoners as if you were sharing their imprisonment, and of the ill-treated as if this was happening to yourselves, since you, too, for you are in the one body.” (Heb. 13:3)

In October 1655, when he was speaking to the Sisters about the service of galley convicts, Saint Vincent exclaimed: *“Ah! Sisters, what a happiness to serve those poor convicts abandoned into the hands of persons who have no pity for them! ...that caused God to be moved with compassion...to have them served by His own daughters, because to say a Daughter of Charity is to say a daughter of God.”* (Coste X, 103)

The author describes over several pages the state of these condemned men for whom Monsieur Vincent became “**Chaplain General of the galleys**”. Pious and charitable persons went down into the prisons to instruct and console the convicts. Was Louise de Marillac one of these visitors? Her own writings and her biographers furnish no details about this but Louise had all the qualities needed to organise the **service to the convicts**. In 1640, she drafted a set of regulations about treating the prisoners with respect and gentleness, how to deal with the guards, and to organise charity while respecting those in authority. Louise’s first priority was to reform sanitary conditions in the galleys. She also understood that collaboration with the Ladies of Charity, whom she had personally initiated into visiting the galley convicts, would facilitate the spiritual assistance as well as the corporal service provided by her Daughters. It was a difficult task, and it was important not to be overwhelmed by it: *“Isn’t that doing what we’ve said: honouring the great charity of Our Lord, who assisted all the most wretched sinners, without taking their crimes into consideration?”* Coste X, 93)

The isolation of elderly people

The author introduces this chapter with several pages of background information on the situation of beggars: an increase in the level of poverty and

indifference to works of charity. Vincent and Louise tried to find a solution to mendacity in Paris. They collaborated in organising the Hospice of the Holy Name of Jesus, which served as a residence for poor workers whose advanced age or infirmity prevented them from earning a living.

Approbation was “given to the work by His Excellency, the Archbishop of Paris, on March 16th 1654, and that of the king in the month of November. His Majesty recognised this new Hospice dedicated, as it were, to God. For that reason he granted it exemption from all taxes on food...”

1653 is the date unanimously given for the opening of the hospice which received and lodged forty poor workers, twenty of each sex, in two separate buildings separated from each other but so well arranged that both men and women assembled in the same Chapel to hear Mass without either seeing or speaking to one another.

It was Louise de Marillac who organised the Hospice of the Name of Jesus as a form of service. Vincent and Louise were especially conscious of the liberty of these poor persons and respected their dignity. Work provided an excellent way of coping with solitude and loneliness which are the great suffering of old age...Monsieur and “Mademoiselle” foresaw the need for the aged people to do voluntary work of such a nature as to keep them busy, work that would be “according to their strength and ability in order to avoid idleness.” (words from the dissertation, p. 123-124).

A precious note written by Saint Louise and preserved in the Archives of Rue du Bac emphasises the work of Providence in this situation: “Wishing to meditate before God on this work, the thought came to me to look at it in all its stages; namely, its beginning, its continuation and its completion.” (SW, p. 794)

The work was organised. The founders did not focus simply on material assistance; a Priest of the Mission was to be responsible for their spiritual needs. Saint Vincent himself wanted to give the first conference.

The good reputation of the Hospice created interest in developing similar works...after much hesitation, M. Vincent asked Queen Anne of Austria to give him the Salpetriere building and enclosure.

“The little hospice for forty old people had served as plan and model for that huge hospital which for so many years has served as a shelter for countless unfortunate persons.” (words from dissertation, p. 131)

The suffering of the mentally afflicted

For a long time, Saint Vincent had been interested in people with mental illness, and loved them as Our Lord loves them. He felt called to improve their living conditions. He even preached a mission to them. The priests of the Tuesday Conferences went in turn to catechise these poor sick persons. Several years later, Louise de Marillac agreed to send the daughters to *Les Petites Maisons*. This hospice was built on the site of what is currently a park next to the Bon Marche in Paris.

Vincent de Paul realised that there was nothing attractive about the work. He said to the Sisters: *“At Les Petites Maisons, the patients are insane; they are extremely hard to handle, and always cranky. They are always fighting. Oh! it is so beyond description that I can give you no idea of what it is like. They are so lacking in sociability that they cannot live even two together, and it was found necessary to separate them. Each one attends to his own cooking.”*

Neither Vincent nor Louise was appalled by the task each was asked to assume at the *Petites Maisons*. Together they prepared their Daughters for this beautiful mission. At the request of Louise de Marillac, Vincent gave a talk to the Sisters to make them recognise the good that could be accomplished and the way in which they were to go about the work. Encouraged by his words of faith, the Sisters entered into this new mission. Saint Vincent went there regularly to visit the residents. There is not sufficient documentation available to provide details of the administration and methods used at that time to improve the situation of these unfortunate people.

In conclusion, we can say that Sister Margaret Flinton’s book, *Louise de Marillac, Social Aspect of Her Work* is a historical as well as spiritual text, one that is the fruit of her relationship with God and the respect she showed for others. This work, painstakingly prepared after years of research, continues to be relevant despite the fact that it is already fifty years since it was published.

SISTER ALFONSA RICHARTZ

VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY: “JOURNEYING WITH VINCENT DE PAUL AND LOUISE DE MARILLAC”

The spirituality and the life of Louise de Marillac were also described by Sister Alfonsa Richartz from the Province of Cologne. Twelve conferences have been chosen from among the two volumes published in German between 1986 and 2005: *“Journeying with Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac”*.

The Daughters of Charity were not the first to benefit from this study. Rather, it was written for religious Sisters whose foundation was based on Saint Vincent, as well as another group called MEGVIS (Vincentian Studies Group of Central Europe).

In the following lines, the author explains what she discovered after much reflection.

“We follow in the footsteps of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, in an ongoing encounter with Christ, whose mysterious presence we discover in persons who are poor. The face of Christ is reflected in diverse and unexpected ways in our daily life. It may seem at first glance that my reflections lack a sense of unity. However, they are as closely connected as links in a chain. We honour Vincent de Paul and his special way of seeing Christ. Vincent knew that he was sent by Christ to evangelise the poor.. For Vincent, a poor person was a sign of God, a holy sign. Jesus Christ is in the heart of the poor person “and that’s as true as that we are here.”

The poor person is a messenger from God; it was a poor man who revealed the presence of Jesus Christ to Vincent the priest. Afterwards, in the light of events at Chatillon, a transformation took place and the poor person became for Vincent the person of Christ himself.

Vincent was a man of action. He took some passages from the evangelists Luke and Matthew as his life project. In Chapter 4, Saint Luke describes the first time that Jesus preached, and Vincent concluded that in the present time, here and now, the evangelisation of poor persons was being accomplished. Jesus became human and came to earth for poor people, and Vincent de Paul saw that he had to continue this mission as “another Christ”, knowing that Christ was working in and through him. *“Our actions are no longer human or angelic actions, but rather God’s actions, since they are done in and through him.”*

Inspired by the words of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew, *“I was...sick and you came to visit me.”* (Mt. 25:36), Vincent created the Charities at Chatillon.. He then entered a new world in which values were turned upside down: the poor are the Lords and Masters. It is natural, then, for us to serve Our Lord in the transfigured person of the poor.

This is the spirit in which Louise de Marillac, who was a great help to Vincent, initiated the first Sisters into their new activities. Having the honour of teaching these women, she and Vincent de Paul established the foundations needed to sustain this community through the centuries that would follow. When she was a young wife and mother, Louise went through a period of profound despair and experienced the grace of enlightenment by the Holy Spirit. In this Light of Pentecost, Louise accepted the spiritual guide presented to her, for she saw God’s will in it and believed it to be a sign of God’s love.

In this way, Vincent de Paul began to guide Louise in a gentle way, respecting her own spirituality, with sensitivity, giving her wise counsel and helping to dissipate her worries and moderate her impatience. Louise abandoned herself to God’s will and Vincent taught her how to be docile to the Divine will, in order to carry out the mission of service to persons living in poverty.

From that time on, the poor became the focus and goal of her actions. Louise wanted to do as the Son of God did, serving with compassion and humility. She guided the young Sisters to serve Christ when going out to take care of those in poverty and misery. In the face of this suffering, she believed that the Passion of Christ is the only liberating force. The Crucified One reminded her of Christ’s suffering and his unbounded liberating love. The Cross gave Louise the strength and sense of hope needed to respond to every form of human suffering.

The love of Christ is linked to the sufferings he endured for us on the cross. This is love through the imitation of Christ together with a reflection on Mary that deepens over time. *“And from whom can we learn these virtues of yours, if not from your Mother?”* Louise identified the Company with John the disciple, who was confided to Mary and who learned from her the practice of virtue.

Throughout the course of her life, Louise understood more and more the connection between Mary's virginity and her dignity as Mother of God. She continually prayed that God would grant the Sisters purity in thought, word and action and that they might live as Mary herself had lived. Louise chose the Virgin Mary as the "Only Mother of the Company". The Sisters are called to imitate her life in order to serve Christ by lovingly dedicating their lives to poor persons, remaining always humble and simple.

At Louise's request, Vincent de Paul placed the entire Company under Mary's protection (December 8th 1658), as Mary is the only Mother of the Company.

This uninterrupted devotion to the Immaculate Conception in the Company of the Daughters of Charity reached its peak with the apparitions of Mary to Catherine Labouré and in the prayer "O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you." (November 27th 1830)

The greatest achievement of Louise's life was the formation of hundreds of Sisters who served Christ in the person of the poor, along with the foundation and direction of numerous charitable works that extended even beyond the borders of France.

Today, thousands of Sisters still strive with all their might to witness to the love of Christ Crucified: "*Perfection is found in the practice of true charity*" and "*Love is inventive to infinity,*" as Louise and Vincent said.

As members of the Vincentian Family, we live out the charism of Saint Vincent and continue his work. Our goal, as followers of Jesus, is to bring the Good News to persons living in poverty, for "The love of Jesus Christ Crucified urges us."

In our world today Vincentians are called to witness to Gospel values through the example of their lives,. This responsibility calls for a deep interior life and the certainty that the Holy Spirit works through us and in us. It calls for openness to being evangelised too. As we well know, our consumer society presents one of the greatest challenges in the history of the Church's mission. In this context, we must continually renew and increase our inner strength as Vincentians, meditating on the words of Saint Vincent: "*To do what the Son of God did, he who came to set a fire on the earth in order to inflame it with his love.*"

SISTER ELISABETH CHARPY

Sister Elisabeth Charpy the author of several books on Louise de Marillac, prepared two official documents for the Company: a revised edition of the "Grey Book" and the book of Documents relating to the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

LES ECRITS SPIRITUELS (SPIRITUAL WRITINGS), 1983

In 1983, on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the foundation of the Company, the revised edition of the Writings of Saint Louise was published.

Father Richard McCullen, then Superior General, praised this work in his preface, noting with regret how Saint Louise had been overlooked in the past, but he said that in the present, *“It is now a pressing invitation to as many Daughters of Charity as possible to become familiar with the personal writing of their Foundress.”* Father McCullen added that nothing is more instructive than the two conferences of July 3rd and July 24th, 1660 on the virtues of Louise de Marillac. The preface adds: *“You can but rejoice at seeing an attractive personality of your Holy Mother emerge from the shadows in which her humility had hidden her.”* The Superior General ended his praises with the words of Saint Vincent: *“You did not make yourselves, Sisters; it was she who made you and gave birth to you in Our Lord.”* (Coste, X, 582)

LES DOCUMENTS, 1989 (DOCUMENTS)

This book regrouped the important documents relating to the origins of the Company: letters received by Louise de Marillac, those written and received by the first Sisters, writings concerning the life of the Company, and advice and counsel. Documents relating to Louise de Marillac were collated in an appendix at the end of the book.

Father McCullen thanked Sister Charpy who “with much attention and love, brought together in the pages of this book, matters of such great interest relating to our Founders, and did this in an accessible style and attractive format...” He hoped that she, and all those who read this book, would rejoice and be glad at the wonders that the Lord accomplishes in his saints.

These two volumes, now considered official documents, are translated into the main languages of the Company. This allows the Sisters to work with the “sources”.

Later, Sister Elisabeth wrote several books which help us discover Louise de Marillac’s holiness. In the midst of such a vast range of activities, Louise acquired and nurtured a profound interior life that made her a saint. Cardinal Pacelli, the future Pius XII, said at the canonisation of Louise de Marillac: *“Daughters of Charity, consider this: Louise de Marillac is one of your own, she is your mother...come and raise your eyes towards the image of your mother, see in her expression and hear in her own words her satisfaction and her encouragement to grow in resemblance to her spiritually, to be worthy ...”*

CONTRE VENTS ET MARÉES, 1988 (COME WIND OR HIGH WATERS)

“Come wind or high waters, preserve your identity,” John Paul II said to the members of the General Assembly who had come to a papal audience in 1985. In this book, Sister Charpy develops this phrase “Come wind or high waters” by applying it to the life of Saint Louise, presenting the light and shadows along her life journey.

LE CHEMIN DE SAINTETÉ DE LOUISE DE MARILLAC, 1988 (THE WAY OF HOLINESS OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC, 1988)

In the preface to this book, Mother Duzan concluded with words that are still relevant: “...*May we, with greater understanding of Saint Louise and assimilating her thoughts little by little, put into practice in our daily life the wise and demanding counsels given to our first Sisters and to each Daughter of Charity who has come after them!...This applies to us today...*”

LA PETITE VIE DE LOUISE DE MARILLAC, 1991
(BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE LIFE OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC)

This account has been made available to the public. It presents Louise as a 17th century woman collaborating with Saint Vincent de Paul in the service of poor persons, abandoned children, galley convicts, and sick people. Louise de Marillac brings all her feminine values to these works. A true and solid friendship which respected the personality of each of them united these two great saints. In her introduction, the author asks the question: Why does history seem to have overlooked this humble and unobtrusive collaborator of M. Vincent? This “brief account” offers some answers.

UN FEU DÉVORANT, 1994
(A CONSUMING FIRE)

This book is a collection of meditations and prayers by Saint Louise. In the introduction, the author presents the origins of these texts which demonstrate how the love of God permeated every aspect of Louise de Marillac’s life. She was “*consumed with a deep desire: that all might understand that God is absolute.*” This little book calls attention to the depth and relevance of her spiritual message.

LA SPIRITUALITÉ DE LOUISE DE MARILLAC, 1995
(THE SPIRITUALITY OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC)

The spirituality of Louise is presented in a simple and clear way, revealing the profound unity she achieved between prayer, theological culture and commitment. In reviewing her spiritual journey, we can discover its various stages. Louise de Marillac guided her Daughters along new pathways, in response to the needs of the poor in their day.

CONCLUSION

These written works of Daughters of Charity in the 20th century have helped to bring Louise out of oblivion. It is interesting to note that people who belonged neither to the Company nor the Congregation of the Mission pointed out this lack of familiarity with our Foundress. In an ascetic and mystical journal published in 1922, there is a twelve page chapter on Louise de Marillac, “*chosen by Monsieur Vincent to assist him in everything...*” “*she gave a soul to the works of Monsieur Vincent, her own soul*”. How can we explain the silence that surrounded her memory for more than 300 years, while Gobillon, her historian and contemporary, expressed his admiration and concluded “*She was an ever-moving star, incessantly spreading her light and influence. The place that she held in the Church and in society now remains vacant, for Louise de Marillac, extraordinary in virtue, was the creative genius of*

charitable works, a faithful model of the person of Christ presented in the image of the Good Samaritan.”

(To be continued)

Sister Claire Herrmann
Archives Service

Jubilee Year

to commemorate the 350th
anniversary

of the death

of the Founders