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SISTER EVELYNE FRANCO, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Letter of 26th November 2009

To all Daughters of Charity

Dear Sisters,

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

This brief message that I am sending to you is first of all to wish you very happy and holy feast days of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal and Saint Catherine. I also wish you a joyful celebration of the Anniversary of the Foundation of the Company and an Advent of grace with Mary, a season that prepares us “to meet the Saviour who is to come...vigilant in prayer and joyful in praise.” (cf *Marialis Cultus* 4). I take the opportunity as well to share some community news with you.

You will surely have been following the reports of the natural disasters that in recent months have affected Indonesia, Philippines and Central America, to mention only those Provinces most devastated by these events. On each occasion, our Sisters have joined forces to care for those who have been injured, to feed those who are hungry, and to console those who have been affected. Our Sisters have been comforted both spiritually and materially by the “Company without borders”. Let us all continue to pray for all the people involved. Despite these frequent trials, their courage in rebuilding and beginning anew is admirable.

Last week, the General Council held its second Special Council Meeting dedicated, among other topics, to a reflection on future international formation

sessions, in response to the desires expressed by the General Assembly. During one of our meetings, Sister Germaine Price presented a report on the activities in which she and her team are involved in various United Nations Commissions. She explained to us how much they appreciate the responses that have been sent in by several Provinces who participated in a survey on reinsertion of marginalised persons into society. These responses truly represent your understanding at the grass-roots level and provide very concrete suggestions to remedy the difficulties associated with this reinsertion. I urge you to continue to weave this network of communication among us. It complements the corporal and spiritual service that we provide in the four corners of the world, in collaboration with so many women and men of good will. It also helps bring to light the flagrant injustices present in our societies.

We will be united in celebrating our Community Triduum, in thanksgiving to the Blessed Virgin for having given the world the message of the Miraculous Medal, through a Daughter of Charity as intermediary. This message is very much in keeping with Saint Louise's devotion to the Lord of Charity and her confidence that Mary would keep watch over the Little Company. Isn't it appropriate that we reflect more deeply on our Vincentian roots and the spiritual legacy of our Founders during this Jubilee Year in which we recall the 350th anniversary of the death of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise? Could this not be a fitting occasion to open new avenues where we live, pathways not yet well-marked or courses that are still uncertain? A Community event such as this should also be an impetus for us to invite children and young people to become involved in a Vincentian activity for those most in need.

Let us enter wholeheartedly into this Advent season, as we prepare to welcome the Mystery, this time of silent hope, as we wait for joy to break forth. Let us contemplate Mary, the simple young woman of Nazareth, who completely trusted the Word of God that dwelt within her and fashioned her, and who was completely focused on the event to come while remaining available to the needs of others. Let us take her as our guide, and with her, let us be open to the transforming Spirit! With my devoted affection and the assurance of my prayers for each of you,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

FATHER G. GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

Advent 2009

To all the members of the Vincentian Family

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

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

During the time that I was director of the internal seminary in Panama, and at the same time pastor of the parish where the internal seminary was located, I and another confrere did a special programme during Advent with the intention of purifying the meaning of Christmas. It was a campaign against the figure of Santa Claus and in favour of El Niño Dios, the Child God. We ran the campaign throughout the whole of Advent and then had a symbolic expression of purifying the meaning of Christmas during the penitential rite of the Christmas Eve celebration.

What brought about this pastoral action on the part of my confrere and myself was seeing the subtle change that was taking place in the area in which we were working pastorally. When I first arrived in Panama the experience of Christmas was always focused on the birth of the Child Jesus, El Niño Dios. The emphasis was clearly a religious focus on the birth of God into the life of humanity. And yet, little by little, over the years, in and through intensive marketing techniques, the concept of Christmas slowly began to be replaced by images of the commercial side of Christmas with the appearance of the Santa Claus figures in all the stores and then even given away as gifts to the people to put in their homes and on their front doors, as decorations for the season. It was sad to see how in a very subtle and cunning marketing way the true meaning of Christmas was being replaced by increasing people's desires to participate in a consumer society.

This Christmas, especially in this time of Advent, I'd like to focus on it being a time of bringing back the true meaning of Christmas and purifying our attitudes with regard to what we are really about in this most significant liturgical season of our Christian faith. It is about the birth of God into our lives in and through the person of the Child God, Jesus, a theme so important in the spirituality of our own Saint Vincent de Paul, God becoming flesh, becoming one with us in order that we might become like God in our relationships one with another, especially with the poor.

This Advent season, I'd like us to think about and reflect on a particular aspect of the Christmas season which is so important; to understand the birth of the Lord Jesus as one who comes to bring to the world peace and harmony. He is the Prince of Peace as we reflect on the scriptures throughout the Advent-Christmas season. What has moved me to want to speak more in depth and to have us reflect on the subject of peace is the actual world situation in which we live today.

We see all around us in every corner of the globe destructive situations, wars between nations, violence between peoples, even neighbourhoods with gang violence, and in the very homes, domestic violence. In such a violent atmosphere in which we live world-wide, there is a search, a struggle, an anxiety to live with greater security. Often nations try to find "security" in and through having more weapons and greater power to destroy the enemy. This sort of security only causes more anxiety. It is not true security.

There are many who say that since the experience of September 11th in the United States we have been living in a world that looks for its own security to the point where we become unconscious or unaware or even indifferent towards securing true peace and security for others outside our own circle. We adopt attitudes of wanting to be protective of what we own, closing in on ourselves. We try to be close

to what we know and even close to what we consider home, giving us an illusion of security.

The consumer attitude which is creeping into all levels of our global village is highlighted in the Christmas season. We are challenged to turn to the Prince of Peace who, in and through the promotion of His Father's kingdom, calls forth attitudes that produce true harmony and good relationships among all peoples.

I want to suggest a specific point for our reflection that has to do with the promotion of peace and harmony in the world in which we live, first and foremost shown through open concern for the needs of others.

In view of the celebration of the 350th Anniversary of the death of Saint Louise and Saint Vincent in 2010, the international leaders of the Vincentian Family have named a Projects Committee to develop a specific initiative in favour of the poorest of the poor that would involve all the branches of the Family. From among the options suggested, the leaders selected a pilot project in micro-finance based in Haiti. Micro-finance, combined with educational programmes and social services, has proved to be an effective instrument in transforming the lives of many who are experiencing poverty. It is anticipated that such a pilot project could serve as a model that could be followed in other places.

I encourage all of us this Christmas season, especially when we want to consider giving of ourselves to others through gifts, to do this in breaking the consumer attitudes that often are deeply rooted within our lives, attitudes that perhaps we are not quite aware of and which can very often lead to attitudes of those who have and those who have not, and therefore cause divisions instead of bringing about harmony among peoples. It is negative attitudes like these when pushed to the extreme that bring about the violence and destruction we experience in our world today. Most times violence is caused by the very fact that people don't have their basic needs met. They fall into the trap of violence in order to secure for themselves a better way of life.

Let us, as a Vincentian Family, this Advent season, reflect on wanting to change attitudes from a consumer society tendency, to a giving of oneself or giving of alternative gifts to those in need as a concrete way of promoting harmony and peace.

I suggest a second point for our reflection regarding the promotion of peace. In these days prior to Advent, we had a request on the part of the international council of Pax Christi, to visit our Curia in Rome. We cordially created that space and opportunity for the International Board of Pax Christi to speak to us. Present at that meeting were one of my Assistants, one of the Daughters of Charity who works on our staff, and a confrere who is very supportive in the area of justice and peace actions that we want to be open to and promote as an international Vincentian Family. I think it might be worth our while to investigate and reflect on the possibility of being connected to such an international movement as Pax Christi.

Pax Christi began at the end of the Second World War when a group of French and German people came together to pray, to seek reconciliation and to work towards peaceful new beginnings after years of bitter conflict. That same spirit continues to

inspire the international Pax Christi movement today by bringing together ordinary people from many different backgrounds and cultures as they shape and act upon their sacred vision of peace, reconciliation and justice for all. In a world shaken by violence, terrorism and deepening inequalities and global insecurity, that vision is needed more than ever.

Let me share a little bit more about Pax Christi for your own personal reflection. Pax Christi is a world-wide Catholic group for peace. Some member organisations in the Pax Christi network have grown from different roots and even use a different name. But all share the conviction that peace is possible and the vicious cycles of violence and injustice can be broken. As a faith-based group, Pax Christi international seeks to have a transforming influence, making religion an unequivocal force for peace and justice. It is Catholic in its origin and tradition, and firmly committed to cooperation with other religious traditions and with all who share its objectives.

Working for peace implies working against violence and Pax Christi International carries out research into the root causes of violence. Pax Christi International gives priority to non-violent means of resolving conflict and this includes strengthening the basis of a peaceful society: human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Pax Christi promotes peace education, youth work, training in peace-making skills, mediation and non-violent action. Pax Christi works to create a culture of peace and helps people as they move toward reconciliation and more hopeful futures.

What can we do? I suggest, my brothers and sisters, that as a Vincentian Family, we explore in our daily lives and in our personal commitment to serving those living in poverty, ways to deepen our affirmation of justice and peace. I know that we are already doing this, but the Christmas Season brings the special opportunity to renew our response. This should be the bottom line commitment of anyone who lives the charism of Saint Vincent de Paul, who so often looked for harmony and peace especially for the poor who are often the victims of violence, destruction and war. We can support the work of Pax Christi through our own work and prayer, and giving them publicity as I am doing here in this Advent letter. Pax Christi International welcomes financial help in its efforts to eradicate violence and to foster a culture of peace so much needed in our world today.

My brothers and sisters, as we begin this Advent season reflecting on the true meaning of Christmas let us do so by being promoters of peace, especially in a society that is prone to violence – this type of society which is often caused by a world that is selfish and materialistic and bent on consuming. We know that this creates division rather than harmony. Let's reflect on the true meaning of Christmas in and through the birth of the Lord Jesus, and put aside other images that our world has created and which are only meant to satisfy our own personal and materialistic needs rather than being concerned about giving to others.

As Vincentian Family, we bring together people from many different backgrounds and cultures as we attempt to shape and act upon our shared vision of peace, reconciliation and justice for all. This is very much at the heart of our spirituality.

As Saint Vincent de Paul said: “Ask His Divine Goodness to give the Company the spirit of union for we have been established to reconcile souls with God and people with one another” (Coste XI, p. 6).

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

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

FATHER J ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Outline for the monthly day of reflection and prayer

“The Lord is faithful for ever”

(Psalm 116, 2).

Fidelity is a value which in our times is not held in such high esteem by society as it used to be. The rapid and profound changes that have taken place in people’s way of thinking and the irresistible tendency to go in search of whatever is new in all spheres of life, have led to the meaning of fidelity being called into question. It is no longer considered to be an important value that is recognised the world over, at least this is so in the West where people have got used to not honouring their commitments important or otherwise, and this is taken as normal. People have become accustomed to living in a culture which uses and then discards everything very quickly and this includes even the most important experiences and the most serious life choices.

So it is in the context of a culture where everything seems to bear the label “provisional” that we are asked to faithfully live out our Vincentian vocation. This immediately gives rise to questions: Is fidelity possible today? What is meant by being faithful to our God-given vocation? How can we live and grow in greater fidelity? Perhaps the first idea that we spontaneously associate with fidelity is that of perseverance, that is to say, continuing to follow our vocation and living in the community until we die. But there are other dimensions to this fidelity, for example, we have to struggle against routine as we nourish the flame of our vocation, we have to be enthusiastic in keeping to the commitments of service, we must not fall into the trap of living a “middle class” and less demanding life style.....All these things are implicit in the expression “creative and audacious fidelity.” For Saint Vincent, fidelity meant, more than anything else, constancy and perseverance in one’s vocation. This is very clear from his conferences to the first Sisters on 22nd September 1647 and 3rd June 1643. However, in another conference which he gave on 4th March 1658, he emphasises another aspect of fidelity: *“But I have been in the Company so many years.” It is not by the length of time that one judges if a girl is worthy to bear this beautiful name of Daughter of Charity, but whether she is*

*interiorly clad with this robe of charity, and the love of God and her neighbour. That is what makes a Daughter of Charity.*¹

THE BASIC FOUNDATIONS OF FIDELITY

Sacred Scripture tells us about God's relationship with his people. From the beginning of time, from humanity's earliest days, God has shown his love for the human race. He took the initiative and he faithfully continues to do so across the centuries in spite of the sins and infidelities of the Chosen People. God's commitment to the human race reached its peak in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Our human fidelity is based on God. In fact, for those who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ there can be no other means of support and because God is faithful to his promises and his steadfast love is without end, we ourselves can be faithful to our Christian and Vincentian vocation. In the Bible there are numerous references to God's faithfulness. In the Psalms, for example, countless invocations express trust in God. These invocations are made in the most diverse human situations: in times of tranquillity and peace, in persecution and weariness, in times of discouragement and perplexity etc. *"The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want. Fresh and green are the pastures where he gives me repose."* (Ps 22, 1-2). *"I waited and waited for Yahweh, now at last he has stooped to me and heard my cry for help."* (Ps 40, 2). *"Yahweh, you yourself are my lamp, my God lights up my darkness"* (Ps 18, 29). *"When I am in trouble you come to my relief."* (Ps 4,2).

It seems clear that our fidelity is based on God because, as Saint Paul says, without him we can do nothing (cf I Cor 12, 3). But Scripture also tells us that the measure of our faithfulness is in proportion to the trust we have in him. Abraham is a clear proof of this. His story is one of fidelity because his trust in God was tested to the limit. It is not for nothing that the New Testament presents him as a model of faith. God gives him a command which is, at the same time, a promise, *"Leave your countryI will make of you a great nation."*(Gen 12, 1-4). Abraham believed. Faith prompted him to act against common sense and the laws of nature and yet, *"he left without knowing where he was going."* (Hb, 11,8). Years passed but no sign came that he would be the father of a great nation, he didn't even have the son God had several times promised him. If we reflect on Abraham's innermost feelings we can understand his doubts and his sufferings as he grew older and God continued to remain silent. However, he went on believing in God's promises in spite of the physical changes that he and his wife were subject to.

At last God sent him the son he had so much longed for and this event strengthened his faith. However, God put him to a final test, a terrible "dark night" so as to purify, once and for all, his fidelity. *"Take your son, your only son,"* God said to him, *"Isaac, the one whom you love, and go to the country of Moriah where you will offer him in sacrifice on the altar I will point out to you."* (Gen 22, 1-3). Let us try to understand Abraham's feelings at that moment – for many years he had longed for a son, he now felt he was growing old and he lost hope of ever having any descendants. One day God promised that he would have this son. Abraham believed because all

¹ Cf. Coste X p. 461, Conference given by Saint Vincent to the first Sisters on 4th March 1658 on "Mutual charity and the duty of reconciliation."

things are possible with God. After several more years of hope and despair the child of the promise was born and Abraham could now die in peace. It is precisely at this last stage of his life that God asked him to sacrifice his son, against all human logic and the most elementary common sense. Yet Abraham continued to trust in God (Gen 22, 3-12). We see how he gave himself to God in complete abandonment and trusted God completely- all this without any reservation and against common sense. This is why Abraham was able to remain faithful all his life and we can be sure this was no easy matter.

Abraham's story clearly shows us the two faces of fidelity: on the one hand there is the faithfulness of God who always fulfils his promises, and on the other hand there is the human response which can take different forms according to how much the person trusts in God.

THE FIDELITY OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

The Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* constantly uses the phrase "*fidelity to the charism*"² to describe the different ways in which the various religious families in the Church follow Christ. It is well aware that the variety of charisms is a precious gift that the Holy Spirit, the source of all gifts, desired for the Church which vigorously and with conviction defends this diversity. Saint Vincent recommended the Sisters to respect and admire all forms of the religious life but he also repeatedly asked them to love and be faithful to the new way of life that God had inspired the Founder of the Company to establish in his Church. With this in mind, it is not enough for the Daughters of Charity to be faithful, in a general way, to the Gospel, the Christian life and the Church. The fidelity practised by the Daughters of Charity must necessarily be linked to the essential elements that speak of the Company's particular reason for existing in the Church. Moreover, faithfulness has to give added impetus to the life and work of a Daughter of Charity – otherwise fidelity would be something more dead than alive. Let us see how this fidelity can be put into practice.

A chosen vocation.

It is not just a matter of preserving one's vocation, resisting temptations against it or persevering, even if we find it hard to do this in spite of spiritual aridity. To look on fidelity purely in these terms would be to diminish it. Faithfulness cannot be a matter, either, of spiritual debility, with routine or with a purely professional service of those who are poor. Fidelity is never just a passive virtue but something dynamic and audacious, which makes us aim high and looks to the future. It is not content with what has been achieved so far but is always purifying still more the reasons which led the person to make this response to their vocation and follow Jesus Christ in the Company. The Constitutions ask the Daughters of Charity to take their formation seriously in order to "*acquire convictions that strengthen and unify [their] total gift of self to God.*" (C. 50). This choice of life which was made a short or a long time ago, continues to irrigate every aspect of this life: the person's will, their intelligence, their activities, motivations and conduct.

² See, for example, articles 52a, 56a, 65c...

Given to God..., in community..., for the service of Christ in those who are poor.” (Constitutions, C.II). Fidelity impels the Daughters of Charity to live out the three dimensions of their life in a symbiotic, unified way, without separating these aspects because otherwise their faithfulness would be fragmented: serving the poor but not giving one’s life completely to God would not make sense for them. *“It is not enough to serve the poor,”* Saint Vincent told the first Sisters,³ there are many people who do this for very different reasons. The Daughter of Charity has to serve them because this service is a way of showing that her life is totally given to God. Article 16b of the Constitutions is very clear on this point: *“Service is for them the expression of their total gift of self to God in the Company and gives it its full significance.”* Service which does not have God as its source weakens the other dimensions of vocation and inexorably leads to professionalism, that is to say, service that has no soul. When we enter into the Vincentian mystique, we find the strength to serve even when this is difficult and demanding. In his book *“The city of joy”*, Dominique Lapierre tells how on one occasion an American journalist went to India to meet Mother Teresa of Calcutta. He found her looking after a sick man who had a very repulsive wound. He said to her, “Mother Teresa I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars”... “neither would I” was her reply.

We know that according to Vincentian spirituality community is for mission. There are two other aspects of authentic fidelity. How can we live these two very different concepts in a harmonious way? We will manage to do this to the extent that the local community prepares, organises and revises the mission. The community gives its members strength to carry out the mission while the mission is a source of enrichment for community relationships. There can be no doubt that close, friendly relationships are important if the members are to live out these seemingly opposite concepts at a deep level because if these are lacking, sisters’ thoughts and enthusiasm will turn towards service and they will become increasingly absorbed in their work. In order to live out community and mission in a harmonious way a Sister must give herself entirely to the community and at the same time take seriously the service entrusted to her. If one of these two elements is disregarded then fidelity will be compromised.

The spirit of the Company.

Being faithful will lead the Daughter of Charity to identify with her own special spirit. Saint Vincent was well aware that the Daughters of Charity were not the only persons in the Church to work for poor people. He said to them, *“You must know the difference that exists between your Company and many others that profess, as you do, to help the poor but not in the same way.”*⁴ He went on to add, *“You should know then, my dear Sisters, that the spirit of your Company consists of three things: to love Our Lord and serve Him in a spirit of humility and simplicity. As long as charity, humility and simplicity exist amongst you, one may say, “The Company of Charity is still alive” but when these virtues are no longer to be seen, then one may say, “The poor Company of Charity is dead.” ...Where is the charity of a Sister who has no humility or simplicity, and who does not serve the poor with kindness and love? She*

³ Cf. Coste X p. 615; Conference given by Saint Vincent to the first Sisters on 25th November 1658 on “The duties of the Day.”

⁴ Cf. Coste IX, p.591, Conference given by Saint Vincent to the first Sisters on 9th February 1653 on “The spirit of the Company.”

*is dead. But if she has these three virtues she is alive, for that is the life of her spirit.”...Whoever sees you should know you by these three virtues.”*⁵ In order to understand the importance of this excerpt we have to think about the context in which Saint Vincent gave this conference. He himself said, *“If ever there was a useful conference, this is one.(the conference on the spirit of the Company). If there is anything in the world you should ask God for it is your spirit.”*⁶

Saint Vincent explained in detail, and in the language of his day, the special connection between fidelity and the spirit of the Company. The Constitutions present us with an updated version of the three specific virtues that comprise this spirit (cf. articles 13 and 18). But the most important thing is to know how to grow spiritually and put into practice the three virtues that characterise it and give a particular colouring to the identity of the Company. I am convinced that good initial and ongoing formation can greatly help the Daughters of Charity to grow in their spirit.

NURTURING FIDELITY

All the experts on Saint Vincent are unanimous in paying tribute to his realism and his common sense in all matters. It is true that he had very lofty convictions but he lived them out with his feet firmly on the ground. On one occasion when he was speaking to the first Sisters about the need to practise fidelity, he began by describing a situation that could certainly be true in his times as well as in our own. This is what he says, *‘But, Sir’ someone will say to me, “I confess that for a year or perhaps six months, I was so fervent that I flew, I used to go to serve the poor so gladly. I used to say such beautiful things to them, I had so much satisfaction in listening to spiritual reading, in talking of God and hearing others talk of Him and everything seemed easy to me. But now everything is quite the contrary, for I have lost all that; I no longer have any fervour; I no longer do anything save for form’s sake; spiritual reading and conferences do not touch me; if I go to serve the poor it is only because I have to.”*⁷

It is only to be expected that people who walk should feel weary after the journey. So as the years go by, the person who has answered the call begins to feel weary, she feels physically, psychologically and even spiritually weaker. The dark night is not reserved only for those whom God has called to the highest peaks of the spiritual life. It is a more or less frequent happening for those who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ and to serve poor people. We should look on this as a necessary trial that is meant to purify us. When we feel fatigue and weariness it is precisely the time for us to revive, nurture and reaffirm that fundamental attitude we call fidelity. Fatigue and weariness are not always caused by our personal interior dispositions. Sometimes it is society that makes it difficult for us to follow the path of our vocation, either because of the disbelief and secularism that shake the convictions of faith, or because of the attacks made by a consumer society which tend to destabilise us in our vocation and mission. In any case, we have to reaffirm our commitment to fidelity in order that the flame of our vocation will continue to burn. Let us look at some of the means of doing this.

⁵ Cf. Coste IX, p.594-595-596. Conference given by Saint Vincent to the first Sisters on 9th February 1653 on “The spirit of the Company.”

⁶ Cf. Coste IX, p.607. Conference given by Saint Vincent to the first Sisters on 24th February 1653 on “The Spirit of the Company.”

⁷ Coste IX p. 633, Conference given by Saint Vincent to the first Sisters on “Fidelity to God.”

Fostering our relationship with God in prayer

From what has just been said, we see that God is the foundation of fidelity and also that our fidelity is strengthened in prayer and our personal relationship with Him. *“I know who it is that I have put my trust in, and I have no doubt at all that he is able to take care of all that I have entrusted to Him until that Day.”* (2 Tim 1, 12). These words were written by Saint Paul to his disciple, Timothy, during a very difficult period in his life. Paul had been betrayed by the Christians of Asia and he was in prison. His abandonment to God and trust in the One who holds the destiny of the world in his hands, strengthened even more, his vocation.

I would like to stress the importance of personal prayer in building up fidelity and giving new strength for our vocation journey. (cf. C 21). Deep personal prayer every day builds a solid spirituality, emotional balance and great stability in one’s vocation. This is because personal prayer that is made seriously and with perseverance, has an effect on the person and transforms them interiorly. Gradually their criteria, their feelings and their conduct change. They become more transparent, more open and more inclusive. Deep personal prayer creates personal liberty and permeates the whole range of the emotions.

Living our daily lives to the full. Our life span on this earth drains away day after day, the hours follow one another and we cannot live it in any more concentrated form. It is like an ever-flowing river; the past is already out of our reach, the future hasn’t happened yet and that leaves only the present in which we are to live. So it is good for us to live out the present well, to give meaning to all that we do. In this way we will be sure of doing God’s will and our vocation will blossom. Doing God’s will is the surest path to fidelity, the best guarantee of a successful life. Pope John XXIII liked to say, “I am like an empty sack that God wishes to fill. My one concern is to do his will day after day. I assure you this is the greatest way to live.” Saint Vincent said almost exactly the same thing: *“Oh! What happiness...to be doing God’s will always and in all things.”*⁸

The Gospel urges us to learn the wisdom contained in small things in order to be faithful in big ones: *“Well done, good and faithful servant: because you have shown you can be faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master’s happiness.”*(Mt 25, 21). Commenting on this scriptural text, Saint Vincent said, *“So then, my dear Daughters, to be faithful in little things is everything.”* By these little things we mean everyday life: this service, this work, this community time, this prayer, this sisterly visit, using our time well, etc. It means living an ordinary life in an extraordinary way because such a way of living in the present gives fullness and meaning to everything in life. It also allows us to keep the ideal we chose to follow ever alive and active and it gives direction to our lives. In other words, a person’s response to God’s will is shown by constant vigilance and we can be sure that this will give us great joy as we continue our vocation journey.

Being able to appreciate community life

⁸ Coste IX p.315, Conference to the Missioners given on 15th October 1655 on “Conformity to the will of God

There can be no doubt at all that the community is an important aid to fidelity and recognising this is simply a matter of justice. People who judge community life too harshly blind themselves to seeing calmly all that is good in it.

To begin with, this community life accepts each Sister and provides her with the necessary means to make progress in the different aspects of her Vincentian life. God himself presents us with people who, called by Him just as we were, will help us along the path of fidelity. The community helps us to advance in our vocation in many ways: for example, the Eucharist, the powerful bond of being Sisters, community sharing, sisterly correction, times of relaxation, the service of the poor carried out in the name of the Community, the blessing of the elderly Sisters' prayers, etc. Looking back on this list of things that help us, we should remember that each one of us has the duty to build community. This might be a way of saying that each one has to help safeguard her Sister's fidelity. The question that Cain put to God at the dawn of humanity ("*Am I my brother's keeper?*") shows a lack of true solidarity. In the light of the Gospel, this question has become the avowal, "Of course I am my brother's keeper."

The anniversary dates that mark our vocation and jubilees celebrated in community should be good occasions for strengthening the spirit of our vocation and sense of family. Each celebration should be a loving and grateful recognition of God's love for us and the tremendous gift of our vocation.

CONCLUSION: HOW SHOULD WE COOK A FROG?

I will end this reflection on fidelity with a very striking story by the French philosopher Olivier Clerc: Imagine a pan filled with cold water and a frog swimming peacefully in it. Then imagine that someone puts a light under the pan. The water gradually begins to heat up. The frog feels really comfortable in this water which no longer seems so very cold. Little by little the water begins to get warm. The frog continues to swim and thoroughly enjoys itself, suspecting nothing. The temperature of the water continues to rise. Now it is hot. The frog begins to feel a bit uncomfortable, to be rather tired, to have a slight headache, its legs are not able to move as well as they did before, but in spite of all this it is not afraid and it keeps on swimming.

The temperature of the water continues to rise and now the frog feels real discomfort. It stops swimming because its legs have swelled. It would like to jump out of the pan but hasn't now the strength to do so. Its sight is affected and it becomes dizzy. It stays curled up at the bottom of the pan. The water gets even hotter and the frog dies from being cooked. If the frog had been placed in water at a temperature of 50 degrees it would have used its legs to jump out of the vessel but this progressive warming proves deceptive.

Small infidelities in one's vocation can lead to greater infidelities and these to total paralysis and eventual death. Acting in the contrary way is, thank God, equally sure to give good results. The seeds of future fidelity are sown in the present and this is always achieved through commitment to small things. "*Well done, my good and faithful servant. Because you have shown yourself faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master's happiness.*" (Mt 25, 21).

Father Javier Alvarez
Director General

Many thanks for all the holiday greetings and good wishes sent to me on the occasion of my Feast Day, Christmas and the New Year. Some of your greetings included requests for prayers for specific situations. Be assured that I presented to the Lord in a special way all your intentions.

In this New Year 2010 in which we celebrate the 350th anniversary of the death of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, may God grant all of us in the Vincentian Family the grace to become ever more aware of the beauty of our vocation and its value for our world!

Javier Álvarez,
Director General

NOMINATIONS

PROVINCE OF ALBANY, NEW-YORK: Sister Louise GALLAHUE was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Kathleen APPLER, September 8th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF CURITIBA: Sister Paula PEREIRA ALVES was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, September 8th, 2009

PROVINCE OF FRANCE-NORTH: Sister Marie-André CADET was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Françoise PETIT, September 8th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF CALI: Sister Maria Lia GIRALDO HERRERA was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, September 23rd, 2009.

PROVINCE OF CUBA: Sister Fara GONZALEZ CONZALEZ was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Iliana SUAREZ PEREZ, September 23rd 2009.

PROVINCE OF JAPAN: Sister Janet NUNOGAMI was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Madeline HARA, September 23rd, 2009.

PROVINCE OF SLOVAKIA: Sister Alzbeta VOLOSINOVA was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, September 23rd, 2009.

PROVINCE OF SAN SEBASTIEN: Sister Manuela RUBIO AGUADO was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Maria Carmen PEREZ GONZALEZ, October 21st, 2009.

PROVINCE OF PHILIPPINES: Sister Maria Teresa MUEDA was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, November 11th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF PERU: Sister Miguelina FLORIDO PECHEAROVICH was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Marina Isabel MELENDEZ MELENDEZ, December 2nd, 2009.

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PROVINCE OF SAINT LOUIS (USA): Father John Francis CLARK was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, March 11th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF NORTH AFRICA: Father Christian MAUVAIS was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, March 11th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF SANTO DOMINGO: Father Alejandro PAULINO PERALTA was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, October 27th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF BOLIVIA: Father Joel VASQUEZ DUQUE was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, October 28th, 2009.

PROVINCE OF COLOGNE: Father George WITZEL was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, October 28th 2009.

VISIT FROM SUPERIORS

Province of Slovenia

The 90th anniversary of the Province,
visit from Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General,
and Sister Žofia Daniščakova, General Councillor

July 17th – 19th, 2009

There is a Slovenian proverb that says: “short visit – sweet visit”! We experienced this truth when Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, accompanied by Sister Žofia Daniščakova, General Councillor for the Sisters from the Slavic languages, gave us the joy of being with us for two days. It was a short but very full visit. We are grateful to God for this visit which coincided with Mary’s visit to Catherine Labouré 179 years earlier.

The date of July 18th 2009 was chosen for our celebration of the 90th anniversary of the foundation of the Province of Slovenia, former Province of Yugoslavia. That Province had been founded by the Province of Austria in 1919, at the end of World War I. As Sister Bernarda, our Visitatrice, recalled, the Province of Slovenia had spread into Serbia, Croatia, and a bit later, into Macedonia and Kosovo. In those years, the Province experienced a time of real growth. In all the areas where the Sisters worked, they were very close to people living in poverty, serving them with much loving creativity.

Then the times of trial arrived! In 1948, the service of the Sisters in Slovenia was halted by the communist regime. Their works were confiscated and the Sisters were forced to leave the hospitals and other institutions.

The Sisters were dispersed, but in spite of everything, continued to serve those who were suffering wherever they could. Thanks to their courage and fidelity, the Province survived. The witness of the Sisters helped bring about a flourishing of their activities in the south of former Yugoslavia and this allowed for the formation of the Region of Albania in 2000.

So it was in recognition of these many years of fidelity that a huge celebration was organised at the Cultural Centre of Mengeš, in the presence of numerous guests: a cardinal, women and men religious, many Vincentian priests, other clergy, civil authorities, directors of works, the mayor and the inhabitants of the city. All were able to learn about the history of the Province, thanks to a presentation of scenes from history, with folk songs and music, in which many young people participated. Among the guests were the Sisters of the Province of Austria as well as religious of two other congregations founded in the Vincentian spirit.

To mark this anniversary, a huge new building was opened in Mengeš. It had been constructed in accordance with European standards to house the elderly Sisters and in the future, elderly lay people. The building, named “Sister Catherine Labouré”, was blessed on July 18th. Afterwards, a Eucharistic celebration was presided over by Cardinal Rodé, CM, (Prefect of the Congregation for Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life). The house in which Cardinal Rodé, the brother of Sister Cecilia Rodé, was born, is located near the small town of Mengeš where the Daughters of Charity have been serving poor persons for many years. This celebration was a great event for the Sisters, the inhabitants of the country and the large work force who were so pleased to contribute their efforts to building this modern and functional retirement home.

As soon as she arrived on July 17th, Sister Evelyne paid a brief visit to the Daughters of Charity in Ljubljana who gathered together with the community of Ljubljana-Potočnikova. The following day, she first met the Councillors of the

Province of Slovenia and the Region of Albania, and then the sick Sisters living in Mengeš. On July 19th, Sister Evelyne met the Sisters of the Province who had gathered at the Provincial House in Šentjakob and shared with them some key points about community life. Then, joined by Sister Žofia, she visited two Sisters who were patients at the Ljubljana Hospital. Finally, a brief stop to see the two Sisters in the Seminary, a visit that brought them much joy.

The Daughters of Charity of the Province of Slovenia and the Region of Albania will always remember these two days of celebration with the loving presence of Sister Evelyne and Sister Žofia. We praise you, Lord, for the wonders that your goodness brings to us!

Sister Cveta JOST
Correspondent for the Echoes

VISIT FROM SUPERIORS

The 170th anniversary of the presence of the Daughters of Charity in Turkey, visit of Mother Evelyne Franc and Sister Francoise Petit, General Counsellor

October 17th-18th 2009

Introduction

On October 17th 2009, all the Sisters in Turkey went to the airport to welcome our Superiors who had come to celebrate the 170th anniversary of the presence of the Daughters of Charity in that land: Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, Sister Christa Bauer and Sister Francoise Petit, General Councillors, Sister Rita Ferri, Treasurer General, Sister Madeleine Saillard, Visitatrice of the Switzerland-Turkey Province, Sister Angelika Pauer, Visitatrice of Austria and Sister Pia Humbel, future Treasurer General.

On October 18th 2009, the Sisters from Saint George's Austrian Hospital, the Hospital of Peace and Saint Benedict secondary school made the final preparations for the celebration planned in honour of the arrival of the first Daughters of Charity in Turkey in 1839.

On the occasion of this anniversary, we would like to join with our Superiors in expressing our gratitude to the Lord for having called the Little Company for the past 170 years to serve the poor in Turkey.

A bit of history

In order to understand the significance of this day, let us go back in time.

In May 1839, two young Protestant women converted to Catholicism and were baptised and made their first communion. These two young women, Ms. Tournier (originally from Geneva) and Ms. Oppermann (from St. Petersburg) wanted to go even farther. Wanting to consecrate their lives to God and to poor people, they knocked on the door of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity at 140 rue du Bac. The Company hesitated to accept them because of their age which, at that time, was considered rather old.

At this time, Fr. Leleu, Provincial Visitor and Apostolic Prefect of Levant, was hoping to associate the Daughters of Charity with the mission in Turkey, in order to bring about some needed reforms. He pleaded with the Superiors to send some Sisters to collaborate with the Vincentians in serving the poor people in that country.

The Superiors suggested sending these two recent converts there to open a school. If they were successful in this work, some Sisters would join them. Full of hope and courage, these two young women left Paris on June 20th 1839, the date which would mark their entrance into the Company as well.

On July 4th 1839, Sister Bernardine Oppermann and Sister Marie Tournier arrived in Constantinople, where they were welcomed by Fr. Leleu and his confrere, Fr. Pecquet, who helped them move into Saint Benedict house where a French woman held classes. The Sisters collaborated well with her and the project was successful.

Not long afterwards, the Superiors agreed to send two groups of Sisters, one for Smyrna and the other for Constantinople.

On November 21st 1839, the Sisters set out from Marseilles. On December 4th 1839, the first group reached Smyrna. The second group had to wait until stormy weather had passed so they could leave on a steamboat belonging to the royal mail-coach service. On December 8th 1839, the Sisters set foot in Constantinople. That same day, Sisters Bernardine and Marie received the habit of the Daughters of Charity. This was the beginning of the mission in Constantinople.

Over the years the number of local communities grew, with the support of the Vincentians. Many Sisters experienced much happiness and joy; others had a great deal of sadness: some of them lost their lives during times of war or when epidemics ravaged the country. Nevertheless, the mission continued in spite of everything.

Celebrations of October 18th 2009

On that great day, we welcomed our guests. Sister Madeleine Saillard, Visitatrice, opened the celebration and introduced the guests: two members of each religious family, many Vincentians, representatives from Caritas, from Fakirler Dostum (friends of the poor) and the directors of the two French establishments (Hospital of Peace and Saint Benedict School). A total of 97 persons joyfully gathered around three large tables: the “Vincent de Paul” table presided over by our bishop, the “Louise de Marillac” table, presided over by Sister Evelyne Franc, and the “Marguerite Naseau” table presided over by our new General Councillor from France. The atmosphere was very friendly and joyous. Mr. Rinaldo Marmara presented a newly published book on the history of the Saint Benedict School, formerly called

Our Lady of Providence (1839-2009). The year before, he had written a book on the Hospital of Peace to mark its 150th anniversary.

At the end of the meal, as we sang the song “*Good village girls*”, seven Sisters came in procession in, each carrying a picture representing Saint Vincent, Saint Louise, Marguerite Naseau and the four Sisters who were recently beatified. Next came a large banner with the date December 8th 1839 and we sang the final verse of the song: “*The Lord said to them: Come, work and pray. I have great need of you for there is much hard work to be done and the workers are few.*”

The Eucharistic celebration followed. The seal of the Company and two large portraits of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise were brought in procession, followed by Sister Evelyne carrying a lovely candle, with Sisters following two by two and carrying candles. Then the bishop and about twenty priests processed to the altar. It was a very poignant moment for all the faithful present: Christians, Muslims and Jews, all gathered in a prayer of thanksgiving. After the Word of God was proclaimed, Fr. Danjou gave the homily. The prayers of the faithful were said in various languages, asking God for peace, tolerance and love in order that all might live in friendship and solidarity together.

For the presentation of the gifts, a patient from the hospital and a Vincentian came to the altar, followed by a Daughter of Charity carrying the Constitutions, a lay person carrying the two books written by Mr. Marmara, a member of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, a representative of the youth group, and a priest, symbolising Saint Vincent’s work in priestly formation.

At the end of the ceremony, a resounding Magnificat expressed our heart-felt gratitude. The Lord has done wonders for us as well!

Afterwards, the 27 Daughters of Charity present for this great celebration were photographed in front of the altar in the Cathedral, to the applause of all the faithful.

PHOTO

Finally, that evening we all gathered at the Austrian Hospital of Saint George, for our last feast day meal together.

When she returned to Paris, Sister Evelyne sent us the following message: “Yes, let us all ask the Lord to send numerous vocations to continue this service to poor people. I remain united with you in confidence. What a truly beautiful, wonderful time we shared!”

The Sisters of Istanbul

SISTERS’ TESTIMONIES

Province of North India

Saint Catherine's House in Raikia, at the very heart of the Kandhamal riots

The state of Orissa in the Province of North India has a population of 40 million. Kandhamal is a tribal district tucked away between the hills and mountains, with 40% of its people being “untouchables” or of tribal origin. Christian missionaries came to this area in the early 20th century in order to promote education, health and social standards. These works were set up thanks to the hard work of the missionaries – non-catholic groups, our Vincentian Fathers and the Daughters of Charity. Later, the Catholic community became part of the Archdiocese of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar and many parishes and Christian institutions were founded in the district. In Kandhamal, there are 120000 Christians. In the past, the people of Kandhamal lived in peace and harmony and they had very good relationships with one another. They had their own tribal beliefs and customs, and responded well to anything that could help their own cultural, educational and social development. Some decades ago, a number of Hindu families came into various parts of the district to promote trade and commerce and this also helped the people here.

In the course of time, some Hindu fundamentalists introduced an ideology that led the simple hearted people into rivalry between social groups and different religions. Thousands of people fell into this trap and they began to take part in destructive actions against Christians. Some people, including Christians, benefited from education and attained a certain status in society. The Hindu leaders then began to feel threatened.

Last year the Church in India witnessed and fell victim to a period of intensive persecution. Kandhamal in the state of Orissa was the worst hit. These riots continued with the same ferocity from 24th December 2007 to January 2008 and from 23rd August to October 2008

What happened at Saint Catherine's House, Raikia

Raikia is located in the central part of Kandhamal. When Sisters arrived in Raikia in 1948, there were a few houses belonging to tribal people, some Christians, a lot of forests, one or two Hindu families with their small shops, and a small Church. Our Sisters started a health care service in the dispensary, visited families, and held catechism classes for the Catholics from different villages. Realising the need for education the Sisters opened a primary school and then a High School. Seeing the problems faced by families where the mother had died in child birth, the Sisters opened a crèche for babies. St. Catherine's House has played an increasingly important part in the promotion of the people and it is unique among the other institutions of the district since we were the first group of Sisters in that locality. Today our community there offers the following services:

- A Health Centre with facility for 30 in-patients
- Girls' High School with around 800 students

- A new English Middle School for the growing number of
- village children
- A crèche for 35 motherless babies
- A hostel for 180 students who attend the High School
- Medical and pastoral assistance for families in neighbouring villages

The sad events that took place at the end of August 2008

On 23rd August 2008 a man was shot dead in his home. The next day the Pastoral Centre at Konchamendi and other social services buildings were attacked and destroyed. Then the market shops belonging to Christians were looted and set on fire. The priests from the parishes of Phulbani, Shankarakhol and Konchamendi were attacked. We later learned that some people had sworn to drive Christians out of the district of Kandhamal and they destroyed Christian villages and their churches. After consultation with our Superiors, we decided that it would not be possible to take all the children and babies and find a way to escape. So within half an hour, we shifted all the things in the community building to the school rooms. We all received Holy Communion and then put the lights out and stayed in the dark. We heard bombs going off and shortly after this a group of violent men reached Raika. We could hear their vehicles, which had a special horn and no lights on, driving up and down the streets. When they went into houses belonging to Christians, they loaded anything of value on to a bus and destroyed the houses before setting fire to them. This destruction went on in different parts of the town. A motor cycle passed our house and then returned and stopped at our gate. I very clearly heard the leader saying: “Let’s go in here”; another man answered “Leave these alone” And then they went away. We spent the whole night in prayer and when dawn broke we felt a certain relief.

Next day news reached to us that they were planning to attack our institution and the Church between 7.30 and 8.30 p.m. I managed to send a letter to the police officer in charge of that district, with the help of two other policemen who came to collect their children from the nursery. I was told that the Rapid Action Force would soon reach Raikia. Up to 8.30 p.m. there was no sign of them as the way was blocked by huge tree trunks and heavy stones. We decided to leave the hostel and stay in the nursery building. We asked the small children to sleep between the baby cots, and the big girls to join us in prayer. At about 9.30 p.m. seven Rapid Action Force vehicles reached Raikia and there was no more noise outside. The Para-military force came and stationed themselves in front of our gate. On the next day, our hostel students heard that their houses in the villages had been destroyed and also that some people had been murdered. The students were really convinced that in response to prayer, God did really work a miracle to save them

As these events began to take place, all the Christians ran away and took refuge in the forests and mountains. On the first day, we visited the Development Office where people had taken shelter. There were about 6,000 people huddled together, it was raining, and the ground floor was covered with water. The people were standing in water and had spent the night in those conditions. The news of brutal killings of Christians began to reach the ears of the people in the camp.

After a few days the forces of order began to set up camps to ensure the people's safety and to see that they had food. These camps were overcrowded, so the government asked us if they could use our play ground and the school building to set up a camp. The second battalion of RAPID ACTION FORCE was accommodated in our school building and the officers were billeted in some of the rooms in the institution. The only way that the Church could gain access to the Kandhamal District was via St. Catherine's, which also became the base camp for the medical team which very gradually began to operate in some of the camps in the area. Stories of brutal murders continued to reach us. I met the widows of five Christians who were killed, some were even murdered in front of them and their children. Christians were threatened that they would be forced to become Hindus if they wanted to remain in their villages. One widow told me that the village children gathered twigs and grass to burn the bodies."

In this devastation more than 18,000 people were injured, over 4000 houses were burned down and nearly 150 churches destroyed

Today the people are still suffering: many have left the place where they were living for other parts of the country, especially secure places in the southern states. Some Christian families have been allowed back in their villages, but there are many places where they are in camps close to their villages under police protection and waiting for the day when they will be allowed to go back to their homes. Some of them have become Hindus, and others hold firmly to Christ and His values in spite of the persecution

In simple faith, we placed Miraculous Medals in different parts of the buildings. Today we can see how Mary, the only Mother of the Company, and Jesus in His mercy, have protected us. *O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you!..*

Sisters of the Province

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Provinces of Italy

S.O.S. from the region of Abruzzi. The Vincentian Family responds

A terrible earthquake

For several days after April 6th 2009, the media gave detailed accounts of the devastation caused by the earthquake that shook the province of Aigle in a matter of seconds.

Thousands of volunteers rushed to the scene to bring psychological support and material assistance. Right away, the Vincentian Family wanted to do its part in contributing to the relief effort. It quickly made itself available in collaboration with

Catholic and other social agencies in the area (Caritas, Civil Protection, Fire Department and Red Cross). It was necessary to pinpoint the areas in greatest need of urgent action, the persons to be contacted, the methods and means of intervention, etc. In a few days, a team of Vincentians was formed, called C.O.V.I. (Vincentian Operational Centre). Their role was to develop a detailed intervention plan that would rapidly and efficiently serve the earthquake victims. In studying the areas of devastation, the *San Demetrio de' Vestini* region was immediately chosen as the operational zone. This is a region well-known to many in the Vincentian family from the Province of Naples and Rome, for many were either born there or served there.

In September 1919, the Daughters of Charity had arrived in San Demetrio to work in a nursery school, and later, in an embroidery workshop, an orphanage and a home visiting programme for poor people. In 1998, the large house there was transformed into a residence for the elderly Sisters. In May 2007, however, the house was closed. In retrospect, we see that this decision to close the house was very providential, as the earthquake destroyed part of it.

Preliminary visit

On April 15th 2009, some members of the Vincentian Family visited the region to evaluate what needed to be done. The residents of the area pleaded: *“Please don’t abandon us!”* The C.O.V.I. invited all the Vincentians in Italy to participate: *“We are setting up a service post in San Demetrio! We need volunteers who are ready to give their time and moral and spiritual support. Teams will be sent there every week for a period of three months (from June 27th to September 13th).”* People came in response to this. The first group set out on June 27th from Central Italy, a team consisting of Sisters and lay Vincentian adults, with Father Giuseppe Carulli C.M. in charge of the programme: *“Your task is to be alongside the adults, the elderly, and families. The Scouts will take care of the children. First of all, listen to their needs and the difficulties that these people have experienced. Social and spiritual action will come later.”*

At the scene

Each member of the team wore an orange t-shirt bearing the name of the group to which they belonged: “Vincentian Family for the Abruzzis” and on the back of the shirt, the Vincentian prayer was printed. Each one went into the zone reserved for the tents and began their work. Very attentively, they observed the silent and dignified people, whose expressions showed the tragedy they had lived through, the complexity of their present situation, and their worries about their uncertain future.

Sister Cecilia recorded in her little notebook:

“In front of the first tent, Maria Teresa invited me to come inside. Her mother shared with me her concern about her husband’s health, for he did not want to go to hospital although this was necessary. The tents were cold at night and too hot during the day. The mother then pointed to a statue of Mary. ‘Do you see this? The only thing I brought from the house was this statue, because I wanted the Blessed Virgin to stay with us always! She’s the one who saved us from this terrible earthquake. We all

escaped without a single scratch!’ So we prayed together, thanking Mary for her protection and asking for her continued help.

“In another tent, Paola had nervous twitches that made it difficult for her to communicate with others, even her brother. What loneliness and suffering!

John was sitting outside his tent, sullen and angry with the entire world. He said to me: ‘Where was your God when all this happened? Tell me, answer me: Where was he? I’m a decent man. I love my family and I’ve worked hard. Now I’m just going to stay here by myself until I can get my house back.’ With tears in my eyes, I listened to him and prayed for him.

“An elderly woman, who had difficulty moving about independently, asked if we could help bring her to the doctor. We gladly did so.

A person whose age we did not know told us that for her, the earthquake had been going on for several years, as she had suffered serious psychological and physical abuse from her father who was mentally ill. We suggested she should see the psychologist, and she agreed to do this.

Sister Marguerite said with great conviction that the physical upheaval of the earthquake had produced change of heart as well. Many people had reflected on the fragility of everything and on the difficulties of personal relationships. For example, an elderly man had just learned about the serious illness of one of his neighbours, whom he had not spoken to for years. He said: *“Sister, I have to go and ask his forgiveness, because I had refused to speak to him!”*

Sister Gina met Maria, an 83 year old widow who had no children. Her house had been badly damaged. She had been housed in the tent camp but had been unable to adapt to it. She fled back to her house where she was hiding in the ruins, without access to running water. The fire-fighters discovered her and entrusted her to us. We took her into our tent, cleaned her up, gave her clean clothes, special attention and all the provisions she needed. One morning, however, Maria disappeared again. She had gone back to tend her vineyard. We found her again and introduced her to Elisa, another elderly widow. Thanks to Elisa’s gentleness, the two became friends.

Sister Rita told us about a group of volunteers who came to work at San Demetrio from July 12th-19th, 2009. This group, made up of a Vincentian priest, 5 seminarians, 2 students and 6 Daughters of Charity had a variety of jobs assigned to them: staffing the clothing centre for the elderly and preparing and serving meals to them. Sister Rita said:

“The most powerful experience for this group was to share totally in the life of these people: the precariousness of a tent, which was very hot during the day and very cold at night, using common toilets that were quite a distance away. For us, these inconveniences only lasted one week, but for the residents of this area, everything is much more difficult and overwhelming. Every day and every night the same insistent and unanswered question persists: what will tomorrow bring?”

The litany of these painful situations is long and difficult to put into words. Answers need to be found to all these stories which seem to be similar and yet sometimes require very different solutions.

Sharing experiences

Divided into 11 groups of between 10 and 15 persons each, the Vincentian volunteer teams took turns at staying at San Demetrio, with experiences that gave a new flavour to their every day life.

Sister Simone shared the experiences of a group of adolescent volunteers (aged between 17 and 18, from Rivoli, Turin, with complex family situations and personal difficulties). She explained how this experience developed and two objectives they were able to meet as a result of it:

- it was an opportunity for these young people to give of their time and of themselves to serve persons in difficulty
- a discovery of the meaning of life, an understanding that cannot be found in superficial experiences but in freely giving of oneself for others.

How did this happen at San Demetrio? In this setting, rules and schedules were well respected. While these young people are often so reluctant to obey school rules, they were there each morning, arriving on time and remaining in silence during the flag-raising ceremony. Before beginning their work for the day, they would come together to hear the Word of God. Then they went to those who had lost everything, to listen to them, and to serve them in a variety of ways: preparing meals, cleaning the common areas, etc. These tent camps, places of suffering and grief, became for these young people a sacred place to hear the Word of God and to encounter God's Word in suffering humanity. In the long return trip home, the conversation among these young people which is usually quite argumentative, was for once harmonious. They were all astounded and very pleased to have been able to be useful, and to discover their ability to love. In the dust and dirt of the rubble, these typical modern-day adolescents discovered the pathway to follow to find meaning and value for their own lives.

Rosita, a kind-hearted Vincentian volunteer, expressed it like this: *“My morale had reached rock bottom; I was exhausted physically and morally, and without knowing why, I accepted Sister Nevia’s invitation to participate with the Vincentians in serving the victims of the San Demetrio area. In the tent camps, my mission was to be present and available to the people, to listen to them and share in their difficulties. They confided in me and cried with me with such simplicity! And how many times did they thank me? Too many times! Really, I’m the one who should be thanking them for the sense of trust that they showed me and the way that they helped me to find once more a desire to live. Thank you!”*

Sister Gina explained how difficult it is to share the richness of her experience: *“It was not an easy undertaking. No words will ever be able to express the reality of it. All I can say is that I came away renewed humanly, psychologically and spiritually.”*

Maria Teresa, a young person in San Demetrio with a disability, expressed her gratitude with a beautiful parchment she made. She also wanted to show her thanks to

Sister Marguerite and to the young people with a beautiful Irish folkdance: *Colour brings joy to life.*

After this, the people of San Demetrio said to the Vincentians: *“Thank you! But please do not abandon us! Stay here with us!”* The citizens remain very devoted to the Daughters of Charity because they had been living in their midst until recent years. They have very fond memories of the Sisters.

In conclusion

We would like to share our profound admiration for the courage and inner strength of the people of Abruzzi. They’ve rolled up their sleeves, and holding heavy tools, they are already in the process of clearing away the debris to make way for new buildings.

Sister Maddalena CASTRICA
Daughter of Charity

SISTERS’ TESTIMONIES

International Meeting of the Association of the Miraculous Medal (

15th-20th November 2009,
Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity in Paris

The Third International Meeting of AMM, convened by Father Gregory Gay, its Director General, took place at the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity from November 15th-20th 2009. This gathering coincided with the closing of the Jubilee Year, for on July 8th 2008, Father Gregory had inaugurated the Jubilee celebration to honour the centenary of the Association approved by Pope Pius X on July 8th 1909.

This third meeting brought together delegates from twenty-six countries. Some came from great distances: Australia, Thailand, Philippines, India, Chile, Peru, United States, Congo, Ukraine, and various European, American and African countries. The total number present included 21 Vincentian priests, 14 Daughters of Charity, 2 religious from other congregations and 26 lay people. Each delegation, composed of up to four members, had as its mission to study the new International Statutes with a view to their approbation.

On the morning of November 16th Father Gregory, Superior General, and Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, cordially welcomed the delegates, expressing their high esteem for the Association and their hopes that it would remain

ever faithful to the objectives proposed by the Blessed Virgin Mary to Saint Catherine Labouré with regard to the creation of an Association which was to be founded by Father Aladel.

The main objective of this gathering was to update the Statutes of the Association for the 21st century, in fidelity to the structure approved by the Church in 1909 and to the needs of the world and the Church today. This Association was formed to spread the message of the Medal, a catechesis for the History of Salvation, and to witness to the gospel-inspired love that is represented in the symbols on the Medal. This is the bond that unites the members: they are invited to receive, wear and be inspired by the Medal, praying to Mary through the invocation: *“O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.”*

In the Statutes of the Association, Pope Pius X designated it as an association of the faithful whose mission is to spread the Medal and its message and to deepen their Marian devotion. The Association’s definition as an association of the faithful goes beyond that of a simple association of the laity. All the members of the People of God can become involved in it: lay people, priests, religious, members of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The Superior General, in his welcoming address said: *“I am very pleased to be able to be present with all of you; we are all members of the Association of the Miraculous Medal, members who have the right to speak and dialogue among ourselves, whether we are priests, Daughters of Charity, or committed lay members of our Church. This is a characteristic that is unique to our Association, for this is the branch of the Vincentian Family in which there is full participation of members coming from every state in life.”*

PHOTO

During this gathering, the delegates, divided into six language groups, studied the text of the new Statutes that had been developed by the International Council of AMM. With the assistance of Sisters from the Motherhouse serving as interpreters, the delegates participated in lengthy discussions and prepared the text that will be presented to the Holy See for approbation.

One day the delegates went on pilgrimage to Fain-les-Moutiers, the birthplace of Catherine Labouré. At the parish church, they renewed their baptismal promises at the baptismal font where Catherine was baptised. The community of Sisters there gave them a very warm welcome.

On November 20th the Superior General closed the AMM Jubilee Year with a solemn Eucharistic celebration in the Chapel in which the apparitions took place. It was a great grace to be able to celebrate the Centenary of the Association at the actual site of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Saint Catherine.

Although this meeting was primarily focused on the study of the Statutes, we felt Mary’s presence strengthening and guiding our missionary impetus to formulate these Statutes in fidelity to the Association’s role within the Church of the third millennium. We had the grace of being able to spend significant time in prayer in the Chapel and this allowed us to be imbued with the message of Mary to Saint Catherine.

It is a treasure of extraordinary grace and power, and there is no limit to what we can discover in it for our world today.

The welcome we received from the Sisters of the Motherhouse was extraordinary and contributed to the atmosphere of cordiality that we experienced. I would like to express my gratitude to Sister Evelyne Franc and to all the Sisters for their sisterly kindnesses to us.

Father Enrique Rivas, CM
Deputy-Director of the International AMM

NEWSBRIEFS

On the death of Sister Vittoria Camiolo, former Visitatrice of the Province of Naples, the Director of the Medical Bureau at Lourdes, Sandro De Franciscis, a former Vincentian volunteer, wrote the following:

“When I heard the news of the death of Sister Vittoria, I could not believe it. Full of sadness, I hurried over to the grotto of Massabielle to confide her to the Lord. Close to the Blessed Virgin, I experienced a sense a peace and the certainty that Sister Vittoria is in Paradise. With that understanding, I started to smile. I met Sister Vittoria when I was a student at the University of Naples. For forty years she was a mentor and support for many students. In her company, we discovered her confidence in the Blessed Virgin Mary. She helped us to become involved in serving poor persons, in union with the Vincentian Family. Thanks to her we got to know Saint Vincent, Saint Louise and all the saints in the family. Last year, she helped me when I was discerning my involvement with the Medical Bureau at Lourdes. She encouraged me to leave my country in order to place myself at the service of sick pilgrims, ‘our lords and masters’.”

Visit by the Director General to the Region of Albania

In 1927, the Province of Slovenia opened its first mission in Kosovo, in the parish in Letnica. After several years, young women began to enter the Company. After 50 years under the Communist regime, Albania opened its doors to God. In 1992 the first mission was opened in Durrës (which is now the Regional House.) Since that time, the Region of Albania has grown to include 3 local communities in Albania and 6 in Kosovo. The Region has 53 Albanian Sisters (and one Slovenian). Albania and Kosovo are two countries which share the same culture and language, but which have been separated by history.

All the Sisters had been making preparations for the arrival of Father Alvarez to our Region, which is a relatively young one. This joyous occasion suddenly became a problem on the eve of his arrival. Severe rains inundated our coastal city of Durrës, and by midnight, the courtyard and the entry to the house were under water. We battled in vain for hours against the floodwaters but our human forces could not withstand this torrential rain. The following day, we cleaned the house, as the entire

ground floor had been flooded. However, this did not prevent Father Alvarez from visiting the various communities of our Region. In Stublla he met many elderly persons who live alone in misery, for prior to the war in Kosovo, many Croatians returned to Croatia, leaving elderly persons behind in their homes without any resources. We thank you, Father Alvarez, for your visit that has encouraged and energised us. (Sr Donata Bardhaj. Echoes correspondent)

PREPARATION FOR THE 350th JUBILEE ANNIVERSARY

Saint Louise de Marillac

XXth century:
history – remembrances – meditation

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mother Marie Julie Kieffer was the Superioress General of the Company of Daughters of Charity and Father Fiat was the Superior General. This was in accord with a decision taken in the earliest days of the Company.

The law that had just been passed in France on June 1st 1901 decreed that no religious congregation could remain in France unless it was authorized to do so: congregations already recognised could only benefit from this authorisation for their works provided these met the conditions outlined by their statutes. The legal recognition accorded to a congregation no longer extended, as it had previously, to all its individual establishments. In addition, no establishments could continue to exist without a special decree of authorisation or at least without a request for authorisation, which served as a safeguard while awaiting the government's decision. Congregations or establishments had to comply with these orders within four months of the decree or risk dissolution or closure.

The first case of dissolution took place in January 1903 for the Sisters of Mercy of Beziers, a true House of Mercy that had provided relief from all forms of misery since 1693. This blow would be followed by others: 90 closures followed throughout the year 1903. In July of the same year, the great Pope Leo XIII died.

In the midst of these hardships and so many other gathering clouds, God would soon send the brightness of a rainbow. The informative process on the heroic virtues of the Venerable Louise de Marillac had just been completed. The time had come to examine the human remains of this servant of God. The body had previously been exhumed at various times, always in accordance with canonical requirements, and at the same time, without any sort of religious formality that might serve as a prelude for the future. Finally, in the Church's name, the remains of our holy

Foundress, worn out by her works of charity and veiled of humility, would be brought out of its resting place for several hours. It was put back there only in the hope that this place of shadows would soon be exchanged for a bright shining place at the altar.¹

On March 29th 1905, a group of Vincentians and Seminary Sisters gathered in the Chapel. Bishop Legoux, the Apostolic Protonotary and president of the Ecclesiastic Tribunal established to study causes for beatification, entered the sanctuary, followed by other members of the Tribunal, three physicians and several workmen. All the people who would be involved in opening the tomb and handling the relics took an oath at the foot of the altar

The first part of the ceremony began in an atmosphere of silence that allowed every sound of pick and hammer to be heard. Finally, the casket containing the precious remains came up from the earth. It was placed on a stretcher and transferred to the retreat room. It was moved between two files of Seminary Sisters and habit Sisters holding candles. Just inside the room, the benches had been replaced by two large tables covered with white linen. The casket was placed on one of the tables, and then, in the presence of the ecclesiastic and lay commission and the community gathered around it, the treasures that it contained were brought out. Excitement grew as the various bones were re-assembled to reconstitute the skeleton. The lawyers and physicians admired the impressive structure of the skull.

After all the canonical formalities had been completed and the Sisters and the Vincentians had slowly filed past, these precious remains were placed in an oak chest trimmed with copper, along with the written record of the ceremony. This chest was then placed in another casket and returned to the grave, awaiting the day when it people would at last be able to say:

“Blessed Louise de Marillac, pray for us.”

This long introduction brings us into the presence of the one whom we now call Saint Louise de Marillac. We know her as a person and we know the actions of the one who founded the Company, providing the organisation and administration of this work of charity that Saint Vincent wanted and Louise de Marillac fashioned. Before the Company was founded, Louise had experienced physical and spiritual suffering. The Light of Pentecost was a turning point. After the death of Monsieur Le Gras, Louise sought support in God alone. Bishop Camus, her director at the time, saw that it was God’s plan for her to dedicate herself completely to charitable works, and wanted only to encourage her in this. So, on the advice of Saint Francis de Sales, he confided her to Vincent de Paul. Very respectful of his new penitent, Vincent waited for God’s hour to come and this came to pass in 1626. Pleased with her decision, he affirmed her in the resolution she had taken to give herself to the service of the poor:

“Yes, certainly, Mademoiselle, I agree. Why not, since our Lord has given you this holy thought? Receive communion tomorrow and prepare for the review of life you propose to make. Later you can begin the prescribed retreat. I cannot tell you how anxious I am to see you and know how all goes with you. But I must deny myself

¹ Account of the examination of the remains of the Servant of God

for the love of God, which must be your sole wish also. I can well imagine how touched you were by the words of today's Gospel, for they are powerful for a soul loving with a perfect love. You must have appeared in the eyes of God as a beautiful tree, for by his grace you have borne such good fruit. I beseech him, by his infinite goodness, that you shall ever be that tree of life bearing the fruit of true charity. Oh! what a tree you have appeared to be today in God's sight, since you have borne such a fruit! May you be forever a beautiful tree of life bringing forth fruits of love, and I, in that same love,"

Your very humble servant, Vincent Depaul
(Abelly, Book I, chapter XXIII)

When she started to be directed by Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac abandoned her surname Le Gras. From that time on, she would be Louise de Marillac, and ready to undertake any works that her director might suggest.

As she became more and more aware of this apostolic man's charitable activities, she felt the ever-growing desire to consecrate her life to the service of persons living in poverty and to participate wholeheartedly in Vincent's holy actions. When she communicated her desire to M. Vincent, he did not judge it wise to follow this up so quickly. He wanted first to get to know her better and so he observed her actions for several years. During this time, however, he made use of her willingness to undertake various charitable works. She also did needlework at home for the benefit of poor persons. Vincent also asked her to put her interpersonal skills at the service of "some poor young women".

Gobillon noted: *"This delay, which was for her a kind of novitiate, served only to increase and strengthen her resolution even more, and make her take up during this time every opportunity of charity which arose."*²

GOD'S TIME

From 1626 to 1629, M. Vincent supported and encouraged Louise: *"Be then His dear daughter--quite humble, submissive, and full of confidence--and always wait patiently for the manifestation of His holy and adorable Will."*³ He was firm in the advice he gave her.

At the end of June, 1630, in reply to a letter from Mademoiselle, M. Vincent wrote: *"We shall talk about the other one when next we meet; I mean about the one for your confessor. Meanwhile, do what he advises you and everything that your fervour suggests ..."*⁴ M. Vincent **also asked her help** for the works of the Mission. After she had received a donation, he wrote to her: *"... I beg you to send us by M. du Coudray, the bearer, the sum of fifty livres... Please send us also four shirts, and convey our most humble respects..."*⁵ to the donor. This wise director reassured her that she should not hesitate to confide her troubles to him as the guide that God had given to her: *"To be sure, Mademoiselle, it is well to take notice of the more ardent affections that agitate your heart so that you can do your best to regulate them by the*

² Gobillon, Chapter 4

³ Coste I, L. 12, p. 24 from St Vincent to Louise de Marillac, 30 October 1626

⁴ Coste I, L. 49, p. 80

⁵ Coste I, L. 16, p. 28-29

standard of the holy and ever-adorable Will of God. And you have done well, in this doubt, to seek enlightenment so that you may do what Our Lord is asking of you, without fear of burdening me by seeking it. Understand once and for all, Mademoiselle, that a person whom God in His plan has destined to assist someone else is no more overburdened by the advice that the other requests..."⁶

The correspondence between M. Vincent and Louise de Marillac during the year 1629 is marked by a change in the way he addressed her. He no longer wrote "my dear daughter" but "Mademoiselle", beginning his letters with the greeting that the Daughters of Charity have used for centuries in their correspondence: "The grace of our Lord be with you forever." Emmanuel de Gondi, who had returned to the Oratorians not long before this, asked M. Vincent to come immediately to meet him. Vincent sent word to Louise de Marillac in a letter: "*Do you feel like coming, Mademoiselle? If so, you would have to leave next Wednesday on the coach to Châlons, in Champagne...And we shall have the happiness of seeing you in Montmirail.*"⁷

Mademoiselle agreed to go; this would be her first journey. She set out for Montmirail with some instructions from M. Vincent dated May 6th 1629:

"Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works..." Some details regarding her length of stay in the various towns were included as well as the following advice: "*Although I say two days, take more, if need be, and do us the kindness of writing to us.*"⁸

Her first biographer explained that she was "*accompanied on these journeys by some pious ladies, and travelled in uncomfortable coaches, putting up with many inconveniences, living and sleeping very poorly in order to share more fully in the misery of the poor...When she had arrived in the village, she assembled the women who belonged to the Confraternity of Charity, gave them the instructions necessary to acquit themselves well of this employment, encouraged them by the fervour of her talks, worked to increase their number, reanimated what had cooled, raised up what had fallen, strengthened and perfected what was established.*"⁹

After providing relief for people's physical illnesses, she sought to remedy their spiritual difficulties. Since their ignorance was the main spiritual problem, she did everything possible to combat this, gathering together the young women in the villages to teach them the articles of faith and the duties of the Christian life. M. Vincent kept close watch over Mademoiselle, given the newness of what she was doing, the fatigue that resulted from difficult travelling conditions, and the high level of poverty that existed in the rural areas. He especially recommended her: "*above all,*

⁶ Coste I, L. 148, p. 212

⁷ Coste I, L. 38, p. 63-64

⁸ Advice for the voyage to Montmirail: Coste I, L. 39, p. 64-65, letter from Saint Vincent to Louise de Marillac

⁹ Gobillon, Chapter IV, p. 12, English edition, 1984 (original text: 1676)

*take care of your health, which I beseech God to preserve for you...*¹⁰ Louise had the experience of living out the gospel from deep within herself. She who had wanted to give herself completely to God was now continually living in God's presence. She was experiencing the gospel truth that in serving the least of her brothers and sisters she was serving God in the person of Christ present in them.

The activities in which Louise de Marillac was involved during her visits to the Confraternities served as a real step in preparing her for her future mission. The formation that she acquired came from the direction that M. Vincent provided, as well as the experience of direct contact with poor persons. In her attentiveness towards their needs and in dealing with all kinds of appeals, she discovered what was lacking in their service. Day after day, Louise was formed through her contact with specific realities that helped inspire her way of thinking and acting. Her director maintained a wise and reserved position which was solidly based on his trust in God's loving Providence. *"Our Lord, in the footsteps of Whose Providence you are walking, will Himself provide someone. You must leave that worry to Him and remain in peace."*¹¹

By keeping in step with Providence, they established a collaborative relationship based on trust that was both unlimited and reciprocal. M. Vincent guided the efforts of Louise de Marillac, but at the same time gladly welcomed and acted on her wise advice. When she returned from her visits, Louise de Marillac gave M. Vincent very detailed reports pointing out the shortcomings she had noticed. They clearly saw the need to remedy these situations.

MISSION IN PARIS

M. Vincent had discovered the physical, moral and spiritual poverty of the good people of France who lived in rural areas. At the same time, though, the cities, beginning with Paris, were full of poor persons stagnating in airless slums. Mademoiselle knew this, and under the guidance of M. Vincent who was aware of all this poverty, she discovered more and more the depths of distress in the capital.

She reestablished the very first Confraternity that M. Vincent had created in Paris, Saint-Sauveur, which was on the point of collapse. A very content M. Vincent congratulated Mademoiselle on her success. The following year, in 1630, with the pastor's consent, Mademoiselle established the second Paris Confraternity in her own parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. She invited some of the Ladies to join her, and in her generous devotedness, did not hesitate to risk her own health by visiting a young woman who had the plague. It is from her biographer Gobillon that we learn the names of the Confraternities that were formed in Paris in 1631: the parishes of Saint Eustache, Saint Benoit, Saint Sulpice, and Saint Merry, soon to be followed by Saint Paul, Saint Germain l'Auxerrois and Saint André. Louise de Marillac, elected as president, was the one who started the practice of placing young woman from the villages with Ladies from the Parisian upper class.

IN THE PROVINCES

¹⁰ Coste I, L. 39, p. 65

¹¹ Coste I, L. 151, p. 216

Gobillon wrote the following about Mademoiselle's creation of and visits to the Confraternities in the areas outside Paris: "*She was an ever-moving star, incessantly spreading her light and influence*".¹²

M. Vincent was kept updated. On Ember Wednesday before Christmas, Louise set out for Asnieres, and on February 5th 1630, for Saint-Cloud. This latter date was her wedding anniversary, and that morning, M. Vincent said a commemorative Mass. Louise wrote the following: "*At the moment of Holy Communion, it seemed to me that Our Lord inspired me to receive Him as the Spouse of my soul and that this Communion was a manner of espousal. I felt myself more closely united to Him by this consideration which was extraordinary for me. I also felt moved to leave everything to follow my Spouse; to look upon Him as such in the future; and to bear with the difficulties I might encounter as part of the community of His goods.*" (*Spiritual Writings*, p 705)

Louise de Marillac was a woman of prayer. At that moment on February 5th Our Lord was present in her life and in her person. This supernatural experience left her with a sense of wellbeing that had an effect on all that she was experiencing at that time in her life. M. Vincent later expressed some concern in a letter to her dated February 19th: "*I praise God that you have the health for the sixty people for whose salvation you are working, but I beg you to let me know right away whether your lung is being irritated by your talking so much, or your head by so much confusion and noise...*" and in the same letter he added: "*Let me know also whether that good young woman from Suresnes, who visited you before and who spends her time teaching girls, has come to see you as she promised me last Sunday when she was here. While waiting to hear from you ...*" (Coste I, p. 67-68)¹³

Beauvais

In December of the same year, she left for Beauvais to bring to completion what M. Vincent had had difficulty in starting. In spite of the squabbling that M. Vincent had encountered, Louise succeeded marvellously. She inspired people to such an extent that M. Vincent felt obliged to put her on her guard, and said: "*...unite your spirit to the mockeries, contempt, and ill treatment that the Son of God suffered. Surely, Mademoiselle, a truly humble spirit humbles itself as much amid honors as amid insults...*" (Coste I, p. 94)

Gobillon wrote that she "*looked upon this advice as a salutary precaution amidst the applause she received on this journey.*" Nevertheless, Mademoiselle carried on full of zeal, so much so that men would come and hide themselves in order to hear her and be touched by her words (Gobillon, p. 15). It seems she left Beauvais in an aura of sanctity because a child who had fallen under the wheel of her carriage got up unharmed as a result of her prayers. The fruit of her labour was the establishment of 18 Confraternities in the parishes of Beauvais. M. Vincent, certainly pleased with her success at Beauvais, was also the spiritual director who kept watch over the maturing of Louise's vocation. We see this in the remark he made in a letter: "*When you are honoured and esteemed... Surely, Mademoiselle, a truly humble spirit*

¹² Gobillon, Chapter V, p. 14, English edition, 1984 (original text: 1676)

¹³ Coste I, 75-76

humbles itself as much amid honours as amid insults, acting like the honeybee which makes its honey equally well from the dew that falls on the wormwood as from that which falls on the rose. I hope that you will make use of them in that way..."¹⁴

Meditation

How can we explain the spiritual or apostolic mystery of her life which, for a long time, was preparing her to found a Community which had the objective of "doing what the Son of God did on earth, loving Our Lord and serving Him corporally and spiritually in the person of those who are poor."

During the three years in which Louise de Marillac carried out these charitable works, her vocation was maturing through the events of her life until, detached from self, she was truly given to God. There was no shortage of trials, which served to make her detached from herself, her family and the world. A personal suffering during one of her journeys that M. Vincent described as "unfounded gossip" called for strength of character, reminding her that what she did not understand then would become clearer later.

Family sorrows followed. While Mademoiselle was visiting the Charities, the royal family was in crisis. On November 10th 1630, there was an attempt to overthrow Richelieu, the prime minister of Louis XIII. The attempt failed, however, and those involved, including Michel de Marillac, were arrested and imprisoned. A few months later, his brother Louis, was also imprisoned and was guillotined in May 1632. At the end of the same year, Michel died in prison. In losing her two uncles, Louise lost part of herself. Monsignor Baunard, a biographer of Louise, judged that the following letter from Vincent to Louise was written on the feast of the Assumption in 1632: "*I pray that the Blessed Virgin will raise your heart to heaven and unite it to her own and to the heart of her dear Son.*" Louise experienced these painful events in a spirit of faith. She continued her visits to the Confraternities, for she quickly realised that many things were not going smoothly. The Ladies, prevented from going to visit the poor, were sending their servants instead, thus depriving the poor people of the affection and attention that had marked the beginnings of the Confraternities.

God's time, at that specific moment, was putting Louise to the test, as she wondered "from where will help come? Marguerite Naseau was sent by M. Vincent to Louise. This meeting was a decisive one for both Marguerite and Louise. Had not M. Vincent written to Louise one day: "*Our Lord wishes to make use of you for something that concerns His glory, and I think He will preserve you for that purpose.*"¹⁵ (To be continued)

Sister Claire HERRMANN
Archive service

¹⁴ Letter 35 from M. Vincent to Louise de Marillac – show moderation in zeal, and rules for the direction of the Confraternity .

¹⁵ Coste I, 186

PREPARATION FOR THE 350th JUBILEE ANNIVERSARY YEAR

The influence that Vincent and Louise exercised jointly in founding the Company of the Daughters of Charity

Introduction

We know that Saint Vincent and Saint Louise were convinced that God spoke to them, not just in prayer and through the Scriptures, but also through daily events. The need to recognise the divine presence in every event is what Saint Vincent had in mind when he told the Sisters: “*we must never omit it (prayer) and must pray continually.*” (IXp.422) Also, the phrase he used “*we must not anticipate Providence*” was a way of saying that we should reflect on everything that happens during the day, in the light of the Holy Spirit.

The Daughters of Charity

We would do well to keep this in mind when we study the foundation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, because we cannot really say that the Founders created it but rather that they were its real promoters. The outlines of the Company had already been sketched by people before Vincent and Louise but circumstances prevented this project from being put into action. Vincent and Louise tried to put it into practice and in so doing they showed the audacity, perseverance, wisdom and dedicated holiness with which the Holy Spirit enfolded them during their dark night of contemplation. It was this that led them to move at the same pace as Providence and collaborate with it at the right moment for the good of the poor. Because they were saints, both Vincent and Louise were able to hear the voice of God speaking to them through the horrendous situations in which poor people found themselves.

The historical facts

Who was the first to hear the divine call? We do not know and it is not important. Vincent de Paul relates the facts five times: on four of these occasions he said that the initiative came from Marguerite Naseau, and in another account of the founding – not the longest account – he attributed this first decision to himself.¹ So I think that it was Marguerite who without realising it, had the idea of replacing servants who did the work to gain a living, by young women who would do it out of love and a sense of vocation. She was the first to undertake the task and then many others followed her. The Director of the Charities, Vincent de Paul, had to renew the spirit of the Charities and Mademoiselle Le Gras urged him to do this if he wished to

¹ Coste IX p. 77-79, 209, 245, 455-456, 601

be faithful to God's plan that was revealed to him in that mystic Night, to come to the aid of the needy and also to find creative ways of being faithful to God who was speaking to him through the needs of the poor.

The work of renewing the Charities took time. Saint Vincent, Saint Louise and Marguerite Naseau discussed it several times (Coste 1 p.76). After reading their letters I have come to the conclusion that Saint Louise was just as much responsible for this renewal as Saint Vincent was: it was she who would directly or indirectly influence Saint Vincent to agree to revitalising the Charities by letting the young women who came along work in them. It is Louise who would take them into her home and train them for service. It is she who would place them in the parishes when Marguerite was their model and attracted new people to be servants. When the first young women arrived they had no problem in integrating into the Charities. They replaced the paid servants and did the work as a vocation. Like previous members of the Charities they were under the authority of the Superioress-President of each Charity but Saint Louise was responsible for their formation and for deciding where they would work.

Two years later, the two saints began to hesitate between conforming to the laws of the Church, the customs of social classes,² and being faithful to the call of God coming to them through the needs of the poor. At this time they must have shown daring creativity in modifying the Charities to meet the situations of their day. Saint Vincent was well aware that many marvellous projects, Utopian or not, did not get off the ground because the people responsible for them did not know how to keep faith with social and ecclesiastical customs and at the same time show boldness and creativity. Saint Louise must have known this too, but seven years after the death of her husband she was still tormented by the feelings of guilt she had during the mystic Night, she felt guilty that she had not entered the religious life as she had promised God she would when she was young. This guilt complex very nearly brought about the failure of the mission God had confided to her: fortunately, Vincent de Paul found out in time what Mademoiselle Le Gras was thinking and he guided her on the right path.

About the year 1632, he wrote to her and showed he did not agree with what she was trying to do: *"I am delighted with the employment of those good young women and I commend your desire to give them a painting, but not your giving way to concern over the matter. You belong to Our Lord and to his holy Mother. Cling to them and to the state in which they have placed you until they make it clear that they wish something else for you..."* (Coste I p.79).

The word "*state*" in the context of this letter could indicate the class, background or social situation in which a person lives but it could also indicate their civil or religious status; single, widow or religious. Without falsifying the meaning of the letter but rather keeping to what Saint Vincent had in mind, I think that here it is a question of change of religious or civil status, in other words "*to become a religious*"

2

When we speak about *social class* we are using the word in the XVII century sense (1627) as in the *Traite des ordres et simples dignites* (1610). The author of this work divides society into 3 orders or states and then divides each order into categories or classes, according to the *dignity* of persons and not according to economic factors, though often these two points went together.

and I conclude from this that Louise was thinking of doing this. But Saint Vincent was against this for he had discovered the role that this very gifted and dynamic collaborator could play in the project that he had in mind for the poor.

Shortly after this, Saint Vincent expressed in strong terms his opposition to what the lady he was directing had in mind: *“As for the rest, I beg you once and for all, not to give it a thought until Our Lord makes it evident that He wishes it, and at present He is giving indications to the contrary....You are trying to become the servant of these poor young women, and God wants you to be His own, and perhaps of more people than you would be in that way. And even if you were only His, is it not enough for God that your heart is honouring the tranquillity of Our Lord’s?”* (Coste I p. 113-114).

This letter leads me to the conclusion that Vincent was opposed to Louise and her daughters changing their state because in their new status as religious they would not be able to serve their neighbour. Today we find nothing surprising in this. Vincent de Paul says again to Louise that *“maybe”* God plans to use her to serve many people....he does not say specifically where she will serve them, or in what context: in a Confraternity of the future, that is to say a new Company, in the Charities , visiting people, or in a convent?”

This project involving Saint Louise was the subject of many conversations between her and Saint Vincent and they thought it was very important for the Church and for poor people. Vincent’s prayer and his conversations with Louise led him to the firm conviction which would be crucial for the future: *Louise has a divine mission to accomplish with these young women for the good of the poor.*

It seems to me that it was precisely at this time that the two saints thought of regrouping the young women in a Charity specially designated for them. Louise seems to have accepted the idea without any hesitation and, given her temperament, no doubt she wanted this to happen quickly. She persisted in urging this on several occasions.

In May 1633 Vincent tried to moderate her haste: *“With regard to your employment, my mind is not yet enlightened enough before God concerning a difficulty which prevents me from seeing whether it is the Will of His Divine Majesty. I beg you, Mademoiselle, to recommend this matter to Him during these days in which He communicates more abundantly the blessings of the Holy Spirit, rather, the Holy Spirit Himself. Let us persist, therefore in our prayers, and may you remain quite cheerful.”* (Coste I p.200).

We don’t know the nature of this difficulty: was it about the structures to be put in place or whether to begin with just the minimum of guarantees, because now it was a matter of starting a project? This shows that Vincent wanted to study the material, human and social circumstances of it and to meditate on these in the light of the Holy Spirit.

In September 1633, Vincent was convinced that God was asking Louise to do something extraordinary, to gather the young women together into a Charity. (Coste I p.218). A month later, under the direction of Vincent, Louise got them to spend a

weekend together (Coste I p. 219). Finally, in November 1633 they decided to found the new Charity with Marie Joly and two or three other companions.³ Marguerite Naseau, who had taken ill after giving up her bed to a poor woman, had already died nine months earlier. (Coste I p.238-240).

The Charity that these young women belonged to was one of Vincent's Charities but it had its own special statutes as did that of the Hotel-Dieu, the main hospital in Paris (which would be inaugurated three months later). Vincent de Paul was its Director and he appointed Mademoiselle Le Gras its Superioress-President. She would be responsible for governing, directing and administering it. He was well aware of the qualities and the values of Louise de Marillac and giving her responsibility for the task meant putting the Company into her hands. The first Rule and the horarium were drawn up by Louise. After reading these, Vincent wrote some comments in the margin and asked Louise herself to explain them. But Louise had great respect and admiration for Vincent and she asked him to explain the document to the Sisters. He did this in July 1634.⁴

I think that their joint influence which was both creative and audacious, is so obvious that in terms of science fiction and taking everything into account purely on the natural and human level, I would dare to say that if one of these two saints had not been involved in the project, the present Company of the Daughters of Charity would not have come into being. Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac were both truly, and in equal measure, the Founders of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. In other words, God is the Founder and they are only his poor instruments. They must surely have meditated on this in prayer and discussed it with each other on many occasions because Saint Vincent said to the Sisters. *“And that, my dear Sisters, is how God has brought about this work. Mademoiselle never thought of it, neither did I, nor Father Porail, nor this poor girl. Now it must be admitted - this is a rule laid down by Saint Augustine – that when the author of a work cannot be discovered, then it is God Himself who accomplished it. Who gave the spirit of the poor Daughters of Charity, I mean the good ones? God Himself. Daughters of Charity who possess their spirit have the spirit of God. It was God who began this work; therefore it is His.”* (Coste IX p.602)

The founding charism

When we consider these facts in a supernatural light we come to the same conclusion: the Vincentian charism is also a “Louisian” charism.

It is quite certain that in order to found the Company of the Daughters of Charity, Vincent and Louise were given a divine *charism* which today we would call the *founding charism: they had a divine experience* which moved them to seek God and to made them reflect on their lives. For Vincent, this began when he was in captivity, then when he was accused of theft, and then when he came to know Berulle who initiated him into prayer. For Louise this started in 1607 when, living in the

³ Coste I p.172-21. Gobillon p. 51-52

⁴ We are very fortunate to have the third conference that Saint Vincent gave on the Rule. It was transcribed by Saint Louise and is the first Conference that Fr. Coste included in his *Works of Saint Vincent*

boarding house, she felt abandoned by her family and experienced loneliness. She turned to the Capuchins and devoted herself to prayer.

Their deep spiritual life brought about a transformation in them, a “*second conversion*” (to use the words of Lallement, a contemporary of the two Founders) through a mystic Night, in 1617 for Vincent and in 1623 for Louise. In the course of this contemplative experience they received a “*revelation*”; they were to consecrate themselves to the service of the poor. This service was born out of that spiritual darkness; Vincent gave himself to the poor in order to emerge from that darkness. God brought Louise out of that darkness to give her to those who are poor. Vincent began his mission at Folleville and at Chatillon. Louise discovered her mission when Vincent sent her on mission to Montmirail. (Coste I, p.73-74).

The charism was given by the Holy Spirit. Vincent and Louise took up the work of founding the Company through their exemplary lives and selfless activity. What was contagious was not so much their words as their personality, their lives and those of the first Daughters of Charity who came together in the house of Mademoiselle Le Gras to begin this divine venture. Many other young women embraced the charism of the two saints and began to follow Jesus Christ. For this reason we can say that these two people had one single charism; the same founding charism.

The influence of the Daughters

We should mention the influence exercised by Marguerite Naseau, or what amounts to the same thing, that of the young women who followed her example,⁵ because it seems to me that most of these who wanted to join the Company were attracted by the example of those who were already members and who directly encouraged them to join that Charity or indirectly influenced them by their example. The Daughters, or the Sisters – as they were called and as they called themselves – were women who had a genuine love for poor people and were delighted with their new situation – they were very happy and brought along other companions, friends or members of their family.

We have to admit that others came, or were sent, for less worthy motives such as curiosity or the lure of going to Paris, the capital, where they would easily find employment as servants in the households of the aristocracy whom they knew to prefer peasant girls to the young women of the town.

Another not so worthy motive, and one common to every era, is the attraction offered by every new work. This Confraternity resembled a Religious Congregation but its aims were more contemporary and it offered a simpler charism which was more modern and original in its organisation. This seemed to be an easier way of life: no need to go through the different stages of the religious life, no novitiate, public vows or enclosure. All this made it seem easier to join, to live in the Charity and even to leave it without a lot of juridical complications. Even if this was not the intention of the Founders, the young women felt free and were not bound to a life-time commitment.

⁵ Coste IX p.77-90

There were two other motives which are more legitimate but these reasons for joining the Company needed to be purified. The first is the question of a dowry, something beyond the reach of poor girls. Convents were generally reserved for aristocratic and wealthy women, those who were poor could only be admitted as lay sisters who would do ordinary tasks, and even the number of these sisters was limited. In the case of the Daughters of Charity, however, many poor young women who heard God's call were accepted without a dowry. In fact, nearly all the early Daughters of Charity came from families of very modest means.

The second such motivation was the lack of structures in the Confraternity during those early years. Some Daughters of Charity thought that this new Confraternity was like the others which accepted decent young women who were ready to do good to the poor. Some of them, when they had had enough, left the Company. In her writings Sister Mathurine Guerin recalls; *"I often heard her (Saint Louise) say that in the beginning she took in girls who came in great numbers but stayed a very short time and that she was very sorry to see all those different faces; but as things couldn't be otherwise, she had to keep on bearing this sorrow."*(Documents, Sr. Charpy p. 948).

It was Louise's task every day to clarify and purify these motives for people joining the Company. Vincent supported her in this difficult work and encouraged her by his talks and his letters. In his conferences he gave guidance to the young women who joined the group. It is worth quoting here some paragraphs from a letter that Vincent wrote to Louise, encouraging her in that arduous task of being directress and formator.

"As for what you tell me about them, I have no doubt that they are as you describe them to me, but we have to hope that they will mature and that prayer will allow them to see their faults and encourage them to correct them. It would be well for you to tell them what constitutes solid virtue, especially that of interior and exterior mortification of our judgment, our will, memories, sight, hearing, speech and the other senses, of the attachments we have to bad, useless, and even good things, all this for the love of Our Lord, Who acted in this way. You will have to strengthen them a good deal in all these matters, especially in the virtue of obedience and in that of indifference. But because too much talking is harmful to you, do so only occasionally. It would be well for you to tell them that they must be helped to acquire this virtue of mortification and be given practice in it. I shall also tell them so they will be well disposed to it."

In the first two years, neither Vincent nor Louise had any clear idea of what they wanted to do with this group of widows and young women but no doubt they had something more in mind than a simple Confraternity of pious people.

Prior to 1636 the conditions necessary for young women to be accepted into the Confraternity can be described in a few words: a desire to join, good health and robust strength to serve the poor sick, a simple and uncomplicated outlook on life and "a good spirit and good will." (Coste I p. 313-315). Anything else they could acquire or could correct. If they didn't correct any serious faults they could be sent away.

During these first two years, Saint Vincent often thought of Saint Francis de Sales and what he had to say about vocation: the priesthood or consecration to God in chastity, poverty and obedience, were meant to enable a man or woman to live a nobler life. So it was sufficient to feel a certain attraction for this life, and to desire it with a good intention, for this to be a vocation.

In 1636 the Founders talked to the Daughters of Charity about vocation using the ideas of Berulle and the Oratorians. They presented it as a call to follow a path indicated by God, and a response to this call by commitment to this way of life. This marks the first steps in moving from the Confraternity of Charity to the Company of the Daughters of Charity. This change was confirmed by the Daughters moving from the house in rue Saint-Victor, which had become too small, to the village of “la Chapelle” a suburb of Paris which was nearer to Saint-Lazare where Vincent de Paul lived.

Between 1638 and 1639 the Confraternity made up of widows and young women, although not juridically recognised, became, in fact, the Company of the Daughters of Charity which was well organised and independent of the other Charities. The Ladies of Charity of the main hospital in Paris recognised this and they looked on Mademoiselle Le Gras as the Superioress of this new Company. Vincent and Louise were convinced that these Daughters already formed an association, a confraternity or a Company which was not only autonomous but also different from that of the Ladies of Charity.

In February 1638 we see this in a letter Vincent wrote to Louise about the direction of an establishment that took in foundlings. He told her what he had explained to Madame Pelletier who was in charge of this institution: “*..that for purely temporal matters, she should be under the good Ladies; but, for spiritual matters such as the direction of the Sisters, the wet nurses and the little runaway children whose number will be increasing, that is when she should deal with you. To that end, she should let you know from time to time what is going on, every week for example, or at least every two weeks.*” (Coste I, p.444). In an indirect way Vincent was declaring that the Company of the Daughters of Charity was autonomous with regard to its internal government and also that it was independent. He was doubtless in agreement with Louise on this matter since he writes to her in a way that suggests they had already discussed it.

In May, 1639, a letter from Louise to the Mother Superior of the Benedictines in Argenteuil (Ecrits Sr. Charpy, L 9) gives us some information about this. In the village of Argenteuil (at that time a suburb of Paris) there was a Charity of two Daughters of Charity who cared for the poor. A lay Sister at the Benedictine convent there died and it was thought that Barbe, one of the Daughters, could replace her. These religious thought of the Daughters as simply members of a lay association dedicated to works of piety and charity.⁶ Then another lay Sister died and it was thought the other Daughter could replace her. But neither Louise nor the Sister concerned agreed to this so Louise wrote to the Mother Superior. In this letter we can see that Louise already had very definite views about the Company:

⁶ A strange thing: the Ladies of Charity and the Sister herself ask Saint Vincent for permission to leave the association of the Daughters of Charity to become Benedictine lay sisters (Coste I p.397)

“Madame, I came by this information through a Daughter of the parish Charity who has served the sick for eight years. I find it incredible, Madame, that you tried to turn this Sister away from her vocation. I can’t believe that those who understand the importance of God’s designs would try to oppose them and thus jeopardise the salvation of a soul. You would, moreover, be depriving the poor, burdened by all sorts of necessities, of the help that only these poor girls brings them. For the love of God they live a disinterested life, dedicating themselves to the spiritual and corporal service of these poor creatures whom He deigns to consider as His members. I hope to God, Madame, that the girl you already have in your house will serve you well and be contented. I only hope that she was not called to the state in which she was, otherwise she would indeed be blameworthy. But I beg you, Madame, do not any longer permit them to be accepted with your permission. This could be a temptation to many others.” (“Ecrits” Sr. Charpy L9, p 19)

In accordance with theological ideas of her time, Saint Louise explained that even if they are “*secular*” the Daughters of Charity are not simply *lay people* and that they have a God-given vocation just as the Benedictines have. This vocation is eternal because it is rooted in the eternal designs of God. The difference between the two vocations lies not in the call but in the objective for which they were called – the Benedictines were called to prayer and meditation, the Daughters of Charity to serve poor people.

We can see from this letter that Louise already had definite ideas about the name, charism, objective and nature of the new Company of the Daughters of Charity. We may be sure that Louise wrote this letter with Vincent’s agreement because she would never have done anything without first consulting her director and superior.

In her letter to the Sisters at Richelieu, Sister Barbe Angiboust and Sister Louise Ganset, (Ecrits – Sr Charpy L11 p. 20-22) Louise showed that she had very clear ideas about the internal government of this new Company. She explained clearly the relationship between authority and obedience, between community unity and individualism, between personal freedom and permissions.

On the occasion of the foundation of a community at the Grand Hopital de Saint-Jean-l’Evangéliste at Angers on 1st February 1640, Louise de Marillac signed the contract with “the Reverend Administrators and Fathers of the Poor” of that hospital in her capacity as “*directress of the Daughters of Charity, servants of the poor sick in the hospitals and parishes, at the good pleasure of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission, Director of the said Daughters of Charity.*” (Coste II p.1 Documents- Sr. Charpy no. 280 p.264. The Hospital Administrators were unwilling to sign a contract with a woman. That is why Vincent supported Louise and stated that because of the special nature of the Company, Louise was authorised to sign the contract.

Prior to 1640, the Daughters of Charity were established in accordance with the needs of the poor people cared for by the Ladies in the Charities. From this time onward, the Daughters of Charity would develop at their own pace and would be independent of the other Charities.

Vincent and Louise continued to develop structures within the Company. This was composed of communities with a Sister Servant in charge. The main residence would be the House where the Superioress, Louise de Marillac, lived and she would have immediate governance of the whole Company. But the Company had one special feature that was unique in that century, it had a Superior, Vincent de Paul. Vincent and Louise together drew up the Regulations and the Common Rules. Either she would write them and he would amend them or he would write them and she would amend. In the course of time they added the Councils, the Director General, the vows, the seminary etc. In this way they completed the essential structures of the Company as they appear in our present Constitutions.

Father Benito Martinez, CM

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