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SISTER EVELYNE FRANCO

Letter of 5th March 2010

To all Daughters of Charity

Dear Sisters,

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

I am sure that your thoughts and prayers have been with our Sisters in Chile since the earthquake on February 27th. The media have given it wide coverage, describing the extent of the destruction caused by the earthquake (8.8) and the tsunami that followed, but individual communications as well as access to water and electricity were cut off for three long days. In the evening of March 1st Sister Julia Moreno, the Visitatrice of Chile and Father Luis Fernando Macias, the Provincial Director, sent us reassuring news about the Sisters, the children and the personnel in our houses. However, some family members of our Sisters have been reported missing since the tsunami. This latter event was particularly devastating, since it occurred during the summer vacation season along the Pacific coast. Several of the Sisters' houses suffered minor damage, but of course the concern is now focused on getting help to

the victims. I assured Sister Julia that the Company is united with them in prayer and in sharing resources.

This catastrophe followed those of Haiti and Madeira Island (Province of Portugal). Yesterday as well, an earthquake (6.4) in southern Taiwan brought back dramatic memories of October 3rd 2009. Fortunately, the Sisters sent us reassuring news.

Excuse me for this succession of rather sad news reports, but I know how necessary it is to have information about our family.

I conclude this brief note with some words of hope. The same day as the earthquake in Chile, three Sisters arrived in the Interprovincial Seminary in Santiago Chile, two from Paraguay and one from Argentina. They will be admitted officially into the Company on March 15th. Let us confide them to Saint Louise and let us all ask our Foundress for the grace to serve poor persons with gentleness and compassion, as our Sisters in Haiti, Madeira Island, Chile and Taiwan are doing in these emergency situations.

A very happy Feast of Saint Louise! May the celebration of the 350th anniversary of her death renew in us the desire to go forward with ever greater fidelity, along the road she marked out for us: the pathway along which we journey with God, our Sisters and persons living in poverty.

Assuring you of my affection and devotion.

Sister Evelyne FRANC

Daughter of Charity

FATHER GREGORY GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

Motherhouse, 25th March 2010

Conference given for the Renovation

Peace and the Vows

One of the key aspects of our faith that I have been reflecting on in a very specific and concrete way since my Advent letter at the end of last year, and my Lenten letter this year, is peace. That is what I would like to speak about today, especially how peace contributes to and is the consequence of the living out of the vows that you have pronounced before the Lord this day.

Peace is the first gift of the Spirit of the risen Lord Jesus. You recall that as the disciples were huddled in an upper room for fear of the Jews, and Jesus, the resurrected Lord appeared to them, it was the gift of peace that calmed their fears. Jesus entered the room and the first words from His mouth were, "Peace be with you." It was the peace of the Lord Jesus that transformed them into new creations.

Throughout the mature years of the life of Saint Vincent de Paul, he was heavily burdened by the misery in which the people lived. He often called the poor his “burden and sorrow.” It was evident that one of the principal causes of such abject poverty was the war in which France was immersed. Vincent pleaded, he begged, and he even obliged the authority of his time to bring an end to war. Bringing an end to war and promoting peace would mean a more dignified life for those who are poor.

Throughout the history of humankind it is true that those who most suffer and are the victims of war and its consequences are the poor. It is the poor, for the most part, who are employed to fight the battles of the rich. The statistics of any army in any country will show that the majority of those who are soldiers come from lower middle class to poor families. We often hear different protests in many parts of the world: “No more war, all we want is peace.” It is just not slogan, it is a fact.

The liturgy that we as Catholics celebrate, especially the Eucharist, recognises the great value of this gift of the Spirit of the Lord Jesus. We open and close the Mass with peace, “the grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” And again, “the Mass is ended, go in peace.” As a way of showing communion with the Father, and with one another, the prayer that Jesus has taught us is followed by the Rite of Peace. Communion with Jesus’ body and blood is preceded by “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace.” Communion, both in prayer and in Eucharist bring reconciliation and peace.

Peace is not only a calming experience but also an encouraging one. The peace of the Lord Jesus gives us courage to go out and give witness in the world in which we live. Our vows also are enhanced by the gift of the Spirit’s peace. At the same time peace is the fruit of a deep living out of each of the vows. Let me briefly show how each vow is related to peace.

The **Service of the Poor**, the vow which gives meaning to the vocation of the life of the Daughters of Charity and the vow which is the key in the living out of the other three evangelical counsels, can easily be understood in its relationship to peace. The victims of war and violence, both global and domestic, are the poor. Peace and its promotion are significant contributory factors in your service of them. It is interesting how at the UN, many of the working groups on poverty and the poor are related to any number of the major difficult world situations in which we live, whether climate change, the lack of respect for creation, immigration, human trafficking, war, all are related in one way or another as a significant destructive force in the life of those who are poor. To serve the poor is to work for peace and to work for peace is to serve the poor.

With the **vow of poverty**, living with less in simple lifestyle helps to counteract the greed and uncontrolled avarice of the world in which we live. The unreflective, unquenchable thirst for material things, power and wealth are the root causes of many wars, violence and destructive situations that we find. Therefore, to live as poor women, to live with less, in a sense of solidarity with those who do not have an equal share of this world’s goods, helps us at the same time to create peace.

Chastity, as we well know, is all about living more deeply your relationships with God, with your Sisters in community, with the poor you serve, and with the many other good people that surround you in your lives. Chastity is that gift that helps you to love deeply and unconditionally without the need to possess or dominate in your relationships. Peace is that

gift which enables you to have more harmonious relationships. Through the transforming power of peace, you are able to listen to the Spirit in “communion of heart”.

One appeal in the Inter-Assemblies Document of 2009-2015 encourages you to “enhance living together in great union and cordiality as a prophetic witness of love in a way of hope.” Such an atmosphere can only be promoted if your relationships with one another are peace-filled. As is made clear in the responses, the first point calls you “to be open to each Sister with a faith perspective that accepts differences as enriching”. This is the same point I highlight in my Lenten letter wherein the diversity of expressions of human life are to be respected. “It is possible to build a world in which people of different backgrounds and cultural expressions can learn to live together and therefore create harmony based on diversity rather than diversity being the justification for violence and destruction.” It is to be hoped that we never get to that point in any of our community experiences.

It is important that we have peace in order to harmonise our community relationships. Peace works in and through the gift of chastity that God has given us. Peace comes from our primary relationship of intimacy with God. He places it in our hearts. It is deepened in and through our meditation and communion with God, contemplation. Chastity helps us, when peacefully lived, to achieve authentic relationships with one another in community and beyond. It helps us to open our hearts to those with whom we share our apostolates and give our service. When this harmony comes about, one evident fruit of it will be peace.

A concrete expression of chastity is shown in the following text from St. Louise de Marillac: “Be affable and sweet with the poor. Know in fact that they are our lords that we ought to love and respect them with greatness. It is not enough that this maxim be in our spirit, what we need to do is show it externally with our actions”.

The **vow of obedience** is a gift that enables us to be attentive to the Will of God. In order to be attentive, we need to create an environment of peace and quiet. Peace enables us to listen attentively to the Will of God. Listening to God’s Will, as it is discerned in community, is enhanced when there is a peaceful atmosphere.

My Sisters, much more could be said about the relationship between each of your four vows and the gift of peace. I ask you to reflect on how God’s peace, enhances the living of your vows and at the same time is the fruit of your living them. Witness to peace, Sisters, and do so with courage.

May Mary, the Queen of Peace, intercede on our behalf and as the Mother of God, may she intercede in order that there may be peace in the world. There is a song that says “Let there be peace on earth, but let it begin with me.” I pray that the gift of peace, which the Lord has placed in each of your hearts, be strengthened by your union of hearts.

Father Gregory GAY

Superior General

FATHER JAVIER ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Conference in preparation for the Renovation

***“The Word was made flesh
and lived among us” (Jn 1,14)***

Ever since 1669 the Company has kept up the tradition of renewing vows on 25th March, feast of the Annunciation. This date was chosen in remembrance of the day when Saint Louise, together with some of the first Sisters, made vows for the first time in 1642. The feast of the Incarnation or the Annunciation could not be more appropriate for giving us a better understanding of this act of Renovation: Mary’s “yes” to God’s plan at the Annunciation encourages the Daughters of Charity to say “yes” to God’s plan for them in line with the Company’s charism.

This year I invite you to reflect more deeply on one of the most central mysteries of our faith, the Incarnation. The spirituality of the Daughters of Charity and the vows they make are based primarily on the Incarnation and this is the reason why we have them. Without Him nothing would make sense in our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. Throughout this talk we will see that the thinking of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise is deeply rooted in the Incarnation which is one of the pillars of their spirituality. I will try to present all they have told us about this mystery as two actions, contemplating and imitating. Neither the Church nor our Founders ask us to do anything else with regard to the Incarnation. Let us see what lies behind these two verbs.

CONTEMPLATING THE INCARNATION

One of the things we can or we should do with regard to a mystery is to stop and contemplate it, not in order to understand it or explain it rationally but to let ourselves be lost in its unfathomable depths, its attractiveness and its fascinating beauty. Somebody surveying from the top of a mountain a vast landscape suffused with light and feeling on their cheek the gentle evening breeze while letting their gaze rest on the different colours and shapes before their eyes, can be an image that helps us to understand what is meant by contemplating the mystery of the Incarnation. Also, John Paul II, in *Tertio millennio adveniente*, recommended us to sit down and contemplate the great two centuries old river of revelation, of Christianity and of the Church.¹

Saint Vincent said to the first missionaries: *“Let us look at the Son of God; what a heart of charity He had; what a fire of love! Please tell us, Jesus, who drew you away from heaven to come and endure the curse of earth and the many persecutions and torments You suffered? O Saviour! Source of love, humbled to our level and to a vile agony, who showed in that, greater love for the neighbour than You yourself did? You came to lay yourself open to all our misfortunes, to take the form of a sinner, to lead a life of suffering and to undergo a shameful death for us; is there any love like that? But who else could love in such an outstanding way? Only Our Lord, who was so enamoured with the love of creatures as to leave the throne of His Father to come and take a body subject to weaknesses. And why? To establish among us, by His Word and example, love of the neighbour. This is the love that crucified Him and brought about that admirable work of our redemption.”*² It is well worthwhile to read and reread this text so that we can realise to what extent this mystery of

¹ *Tertio millennio adveniente*, no. 32

² Coste XII p. 216, Conference of St. Vincent to the Congregation of the Mission, 30th May 1659 on Charity

the Incarnation influenced Vincent's thinking and actions. He invites us to welcome this mystery with the joy and gratitude of someone who knows that he has been blessed with the gift of Redemption. The words "*Let us look at the Son of God*" are a way of saying in today's language, "let us contemplate" or "let us meditate." The many phrases expressing admiration or posing questions are simply ways of inviting us to take rest in the mystery that is beyond our understanding and to be penetrated with the light and strength of the example of Jesus Christ so that we can imitate him in our daily lives.

For her part, Saint Louise wrote on various occasions about this mystery of the Incarnation.³ She contemplates and adores God made man. At the beginning her spirituality is mystical and intimate but it later becomes open to the world of serving the poor. The accompaniment and spiritual help offered by Vincent were decisive factors in this later development. This is how Louise contemplates the mystery of the Incarnation during a retreat she made sometime before 1633: (I propose to) "*To love abjection since God is to be found there. Jesus teaches us this by His birth. He wanted us to know that this abjection filled heaven with astonishment and gave glory to the Father. However I must unite my miserable, weak self-abnegation to His glorious abjection.*"⁴

As we have seen in relation to other topics, the Constitutions are on the same wavelength as our Founders. They show us that Christ's Incarnation is a fount of spiritual energy that we have access to through contemplation. The Daughters of Charity "*contemplate Christ in the self-emptying of His Redemptive Incarnation and they marvel that a God should somehow be unable or unwilling to be separated from man.*"⁵ They learn from Him how to reveal to their brothers and sisters God's love for the world, especially for persons who are poor." (C.17b). By meditating on the Incarnation we discover the humanity of Christ as presented in the Gospels and we do this not out of intellectual curiosity but in order that our own life of commitment may benefit from the light and warmth that radiates from the person of Christ. Anyone who comes close to him will be drawn to his person and his message. Over and over again contemplation reactivates the process of falling in love with Christ and our commitment to serving his favoured ones, the poor.

We cannot contemplate the Incarnation without recourse to the Gospels. These bring us into the mystery of Christ as He came into our world, the difficulties He experienced in preaching the Kingdom, His death and resurrection.... The Incarnation leads us to meditate on Christ's humanity as Saint Vincent loved to do.⁶ After listening to the Gospel accounts Saint Paul sums up the mystery of the Incarnation in these words, "*Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.*" (Ph.2, 6-7).

Meditating on the Gospel and on each of its texts is surely the best meditation we can make and without doubt the surest way of growing in the mystery of the Incarnation in order to "*be configured into Christ*" as Saint Vincent said on so many occasions. The Gospels show Jesus as an ordinary and well adjusted man in spite of living contrary to the current ideas that he could not subscribe to because they were so far from being human and so far from being divine. Yet in spite of this background that was not at all easy, Jesus carried out his mission with admirable serenity. So much so that the Pharisees "*did not dare to lay hands on him.*" (Jn 7, 45). The ordinariness of Jesus is in no way compromised by the words

³ Spiritual Writings. Thoughts A7,A9, A8.A26. This was a favourite theme for her retreats

⁴ Spiritual Writings A9 , p.703

⁵ Saint Louise, *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, Gobillon, 1676 ed, vol 5, chapter 1,§1, p.189

⁶ Cf. L.ABELLY *Life of the venerable servant of God, Vincent de Paul*,pp. 600-608

of Sacred Scripture which assure us that *“he became as men are in all things except sin.”* In fact, sin does not make a person more human but on the contrary it prevents them from fulfilling their vocation to practise love, truth, solidarity and forgiveness.

The Gospels dispel any possible doubt about the authenticity of Jesus’ Incarnation. From the earliest centuries, the Church has condemned as heretical the thinking known as Docetism which taught that Jesus was only human in outward appearance. The truth about the Incarnation is that Jesus took on human form and so was able to think and feel like a man, a man with a heart. When someone undertakes an important enterprise feelings are often deemed less important than the mission. This did not happen in the case of Jesus. It is easy for us to see that the great task of preaching the Gospel did not shrivel up his feelings or make him a fanatic to the point of forgetting the small details of everyday life. He always shows sympathy for the people and their problems. For example, he looks lovingly on the young man who is saddened by the thought of what discipleship entails, he reacts strongly to the apostles’ lack of understanding but on other occasions he is filled with joy when they come back happy with the results of their preaching, he is saddened by the hardness of heart he sees in the people of his day; he is impressed by the faith of a pagan man; he is moved at the sight of a mother weeping for her dead son; he weeps at the tomb of Lazarus, etc.

Alongside these feelings there is his ability to reflect. Jesus appears to his contemporaries as someone who has his own personal teaching to offer. What he says is reasonable and human and this helps people in their lives. Moreover he gives the reasons for his teaching. These reasons are based more on common sense than on high-flown philosophical propositions. If he tells us to love our enemies, he explains that this is because we are all children of the same Father (cf Mt 5, 45). If he tells us to do good to everyone he says this is because we all want others to do good to us. (cf Lk 6,33). If he tells us to have confidence in the Father he does this by reminding us that God cares for the birds of the air (cf Mt 12,11) and if He cares for the birds of the air how can He not care for us? His precepts are penetrating, simple, and shrewd as we would expect from someone who is sure about what he says; be reconciled with your brother, do not swear by anything, offer the wicked man no resistance, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well.

The Incarnation did not take away Jesus’ awareness of being sent by the Father. He soon discovered his mission and was passionate about it: *“Did you not know”* he replied to Mary and Joseph, *“that I must be busy about my Father’s affairs?”*(Lk 2, 49). The will of God was the pole star that guided his life. *“He did not come to triumph or to die but to do the will of God,”* said Saint Vincent. If he died and rose again it was because this was all part of God’s designs. His whole life will be lived in accordance with this divine plan. He will go to the Jordan because, *“it is fitting that we should, in this way, do all that righteousness demands.”*(Mt 3,15). In the desert he will be under the influence of the Spirit, *“Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.”*(Mk1, 12). He will cast out demons by *“every word that comes from the mouth of God”* (Mt 4,4). When he is asked to stay in Capernaum he says that he has to go and preach in the neighbouring country towns because *“that is why I came.”*(Mk 1, 38). One day he will even say that his food is *“to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work.”*(Jn 4,34).

Fulfilling God’s will does not stop him from acting in complete freedom; He speaks to children, he declares that man and woman are equal, he allows his disciples to pluck ears of corn on the Sabbath, he is outspoken with the political authorities, he rejects the temptations of his family who want to turn him aside from his mission (cf Mk3,21;3, 31). What is the secret of his freedom and his courage? Jesus puts himself completely into the hands of God.

Thanks to his total confidence in the Father he is able to overcome even the fear of death, a death he freely accepts.

This brief review of Jesus incarnate makes me remember that every passage in the Gospels should be the basis of my meditation. Nobody would deny the importance of the psalms and the liturgy as the prayer of the Church. However, it is personal prayer or meditation made with serious and persistent effort that has the greatest effect on people and transforms them from within. Contemplating the person of Jesus Christ will gradually change people's standards, feelings and attitudes. This contemplation will shape the person's liberty and penetrate their innermost feelings. The General Assemblies Document says quite rightly that this is the way to become "*deeply rooted in Jesus Christ.*"⁷

IMITATING THE INCARNATION

In the Incarnation Jesus Christ acted in a serious and committed way; he reduced his divine state to our human condition and took on our human nature with its feeble and sinful side, in order to raise up the human race. Saint Vincent reduces this threefold movement to two: the incarnate Christ's abasement which he describes as "*humiliated love*" and his commitment to the world of the poor in order to lift them out of their poverty and bring them to know the Gospel. According to Saint Vincent, "*affective love, which is to be engaged in the works of Charity and the service of those who are poor, undertaken with joy, courage, fidelity and love.*"⁸ This important statement is full of meaning and must have been the fruit of many hours meditating on the Gospel in order to produce this definition of the objective of the Company! The Daughters of Charity who continue the mission of Jesus Christ are called to imitate this dynamic force of the Incarnation. Also, the specific virtues, the evangelical counsels, and even sisterly life in common have as their ultimate goal an incarnated service. The insistence on inculturation so strongly perceived in the 90s had no other aim but to imitate Christ's abasement. Life style and a particular way of serving in accordance with the needs of the poor were essential for this. In fact, Jesus Christ practised inculturation to the highest degree by his Incarnation. Let us pause here and think about some of the consequences that the mystery of the Incarnation has for ourselves:

The Incarnation leads us into a particular way of praying

Our prayer has to be rooted in humanity. Saint Vincent was suspicious of prayer that was too theoretical and too lofty because he knew the dangers that may lurk in using this kind of prayer. We can sum up these dangers specifically as self-seeking under the guise of mysticism or an escape from real life, the movement that is most opposed to that of the Incarnation, "*ecstasies and raptures which are more harmful than useful*" Saint Vincent declared forcefully to the Daughters of Charity.⁹ Seeking after new sensations and novel experiences in an intimate and subjective form of spirituality, cut off from real life and not leading to efficacious love for the poor, can be a danger for men and women of our times, too. Contemplating Christ in the self-abasement of His redemptive Incarnation, his life devoted specifically to service, his constant seeking to know the will of God, his love for poor people, his humility and charity; all this is without doubt the best way of arriving at prayer which is realistic and makes us grow in the love of God and of our neighbour." "*You can make your prayer in this way, which is the best way; for you shouldn't make it in order to have exalted ideas, ecstasies and raptures – which are more harmful than useful –*

⁷ Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009-2015, *Open to the Transforming Spirit*, pp9 and 19

⁸ Coste IX, p.466, Conference to the first Sisters, 9th February 1653, on the Spirit of the Company

⁹ Coste IX p.26, Conference to the first Sisters, 2nd August 1640 on Fidelity to Rising and Mental Prayer

but only to perfect yourselves and make you truly good Daughters of Charity."¹⁰ Following Saint Vincent's line of reasoning, the Constitutions ask us to make our prayer Incarnation-based: *"The Sisters contemplate in Christ those dispositions which will draw them close to the most deprived, endeavouring to make them a part of their own lives."* (C13). The two verbs used in this article of the Constitutions: *"contemplate"* and *"make them part of their own lives"* are most appropriate for defining the nature of Vincentian prayer.

In other words, incarnated prayer must always be related to life. Praying in this way might be described as seeing life through God's eyes or again, bringing life into our prayer: the concerns, fears, joys and other experiences that come our way during the day, the image of poor people, their sufferings and the major problems affecting humanity, *"The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."*¹¹ This guideline presented by the Church points to the path of Incarnation and commitment. We know, too, that if prayer and life go hand in hand we will easily discover the gospel standards that should underpin the Christian life. The person who makes the effort to meditate on Jesus Christ ends up acquiring quite naturally a great capacity for discernment. If *"Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life"*, anyone who takes Him as their model and follows in His footsteps, will know which path to take and how they should live. That is why Saint Vincent recommended us to ask ourselves what would Jesus think and how would he act in a particular situation because *"it is in prayer that God lets us know what He wants us to do and what to avoid."*¹² It is clear that prayer based on the Incarnation also leads us to make practical resolutions with regard to our own personal circumstances and our service of those who are poor. According to Saint Vincent's way of thinking, these resolutions should be the most important part of our mental prayer.¹³ Contemplating Jesus on Tabor would not have been much use to the disciples if they had not been able to come down from the mountain and take up again their ordinary life.

The Incarnation strengthens the vocation of self-giving

From his earliest years, Jesus cultivated the conviction of Being Sent. Some phrases such as, *"My food is to do the will of him who sent me"* (Jn 4,34) or *"I came to do his will"* show us that Jesus was well aware of his mission. In Jerusalem did he not say to Mary and Joseph, *"Did you not know that I must be about my Father's affairs?"* Lk 2, 49. (Lk 2, 49). When a Daughter of Charity is faithful to the call and the mission confided to her by the Father, she is identifying with an essential characteristic of Jesus Christ, that is to say, the realisation of being One who is Sent. I would even go so far as to say that the Sister who often thinks about this theological truth and applies it to her own case, strengthens her vocation and grows in the knowledge of her religious identity as well as her sense of being part of the Vincentian charism as it is defined by the Company. There are certain texts, such as Mk 3, 13-39, that she should meditate on frequently.

The Incarnation provides enlightenment when the Daughter of Charity experiences difficulties in her mission or her vocation. These difficulties might come from contact with the prevailing culture which is not well-disposed towards a vocation to serve others, such as our own. Very often this lack of understanding and acceptance comes from those closest to

¹⁰ *Ibidem*

¹¹ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, n° 1

¹² Coste IX p.328, Conference to the first Sisters, 31st May 1648, on Mental Prayer

¹³ Coste IX p.26, Conference to the first Sisters, 2nd August 1640, on Fidelity to Rising and Mental Prayer

us and even from people who are dear to us like our family or local community. The family can be a problem when people do not understand the life style of a Daughter of Charity. In this situation a Sister feels more pain than when criticism comes from people less close to her. Jesus also was saddened by his family who went looking for him, thinking, "*He has gone out of his mind.*" (Mk 3, 21). It can sometimes happen, too, that difficulties can come from the community the Sister belongs to. Sadly, there can be rivalries that cause suffering and bring coldness to community life. Problems can also come from within the Sister herself. Over time she may come to feel fatigue, listlessness, discouragement or a certain slackening in the spiritual life. At the basis of all this there must surely lie, a lack of deep conviction, a Vincentian spirituality that is not as clear as it used to be and all this could lead to the Sister losing a sense of what serving the poor means. In other words, all the difficulties experienced by the Daughters of Charity today are similar to those that Christ encountered in his human life and mission. What should one do when these spiritual problems arise? We need to strengthen our conviction that a life of service is meaningful, that it is very meaningful and that if we do not appreciate this then we will lose the conviction because we have taken a different path. Once again let us remember that Christ found fulfilment in his Incarnation and in giving himself to others. The Daughter of Charity has the same vocation and mission as Jesus incarnate. Saint Vincent tells us this, "*In this vocation we are very much in conformity with Our Lord Jesus Christ, who on coming into this world seems to have made it his principal aim, to assist poor people and to take care of them....And if we ask Our Lord, 'What did you come on earth to do? To assist the poor. Anything else? To assist the poor'*"¹⁴ So for Vincentians, Jesus Christ is the great proof of the validity of their vocation and this dissipates the fantasies which at certain times can invade our interior castle.

The Incarnation sheds light on our life style

If we want to be able to explain Vincentian spirituality we must first come to know Saint Vincent's understanding of Christ's Incarnation and mission for that is the key and the source of it all. Following the teaching of Saint John and Saint Paul, the Incarnation is for Saint Vincent the highest expression of God's love for the human race. A completely gratuitous love which would even go so far as to take on the human condition most authentically and radically. "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*" (Jn 3,16). "*Christ Jesus...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness*" (Ph 2,7) The Incarnation event cannot leave humanity indifferent. In fact, with Jesus Christ we have a period of history which comes to a close and another one which is just beginning. In his self-abasement God has given everyone a personal value and an inalienable dignity: this dignity is conferred on the poor, too, and especially on the poor. The way Jesus acts in the Gospel clearly shows who were his favoured ones. I would even go so far as to say that these are the hidden presence of God incarnate (cf Mt 25, 15) "*In serving poor persons we serve Jesus Christ*" was Saint Vincent's message to the first Sisters and his most detailed commentary on the text from Mt, 25, 15.¹⁵ For him the Incarnation was the clearest light shed on his vocation and this is what moved him to found institutions in the Church. When he spoke to the first Sisters about their vocation he said to them, "*To be a true Daughter of Charity you must do what the Son of God did when He was on earth.*"¹⁶ All the rest are more

¹⁴ Coste XI p. 98. Conference of Saint Vincent to the Congregation of the Mission, 29th October 1683 on Perseverance in Vocation

¹⁵ Coste IX p. 199-200, Conference to the first Sisters, 13th February 1646, on Love of Vocation and Assistance to the Poor.

¹⁶ Coste IX, p. 14, Conference to the first Sisters, 5th July 1640 on the Vocation of a Daughter of Charity

or less good explanations, more or less interesting discourses, but the main thing is not to be found in words, the main thing is a person; Jesus of Nazareth.

The service of those who are poor and the mystery of the Incarnation invite us to review our life style for it would be inconsistent to serve the poor from a level of some superiority. Officials and professional people may do this because their aim is efficiency and the fulfilment of their duty. The Daughters of Charity, on the other hand, wish to imitate the Son of God *“though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”* (2 Co.8,9). A modest, simple life style that is adapted, as far as possible to the life style of poor persons, can be significant and prophetic for the world in our day as that of Jesus Christ was for his times. *“The criterion for their simple and modest life is the very life of the Son of God. Jesus did not live in misery or indigence, neither did He live in affluence and wealth. His way of life was that of the people of modest means of His milieu, who earned their living by working, and were obliged to live simply and frugally.”*¹⁷. This criterion for discernment that we are given in the *Instruction on the Vows of the Daughters of Charity* can be applied to the life style of an individual as well as to that of an Institution. Perhaps it may prove more difficult for the latter to discern and more complicated to adapt. The works should be, on the one hand, up to date and efficacious, and on the other hand, modest and simple. It is not always possible to have both these elements at the same time. In some cases it might even be experienced as a contradiction. The temptation would be to exclude one aspect in favour of the other: for example, to opt for efficiency and modern methods and to put aside simplicity in everything relating to personal life style: or else to choose the meaningful and prophetic aspect of using simple resources and downgrading efficiency as something of secondary importance. The answer must surely lie not in discarding one of the two aspects but rather of integrating them by being mindful of both. The Incarnation has something to say about the specific facilities we give to the works.

Life style means more than just living simply on a personal or institutional level; it concerns the balanced life that should be characteristic of the Daughters of Charity. For example, they translate the spirituality of the Incarnation into love of God which moves them to give themselves to Him and into love of those who are poor which moves them to undertake works of charity. We cannot ignore either of these two factors; affective love of God and effective love of poor people. Disregarding either one of these factors would result in a lack of balance which would end up killing off one's vocation. Balance is to be found in the happy medium. It is this balance *“which directs their whole life”* as we are told in Constitution 24a.

The Incarnation calls for another form of balance, balance between heart and head. We know that Jesus was able to maintain a balance between his absolute devotion to the mission confided to him by the Father, and the warm and friendly relationships he had with specific people. The two objectives of the Kingdom, Mission and Charity did not stifle Jesus' emotions. This same balance is put before the Daughters of Charity; transparency and integrity of life style, with regard to vocation and in their convictions; but at the same time, closeness and very considerate and respectful relationships with the persons entrusted to them, affective love for all but particularly for the poor and for those closest to them. If these two elements are lived out in such a way that one excludes the other, there will then be an imbalance. Jesus of Nazareth is the true model of being able to balance small with the great, the human with the divine, charity with truth, contemplation with action, what is personal and what relates to community....

¹⁷ *Instruction on the Vows of the Daughters of Charity, p.81*

MARY AND THE INCARNATION

“I am the handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1, 38). In these simple words Mary utters her “yes” to collaborating with God in order to make possible the Incarnation of God’s Son. It is thanks to her that we have eternal life. As John Paul II told us, *“Mary gave full expression to the longing of the poor of Yahweh and is a radiant model for those who entrust themselves with all their heart to the promises of God.”*¹⁸

As we contemplate Jesus Christ in the Gospels, we will inevitably find Mary, too. She teaches the Daughters of Charity her disposition of being the humble and faithful servant of the Father’s designs (cf. C 15-23). They will be particularly grateful to her for her example of obedience. Thinking of her with thanksgiving will also include our prayer that she will continue to be the Mother of the Company and the star that guided every Daughter of Charity in her daily sharing in the mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Javier Alvarez

Director General

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Tertio millennio adveniente* NO. 48

DEUS CARITAS EST

**A fresh look at
our vocation as Daughters of Charity
in the light of the encyclical *Deus caritas est***

Introduction

Founded in 1633 the “Company of the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul” continue to this day their remarkable worldwide witness to the charism of love that animated the spirituality of the founders, St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac. The *Constitutions* of the Daughters of Charity seek to embody this charism which lies at the heart of the Gospel message. They also seek to make the charism of love central to the ministry of each succeeding generation of Daughters of Charity in tune with the signs of the times.

Even at first reading, it is easy to see the connection between Pope Benedict XVI’s Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* and the spirit of the Company. The key themes of the encyclical are fundamental to the *Constitutions* of the Company. Pope Benedict XVI’s first encyclical expresses much of the thinking of St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac. In fact, it looks as if Benedict XVI is very familiar indeed with the Vincentian spirit. This comes as no surprise as the spirituality of the founders was deeply rooted in the Gospel. *Deus Caritas Est* provides a contemporary lens for the Daughters of Charity to help them meet the challenge of communicating the charism of love in today’s world. The encyclical is animated by the Gospel and written to meet the exigencies of today’s increasingly secular culture. It has been described as: “...a *profound meditation upon what constitutes the newness of the new covenant, and hence upon what is radically constitutive of Christian identity and discipleship.*”¹

For us Daughters of Charity, *Deus Caritas Est* presents material for reflection that sheds light on our vocation and gives us new impetus to act like Saint Vincent and do “still more”

What follows is a reflection on the *Constitutions* in the light of the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*. To what extent and in what manner will the encyclical throw fresh light on the precise character of the vocation of the Daughters of Charity in today’s world.

Encounter with God in Christ

“In addition to their necessary training, these charity workers need a ‘formation of heart’: they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirit to others. (DCE 31)

A belief in the personal encounter with Jesus Christ is fundamental to understanding the vocation of the Daughter of Charity. Personal encounter with Him is also at the core of Pope Benedict’s vision and proclamation. This vocation is a response to a personal and divine call.² In this context, ongoing ‘formation of the heart’ is fundamental for Vincentian

1. Imbelli, Robert P., *America*, Vol. 194, 13th March 2006, p.9

² *Constitutions 7a*, p. 29 cf Saint Vincent, 22 September 1647, “ Perseverance in One’s Vocation,” IX, Conf. 32

members in order to foster a creative relationship and deeper intimacy with the person of Christ, one that is enriched by a deep prayer life. Each event and encounter in which the Sisters engage prompts them to seek the person of Jesus. Most especially they seek Him in those persons who are poor. St Vincent de Paul spoke constantly about the importance of a personal relationship with God and with Jesus Christ. St Vincent was continually in dialogue with God. For instance, St Vincent said, when one wakes up in the morning one goes to converse with God in prayer. “*O what happiness to hold converse with a God who loves us so much*”, he would say. The Daughters of Charity are encouraged to engage in uninterrupted dialogue with God throughout each day as in prayer the soul maintains itself in the love and friendship of God.³ The Sisters, therefore, are committed both as individuals and as members of a community to live in a relationship with God in Jesus Christ through prayer, the sacraments, the service of the poor, community living and the events of daily life.

This personal encounter with Jesus Christ is likewise a core theme in the Constitutions and in *Deus Caritas Est* and one that has its roots in love as *agape*. *By contrast with an indeterminate searching love [eros], this word [agape] expresses the experience of a love which involves a real discovery of the other.* (DCE 6) This insight is of paramount importance because, *in the absence of a belief in the possibility of such an encounter, Christianity risks becoming “lifeless ritual or well-intentioned moralism.”*⁴

Benedict XVI identifies being Christian as a meeting with “a person”. The Pope says that this relationship implies “*life has been given a new horizon and consequently its decisive orientation.*”

As the encyclical stresses, it is Christ who takes the initiative in this encounter and allows us to experience a privileged encounter with Him.⁵ Not only is this vision of the graced nature of this encounter shared by both the *Constitutions* and *Deus Caritas Est*, they also share the same emphasis on where the encounter with Christ takes place. We encounter Christ Jesus in each event, in each person and most especially in persons who are poor. He encounters us ever anew, in the men and women who reveal His presence, in His word, in the sacraments and especially in the Eucharist. We experience the love of God in the Church’s liturgy, in her prayer, in the living community of believers. We perceive His presence and learn to recognise that presence in our daily lives.

Who is God?

In his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI alerts us to the importance of the related questions as to who God is and who we are. The encyclical is entitled “God is love” and this love is both generous and lavish (DCE 9). Belief in God’s personal love for each one lies at the heart of every Christian vocation and consequently the vocation of the Daughters of Charity. God lavishes His love on us each day mysteriously and gratuitously. This love once received must be shared with others because it is the charity of Jesus Christ crucified which urges us. The Pope reflects on the mystery of God who is love. He describes how in God two forms of love, *eros* (love as desire) and *agape* (love as self giving) complement one another. God’s desire (*eros*) for us which is expressed in concern and care is also totally selfless (*agape*) and finds its fullest expression in the mystery of the Incarnation.

³ The Conferences of St Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity, *Conference on Prayer*, No.37, 31 May 1648, p.364

⁴ Robert P Imbelli, *America*, Vol. 194 March 13 2006, p. 10

⁵ On the importance of acknowledging the gift dimension of love see *DCE 7 and 17*

“You must live in conformity with the name you bear, since it is God who has given this name to the Company”⁶ In the light of the encyclical, our identity as Daughters of Charity is rooted in the person of Christ. This point is repeated many times throughout the *Constitutions*. This rootedness describes our unique vocation where, living in community, we serve God in persons who are poor. St Vincent describes the Daughters as poor instruments in the hands of a skilled craftsman.⁷ This theme is reflected beautifully in the following passage, “...”*When you gave yourselves to God...you received this name which God gave you.*”⁸

For Benedict XVI God is visible and ever present in our lives. In the love story recounted in the Bible, He comes towards us, He seeks to win our hearts all through his life to the Last Supper, to the piercing of his heart on the Cross, to His appearances after the Resurrection and to the great deeds by which through the activity of the Apostles, He guided the nascent Church along its path. In the love story between God and man, our will and God’s will increasingly coincide. God’s will is now my will, based on the realisation that He is more present to me than I am to myself. The guidance of the Holy Spirit leads to self-abandonment to God and God becomes our joy. In God, love knows of no distinctions: in the life of the Trinity *eros* is totally *agape*⁹, and therefore God’s love (*eros*/desire) that we may share in the loving unity of the Trinity becomes concern and care for us and is willing for sacrifice (*agape*). One of the core messages for us that flow from the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* is that all love is from God- both *eros* as well as *agape*. However, because of sin our desires (*eros*) need to be purified and we can only enter into union with God to the extent that our desires (*eros*) are purified to become one with the self-sacrificing love of Christ (*agape*).

In this context, the challenge for us as Daughters of Charity is to imitate the love of Christ- to purify our desires (*eros*) to ensure that they truly are loving desires shaped by the generous self-giving love (*agape*) of Christ.¹⁰ This journey focuses us on authentic self-discovery and the discovery of God. Like Jesus’ journey, our journey leads us through the Cross to Resurrection. However, as the encyclical reminds us, *eros* needs to be disciplined and purified by asceticism and growth in maturity, ‘passing through the path of renunciation’ (*DCE 5*). *Agape* is the love grounded in and shaped by faith. The more *eros* and *agape* find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realised. *Eros* and *Agape* correspond to the affective and effective love of which St Vincent speaks.

As the encyclical puts it, quoting from John 19:34 “*We drink anew from the original source which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God.*”¹¹ It is a journey which is an ‘exodus’ from self into the promised land of communion with others; one marked by asceticism and renunciation as well as prayer and reconciliation; it is a path that follows closely ‘the royal road of the cross’, a phrase so dear to St. Louise de Marillac and one that gives expression to the true path of freedom through sacrificial self –giving. As the St Vincent’s own life testifies, this is no easy vocation¹² - a theme echoed by Pope Benedict XVI as he quotes the passage from Jn 12:25 that state that the wheat can only bear fruit when

⁶ *Constitutions* p. 16 of Saint Vincent, 4 March 1658, *Mutual Charity and the duty of Reconciliation*,” X, Conf. 93, p.1045

⁷ Delarue, Jaques, *The Faith of St Vincent*, p.52

⁸ Conference of Saint Vincent on “mutual charity and the duty of reconciliation”

⁹ See *Deus Caritas Est 10*.

¹⁰ Note the following passage: “*Whoever would behold the life of Jesus Christ would surely behold the very same features in the life of a Daughter of Charity*”, *On the Spirit of the Company*, 9 Feb. 1653, p. 526

¹¹ See *DCE 7* and *12*.

¹² St Vincent himself testifies that it was only through prayer and working with the poor that he gradually became conscious of the spiritual misery of his time and of his vocation to the service and the evangelisation of the poor. See *Explanation of the Rule IX, Conf. 15*, 14 June 1643.

the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies.¹³ Although challenging, it is not a vocation we live out unsupported by the love of Christ as our motto reminds us, *the charity of Christ (crucified) urges us*".

Love of God and love of our neighbour

In one of the most inspiring sections of the encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* 16-18 explores the intimate relationship between the love of God and the love of neighbour. Drawing inspiration from that magnificent reflection on this theme that is found in 1 Jn 4:17-21, the encyclical stresses that the two loves are inseparable (*DCE 18*). As St John reminds us, "*if anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar: for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen*" (1 Jn 4:20).

It is hardly surprising that the *Constitutions* would seek to stress the unity of these two loves; love of God and love of neighbour. For both St Vincent and St Louise the path to an encounter with God was one marked by the love of the neighbour or it was no path at all. In point of fact, St Vincent had a dread of a love of God which neglected the neighbour. The charism of the Daughters of Charity is shaped by this insight. The love of God does not confine itself to pious sentiment. Rather, affective love must pass to effective love which is the practice of the works of the Company of Charity. The unity of the two great commandments of love is a core tenet of the *Constitutions*. The answer we give to the question, "Who is my neighbour?" marks out the special charism of the Company. Taking inspiration from the parable of the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:1-19) who is God Himself, who "*goes in search of the lost sheep, suffering and lost humanity*" (*DCE N0 12*) St Vincent urged the Daughters of Charity to 'seek out the poorest and most abandoned'.¹⁴ To serve the poor is to serve Jesus Christ himself, who suffers, agonises with them and in them. It is nothing less than the specific vocation of the Daughter of Charity to see Jesus Christ in persons who are poor and they see those who are poor in Christ.¹⁵

Deus Caritas Est draws attention to the parable of the Good Samaritan in Lk. 10:25-37 and the great parable of the Last Judgement in Mt. 25:31-46 to shape a response to the question "who is my neighbour?".¹⁶ Drawing inspiration from these two passages the encyclical affirms that "anyone who needs me and whom I can help is my neighbour" (*DCE 15*). "Neighbour" is universalised by the way in which Our Lord identifies Himself with those in need: the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, those in prison and those who find themselves strangers. The reflection on these biblical texts concludes with a beautiful passage that gives expression to the unity of the two loves in the context of the service of the poor. "*Love of God and love of neighbour have become one; in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God*" (*DCE 15*). Because of this identification with Christ, St Vincent identifies persons who are poor as our lords and masters.¹⁷ The parable of the Good Samaritan remains a standard example which demands universal love for all the needy that we encounter "by chance", or providentially in Vincentian thinking, whoever they may be. In

¹³ *DCE 6* See also in the same section the reference to Lk 17: 33 "Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it".

¹⁴ *Constitutions*, No.11b, p. 32. See also St Vincent's comments on this theme that are to be found in *On the End of the Company*, 18 Oct. 1653, p.743. These passages show the influence of St Paul on the writings of St Vincent.

¹⁵ *Constitutions*, No. 10b p. 31

¹⁶ *Deus Caritas Est 15*

¹⁷ Robert P Maloney, *The Way of Vincent De Paul*, Contemporary Spirituality in the Service of the Poor, New York: City Press, 1992, p.26

this context we see that the love that is “charity” extends beyond the frontiers of the Christian community- *“in God and with God, I love even the person I do not like or do not know”* (DCE 18) Every Christian community has the mission of giving to every person what they need for leading a life that has dignity.

The teaching of Benedict XVI goes on to give a meditation on the Eucharist-in which he stresses the social character of this sacrament. In the Eucharist, God’s agape comes to us corporally so that Christ can continue his work through us. It is only on this Christological and sacramental basis that we can have a proper understanding of Jesus’ teaching on love. *“Faith, worship and ethos are interwoven as a single reality which takes shape in our encounter with God’s agape”* _ (DCE 14). Likewise, for us Daughters of Charity, love has its roots in the Eucharist. Love is service in imitation of the action of Jesus at the Last Supper when he washed the feet of the disciples. This is a charism that constantly draws us to persons who are poor and living on the margins of society.

Commitment to justice and the ministry of Charity

Love- caritas – will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so that it can just eliminate the need for a service of love. (DCE 28)

The Church’s social teaching is always concerned with justice that guarantees everyone, on the basis of subsidiarity, their share in the common good

In the XIXth Marxist thinking was in opposition to the charitable works undertaken by the Church declaring , “It is not charity that the poor need but justice.”entury this re-awakening to the urgency for the cry for justice has been interpreted incorrectly in terms of Marxist doctrine-“the poor do not need charity but justice”. Benedict XVI acknowledges that charity has in some cases been used to maintain an unjust *status quo*. He stresses, too, the importance of respecting appropriate boundaries between Church and State in the exercise of their responsibilities in the fight for justice. This is an important issue because as the encyclical emphasises, that just as we do not need a State which controls everything, so likewise the Church and by extension religious congregations, *“cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible.”* (DCE 28) While the Church must not remain passive in the struggle for building a just society, nevertheless it is the State which has the primary responsibility for creating such a society.

The issue here for the Vincentian family is about a ministry of justice where there is a call to promote the Principles of Catholic Social Teaching. The Vincentian charism encourages the ‘lay faithful’ to create an environment where citizens recognise their calling and *“direct duty to work for a just ordering of society”* (DCE 29).

There is much in this section of the encyclical which confirms the Daughters of Charity in their ministry of justice today, specifically the work of the ‘Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice’ which promotes active citizenship, and the eradication of poverty through building a just society. However, as the encyclical indicates, the challenge of integrating the commitment to justice and the ministry of charity into a unified vision is no easy task. The Daughters of Charity and the other members of the Vincentian family must also participate in programmes concerned with social justice and do this in collaboration with other institutions that have similar aims.

What needs to be stressed in our Company's commitment to working for justice is that its primary concern should be the establishment of a just society. Charity should not be an agent of proselytism. Love is gratuitous, it is not to be used for other ends.(DCE 31).

Catholic Social teaching is at the centre of the Church's mission and at the heart of evangelisation. Effectively used it is a fruitful agent of change. While efforts have been made to bring the Church's social teaching into the public arena, there is a school of thought that says the Church should remain silent on political affairs and concentrate on spiritual matters.

As Daughters of Charity we ask ourselves, what is the appropriate level of involvement in the political system and where is the appropriate open forum for the promotion of Catholic Social teaching? Thomas Massaro argues that this is an important issue because unless we see concrete evidence of the possibility of bringing gospel values to bear on temporal affairs there is a danger that we could lose the enthusiasm necessary to promote the social gospel. Furthermore, he argues that all work for justice must address the root causes of need.

A key to understanding the Vincentian charism is to be found in the following comment from Pope Benedict in the encyclical, *"within the community of believers there can never be room for a poverty that denies anyone whatever is needed for a dignified life."* (DCE 20) What is clear is that this type of poverty cannot be dealt with by charity alone but requires the promotion of justice through changing the social structures that bring about this poverty.

Through the work of the Vincentian Partnership the Company is confirmed in its commitment to building a just social order and to promoting the Church's social teaching.

Benedict XVI challenges us to "help form consciences in political life" and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as a greater readiness to act accordingly. Donal Dorr echoes this theme in arguing that the role of the Church is primarily an indirect one, namely to re-awaken those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run. Nevertheless, the question must be asked, if the pursuit of justice is a fundamental norm of the State and if this is neglected who will challenge the state to fulfil its responsibilities? Does the Church have a legitimate role to play in such circumstances? The encyclical reminds us that the Church cannot remain on the sidelines in the work for justice. Rather, the Church is duty bound to offer her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically.

These and other related questions throw up a number of challenges for the work of the Vincentian Partnership and indeed for the wider Company. We are continually urged to read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel in the work for justice. Keeping in mind the principle of subsidiarity, we are challenged to redefine the boundaries surrounding appropriate Church interventions in the political work to promote the just ordering of society. Finally, we are challenged to dialogue with all those seriously concerned for the dignity of the human person and for the stewardship of God's creation. With a view to harmonious development in the world, Christians, and therefore the Company, must unite their voices and their commitment to respecting the rights and the needs of people, especially the poor

Conclusion "The love of Christ urges us on"

"Charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could be equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being". (DCE 25)

In the context of the universal struggle for justice and love in the world today, Pope Benedict XVI in the final section of *Deus Caritas Est* reflects on the Christian perspective and the distinctive character of its contribution.

Firstly, it offers a vision of the neighbour that transcends national, ethnic, or religious boundaries and thus supports the work to create a real solidarity between all peoples.

Secondly, based on the love of neighbour it offers a vision of service that goes beyond material assistance.

Thirdly it looks to the goal of a true humanism that acknowledges the inalienable dignity of each person created in the image of God;

Finally, the Christian faith offers us a motivation for engaging in this work that is not ideologically driven but rather is inspired by the love of Christ. : *'the love of Christ urges us on'* (2 Cor 5, 14) (DCE 33).

It is surely no coincidence that this same phrase from St Paul, 'the love of Christ urges us on' is in fact the motto of the Daughters of Charity. The Constitutions not only echo the points listed above but find a resonance within the final section of the encyclical which treats of interior attitude or dispositions, the importance of prayer (25) and in that context, devotion to Mary whose life plan was to give priority to God through prayer and service of the neighbour (41). Furthermore the Constitutions stress the importance of the interior attitude of humility which should accompany all acts in the service of charity- a theme echoed in the encyclical. Finally, there is that whole understanding of the service of charity as *diakonia*. The encyclical places the ministry of charity at the heart of her mission to proclaim the word of God and to celebrate the sacraments. As the encyclical states: "*These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable.*" (DCE 25)

Saint Louise told us, "*take good care of the service of the poor...they are our masters.*"

Sister Catherine PRENDERGAST

Daughter of Charity

WITH OUR FOUNDERS TODAY

Province of Central Africa (Rwanda)

Miracles still happen

We are an international local community of 8 Sisters and 5 different nationalities, sent by the Company to Mukungu, located in the southwestern part of the country in the district of Karongi, in the diocese of Nyundo. At an altitude of 1996 metres, this region is the most destitute part of Rwanda.

For 37 years, the Community has been serving people who are very poor through a health care centre that includes a dispensary, a maternity ward and a nutritional centre. In

response to the appeals and signs of the times, we expanded our services to persons living in poverty: associations for promotion, services to persons living with HIV/AIDS, Vincentian Marian Youth ministry, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and adult literacy. Recently, in 2006, in collaboration with the Lillian Foundation, we began a service to children with disabilities (physical, auditory-speech difficulties, visual impairment, epilepsy, mental disabilities, multiple disabilities, etc.)

One of our Sisters was named by the Visitatrice and her Council as the intermediary between the Lillian Foundation and our community. She is in charge of helping in the medical and social rehabilitation of children with disabilities. She establishes and maintains direct contact between the Lillian Foundation and the children and their parents. She visits the children's families in order to have a better understanding of the reality of their family setting. She also visits the schools and rehabilitation centres in order to follow the children's progress and help them to integrate into society, accompanying them until they reach the age of 25. The entire local community feels part of this mission through our moral and spiritual support, welcoming, listening and dialoguing, all of which opens doors for these children into society and humanity.

The Association "Dufatanye" (*Let's help one another*) was created to help and accompany the parents of children with disabilities. Each month we organise a meeting with them, to share their concerns, their joys, and the progress and difficulties of their children. Each family has the opportunity to express themselves simply, in an atmosphere of complete trust. We also provide brief formation sessions on various forms of disabilities as well as the programme for children sponsored by the Lillian Foundation. We also offer human and Christian formation, and read the Word of God together.

"God's love reaches from age to age". We see miracles taking place through the help of the Lillian Foundation. For example, children who are lame walk with the aid of crutches, canes, orthopedic devices or wheelchairs, those with hearing disabilities receive hearing aids, those with vision problems improve their vision thanks to glasses, and special surgical interventions open the eyes of those who are blind. All are then able to study in specialised schools. The children can then flourish in society, while their parents come to accept the disability that their child has.

Our local community, sent on mission to these children with disabilities and to their families, is open to being evangelised by them. We are in continual admiration at their determination and endurance despite the fatigue of travel since the rehabilitation centres and special schools are located at great distances from their homes.

The children need a great deal of financial assistance for their health care and studies. Most especially, they need to feel welcomed and accepted. They yearn to be loved and accepted just as they are. Many of them wonder why they must suffer so. They are frequently abandoned by their families or rejected by neighbours or friends. If we ask a father of six how many children he has, he replies: "5 children and one who is not normal."

Our service to these vulnerable children and our sharing in the sufferings of their families remind us of the words of Saint Vincent in the film *Monsieur Vincent*: "...you will see that charity is a heavy load to carry. Heavier than the soup or the basket of bread you carry...It is not everything to give soup and bread. That the rich people can do...the more repulsive and dirty they are...the more you must give them of your love..."

God is on the journey with us, for without Him, we could do nothing. We are grateful for the gift of love that He gives us in calling us to His service and letting us be challenged and transformed by the testimonies of the people.

Verene (13 years old) says:

“Blessed be God! Today on August 15th 2009, I have just experienced an unforgettable moment in my life: an intimate meeting with the Lord in the Holy Eucharist. I’m 13 years old, and for 4 years I’ve wanted to receive Jesus but my health wouldn’t allow it. An open fracture that was not well-treated because of a lack of money led to a case of osteomyelitis in my right leg. I suffered so much without any relief. After my leg was healed, I got involved in Vincentian Marian Youth (JMV) because I wanted to help, in my turn, poor persons in whatever way I could, according to my energy and possibilities. In 2007, I went through a very lonely time at home, with my parents in the fields and me sick at home. I wasn’t able to move around. One day, two young people from JMV came to visit me and helped me to get around. They talked about the love that God and the Blessed Virgin have towards those who are suffering, and they promised to pray for me. In early 2008, thanks to the Lillian Foundation and the Daughters of Charity, I received care in the hospital in Rilima. Now I am much better. I had an operation, I was able to return to school, I am not in pain any more and I can participate in normal activities just like all the other children. My family is very grateful after having been so discouraged. Having had to go through this long journey of suffering has helped me to discover the presence of God in my life and in the life of my family.”

Domitille (age 16) gives testimony:

“God is Love! I can think of nothing else to say except to give thanks to God, to the Lillian Foundation and to the Daughters of Charity for having giving me the possibility of treatment. I had contracted osteomyelitis in my left leg. I had a difficult time moving around even with crutches. I was always sad and had given up all hope. I saw young people my age involved in their studies and playing, and that made me feel hopeless. Now, after several operations, I have been able to go back to school and no one makes fun of me anymore. My cure has revealed the love that is in the hearts of my neighbours, who were repelled by me because I had a bad odour. Even then, my parents never abandoned me. I thank the Lord for his infinite love that helped me to experience the happiness of living with dignity in society with others. I don’t need crutches anymore, I am completely healed. I’ve made the commitment to pray for all children with disabilities so that they may discover God’s goodness through the kindness of others. I also pray for parents who abandon their children who have disabilities because they think they are useless. When we find ways to receive treatment or to study in specialised schools, we are just like other children.”

Frodouard (20 years old) explains:

“As a child I was never happy. Now, I have found the road to happiness because I received medical care and I can walk with an artificial limb. During the war, I was burned and my right leg was amputated, and I felt very ashamed. In addition, my parents didn’t have any means of paying for special canes made for my size. Deep inside, I wondered why I had not died right away., I am now in my fourth year of secondary school. With my artificial leg, I can walk without a cane, I feel more like a human being, my will to live has come back, and I discovered that God has a merciful plan for each one according to His time.”

The parents of Therese share the following with us:

“After a long time of ignorance and belief in traditional medicine, we can testify that God is our Saviour. Our little daughter Therese (aged 3) was born with a malformation in her feet. My husband and I took her to traditional medical practitioners who tricked us. The more our daughter grew, the more deformed her feet became. When we could no longer pay for the traditional medicine, we hoped that she would die. We were ashamed of her, and I hid her on my back and breastfed her in hiding to avoid everyone’s scorn. One day, another mother told us about the Health Centre in Mukungu. The nurse introduced us to the Sister who takes care of children with disabilities. She welcomed us and brought us to the Hospital of Our Lady of the Poor in Gatagara. There, our daughter was treated and healed. We are no longer ashamed of her. We were not able to accept her illness and this created misunderstandings between us and with our neighbours, and even our families began to grow apart from us. It is truly the Lord who saved us, and showed us the pathway to joy. Meeting the Daughters of Charity helped us to discover the happiness of believing in God, thanks to their spiritual, psychological and financial assistance. The Lord uses every means to seek out his lost sheep, for we were lost in ignorance. In experiencing the generosity and dedication of all the people who helped and supported us, we have been able to discover and understand that God is Love and that He is with us.”

Let us pray for these children who are so often marginalised and abandoned, as well as for their families, especially for those who are not able to accept their children with disabilities.

The Community in Mukungu

Today’s Challenges

With the Founders Today

Province of Cameroon

Carried on eagle’s wings, the Daughters of Charity in Moutourwa

“May the Lord bear you up on eagle’s wings and help you....to fly gracefully to God and teach others, especially the poor, how to fly also.” (Father Maloney, Opening of the 2003 General Assembly)

The extreme northern region of Cameroon is well known for the beauty of its landscape and the hospitality of its people. The Daughters of Charity arrived in this region in 1972. The Company is represented there by two local communities. Marginalised for many years because of its resistance to the Muslim invasion, the Guiziga people little by little evolved into a society with a lifestyle of very selective traditions. The Guiziga are a very welcoming, simple and joyful people.

The tropical Sahelian climate (south of the Sahara) is very unpredictable. The rainy season lasts between three and four months and can be a time of very abundant rain. The irregularity of rain per year, however, is a serious handicap for the region since all of life's activities are dependent on it. Income is principally from agriculture and livestock and the staple food is millet. The dry season is very long, lasting eight or nine months with temperatures between 32°C and 52°C (90° to 125°F). The population is estimated at about 20,000 inhabitants.

MOUTOURWA, “IN THE SHADOW OF EAGLE’S WINGS”

Our community of Daughters of Charity in Moutourwa comprises four Sisters. The house, made of stone, is located on a rocky hill in this tropical Sahelian zone. The Guiziga people, despite their very difficult living conditions, are very hard-working. Their courage and good will are signs of God's action among these people so often having their hopes dashed because of the climate. In Moutourwa, life is marked by a deep sense of community. The Sisters are active members of this great community of brothers and sisters and have a valued place as counsellors, mothers, and guides, as they are seen as collaborators who have been sent by God. This role attributed to them is the primary reason why the Sisters have been accepted and integrated into the extended family of the Guiziga. The people are deeply religious; the god of their traditional religion is the one who gives life and works to safeguard it. We as Daughters of Charity imitate Jesus Christ, evangeliser of persons who are poor. Jesus opens doors for us and is at work in the hearts of the people. He also gives us the courage to work with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brow, in temperatures of 50°C (120°F).

In the midst of this people, the community strives to respond to God's call to the Company and to “learn to fly...very high”. We are involved in all aspects of the life and activities of the people: children, youth, men, women, associations, villages...As members of the Guiziga family, we all have to work together to help bring changes to the lifestyle and mentality of the people, striving to support efforts for a holistic development of the inhabitants.

Although the number of Christians is clearly rising, we note that the greatest poverty continues to be religious ignorance, despite many years of evangelisation. There is a lack of rootedness in the faith, a loss of basic cultural values, a return to traditions... This is manifested in some very concrete ways: family instability, uprootedness from their culture, social inequalities... Other forms of poverty are added to this, such as malnutrition, poor management of harvests, illiteracy, lack of sanitation, etc. Faced with all these forms of poverty, together we seek to maintain our hope in a better future and to witness to the tenderness of God.

THE SERVICE OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY “TO FLY TOWARDS THOSE WHO ARE POOR”

The primary concern of the community is to work to improve the people's quality of life, first of all in the realm of health, beginning with the children. Numerous cases of malnutrition and childhood illnesses call for the participation and commitment of every Sister in the community. It is a real relay race.

Maternal and Infant Protection (PMI)

The work of PMI that we are involved with in the villages allows us to follow children from birth to 5 years of age. Once a month, we provide a day of formation for mothers at each of the PMI sites. Working with those in charge at the sites, a Sister organises a session of formation for animators in order to broaden the network and ensure more effective follow-up. Each village sends one of its experienced and authorised animators to provide daily follow-up for the children in the village and to contact the community in case of difficulty. This formation of animators allows them to become aware of issues such as hygiene, vaccinations, nutrition and infections of every sort, especially malaria which remains one of the principle causes of mortality.

Saint Louise de Marillac Centre for children suffering from malnutrition

In order to continue the work of these gatherings in the villages, the community opened a Centre providing closer healthcare follow-up to children and teaching their mothers to effectively oversee the development of their children. At the time of meetings in the villages, malnutrition screening is provided. Malnutrition is due to irregular harvest, certain eating customs, frequent pregnancies, shortage of breast milk, and at times, negligence on the part of some parents. All these persons are directed to the Centre. During their visit to the Centre, the mothers receive practical formation in good nutrition, hygiene and disease prevention. The Centre can receive up to 20 persons. It is a warm and friendly setting and allows the participants to regain good health.

In addition to this practical formation, we provide sewing and literacy classes for those who are interested. When the mothers have achieved some autonomy in the process of raising their children with regular good habits and concern for their well-being, they return to their villages and in turn serve as intermediaries for us. We are able to maintain contact with these mothers at the times of PMI meetings in their respective villages.

“Village Pharmacies”

Since the villages are at times more than 40 km away from the Centre, we have set up “village pharmacies”. In a way that is similar to the animators’ formation for PMI, the future pharmacists participate in education sessions in order to recognise symptoms of the most common illnesses and to administer essential healthcare in order to bring down the mortality rate.

Each pharmacist has a small pharmacy with essential medications and first aid equipment. Their practice guidelines are to give priority to pregnant women and elderly persons. This service is linked to a hospital in Moutourwa to which we refer many poor patients and where we pay for their care. We also accompany the most serious cases in other referring hospitals in the region.

Persons with HIV/AIDS

As in many other regions of the country, AIDS has ravaged much of the population in Moutourwa. In collaboration with the Diocesan Committee for Development (CODAS-Caritas), we carry out screening campaigns. The community is committed to providing follow-up and accompanying persons with HIV/AIDS, in collaboration with several hospitals in the area. This includes first of all the work of approaching the people, visiting them in their homes, giving nutritional follow-up and seeing that they have the correct dosage of medication.

With the Provincial Council, the DREAM Centre and the community in Dschang, we are seeking ways of making it easier to have access to antiretroviral therapy. AIDS spreads rapidly and is currently one of the major concerns of the community. We strive to put into practice one of the points of the Inter-Assemblies Document: *“thirsting to respond with creative charity to the appeals of persons living in poverty and to carry out our service as a mission entrusted to our local community.”*

Our mission is not limited to health care, but includes other areas of work such as children’s education, and fighting famine. We stock reserves of millet to distribute each month to poor families, according to their needs. We encourage other families to do the same in order to have reserves for times of shortage. In order to improve their family income, we also provide opportunities for them to raise small livestock in order to sell them in the market.

We are also involved in local pastoral ministry. This area of evangelisation is an opportunity to come together with other groups: children from World COP, young people, women, catechists. We collaborate closely with the Ladies of Charity (AIC), and Vincentian Marian Youth. Through various gatherings and sharing, we help the people to become conscious of their human dignity, concern for the common good, solidarity and sharing of resources, deepening their Christian faith and self-promotion. We strive to meet each one wherever he or she may be, to journey with the people at their own pace, and to encourage them in their desire for a better way of life.

In this way, carried on eagle’s wings, we witness to the action of the Spirit, who brings forth new strength and urges us each day to respond ever more generously to God’s call. In Moutourwa, in the midst of the people, we grow as persons each day: *“people from various backgrounds who join forces to witness to truth, the value of life, human dignity, and the true meaning of freedom”* as we are reminded in the Document “Open to the Transforming Spirit.”

The Community of MOUTOURWA

NOMINATIONS

Designation of Visitatrices and Provincial Directors

PROVINCE OF VIETNAM: Sister Justina TRAN THI TUOI was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, April 1st 2009.

PROVINCE OF ARGENTINA: Sister Graciela Judith PELLERIN AZABAL was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Clementina AQUINO, December 16th 2009.

PROVINCE OF BELO HORIZONTE: Sister Maria das Gracias ALVES was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, December 16th 2009.

PROVINCE OF TURIN: Sister Pia BERTAGLIA was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, December 16th 2009.

PROVINCE OF VENEZUELA: Sister Yolanda ZAMBRANO PALENCIA was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, December 16th 2009.

PROVINCE OF COLOGNE: Sister Hildegard KOHLER was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, March 23rd 2009.

PROVINCE OF BARCELONA: Sister Eduarda VERGARA SAEZ was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Maria Cruz ARBELOA HUARTE, March 23rd 2010.

PROVINCE OF GIJON: Sister Maria Margarita GARCIA CARREIRA was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Julia del BARRIO GONZALEZ, March 23rd 2010.

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Father Javier ALVAREZ was reappointed Director General for three years, March 15th 2010.

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PROVINCE OF VENEZUELA: Father Antonio GONZALEZ LOPEZ was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, January 20th 2010.

PROVINCE OF ECUADOR: Father John PRAGER was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, January 26th 2010.

PROVINCE OF MEXICO: Father Francisco Javier GARCIA ORTIZ was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, March 4th 2010.

PROVINCE OF ETHIOPIA: Father Asfaw FELEKE was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, March 30th 2010.

PROVINCE OF GREAT BRITAIN: Father Fergus KELLY was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, April 15th 2010.

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Emmitsburg

Celebration of the bicentenary of the arrival of Elizabeth Seton in 1809

For the Province of Emmitsburg, the year 2009 was marked by the celebration of the bicentenary of the arrival in 1809 of Elizabeth Anne Seton in our city of Maryland. The

bicentenary of the Heritage Seton Legacy for the Sisters of Charity of North America was officially opened on 4th January 2009 and closed on 2nd August 2009 in the Basilica of the National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Anne Seton in Emmitsburg

SOME BACKGROUND HISTORY

Saint Elizabeth Anne Seton was born in New York on 28th August 1774 and died at Emmitsburg on 4th January 1821. She is the first American woman to have been canonised by the Catholic Church and is the foundress of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph at Baltimore (1809).

Elizabeth Anne was baptised as a child in the Anglican Episcopal Church and grew up in New York. On 25th January 1794 she married William Seton and they had 5 children. William contracted tuberculosis and left for Italy with his wife and eldest daughter in a bid to regain his health but died on 27th December 1803, leaving Elizabeth a widow at the age of twenty-nine with five children. The Felicchi family in Leghorn were great friends of the Seton family and they offered Elizabeth hospitality. It was here that she was particularly moved by the Catholic faith of her hosts. After her return to New York she decided to become a Catholic. On 4th March 1805 Elizabeth was received into the Catholic Church by Bishop Carroll, first bishop of Baltimore. This decision alienated her from her family and all her friends. Her life became even harder as her finances were in a precarious state after the collapse of the family business. In June 1808 Bishop Carroll invited her to Baltimore to open a school for young girls in the city. A generous benefactor undertook to finance the project. The school was established in Baltimore and the work began on 31st July 1809. Soon other women came to join Elizabeth and devoted themselves to the care of poor children. The community of the Sisters of Charity of the United States began its work. In January 1812 the Constitutions of the Sisters of Charity were approved and one of the priorities was the education of young girls. In 1814 three Sisters were sent to Philadelphia to set up the first mission of the Sisters of Charity outside of Emmitsburg. In 1821 Elizabeth Ann Seton died. In 1832 some Sisters of Charity from Emmitsburg left for Baltimore to look after cholera victims. Others went to Saint Louis, New Orleans, Albany, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington and New York. In 1850 the Emmitsburg community of Sisters of Charity merged with the Daughters of Charity. These were the first Daughters of Charity in the United States. They formed the United States Province and in 1910 this was divided into 2 Provinces; the Province of Emmitsburg and that of the West. The Sisters of Charity from other dioceses also continued to expand. In 1947 the communities of Sisters of Charity in several dioceses formed a federation and became the "Confederation of Daughters of Mother Seton." In the 1980s they were joined by other communities of the Sisters of Charity.

4th JANUARY 2009: OPENING OF THE SETON LEGACY BICENTENNIAL FOR THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY OF NORTH AMERICA

For the Province of Emmitsburg, the year 2009 was marked by the celebration of the bicentenary of the arrival in 1809 of Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg, Maryland, two hundred years ago. The bicentenary of the Seton Legacy for the Daughters of Charity in North America was officially opened on 4th January 2009 in the Emmitsburg basilica. More than 600 people gathered for the feast day of Mother Seton in the Basilica of the National Shrine in Emmitsburg, Maryland. The Eucharist was concelebrated by many priests from the University of Mount Saint Mary and Priests of the Mission from Emmitsburg and Philadelphia. The Very Reverend Ronald D. Witherup, Superior General of the Sulpicians, was chief celebrant. It was the Sulpicians who had helped Saint Elizabeth Ann and the first Sisters in the early days of the Congregation, offering them spiritual accompaniment and the

encouragement they needed as the Congregation began its work. It was the Sulpicians, too, who brought from Paris the Rules of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, to help Elizabeth Ann Seton to draw up the Constitutions of the Congregation.

After the liturgy, the Provincial archivist, Sister Betty Ann McNeil, DC, presented a work of art: a tryptich containing 215 miniature photos, publications and items of memorabilia. This work reflects 200 years of history, charity and dedication begun by a small band of young women in Emmitsburg, under the inspiration of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton.

23rd MAY 2009; AWARDING THE BICENTENNIAL MEDAL

Another important event in this jubilee year was the awarding of the Seton Legacy of Charity Bicentennial Medal during a ceremony which was open to the general public, media and friends and families of the recipients of the medal. On Saturday, 23rd May 2009, fifty people from diverse backgrounds were honoured to receive this medal for their charitable work in the spirit of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. The Most Reverend Kevin C. Coades, DD, Bishop of the diocese of Harrisburg, presided and he also presented the medals. The recipients came from every country: Italy, Canada and Korea.... They represented different types of work: social services, education, health care, promoting awareness of Mother Seton or spiritual formation in the spirit of the Seton Legacy of Charity. They included Daughters of Charity, Sisters of Charity of the Federation, other women religious, clergy, lay men and women, and various diocesan groups.

31st JULY-2nd AUGUST 2009, BICENTENNIAL WEEKEND

The high point of the year was the Bicentennial weekend held at the Provincial House, Emmitsburg from 31st July to 2nd August 2009.

Friday 31st July: theatrical presentation in Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton Basilica

From the first day onward, a vast tableau was presented in the Basilica dedicated to Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. Sister Claire Debes, Visitatrice of the Emmitsburg Province, gave a welcoming address to the great number of people present: Daughters of Charity with their Superioress General, Sister Evelyne Franc, Sisters of Charity of the United States, the President of the National Association for Catholic Education, friends of Catholic schools, etc. She then presented the tableau which retraced the defining moments of these 200 years that have passed since the foundation of the Sisters of Charity by Elizabeth Ann Seton. At key points in the narrative, actors representing personages from the past emerged from the shadows to join important figures in our own day.

After this impressive historical fresco, Sister Claire Debes presented the Bicentennial Seton Legacy Medal to the mayor of Emmitsburg in recognition of all that the city and its inhabitants have done to support the Community over 200 years. She then presented the medal to Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity. Her presence symbolised for everyone the close links that exist between the French Founders and the countless spiritual daughters of Mother Seton who continue to live out the same spirit of serving Christ in the poor. With Elizabeth Ann Seton, the schools for children from all social backgrounds began to spring up. They multiplied in a short space of time. Since the Second Vatican Council, the emphasis has shifted to respond to new needs but traditional forms of education have been maintained. The Sisters undertake the formation of lay people in their

Catholic schools to help them in their work and to allow other Sisters to respond to new forms of poverty: immigration, hunger, homelessness etc.

As part of the Bicentennial celebrations, the co-ordinating committee decided to set aside part of the budget to support a school which is making every effort to take in children from disadvantaged families and teach pupils the spirit of service after the example of Mother Seton.

Saturday 1st August 2009: Eucharist and a concert

On 1st August 2009, Cardinal Francis George, OMI, Archbishop of Chicago and President of the Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States, presided at the morning Eucharist. In his homily the Cardinal reminded us that the Church is counting on the witness we give in our different works and the values that we promote. He also emphasised that we must continue to seek out the poorest of the poor and respond to new challenges.

In the afternoon the guests were all invited to a special concert in the Basilica. It was a wonderful experience of sharing with one another through music, so dear to the heart of Elizabeth Ann Seton.

Sunday, 2nd August 2009: Mass and benediction in the Seton Heritage Garden

Eucharist with the Superior General

At 8 a.m. Father Gregory Gay, Superior General, presided at the Eucharistic celebration. It was a real privilege to have Father Gregory with us for the bicentenary. It had a double significance for us all since Father Gregory, a native of Maryland and who knows a lot about Elizabeth Ann Seton, and Sister Evelyne Franc, could be here to celebrate this great occasion with us.

The Seton Legacy Garden

Then followed benediction and the ceremony of dedicating the Heritage Garden. All the founding members of the Seton Federation were represented.

This Seton Legacy Garden honours the bicentenary of the foundation of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph in Emmitsburg, Maryland. The garden is set out in beautiful pathways that extend from behind Saint Elizabeth Ann's first permanent home in "Saint Joseph's Valley." These pathways lead to reflection areas where quotations from Saint Elizabeth Ann are inscribed on bricks, paving stones, benches

As the Seton Legacy continues into the next century, the Seton Legacy Garden will add beauty to the blessed grounds familiar to Saint Elizabeth and will be a place of prayer for future generations who will visit it.

The bicentennial Mass

The crowning moment of these three days was the bicentennial Eucharist celebrated at noon on 2nd August 2009 in the Basilica of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg. The liturgical celebration was presided over by Bishop Dennis Madden, auxiliary bishop in the archdiocese of Baltimore (the city where Saint Elizabeth Ann had brought together the first Sisters of Charity). Very many people attended the Mass; many pupils came from the different secondary schools that have Elizabeth Ann Seton as their patron, members of the

Congregations of the Sisters of Charity, the choir from Elizabeth Ann Seton secondary school in Bladensburg.

During the entrance procession the bicentennial banner was carried forward as well as the Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity, a picture of Saint Joseph that had belonged to Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton and an icon of Christ the Redeemer given to Elizabeth Seton by her husband. After the very stirring homily preached by Bishop Dennis Madden, the offertory gifts were presented by a Daughter of Charity and three Sisters of Charity. The final hymn was an impressive rendition of "Now let us praise" which was composed in 1975 for Mother Seton's canonisation.

So ended the Bicentennial Seton Heritage year. These celebrations strengthened the bonds between us all and were for each and every one of us a springboard for lovingly continuing this beautiful mission of educating young people and serving the poor.

Sister Mary Jean Horne

Daughter of Charity

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Quasi-Province

In Notre-Dame cathedral, Paris,

Celebration of the feast of

Saint Louise de Marillac

14th March 2010

To honour Saint Louise de Marillac during this Jubilee Year, the Vincentian Family gathered on Sunday, March 14th 2010 at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris for a Eucharistic celebration. It was presided over by Cardinal André Vingt-Trois, Archbishop of Paris, who was joined by Father Gregory Gay, Superior General, Father Javier Alvarez, Director General, and approximately 90 Vincentian and other priests. Among the many faithful were Daughters of Charity, members of the Ladies of Charity (AIC) and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, young people from Vincentian Marian Youth Association, Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg from Alsace, groups of the Vincentian Family from Italy, etc.

After the entrance procession, the relics of Saint Louise and Saint Vincent were placed in front of the statue of Our Lady. Then, Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, thanked the Archbishop for his welcome and his great interest in celebrating our Founders with us, and called to mind the missionary figure of Louise de Marillac. The Cardinal gave a very inspiring homily, and before the final blessing, he read a message brought by the Apostolic

Nuncio from the Pope, who united himself with the homage given to Saint Louise by the Vincentian Family.

Homily by Cardinal André Vingt-Trois, Archbishop of Paris

(4th Sunday of Lent, Year C, 2 Cor 5:17-21; Lk 15:1-32)

Brothers and Sisters,

In his letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul speaks to us of a “new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” It is a world that “is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ” (2 Cor 5:17-18). In meditating on this passage, we could ask ourselves what newness we are bringing to this world of ours.

When we call to mind the actions of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac in the 17th century, we can identify the newness that they brought, when famine raged in certain areas of France or among certain sections of the population, when so many children were abandoned, when convicts were treated inhumanely, when war bred desolation throughout Europe, when sick people received no care and when elderly people were abandoned. Despite the gap that existed between the means they had at their disposal and the needs that they confronted, Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac brought a light of hope to those crushed by misery in an epoch so terrible in so many respects. Today still, throughout the world, so many men and women, those whose distress we know and others whom we do not, are victims of famine, war, and disease. Millions are waiting, not so much for miraculous solutions to their distress but rather for a sign of hope and some attention, a sign to help them know that they are neither forgotten nor abandoned. They want to know that there are men and women who at least are willing to be concerned for them, if not to take care of them.

In our French society today, these forms of extreme distress are less striking, even if at times they remain hidden or misunderstood. For the majority of people who do not experience the tragedy of material misery, what newness can we bring them? It seems to me that the figure of the Father who welcomes his prodigal son home, as this figure appears in the parable, is the newness that our world needs.

It is true that our society feeds on paradoxes. On the one hand, society erases more or less discreetly the boundaries between good and evil and refrains from making value judgments on different lifestyles. It resists saying what is good for humanity in the name of preserving a certain level of peace in society and avoiding violence. At the same time, this society that seems to have almost succeeded in removing any sense of fault or blame, seeks out guilty parties and creates lawsuits, investigations and denunciations. It is as if this guilt that society wants to erase is taking revenge and imposing itself relentlessly on those that it considers guilty. This society that refuses to forgive anyone for anything greatly resembles many Pharisees and scribes in the Gospel (Luke 15:2) who do not understand that Christ can welcome back those who are sinners. The Pharisees and scribes consider themselves free from fault and denounce day after day the faults of others. Or even if they realise their faults and their crimes, they never consider the idea of repentance, conversion or renewal.

This is the world in which we need to be able to bring the light of hope without joining in with the cries of the accusers, but rather in accepting to stand with those who are accused. We must dare to take the position of the Father who opens his arms to welcome the guilty

party each time that the latter recognises his or her sin and asks to be forgiven. As Saint Paul urges us, we are ambassadors of Christ who call out to humanity in his name: “since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (2 Cor 5:20).

Here is a meaningful way to enter into the pathway of conversion that leads to Easter: become participants in reconciliation, forgiveness and peace, and proclaim to our society that human beings are greater than our sins and our crimes, that “God is greater than our hearts” (1 John 3:20). We can be signs of this mercy by the way we live as Church, by banishing all aggressive ways of relating to others, all acts of denunciation and even hatred. For if we love one another, those who see us can believe that God is love. But if we look down on one another and tear one another apart, how can those around us believe in the mercy of the Father?

Like the prodigal son, we also need to reflect on our own lives and make our way back and throw ourselves at the feet of our Father and say to him: “I am no longer worthy to be called your child” (Lk 15:19). Perhaps not because we have led a dissolute life, but because we at least have allowed ourselves to be led into making accusations or showing hatred and scorn for our brothers and sisters. I am no longer worthy to be called your son or daughter because I have not behaved as a brother or sister. The Father will then open his arms to receive us, and we will experience the ever-new power of mercy. God comes to purify our hearts of this virus of hatred, scorn and violence, entering our lives in ways that go deeper than the evil that we have done.

Brothers and sisters, guided by the witness of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, supported by the long line of men and women who have followed along after them, we are invited today to enter into the suffering of those who are accused or declared guilty by others who have decided that there is no longer any moral authority. If we no longer say what is good and what is evil, how are we to know if our actions are good or evil, how can we avoid the trap of rumors, hypocritical accusations and rampant denunciations launched by those who want everyone to forget about the shadows that exist in the very lives of those who are accusing?

My brothers and sisters, we can count on the intercession of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, of Saint Catherine Labouré, Blessed Sister Rosalie, Blessed Frederic Ozanam, and countless other men and women who were touched to the heart by the love of the Father and who became missionaries of love. May their prayer and their guidance help us to witness to reconciliation and be missionaries of hope. May we witness to the reality that every man and woman in this world, and each of us personally, is precious in the eyes of God, who waits for us as a merciful Father. Amen.

Cardinal André VINGT-TROIS
Archbishop of Paris

Quasi-Province

Motherhouse

Celebration of the Feast of Saint Louise de Marillac in the Miraculous Medal Chapel

Monday, March 15th 2010

On March 15th 2010, many lay members of the Vincentian Family, priests and Daughters of Charity gathered in the Chapel at rue du Bac to honour Saint Louise in a festive Eucharistic celebration presided over by Father Gerard Du, Assistant General. The liturgical celebration was also open to the public, so the chapel was completely filled. In his homily, Father Du emphasised how Saint Louise contemplated the humility of Jesus the Servant.

HOMILY GIVEN BY FATHER GERARD DU, ASSISTANT GENERAL

My dear Brothers and Sisters,

When I reflect on the Gospel scene of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, I recall the words that He said a few moments later, during that same evening of Holy Thursday, in response to the request from the apostle Philip: "Show us the Father." Jesus said to him: "The one who sees me, sees the Father." Jesus is the manifestation of the unseen Father. The Father of Jesus Christ, and thus, our Father, is a God who is a servant to humanity, whatever its condition. The first reading, moreover, taken from the book of Isaiah, already shows us a God who is concerned for humanity crushed by oppression, injustice and material misery.

The spirituality of Saint Louise is built around the central axis of Christianity, the Incarnation, revealing the mystery of God to the world. Humility is at the heart of the mystery of God. Louise reflects at length on Jesus' gestures of humility that take place throughout the course of his public life. In particular, Jesus washing his disciples' feet is for her an invitation not to seek her own glory. "Nothing should keep me from humbling myself. For this, I have the example of Our Lord... who did not shrink from humbling Himself to the point of washing the feet of His Apostles."

For Louise, Jesus is the true servant, gentle and humble, who gives his life for the salvation of all. At the end of this Gospel, Jesus concludes: "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." Louise knows that it is not just the actions of the Son of God that serve as an example and instruction, but more particularly his life. Louise wanted her life and the lives of all the Daughters of Charity to be a continuation of Jesus' life.

As a result, all those who wish to commit themselves, to dedicate their life to the service of others, to those who are poor, need to be filled with the life of Jesus Christ. Christ in his incarnation unites himself and identifies himself in some way with every human being, so that each one becomes an image of the Son of God, even if this image is marred by spiritual and material suffering.

Following the example of Christ, who sought out those rejected by society, Saint Louise sends her daughters to places where humanity is most wounded, to abandoned children, to galley convicts treated like beasts, to sick people wasting away in slums, to people devastated by war and dying of hunger. All of them, whoever they are, are members of the human race, the state that Christ took upon himself.

Louise asks her Sisters that as they serve those who are poor, they reveal to them the profound respect they have for them through their actions, words and gestures: “Please continue to serve our dear masters [those who are poor] with great gentleness, respect and cordiality, always seeing God in them.”

In their daily life, the Sisters are invited to be open to the Spirit of love, the divine fire, to let it invade their being, in particular through the grace of the Eucharist and prayer. It is through this intimate union with divine love that the Sisters find the strength, energy, initiative and creativity to carry out their service of love to those who suffer poverty in all its forms, old and new.

My dear Brothers and Sisters, this invitation is addressed to all of us today who strive to keep alive and well the charism passed on to us from Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. This charism is firmly linked to the essence of Christ’s message. It has brought about eternal happiness for the two Founders as well as to countless others who have followed in their footsteps.

Father Gerard DU
Assistant General

SISTERS’ TESTIMONIES

Province of Curitiba (Brazil)

Development of the Vocations Ministry

For the Daughters of Charity, the jubilee year marking the 350th anniversary of the death of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, is a time of grace and renewal. 350 years have gone by and our Founders continue to attract young people. The fire of charity that energised them is still a source of encouragement for those who are thinking of giving themselves in the service of the poor. The charism which watered the hearts of our Founders waters ours, too, and enables us to share in and continue the Project they initiated.

In Brazil

The history of vocations ministry in the Province of Curitiba is set within the context of the Church in that country. It is a rich history and one that is full of challenges. After the Second Vatican Council, the bishops of Brazil began a process of reflecting on vocation. Several initiatives were implemented. Theological reflection on the Church as “People of

God” led to the development of vocations ministry, to making Christians more mission conscious and to an awareness of the need to develop a vocations apostolate which would take more account of the situation in Brazil and its numerous challenges, and which would use the method summed up as “see, judge, act.”

In 1983 the initial reflection process ended and the first year of vocations ministry was put in place. Its aim was to bring about within the national, diocesan and parish Church, an increased awareness of vocations and formation for young people. Before this time, and from 1971 onwards, the month of August had been designated “Vocations Month.”

The enthusiasm generated by the Brazilian vocations ministry involving every section of the Church, was given added momentum by the organisation of the Vocations Congress which had as its aim the setting up of teams in the parishes and the diocese. In 2005 the Vocations Year had as its theme, “baptism, source of every vocation” and it emphasised the need for commitment on the part of all members of the Church; priests, lay people and consecrated persons.

IN THE PROVINCE OF CURITIBA

The development of the vocations apostolate in Brazil allowed the local Churches and Institutes of Consecrated Life to develop their vocations ministry. In their work of accompanying young people, the Sisters of the Province are mindful of diocesan and parish guidelines.

Some background history

The Province of Curitiba is situated in the south of Brazil. Its history began on 17th October 1904 with the arrival of three Daughters of Charity from the Province of Chelmo (Poland) who had come to serve Polish immigrants. In the early days, young women were spontaneously drawn to the Company and its mission, and this led to a rapid increase in the number of Sisters in the region. After 1964, changes in the Church and in society led to a decrease in the number of vocations. This marked the beginning of a new era for the Province. In 1971 the Seminary was closed because there were no candidates. During that year the Seminary Directress and the Sisters of Office worked as a reflections team and began vocations ministry. They moved from the north to the south of the Province with the aim of making the Sisters more aware of the need to work together for vocations. They planned and organised meetings at Provincial, regional and local level for young women interested in the Company’s mission.

This was the beginning of a daring and successful project which is still in force today and which tries to support new vocations. The mission of vocation ministry nowadays is to make young people aware of vocation, to help them and support them in their choice of vocation. At Provincial level there is one Sister whose mission it is to animate this apostolate. Her mission is to welcome and accompany young women who show a desire to enter the Company. For the purposes of this apostolate, the Province was divided into 8 regions each of which had a Sister in charge of the work. Each local community, too, has a Sister responsible for animating young people. The Sister in charge at Provincial level, together with the team of Sisters working at regional level, organise for young people meetings, formation times, spiritual retreats and visits to their family. They also draw up programmes for the Sister animators in each local community. In recent years the team of

Sisters responsible for this work have been collaborating with the Priests of the Mission's vocations apostolate with a view to the formation of young people and to awakening vocations. Members of the Vincentian Family also join in the work.

This year, 2010, the Vocations Ministry has organised for the celebrations marking the 350th anniversary of the death of the Founders, a project entitled, "Rekindling the flame." A huge candle symbolising vocation is taken from one local community to another. During the time that the candle is with a local community, the Sisters organise intensive periods of prayer and reflection with all their collaborators on the Jubilee theme "Charity and mission." This project is rooted in the conviction that vocation is a gift from God. It is He who takes the initiative and calls people gratuitously. In the Gospel, the One who calls is the One who sends. Vocations ministry is an evangelising and missionary work. God calls us all and sends us into the world to serve the People of God and humanity. After the Apareciada Document, the Church in Latin America called on all disciples of Jesus Christ to take up their evangelising mission as missionaries. This opened up a new horizon, particularly with regard to vocations work.

Over the last six years the Province has committed itself to paying special attention to the early stages of formation. Every year the Vocations Ministry organises a spiritual retreat for young women who express the desire to be Daughters of Charity. Some of them are accepted as aspirants for a minimum of one year. Together with the Sister in charge of this stage of formation, the aspirants learn to live together in community. Other Sisters help in the formation of aspirants by giving courses in Scripture, liturgy, Vincentian spirituality, etc. A psychologist (Daughter of Charity) follows up each aspirant individually. There are two communities of aspirants in the Province. This year we have 10 aspirants, 4 pre-postulants, 3 postulants and 5 Seminary Sisters. Even if the Company of the future will be the fruit of a new era, the following of Jesus Christ with the Founders will always be the dynamism of our vocations.

Sister Bernadete VALENGA and Neriuzza FRANCO
Daughters of Charity

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Turin

Sister Giuseppina Nicoli,

Patroness of the Women's Section of a Prison

In Turin, a Chapel has been dedicated to Blessed Giuseppina Nicoli. This is neither a parish nor a Vincentian church, but rather the chapel in the women's section of "Vallette Prison" where the Daughters of Charity have been visiting the inmates once a week for the last one hundred years.

The plan to dedicate the prison's chapel to the recently beatified Sister Giuseppina was suggested by Cardinal Poletto when he came to the Provincial House to celebrate a Mass of thanksgiving for her beatification.

“I proclaim that as of today, Blessed Giuseppina Nicoli, Daughter of Charity, is the patroness of the women’s section of the prison. These words of Cardinal Poletto, the Archbishop of Turin, certainly would have made Sister Giuseppina Nicoli very happy. In fact, during her life she accompanied the Sisters who were serving the detainees in the prison in Sassari (Sardinia) and spent an entire day there, trying to bring assistance and comfort to the prisoners living in very poor conditions in the prison. One day was sufficient to understand how important it was that these persons receive special attention from the Daughters of Charity, for they were living in great desperation, all the while hoping to gain their freedom some day. Sister Nicoli herself had wanted to work in this prison system.

This solemn proclamation from Cardinal Poletto roused great emotion on the part of everyone present, especially the prisoners who, since the day of Sister Nicoli's beatification on February 3rd, 2008, had come to know her and prayed to her as their future patroness.

On the Sunday morning before Christmas, the Cardinal celebrated Eucharist for over 1500 inmates in the detention centre's chapel. Then he met with the staff, volunteers, prison chaplains and their collaborators, including the Visitor of Turin, Father Erminio Antonello, (who was the biographer of Blessed Giuseppina), the Visitatrice of Turin, the Sisters who serve in the prison and other Daughters of Charity, the police officers for the prison and the administrators of the detention centre, including the director who oversaw the restoration of the chapel in order to make it a more fitting place of honour. During that project, when they were deciding the colour for the chapel walls, one of the detainees who is an interior decorator made this suggestion: *“Sisters, the chapel should be painted white since this is the place where the Lord is present. It should be clean and bright, just as the colour white is.”*

The prison chapel was not big enough to hold all the people who attended so the celebration of the patronage took place at the junction of two corridors. On the altar side was a picture of Sister Nicoli with her gentle smile and white cornette. This painting served as the inspiration for the Cardinal's homily. During the prayer addressed to Blessed Giuseppina, Sister Maria Pia Bertaglia, the Visitatrice, raised up the painting. The Cardinal blessed the painting which was to be placed in the chapel on a pedestal covered by a cloth hand-embroidered by a police officer from Cagliari.

All those present were deeply moved by the celebration and were full of joy. At the end of the service the Sisters distributed pictures and leaflets of Sister Nicoli. Several inmates said: *“When we see the face of Sister Nicoli, we feel encouraged to do good. Her eyes are like a light for our lives and an invitation to place our trust in the Lord.”*

Sister Giuseppina is now once again at the side of these prisoners. She is there forever just as she had wished to be when she wrote to her family after having spent a day in the prison: *“I really mean it when I say I would stay there forever to offer them encouragement. I felt so sorry for them.”*

Sister Maria Ida CISLAGHI

Daughter of Charity

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Rome

**United in a chorus of praise:
thank you, Blessed Virgin**

On September 8th 2009, after the midday meal, we saw from the window in the Provincial House that Pineto park, several metres away from the house, was dangerously on fire. The wind was blowing the flames that were spreading into the dry undergrowth, the bushes and trees. We called the fire brigade immediately, and it arrived quickly, together with the police, civil defence agencies, volunteers, most of whom are our neighbours, and photographers and journalists. The fire fighters ordered us to evacuate immediately. However, we wanted to go help our forty elderly Sisters in the infirmary. *“Don’t worry about them,”* said the chief, *“We’ll take care of them. Go outside, towards the entrance gate. Everyone out immediately; get out quickly!”*

The danger being so great, the fire fighters hurried towards the infirmary, as the Sister nurses and the personnel of the residence brought wheelchairs, stretchers, crutches, anything that could help the residents escape the danger. It was not easy to carry out such an operation in a few minutes, for at this early afternoon hour, most of the elderly and ill Sisters were in bed. A frantic race began to bring them out to the garden, which until that time was out of reach of the fire. Suddenly, a fierce wind pushed the flames onto the wall of our courtyard and reached the sixty trees which would be destroyed. The flames leapt to heights of nearly forty metres above the wall. We started to panic. The exposed containers of methane were just metres away. If the flames reached them, what a catastrophe it would be, Fortunately, the helicopters launched powerful jets of water on the fire and kept the danger away. The flames died down, including those that might have reached the parking place where about ten cars were parked. We didn’t dare imagine what might have happened. This was a real miracle! Some of the volunteers came towards the group of elderly Sisters and shared with them the good news: all danger had been avoided. Thank you, Blessed Virgin Mary!

Nevertheless, we were not allowed to re-enter the building immediately. About three hours later, we were able to return to the house and open doors and windows to air everything. Naturally, the Provincial House had suffered damage: more than 60 trees destroyed, shutters broken, windows buckled, glass broken, several metres of the underground methane pipe damaged. All had to be repaired, but more importantly, there were no casualties. We graciously thanked the fire fighters and the police officers, giving each one a Miraculous Medal.

Thank You, Blessed Virgin Mary! We have seen how you protect us and we recall your words to Catherine Labouré: “The Community, how I love it. I am with you; I have been established as guardian.”

Sister Maddalena CASTRICA,

Daughter of Charity

THE POOR SPEAK TO US

Province of Venezuela

“A Sister will go ten times a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day she will find God there.”

About the year 2000, I was serving as family catechist in the parish of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, near the Provincial House where I am on mission. The Lopez family registered for catechetical preparation for First Communion. They were members of the group of the Catechumenate that included the parents, the grandmother and two children, one named Nelson. Family catechesis includes weekly meetings and several special gatherings. At the first family meeting, the mother was not there. When I asked Nelson about her, he said that she was ill. The following week, she was absent again. At the end of the meeting, Nelson said to me: “Mama can’t come to these meetings because she’s confined to bed and can’t speak any more.” His words really disturbed me. (I had lost my own voice four times, after having had surgery.) I promised Nelson that I would go visit his mother. When I went there that same week, I found her in bed, immobile, unable to speak, but with an extraordinarily radiant expression, and a mind that was totally lucid and enabled her to make herself understood. However, her eyes were the only part of her body that she could still move after these ten years of illness. From that day onward, we were friends.

When I returned home I told my community what I had experienced. The Sisters were interested in this sick mother and her child. Some Sisters from the community and from the Seminary went to visit her. For everyone who met her, each time it was like meeting God. We are always welcomed with much joy, attention and a spirit of faith. This family seems to have a special charism in the face of this suffering, a charity without limits. I have never seen this mother or Nelson in a bad mood or impatient. We never hear any cries of anguish or complaints about anything or against anyone. The husband is also very loving and attentive to his wife. He is her nurse by vocation and by love.

We learn from them how to give our lives joyfully. Seeing the love that this mother has for Holy Communion, we understand better what Eucharist means. Jesus, the Bread of Life, communicates his strength and love to her so that she in turn, becomes “Bread of Life” for her family.

From the time she first became ill, she asked to receive Communion. One of the women catechists brought it to her each week, and when the catechist died, our community arranged to take her place. Whenever it is my turn to go, I notice that the moment I enter her home, her eyes are fixed on the pyx that I carry and her whole face becomes radiant. She always receives communion with great joy and makes a very fervent thanksgiving.

When I look at her, I often recall the passage of the Gospel where Jesus says: *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower...Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”* I would go so far as to say that the limitations caused by her illness, the wasting away of her body, her suffering from bedsores, her inability to speak... all this is

the road by which the living water flows, purifying her and fashioning her into the image of Christ, gentle and humble of heart.

Sister Berenice JIMENEZ

Echoes Correspondent

Special 350th Anniversary of the Deaths of the Founders

Saint Louise de Marillac

1591-1660

History - Memorial - Meditation

Louise de Marillac in her times

The works of God are accomplished slowly, each in its right time, according to God's wisdom and Providence.

On the occasion of the tercentenary celebrations honouring the death of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, in a souvenir book entitled *Monsieur Vincent vit encore*, (Monsieur Vincent still lives on), the preface contained some striking observations: "It should be noted that Vincent de Paul's masterpiece was the creation of the Daughters of Charity...at the school of Vincent, Louise de Marillac's soul was detached and transparent, and her life was impelled solely by charity, the gift of the Holy Spirit."¹

After the death of Antoine Le Gras, Monsieur Vincent waited eight years for God to bring to maturity His plan for the heart and soul of Louise. Vincent took quite a long time to study her from a human and a spiritual point of view, for though she was striving for perfection, her whole being was in a state of tension. Vincent wanted to help Louise to be free of self while remaining the humble servant of the Holy Spirit. In simple ways, he told her: "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." The testing period was a long one...long for Louise, as all the while M. Vincent patiently waited for signs from God. Louise was kept updated on the charitable activities of the Missioners through the letters she received from Monsieur Vincent. Her biographer, Abelly, tells us that one day Mademoiselle Le Gras told Monsieur Vincent that she *felt herself strongly moved in her*

¹ Gal 5:22

prayer to give herself to the service of the poor. Vincent was happy about this! His reply was not long in coming: “*Yes, certainly, Mademoiselle, I agree. Why not...*”² This would not happen immediately, however, as Vincent wanted to lead Louise to the point of letting go of her own will, not being turned in on herself, **not treading on the heels of Providence**, to use Vincent’s own words. The following year, 1629, God’s Providence sent signals to both of them.

“Go, therefore, in the name of Our Lord”

The direction that Monsieur Vincent gave to Louise was clear: “**Go**” and off she went, with the task of visiting the Charities that were being run by the Ladies. **She went...** facing uncertainties and the possibility of accidents along the way. She went to rural villages or hamlets in the outskirts of Paris, and later into Champagne and other regions. Everywhere, she saw misery and ignorance, but also evidence that the spirit of charity was there as well.

Visitor of the Confraternities of Charity³, is how her first biographer described her. When she arrived in a village, she assembled the women who belonged to the Confraternity of Charity which Monsieur Vincent had established at the time of his Missions. She gave them instructions on how to carry out this task well, encouraging 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. (Gobillon, p. 12) Her reports of these visits, which were handed in to Monsieur Vincent, were objective and specific.

This experience taught Louise that good intentions are not always appreciated, and can even be misunderstood. In some places, the pastors thought this woman was infringing on their role, and even the bishops, who had a negative opinion of Parisians, saw her as being sent by someone in authority they did not know very well. The value of this experience was not lost. Monsieur Vincent, after reflecting on the matter, offered this advice: apologise, withdraw, and even return home if ordered to do so. Louise also had the experience deep within her being that she was putting the Gospel into practice, a sense that what she was doing was encountering “**God, in the person of Christ**” in each one she met. Monsieur Vincent gave her the necessary instructions, and at the same time allowed her much latitude in improving the rules so that the poor might be better served. This direct contact with people living in poverty, attentive observation of their needs, the wide range of appeals, the discovery of shortcomings in the quality of service, these were all signs that served as precursors to the mission that would be confided to her later, by God and people. Monsieur Vincent was delighted with this, but maintained a wise, reserved stance: “*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...*”⁴

Monsieur Vincent would end a mission by founding a Charity. Paris was honoured by having the first Confraternity of Charity in the parish of Saint Sauveur; Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet was the second, and others followed. Louise’s primary responsibility was to have meetings with the Ladies, as requested by M. Vincent. Very quickly, she was recognised as a model of authority. Her human qualities and culture, and even more, her religious qualities, allowed her to provide valuable assistance in the functioning of the Charities, one of which,

² Abelly, Vol. I, Chapter Twenty-Three

³ Gobillon IV, p. 11

⁴ Coste I, p. 216, L. 151

according to Monsieur Vincent, seemed on the point of collapse. Louise was wholeheartedly committed to the work.

She reviewed the original rule and the end for which the Confraternity of Charity was to be instituted:

The patron of the Confraternity shall be Our Lord Jesus Christ

- It shall be composed of a stated number of virtuous women and girls... with the consent of their husband or their father and mother

- Three elected members will direct the Confraternity with the approval of the Pastor, one as Directress, the others as Assistants to serve as Council to the Directress. The rule also included the duties of each servant of the poor, the manner in which the servants of the poor should serve the sick... the manner in which the sick are to be fed... mutual charity among themselves... election of officers and financial reports⁵.

Visits to the Confraternities showed Louise the concrete realities that called for a response. She kept M. Vincent updated by the detailed and intuitive reports she sent him, pointing out shortcomings. Their collaboration was founded on complete mutual trust. Monsieur Vincent guided the efforts of Louise de Marillac, readily welcomed her advice and took it into account, and moderated the intensity of her work, specifying: *“As for the sisters of the Charity, I think it is expedient that you assemble all of them, read the rules together, and try to put everything back into practice according to those rules, which are different from the others because that was the second establishment. But please tell them the practice in other places and try to persuade them to do likewise, especially with regard to the perpetuity of the sisters' membership...”*⁶

Louise tried to put things in order under the guidance of Monsieur Vincent, or using her own organisational skills, for which Monsieur Vincent spontaneously praised her: *“You are a very competent woman to have adapted the rule of the Charity in this way; I think it is fine.”*⁷ Vincent had founded this Charity but did not have the time to continue guiding it. He confided it to Louise when it was in difficulty, and with her special ability in applying the rule, she was able to return it to good working order.

Monsieur Vincent, Spiritual Director

Monsieur Vincent always kept in mind that he was **Louise's spiritual director**. At the end of 1630, Michel de Marillac, former Keeper of the Seals, was imprisoned at Châteaudun. Mademoiselle, who loved him dearly, wanted to visit him in prison and Monsieur Vincent did not think it appropriate: *“...As for Monsieur de Marillac, I consent to everything that you think proper, but take care not to implicate yourself. I think that in these matters one must be disposed to take the advice of the person from whom one has asked counsel. When he tells you something contrary to your opinion, you must not go back to it again. Do, however, what Our Lord suggests to you.”* (Coste I, p. 150) Louise decided not to make this visit and continued to visit the Charities. After these trying times, M. Vincent encouraged her and expressed his concern for her health: *“...Take good care of your health*

⁵ *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, p. 707-709

⁶ Coste I, p. 79, L. 48

⁷ Coste I, p. 114, L. 74

*and spare nothing in order to eat properly during your hard work. I still think that you do not eat enough...”*⁸

The frequent absences of her director during the year 1632 made it more difficult for Louise to overcome her interior struggles. M. Vincent understood: *“Here I am, your neighbour, since noon.⁹... If you would kindly take the trouble to come here tomorrow right after dinner, we will hear from you in person what you have been writing to us.... P.S. I cannot resist telling you that I intend to give you quite a scolding tomorrow for giving way as you do to those useless and futile apprehensions. Oh! prepare yourself for a good talking-to!”*

Later, when Louise was having difficulty finding a place to live, her director responded with his usual clarity: *“I am asking you to let me know if you have decided upon a place to live and where it is. You may perhaps think that I have some reason which involves you on account of which I think it unwise for you to live in this neighbourhood. Oh! no, that is not the case at all I assure you. The reason, rather, is this: **we are among people who watch everything and pass judgment on everything. They would not see us go into your house three times without finding the opportunity to talk**, to draw conclusions which they ought not to draw, and to repeat them wherever they go. It is not that we have been watching them, but only the one who has the power to do so. When I have the happiness of seeing you, I will speak to you about the matter in greater detail.”*¹⁰

Louise’s spiritual journey, which included doubts, torments, anguish and unbelievable suffering, became clearer in time. Monsieur Vincent guided her towards her new vocation of dedicating herself to poor persons for the love of Christ. In her total gift of self to her neighbour, Louise gradually discovered a sense of balance, focused her heart on God’s will and never let the difficult events experienced by her loved ones lead her away from her responsibilities. She visited the Confraternities and the Charities in the rural areas, slowly but continually guided by insight and by her integrity. This was the work of God’s inspiration and her quiet confidence in God’s Providence. Louise knew that the Charities needed persons capable for service and prepared for their role; God sent a sign through Marguerite Naseau.

Marguerite Naseau

*“... was the first Sister who had the happiness of showing others the way, both to teach young girls and to nurse the sick poor, although she had almost no other teacher or schoolmistress but God.”*¹¹

How did this happen? Monsieur Vincent had founded several Charities in the city of Paris. Some Ladies of the nobility had the same desire to assist poor people in their parish, but when it came to carrying out their good intentions there were various reasons why they could not engage in lowly and difficult tasks. Abelly explained how the Ladies went about serving the poor: *“Since they themselves employed servants in their own homes for taking care of these chores, they were unable or unwilling to do them personally. They realised that it was absolutely necessary to have some servants who would only work for the sick poor. They would distribute food each day, or the required medicines. This situation was brought*

⁸ Coste I, p. 284, L. 198d

⁹ M. Vincent had moved to Saint Lazare from his former residence at Bons-Enfants, which he was visiting at the time of this letter (Coste I, p. 157-158, L. 106)

¹⁰ Coste I, p. 308-309, L. 215

¹¹ Conference of St Vincent de Paul, July 1642, Coste IX, p. 65

to Monsieur Vincent's attention in 1630. He considered the matter carefully before God and recognised the need to find some way of remedying the situation."¹²

Once again, Providence guided M. Vincent in arranging for him to meet Marguerite Naseau! He explained how it happened in the Conference of February 24th 1653: "*I never thought of it; consequently, it's God himself who did it on His own.*"

The Archives of the city of Suresnes have produced a very detailed document about Marguerite's life and the origin of her name, stating: "*She was called, according to Monsieur Vincent himself, Marguerite Naseau.*"

When did she meet M. Vincent for the first time? We have no texts that mention this, other than those referring to a Charity that had been established in Saint-Cloud, very close to Suresnes, and that Louise de Marillac was there in February 1630. Monsieur Vincent wrote to her on February 19th 1630, and ended his letter by asking: "*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.*"¹³ After this visit, Marguerite went to Villepreux. She taught there for some time, and then permanently left her parish, Saint-Leufroy, when she learned that Monsieur Vincent was going to found a service in Paris to care for sick persons and those who were poor. Despite her interest in continuing teaching she said: "*I'd like very much to serve the poor in that way.*"¹⁴

God spoke through this event. Marguerite assisted Louise de Marillac, and went to work at the parish of Saint-Sauveur. She was then sent for a short time to the parishes of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, Saint-Benoit, near the Sorbonne, and then returned to Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. The harsh conditions under which Marguerite lived affected her health. Monsieur Vincent became aware of this, and on February 24th 1633, he wrote to Mademoiselle Le Gras: "*As for Marguerite, it would be well to have the surgeon from the Santé visit her in case the doctor objects to going there. Monsieur Cotti is easily frightened. Nevertheless, I think it would be wise to have that done as soon as possible. Monsieur Bourdoise will give the order for it. Please see that he is asked. He knows what has to be done...*"¹⁵ Nevertheless, Marguerite continued her service. It was Monsieur Vincent who told the Sisters about her much later, during one of his conferences, when he spoke about Marguerite Naseau without mentioning her by name:

*"Around that time, because the Ladies of the Charity of Saint-Sauveur were women of quality, they were looking for a young woman who would be willing to carry the soup pot to the sick. When that poor young woman came to see Mademoiselle le Le Gras, she was asked what she knew, where she had come from, and whether she was willing to serve the poor. She gladly accepted. So, she came to Saint-Sauveur and was taught how to administer medicines and to render all the necessary services, and she succeeded very well... Called to establish the Charity in Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet parish, she slept with a girl who had the plague, which she caught from her, and was taken to Saint-Louis Hospital, where she died."*¹⁶

In the conference on the virtues of the first deceased Sisters, Monsieur Vincent, referred to Marguerite Naseau and ended his conference with the following words: "*Having contracted this illness herself, she said good-bye to the Sister who was with her, as if she had*

¹² Abelly Volume I, Chapter Twenty-four

¹³ Coste I, p. 68, L. 40

¹⁴ Coste IX, p. 473

¹⁵ Coste I, p. 187-188, L. 132

¹⁶ Coste IX, p. 473

foreseen that she was going to die, and went off to Saint Louis [Hospital], her heart filled with joy and conformity to God's Will.”¹⁷

Charity needs servants... the Charities are waiting for them

Urged on by the Spirit of God, Marguerite made herself available to Louise de Marillac. In the course of several meetings, Marguerite told her about her work with poor little girls who had no school to attend, her work with young girls and even some young people who had learned to read. All her work had been inspired by love for God. Meeting Monsieur Vincent when he preached a mission, she told him about her life: “*‘Monsieur,’ she said ... ‘I’ve taught myself to read, in a certain sense. I’ve had a strong desire to teach other country girls who don’t know how. Would that be a good thing?’*” Monsieur Vincent responded: “*Certainly, certainly, my daughter, I advise you to go ahead.*” (Coste IX, p. 358)

She followed his advice, and her way of teaching must have been so attractive that some of her students followed her example and went to other villages to share their limited knowledge with other young girls. Marguerite, in turn, gave herself completely to her role as school teacher, with little regard for herself. She even deprived herself of necessities in order to help young men to complete their studies and prepare for the priesthood. Several of them succeeded in doing this.

Despite the success of her apostolate as school teacher, her life took a different turn. She learned that in Paris there was a Confraternity of Charity for poor persons who were ill. When Monsieur Vincent preached a mission outside Paris, Marguerite went to confession to him and became involved in his plan: “*I’d like very much to serve the poor in that way.*” (Coste IX, p. 473) The Charities needed servants, women who were freely available volunteers. “*And that was how God wanted it, so that she might be the first Daughter of Charity and Servant of the Sick Poor in the city of Paris.*” (Coste IX, p. 66)

She went to serve the poor people at Saint-Sauveur. Here she learned how to give medicines and render other forms of care, and she was very successful. Other young women, whom Marguerite Naseau helped to detach themselves from all the vanities of the world and to “devote themselves”, made themselves available. They were sent to Louise de Marillac who had them make a four-day retreat when they arrived, as recommended by Monsieur Vincent. When the retreat was over, the young women were placed in one of the Confraternities. Monsieur Vincent oversaw their formation to some extent, recommending them to the parish priest. Marguerite was the key figure in the Confraternity of Saint-Sauveur. Very quickly initiated by Louise de Marillac into all the requirements for the service of poor people, Marguerite moved from the parish of Saint-Sauveur to Saint-Nicolas, then to Saint-Benoit. “*In the parishes, she was just as charitable as she had been in the country, giving away anything she might have, whenever the opportunity presented itself.*”¹⁸

In his conference on the virtues of Marguerite Naseau, Monsieur Vincent declared: “*Marguerite Naseau from Suresnes was the first Sister who had the happiness of showing others the way, both to **teach young girls** and to **nurse the sick poor**, although she had almost no other teacher or schoolmistress but God.*”¹⁹

This pathway was familiar to Louise de Marillac. Teaching was included in her visits to the various Confraternities, and she even drew up a catechism to be learned. She founded

¹⁷ Coste IX, p. 66

¹⁸ Coste IX, p. 66

¹⁹ Coste IX, p. 65

schools for children who were poor, taught the faith, and cared for poor people who were ill. She formed newcomers for these services, those who, like Marguerite Naseau had come, “for the glory of God.”

Louise de Marillac, always faithful to her “*Light of Pentecost*” experience, responded to God’s calls by being solidly rooted in God: “*I must practise great humility and mistrust of myself; abandon myself continually to the Providence of God ... assist my neighbour to the best of my ability, both corporally and spiritually, for the love which God has for all of us equally.*”²⁰

Sister Claire HERRMANN,

Daughter of Charit

²⁰ Spiritual Writings M 40b, p.776

SPECIAL 350th ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF THE FOUNDERS

**The joint influence of Vincent de Paul and
Louise de Marillac
on the nature of the Company**

THEY ARE NOT RELIGIOUS

When several young women gathered together in Louise's home. Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul did not think they were starting a Company of consecrated women. Just a few months later, however, they were already taking precautions so that this group of celibate women who were living in community, in poverty and obedience, would not be considered religious, for this would mean the cloister and, with the cloister, they would have to say goodbye to the service of the poor.

In those days, the religious ideal was linked to seeking personal holiness through contemplation and separation from the world. To facilitate this, the Church imposed the cloister in all convents of women. The cloister helped promote the path to holiness, and also safeguarded women religious from real moral danger.

From the time of Pope Boniface VIII, papal law demanded strict enclosure for women religious. Although the Council of Trent that took place just prior to that time was not yet officially implemented in France, it appeared as a guiding light in the face of the Huguenots and as the Church's absolute authority in the matter of reform. It called for strict adherence to its laws. Even harsher was the declaration by Pope Pius V that any women's congregations that were not cloistered could not receive new novices, thereby condemning them to extinction. Together with this legislation, the Church determined that religious life required solemn (public) vows and this obliged members to be cloistered. Anyone who did not take solemn vows was not considered religious and was not bound to the cloister. However, no congregation was allowed to pronounce vows that were not solemn.

It is not easy to understand the nature of this confraternity that Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac were forming. This was a situation where love for poor persons encountered rigid Church law, which made it impossible to form new institutes of consecrated life dedicated to the apostolate of charity. Nevertheless, that is what they were undertaking.

RESPONSE TO CERTAIN PROBLEMS

The foundation of the Daughters of Charity was a response to one of the ever-present concerns of the Church: how to adapt the living forces of the Church to the social needs of each era. There was much potential energy in women consecrated to God, and one of society's needs was to resolve the issue of helping poor persons who were left abandoned. The problem was threefold in nature: how could women consecrated to God in prayer dedicate themselves to action, how could consecrated women in a convent exercise charitable works in the midst of society, and how could consecrated women in the Church be exempt from the local bishop?

These three problems had become intertwined since the 12th century, and called for a convincing response. Women from wealthy bourgeois families in the cities had great innovative potential; however, they were not generally encouraged to enter convents, for these were reserved for the nobility. For many the convent was certainly a place to live a religious vocation, but we should not overlook the fact that it was also considered a position within society just like any other civil occupation.

Because of this understanding of consecration to God in convents and monasteries during the 13th and 14th centuries, many poor women, who were unable to pay a dowry, lived chastity and poverty in private and dedicated themselves to works of charity. An example of this was a women's movement that history calls "*mulieres religiosae*" semi-religious or extended branches of Beguines, who were widespread in the Netherlands, Germany and northern France. As a result of accusations typical of that period, they were obliged to become cloistered, and those who refused to conform met with ecclesiastical censure.

However, neither the situation nor the problem of poverty was able to be resolved; rather they continued to exist throughout these centuries. Many congregations without solemn vows were founded in the 16th and 17th centuries for the purpose of caring for poor people. However, when Pope Leo X codified the rules for Third Orders in 1521, and when Pope Pius V promulgated the constitution *Circa Pastoralis*, most of these groups eventually became cloistered. Those institutions that did not adopt enclosure disappeared over time. Saint Vincent and Saint Louise would have known many of these congregations.

THE CHARITIES AND THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

It is true that the Daughters of Charity began as one of the Charities founded by Monsieur Vincent, although a distinctive one, as was the Charity of the General Hospital (Hotel-Dieu) a bit later. It is equally certain that the Charities existed before Saint Vincent's time. This was a gradual development of the guild fraternities of the Middle Ages that were formed to protect professional trades from intruders. Later they began to assist the widows and orphans of the artisans or guild members who were ill, thereby becoming confraternities. They were then placed under the patronage of a saint and assistance was extended to help all poor persons, not only those belonging to the confraternity. At this point they began to be called "*Charities*". Membership was limited to men, for in those centuries only men had legally recognition.

When Vincent de Paul arrived in Chatillon, he discovered that in order for charity to be effective, it needed to be carried out by a *group* and be *organised*. He established a Charity there, similar to those that existed in other places. He gave as an example, the Charity in Rome (Coste XIII b, p. 9). Vincent's creativity can be seen in the two modifications he made. First, membership was reserved exclusively to women.¹ This required unbelievable courage at a time when women were excluded from *civil, political and social citizenship*, unless they were widows. In one same association there were wealthy women and women from the working class. The women "of means" would defray the costs, and in addition, "*experience has shown that it is absolutely necessary for women not to depend on the men in this situation, especially for the money.*" (I, 70) The women who were the salaried servants,

¹ A few Charities composed of men and women were founded, but they did not exist for very long. "*Men and women working together do not agree on administrative matters. The men want to assume entire responsibility for them and the women cannot tolerate this. In the beginning, the Charities of Joigny and Montmirail were governed by persons of both sexes ... but because the funds were in common, we were obliged to remove the men. And I can give this testimony in favor of women, that there is no fault to be found in their administration because they are so careful and trustworthy.*" (IV, 76)

called *Nurses of the Sick Poor* (XIII b, 10) would bathe and care for the sick. The second modification was this: although each Charity was completely autonomous, they would all be joined in an inter-diocesan union in order to maintain the founders' influence and create unity through a common rule adapted to the particular situation of each parish. Certainly, the authority of the local bishop was fully recognised, as he was the one who would approve the Charity, its rule and statutes. He had juridical authority and oversaw its development. The pastor of the parish was the president of the Charity, and would participate in meetings with deliberative voice, overseeing its functioning and proposing charitable activities. Saint Vincent was not the president of any of the Charities except the General Hospital (Hotel-Dieu) and the Daughters of Charity when they came together in community. His role was limited to founding the Charities with authorisation from the Archbishop of Paris and the Holy See, to draft the rule and to visit them to encourage them and correct any possible irregularities. Saint Louise or one of the missionaries frequently made these visits on his behalf.²

The Company of the Daughters of Charity marked a change from these Charities of Saint Vincent. However, when the Founders thought of making the Company juridically independent, they discovered fertile grounds for the feminine movements of charity that had been lying fallow in the hearts of women even into the 17th century. The two saints were already familiar with the Ursulines, the Canonesses of Saint Augustine, the Religious of Notre-Dame, and the Daughters of Saint Mary. They knew that all these had been transformed into cloistered groups that made solemn vows.³ It is quite probably that they would have also known that the daughters of Mary Ward who did not become cloistered and would be almost completely suppressed.

The two Founders, in ongoing conversations, were creating a modern form of the archetype of the Company that was making its way into Christian society at various rates and in different ways, yet still not achieving their end until that time. The Council of Trent brought about the means of doing this. The two saints saw that the confraternities of Charity that the Council had left in the hands of the bishops were a possible way of renewing the world and the Church through the laity. Others had had the same vision but had not succeeded. Vincent de Paul's and Mademoiselle Le Gras' holiness and personalities were what drove them forward. That is, they knew how to collaborate with Divine Providence at the right moment, without rushing it or holding it back. They knew how to see and read the signs of the times, and had the courage to act, the perseverance to never give up and the wisdom to not be confrontational in their dealings with Church or civil authorities.

Creativity and Courage

By communicating and working together, the two Founders overcame obstacles arising from the mentality of the official Church and civil society in order to give a firm foundation to a new Church Institution, the Company.

The four appeals and responses in the Inter-Assemblies Document (2009) seem identical to what Saint Vincent and Saint Louise had in mind for the Company "*the abandoned poor who are in great need and who can only find relief in the service of these good girls, who are detached from all self-interest and who give themselves to God for the spiritual and corporal service of these poor creatures that His goodness wills to look upon as*

² Coste II, 1-3; XIII b, 23-48, 53,

³ Coste IX, 458; X, 92, 93, 102, 117...

*His members.*⁴ In the past and in our own times, the Company appears as a four-sided pyramid: Given to God, service of poor persons, community life and defining spirit. Animated by what is called a Vincentian charism, all the members feel they *belong* to an Institution of women who are secular and not religious.

Given to God in chastity, poverty and obedience.

The document speaks of being rooted in Christ. The Founders used the expression *clothed* with the Spirit of Jesus Christ: humility, simplicity and charity nourished by prayer and Eucharist (which today includes the Word of God).

For the corporal and spiritual service of persons who are poor.

Saint Vincent made the service of the poor the objective of the Company but this service is not unique to the Daughters of Charity. Every human being has the duty to practise solidarity towards all people and especially the most deprived. It is an even greater obligation for Christians who follow Jesus' teaching. The whole history of Christianity is evidence of this and the Second Vatican Council put a strong emphasis on it.⁵

In community.

Community life for the Daughters of Charity was a true revolution in consecrated life, with challenges of living together that until that time had been unknown. As the Sisters set out from a community setting for their service, they need to find the support and friendship of a united and prayerful community when they return to it. Although the Constitutions quote the famous text of Saint Vincent (C. 12), we see that this charter is also inspired by Saint Louise, who wrote to the Sisters on their way to Narbonne: "*Before you arrive, I must tell you, my dear Sisters, what a consolation it is for me to see you living in your cloister on this journey as you did in the streets of Paris.*" (SW, L. 628 b). In former times women religious generally entered a convent to live their entire life with the same companions in community. They only experienced community during liturgy and mealtimes. Otherwise, their time was spent individually in their cells or in the gardens. It was not unusual for them to also pray privately. The Beguines, mentioned earlier, might have lived in the same house or in several small dwellings within one larger enclosed area called a Beguinage, but they did not have a motherhouse, common rules or superiors. Each beguine was free to choose the way she lived her life and served poor people. And above all, they were free to come and go as they wished.

The community life ideal in a Vincentian community was modelled on the image of the unity of the Trinity, according to the Regulation that the two saints developed by common agreement, and the purpose was always the service of the poor. Unity was hard to achieve for they did not choose their companions, they were given to them, nor did they choose their community, but instead were sent to it. Certainly, although this way of life was designed by both saints, it was Mademoiselle Le Gras who brought it into being by forming the women who lived with her. Once they were sent on mission, she continued this formation through her letters. Her amazing results show the practical talent and holiness of this woman, who had neither models to guide her nor books to instruct her. Her school was prayer and her teacher was the Holy Spirit, who at times worked through Vincent.

In the beginning, it was not difficult to live united in community. They generally lived in twos, located quite close to Mademoiselle. Difficulties arose when they were at a distance

⁴ Spiritual Writings, Sr Charpy, L9 p.19

⁵ Especially part 2 of *Gaudium et spes*, Chapter 3 §.2

from Paris, for example, in Richelieu (SW, L. 11), and even more so when they formed larger communities of five or more Sisters far away from Paris, as in Angers and Nantes.⁶

BELONGING TO A SECULAR COMPANY

The most distinctive feature of the Company was *exemption from the local ordinary in governance and internal life, while remaining a secular Company.*

For many years, Louise de Marillac feared that the Company would disappear. Until the Company was officially recognised by the Church and the government, it might have disappeared at any moment.

It was September 1645 when the two Founders decided that, without the risk of being confused with religious, they could request the archbishop of Paris the establishment of the Daughters of Charity as a “confraternity independent from the Confraternity of Charity” with a juridical identity and its own autonomy. Vincent de Paul explained to the Sisters: “*Up to the present, you haven’t been a body independent of the Ladies of the Confraternity of Charity; but now, Sisters, God wills that you form a special body which, however, without being separated from that of the Ladies, will still have its particular functions and spiritual exercises.*”⁷

Vincent de Paul, who was trained in law, deliberated on how to secure the juridical nature of the Daughters of Charity while dealing with a canon in the Council of Trent, which confirmed another from the Fourth Lateran Council, and the Constitution “*Quaecumque*” of Clement VIII. He drew up a petition and sent it to Louise to get her opinion. Louise was horrified on reading that the Company would remain under the authority of the archbishop of Paris. There was disagreement between the two saints for several reasons. Vincent did not wish the Company to be suppressed but to be recognised by the civil and religious authorities. After Trent, the establishment of new religious communities was prohibited. Bishops, however, had the power to approve pious or charitable confraternities. Saint Vincent saw this as the only way to have the Company established. He also thought that no bishop would sign a decree of establishment if the Company depended on a priest, even if that priest was Monsieur Vincent. The Company would be accepted if it depended on the archbishop and this would also put an end to the opposition he encountered within his own congregation to assuming direction of a Company of women⁸.

Louise was firmly opposed to this although she acted with feminine tactfulness. Realistic and observant, she was more aware of the situation of her daughters who were not part of the social or religious culture. She was familiar with the psychology and customs of these young women and well aware that these simple peasant women were in need of well-trained priests. She also feared that the Daughters of Charity would be rejected in other dioceses, if they remained under the authority of the archbishop of Paris, and if they depended on other bishops, each one would direct the Daughters according to his own ideas and this would cause division in the Company. On the other hand, the Vincentian priests had the same Founder, the same purpose and an identical charism and spirit. At that time, the Congregation of the Mission was greatly esteemed because of the fame of its Founder and the fact that many of its members had come from the secular clergy. Louise would rather see the

⁶ SW, L. 104 b, L. 174; Coste III, 181-185.

⁷ Coste IX, Conf. of 30 May 1647, p.255.

⁸ Coste VIII, 271-72, 276-279; XII, 76-77.

Company destroyed than for it to be no longer dependent on the Superior General of the Mission⁹.

Vincent de Paul reflected on this question for a year. He knew that Louise was intelligent and intuitive but feared making a serious and irreparable mistake. It would be better to wait for God's will to be clearly manifested.

Unsuccessful attempt at approbation

In the autumn of 1646, Vincent de Paul decided to send the petition to the archbishop (III, p. 59-62). He requested that the "*Confraternity of Charity of the Servants of the Sick Poor in the Parishes*" be established as a confraternity independent of the Ladies of Charity. The archbishop coadjutor of Paris, Jean Francois Paul de Gondi, approved it on November 20th 1646¹⁰. The young king Louis XIV gave his approval and sent the letters patent to the procurator general, Blaise Meliand, so that it would be registered in the Parliament of Paris. Without this step, neither the approbation of the archbishop or that of the king would have any civil validity.

The clause that caused so much fear was clearly expressed: "*The Confraternity will be, and will remain in perpetuity, under the authority of and dependent on the Archbishop and his successors*". It is true that this was qualified by another vague phrase that gave a particular nuance to that clause: "*[to] our dearly beloved Vincent de Paul... we have confided and entrusted to him the leadership and direction of the Society and Confraternity for as long as it pleases God to keep him in this life*" (Coste 13b, 133). But what would happen after his death?

In spite of her respect for Vincent and the way she always deferred to him, Louise could clearly see the danger that threatened. Some days later she wrote to him: "*Could not this unqualified term of 'dependence on the archbishop' be harmful for the future, since it allows us to be withdrawn from the direction of the Superior General of the Mission? Is it not necessary, Monsieur, that through this Act of Establishment your Charity be given to us as perpetual director?...In the name of God, Monsieur, do not permit anything to take place which even slightly draws the Company away from the direction which God has given to it. You can be sure that immediately it would no longer be what it is. The sick poor would no longer be helped, and thus I believe that the will of God would no longer be accomplished among us.*" (SW, L. 130D)

This letter raised questions for Vincent de Paul and led him to wait for six months before communicating to the Sisters that they had been approved by the archbishop of Paris. At the same time, the Rules of the Daughters of Charity had been approved and he wanted to tell the Sisters about this. He did so on May 30th 1647 during a conference he gave on the observance of the Rules. He then explained the name of servants of the poor, the article that dealt with work, the one relating to chastity and the one about silence.

At the end of 1647, Louise, returned to the question and, with the perseverance that God gives a person when something must be done, insisted: "*Monsieur, it seems that God gave my soul great peace and simplicity during my imperfect meditation on the need for the Company of the Daughters of Charity to remain continuously under the guidance given it by Divine Providence in spiritual as well as temporal matters. At that time, I believe that I came*

⁹ SW, L. 124b, L. 130d

¹⁰ Coste III, 59-62; XIII, 131-133.

to understand that it would be more advantageous for His glory for the Company to fail completely than to be under another's guidance, since that would seem to be contrary to the will of God." (L. 199)

Definitive approbation of the Company

The two Founders were well aware that the Company had still not gained official recognition as the Parliament had not registered the letters patent from the king. The Parliament of Paris had not registered them because the Procurator General did not present them with the annotation *requiero o consiento* that would validate them. Blaise Meliand, the Procurator General, wanted to safeguard the interests of the State, for if the Daughters of Charity were cloistered religious, they would not have income to provide for their living expenses and they would be a burden on society. If they were seculars, this would be a completely new situation (SW, L. 283). The Fronde civil war broke out soon afterwards, and Blaise Meliand died a few months later. Nicolas Fouquet replaced him as Procurator General. When they went to him about the letters patent, these letters could not be found; they had no doubt got lost in the tumultuous events of the Fronde.

A political event came to the aid of Louise. The archbishop of Paris, Cardinal de Retz, having to flee from Mazarin, had arrived in Rome. The Holy See asked the Vincentian priests to take him into their house and they obeyed. The Court in Paris protested at this and ordered all the French Vincentians to return to Paris. Just days prior to this, Vincent de Paul had sent the archbishop all the documentation needed for the approbation of the Company. In gratitude for the hospitality given him, Cardinal de Retz approved it but with considerable modification: the Company would be a simple confraternity under the authority of the archbishop of Paris, but this time the archbishop would confide and entrust its responsibility to Vincent de Paul: *"to empower the petitioner and his successors as Superiors General of the Congregation of the Mission to direct the Confraternity"* (XIII b, 146) On August 8th 1655 the Company of the Daughters of Charity, numbering more than 150 Sisters, was officially established. On December 16, 1658 the Parliament of Paris registered the Letters Patent that King Louis XIV had signed in November 1657, approving the Company in France and in all the countries under his jurisdiction¹¹.

Originality of the Company

Vincent knew that it was common practice for the local ordinary to delegate the direction of a confraternity to a priest, but for him to give up his authority to the Superior of a men's Congregation in accordance with the Directives of the Council of Trent would be highly unusual. Also, would future archbishops of Paris agree to this arrangement? Would bishops in other dioceses reject it? This being the case, the only solution was to take the matter to the Holy See. Saint Vincent did not seek pontifical approbation because this would bring the danger of the Company being approved as cloistered religious or quite simply, suppressed, as happened with the daughters of Mary Ward, by giving the right and obligation of the Company to the successive superiors of the Congregation of the Mission..

What Saint Vincent and Saint Louise were not able to achieve was finally granted to their successors. When Cardinal Louis de Vendome, Papal Legate, passed through Paris, he met the superiors of the Company and listened favourably to their request. In his capacity as Papal Legate to His Holiness Pope Clement IX, he signed the document on July 8th 1668,

¹¹ Coste V, 270-276, 334; VI, 25-26; XI, 165; XIII, 131ff, 144ff, 225ff, 236ff.

giving the approbation: “*We approve and confirm by the Apostolic authority with which we are invested, in this cause of the said Company or Congregation, its novitiate and its constitutions as well those of the said Vincent, its institutor, as those made and approved by the said Cardinal [de Retz]...*” (Genesis of the Company, p. 26). The Company which had been approved by the Archbishop of Paris, now had Papal approval. The astonishing thing about this is that the approbation was granted without any official request being made to Rome as required by the IVth Lateran Council. The Company existed now by pontifical right while remaining under the authority of the Superior General of the Mission.

Saint Louise was well aware of the situation of women in the 17th century. It was rare for women to act independently and freely in civil society. They were excluded from *political citizenship, civil society* and had no property rights, they were excluded from *social citizenship* or the right to participate equally with men in public life and the administration of the goods of society. From the moment of their birth, regardless of social rank, girls were dependent on men, whether their father, husband, brother or guardian. Whether single or married, by law they were considered inferior. Their destiny was to bear children and take care of the household, for the belief was that women were flawed men, that they were born female by a fault of nature. In order to be respectable, women needed to be either married or in a convent¹². A single young woman was marginalised for the double reason of being a woman and being single, and at times was mistakenly regarded as a woman of ill-repute. We should recall that one of the arguments that Saint Louise presented to the city council of Paris when she asked that a well be installed in the garden of the Daughters of Charity Motherhouse was the *verbal* abuse that the Sisters received when they went to collect water because people considered them to be neither religious nor married¹³.

Louise was a widow of the bourgeois class who needed to defend the rights of her son who was then a minor and this gave her some autonomy and certain rights on a par with those of men. On the other hand, she was also marginalised by civil and family laws by the mere fact of being a woman and the unknown circumstances of her birth. She knew that women were defenceless, and she sought support from her director, Vincent de Paul.

The Company of the Daughters of Charity was revolutionary in its time as it allowed women of the lower classes to take on responsibilities which up to then were reserved for wealthy men and women and these women of low social status were even allowed to direct many of these works¹⁴. This was inconceivable. They could become “*superiors*” solely on account of their personal qualities and not their aristocratic title.

It is no wonder that this new Company was a matter of concern for the Procurator General of Paris and that the deputy of Beauvais tried to prohibit the meetings of 300 Ladies of the Charities that had been founded in the city by “a certain priest named Vincent”¹⁵.

Saint Vincent said in one of his conferences: “*‘This is alright for men; you may say, ‘but women?’ Do you know, Sisters, that many persons, even of your sex, are crossing the ocean to go and render service to God by serving their neighbour?’*”¹⁶ (X, 407)

Benito Martínez, C. M.

¹² See Coste I, 308-09; IX, 463-64, X, 527-29.

¹³ Documents Sr Charpy, p.826 (in French).

¹⁴ SW, L. 547, 136, 174, 481, 283, 333, 341, 368, 655; A 61; Coste, IX, 430-33.

¹⁵ SW, L. 283; Coste I, 92, footnote quotes Alphonse Feillet.

¹⁶ Coste X, p.508

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