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FATHER G. GAY SUPERIOR GENERAL

Advent letter 2010

To all the members of the Vincentian Family

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

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

“In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet on to the road to peace” (Luke 1: 78-79).

The images of darkness and light, night and day, despair and hope, death and life, hell and heaven are ones that often come to mind in our reflection and prayer during the time of Advent that we are privileged to begin again. These contrasting images are ever present and surround us in the world in which we live. The prophet Habakkuk cries out at one point, *“Why do you let me see ruin: Why must I look at misery? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife and clamorous discord” (Hb.1:3).* As I heard that text proclaimed some weeks ago during the Sunday Eucharist, it struck me that still today we are surrounded by the same violence and destruction, whether because of natural causes or man-made disasters.

Natural disasters have led to the destruction of so much human life. I think of the recent outbreak of cholera in Haiti; hundreds of people died of it after having survived the earthquake. They continue to suffer; they continue to pass through what literally we may call hell. In Pakistan, hundreds of thousands of people vanished recently in the typhoons that have hit the Asian areas; how many people have lost their lives, their health, their homes? Human causes include border violence between Mexico and the United States, where since 2006 more than 30,000 people have been assassinated because of drug conflicts. So much violence before our eyes. Advent is a time to turn that darkness into light, that experience of hell to heaven, the despair to the hope that a decent life can be a reasonable goal.

I entitle my reflection this year, *Christmas: A Story of Living Without Frontiers.* As we read through the various Scripture passages that the Church presents for our reflection during this time of Advent, we find the theme of a God who is for everyone, a God of all nations. In one sense it is ironic because Jesus, when He was born into this world, was born into a corner, a place where no one would live, a shelter for animals. And yet the contrast is that, even though being put into this limited place for survival, He has become for us, the God of life for all, a God who knows no boundaries, a God who came among us breaking down barriers that did not allow people to draw close to each other, whether people come from another nation, such as the barrier between the Samaritans and the Jews or because they were well-to-do and educated, never wanting to mingle with those who were considered outcasts of society; breaking down that barrier of the so-called unwanted people: lepers, beggars, the blind, the crippled.

Through being born into poverty Jesus, by his words and actions, filled people’s lives with richness, peace, goodness, health, reconciliation and healing, leading them from darkness into light, from despair into hope, from death into new life. In August I had the opportunity to visit Project Juan Diego, an apostolate of the Daughters of Charity on the US-Mexican border. It spoke to me of the gift of new life, the opportunity to be truly born, that we receive at Christmas,. The Daughters of Charity have trained a staff of lay people and volunteers and have become a dynamic community. They reach out to those who have lived in darkness, those who have known the depths of despair, giving them light and hope for new life. I experienced this personally when I visited some of the people whose lives have been touched by Project Juan Diego. They are people touched by the volunteers, the staff and the Sisters who have entered into their lives and given them the opportunity to live a new life.

I heard that from the witness of a man of my age who had literally shut himself off from the world, living only in the confines of his small room, reluctant even to step out to his

yard to relate to others who might be passing by. After a gradual gentle yet firm process of accompaniment and presence, this man came to discover his true self. Given the opportunity to live for the first time in his life; he now lives with the enthusiasm and desire to go out from the confines of his own home to meet others and to encourage them to live the new kind of life that he himself discovered. The witness of this one man is just one of many stories of people who have been given new life once they were able to pass beyond the limits that they had imposed on themselves. They have come to recognise the gift of life that God is for each and everyone. This gift has been deposited in us and is part and parcel of what Christmas is about: the gift of God Himself, the Incarnate Jesus entering into our lives, helping us to discover our own giftedness and encouraging and moving us to go beyond ourselves in order to give that gift, helping others discover it in themselves.

Not very far from this neighbourhood where the Daughters of Charity have been a sign of new life and have shared that life with others, there is another group of Daughters of Charity who also give life, but in a very different way. You might say that they live an experience of hell. This community of Daughters of Charity lives just the other side of the border in a town that is ravaged by violence and destruction because of drugs, poverty, greed, and ignorance. The Sisters crossed the frontier and joined with the Daughters of Charity of Project Juan Diego as we celebrated together the Eucharist which is the culmination of our life, the source of our strength and the true experience of God's gift of Himself among us.

Talking to the Sisters from the Mexican side, and listening to the stories of horror and suffering on a daily basis that they recounted, in the midst of suffering and violence that they experience, I was struck by the contrast of the presence of the Sisters on one side of the frontier as compared with the presence of the Sisters on the other side of the frontier. And yet, even though one might be considered an experience of heaven and the other an experience of hell, their graced presence among these poor people brings the possibility of hope and new life.

It is in both experiences that I sense clearly what God says to us in Zacharias' canticle: "*In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet on the road to peace*" (Luke 1: 78-79). That tender compassion of our God is the gift of Jesus Himself, the dawn from on high that has broken upon us, the gift of Jesus in his birth at Bethlehem who through his life, death, and resurrection continues to shine on those who dwell in experiences of darkness, despair, death and hell. And through His instruments of love they are guided on the road to peace.

As members of the Vincentian family, my brothers and sisters, in this time of Advent we are called to be close to those whom we call our lords and masters when they live in situations of darkness and despair, being for them instruments of hope and life. Together as a Vincentian Family, and together with our lords and masters, we are called to be builders, builders of solidarity with love as its foundation, not builders of walls that divide humanity. We are called to live the life of Jesus, that life that came to us the day He was born. He invites us to go beyond the limits, the boundaries, the frontiers that many times we our ourselves have built or that have been constructed by the society in which we live. Often they are the traditions that we have learned, or prejudices that we have simply adopted.

I would like to share a prayer that I came across as part of a service composed by the Commission for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, of the Union of Superiors

General for the celebration of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. The prayer, called *The Beatitudes for Social Engagement*; has been adapted for our situation as a Family.

- Happy are you when you remain available, sharing in simplicity what you possess.
- Happy are you when you weep over the absence of happiness around you and throughout the world.
- Happy are you when you opt for gentleness and dialogue even when this seems long and difficult.
- Happy are you when you creatively devise new ways of donating your time and tenderness and sowing seeds of hope.
- Happy are you when you listen with your heart to detect what is gift in others.
- Happy are you when you strive to take the first step, the necessary one to attain peace with brothers and sisters throughout the world.
- Happy are you when you keep in your heart wonderment, openness and free questioning of life.
- Happy are you when you take seriously your faith in the Incarnate Christ.

I ask you throughout this time of Advent to pray this prayer individually and with those with whom you share your lives. We have many experiences in our own lives of living without frontiers. These are experiences of the Christmas Story, experiences of the presence of Jesus among us. May our own witness in the world be a sign that helps people leave the night and enter the day, walk from their darkness into a new light, lift them from despair and fill them with hope, pass from death unto new life and out of hell into heaven. We can do that if we truly live the gift of the Incarnate Christ, the gift of His life, the gift of His love, the gift of His peace. We can do this, not only for those who are close to us, but for those who are far from our reach.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,



G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

REVIEWING OUR LIVES TO FIND GOD THERE

Looking back on life's events in order to see God in them

Introduction

In his 2010 Advent letter, our Superior General, Father Gregory, invited us to recognise and allow ourselves to be touched by the active presence of God in the heart and the life of the poor. He wrote: "*...people who have been given new life once they were able to pass beyond the limits that they had imposed on themselves. They have come to recognise the gift of life that God is for each and everyone. This gift has been deposited in us and is*

part and parcel of what Christmas is about: the gift of God Himself, the Incarnate Jesus entering into our lives, helping us to discover our own giftedness and encouraging and moving us beyond ourselves in order to give that gift, helping others discover it in themselves.”

We are invited to take the time daily to look at our life and the lives of those who are poor in order to discover the presence of Jesus among us.

To do that, let us first look at how Jesus revealed his presence to the two disciples of Emmaus. In the light of this Gospel, we will contemplate the way God acted in the heart and life of Louise de Marillac and Catherine Labouré so that we, in our turn, may discover how to contemplate the action of God in our life and in the life of the poor.

THE TWO DISCIPLES ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

In his Gospel, St. Luke recounts many incidents of Jesus’ encounters with the sick, with sinners, etc. He also reveals the mystery of the resurrection in the marvellous story of Jesus with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24: 13-35).

St. Luke describes the experience of these two disciples completely overwhelmed by the violent death of their friend who, by his teachings and his love, brought light into their lives. They were remembering the good deeds he performed everywhere. As they walked along, the two disciples were talking and trying to understand the dramatic events of the previous three days. Their hearts were filled not only with all these questions, but also with confusion and helplessness.

And then Jesus met them on their way and walked along with them. In his presence, and with his help, the disciples will walk a long path, from hopelessness to faith. After allowing them to explain why they were so sad and allowing them to express their lack of understanding of the recent events, Jesus invited them to remember and to reflect on their experience, in the very depths of their being. Then, using the Scriptures, he explained the meaning of the events and shed a totally new light on the resurrection. For Jesus, through his Passion and death, the fidelity of the God of Life and of Love burst into the world. It is his own experience and he alone can speak of it; he alone can give a new sense to the Scriptures.

Little by little, as they walked along the road, confidence in the Word of Jesus grew in the heart of the disciples, and they began to understand more clearly. Their hearts were comforted and even began to “burn within them” as he spoke. And then Jesus walked on as if to leave them, but the disciples urged him to stay longer with them: “*stay with us*”. Jesus had changed their hearts from confusion to hope and they longed to hear more.

It would be the gesture of the breaking of the bread at table that would bring the two disciples to the fulness of faith: “and they recognised him”. Their hearts were burning as they remembered all that he told them and their understanding of the events was transformed. Everything took on new meaning for them. The Lord disappeared, but they knew he was alive. They had only one desire: to communicate to the others the life of the Risen Christ and the Good News of Salvation.

This rereading of events in the light of the Risen Christ allowed the two disciples of Emmaus to recognise the Lord and to anchor their faith in him. It is the same for us in our lives today, as it was for Louise de Marillac and Catherine Labouré.

LOUISE DE MARILLAC AND CATHERINE LABOURÉ ON THEIR JOURNEY

As with the disciples of Emmaus and other people in the Bible, there can be no doubt that in the history of the Company, God touched in a very particular way the lives of both St. Louise de Marillac and St. Catherine Labouré. Both of them had been favoured by heaven, receiving exceptional graces to witness to the Love of God for the Company, the Church and the world. God accomplished marvellous things in them and through them. Why Louise? Why Catherine? That is a mystery known only to God.

It is interesting to see the way in which God called these two women and led them to accomplish the mission that he confided to them, two centuries apart. In seeing the parallel between the Light of Pentecost of St. Louise and the dream of St. Catherine at Fain, we can also discover that “something came from Heaven” which united these two women, seemingly so different.

Introduction

In the Chapel at rue du Bac, the reliquary of St. Louise and the one of St. Catherine are found on either side of the Blessed Sacrament and of the images representing Mary Immaculate. And St. Vincent, at the side, seems to watch over the two reliquaries, as he had watched over these two women when they were alive. We know the place that St. Vincent held in the life of St. Louise as well as in the life of St. Catherine.

THE SPIRITUAL RICHNESS OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC AND CATHERINE LABOURE

An exceptionally gifted organiser and spiritual animator, Louise de Marillac was also a somewhat frail personality; she was anxious by nature and emotionally fragile. It was her faith in God and her desire to do his will that made her “strong”. With the grace of God, Louise was able, little by little, to see others as God saw them. The poor became her brothers and sisters in whom she saw the suffering Christ. She became the *ideal collaborator of Vincent de Paul* and gave herself to the service of the Charities. Later, *she would gather hundreds of village girls and invite them to give themselves to God to serve the poor.* With these young women, she began a multitude of activities that were incredibly fruitful, without any disorganised activism or a desire for personal success. In all these works, her only desire was to accomplish the will of God. It is amazing to see the enormous amount of work and responsibility that, little by little, fell on the frail shoulders of Louise.

On the day that Louise was beatified, May 9th 1920, Pope Pius XI said, “*We can clearly affirm the fact that the number and variety of works for which Blessed Louise de Marillac was prepared by the hand of God is a miracle.*” “*We will never manage to understand on a human level how this Servant of God could have performed so many forms of charity: to do them, and even more, to seek out so many works of charity,*” remarked her first biographer, an eye witness to her last years.

We can say, in some sense, that the heart of Christ, little by little, took the place of the heart of Louise. *“The charity of Christ crucified urges us.”* Louise died on Monday of Holy Week in 1660, as if God wished to ratify her motto during the week the Church celebrates the redemptive mystery of the Cross.

Gifted with natural common sense, physical strength, good mental health, and a strong will, Catherine Labouré was just a simple country girl, without formal education; and she never founded a congregation. However, she has inspired (or the Blessed Virgin has done this through her, which means the same thing) the huge *Marian movement* of the last two centuries and the Catholic renaissance. This renaissance, for the most part was the consequence of the Marian movement. Before 1830, the teachings of the mysteries of Mary had been almost completely neglected, and this obviously weakened the mystery of the Incarnation. Catherine also inspired the *renewal of the double family of St. Vincent*. With all the troubles and persecutions of the revolution, the Company was lacking in spiritual fervour. During that time, God had prepared in Catherine Labouré a sort of “new Marguerite Naseau” to reanimate the fervour, and the missionary spirit which was at the heart of the beginnings of the Community.

During the time when Father Etienne was Superior General (1843-1876), Catherine played an indirect, but important role in the renaissance of the two congregations. Father Etienne, himself, made reference to this *Marian influence* in several documents. In 1843, he decided to consecrate the Congregation of the Mission to the Immaculate Virgin. *“Immaculate Virgin, your many mercies and blessings have been showered on us; we know that it is to your tenderness and your love that we are indebted. Our little Congregation was lost and you have revived it...”*

In choosing Catherine, a young girl unknown in the eyes of the world and coming from an obscure village, the Lord proved, once more, that all is his work and not that of human beings. The words of St. Paul surely apply to Catherine’s humble origins in Fain-les-Moutiers: *“God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world...”* (I Cor. 1:27) Mary could have chosen a bishop, or someone important, but she chose a young, uneducated country girl.

The life of Catherine helps us to better understand the distinction between holiness and genius. Certainly the two are found together, as we see in Louise. But they do not necessarily go together. All geniuses are not saints. And all saints are not geniuses and yet are no less saintly because of that. However, Christian literature and the preaching of the priests, that is the intellectuals, usually equate “the great saints” only with saints like St. Augustine, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales, St. Vincent de Paul, St. Teresa and St. Therese. “The great saints” were those who knew how to teach with conviction and were skilled in writing or those who have founded great Orders. By this reckoning, it is clear that Catherine would not be a “great saint.” *“I knew nothing, not even how to write, and that is why the Blessed Virgin chose me...”*

Pure holiness, in reality, is a kind of genius, but a genius that is “interior” and supernatural and which appears only as a reflection of divine light. At the highest level, this is the case of Mary. Catherine Labouré did nothing extraordinary; she did what was done by thousands of other Daughters of Charity: humble service of the poor. She lived simply, in the same manner as another young girl, also living very simply in the village of Nazareth.

Catherine Labouré appeared as the first witness of a new type of holiness, without glory or human triumph. The Holy Spirit was creating a new form of holiness for modern times. Catherine lived, above all, the charism of daily life. What was most important for her was service of the poor. The day after her beatification, May 22nd 1933, Pope Pius XI declared: “*There is no better or more striking example of a hidden life.*”

TWO WOMEN CHOSEN BY GOD FOR A SPECIFIC MISSION

God intervened in the life of both Louise de Marillac and Catherine Labouré in a very personal way to confide to each a particular mission. For one, it was through the “Light of Pentecost” in the Church of Saint Nicolas des Champs. For the other it was through a dream in which she saw St. Vincent in the Church in Fain. Neither of the two has written her life story, but it is through their respective spiritual directors (Vincent de Paul and Father Aladel) that we know of their spiritual experiences. St. Vincent was present for both of these divine interventions. His role was of great importance in the mission confided to Louise as well as in the mission confided to Catherine. And yet, both of them were hesitant for a time about God’s choice of these two women.

In the case of **Louise**, Vincent de Paul was presented as a spiritual guide who would play a decisive role in the mission confided to her concerning the foundation of the Company. In spite of it being God’s choice, Louise felt some repugnance in accepting Monsieur Vincent.

Catherine, in a dream, saw Vincent who came to reveal to her that she had a vocation and to prepare her to receive a mission that God wished to confide to her: “*God has designs on you, don’t forget that.*” Catherine also had, for a time, a desire to distance herself from the elderly priest, and even to run away from him.

We cannot trivialise or minimise these divine interventions. We must approach them with great humility and respect, knowing that their fullest meaning is beyond us. We are on the threshold of the mystery of God revealed in these two souls. These two annunciations “*The Light of Pentecost*” and “*The Vision of St. Vincent in the Church at Fain*” are fundamental events for the Company and for the Church.

I TWO ANNUNCIATIONS

JUNE 4TH 1623, “THE ANNUNCIATION” TO LOUISE DE MARILLAC: *THE LIGHT OF PENTECOST* AT ST. NICOLAS DES CHAMPS

CONTEXT

The year 1623 was a very difficult one for Louise. Her husband’s health declined more and more and his suffering became more acute. It distressed Louise to see her husband’s pain, and her strength was exhausted. Added to this human trial, three doubts or “uncertainties” assailed her spiritually: - continual remorse that she had not fulfilled her vow to enter the religious life and as a consequence, her doubt about whether she should remain with her husband

- doubt which affected her faith in the immortality of the soul and even the existence of God.

- doubt regarding the change of her spiritual director, something she was obliged to accept.

On the day of Pentecost 1623, Louise entered St. Nicolas de Champs Church with her mind in torment. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Louise's thoughts were plunged in profound helplessness. She was full of questions. Her heart was agitated by these interior doubts and her thoughts were confused.

THE EVENT

At 32 years of age, Louise had a spiritual experience of illumination which was sudden and strong, like that of the apostles in the Cenacle. A sudden light invaded her heart and her spirit. Her three "uncertainties" became three "certainties." God gave her a glimpse of what he had in mind for her.

A truly prophetic light

"My mind was instantly freed of all doubt." Strengthened "by the inner assurance I felt that it was God who was teaching me these things..." The initiative came from God: "...it was God who was teaching me..." said Louise. The darkness did not hinder the Light of God from shining. The Spirit of God melted Louise's doubts. Her heart, which had been slow to believe, became inflamed with love. God led Louise to detach herself from all that she thought was so important until now, her fear of having been unfaithful to her vow to be a religious. Louise thought she knew God, but she understood that she was wrong about him. Discovering herself reunited to God, she was led to see things from a new perspective. Like the disciples of Emmaus, Louise quickly followed the path which led her to pass from what she perceived as a lack of meaning to a sense that God wished to reveal himself to her to assure her in her faith. "My third sorrow was removed by the assurance that I felt in my spirit that it was God who was teaching me all that I began to understand."

A mission to accomplish

The second thing which turned her thoughts upside down was the mission which God wished to confide to her. She discovered that her deepest wish would be fulfilled one day. God did not disdain her desire for total consecration and far from holding it against her, he had confidence in her, in revealing to her, in a manner still obscure, his project with regard to the Company. *"That one day, she would be in a little community to serve the poor and that she could consecrate herself to God by the vows of religion." "I understood that I would be in a place where I could help my neighbor, but I could not understand how this could be since there was to be much coming and going."*

Louise knew that God counted on her, and that was sufficient for her, even if she did not know "how it was going to be." It was the annunciation of a promise which looked to the future. God aroused hope in her and Louise presented herself as "the servant of the Lord."

A spiritual director to help her in her mission

"I was also assured that I should remain at peace concerning my director; that God would give me one whom he seemed to show me..."

Again, God took the initiative in giving her “a sign” about the mission she was to accomplish by indicating her future spiritual guide. It would be this spiritual guide who would help her and support her on this unknown path. Louise recognised Vincent de Paul. “...it was repugnant to me to accept him...”

This choice of a spiritual director astonished Louise. Vincent de Paul was not, humanly speaking, very appealing and she did not hesitate to admit the repugnance that she felt. What did he have in common with Francis de Sales or Bishop Camus, those two bishops who were writers and well known preachers? “Nevertheless, I acquiesced,” said Louise. “...but it seemed to me that I did not yet have to make this change.” In this last admission of Louise, we sense a sort of relief on her part: “If it must be he, Lord, I accept, but it is better that it should not be immediately!”

And so, in this way, Providence led Louise and Vincent, seemingly so different in character, to cross paths. From that time on, the life of Louise would blend with that of Monsieur Vincent in a life of collaboration of exceptional fruitfulness. Vincent would play a decisive role in the foundation of the Company, even if the initiative came from Louise.

One can suspect that later, Louise, with the Light of Pentecost continually dwelling within her, discerned that her spiritual guide, chosen by God, was closely linked to the mission “*of the little community for the service of the poor.*” Was this not also one of the reasons why Louise was completely convinced that one of the means of safeguarding her young Congregation, was to place it, in perpetuity, under the authority of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission?

The role of St. Francis Sales in the lives of Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul

With regard to the Light of Pentecost, Louise admitted later that “*I have always believed that I received this grace from the Blessed Bishop of Geneva because, before his death, I had greatly desired to communicate these trials to him and because since that time, I have had great devotion to him.*”

We are aware of the great influence Francis de Sales had in the life of Louise. He was instrumental in the renewal of the spiritual life, a much sought after spiritual director and a writer of works of mysticism appreciated by many. Having died in 1622, Francis de Sales was no longer there to guide and support Louise during her trials and doubts during the month of April, 1623. Louise prayed desperately for his help. It was about a month later that she received the “Light of Pentecost.”

And so it was through the intercession of Francis de Sales that God gave Louise the answer to her doubts and, above all, the mission of founding the future Company. Only seven years earlier, Francis de Sales had had to submit to the authority of the Archbishop of Lyons, Denis de Marquemont, obliging him to discontinue the visits made to the poor and the sick by the Sisters of the Visitation because that way of life was incompatible with the life of Religious as this was understood in the Church at that time.

St. Louise and St. Vincent would benefit from this unfortunate experience of Francis de Sales. Vincent and Francis were close friends, having met in Paris in December, 1618. Both were convinced that the only way of coming to God was through charity. Before his

death, Francis de Sales had even confided to Vincent the direction of the Congregation of the Visitation.

Later, the providential arrival of Marguerite Naseau and her companions would give a new face to charity, that of poor country girls who would work with their hands in direct service. Louise would begin to see that the service of the poor, undertaken by poor servants, gives charity its true dimension and efficacy: the life of charity lived by the poor themselves: “the poor serving the poor.”

THE ANNUNCIATION MADE TO CATHERINE: “*THE DREAM ABOUT ST. VINCENT IN THE CHURCH IN FAIN*”

CONTEXT

Catherine was a poor peasant girl without any formal education. She did not attend school because she was needed to work at home on the family farm and to take care of her little sister and her little brother who was handicapped. United to Jesus and Mary, she worked on the farm with an ardent zeal, prayed fervently, fasted twice a week, and visited the sick of the village. She had a desire to give herself entirely to God but she did not know where or how. When she was about 16 or 17 years old she saw St. Vincent in a dream. He invited her to follow him.

THE EVENT

One night, Catherine had a strange dream. She dreamed she was in the Church in Fain, sitting in her usual place. She was praying. An elderly priest arrived, vested and celebrated Mass at the altar. She was struck by his eyes and how deeply he seemed to look at her when he turned for the *Dominus vobiscum*. At the end of Mass, after the words, “*Ite missa est*,” he beckoned to her to come to him. She was afraid and backed away from him. Yet she was fascinated by him and the penetrating way he looked at her. She could not look away from him. She would remember that all her life. In this dream and in the attitude of the elderly priest, we see reflected and extended, in a human way, the attitude of God revealed in Jesus.

A Mass was beginning

“I was in the Church in Fain. I was praying. An elderly priest wearing a black cap went to the altar and began to say Mass...” The first sign given to Catherine was the Eucharist. She was praying in the Church and a priest came to celebrate Mass and allowed her to receive the Eucharist. God came to meet her in her profound desire to participate in daily Mass. Her heart was so open that God could give himself without reserve.

All her life, the Eucharist would be the centre and the source of all graces! How many times would she go and kneel “at the foot of the altar”?

A glance that revealed the heart of God

“His look, his eyes, fascinated me...” St. Vincent spoke to Catherine first by looking at her profoundly. Without knowing it, Catherine had an experience somewhat like that of Moses at Mount Horeb when he contemplated the burning bush. She could not turn her eyes

from the glance of St. Vincent. She is completely taken by his gaze, illuminated by the light of God. Face to face with such a look of love, she discovers the grace of her existence as a person valued by God.

We can also suspect that St. Vincent was fascinated by Catherine, as he had been before by Marguerite Naseau. He, himself, was *“The son of a labourer who herded swine and cows.”* (Coste IV, 215) He was surely fascinated by this young, uneducated peasant girl. It was not their common background which drew the attention of St. Vincent, but the extraordinary personality of Catherine, her life of intense faith, her perseverance in adversity, and her zeal in her work without any other motive but the glory of God. How could St. Vincent not have been impressed by this village girl, so simple and so humble?

A glance that calls

“At the end of the Mass, he signalled for me to approach...” St. Vincent invited her to come close and used a sign of familiarity. Catherine was surprised. This attention of the elderly priest should have been reassuring, but she was troubled. *“I was afraid. I backed away, mesmerised by him, unable to look away from his eyes.* In her fear, her first reaction was to distance herself. But, as she was backing away, she felt compelled to keep her attention on the elderly priest. Catherine was attracted by the eyes, the look of trust and confidence which called her.

A word which invites her to serve

“Leaving the church, I went to visit a sick person. The elderly priest found me there and said, ‘My daughter, it is good to care for the sick...’” Leaving the church, Catherine goes to visit a sick woman (still dreaming). St. Vincent finds her there and thanks her for her generosity and devotion which reveals to him her capacity to care for those who suffer.

And he continued to speak to her: *“You may be running away from me now, but one day, you’ll be happy to come to me...”* We can imagine how Catherine was distressed. St. Vincent calmed her and spoke encouraging words to her, the joy of coming to him one day. It is a call. *“Come, follow me”* Jesus said, and immediately, Peter left to follow him. It is the same call that this elderly priest addressed to Catherine without ever revealing his identity.

But Catherine understood very well the invitation to make a commitment of her life. Yes, her life would be useful, she would be of service. But “how this will be?” she did not know.

A mission to accomplish

It was some time after encountering Catherine that Vincent spoke to her concerning her personal future: *“God has designs on you. Don’t forget it.”* It was an unexpected announcement. Catherine understood that God wanted her to be ready to follow him. *“Don’t forget...”* God will stand at the door and knock at a certain time. This is the announcement of a promise regarding the future.

Conclusion:

Catherine distanced herself once more, astounded by this very strange message. Passing the porch of her family home, she wakes up. It was only a dream.

DESPITE DIVINE REVELATIONS, LIFE REMAINED DIFFICULT

What a wonderful song of thanksgiving must have flowed from the heart of Louise de Marillac after the “Light of Pentecost!” She would never be exactly the same woman she was before. Her life was changed forever by this unforgettable event. Her future path would be clear. However, the “Light of Pentecost” had not resolved, with the stroke of a magic wand, all the difficulties of her life. The illness of her husband continued to progress. The weight of accompanying him on that journey became extremely heavy. Staying at his bedside day and night, Louise again found herself weary with exhaustion. Her husband died two and a half years later.

Widowed at the age of 34, Louise was at the end of her strength, left alone to care for her 12 year old child. It seems that at this time she decided to meet Monsieur Vincent. He, with his country background, knew very well that it is necessary to take time to find again one’s equilibrium and to move forward. He would first welcome the sufferings of Louise and, later, patiently help her accept her situation.

Louise again had periods of torments. We know that while some sorrows are removed by the power of God, others remain permanently buried in the heart because of our human nature. However, Louise courageously involved herself in the service of the poor, becoming the ideal collaborator of St. Vincent. The arrival of Marguerite Naseau in 1630 was something that clarified how the mission confided to Louise would be accomplished.

Catherine’s dream in Fain was mysterious, but it remained alive in her heart and her spirit. Though the work on the farm was always difficult, Catherine’s interior life had been enlightened. She had new spiritual momentum. She did her work even better than before, but as if she were not actually working. Plans for the future were taking shape in her mind. When Catherine had the green light from her father to learn to write, she left for a boarding school at Châtillon-sur-Seine. There she met Father Gailhac, the pastor of the parish, who provided key to her dilemma. Catherine would enter the Daughters of Charity.

But her vocation was tested and objections were raised to it for five long years. Her father absolutely refused to allow her to enter because he wanted her to get married, then she was exiled in Paris, and finally, the Community was also hesitant. However nothing swayed Catherine’s determination.

ONLY AFTER 7-8 YEARS WOULD LOUISE AND CATHERINE PERCEIVE THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSION GOD HAD CONFIDED TO THEM

After recognising the Risen Jesus, the two disciples of Emmaus left and continued on their way. They took the same road they were on during the day, but now they had lighter spirits. Darkness, which had fallen on the hills of Judea, was not an obstacle. Their hearts, slow to believe, were now burning within them. Everything had new meaning and this night time return to Jerusalem confirmed this. The Lord had disappeared, but that did not matter, for now they knew he is alive! But they had not yet come to the end of their journey...

It is important to let spiritual experience mature in interior silence in order to see it through to completion. Seen through human eyes, the necessary time to achieve the plans of

God can seem very long. It was in the reality of everyday life that Louise de Marillac and Catherine Labouré discovered the signs that God gave to carry out the mission confided to them.

For Louise: 1623 (The Light of Pentecost); 1631 (Marguerite); 1633 (Foundation of the Company)

After the “Light of Pentecost,” it took more than 8 years of interiorisation, discernment and preparation in order for Louise to truly see the mystery of the mission entrusted to her. With the arrival of young women from the countryside to assist the Ladies, Louise was drawn little by little to dedicate herself to them and their formation. It was “the little community consecrated to serve the poor.”

For Catherine: 1823 (approximate date of the dream at Fain); 1830 (The Medal)

After the dream in Fain, Catherine also had to wait 7-8 years before discovering on November 27th, 1830 “*the designs of God for her.*” But that day had been preceded by other events which were also important. We must look closely at those events so that we may interpret them properly and not run the risk of missing their full significance.

When Catherine came to the Seminary, she again found Monsieur Vincent whom she admired so much and whom she wanted to imitate. But this time, she was wide awake!

THE VISION OF THE HEART OF SAINT VINCENT

On Sunday, April 25th 1830, after returning from Saint Lazare, and while in the chapel at rue du Bac, Catherine saw on the right, above the small reliquary of St. Vincent, his heart. For the next three days, Catherine “saw” the heart of St. Vincent as an icon. Each day the heart was a different colour: white, red, dark red. Catherine not only saw Vincent’s heart, she also received an interior message. *The rich significance of the “vision of the heart” is amazing after hearing Catherine’s own interpretation of the colours.*

Catherine “*pondered all these things in her heart.*” Far from removing her from every day reality, this vision redoubled her strength to love and serve. And heaven continued to give Catherine signs. One could say that her humility was an irresistible attraction for the Lord who was pleased to communicate with her and to respond to her desires.

THE APPARITIONS OF OUR LORD IN THE EUCHARIST

St. Vincent said, “*Love is inventive unto infinity.*” God is not lacking in creativity. He did not create everyone to follow the same path or live at the same pace. In the dream at Fain, through the elderly priest, God came to meet Catherine in her desire to participate in the Mass. During her Seminary, God came in person and responded to her “desire” that was so pure. In the following months, it was Our Lord whom Catherine saw, clearly in the Eucharist.

For the disciples of Emmaus, the breaking of the bread was the moment of the dazzling light of the presence of Christ in their lives: “*And then they recognised him!*” For Catherine, the Eucharistic table became the place where she touched the reality of God. Her faith was a relationship of love with her God and, at Mass, she allowed herself to experience union, in the most secret depths of her heart, with Jesus Christ himself.

The time of her Seminary would be for Catherine a “Eucharistic time.” God alone, Christ alone reigned in the life of Catherine. The Eucharist was a privileged place where she found strength and renewed meaning. The Eucharist is the affirmation in faith that there, and only there, is found the real and full meaning of all life.

This new experience of presence and revelation is not comparable with the one before. But it is again an intervention of the supernatural, of the Divine. All her life, Catherine would remain “Eucharistic.” How often would she go “to the foot of the altar” to meet Him who is present in the Blessed Sacrament?

In writing about the Eucharistic fervour of Catherine, how can we not quickly evoke the devotion of Louise de Marillac who never ceased to marvel before this “*admirable and loving invention*” (SW M. 72, p. 821) “*Before such generosity, such love of humanity*” she had only one word, one cry, “*O infinite Love.*” (SW A. 15, p. 713) The Sisters living near Louise were very impressed and moved by her attitude at the moment of communion. (C. X p. 729) Louise always recommended the Sisters to be “*attentive to this divine presence.*” (SW A. 71, p.779)

THE FIRST APPARITION ON JULY 18TH, 1830

St. Vincent came close to Catherine in order to prepare her heart to receive “*God’s designs for her.*” On July 18th 1830, the vigil of the feast of St. Vincent, everything happened as if St. Vincent filled the heart of Catherine with a great desire and invited her to prepare to meet the Blessed Virgin during that night. And this first Apparition would be a preparation for the Apparition on November 27th when Catherine received the mission to have the Miraculous Medal made.

When Mary came “*into the sanctuary and sat in the chair at the left of the sanctuary,*” Catherine was not aware that she was there. “*I did not see the Blessed Virgin,*” Catherine said. She doubted the identity of the Virgin and stayed some distance from the chair. The little angel had to repeat three times, “*The Blessed Virgin is here.*” It took some time for Catherine to adjust her way of thinking and enter into the realm of faith. Going beyond appearances, she “*recognised*” Mary. Like the disciples of Emmaus, Catherine had become capable of seeing “*the invisible.*”

Then came the time for understanding the events. Before offering Catherine an explanation of the events, Mary gave Catherine time to talk. And Catherine told her life’s story. After listening for a long time, Mary responded with her own interpretation of the events. She situated it in the history of the people of God and that of the Company and explained the meaning of the events. Mary engaged Catherine on the path of faith, searching for the will of God. In the same way that Jesus’ explanation of the events had nourished the two disciples of Emmaus, Mary’s explanations led Catherine also to take hold of her own history and that of the Company. Seen in the light of the Spirit, the present became the time when God graced our land and we are called to live this grace with our brothers and sisters.

AFTER THE EXAMPLE OF LOUISE AND CATHERINE, WE REFLECT ONCE MORE ON THE STORY OF OUR LIVES, IN ORDER TO SEE GOD THERE

Following St. Louise and St. Catherine, we are invited to reread our lives through the eyes of God. We do this, not through negative introspection or for narcissistic satisfaction,

but in gratitude to the One who calls us and guides us in our vocation as Daughters of Charity. Is it not true that the best way to witness to God is to recognise him in our own daily life? This rereading of our lives always presupposes an attitude of faith which knows how to discern the action of God in the ambiguities of our story. And we must cling to a simple faith in providence which sees God as the immediate cause of everything. God is not in the event itself, he is at the side of human beings who encounter the event. If our daily life often seems to us ordinary, repetitive, is it not because we are unaccustomed to recognising God who comes to meet us, to love us and to lead us to love like him. Truly, in his love, God does not cease to look for us and to go before us. With him, our days are an adventure of love and faith.

“To remember,” as God constantly reminded the Hebrew people, is the fundamental act which supports our spiritual life, our journey in community with the Lord. “To remember” the key events of our life or the most ordinary daily moments keeps us living in the presence of God, in gratitude and thanksgiving. “To remember” our limits and our mistakes invites us to begin again, confident in God’s mercy for us and for others.

THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY AND THE POOR CONTINUE THEIR JOURNEY

In her encounter with Elizabeth, Mary recognised her own dignity and the gift that God had bestowed on her. In her Magnificat, Mary’s spoke of a vision, broadened beyond her own life, toward God and his action in the history of humankind.

Following Mary, we are invited to recognise the efficacious presence of God, not only in our life, but also in the lives of the poor whom we accompany. As Jesus did with the disciples of Emmaus, we can reread with the poor their own lives, so that they will recognise the love that God writes each day in their hearts. The conviction that others, all others, carry within them hidden riches encourages us, in all circumstances, to see every human being as Christ sees them. This quality of looking on people, with great kindness and respect, can lead the most excluded person to see his or her own mystery and value and find meaning in life. Each person alone can tell us who he or she is, what he or she thinks and what makes him or her live. To really grasp the revelation which can be given at any moment and to understand the message, it is often necessary to walk for a long time with someone, with the same patience Jesus had on the road to Emmaus. The quality of presence and commitment allows for mutual trust, to learn the language of the other person and, more and more, give those who are poor their own voice. In this way, little by little, in a respectful relationship we allow ourselves to be taught and evangelised by poor people.

Open to the encounters that God allows us to have, we discover the mystery of the incarnate love of God which opens our hearts to one another and unites us.

Sister Anne Prevost
Daughter of Charit

TODAY’S CHALLENGES

Topical issues

THE PONTIFICAL MISSIONARY WORKS

Notes taken during a formation session for lay people and Sisters working in the Chapel apostolate (140 rue du Bac)

I am here to speak to you today as head of the “Universal Mission Service”. This work, at the heart of the Bishops’ Conference in France, is a service to help prevent the Church from becoming closed in on itself. Instead, the Church should continually be more and more open to other Churches in the world. This service includes working with priests *fidei donum*, that is, priests who wish to go and serve in other continents. Currently, 158 priests are serving in about 50 different countries. We also have a new service in the form of a welcome committee for priests, religious and foreign women and men religious who come to France especially for ministry. This is a group that is dramatically increasing in number. We have gone from 500 priests and religious eight years ago, to more than 1,400 priests coming from other regions as well as 4,500 religious.

This is a new situation for France, because in the past we were more accustomed to going to serve in other countries. Now, a sort of reciprocity has been established. I am responsible, along with a team, for missionary activities in the dioceses. This consists of working with the diocesan teams for missionary activities for World Mission Week and being the link with the Churches in Africa (and the collection on Epiphany for the Churches in Africa). I also work specifically with the Pontifical Mission Service in connection with World Mission Week which is held each year during the third week of October.

Even before they were given their present name, the Pontifical Mission Societies have existed for a long time. In the Acts of the Apostles, the idea of mission is very evident, since it existed in the Gospel: “*go and teach all nations*”. Bring the Gospel to others, baptise them -- and very quickly the idea of material support came about. The idea of sharing and the practice of collecting money became part of the mission of the Church. From the time of the Acts of the Apostles, we see that the communities would take up a collection for communities in difficulty. This custom has continued throughout the history of the Church. As you well know, missionaries and missionary congregations will always be in need of support and financial assistance to be able to go out and ensure that the Gospel can be proclaimed in other countries, even to the ends of the earth.

More specifically, in 1819, a young woman from Lyons, France, Pauline Jaricot, had an intuition: in Lyons, a home to tradesmen, artisans, and labourers, but also to middle class and aristocratic members of society, people needed to take an interest in the missions. This is why Pauline suggested setting up prayer groups for the missions and groups of people who would keep up correspondence with missionaries. These are concrete means of supporting the missions: keeping one another informed so as to learn more about life in other places, praying that the Gospel may become more widely known, and praying for all missionaries. These men and women religious living far away are in a certain sense “sent by us”. Since they need material support, Pauline started the idea of “a penny a week”. A small weekly offering, prayer, and exchange of information was the first stage. In a second stage, Pauline thought that each of these original 50, 60 or 80 people who were first involved would each find ten others. And so it was that each one was committed to finding 10 other people to create another group for prayer, correspondence and collecting pennies. Little by little, a great chain

of solidarity was formed, comprising prayers and information-sharing. 1822 marked the official beginning in Lyons of what would lead to the foundation of the “Society for the Propagation of the Faith.”

This initiative began with a simple idea: pray, inform one another, donate small sums of money. When many people join together, this can work miracles. Rather quickly, Rome became interested in this idea of the Propagation of the Faith (*Propaganda Fide*). One of the prefects of the Congregation (who would later become Pope Gregory XVI), recognised the value of this initiative. During this time, Pauline’s work became more structured. It would take some time before Rome recognised its statutes. This occurred in an unexpected way after World War I.

In 1922, Rome declared the work of the Propagation of the Faith one of the “Pontifical Mission Societies”. Pauline’s work, created a century earlier was recognised as a work promoted by the Holy Father.

In 1926, at the suggestion of the Superior Council of this society, the Pope requested that each year, the third Sunday of October should be World Mission Sunday in all countries throughout the world. The work has gradually taken shape, and each year now, the Holy Father delivers a message to the entire Church about its universal mission, with a specific theme chosen each year.

We who are French are touched by the fact that all this began in Lyons. At this same time, near Caen, France, two women from the Bigard family were also concerned about support and formation for missionary and native priests. They started a work entitled “The Society of St Peter Apostle”. This second Pontifical Mission Society was also begun in France. Then, Bishop Forbin Janson, realising that children can also be missionaries for other children, started the “Holy Childhood Association” which would become “Missionary Childhood”. This is the third Pontifical Mission Society to originate in France.

A fourth work came from an Italian priest, Father Manna, who emphasised the need for formation of catechists, lay people, and women and men religious. He created an organisation for formation: “Missionary Union of Priests and Religious”, the fourth work of the Pontifical Mission Societies.

The 19th century was absolutely astonishing in terms of missionary revival. The Church in France in particular, as well as the Church in Italy, experienced a very strong missionary resurgence throughout that entire century. (One only needs to look at the number of diocesan congregations that were founded during the 19th century.) The Church in France emerged renewed after the religious persecutions of the French Revolution. This was also a time of industrialisation as well as colonisation. It is interesting that in the Pontifical Mission Societies, the original idea proposed by Pauline was taken up by the “*Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith*” which would become, after Vatican Council II, the “*Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples*”. Its role is to support young Churches and develop new dioceses. One of the very important aspects of the Pontifical Societies is to ensure that no one is forgotten in the Church, especially the young dioceses. Whether a bishop is an eloquent speaker, very much in the public eye, or whether he is unobtrusive and reserved, each one has the right to a share in the universal mission. The underlying idea of the Pontifical works is the profound conviction that we need to have a universal fund, to which all the Churches contribute, and which is distributed to dioceses and works according to need.

How does this come about? Each year, all the money that is collected on Mission Sunday is gathered together at the diocesan level and at the national level of each country. Together, all these collections form a global sum worldwide. Then, taking into account the 1,560 dioceses that receive aid from Pontifical Missions, the sum is distributed based on the number of catechumens, baptised members, priests and the needs of the diocese. Each diocese is therefore sure of receiving assistance each year for its pastoral activities. These funds are not intended for building a school or a storage space; rather, they are to be used for ministerial purposes.

There is also a second stage in which each diocese can submit requests to the Pontifical Mission Societies in its diocese to seek funding for communal projects. For example, they may ask to build a school for catechists, specifying the number of hours of work that people can provide, bricks that they can make, furnishings that they can produce, and indicate what they are lacking. The project is submitted to the Pontifical Society in that country, and then the nuncio sends it to the Pontifical Society office in Rome. The projects are studied during the annual week-long meeting in May of the Superior Council with all the national directors. We strive to distribute the available funds in such a way that no one is forgotten. We have to set limits on the number of projects per diocese. These are arranged in categories such as construction, formation and projects for diocesan gatherings. Thanks to the generosity of the Christian people, we raise nearly 200 million euros each year worldwide. In addition to parish collections, we receive donations, legacies and Mass intention stipends. Taking up the idea of Pauline Jaricot, there is information sharing, prayer and sharing of resources. Mass intention stipends are a way of being in communion with others, a form of solidarity. The Mass intention stipends that are received by the Pontifical Works are used almost exclusively in places of formation including seminaries. Whenever we receive a request to offer a month-long series of Masses for the intentions of a family, we send this request to a seminary that has limited resources. It is good that people are made aware of this, because some Churches can only function with the help of these resources.

Today, who else besides Catholics can assist in the development of the Catholic Church? Obviously, this happens through Catholic solidarity. The multiplication of these small donations works miracles. Pauline Jaricot is currently recognised by the Church as Venerable. We would like her to be beatified, but there has not yet been a miracle in terms of a cure. I said on several occasions not long ago to Cardinal Diaz that in my opinion an ongoing miracle has been taking place since 1822. Every year, thanks to the generosity of Catholics, we have never had to close any of our works due to lack of money. Is that not a sort of ongoing miracle?

Each diocese now has a delegate to missionary life, and each country has a director. Together, they seek to promote missionary activities in such a way that the local church never becomes turned in on itself, but rather remains open to foreigners, to other Churches and is interested in the vitality of other Churches. Our Church must always be a church that is open to others.

Currently, we have approximately 150 national directors, which means there are 150 countries in which the Pontifical Mission Societies are located. We assist over 1,500 dioceses. In the area of formation, this means we are responsible for 220,000 catechists (providing books, formation sessions and at times transport expenses). We also support

35,000 students in major seminaries throughout the world and 54,000 students in minor seminaries.

For those in major seminaries, the assistance given amounts to 550 dollars a year per seminarian. For minor seminaries, we give 250 dollars per person. We also assist novitiates for native vocations, as well as postulants and all inter-congregational settings. Another form of aid is the establishment of Catholic universities or schools for catechists. Worldwide, we support about 150 Catholic universities, and more than half of these are in areas where the Church is just starting to be established. We provide assistance to each of these establishments as well as to newly-formed dioceses. Each time a new diocese is set up, the new bishop needs to have the resources to get things started. This is why we provide each new diocese with start-up funds.

In 1962, there were approximately 2,200 dioceses throughout the world. In 2008, this number reached 3,800. This means that the Church has grown in the number of baptised members, dioceses, religious women and men, seminarians and priests. Catholics currently number a little more than 1 billion. (1.6 billion with all Christians included). However, since the human population is 6 billion, evangelisation can still do more. The issue hidden behind the statistics is that the number of baptised Christians is growing more quickly than the number of priests and formators. The number of priests is tending to reach a stable level worldwide at the present time even though the numbers are decreasing in Europe. However, the number of formators is falling behind in comparison with the needs. Here, the Pontifical Mission Societies, especially the fourth group, "Missionary Union of Priests and Religious" strives to promote the formation of formators. For example, a month-long French-speaking session for formators is held in Rome for 35 African women working together in inter-novitiate programmes. A similar programme for men is provided. Similar sessions exist for those who are English- or Spanish-speaking, etc. This service of evangelisation seeks to ensure that all the works that are established have the necessary resources to develop their programmes. So the ongoing work of the Pontifical Mission Societies is to continue to inform, encourage, pray and above all seek what is needed to create new works and ensure their continuity. John Paul II and Benedict XVI have had the same goals for this project, and defined its objectives.

In a letter to China, Benedict XVI specified the objective of the project: openness towards China, and more broadly, openness towards all Asia where the needs are immense. Currently, numerous projects for formation are being created and are developing on the continent of Asia.

Each year, activities are held in each country. In the Church in France, this helps promote awareness among the Christian communities, to be open to other Churches, and to provide them material support. In addition, it sensitises people to the need to welcome priests and religious who give witness in our land to Churches in other areas. This then encourages us to take responsibility for some of the projects they are undertaking.

This is not easy given the fact that the Church in France has its own difficulties to face today in renewing its own structure, and the bishops more often call for assistance from elsewhere rather than send aid. Nevertheless, we must always remember that baptism is at the heart of the mission. Baptism sends us out to our brothers and sisters; it makes us missionaries. It is important to remember the Universal Church. We need to always be aware of and attentive to the other person and the idea of being sent on mission.

Today, in a significant number of countries, the Church is the stabilising factor in society. In some countries, the Church is the only reliable structure that exists. When I was head of the organisation for the Church in France, various government officials would say to me: "Father, we are counting on the Catholic Church in a certain area to support a particular project." This was not necessarily coming from right-wing officials. Looking closely at the situation in certain countries, we note that the Catholic Church has been the one to assist in reconciliation and sponsor national conferences of reconciliation and peace. This Church role is supported by the Pontifical Mission Societies when we keep in mind that the bishops have a special mission in peaceful cultural development. This is the reason why Vatican II was so committed to "Justice and Peace".

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church is a treasure for the human race. In a significant number of countries, these aspects of social doctrine: promoting life, justice and peace, and respect for human rights, is a missionary approach. This way of looking at and being involved in society and the world is also a very specific way of practising charity in everyday life. It is also a way of channelling charity to others. Pope Paul VI said that the supreme form of charity is political involvement. This means the good of the people and the good of all. This is one of the dimensions in which the Church is fully committed through its missionary works. Today, if we look at all that is done in the realm of justice and peace, all that is related to children (such as child soldiers and the horror that is associated with this issue), we find our Salesian brothers present in one place, the Daughters of Charity or the Sacred Heart Sisters at another, etc. The mission is carried out today through personal, respectful contact with the other person and by the service of Christ present in each person. In short, this is the mission of the Pontifical Mission Societies.

Father Pierre-Yves Pecqueux
Congregation of the Sons of Saint Jean Eudes

WITH THE FOUNDERS IN OUR DAY

Province of Granada

A Rural Social Services Centre
 in the outlying areas of Temara (Morocco)

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

The Rural Social Services Centre is situated, as the name implies, in a rural area on the outskirts of Temara, 20 km from Rabat, the capital of Morocco, a city in the northern part of the country, on the Atlantic coast.

In the 1980s, there was significant internal migration towards the major cities. Huge slums developed, with countless numbers of inhabitants, as the birth rate was very high. Today, the government would like to see these slums disappear but that will take some time.

In September 1975, the Daughters of Charity arrived in Temara, in response to a request that the French Jesuits had made to the Motherhouse. The Sisters began their mission by caring for sick people who came to the Centre where we serve. The Sisters also went, either on foot or by donkey, to the homes of those who were sick and who lived at a distance from the Centre.

“Presence and witness” of the Church in the midst of a Muslim population, the local community is made up of four Sisters. Our mission is to serve poor people with respect and gentleness and to live in harmony with everyone. A French Jesuit priest celebrates the Eucharist with us each day, a real gift to us, as we are the only Christians living in Temara.

The church community in the diocese of Rabat to which we belong, is multi-cultural, and this is very enriching. The positive interactions we all have strengthen our faith and our sense of belonging to the Church.

The Centre where we minister includes a small dispensary, a place for the promotion of women, and another area in which we provide tutoring for children and milk distribution. In our extensive home visiting, we have discovered shocking conditions of poverty. Many people travel several kilometres to get to our Centre each morning.

THE DISPENSARY

We work in collaboration with a Jesuit priest who is a doctor. Each day, our dispensary receives on average 30 patients in need of care, many of them suffering from burns.

Because of poor living conditions and inadequate housing, the children often end up playing in the kitchen. There, the bottle that is warming is within everyone’s reach, including the children, or the butane stove or pressure cooker explodes... resulting in second or third degree burns. All of this is a result of ignorance and poverty.

Poor hygiene leads to skin infections. When we care for our patients, we also give them advice about good hygiene habits.

Finally, we welcome about 50 patients, young and not so young, whom we treat for psychiatric illnesses. During treatment, we often discover the causes of their problem: difficult family situations, relatives who have no resources because of their illness, unemployment, etc.

WORKING FOR THE PROMOTION OF WOMEN

Many young girls who benefit from our formation come from neighbouring villages. We provide classes in general culture (most of the participants have had no formal education or had to leave school at a young age) and teach them machine and hand embroidery, using the Moroccan stitch which is typical of this country. After their time of formation, they receive a social service diploma, which helps them find employment.

NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENT FOR INFANTS

We care for sick or malnourished infants whose mothers are unable to breastfeed them. Over time, we get to know the entire family and discover other forms of poverty: the children do not go to school; their homes are in poor condition; other members of the family are ill. The Centre provides milk for the infants and basic nutritional aid for the entire family.

TUTORING FOR CHILDREN

35 children between the ages of 4 and 12 come to the Centre for a meal and tutoring. One of our Sisters collaborates with personnel from this country in order to adapt our aid to the needs of each child.

In our home visiting, we learn more about the child's circumstances, health and behaviour, and help promote a friendly relationship with everyone. This facilitates education at all levels.

Arabic is a difficult language, and so we devote some time each day to studying the language, culture and values of the people in order to be better able to communicate with people living in poverty.

Our Muslim brothers and sisters are very religious, and have no reservations about praying and showing their faith in Allah. They live very joyfully, with deep trust in God. They teach us a great deal: they are very hospitable, and their doors are always open to share who they are and what they have.

In the midst of this people, we feel loved and respected. We bear witness to the fact that, despite our differences, it is possible to live and work together when mutual respect abounds. We live out our missionary vocation in community, which is where we find the strength to live the mission. Our principle focus is to live in union and joy and to witness to unity in diversity. We have a beautiful experience of community; we share the lives of those who are poor and our life of service. Together, we all carry out our community mission.

In this jubilee year in which we celebrate the 350th anniversary of the death of our Founders, we are committed to ***"live together in great union and cordiality,"*** as Saint Louise asked us to do in her spiritual testament. We know that the quality of our life of service depends on the quality of our community life.

Through our service, we proclaim the God who does not forget the poor. We continue to follow the pathways marked out by the Sisters who preceded us in this mission in Temara. In the name of the poor, we thank those Sisters for their dedication and efforts so that our brothers and sisters may live with greater dignity. We bear witness to a God of mercy who loves each one of us without distinction.

The Sisters of Temara (Morocco)

WITH THE FOUNDERS IN OUR DAY

Province of Ireland

Saint Vincent's Centre,
Navan Road, Cabra, Dublin

Among the most vulnerable people in our society to day are those with a learning disability, especially those with complex and challenging needs. In keeping with the charism of St. Vincent and Louise it is no surprise that one of the ministries of the Daughters of Charity in Ireland to day is the management of a specialised service for children and adults in various locations in Dublin, Limerick and more recently in Tipperary.

How did this come about?

In Ireland in **1838** a Poor Law system was established as a response to the poverty and social deprivation people experienced resulting from ongoing war. The main feature of the system was the establishment of "workhouses". These houses helped to relieve destitution and many families were sent there. But there was a growing concern regarding the lack of education for children in these places.

In **1884** the North Dublin Union was established in Cabra, this was the first separate workhouse for children.

In October 1888 six Dominican nuns were employed by the state to teach and care for the boys and girls in Cabra workhouse. After 6 years the nuns decided to return to their ordinary school in the Cabra area. It was then, in 1892, that the Daughters of Charity were asked by the North Dublin Union to take over the management of the Institution totalling about 400 children in all. Many of them were classified as 'feble-minded', 'imbeciles', 'retarded' and indeed not worthy of education or schooling. In Ireland at that time there was little or no understanding or respect for people with intellectual disability and even the most educated failed to see their uniqueness and their right to contribute to society.

When the Daughters of Charity were asked to take responsibility for Cabra it was still a workhouse for children of all denominations. Sr. Martha Galvin and Sr Louise Connolly were two of the six sisters who began this enormous task. Their approach was one of compassion, love, justice and respect for the dignity of each person. They worked at providing a holistic model of care for these children

They gradually introduced educational programmes to meet the children's individual needs. They were constantly providing them with skills to live their lives as independently as possible. The reports from the inspectors at the time were favourable. One report stated: -
"There is a marked improvement in Cabra auxiliary care. The children look so much better and healthier"

As the sisters continued to educate themselves it became very clear that change had to take place. They now decided that it was no longer possible to mix the different categories of children and it would not be possible to provide a structured education for all of them

In 1925 it was decided that Cabra workhouse would become St. Vincent's Centre for the mentally handicapped. This brought its own challenges as Ireland was recovering from war and revolution and had the challenge of becoming an independent State. The early '20s were hard times both politically and economically.

It was sisters like Sr. Louise Burke deceased, and the late Sr Gertrude O'Callaghan who, inspired by the Vincentian charism, continued to be at the forefront in influencing government policy and the changes required to regularise education for children with a moderate learning disability. It was from these endeavours, beliefs and constant pressure that eventually **in 1947** the Department of Education and Science recognised that these children had a right to education.

Over all these years there have been many changes.

At the present time, the service now caters for children and adults with a moderate or severe / profound mental handicap as well as those who have been diagnosed with problems such as autism and other behavioural difficulties. The service has changed from being an institutional type service to one that is person-centred with emphasis on abilities rather than disabilities and sharing in the normal life of local communities.

The service to-day operates under the management of a Board of Directors chaired by the Provincial. The day to day management is in the hands of very competent staff who are totally committed to the ethos of the Daughters of Charity.

Despite declining vocations a number of sisters still support this ministry in various capacities and continue to have an influence on the quality of life of people with intellectual disability, as well as befriending many through the challenges of having a value system in a world that has little time for the marginalised.

In the spirit of our founders, the staff and sisters recognise that each person is unique and all are committed to:

Developing the potential of each person with intellectual disability in an atmosphere characterised by love, respect and creativity.

Enabling each person with intellectual disability to take his or her place in society and contribute to society according to their capabilities..

Giving priority to those with the greatest needs.

Advocating and promoting justice for people with intellectual disability.

The core values that guide our mission to day are the same as when the first sisters started. They are service, respect, excellence, collaboration, justice and creativity.

A testimony of service in action.

Mary came to St. Vincent's Centre when she was two and a half years old. She was totally dependent for all her physical needs and was placed in the unit for children with a severe/profound learning disability. Here each person was treated as an individual, not as a number or a group member, Mary began to respond to the love, care, attention and a

personalised programme to meet her needs. To-day 50 years later, Mary has a full time job, lives independently, and has a very good social life. She goes abroad on holidays every year. Her latest interest is in learning computer skills. Her thanks is to the sisters who believed in her when others had abandoned her. She was one of the first to have the opportunity to be educated.

Some of our sisters have been privileged to work in this area for over 30 years in various capacities. There is one thing for certain: words are inadequate to express how people with learning difficulties and their families have enriched our lives and that of our community.

When you meet a person with mental disability you meet with honesty, justice, compassion, respect, love, recognition and a true sense of being wanted and welcomed. They are the living face and heart of Jesus.

They know when you are suffering because they feel with their hearts. They know if you are sad and a gentle hand will reach out and touch you. They know when you are happy and they are happy for you. They know when you love them and they reciprocate that love. If you need help they are there. If they are treated unfairly they will let you know this because they have a strong sense of justice. When you speak to them they are very attentive and even though language may be a problem for them they do know how to communicate; we can spend our lives striving for what comes naturally to them. Unlike some of us they can live in the present moment and appreciate the beauty around them.

At St. Vincent's Centre, the Sisters know how much our lives have been enriched by living among people with learning disability. We learn so much from them, their needs are simple and show that life is for living, giving and doing for others. They truly live the gospel values and the Vincentian values of humility, simplicity and charity. They are "our Lords and Masters". All their ways challenge us daily to be better people, reaching out, listening, sharing, caring and being present in the here and now, living a simple life style and believing that every person matters.

In the words of St. Vincent, we ask the Lord for the grace that our presence and care for those most in need, may reflect the qualities and actions Jesus showed in his life; gentleness and respect for the dignity of each person.

*Sister Marian Harte and Sister Áine MacNamara
Daughters of Charity*

350TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF THE FOUNDERS

Reflecting in faith on the spiritual journey of
Louise de Marillac

Introduction

Reflecting in a spirit of faith is a fundamentally human activity that leads us towards God and invites us to experience God's Spirit. The presence of the saints among us is a continual reminder of heaven. The Church teaches us that the saints are a concrete way of connecting us to the fulness of the mysteries of Christ and because of this, they are also inseparable from the mystery of the Church's holiness.

Scripture reminds us of our duty to *"be holy, as I the Lord your God am holy"* (Lev 19:2). Jesus re-echoes this: *"Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect."* Christ invites us to follow him. To believe in him means not merely theoretical adherence to what he said, but an actual commitment to him. *"Those who wish to follow after me must take up their cross and follow me."* The journey of faith is a path of trials and a way of freedom, but it is also the work of grace. This grace is often hidden. It is also found in the midst of suffering, where God's grace always precedes us. If we wish to become great through our **actions**; we must also come to greatness through our **being**, in the art of how we live.

This faith perspective helps us to see and to study what is essential in the life of Louise de Marillac amidst the confusion of worldly ideas, *"The classes and duties of life are many, but holiness is one—that sanctity which is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God, and who ... worship God the Father in spirit and in truth. These people follow the poor Christ, the humble and cross-bearing Christ..."*¹

"The charity of Jesus crucified urges us."

The pathway of holiness of Louise de Marillac

"Totally given to God for the service of others"

With firmness and gentleness, Monsieur Vincent showed her the way. *"God is love and wants us to go to him by love."*² This process involves both ascending and descending. Louise progressed spiritually as she emptied herself on a human level. In a context of political turmoil (the Fronde civil war), foundations outside the region of Paris, and formation of the Sisters, she remained steadfast in carrying out her resolution: **adherence to the will of God**. This called for total self-emptying of any aspects of life that continued to be purely human in nature. She had read the words of Luis de Grenada: "God is he who is and only one reality counts: God". There was nothing left to do except to lose one's being in the being of God.

In the conference of July 3rd 1660, presided over by Monsieur Vincent, the Sisters' insights brought about a deeper understanding of how Louise de Marillac served as God's instrument to form the Sisters, bring to completion all that had been begun, and discover the designs of God on the Company. Her correspondence with the Sisters living at a distance sheds light on her personal qualities, her powers of adaptation, and her ability to link everyday realities with divine intervention.

How did Louise de Marillac experience all this?

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 41

² Coste I, L. 49, p. 81

Given the impossibility of retracing her everyday lived experience, certain clear expressions have been preserved: docility to the Holy Spirit, abandonment to and confidence in Providence and asceticism. The life of Louise is an all round picture of faithfulness that became her immense fidelity to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost 1623.

Why did she so frequently make reference to the Holy Spirit in her writings? This illumination at Pentecost was very familiar to her: from the darkness surrounding her, she found herself completely enlightened and her heart comforted by the certainty of the gentle presence that dwelt within her and which gave her some hint of her future mission. This clarity that suddenly came to her was the response to her ardent thirsting for God.

A brief look at some moments of her life allows us to better identify and understand her openness to the Holy Spirit.

Her childhood

First of all, how painful it must have been for Louise to learn of and understand her origins. She did not rebel, but surely she would have suffered knowing that she was not like other children who went home to their families. Until the age of 13, she lived in the Royal Convent of Poissy where her aunt, Louise de Marillac, lived. It was in this monastic setting that the graces of her baptism began to unfold.

Louise was surrounded by an atmosphere of contemplation and prayer. Perhaps the reality of knowing nothing of the experience of going home to her family made Louise more receptive than others to listening to God in day to day life regulated by the sound of the bell.

This is something she would say much later to Marguerite Chetif: “From my childhood, I have had a taste for meditation and am at ease with it.” And since her education was so advanced, she missed no opportunity to sharpen her spirit and mind to culture and the arts in a century whose religious understanding put God at the beginning and the end of all knowledge.

1604-1613

This time at Poissy would not last long. Louise then became a boarder at the home of a pious woman. This was a different setting for her, but she adapted as her pious nature helped her find meaning in this change. In keeping with the religious changes of her day, in which the Council of Trent was being implemented, Louise was inspired by Berulle and the writings of Saint Francis de Sales, which were the fashion at that time. The Capuchins moved to Paris, and she dreamed of joining them. It was her uncle Michel who received the first Carmelites in the Queen’s name. As Louise’s confidant, her uncle had no hesitation in writing to her one day:

*“...the poor soul that knows itself to be such...looks to God for whatever comes...Such a soul is content to submit itself to God, and does not desire to prescribe to him in what manner he shall lead her.”*³

³ Louise de Marillac, *A Portrait*, J. Calvet, p. 36, Letter of March 6, 1620

He was not afraid to guide her to greater docility to the Holy Spirit, which was language that Louise well understood.

After 1625

Holiness is a long-term process, the work of the Holy Spirit who, day after day, shapes our soul into something pure and pleasing to God. M. Vincent would be the instrument to progressively free Louise from her scruples and attachments which continued to hold her captive and which prevented her from being open to the Spirit's movement with humility and obedience.

How many retreats did she make in order to consecrate her life more completely to the Lord and his suffering members, the poor? At the end of one of her times of meditation, she wrote:

*"You, O Lord...have taught me the means for disposing myself for the coming of the Holy Spirit. I must also labour diligently, O my soul, to remove all obstacles and to act, or rather, to let the grace, with which the Holy Spirit wills to fill all the powers of my being, act in me. This can only come about by the destruction of the evil habits which, on occasions, hinder His action in me."*⁴

How can we fail to mention the ceiling that caved in? Louise had hardly left the room with her Sisters, when the ceiling fell in. It was the eve of Pentecost 1644. What a journey she had made between these two feasts of Pentecost: 1623, full of light, and 1644. The latter date brought confirmation of what she was undertaking, bringing an end to her worries about the future of the Company.

In this way, holiness made its way into the heart of Louise. In her almost continual prayer and reflection, Louise allowed herself to be so filled with the Gospel that the more she meditated and contemplated, the more she saw God in those who were poor. Contemplation was united to action: each one flowed into the other.

What she desired for herself was what she also wanted for her daughters: *"My very dear Sisters, we must belong to God in a totally different way. And who are we to want to choose our paths ourselves? Let us leave that to God."*⁵

In an instruction to the Sisters in Montreuil, she gave them a few words of advice about letting the Spirit fill their hearts: *"it would be well if every morning each sister would individually pray... for the blessing of our good God in order that they might act in the manner of his Son... Better still, they should pray that the same Spirit that acted in Him should act through them."*⁶

Always in an attitude of humble prayer before God, Louise noted in one of her meditation some means for participating in receiving the Holy Spirit: *"O Eternal Light, lift my blindness! O Perfect Unity, create in me simplicity of being! Humble my heart, to receive Your graces. May the power to love which You have placed in my soul no longer stop at the*

⁴ Spiritual Writings, A 84, p. 818

⁵ SW, L. 320, p. 249

⁶ SW, A. 85, p. 773

*disorder of my self-sufficiency which, in reality, is but powerlessness and an obstacle to the pure love which I must have as a result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.”*⁷

*“O Pure Love, how I love You. Since You are as strong as death, separate me from all that is contrary to You.”*⁸

ABANDONMENT TO AND TRUST IN PROVIDENCE

To be open to being guided by Providence, to place one’s trust in Providence, to abandon oneself to Providence, all these are phrases that are often found in the writings of Louise de Marillac, in both her correspondence with the first Sisters and her personal reflections. Louise spoke and wrote in this manner in order to share with others the feelings that dwelt deep within in her.

For Louise, the word “**Providence**” meant both total confidence in God and abandonment in faith to God’s design. At times, she used this word simply to signify God’s action in a particular event. M. Vincent helped her along the path that led her to total abandonment to God, freeing her from a tendency to be anxious. *“Mon Dieu, my daughter, what great hidden treasures there are in holy Providence and how marvellously Our Lord is honoured by those who follow it and do not try to get ahead of it!”*⁹

In 1633, Vincent wrote to Louise again: *“I praise God for having consoled you... what I think He is asking of you is that you honour His Holy Providence in your conduct by not hurrying nor bustling about.”*¹⁰

Later, in 1652, M. Vincent once again points her in this direction: *“What Our Lord guards is well guarded; it is only right that we entrust ourselves to His adorable Providence.”*¹¹

Louise lived this faith and confidence in **Providence** grounded in her love of God, and knew how to share it with the first Sisters. What she wrote was clearly a reflection of what was in her mind, what she put into practice and what dwelt deep within her until the end of her life.

In the remarks of Mathurine Guerin about Louise de Marillac, we read: *“she constantly returned to the idea of **being guided by Providence**...”*¹²

The Sisters were spread out in different locations, at times very far away from Paris. In Louise’s correspondence, we find advice, encouragement and the strong convictions that she wanted to share with the Sisters.

Providence sees to our needs or causes us to wait for what we lack. Louise wrote to Sister Jeanne Etienne in Chatilly in 1647: *“I was waiting until we had a sister to send to you*

⁷ SW, A. 26, p. 818

⁸ SW, A. 27, p. 829

⁹ Coste I, L. 31, p. 59

¹⁰ Coste I, L. 147, p. 211

¹¹ Coste IV, L. 1501, p. 381

¹² Documents p. 949, not available in English

*before writing to you. Until now, Divine Providence had not allowed us to find a suitable one.”*¹³

In other writings, we see how she discovers that Providence is an expression of God’s will to which she must acquiesce and abandon herself. In 1656, she wrote to Charlotte Royer in Richelieu: *“You are well aware, my dear Sister, that the path by which God wants you to go to Him is the royal road of the Cross. I have no doubt that willingly and cheerfully you allow yourself to be led along this way so as to accomplish His holy will, as I hope you did when his Divine Providence charged you with the care of your little family.”*¹⁴

Since God leads us and provides for our needs, in faith let us abandon ourselves to God’s action, for God knows what we need. It is with this in mind that Louise wrote to the Sisters in Hotel-Dieu in Nantes in 1658: *“Strive to acquire interior recollection in the midst of your occupations. Be particularly submissive to the good pleasure of God and abandon yourselves to His Providence. However, avoid mournful probing to discover everything that is going on within you.”*¹⁵

Louise wrote to Mathurine Guerin at La Fere in 1659: *“...completely entrust everything to the guidance of Divine Providence.”*¹⁶

These words pass on to us what she lived out and what filled her with conviction. All her actions illustrate her complete openness to the will of God and her desire to imitate Christ. She was pleased to find this same sense of abandonment in Mathurine Guerin to whom she wrote *“I am greatly consoled by the confidence the Lord grants you in his **divine Providence.**”*¹⁷

This confidence in Providence is of paramount importance in order to live in simplicity before God. Louise advised this practice to Françoise Carcireux in 1556: *“We certainly must simplify our intentions by abandoning ourselves to the guidance of His Divine Providence.”*¹⁸

*“I abandon myself completely to the designs of his **holy Providence.**”* This line, found repeatedly in Louise’s writings, reflects her deep faith and her solid and intimate relationship with God. We know that her daughters were able to discover the message she wished to pass on to them, for one of them remarked on this in the conference on the virtues of the Foundress: *“Her confidence in Divine Providence for everything, and especially for anything concerning the Company, was admirable. At every conference she gave, she urged us to entrust ourselves to it.”*¹⁹

Our holy Founders wanted all the Sisters to have this same devotion to divine Providence, for it is a reflection of the life of faith that should animate each member. It is also written in the Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity: *“They will have great confidence*

¹³ SW, L. 197, p. 226

¹⁴ SW, L. 500, p. 527

¹⁵ SW, L. 581, p. 600

¹⁶ SW, L. 643, p. 662

¹⁷ Documents, p. 888, not available in English

¹⁸ SW, L. 531 B, p. 515

¹⁹ Coste X, p.579

in Divine Providence, abandoning themselves completely to it as an infant does to its wet nurse." (Coste XIIIb p. 161)

In conclusion, the words "Providence of God" are by no means a password used to ensure a secure life. Louise expressed this for herself with much conviction: *"I must practise great humility and mistrust of myself; abandon myself continuously to the Providence of God; imitate, insofar as I am able, the life of Our Lord who came on earth to accomplish the holy will of God His Father; assist my neighbour to the best of my ability both corporally and spiritually for the love which God has for all of us equally; carry out my spiritual exercises carefully."*²⁰

A pathway of holiness: asceticism

The document entitled "Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes" provides some solid guidelines for formation in line with the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*. Among these clear directives is a chapter dedicated to the topic of "asceticism."

What does the document say? *"Following in the footsteps of Christ leads to sharing ever more consciously and concretely in the mystery of his passion, of his death, and of his resurrection. The Paschal mystery should be, as it were, the heart of formation programmes, insofar as it is a fount of life and of maturity. It is on this foundation that the new person is formed..."* (Chapter 2, no. 36)

This passage promotes the idea that a holistic formation programme should include daily **personal asceticism** which inevitably involves the way of the Cross. We find all these elements in the life of Louise de Marillac. The word **asceticism** was not part of the vocabulary of her day, but Louise had its **spirit**. Asceticism was part of her personal life as well as part of the formation programme for the Sisters. Louise presented this asceticism as an act of love for Christ who died and rose from the dead. Mortification, a daily death to self, is a manner of participating each day in the death of Christ and allows it to continue to bear fruit in the body of Christ, the Church.

Christ's Passion is a tremendous force for conversion. Louise reflected on this in the course of her annual retreat in 1632: *"Nothing can separate me from Jesus except sin which must now be punished in each person."*²¹

Contemplating the death and resurrection of Christ, she desired to take Jesus crucified as the model for her life. In one of her meditations, she wrote: *"...to choose the life of Jesus Crucified as the model for our lives..."*²² She frequently invites the Sisters to bind themselves completely to the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection: *"I beg our dear Jesus Crucified to attach us firmly to His Cross..."*²³

Asceticism, this royal road of the Cross, can only be lived out in the joy that comes from love. Louise even used the word **sweetness** in writing to Marguerite Chetif: *"...that Our Lord has let you taste the sweetness reserved for souls filled with His love amidst the sufferings and anguish of this life. If such is not the case and you are still standing on*

²⁰ SW, M 40 B, p. 784.

²¹ SW, A. 5 p. 714

²² SW, A 21 B, p. 732

²³ SW L. 46, p 54

Calvary, rest assured that Jesus Crucified is pleased to see you retire there and to know that you have enough courage to want to remain there..."²⁴

For Louise, asceticism was not a series of exercises of varying levels of difficulty that represents a rejection of one's body. Rather, it is an **act of love**, total attachment to Christ our Redeemer. She wanted to make of her life a response to Christ's love: *"Let there be no further resistance to Jesus, no action except for Jesus, no thoughts but in Jesus! May my life be solely for Jesus and my neighbour so that, by means of this unifying love, I may love all that Jesus loves..."*²⁵

This meditation, based on her reflections on baptism, remind us of some other words of Saint Vincent written to Father Portail. It is like a hymn to Jesus Christ that clearly shows the central place that the Son of God occupied in the faith and life of Monsieur Vincent: *"Remember, Monsieur, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ. ..."*²⁶

Death and resurrection were words that rang familiar to Louise. Why mortify oneself? She revealed her thoughts on the matter in one of her meditations as she prepared her conference: *"Since they (our souls) were made in the image and likeness of God, they are disfigured, to a certain extent, when we do not mortify our passions but rather allow them to overwhelm us."*²⁷

Mortification is the life of the soul.... if we do not mortify ourselves, our souls will die in the pursuit of passion... A third reason is that, if we do not practise this virtue, we will never be able to support one another..." And Louise went into specific details:

- mortify our own judgment
- also mortify our self-will and be more willing to condescend to our sisters
- Strict mortification of our curiosity is necessary, especially when the sisters are together. Ordinarily, we are anxious to discover the failings and moods of our sisters and also to talk about whatever we have heard.
- We are even obliged to be careful to mortify the feelings of vindictiveness... when we allow ourselves to complain of our little occasions of annoyance with one another.

If the Daughters of Charity are to persevere in their vocation...they must strive unceasingly to mortify their senses and passions."

Louise went on to make this recommendation: *"we must undertake this labour generously for our entire lives since it is a matter of mortifying rather than of killing our passions. These passions remain constantly alive within us. Therefore, we must be continually vigilant and work to mortify them."*²⁸

The mystery of the Cross dwelt deep within her, as we see in her references to this in her instructions, meditations and correspondence. Louise de Marillac lived out her experience of Christ. Her spiritual wealth overflows into her service of the little Company through the

²⁴ SW, L. 545 B, p. 570

²⁵ SW A 23, p. 786

²⁶ Coste V. 1, L. 197, p. 276

²⁷ SW, A 67, p. 797

²⁸ SW, A 67, p. 797-798

formation she gave the Sisters. The demands of the Cross applied as much to the newcomers as to individual Sisters and local communities:

To Marguerite Chetif: *“However, this requires strong characters...who want to die to themselves by mortification and a veritable act of renunciation, which they already made at the time of their holy Baptism, so that the Spirit of Jesus Christ may abide in them.”*²⁹

Louise recalls the value of the practice of mortification.

She reminded Anne Hardemont that, in order to do God’s work effectively, *“It is not enough to visit the poor and to provide for their needs; one's heart must be totally purged of all self-interest, and one must continually work at the general mortification of all the senses and passions. In order to do this...we must continually have before our eyes our model, the exemplary life of Jesus Christ.”*³⁰

To Cecile Angiboust: *“mistrust ourselves and believe that the unredeemed self is not yet dead in you.”*³¹

To Françoise Carcireux: *“Only allow me, my very dear Sister, to say that I praised God many times for the graces He has granted you. I begged Him to help you to forget yourself and to mortify your desire for self- satisfaction which, in you, hides under the fine appearance of striving for great perfection.”*³²

*“...we must not allow our will to oppose the will of God in any way; we must give ourselves to Him to put into effect all the practices that have been suggested to us, so that we may be detached from our own judgment and strive to mortify our inclinations even in matters which appear to be good.”*³³

Louise also sent advice to the local communities by way of the Sister Servant:

To **Sister Hellot**, after a troubling event: *“As for what happened afterward - such things must be loved and made use of so that we may die entirely to ourselves.”*³⁴... *“My dear Sisters, if you place yourselves often in the presence of God, His goodness will not fail to advise you on all that He asks of you, whether it be the mortification of your senses and passions or the practice of the virtues which He desires so that you may be pleasing to Him.”*³⁵

To the local community in Nantes: *“... we can have no peace with God, with our neighbour or with ourselves unless Jesus Christ gives it to us... which will only be applied to us through our mortification of self, which we acquire by imitating Him in accomplishing the most holy will of God.”*³⁶

²⁹ SW, L. 651, p. 674

³⁰ SW, L. 217, p. 260-361

³¹ SW, L. 394, p. 474

³² SW, L. 557 B, p. 520

³³ SW, L. 531 B, p. 514

³⁴ SW, L. 156, p. 170

³⁵ SW, L. 193 p. 218-219

³⁶ SW, L. 174, p. 197

To the Sister Servant, Jeanne Lepintre: *“Please recommend him often to the prayers of our very dear sisters who, I hope, are strong in their love of God and in the practice of interior mortification. It is only reasonable that those whom God has called to follow His Son should strive to become holy as He is holy.”*³⁷

To the community in Chateaudun, where Sister Jeanne Delacroix was Sister Servant: *“Above all, let me know if, while they are occupied with exterior service, our sisters minds are directed toward vigilance over themselves so that, for the love of Our Lord, they can overcome and control their passions by refusing their senses anything that might cause them to offend God.”*³⁸

To the community in Angers: *“Believe me, our chief preoccupation is also to practise great mortification, not by exterior penance but by submission based on true and solid humility: being content to be despised; waging war against our senses and passions; being strictly attached to obedience and to all the virtues; practising cordiality among ourselves, without showing any preferences, for in this way grumbling, favouritism, and exclusive friendships are avoided.”*³⁹

In short, it can be said that Louise de Marillac, like all spiritual masters, invited the Sisters to follow in the footsteps of Christ: *“...we can attain this only by following Jesus who constantly laboured and suffered. And even He could not have led us to this had His perseverance not led Him to death on the Cross.”*⁴⁰

In the silence of meditation, this time of contemplating Christ incarnate, and Christ the redeemer, the Sisters draw the strength they need to meet the demands of their vocation. Wasn't it Louise who said to Barbe Angiboust in a letter: *“Go then courageously, advancing moment by moment on the path on which God has placed you in order to reach Him.”*⁴¹

This reflection on Louise de Marillac's pathway to holiness, a reflection made in a spirit of faith, has focused on some of its obvious features. These include: her docility to the Holy Spirit, abandonment to divine Providence and asceticism that enabled her to achieve God's plan for her in her **“being and actions”**, the contemplation of Christ in the poor, commitment to community, and Mary as our only Mother.

At the end of her life, she came back to something that always resonated deep within her: *“Would to God that I could fully express the thoughts that, in His goodness, He has granted to me on the subject of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin, so that the true understanding that I possess of her merits and the desire that I have to render her fitting homage may remain always in my heart. ... This is why, throughout my life, in time and in eternity, I desire to love and to honour her...”*⁴²

Her spiritual testament, received by the Sisters who were present at her final moments, reminds us to ask God to grant *“the grace to persevere in your vocation in order to*

³⁷ SW, L. 328, p. 372

³⁸ SW, L. 656, p. 678

³⁹ SW, L. 485, p. 513

⁴⁰ SW, L. 426, p. 36

⁴¹ SW, L. 360 B, p. 412

⁴² SW, A 31 B, p. 830-831

serve Him in the manner He asks of you... Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only Mother."

From the heights of faith from which came her reflections, Louise de Marillac saw her poor daughters as spouses of Jesus Christ, servants of the poor. In the advice she gave the community, she continually came back to what was essential in her eyes: a spirit of peace, forbearance, and cordiality. With this in mind, during the season of Christmas and Epiphany, she suggested they *follow the example of the Magi, in leaving everything to follow the Lord, replacing indifferent service with the incense of fervent prayer, pleasure with mortification, affection for the things of this world with an offering of all we possess.*

Conclusion

Gobillon, her first biographer, concluded chapter five of his book with a description of Louise's last moments. He gave special praise to her charity, to which she had dedicated her entire life and in which she persevered until death.

*"It is this virtue [charity] which makes saints and which, according to the Apostle, is a more excellent gift than the grace of miracles. However, it seems that God is not satisfied with having made known the merit of this faithful servant by so many good things he has brought about by her ministry. It seems that he even has some intention of making known by visible signs the judgement he pronounced at her death, and that he wants to reveal his glory by the extraordinary effects he makes manifest at her tomb. From time to time a kind of soft haze emanates from it, spreading a fragrance like that of violets and irises. Many people can testify to that, and what is more surprising is that the Sisters of Charity who come and pray at her tomb sometimes go away so fragrant with this perfume that they carry it with them to the sick sisters in the infirmary of the motherhouse... whatever might be the nature of the fragrance which rises from the tomb of this servant of the poor, an entirely spiritual one arises from the example of her life, more precious than any perfume. This spiritual fragrance is a miracle of grace, and the most glorious sign of her holiness. It is this true fragrance which penetrates her daughters' hearts, and which draws them so gently and powerfully to imitate her."*⁴³

On July 24th 1660, in Monsieur Vincent's conference on the virtues of Louise de Marillac, it is written:

*"O mon Dieu, what a beautiful picture! It's up to you, Sisters, to conform your actions to hers and to imitate her in all things..."*⁴⁴

Sister Claire HERRMANN
Daughter of Charity

⁴³ *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, Gobillon, p. 65

⁴⁴ Coste X, p. 585

HAPPY AND HOLY NEW YEAR

Our human race continues to suffer
a thousand torments.

The vast number of refugees
wounded by life
painfully continues its journey
in the darkness of grief and sadness.

Each person has his appointed share of misfortune, of anger
and of sorrow.

Here and there, however, we witness
the quiet courage of those who refuse to be resigned,
the generous zeal of those who work
for justice and peace,
the silent commitment of those who choose
to serve and to share.

To express our wishes for the New Year,
we share with you this passage from the Bible:

*“May the Lord bless and keep you!
May the Lord make his face shine upon you!
May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you
and give you peace!”*

(Numbers 6:23-26)