

*E*choes *of the Company*



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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SISTER EVELYNE FRANC, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Letter of January 1, 2013

Dear Sisters,

The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us forever!
“Mary, Mother of the “Yes”, you listened to Jesus, and know the tone of his voice and the beating of his heart. Morning Star, speak to us of him, and tell us about your journey of following him on the path of faith.” (Prayer of Benedict XVI)

It is with Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Company, that we begin this new year. I place the wishes that I formulate for each of you into her hands, and I confide my prayer for your intentions to her intercession.

This prayer is very concrete and up-to-date thanks to the letters that you were kind enough to send to me for Christmas. They speak of life in your local communities, the way you entered into the Year of Faith, your love for the Company and your solidarity with Sisters living through terrible tragedies: wars, natural disasters, etc. They also describe your efforts to accompany those impacted by the economic and moral crisis affecting our contemporaries in all parts of the world.

On this January 1, 2013, we initiate a new step in our life: it may be the year following our sending on mission, our twenty-fifth jubilee year, our fiftieth, perhaps the last year of our life, according to God's loving plan for each one of us. Wherever we may be, we give thanks for the year that has passed and set out resolutely on the coming one. Without a doubt, you have already done so, personally and in community during your end of the year



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retreat, but allow me to do so again with you.

2012

GIVE THANKS FOR THE COMPANY

Let us give thanks because the Company of the Daughters of Charity, which will celebrate 380 years of existence in November, is engaged today, as in times past, in the service of Christ in persons who are poor. Saint Vincent passionately encouraged us: *“It’s for charity, for God, for the poor! ... And what greater act of love can one make than to give oneself, wholly and entirely, in one’s state of life and in one’s duty, for the salvation and relief of the afflicted!”*¹ Referring to your letters, I note your efforts for education, health and holistic promotion of children, youth and adults, actions on behalf of victims of human trafficking, affective and effective accompaniment of migrants, refugees and the marginalized, all the pastoral work put in place in prisons, hospitals and schools... Let us give thanks to God for His grace that allows us to recognize the needs of those who are poor, to respond in collaboration with others and to be transformed by those whom we serve.

The Message to the People of God from the recent Synod of Bishops in October 2012 confirms the relevancy of our charism and its connection to the new evangelization: *“Placing ourselves side by side with those who are wounded by life is not only a social exercise, but above all a spiritual act because it is Christ’s face that shines in the face of the poor. (...) We must recognize the privileged place of the poor in our communities, a place that does not exclude anyone, but wants to reflect how Jesus bound himself to them. The presence of the poor in our communities is mysteriously powerful: it changes persons more than a discourse does, it teaches fidelity, it makes us understand the fragility of life, it asks for prayer: in short, it brings us to Christ.”*²

1. Saint Vincent, November 24, 1658, Coste VII, p. 397.

2. Message of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, 12.

Let us also give thanks for the study and reflection the Sister Servant’s Guide gave rise to in each province. May they help each local community to truly be a *living cell of the Church that renders the Company present wherever a Daughter of Charity, united with her Sisters, lives out her vocation as a servant.*³ The Company’s 213 Seminary Sisters and 983 Sisters already sent on mission and under ten years vocation need a solid local community, a *milieu based on affection, which fosters human and spiritual growth, as well as apostolic creativity.*⁴

I would also like to give thanks for the visits carried out in your Provinces these last six months. They have taken me to Emmitsburg (Province of St. Louise - USA), South India, the Province of Slovenia (Slovenia, Macedonia, and Croatia), Kosovo (Region of Albania), Libya (Province of Pamplona) and Istanbul where I was able to greet the Sisters at Saint George Hospital (Province of Graz-Central Europe) and those at Peace Hospital (Province of Switzerland-Turkey).

For the General Councillors and me, all these visits are opportunities to listen, learn, meet the Vincentian Family and praise God for the charism of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise throughout the world.

2013

BE PEACEMAKERS

From the Gospel for Christmas to that which the liturgy proposes to us today, Mary does not speak. She is close to her Son, she contemplates, she holds events and meditates on them in her heart. Her adoring silence leads us, too, to contemplation. I am sure that you were, yet again, filled with wonder at the peace that emanates from the crèche. Pope Benedict XVI, in his January 1 message, invites us to be instruments of this peace, a gift of God and the work of human beings: *“The Church is convinced of the urgency of a new proclamation of Jesus Christ, the first and fundamental factor of the integral development of peoples and also of peace. Jesus is indeed our peace, our justice*

3. Cf. Constitution 81.

4. Cf. Constitution 32a.

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and our reconciliation (cf. Eph 2:14; 2Cor 5:18). The peacemaker, according to Jesus' beatitude, is the one who seeks the good of the other, the fullness of good in body and soul, today and tomorrow."⁵

A service that the Church can give to society is to offer it hope and show it the way of peace. Within the Church, we are especially witnesses to the love of Christ through our service, our lives and proximity with persons living in poverty⁶, signs that unconditional ways, forgiveness, and Gospel refusal of calculating reciprocity are effective leverage for moving the world, and that peace and justice are possible.

WELCOME THE NEW

For several months, sixteen Provinces in the Company have courageously journeyed towards reorganization that will result in the creation of new Provinces:

-The Provinces of the Canary Islands, Granada and Seville will form the Province "España Sur" on March 15.

-Those of Rome, Sienna and Turin, on May 31, the Province "San Vincenzo Italia".

-The month of July will see the birth of three new Provinces in South America and the Caribbean:

* July 16, the Provinces of Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo will form the Province "El Caribe".

* July 18, the Provinces of Bogota and Venezuela will unite to form the Province "La Milagrosa – Bogota-Venezuela".

*July 21 will be the birth of the Province "Nuestra Señora de la Misión – América Sur" which will bring together the Provinces of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Paraguay.

5. Benedict XVI, January 1, 2013, Message, 3.

6. Cf. I.A.D. p. 13.

Other Provinces of the Company, in Europe, Asia and Africa are also moving toward reorganization. The General Council witnesses the spirit of faith of the Sisters affected and the dynamism of the interprovincial commissions charged with preparing and facilitating these regroupings, under the responsibility of the Visitatrices and their Provincial Councils. I also read in this a very concrete sign of a sense of belonging to the Company that goes beyond existing Provincial boundaries in order to prepare the Company of the future.

CELEBRATE THE YEAR OF FAITH WITH OUR FUTURE "BLESSEDS" FROM SPAIN

The beatification of our 27 Spanish Sisters (and one of their collaborators, a member of the Children of Mary), martyrs for the faith in the 20th century, will also be a significant event in 2013. As I wrote you recently, it will take place October 27 in Tarragona, a city with a rich historical and religious heritage.

Our Sisters' fidelity to their total gift of self to God and to those who are poor, to their vocation, and to the mission that was entrusted to them is a response to the appeals addressed by Saint Vincent and Saint Louise to our first Sisters: "*The blood of our Sisters will bring others to the Company and will merit for those who remain the grace of God to sanctify themselves.*"⁷ "*You should all be holy with the many opportunities that are constantly available to you to serve God and the poor.*"⁸

Their witness also recalls the universal call to holiness, put forward by the Second Vatican Council: *love of God and love of one's neighbor, lived in fullness.*⁹

7. Saint Vincent, August 4, Coste X, p. 443.

8. Saint Louise, letter 113 bis, Spiritual Writings, p. 123.

9. Cf. Lumen Gentium, 42.

CONCLUSION

Let us turn anew to Mary on this first day of the year. Let us look at her: she prays, she meditates, she presents her Son to us. Let us make her faith and her trust our own and, like her, “*keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith*” (Heb. 12: 2): “*in him, all the anguish and all the longing of the human heart find fulfillment.*”¹⁰

A happy and holy new year to each one of you, with my devoted affection and the assurance of my prayer,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

10. Porta Fidei, 13.

Conference for January 1, 2013
given at the Motherhouse, Paris

**Enter through the narrow door:
the Year of Faith and the Vincentian Way**

“Refresh my heart in Christ.” Phm. 1: 20 (St. Paul to Onesimus)

Happy New Year! I pray that this first day of 2013 and the year ahead will be a time of grace and favor for the Company of the Daughters of Charity throughout the world. May this New Year bring us closer to Jesus Christ, those who are poor, our Sisters and all people. My hope and prayer for you is a simple one, taken from the words of St. Paul to Onesimus: *May your hearts be refreshed in Christ!*

We seek refreshment in many ways: a cool breeze on a hot day; a drink of water to quench a strong thirst; a nourishing meal to replenish ourselves; a good night of rest after a long work day; moments of relaxation and conversation in community; and our annual time of retreat. All these are ways to renew ourselves in body, mind, and spirit, essential for health and peace.

This year, the Church gives us an opportunity for refreshment, both as individuals and as a community, by giving us the “Year of Faith”. Promulgated on October 11, 2012, the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Benedict XVI in his Apostolic Letter **Porta Fidei** called us to “*rediscover the journey of faith so as to shed ever clearer light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ.*” (PF, 2) The metaphor of a door as a passageway is found in scripture, especially in the words of Jesus.

In the Gospel of St. Luke which we will hear often this year, Jesus calls his followers to join him in discipleship as co-workers in announcing

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the Kingdom of God, a task demanding much time, energy, and self-sacrifice. While the crowds marveled at Jesus' mighty words and deeds, the reality of committing to him was, for them, a daunting one. It is not a surprise that some of these sought an easier way, but Jesus told them: "*Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough.*" (Lk 13:24)

The door of faith we pass through at key moments in life is like any other door: it has hinges to hold it in place, and requires a key to enter. In *Porta Fidei*, the Holy Father reminds us the two hinges to the door of faith are the Word of God and the Eucharist. They are twin pillars of daily encounter with the Lord; hinges for hearts seeking rest in Christ. As Pope Benedict observed, "*We must rediscover a taste for feeding ourselves on the Word of God, faithfully handed down by the Church, and on the bread of life, offered as sustenance for his disciples.*" (PF, 3) In hearing and receiving both the Word and the Word Made Flesh, we gain strength to be people of the Risen Christ in a world wounded by structural and personal sin.

From this dual daily encounter with the Lord, we realize that moving through the door of faith is not a one-time, one-person action: we need to return often, and to bring others with us! That is why this "Year of Faith" is also a spring board to the quest for a new evangelization. This was the theme of the October Synod of Bishops, of which I served as a representative of the Societies of Apostolic Life. What is the essence of the New Evangelization of which we have heard so much? The Holy Father captures it well: "*There is a need...to rediscover the joy of believing and the enthusiasm for communicating the faith.... Faith grows when it is lived as an experience of love received and when it is communicated as an experience of grace and joy.*" (PF, 7)

As I noted, in addition to hinges, a door needs a key for proper access. In literature, the key often symbolizes authority, power, and privilege. Yet, Jesus resisted those images, calling his followers to be servant leaders. As followers of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, our charism is our key into the door of faith, enabling us to gain access by leading others to Jesus Christ. The Vincentian way is one of faith in Jesus Christ, demonstrated by service to the poor and advocacy

on their behalf. We follow Jesus, first evangelizer of the poor, as did Saints Vincent and Louise, knowing that this Gospel command of Christ is core to our charism: "*As often as you did it to one of these least of my brethren, you did it to me.*" (Mt 25:40)

The Holy Father gets at the heart of the meaning of 'the charity of Christ urges us' when he notes, "*Many Christians dedicate their lives with love to those who are lonely, marginalized or excluded...because it is in them that the first reflection of Christ's own face is seen.*" (PF, 14)

I suggest three basic responses: **reflection, repentance, and re-commitment**. These "r-words" are not only Synod suggestions, but values that shone forth brightly in the lives of Vincent and Louise.

1) REFLECTION

In our order of day, we make time for prayer and reflection. But in this Year of Faith, we are called to do so more deeply. To this end I suggest the following:

- Allow the liturgical seasons of Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Advent, and special feasts of the Vincentian Family to be times for reflection on the Word of God. We know the rich source of grace Scripture and the liturgy provide. Make greater use of them in 2013.
- Commit in this year to reading and reflecting upon documents of the Second Vatican Council, particularly *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium*. They can even be used for community-based reflection and sharing. Along with the fourteen other documents given us by the Council, the above two are not only informative; they were and are transformative for ourselves, the Church, and the world.

2) REPENTANCE

This is a word that evokes strong emotions in today's world. To some, it seems an outmoded, inefficient use of time. Even believers treat it as a necessary evil to be 'taken care of' in the sacrament of reconciliation in Lent and Advent. But this Year of Faith calls us to 'go deeper'. As the Second Vatican Council Fathers noted, "*the Church...at once*

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holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal.” (LG, 8) This Year of Faith is a “summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Savior of the world.” (PF, 6) To this end I suggest the following:

- Make good use of spiritual direction and the sacrament of reconciliation this year. Seek the grace to understand better your ‘sin history’; those patterns of behavior that hold you back from seeing and accepting Jesus’ love for you. Only when we have the courage to fully know ourselves as redeemed sinners can true conversion takes hold.
- Pray for willingness to seek reconciliation with a community member or a family member you have been at odds with. Whether or not your effort is recognized or reciprocated is not the point; you are showing openness to God’s mercy.

3) RECOMMITMENT

A lasting effect of a faithful heart renewed is resuming the journey of discipleship. Here, both Vincent and Louise are great guides. They blazed new trails in establishing religious communities, lay organizations, and innovative and enduring works of charity. We know they faced obstacles and bore many burdens. Vincent reflected on what gave him strength in this recommitment:

“No matter what situation God may place us in, He will provide us with what we need. Let’s ask His Divine Goodness for greater trust concerning the outcome of all that concerns us. Provided we are faithful to God, we’ll lack nothing. God will live in us, guide, defend, and love us.” (Coste XII, Letter 198, February 21, 1659)

At this time, many provinces face the reality of aging and fewer new members; letting go of familiar apostolates and houses; in essence, reconfiguration. Given these unsettling realities, one might ask how one can make an act of recommitment today.

Participating in the Year of Faith, along with a renewed love for our charism, can help us to make an inner reconfiguration of our hearts and minds to accept God’s loving plan for us today. Conversion is a

lifelong process of purification. A peaceful acceptance of the changes and challenges in community and apostolate leads us to deeper faith in God and a more fervent love for one another. As **Porta Fidei** tells us, “[Faith] is the lifelong companion that makes it possible for us to perceive, ever anew, the marvels that God works for us.” (PF, 15)

I began by referring to the “narrow door” in Luke’s Gospel. Our Holy Founders entered this narrow door by being people of faith, charity, justice, and service. In doing so, they left us the key of the charism to enter and bring others through the door of faith. May this New Year be a time in which we continue their legacy of love for Jesus and God’s poor.

I will close with a thought of Saint Louise. “*I entrust Jesus; born into this world and the sole object of our love, to be your strength and consolation at the beginning of this New Year.*” (Spiritual Writings, Letter 650, p. 671)

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

End of year retreat,
Motherhouse, Paris

Stories about Angels

INTRODUCTION

This is the time of the year more than any other (unless, perhaps, Easter) when we hear stories about angels. We can look from the encounter of Zechariah in the Temple of Jerusalem to the greeting of Mary at the Annunciation; we can read the accounts of the birth of Jesus and the choirs of angels with their joyful news; we can hear the messages given to Joseph which guide his care of the Holy Family. There are lots of stories with angels and we are glad for these divine messengers. The cards which we send and receive, the songs which we sing, and the symbols that we see, all present us with angels.

Today, at the end of this year, I would like to share with you some thoughts about angels and do that with an eye to the document which attracts our attention during this year: Porta Fidei. How is it that we embrace and express our faith in this year so that it is better known by ourselves and one another and our society? Maybe angels are part of the answer.

On occasion, people ask me if I believe in angels. I often experience that as a “loaded” question. Some people wonder if I am so liberal that I do not believe in these supernatural beings. Some people wonder if I am so conservative that I do believe in these special winged messengers of God. The real answer is “I wonder about angels.” I think that God communicates with us and with me in a personal and individual way. One of the most powerful ways in which I think that happens is through what I call for myself and for you today “stories about angels.” Let me tell you a few.

All the recent stories have happened here in Paris in the blocks around us in the last year. One is from New York and happened some years ago. There are lots more of these kinds of experiences. I believe that they can, and do, happen anywhere and to anyone. I think that they happen often, but we are not usually attuned to them.

Each day that I am here in Paris, as you know, I go several times between the rue du Bac and the rue de Sèvres. In that short journey, I encounter dozens of people going in and out of the Bon Marché, or coming and going from our Chapel, or visiting the Chapel of St. Vincent.

I. MY STORIES ABOUT ANGELS

THE LITTLE GIRL AND THE COOKIE: WHAT DEPENDENCE ON GOD LOOKS LIKE

Right here on the rue du Bac, right next to our Motherhouse, you may have noticed a very large and popular department store called the Bon Marché or La Grande Epicerie de Paris. One can buy almost anything in this market, including food. I pass by this store several times a day on my way to or from my office. And, I oftentimes see little dramas acted out as I walk along. Sometimes, I wish I had a video camera for these 10 second stories. During this past year, I had one such experience. A little girl and her mother had just exited from the store. The mother had bought a cookie for the girl. As the mother unwrapped the cookie, I was fascinated by the child. Her eyes were totally fixed on her mother’s hands and the cookie. She rocked back and forth on her feet and occasionally gave a little hop while she hummed quietly to herself. It would be difficult to find a more genuine illustration of contentment and dependence and absolute trust and anticipation. Just watching her made me happy; I was tempted to go and buy a cookie for myself! I confess that this scene made me think of the way which we need to be before God. Simple, dependent, content, HAPPY.

I have wondered if this simple event was a lesson for me about my faith. In my head, I know how great God is and how he continues to take care of his children. Did the little girl and her mother tell me a story about my own need to be dependent on God, always attentive

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to his goodness and eager to accept whatever gifts which he has to give me? Knowing that I am loved by God and that God wants me to be dependent upon him is a wondrous lesson. Did it remind me to be happy—to put a smile on my face and a little hop in my step? Was this experience only one of God's ways of reminding me of that truth which was not written in a book or proclaimed from a pulpit but worked out in living color before my very eyes? Was this a story with angels which was to teach me what I really need to know? The famous dependence upon divine providence which characterizes the spirituality of both St. Louise and St. Vincent comes to my mind as I think of this event. How wondrous it is to have such faith which expects and recognizes the good things which God has to give to his children who wait with eagerness! I know that it needs to characterize my faith more. Perhaps God was using some angels to teach me that lesson.

THE BEGGAR AND THE BAGUETTE; AN ORDINARY GENEROSITY

Oftentimes someone sits on the steps of the Chapel of St. Vincent and seeks alms from the people going up and down the block or going in and out of the Chapel. On one occasion, as I approached this point, I saw that a man sought an offering from another man who had just come from shopping at the Carrefour. The man with the groceries simply reached into his bag, took out the baguette which was sticking out, and gave it to him. It seemed so natural and clearly unplanned. I have oftentimes seen people who have bought something in one of the stores for these persons who are needy; they come to them with a bag which contains food and something to drink. I admire these people and the lesson in generosity which they have to teach me. It was, however, the spontaneity of the gift of the baguette which touched me on this particular day. The man who made the gift hardly broke stride. I wondered what would happen when he got home and the family asked where the fresh bread was. That was not his concern at the moment. This spontaneous generosity suggested to me a goodness of heart—someone who saw a need and responded without measuring the cost or (perhaps) fearing later consequences. The experience held out to me another lesson about faith. A true response to God, a true act of kindness, is not calculated but free and immediate.

We all know how much Vincent and Louise depended upon and sought the support of those with significant resources. They offered these people the opportunity to respond to the needs of the poor and these people often acted with great and selfless generosity. The De Gondis were special in the way in which they supported Vincent and his ministry; the Ladies of Charity made it possible for both of our Founders to provide food and shelter and medicine to the orphans and refugees and the wounded. And Vincent and Louise did not store up their wealth. The money and resources which were provided at one moment were turned into the flesh and blood of the poor in the next moment. (Rosalie Rendu was also noteworthy in this regard on these streets.) Vincent showed people how to be generous and encouraged them in this effort. He did the same for the priests and brothers and sisters of the mission.

The simple story of one man providing bread for another man might be an angelic tale, but it is etched in living detail on the streets of our city. It reminds me of my need to be poor and generous. It summons me to a deeper faith in the one who grants me the vocation of following in the way of Vincent and Louise as they follow Christ the evangelizer of the poor.

SEARCHING THROUGH THE GARBAGE BINS: PRIDE AND POVERTY

Several times each week when I go for my walk around the streets of Paris, I pass by the dozen large green garbage bins which are placed for pickup in front of the Carrefour. On these evenings, it is not uncommon to see people gathered at these bins and searching for food. They have brought their own wagons or bags and fill them with the found treasures. All kinds of people take part in this search, and sometimes there is a whole family: mother, father and children. I admit to being embarrassed when I pass by. I usually keep my eyes turned away. I do not want to seem to be looking at these people as they search for the throwaways of a supermarket. But I do not think that the people care if I look or not. Their need has driven them to this activity and their hunger (seemingly) removes any sense of embarrassment. Only I can afford to be embarrassed for them because I do not need. These people have lessons to teach me. Perhaps they are angels disguised

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as needy children of God asking me about my pride and my level of comfort. Perhaps they are telling me what real hunger looks like. Perhaps they want to know what kind of Vincentian I am.

I cannot imagine eating an apple which I found in a garbage can along the street. I—can I say “we”—am so well-fed and provided for that it would not seem possible that I would seek a meal from what has been thrown away. I am so warm in my coat that I would never wear the dirty rags which some people have for clothes. My bed is dry and comfortable and not a piece of cardboard stretched out under a blanket exposed to the elements. I am not saying that we should live in really abandoned conditions, but I am suggesting that we should always know how blessed we are and be grateful. And secondly, I need to be repeatedly reminded of the genuine poverty and neglect which some people experience.

Vincent and Louise knew the actions and extremes to which hunger and need might drive a person. They had few illusions about the unkempt and sometimes disagreeable character of the poor, but they did not allow themselves to be stopped by these experiences. With their knowledge, they strove to respond in the most sensitive and helpful manner. It is these people whom they invite us to consider as our Lords and Masters. If they looked a little more like angels, we might be more eager to comply, but that is the whole point. Remember the way in which the last judgment scene is portrayed in Matthew 25? Both those on the right and the left ask the same question: when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or sick or in prison? Those in need do not act or look like angels or Jesus, but they are for us. The story is illustrated on our streets each day. It is the Gospel in real life. There is a real claim on our faith and our vision. There is another practical lesson about our vow of poverty and a call to be less proud and more vulnerable.

THE LITTLE GIRL AND, “I DON’T LOVE YOU ANY MORE”: THE LOVE AND FORGIVENESS OF GOD

When I worked at St. John’s University in NY, I had a rather remarkable experience some years ago. On a pleasant day, I was in a park nearby and sitting on a bench reading. On another bench were

a young mother and her little girl. The little girl was unhappy about something which her mother was not going to let her do—or perhaps something which she wanted her to do. In any case, the little girl was quite angry and said all kinds of things and made all kinds of motions to convey that anger. She got my attention, though I tried to not be too evident. Finally, she got to the point where she said the worst thing which she could think of. This small child set herself and folded her hands clumsily across her tiny chest and said it loudly: “And I don’t love you anymore.” And with that, she turned away. I was aghast. I could not believe that she had said that. I looked around to see if anyone else was witness to this little drama. No, I was the only onlooker. The strength of the little girl’s statement was re-enforced by her age and that ability of children to put themselves completely in the moment. I looked to the mother. She was calm. She simply got up and came behind the little girl and gave her a kiss on the top of the head and said: “But I still love you.” That dissolved the whole situation. The little girl was in tears and confessed that she did not mean what she said and that she still loved her mother. The mother said simply: “I know.” Then, the mother carried the child back to the bench and they talked about things.

I do not know if I have ever felt so close to the nature of sin and love and repentance and forgiveness. It was all played out in front of me in a few minutes. I knew my part in this scene, and I felt my soul and my heart exposed. I was aware of my own stubbornness and I knew the meaning of God’s love and the constant invitation to come back home. I did not know these people and I do not believe that I have ever seen them again. I was moved and made thoughtful and I remember that story very well. It still makes me think about God’s love for me and my petulance in the midst of my selfishness and sinfulness. I know that God still loves me and repeatedly calls me back to him.

I have frequently been moved with the sense which both Vincent and Louise had of their own sinfulness. They repeatedly draw attention to their weaknesses and how it is due to their faults that the Company and the Congregation are in the sorry condition which it sometimes was. They blame their own bad example for the failure of their followers and they seek God’s forgiveness. They knew of God’s willingness to forgive and his repeated call to sinners to return to his infinite

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goodness. The utter dependence upon God's love characterized their sense of the mission and ministry of Jesus as well as their own calling. It is a lesson which angels can help to teach us when we are willing to open our minds and hearts to see and hear with faith.

THE WOMAN IN THE MOTHERHOUSE WITH A DOLL: OPENNESS AND JUDGMENT

I was in my office one day when I decided to go to the Tribune above the Chapel for some quiet reflection and to watch the pilgrims. On this particular day, a woman arrived and walked up the center aisle to kneel at the altar rail. She had a shopping bag with her. As she knelt down, she opened the bag and took out a doll. Then she held the doll in her arms as she knelt there and prayed. As I watched this whole scene develop, I thought to myself that this woman must have some kind of mental illness and dismissed the whole happening. Later in the day, however, the vision of that woman returned to me. I began to feel guilty. I had presumed that this woman was imbalanced in some way. It seemed to me that I had no right to judge this person. I had no idea what the doll meant to her, or whose it was, or how it helped her in her dealing with the Lord. It was not my place to make assumptions about what was right or wrong for her. Her relationship to the Lord is probably a lot better than mine, and God loves her with her doll. Was this another angel teaching me about the differences among people and about my need to accept people in the way that they have developed? Perhaps. It is clear to me that I need to continue to develop an openness to the experiences of people and to allow them to worship and approach God in the way which is most helpful for them. It is also clear to me that I need to stop thinking that I am the norm by which the actions of other people must be judged. My role is to help others to grow in their faith and not to make their faith conform to my own.

I do not know if all these stories contain angels. All I know is that the characters in the stories carried out the function of angels: they brought me a message from God about living virtuously or doing things differently or thinking less about myself. Their actions helped me think about my faith. Some of these stories would teach me about God and some about myself and some about the ways of human

beings. **Porta Fidei** reminds us: "Only through believing, then, does faith grow and become stronger." (PF 7)

II. BIBLICAL STORIES ABOUT ANGELS

The Bible, of course, has a number of stories in which angels play a part. They tell us something about the character of angels and their role in creation. This is especially true in terms of their relation to us.

In the Old Testament, we probably remember the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel (Gen 32), or Abraham and Sarah entertaining angels (Gen 18:11), or the angel of death striking down the firstborn of Egypt (Exodus 12).

In the New Testament, we undoubtedly recall Gabriel with Zechariah (Lk 1:5-25) and with Mary (Lk 1:28); Joseph, of course, has the angel who visits him in his dreams (Mt 1:20-24; 2:13, 19-21).

I would like to highlight several other angels who are (at least initially) less evident: Raphael with Tobit and his son Tobias and Sarah; the angels who speak to Mary Magdalene from the tomb of Jesus (Jn 20:11-13); and the angel who leads Peter out of prison (Acts 12:3ff).

THE STORY OF TOBIT

Two people whose lives have become unbearable (Tobit and Sarah) pray for death. Rather than answering their prayers in the way which they expect, the Lord God sends the archangel Raphael to bring healing into their lives. In ways unknown to all the characters, Raphael straightens out the complicated situation, enables a happy marriage, and restores sight to Tobit. God chooses to use his angel to make matters conform to his divine will, and only reveals the angelic intervention at the very end. The story suggests the ways in which God is involved quietly in the lives of his people through the ministry of angels.

THE STORY OF MARY MAGDALEN

We find Mary Magdalen weeping at the tomb of Jesus. Now, she does

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not know where the body of Jesus has been placed. When she looks into the tomb and spies the angels, the incongruity does not occur to her. She is too busy with her own grief to recognize the angelic messengers.

But Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping. And as she wept, she bent over into the tomb and saw two angels in white sitting there, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been. And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken my Lord, and I don't know where they laid him." (Jn 20:11-13)

Mary's tears prevent her from seeing the marvel right there in front of her. It is a vision of angels, but her mind is elsewhere and she does not see them for what they are. It is not until she encounters the resurrected Lord that she begins to be able to see and understand more clearly.

Sometimes, angels are present in our lives and we do not recognize them. They ask us questions and invite us to think of things a little differently. They can challenge the restrictions of our faith vision.

THE STORY OF PETER IN PRISON

Peter has been locked up and awaits punishment when he has an angelic visitor:

"Peter thus was being kept in prison, but prayer by the church was fervently being made to God on his behalf. On the very night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter, secured by double chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while outside the door guards kept watch on the prison. Suddenly the angel of the Lord stood by him and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and awakened him, saying, "Get up quickly." The chains fell from his wrists. The angel said to him, "Put on your belt and your sandals." He did so. Then he said to him, "Put on your cloak and follow me." So he followed him out, not realizing that what was happening through the angel was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first guard, then the second, and came to the iron gate leading out to the city,

which opened for them by itself. They emerged and made their way down an alley, and suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter recovered his senses and said, "Now I know for certain that [the] Lord sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people had been expecting." (Acts 20:5-11)

The prayer of the community brings about the rescue and God sends his angel. It is marvelous to consider how God chooses to act in this way and one wonders how often God does act and without our recognizing it. We need to open our eyes and stop dreaming.

III. BEING AN ANGEL

Have you noticed in the stories which surround the births of Jesus and John the Baptist, there are three stories about angels. There is the story of Zechariah in which he encounters an angel of the Lord in the Temple and he is told that he will be the father of John the Baptist. There is, of course, the visit of Gabriel to Mary asking her to be the mother of Jesus. And finally, there is the story of the visions which Joseph receives in a dream in which an angel tells him to take Mary as his wife. Thus, three people, three stories, three angels. But, have you noted that Elizabeth does not have the blessing of one of these angelic visitors? Unless, of course, we think of Mary and the way in which she carries out the role of an angel.

Have you ever been called an angel? Have you ever called anyone else an angel? Let me go out on a limb and say that we have all experienced both of these situations. Children are easily and frequently described as angels. Their beauty, their innocence, their gentleness, their openness, their goodness, all suggest to us qualities which one might expect in an angel, and thus they reveal something of the ways of God to us which is the task of an angel. Sometimes, we recognize these qualities in one another—in adults—and we see the hint of an angel. When we are at our best, we may even manifest those qualities ourselves. (Did Vincent see these in Marguerite Naseau?)

It is all about allowing the truth that we are made in the image and likeness of God to be revealed. Angels reveal the truth about God and the divine nature for us, and thus give us a hint of that part of our

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own nature which was born on the breath of God from Creation. It is a natural role for other human beings to play the part of an angel in some of the dramas which take place around us. It is natural for us to take the role of an angel in the lives of others. In our virtue, they can see the love and care of our God who chooses to act through us. In choosing to take care of one another, we sometimes are “entertaining angels” as the Book of Hebrews suggests: “*Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.*” (Heb 13:1-2)

CONCLUSION

In this “year of faith,” we are encouraged to come to a deeper understanding of our faith and to find ways to more deeply express what we truly believe. Recognizing the abiding presence of God in our world is one of the ways in which we can come to a deeper appreciation of our faith. God is alive and active in our world and demonstrates that presence and guidance to us in numerous ways. We might sense this as the presence of angels among us. We might also recognize the ways in which we can express that which is best in our faith—our generosity, patience, forgiveness, and so on. These gifts could be signs of angels among us for others. It is a year of faith; angels are part of that faith; let us look for them, minister to them, and represent them in our world. As we continue this year of faith, let us be and see angels.

Father Patrick Griffin, C.M.
Director General

Letter of February 2, 2013

Dear Sisters,

The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us forever!

Thank you for your prayers that, I know, accompanied me when I was received by our Superior General to present to him, according to our beautiful tradition, our request for the Renovation, our desire to continue our commitment in the Company in the service of Christ in those who are poor.

I explained to him that we were well aware of our lack of consistency, but that we had faith in the Lord’s mercy and the strength of the Spirit. Father Gregory, who, during his numerous trips, had the opportunity to visit many of your local communities last year, shared with me how much he admired our concern for the most destitute and our obvious joy serving them; he brought up our plans for reconfiguration and for new implantations, the difficulties and challenges that we are encountering. At the end of our conversation, he assured me of his prayer for each of us.

He grants us permission to renew our vows April 8, the Feast of the Annunciation. With you, I give thanks to the Lord and ask Him to help us, through the intercession of Mary, the humble and simple servant, to make the two months before this feast a serene and fervent preparation for our Renovation.

*“The Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name!
His faithful love extends age after age to those who fear him...
He has routed the arrogant of heart...and raised high the lowly.”¹*

1. Lk 1: 49-52

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This year I would like to invite you to reflect on humility and simplicity. It is a matter of following up on last year's letter on charity and looking together at how we live these *solid virtues* Saint Vincent and Saint Louise bequeathed to us; as in previous years, the Inter-Assemblies Document will be present in our process, this time especially the third appeal: "Serve by 'coming and going' with courage and creativity to manifest God's love to persons living in poverty." (cf. Light of Pentecost of Saint Louise, Spiritual Writings, p. 1)²

The values of humility and simplicity are dear to the Company, and I am sure several citations of Saint Vincent spontaneously come to mind. For example: "*the great sign by which you may know if a Daughter of Charity is a true Daughter of Charity is that she's humble*"³; "*God has given me such a high esteem of simplicity that I call it my Gospel.*"⁴ We also know that Saint Louise always signed her letters to Monsieur Vincent "*Your very humble daughter and most grateful servant*" and that she very often advised the Sisters to humble themselves before the Ladies, administrators, the parish pastor, etc.

However, in a nearly universal way, our societies are immersed, even bogged down, in a media culture that promotes the cult of appearances and success, privileges the superficial and the spectacular in news broadcasts and entertainment, and is ready to easily ridicule "genuine goodness".

Let us also confess that we run the risk of being influenced by this invasive media environment.

Nonetheless, humility and simplicity underlie many of the aspirations expressed by our contemporaries, sensitive to values such as gratuitousness, trust, responsibility, solidarity, justice and peace.

2. Inter-Assemblies Document, p. 13

3. Saint Vincent, Conference of July 14, 1658, Coste X, p. 423

4. Saint Vincent, Conference on the Spirit of the Company of February 24, 1953, Coste IX, p. 476

I see here a new appeal for us to live deeply our solid virtues, to deepen them, to give witness to them in our interpersonal relationships and our stands in order to become sacraments of the presence of Christ on our roads of Galilee: "*We approach this world with humility, but also with determination. This comes from the certainty that the truth triumphs in the end. We choose to see in the world the Risen Christ's invitation to witness to his Name.*"⁵

The Constitutions describe the three virtues that shape our way of being and our lifestyle in an attractive and rewarding manner; these are the signs that allow recognition of real Daughters of Charity and are the pillars that support the Company:

"*As long as charity, humility, and simplicity exist among you, one may say, 'The Company of Charity is still alive.'*"⁶

Let us then see how humility and simplicity color, on the one hand, our way of being and, on the other hand, our style of serving.

I. The spirit of the Company: a way of being

The Daughters of Charity allow themselves to be led by the Spirit by the path of humility, simplicity and charity.

These three virtues that make up our spirit are intimately connected to one other: "*It's God's Will that the Daughters of Charity devote themselves particularly to the practice of humility, charity, and simplicity.*"⁷

The vocation to which we have been called has as its center Christ, our rule of life,⁸ and it is by the Holy Spirit, the interior Teacher, that we become like Christ. Those who are guided by the Spirit of God become children of God.⁹ Becoming like Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit if we allow ourselves to be led by it.

5. Message of the Synod on the New Evangelization, n. 6

6. Saint Vincent, Conference of February 9, 1653, Coste IX, p. 467

7. Saint Vincent, Conference of February 9, 1653, Coste IX, p. 469

8. Cf. Constitution 8a

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The path by which the Holy Spirit leads us, as the Constitutions indicate, is that of the virtues of humility, simplicity and charity.¹⁰

*“When we say that the Holy Spirit is at work in someone, it means that this Spirit, residing in that person, gives him or her the same inclinations and dispositions Jesus Christ had on earth, and they cause the person to act in the same way – I’m not saying with equal perfection, but according to the measure of the gifts of that Divine Spirit.”*¹¹

The humility of the Son of God

Our Founders held humility in great esteem, they lived it, and they knew how to inculcate it in the Sisters because Christ Himself, they said, practiced it and recommended it. *“Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all.”*¹² *“Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart.”*¹³

Saint Vincent spoke insistently about the need for humility that *“brings all the other virtues to the soul”*¹⁴ and *“is the origin of all the good we do.”*¹⁵ Humility prompts us to be aware of gifts received from God, be grateful for them and place them at the service of others; humility leads us to acknowledge our own limitations and our need for conversion; it keeps us *“close and available to [our] Sisters and to those who are poor, in an attitude of servant.”*¹⁶

Contemplation of Jesus Christ moves Saint Louise to love humility like He did. The notes she writes during her retreats demonstrate her intention to enter on this arduous path that leads her to live faithfully because *“pride and all its effects are great obstacles to the action and*

9. Cf. Rom 8: 14

10. Cf. Constitution 13

11. Saint Vincent, Coste XII, p. 93

12. Mk 10: 43-44

13. Mt 11: 29

14. Saint Vincent, Conference of April 18, 1659, Coste XII, p. 172

15. Saint Vincent, Conference of March 15, 1654, Coste IX, p. 530

16. Constitution 18a

*plan of God in the soul.”*¹⁷

Humility is an essential value for relationships; it is the expression of balance and maturity. This virtue is far from arrogance, self-satisfaction as well as self-depreciation. Indeed, ostentatious humility is a form of hidden pride that takes pleasure in underestimating oneself and makes one unable to use talents received, as in the Gospel parable.

We could speak about God’s humility. God Himself is infinitely humble because He keeps nothing for Himself; He is only Love, only gift.

Humility and simplicity, foundations of the Company

When, during the Council of the Company on April 27, 1656, Saint Vincent asserts that the Company should love contempt, Saint Louise asks Saint Vincent to recommend concrete means to acquire the virtue of humility. His response is impressive in its clarity: *“The art of loving God is to love Him; likewise, the art of acquiring humility is to humble ourselves, and the more we advance in this practice, the more we will resemble Our Lord. Yes, Sisters, it’s certain that the more we’re poor, humble, and scorned, the closer we will resemble the Son of God...”*¹⁸ The conversation continues, and Mademoiselle mentions repairs to be undertaken in the Sisters’ house, but she emphasizes that they should avoid any appearance of luxury (she even says that she would like to use blackened stones...); Saint Vincent responds to her by saying, *“I want the Company to be established on this foundation of humility and to be conformed as closely as possible to the manner of life of the Son of God. Now, I greatly fear that if you were to have a beautiful house, it might attract upper class people, and that would be objectionable.”*¹⁹

17. Saint Louise, Spiritual Writings, A. 5, p. 714

18. Saint Vincent, Coste XIIIb, p. 341

19. Ibid. p. 342

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In this colorful account, I read a little invitation to be attentive to the simplicity of our lifestyle as the Instruction on the Vows advises us: *this simplicity is manifested in the way we speak and dress, our conduct and relationships, and celebrations and feasts.*²⁰

Simplicity, purity of heart

Simplicity is at the heart of the Gospel message. The mystery of the Kingdom is not accessible to human wisdom; it is revealed to simple and humble people, receptive to God's gifts: *"I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children."*²¹

At the time of our Founders, like today, fraud and corruption were common: *"... the world is awash in duplicity. Today we hardly see anyone who says what he thinks; the world is so corrupt that all we see everywhere is artifice and deceit."*²² Saint Louise encouraged the Sisters to deepen the virtues of their spirit, to live and speak in truth and simplicity with no other intention than pleasing God. *"... [W]hat can sisters,"* she writes to Sister Nicole Haran, *"who have given themselves to God, desire but to seek all the assistance possible to be faithful to Him."*²³

The Constitutions perfectly capture the thought of the Founders on simplicity, a path that leads them directly to God and helps them to seek the truth, to defend it in situations of injustice and to act in authentic and consistent ways.²⁴

Simplicity and truth facilitate interpersonal relationships

A person who lives simplicity is straightforward, is without guile and shares frankly what he or she thinks. Lack of transparency makes real human encounter difficult and stifles the atmosphere of the local

20. Cf. Instruction on the Vows of the Daughters of Charity, p. 118

21. Mt 11: 25.

22. Saint Vincent, Conference of August 22, 1659, Coste XII, p. 246

23. Saint Louise, To my very dear Sister Nicole Haran, L. 640, Spiritual Writings, p. 658

24. Cf. C. 18b

community. However, simplicity cannot be confused with a way of speaking or acting without discernment, without discretion and without the sensitivity to know how to say things at the opportune moment.

In a society where truth is manipulated and disfigured, living the truth is a prophetic message. To educate to the truth and to help discover it is a great responsibility in this age. As the Holy Father Benedict XVI asserts, *"We must be aware that the truth which we long to share does not derive its worth from its 'popularity' or from the amount of attention it receives. We must make it known in its integrity, instead of seeking to make it acceptable or diluting it. It must become daily nourishment and not a fleeting attraction."*²⁵

Truth makes people free,²⁶ free from the traps of lies and attachments that tie us down. Simple and authentic Daughters of Charity give an invaluable witness. It could be said of them: doubly blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God and, through them, God will make Himself seen.

II. The spirit of the Company: its own style of serving

The Founders learned from Jesus Christ to come near to those who are poor and to serve them with His own attitudes and feelings. The words and the actions of Our Lord, His humility, His gentleness, His compassion, His mercy toward the little ones, the sick and the marginalized in society, and His dialogue with the excluded and sinners challenged them deeply. It is the Master who teaches with His life: *"You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet."*²⁷

The lives of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, their writings and their words motivate and encourage to live service of those who are poor in an attitude of servant, following the example of Christ the servant.

25. Benedict XVI, Message for the 45th World Communications Day, June 5, 2011

26. Cf. Jn 8: 32

27. Jn 13: 13

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The Master's way of thinking and acting inspires and shapes the way of being and acting of a Daughter of Charity, servant.

Let us reread the passage in the first chapter of our Rules that presents the end of the Company. It magnificently summarizes the Vincentian mystique of service: to honor our Lord Jesus Christ, to serve Him in the person of the poor in an evangelical spirit of humility, simplicity and charity.²⁸ To honor Christ is to love Him, praise and glorify Him, and live from His spirit. To serve Him is to remain available, attentive, listening, to be totally His and no longer belong to oneself.

Service, vision of faith and concrete expression of love

Thus, service is the expression of the total gift to God in the Company. It is, at the same time, a vision of faith and the concrete expression of love.²⁹ If the faith perspective weakens, service is indistinguishable from social volunteerism, like that of people who give their time to others for humanitarian reasons. *"Faith without charity bears no fruit, while charity without faith would be a sentiment constantly at the mercy of doubt. Faith and charity each require the other, in such a way that each allows the other to set out along its respective path."*³⁰

Saint Louise will say to the Sisters in Angers, who experienced some difficulties in their service of the poor: *"If we deviate in the slightest from the conviction that they are the members of Jesus Christ, it will infallibly lead to the weakening of these beautiful virtues in us."*³¹

The service of those who are poor entails a relationship and culminates in an encounter. Every encounter, as we know, brings something significant to the people who live it; it is an exchange of gifts, and we do not know who receives more. The summit of the mystique of service is the identification of Christ in those who are poor: *"I was hungry and you gave me to eat..."*³²

28. Cf. Rules of the Daughters of Charity, 1,1

29. Cf. C. 16b

30. Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter Porta Fidei, n° 14.

31. Saint Louise. Spiritual Writings, L. 104 bis, p. 113

32. Mt 25: 35

Both Saint Vincent and Saint Louise were certain that serving those who are poor was serving Jesus Christ: *"Servants of the Poor is the same as saying Servants of Jesus Christ."*³³ Thus, we cannot give up this "privileged encounter." No one can live this reality for us. This is why we can say that charity cannot be delegated.³⁴

The servant attitude of the Daughter of Charity is the expression of her *belonging to those who are poor* and her privileged relationship with them, in a joyful dependency, unconditionally. The Daughter of Charity joyfully lives her condition as a servant; she is convinced she serves Christ in the person of the poor.

The Founders instilled in the Sisters the appropriate attitudes of the servant of the poor, and they liked to remind the Sisters of them when they were going to be sent on mission: *"...you're destined to represent the Goodness of God to those poor people... the sick poor should be treated as this same Goodness teaches you, that is, with gentleness, compassion, and love; for they are your masters."*³⁵

The soul of service is the interior life

Saint Vincent and Saint Louise strongly emphasized an essential aspect: the Daughters of Charity unite corporal and spiritual service, helping those who are poor to have a personal experience of God's love.

Openness is an expression of love, which is why Saint Louise advised the Sisters to be kind with the sick, to try to know their needs, to listen to them patiently and to let themselves be taught by them. You must, she would often say to the Sisters sent to serve the poor galley slaves, *"...treat them with great compassion,"*³⁶ in order to help them find, within their adversity, the strength to change their lives.

33. Saint Vincent, Conference of May 30, 1947, Coste IX, p. 256.

34. Cf. Deus Caritas est, 25

35. Saint Vincent, Conference of November 11, 1657; Service of the sick and care of one's own health, Coste X, p. 268

36. Sainte Louise, A. 91, Spiritual Writings, p. 741

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The Constitutions offer us concrete means like apostolic reflection and examining our life to reread deeply and truthfully how we carry out our service and our attitudes towards those who are poor, collaborators and volunteers. Let us ask ourselves if we evangelize by our lives and our service or if instead we serve those who are poor in a rush, like busy, agitated “Marthas,” victims of activism that scatters and leads to a superficial life. We cannot forget that the driving force of service, its soul, is prayer life, the interior life. “... [T]heir relationship with God and their life in common continually revitalize their apostolic commitment.”³⁷

On this subject, the letter Saint Louise wrote to Sister Jeanne Delacroix, in Châteaudun, on February 2, 1660, is very revealing. Saint Louise was concerned because the Sisters, overwhelmed by the needs of the poor, risked falling into activism: “*I am sure that you are very busy and also that you take great care to help our sisters to strive for holiness; nevertheless, I beg you to send me news of yourselves. Above all, let me know if, while they are occupied with exterior service, the sisters’ minds are directed toward vigilance over themselves, for the love of Our Lord... You realize that, without this, external actions, although they are for the service of the poor, cannot be very pleasing to God, nor can they merit a recompense for us because they are not united to those of Jesus Christ.*”³⁸

Humility and simplicity, with charity, facilitate collaboration and participation in networks that increase possibilities to serve those who are poor, often with the Vincentian Family. Our style of serving entails collaboration with others, according to the very example of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. This was well stated in our Inter-Assemblies Document that invites us to collaborate “*with associations and organizations working to combat the root causes of poverty, in order to promote justice, peace and respect for life.*”³⁹

Service, coming and going

37. Constitution 16b

38. Saint Louise, L. 656. Spiritual Writings, p. 678

39. Inter-Assemblies Document, p. 24

The servant of the poor, impelled by the charity of Christ, brings together affective and effective love, lives in constant availability to serve those who are poor “coming and going” everywhere, in order to respond with audacity and creativity to the most urgent calls. The Company has been able to deploy creativity in charity throughout its history, in high-risk missions, in the vanguard of a charity without borders.

Today, I would like to encourage you to continue to develop missionary priority plans in your Provinces, to discern how to respond to the most urgent situations and to go forward with the revision of works and ministries.⁴⁰

The service of those who are poor requires mobility and shifting, not only location, but also ways of acting to be able to discern the calls received and to confront “*the challenges of the new forms of poverty exacerbated by the global crisis and dare to take prophetic stances against injustice.*”⁴¹

The Renovation, a dynamism to deepen our gift on a daily basis

The grace of the Renovation of our vows helps us to keep alive the love of our vocation, the fire of the charism, and fidelity to commitments made at the time of our admission into the Company. In this Year of Faith, I would like to encourage you to prepare for the Renovation, and to live it, by deepening the gift of faith, “*a gift to rediscover, to cultivate and to bear witness to.*”⁴²

Each Renovation assumes an advance in the total gift of self to God for the service of those who are poor. Saint Louise liked to say that the Renovation is an opportunity to make a new offering of freedom.⁴³ For his part, Saint Vincent recalled its meaning: to witness to God that you are happy to have given yourself entirely to Him forever.⁴⁴

40. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document, p. 23

41. Inter-Assemblies Document, p. 13

42. Note with pastoral recommendations for the Year of Faith

43. Cf. Saint Louise; L. 300, Spiritual Writings, p. 346

44. Cf. Saint Vincent, To Sister Françoise Ménage, Coste VII, p. 471

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The virtues of humility, simplicity and charity impregnate and shape our vows. That of service of those who are poor is the specific vow,⁴⁵ directly attached to our identity and to the end of the Company of the Daughters of Charity in the Church. The three other vows, as we well know, are colored by the first. Our chastity, our poverty and our obedience carry the characteristic mark of the servant vocation, with the traits that make up its spirit: humility, simplicity and charity.

Simplicity draws us to seek God and His Kingdom, with complete openness of heart and joyful obedience. Following the example of Christ, the Adorer of the Father, let us live obedience by the path of simplicity.

Humility leads us to recognize our radical poverty in relation to God and underpins our condition as servants of those who are poor, “our Lords and Masters.” Following the example of Christ the Servant, let us live poverty by the path of humility.

Charity pushes us to enter into the space of chastity, love and offering of self, which frees us from every attachment and leaves us available to welcome and serve those who are poor. Following the example of Christ the Evangelizer, let us live chastity by the path of charity.

Conclusion

The Inter-Assemblies Document invites us to serve “by ‘coming and going’ with courage and creativity to manifest God’s love to persons living in poverty.”⁴⁶

Serve by coming and going, aware that we are sent on mission until the end of our lives, available, in an attitude of servant, offering our time with joy, generosity and in unconditional ways,⁴⁷ whatever our age.

Serve by coming and going, enlarging the missionary horizon of our local communities and our Provinces, whether by taking on new commitments for the good of those who are poor or by renewing our

45. Cf. Constitution 24a

46. Inter-Assemblies Document, pages 13 and 23

47. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document, p. 13

presence where the most abandoned are, knowing that the Lord awaits us there.

Serve by coming and going, on the highways of the world where the sorrowful mysteries are lived, in communion with the Church and suffering humanity, carrying out the pastoral work of prayer and offering, the ministry of accompaniment and listening, and bearing witness to joy and hope.

Serve by coming and going, wanting to share the living conditions and the precariousness of the most destitute in society, manifesting God’s love to those who are poor, open to receiving from them and allowing ourselves to be evangelized by them,⁴⁸ wherever we have been sent by the Company.

Let us entrust ourselves to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, “*the humble, faithful Servant of the Father’s plan, and model of the poor in spirit.*”⁴⁹ She supports us and accompanies us on the path of fidelity to our condition as servants of Christ in persons who are poor, in humility, simplicity and charity.

It is a joy to conclude this letter by thanking in your name Father Quintano, whom we often call upon for formation, Father Javier, who continues to help us with his prayer, and Father Patrick, for his spiritual and Vincentian animation and his availability vis-à-vis the General Council, the Provinces and each Sister. To Father Gregory, I renewed our desire for fidelity; I assured him of our daily prayer and thanked him for the warm encouragement that he lavishes upon us so regularly.

With warm and respectful gratitude, I also greet Father McCullen, Father Maloney, Mother Duzan and Mother Elizondo, whose prayerful support is invaluable to us.

With my affectionate devotion and assurance of my prayer,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

48. Cf. Constitution 24b

49. Constitution 15b

“An Undivided Heart”: Hope and Encouragement

Our Inter-Assemblies Document has the title: “Open to the Transforming Spirit—Wellspring of Prophecy and Hope.” We talked about “prophecy” as this gift of the Spirit; now, I want to turn our attention towards “hope,” another precious gift of the Spirit of God and one that is characteristic of an undivided heart.

We must be hope-filled people. Vincent has something to say in this regard:

“Note that, if there were any gloomy persons—and there are some in the Company—who do harm where they are . . . I fear that, in the end, they may cause the Company to perish.” (SVdP, “Mutual Charity and the Duty of Reconciliation,” #93. March 4, 1658. Coste X, p. 370)

That kind of person sucks the life out of a group like no other individual. There is the kind of person who always sees the worst side of things and has no confidence in the goodness of people. Let us reflect upon the nature and blessing of hope, and we can begin by speaking about a necessary component of hope: encouragement.

I. BARNABAS: HOPE AND THE MINISTRY OF ENCOURAGEMENT

When Barnabas is first introduced in the Acts of the Apostles, we are told the meaning of his name. “Barnabas” means “son of encouragement.” And that is the key to his personality. Barnabas is characterized by his ministry of “encouragement.” Every time that he is mentioned, he offers support and strength to the situation. The Acts of the Apostles tells us how the members of the earliest Christian Community provide for the needs of one another:

The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. With great power the Apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them all. There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the Apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need. Thus Joseph, also named by the Apostles Barnabas (which is translated “A son of encouragement”), a Levite, a Cypriot by birth, sold a piece of property that he owned, then brought the money and laid it at the feet of the Apostles. (Acts 4:32-37)

Barnabas is thus singled out as a man who sold what was his own and provided the resources for the needs of the community. He was the kind of person who would be the first to provide a witness for the rest of the early Church. His example of generosity makes it easier for other people to think about acting in the same way.

The next time that we hear about Barnabas in the Acts of the Apostles is after the story of the Conversion of Paul has been told for the first time. When the changed Paul arrives back in Jerusalem after his experience, the Christian community is fearful of this man who had persecuted them so severely.

“Then Barnabas took charge of him [Paul] and brought him to the apostles, and [Paul] reported to them how on the way he had seen the Lord and that he had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.” (Acts 9:27)

It is due to Barnabas that Paul is introduced to the Christian Community. He gives the community the courage to welcome Paul and allow him to become a member of this Church. He “encourages” them and Paul remains there some short time before returning to his home.

Two chapters later, the Church in Jerusalem gets word that the Christian Church in Antioch was beginning to grow. The disciples in Jerusalem want to send someone to learn about this situation and support this growth. Who do they send? Why Barnabas, of course, to help nourish the seed of faith in this new field. When he gets to Antioch, he knows

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that this is too much for him. So, he goes to Tarsus and finds Paul and encourages him to come to Antioch to preach the Gospel (Acts 11:22-25). Paul does that, and it is soon clear that he is a star.

When the Church of Antioch decides that they want to send missionaries forward to proclaim the Gospel in the gentile world, they choose Barnabas and Paul. Now, more and more, Paul emerges as the dominant force in proclaiming the Gospel in the gentile world, and one can discern the hand of Barnabas in this progress. He knows how to encourage people—even the great Paul.

When there is a disagreement between Paul and John Mark, these two separate. From Paul's point-of-view, John Mark lacked courage on the missionary journey. Paul teams up with Silas. Barnabas, of course, goes with John Mark, who needs encouragement. Tradition identifies this disciple as the one who becomes the evangelist Mark. It looks like Barnabas was successful in this case.

Barnabas was a person who knew how to bring the best out in others. He did not need to hold the center of the stage. He was content to help another to take that place. That is a special grace and really needed in any community. This is the kind of person who makes hope flourish. People who can give encouragement to others are a special blessing. When we speak about Barnabas as being a “son of encouragement,” we can also begin to think of ourselves as “daughters of encouragement.” We are called to bring hope to our world, to our people, and especially to our Sisters.

Louise's letters are filled with words of encouragement. She continually tells the Sisters about their possibilities and the gifts that they bring to one another.

- “*Encourage one another, and may your mutual good example speak louder than any words.*” (LdM, Spiritual Writings, L. 402. p. 450)
- “*Renew then, my very dear Sisters, your first fervor. Begin with a true desire to please God, recalling that his Providence has brought you to the place where you are established and has united you so that*

you can help one another to grow in perfection.” (LdM, Spiritual Writings, L. 104b. p. 113)

- “*You are well aware of her [your sister's] virtue which will continue to grow because of the good example of yours, which I beg our Lord to increase more and more.*” (LdM, Spiritual Writings, L. 515. p. 543)
- “*If humility, simplicity and charity, which produce support, are well established among you, your little Company will be made up of as many saints as there are persons. We must not wait, however, for someone else to begin. If it can be said that these holy practices are not universally in use, let each of us be the first to start.*” (LdM, Spiritual Writings, L. 505. p. 532)
- “*I imagine that you are vying with one another both in your efforts to work for your interior perfection and in your service of the sick poor, whom I believe you deeply love.*” (LdM, Spiritual Writings, L. 548. p. 573)

Sometimes, her encouragement even took on a tongue-in-cheek character: “*You can expect a good scolding if I do not find you a real saint.*” (LdM, Spiritual Writings, L. 156. p. 170) Louise wrote many things to her sisters and was often very direct in telling them what to do, but her love for them was clear and her desire to move them towards perfection was always evident. However much she pondered the value of suffering and her own sinfulness, she was nonetheless a real woman of hope and worked to sustain that hope in others, particularly her sisters. She offers us a wonderful example for being people of hope and women who know how to encourage and support one another as sisters.

Our *Constitutions* speak of this value with clarity:

“In simplicity and humility, the sisters help one another to advance towards the Lord. Their desire for conversion is given concrete expression in regular community reviews, spiritual charity and mutual correction, lived in an atmosphere of truth and charity.” (C. 32b)

II. MARY: HOPE AND THE GOD OF WONDER

When I think of hope, I think of wonder, and I am reminded of one of my friends, Fr. Tom Davitt. I love to tell this story. When he and I lived together in Rome, he would ask me the same question every now and then: “Why were there dinosaurs?” This question seriously fascinated him. Dinosaurs existed millions of years before a human being ever walked the earth, and we only know about them from the literal bits and pieces which we put together in our museums. And so, no human being ever saw a dinosaur except as we imagine them today (with the help of some movie magic). Why, then, were there dinosaurs when there were no human beings to appreciate them—that was the heart of Tom’s question. Now, I will confess that this is a very anthropocentric world view—taking everything from the point-of-view of human beings. My answer for him was always the same: “God made dinosaurs so that we can wonder about them.” God wants us to wonder about things beyond our understanding and experience, to think marvelous thoughts about that which is greater than ourselves.

The character of our universe is such that there are objects and realities which are out there or inside here that we will never be able to see, yet they exist. Our universe is unimaginably large and complex, as well as inconceivably tiny and complex. We will never see it all or resolve its mysteries. The greatness of our universe gives us a hint about the greatness of our God, and that gives us hope. Or, as we might express it from a more familiar biblical point-of-view, nothing is impossible with God.

That, of course, is the assurance which is given to Mary at the Annunciation. After being asked to be the Mother of the Lord through the action of the Holy Spirit, she is told that the aged Elizabeth is pregnant for “nothing is impossible with God.” Nothing hinders God from carrying out the divine will and being faithful to the promises which God has made to God’s people. Mary’s trust and belief in this wondrous God-who-acts enables her to say “yes” to whatever God asks in her life, and she believes that God will make all things happen for the good. The God in whom she trusts and in whom she has placed her hope is the God of life.

When we pray the Magnificat, we capture that sense of hope and wonder which filled Mary at the working of God in her life. The praise of God wells up within her and she pours forth her psalm of God’s greatness:

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” (Lk 1:46-49)

Louise echoes a similar sentiment:

“May our love for God lead us to discover his glory and to sing his praise. Let us rejoice in his greatness, in all that He is in Himself praising and loving his attributes . . .” (LdM, Spiritual Writings, A. 15. p. 713-714)

Indeed, nothing is impossible for God and that truth gives Mary and Louise, and us, hope. Our Inter Assemblies Document expresses for us the importance of hope:

“We are witnesses of the Spirit at work, releasing new energy . . . May the Spirit come to quench our thirst, and to satiate our longing for truth and consistency so that we may be bearers of hope in this world. . . . Let us allow the Spirit to touch us, the Spirit who wants to make all things new and who, today, wishes to renew the very depths of our hearts and heal our wounds and those of all humanity.” (IAD p. 6-8)

No matter how difficult matters may appear or how impossible solutions may seem, we are called to be bearers of hope. God makes all things new and accomplishes the divine will through our hands and efforts. Once again, we call upon the gift of the Spirit to lead us and strengthen us in this effort. *Vita Consecrata* picks up this call:

By their charisms, consecrated persons become signs of the Spirit pointing to a new future enlightened by faith and by Christian hope. Eschatological expectation becomes mission, so that the Kingdom may become ever more fully established here and now. (VC 27)

An Undivided Heart: Hope and Encouragement

As we await the fulfillment of God's promises, we act here and now for the establishment of the Kingdom by our commitment to the Christian values of generosity and patience and justice and peace. We are invited to be people of undivided hearts who are filled with wonder at our God who calls us to hope in him and trust in his providence.

III. JESUS: HOPE AND THE GOD OF LIFE

There is an old Chinese expression which says: "Where there is life, there is hope." Our God is a God of life. He brings all things into existence. He gives life to the People of Israel at the Red Sea and in the desert. When he gives the commandments, he invites the people to choose life. In the womb of Mary, he brings life itself into the world which is proclaimed so strongly through the Prologue of John's Gospel. The ministry of Jesus brings words of life and his healing restores life. He came that we might have life and have it more abundantly (Jn 10:10). He repeatedly speaks about himself as "the resurrection and the life," "the way, the truth and the life," "the bread of life," and so on. The greatest sign of the triumph of life is his Resurrection from the dead. Our God is a God of life; in that truth, we are given hope.

In following the footsteps of Jesus, we bring life to the world and, in particular, to those places where death exercises its power through sickness and ignorance and violence. Our call is to witness to life by the celebration of unborn human life and our reverence for human life in the last days of its earthly dwelling. Promoting the dignity of persons is a celebration of life and a valuing of all human life without favoritism.

Clearly, for many people in our world, there are significant difficulties which make the future seem dim. These people are stripped of their rights or are without the means to support themselves.

"Those who vigilantly await the fulfillment of Christ's promises are able to bring hope to their brothers and sisters who are often discouraged and pessimistic about the future. Theirs is a hope founded on God's promise contained in the revealed word." (VC 27)

Those of us who embrace the consecrated life are men and women of hope. We hear and believe the word which God has spoken to us and we look to the future with a joy-filled expectation and hope. We work to establish a better future through the sharing of our resources and the giving of our lives in compassionate and loving service.

To be a hope-filled people is to be a people who depend upon and trust in divine providence. What relationship was more frequently spoken about by our holy founders than dependence upon divine providence? It is a trust and belief in the future and the plan which belongs to God. This notion is frequently reflected in our Scripture.

Isaiah (55:9) reminds us "*as high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts*". Psalm 23 encourages us: "*My shepherd is the Lord, there is nothing I shall want; fresh and green are the pathways where he gives me repose.*" Paul writes to the Romans (8:28): "*We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose,*" and to the Corinthians: "*I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth*" (1 Cor 3:6).

Thus we are called to be hope-filled people with a trust in God's providence and the life which he sustains. Louise offers this encouragement:

"We continue to hope that His [God's] grace will enable us to make better use of the present [year]. He will not fail us, my dear sisters; let us be careful not to fail Him by not corresponding fully to His holy will." (LdM, Spiritual Writings, L. 391. p. 440)

IV. CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR HOPE

If I were to invite you to share some of the characteristics of your hope, to what elements would you point? Encouragement? A sense of wonder? Commitment to life? I would like to add two others:

Joy

An Undivided Heart: Hope and Encouragement

Paul writes to the community in Rome: “*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit*” (Rom 15:13). Whatever problems or difficulties can present themselves in our lives and in our apostolates, in the end we know that God reigns and that God will establish his kingdom in our midst. With this confidence, our undivided hearts can overflow with anticipation and gladness.

Energy

Paul writes to his communities: “*Let us not grow tired of doing good, for in due time we shall reap our harvest, if we do not give up*” (Gal 6:9; cf. 2 Thess 3:13). If we have no sense of a future for which to strive, we do not feel inclined to expend any energy in bringing it about. Hope gives us energy and calls us to fidelity because it holds out to us the greatest of prizes: life forever with God.

The biblical symbols associated with hope stand forth for us with their symbolic meaning: a rock throughout the Old Testament, an anchor in the letter to the Hebrews, a helmet in Thessalonians. We can see hope in an infant or in a poor farmer who plants the seed with which he longs to fill his belly so that there will be a harvest next year. Our world is full of signs of hope, signs of strength, and we are called to commit ourselves in hope to the task of living out our Christian life with energy each day.

CONCLUSION

Are you a hope-filled person? In the first letter of Peter, we have its basis spelled out for us most simply: “*Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence.*” (1 Pet 3:15-16)

When we have recognized that Jesus is Lord in our life, all else fits together and we become a people of hope. When that is true, giving a reason for our hope flows more easily. It is always characterized by our willingness to be people who encourage others, who can wonder at the marvels which our God continues to do, and who support the

uplifting of human life. Our joy and the energy with which we take on our ministry are unfailing signs of our sense of God at work and our efforts to cooperate with divine providence in the changing of this world. Our hope rests in the center of our undivided heart which claims Jesus as Lord without compromise and forever.

Father Patrick Griffin, C.M.
Director General

Province of Peru

Sowers of hope among our people

C

Today's
Challenges

Since 1858, the Daughters of Charity have been serving the poor in Peru, all along the coast, in the mountains and in the primeval forest areas. They try to respond to the challenges that present themselves over the years: *“You have a vocation which obliges you to help, without discrimination, all sorts of persons: men, women, children, and, in general, every poor person who needs you.”*

Around the 1980s-1990s, the country was rocked by terrorism. Many villages in the Peruvian mountains, including the departments of Ayachucho, Huancavelica and Apurímas, saw their political and civil organization and their infrastructure totally destroyed. However, the inhabitants were even more affected on a psychological, moral and religious level. Following this horrible disaster, many children, young people and adults were plunged into deep sorrow, filled with vengeance, hatred and rancor towards those who were the cause of their suffering and who had destroyed their dreams and their families. Years passed, and today this generation has grown up and matured; many have married and have families. Older people still hold this pain in their hearts, and they pray that God will never allow what they once experienced to ever happen again.

According to the final report of the “Truth and Reconciliation” Commission, we need to work to heal these deep wounds that remain in the hearts of so

many of our brothers and sisters. We should give them much love, listening and understanding, show ourselves close to them and, most importantly, tell them that God loves them, and above all, that He is always with them and that He continues to accompany them.

On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of our Province, the Visitatrix, Sister Marina Melendez, and the Provincial Council urged us to be attentive to the situation in our country. The latest censuses of the Institute of Population Statistics (INEI) showed us that the department of Huancavelica is one of the poorest on the economic, social, cultural and religious levels. In the face of this reality, we asked ourselves what we should do for them...

After reflection, the Provincial Council decided to start an implantation in the Caja region, near the border; several local communities are already located in the Central Sierra of Peru. This region is extremely underdeveloped culturally, agriculturally, economically and socially. The people suffer from malnutrition and illiteracy and were badly affected by terrorism in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Caja region has ten rural communities, the most distant one being more than an hour and a half away by car.

From 2005 to 2007, we organized six missions in several stages over a period of two years. At the end of each mission, the team came to the same conclusion: a local community should be established because the poor needed us.

The Louise de Marillac Community has been in existence for five years. One of their goals is to welcome the different branches of the Vincentian Family that want to work in this region. The center has hosted missionary teams from the Association of Graduates of Vincentian Schools in Peru, members of the Corpus Christi Parish in San Juan de Miraflores (Lima), Vincentian priests, etc.

The local community is currently made up of three Sisters. We serve at the school, the clinic and the parish, which brings together the different communities.

Today's Challenges

To respond to the call of the Inter-Assemblies Document 2009-2015 to “serve by “coming and going” with courage and creativity to manifest God’s love to persons living in poverty,” we have chosen to

- Revitalize faith by evangelization based on the Word of God.
- Form rural catechists for the evangelization of their villages.
- Prepare children, young people, adults and the elderly for the sacraments.
- Participate in the human and social promotion of the peasants.

To achieve these objectives, we carry out several pastoral activities in all the rural sections: home visits, Lectio Divina once a month, celebration of the Eucharist, various catechism sessions, Bible classes, setting up groups for young people, married couples, the elderly...

In our daily ministry, we want to take up other challenges:

- Starting an education center for the social promotion of peasants whose only source of revenue is agriculture, is something we dream of.
- We have in mind a home for children and young people who come from far away and live alone, and are at risk.
- A remedial class for primary and secondary school students.
- The reconstruction of our church because it suffered serious damage from the earthquake on August 15, 2007. We can no longer use it for worship.

COMMUNITY LIFE

“The Founders considered community life one of the essential supports of the vocation of the Daughters of Charity” (C. 9). We are truly convinced that God called us, that He sent us to this beautiful mission to be His witnesses so that those around us realize that “we love each other” and that it is possible to live according to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Each one assumes co-responsibility and practices subsidiarity in the local community and outside it; this has an influence on the pastoral plan and our local Community Plan.

SPIRITUAL LIFE

In complete harmony with the teaching of our Constitutions that say, “They aspire to live in constant dialogue with God, remaining in God’s hands with filial confidence in Providence” (C. 17 a), when we travel from one area to another, we pray and give thanks for where we observe God at work in the hearts and lives of families.

APOSTOLIC COMMITMENT

Each of us says, “Thank you, Lord, for the gift of vocation; thank you for sending us among the poorest of the poor and for letting us be evangelized by them.” They teach us faith, piety, devotion, confidence and to place ourselves at all times and in all circumstances in God’s hands. The reality of walking with them and being at their side makes us appreciate our vocation as Daughters of Charity even more and increases our desire to live it more intensely.

We know we count on the grace of God, with Mary and all the generous people with whom we collaborate, to extend the Kingdom of God and bring hope to our brothers and sisters.

The Sisters of Caja

Province of San Sebastian

Community of Egunon Etxea (Bilbao)

N “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” (Lk 4: 18) What words and what signs do we use for this announcement...?

News
from the
Provinces

On February 27, 1926, the Daughters of Charity, whose ministry was to visit the poor in their own homes, came to live in the historic part of the city of Bilbao, in the Basque country, caring for the sick.

They worked in a little clinic, visited the poor in their homes, ran night classes for adults, and spread devotion to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal in the various districts. The doors of their house were open to all those in need. The Sisters continued this work for more than 60 years.

In 1990, the diocese, which owned the building, decided to give it to the “Diocesan Caritas” in order to set up a work with a charitable and social goal in view. After reviewing the situation in the neighborhood, we noticed that there was a significant number of isolated elderly people living in very poor conditions because of their lack of resources. The house then became a Day Center, “Egunon Etxea,” (Hello House).

Now established in one of the apartments in the Center with its new organization, the local community set off on a new path. Caritas in Bilbao and the Company of the Daughters of Charity were enlisted to be Gospel

witnesses to the elderly, to accompany them and to relieve their families.

Then, gradually, the government began to take better care of the elderly. So the Sisters chose to welcome homeless people who wandered in the streets all day. Some spent the night in shelters, others in the street, and others in miserable boarding houses that they had to leave at 8 in the morning and could not return to until 8 at night. Some have mental disabilities and others have problems with addictions. These are people who cannot go to public centers because they don't fulfil the necessary “conditions” for being accepted there.

“Egunon Etxea” adapted to respond to the needs of these people who were the most vulnerable. In order to respond to this new service we had to work out a methodology.

In 2004, we began a process of discernment about the situation, defining new structures, current resources, and other ways of serving. The Day Center was transformed into a project aiming to respond to the needs of people aged 55 and over who were excluded from society. This process of change took place gradually. Again, we saw how urgent it was to create new spaces for lodging, and we opened another apartment to take in several people. The reality of the situation, therefore, gave us a new perspective and emphasis was put on elderly, homeless people.

We encountered many difficulties with public institutions that were unaware of this situation and raised obstacles at an internal level. The real needs and the response that this required led us to a change. There were moments of reflection and of confrontation between the Caritas work team, who were used to working with less difficult persons, and the concern of the local community to help the most disadvantaged.

The local community studied the situation carefully. We made a communal discernment.

Despite the difficulties at the beginning, moments of darkness, fear, and discussion and uncertainty about which direction to follow, we had the experience that a true communal dialogue allowed us to

Sisters' Testimony

discover the decisions that needed to be taken to move forward with the assurance of being on the right path.

A common factor underpinned our concern: we wanted to stake everything on the “truly poor,” even if this ministry was outside our comfort zone.

Now, the “Egunon Etxea” Project includes a socio-educational intervention team, a group of volunteers, and the ongoing presence of the community.

The Day Center can accommodate 35 people, men and women. This requires a very close accompaniment of people, at their level, with a simple form of actions and presence in their daily life.

With the people who work in this project, we committed ourselves to:

- Having an attitude of unconditional service so that we can offer people what life has denied them.
- Having a welcoming attitude, by working at their pace.
- Creating a climate of respect to heal their wounds and make them agents of their own history.

The communal presence where we work has a double function:

- We want to be witnesses of God's love.
- We want to be humane persons and good professionals consistent with our identity as servants.

Following the example of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, who knew, in the context of their time, how to incarnate the Gospel values that today are at the basis of our social action, we, the Sisters, want to be people who are courageous, welcoming and engaged in the service of the poorest people....

Sister Maika Aguirre
Daughter of Charity

MISSION

according to the thinking of Saint Vincent,
the missionary

There can be no doubt that the words “mission” and “missionary” are those that best define Saint Vincent, words that best bring together his personality and spirituality.

When we study Saint Vincent, his life, his activities or his works, we risk being surprised, if not overcome, by the massive and extensive range of what he did, as much as by its great variety. We could say that Saint Vincent is a world! Let us try to explore this world.

- 14 volumes of writings to study, including more than 3,000 letters, 120 conferences to the Daughters of Charity, 224 to the Priests of the Mission, all of this forming an ensemble at times very traditional and at times original, at times prudent and at times audacious, at times didactic and at times spontaneous.

- His ministries and pastoral experiences were extremely diverse: chaplain at the Court, pastor in Clichy, perhaps an aspirant for the Oratorians, tutor, pastor in Châtillon, missionary, Founder, Superior, Member of the Council of Conscience (a sort of Minister), etc.... etc...

- His activities and foundations were no less numerous: missions, confraternities, Daughters of Charity, the foundlings, hospitals, retreats for ordinands, relief for victims of wars and epidemics, the Visitation convent, etc.



*History
of the Com-
pany*

Sources and Updates

- His masters came from every spiritual perspective: Bérulle, François de Sales, Rodriguez, Vincent Ferrier, Benoît de Canfield, Duval... who represented different spiritualities: Oratorian, Salesian, Jesuit, Dominican, Capuchin, the diocesan priesthood...

Yes, Saint Vincent is a world, with a great variety of experiences, influences, masters, activities, foundations, relationships (from the King and the great, to the most humble). And yet he gives the impression of great unity of life and even of perfect continuity, even during the period of his maturation from 1595 to 1609; we might even wonder if we should speak of an inevitable logic in his thinking and his works! In fact, there is a key, a little bit like that in these modern buildings with a thousand doors that can be opened by a single “master key”.

The key is the mission:

- key to all his personal experience,
- key to all his progress,
- key to his spirituality,
- key to all his foundations and activity,
- key to his correspondence and conferences.

Our study of Saint Vincent will consist of two parts:

- The mission according to Saint Vincent, which we will present more as a synthesis
- The missionary according to Saint Vincent, which we will treat in a more descriptive way.

I - MISSION “EVANGÉLIZARE PAUPERIBUS MISIT ME”

All the saints and great spiritual figures in the Church were, in fact, simply Gospel men or women, who made their holiness, life and foundations rest on a single foundation, the Gospel.

However, there is nothing in the Church more varied than charisms, spirituality and holiness: from the king Saint Louis to Saint Maria Goretti, from Saint Francis of Assisi to Saint Ignatius, from the great Teresa of Avila to the little Therese of Lisieux, etc. It's because the personality of each one contributed to a personal quest for holiness:

each one approached the Gospel in his or her own way, with his or her eyes, experience, and past history; each one entered the Gospel through his or her own door.

What was the door for Saint Vincent? It was the account given by Luke (4:16-22) that tells us how Jesus began his public life in Nazareth. It was the Sabbath day; Jesus went to the synagogue and, in the course of the ceremony, he stood up to do the reading: “*They handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll he found the place where it is written: ‘The spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has sent me to bring the good news to the poor...’*” and the text adds: “*He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant and sat down. And all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to speak to them, ‘This text is being fulfilled today even while you are listening.’*”

Here, then, is the Vincentian door to the Gospel: Christ affirms that he has come to announce the Good News to the poor. Now, Vincent noticed over and over again: the poor, in his time, were no longer evangelized and were abandoned by the Church, priests and society. The old man in Gannes almost died in his sin; the poor people of Châtillon nearly died in their solitude. And this was the lot of many others in the Kingdom of France and in the world! The mission of Jesus Christ was not continued. The Church of the 17th century needed to resume the mission of Jesus Christ, that is, target the poor, and make them their priority. This is the clear and simple reasoning of Vincent de Paul, especially from 1617 onwards, a reasoning that will dominate all his thinking and animate his entire life.

To have a good understanding of mission according to Saint Vincent, we must reconsider and deepen our understanding of each term of the key-phrase borrowed from Isaiah and that Jesus Christ made His own: **He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor.**

This sentence contains the four essential elements of mission according to Saint Vincent's thinking:

- Being sent (ecclesial level)
- After the example of Jesus Christ (mystical level)
- To the poor (sociological level)
- To evangelize them (pastoral level).

I – BEING SENT

For Saint Vincent, the sending of the missionary was the most important requirement or step. The essence of being missionary is not connected primarily to the place where the missionary worked. It did not depend, either, on pastoral methods, being able to differentiate one structure from another. It did not depend on a position in the hierarchy or in the people of God. For Saint Vincent, mission was not a method nor a pastoral activity: it was first of all and above all a sending, a sending by God who made it known, a sending endorsed by the Church. Moreover, it is quite simply the etymological and first meaning of the word: ‘mission’ comes from the Latin ‘missus’ which means ‘sent’. It’s the first word of the expression of Isaiah: *misit me*.

This first requirement for mission is not, for Vincent de Paul, a point of doctrine; it is the necessary outcome of a fundamental personal experience.

Until 1617, he led his own life: he went to Rome, Paris, Clichy, to the Gondis, to Châtillon ... essentially because he asked for and wanted this. He was free to take the initiative for his choices, his undertakings, and his commitments.

In 1617, especially January 25 and August 20, in Gannes and Châtillon, he had the feeling of being involved in unexpected events whose meaning escapes him, events placed on his path by someone other than himself and imposed on him. These are the happenings that determined his life. Afterwards, everything followed as if it were no longer he who led his life, but an Other. He had not thought of the Mission, or of the Confraternities, or the Ladies or Daughters of Charity. He hadn’t thought of the galley slaves, or the hospitals, or the foundlings or national assistance. He clearly hadn’t thought of Algiers or Madagascar. In 1617, Vincent de Paul became a missionary because he felt impelled and sent by God.

Every time that Vincent will speak about the origins of the Mission or those of the Daughters of Charity, as well as their works and their activities, this will always be the same assertion and the same refrain: “I didn’t think of it!” This reflection is often presented as a good

example of humility. What was more important than humility, in these circumstances, was his faith.

Faith does not principally consist in believing a certain number of dogmas and truths. Faith is, for us, encountering God one day in our life and handing over to Him the helm to steer this life.

Each time that Vincent de Paul declared that he had nothing to do with what he achieved in his life, he would at the same time affirm that, since 1617, it was God who steered the ship whereas, up to then, Vincent had tried to guide it alone. From 1617, he felt and recognized himself as being **sent** by God: “*Alas, my dear confreres, no one had ever thought of that! We didn’t even know what missions were: we weren’t thinking of them at all and didn’t know what they were all about, and that’s how it can be recognized that this is a work of God; for if there’s something in which human persons have no part, then God is the one who does it, and it comes directly from Him. Then He makes use of people to carry out His work.*” (Coste XI, 162)

And again: “*I’ve told you many times, Sisters, that you can be very certain God is your founder, for I can tell you before Him that in my whole life I never thought of it, and neither, I think, did Mademoiselle Le Gras.*” Vincent recounts the event of Châtillon les Dombes and adds: “*Now, Sisters, see whether that’s the work of human persons or whether it’s clearly the work of God, for was it human beings who had made those poor people ill? Was it human beings who had inflamed the hearts of all those who went off in droves to bring them some help? Was it human beings who had planted in their hearts the desire to provide them with regular assistance - not only them but also those who might come after them? Oh no, Sisters! that’s not the work of humans; it’s clear that God was powerfully at work there, for human beings could never have done it; no, Sisters, there was no way they could have done it.*” (Coste IX, 192-193)

These are the reasons that Vincent gives to affirm the missionary character of the Priests of the Mission as well as the Daughters of Charity: human beings clearly had no part in it; it is therefore God who intervened and acted. It is He who sent Vincent de Paul and who sends us today.

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This mandate from God who sends should be authenticated and publically expressed by the Church. Vincent insisted repeatedly on this point, both for the priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

The Confraternities were parish institutions, and the prominent role of the pastor was affirmed and highlighted in each of the rules: in particular, it was the role of the pastor (or his vicar) to preside over the monthly assemblies, to oversee management, and to preside over elections; it was the bishop or his representative who signed and authenticated the rules. (Coste XIIIb, 15-19)

As for what concerned the missions, Vincent scrupulously requested that the bishop formally send missionaries; in this he acted completely differently from most institutions and founders. In 1635, he wrote to the bishop of Béziers: “ I shall tell you, first of all, Your Excellency, that we are entirely under the authority of the bishops to go to any place in their diocese they wish to send us to preach, catechize, and hear the general confessions of the poor...In a word, we are like the servants of the centurion in the Gospel with regard to the bishops, insofar as when they say to us: go, we are obliged to go; if they say: come, we are obliged to come; do that, and we are obliged to do it.” (Coste I, 297)

To Jeanne de Chantal, he wrote on July 14, 1639: “We live in the spirit of the servants of the Gospel with regard to the bishops. When they tell us: ‘Go there’ we go; ‘Come here,’ we come; ‘Do that,’ we do it; and that is how we act in what concerns the functions mentioned above.” (Coste I, 553)

On January 4, 1647, he wrote to M. Blatiron, Priest of the Mission in Genoa: “You can tell the Cardinal that the prelates are our masters for all our external works, and that we are obliged to obey them, as the servants of the Gospel obeyed their master.” (Coste III, 152-153)

There is the same preoccupation for the Daughters of Charity: following the example of the Confraternities, they are also parochial, “daughters of the parish”.

On February 7, 1660, Vincent wrote to Jacques de la Fosse: “*Daughters of Charity are not nuns, but Sisters who come and go like seculars; they are parishioners under the guidance of Pastors in the places where they are established.*” (Coste VIII, 277)

During a conference on obedience given on December 2, 1657, a Sister asks: “‘Do you mean, Monsieur, that I’m to obey the Pastor of the parish where I serve the poor?’ Yes, I do, Sister, as if you were obeying God, in all that concerns the poor.” (Coste X, 312)

A little further on, in the same conference: “*Here’s the twenty-second Rule: When they are sent to any parishes to live there while serving the sick poor, they will go to receive, kneeling, the blessing of the Pastors. Do you do that, Sisters? Mademoiselle replied that the first time the Sisters went to serve the poor in a parish they didn’t fail to do so, but since they are changed frequently, the next ones who went there weren’t so exact about that. Several Sisters gave almost the same reply. Sisters, M. Vincent resumed, take up this practice and show them great respect. When they say to you, ‘Sister, there’s a sick person in a certain place who should be visited,’ say, ‘Monsieur, I’m on my way to see him.’*” (Coste X, 315)

A brief letter from Vincent to Louise de Marillac, in April 1630, is also noteworthy: “*And because we must relieve other people’s distress as far as it is in our power, I think that you would be performing an action agreeable to God by visiting the Pastor (of Villepreux) and apologizing for having spoken without his knowledge to the sisters of the Charity and the girls. Tell him that you thought you could act in Villepreux just as you did in Saint-Cloud and elsewhere, and that this will teach you your duty another time. If he is not pleased with this, leave it at that.*” (Coste I, 75)

We could multiply quotations and references; all would prove that for Vincent, the relationship with the bishop, the pastor and, through them, the Church, seemed essential for anyone who wanted to be missionary. God sent Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ sent His apostles and the Church, and it is this Church that sends us. In order to be missionary, you must be situated in this line of apostolic continuity. Otherwise, whatever our generosity and our degree of insertion with people, we would not

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participate in the mission of Jesus Christ and of the Church; we would not be missionaries. In a word, for Saint Vincent, a missionary is first of all one who is sent.

II – YOU MUST CONTINUE THE WORK OF JESUS CHRIST AND IMITATE HIM

God's sending people on mission is essential. Now, the first one sent, the envoy par excellence, is Jesus Christ: *"The spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has sent me."* (Luke 4: 18)

Through events, Vincent de Paul felt himself sent to the poor; he read, on the other hand, that Jesus Christ, before him, had been sent to the poor as the Missionary par excellence. Consequently, he thought that the missionary would be someone who would continue the work of Jesus Christ and imitate him. So Vincent de Paul himself, the Priests of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity and all the lay people mobilized by Saint Vincent were and remain missionaries because, sent by God, they continue the mission of Jesus Christ: *"Yes, Our Lord asks us to evangelize the poor; that's what He did, and what He wants to continue to do through us. We have great reason to humble ourselves here, seeing that the Eternal Father is using us for the plans of His Son, who came to preach the Gospel to poor persons, giving this as a sign that He was the Son of God and that the long-awaited Messiah had come. So then, what a great obligation we have to His Infinite Goodness for having associated us with Him in this divine ministry, chosen by God from so many, many others, more worthy of this honor and more capable of succeeding in it than we are."* (Coste XII, 71)

"If the Daughters of Charity knew God's plan for them and how greatly He wants to be glorified by it, they would consider their state fortunate and superior to that of religious. Not that they shouldn't regard themselves as much lower, but I don't know any religious Company more useful to the Church than the Daughters of Charity, if they really enter into their spirit for the service they can render their neighbor, unless it's the nuns of the Hotel-Dieu and the Sisters of the Place Royale; who are both nuns and Daughters of Charity at the same time because they devote themselves to the service of the

sick-with this difference, however, that they nurse them in their own establishment and assist only those who are brought to them, whereas you go to them in their own homes and minister to those who are dying without any assistance because they don't dare to ask for it. In that you do what Our Lord did. He had no home of His own; He went from town to town, from village to village, and healed everyone He met. Eh bien! Sisters, doesn't that show you clearly the greatness of your vocation? Have you ever really reflected on that?" (Coste IX, 458-459).

You can see clearly, and a thousand other references could confirm it: Vincent aligned himself with Jesus Christ the Missionary, this Jesus who, today, continues to evangelize those who are poor, through us. That being the case, everything becomes very simple for us as missionaries. Because we have the same vocation as Jesus Christ and, following His example, we are missionaries, we must imitate him. Imitating Jesus Christ is the privileged way of exercising mission.

This imitation of Jesus Christ according to Saint Vincent is not primarily that of Thomas à Kempis (who was, nonetheless, read during meals at Saint Lazare) nor that of Bérulle, master of holiness. It was the imitation of the missionary Jesus Christ, an imitation that meant following him, step by step, to be certain to end up with those who are poor in the right way, to encounter them as Jesus Christ encountered them, to evangelize and serve them like Jesus Christ evangelized and served them.

Like the rest of Saint Vincent's spirituality, imitating Jesus Christ was focused and had a goal: it was an imitation of Jesus Christ for the service of the poor; the objective of personal perfection was not paramount. It was not a question of copying a model in order to "go to heaven" but to do as Jesus Christ did; to "go to the poor" and serve them corporally and spiritually as Christ Himself did: *"When there's question of doing some good work, say to the Son of God, 'Lord, if You were in my place, how would you act on this occasion? How would you instruct these people? How would you console this person sick in mind or body?'"* (Coste XI, 314)

"... The result is that, when the occasions arise, we may ask ourselves, 'How did Our Lord judge such or such a thing? How did He act in such

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or such a circumstance? What did He say and do regarding certain matters?’ and thus we may adapt our whole way of acting in accord with His maxims and examples. So then, let’s take this resolution. Messieurs, and walk confidently along this royal road on which Jesus Christ will be our leader and guide... Let’s bless Our Lord, brothers, strive to think and judge as He did, and do what He recommended by His words and examples.” (Coste XI, 43)

In the conference of December 6, 1658, on the purpose of the Congregation of the Mission, Vincent said to his confreres: “The intention of the Company is to imitate Our Lord to the extent that poor, insignificant persons can do. What does that mean? It means that the Company aspires to take Him as a model in the way He acted, what He did, His ministries, and His aims. How can one person represent another, if he doesn’t have the same characteristics, features, manners, and looks? That can’t be. So, if we’re determined to make ourselves like this divine model, and feel in our hearts this desire and holy affection, it’s necessary, I repeat, it’s necessary to strive to model our thoughts, works, and intentions on His.” (Coste XII, 68)

Vincent wrote to Sister Anne Hardemont on November 24, 1658: “O Sister, how consoled you will be at the hour of death for having consumed your life for the same reason for which Jesus Christ gave His – for charity, for God, for the poor! If you only knew your good fortune, Sister, you would truly be overjoyed; for, in doing so, you are fulfilling the law and the prophets, commanding us to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. And what greater act of love can one make than to give oneself, wholly and entirely, in one’s state of life and in one’s duty, for the salvation and relief of the afflicted! Our entire perfection consists in this.” (Coste VII, 397)

On November 8, 1659, Vincent said the same thing in almost the same words to Sister Nicole Haran and her companions: “O Sisters! how good it is to do nothing else but to practice charity! In so doing, you practice all the virtues together and make yourselves one with Jesus Christ by cooperating with Him in the salvation and consolation of the poor. If you were only aware of your happiness as it is in the sight of God, surely work, contradictions, sorrow, bitterness – even death itself – would seem sweet and desirable to you, as indeed they are to

those who try to make themselves worthy of the eternal happiness of the next life.” (Coste VIII, 186-187)

All this is summed up in some powerful phrases: “Jesus Christ is the rule of the Mission” (Conference of February 21, 1659, Coste XII, 110) ... To Nicolas Etienne, seminarian of the Mission, who had just turned over all his wealth to the Congregation, Vincent wrote on January 30, 1656: “I thank you most affectionately, my dear Brother, for your heartfelt, effective love for your poor mother; you are like a well-born child, however poor and unattractive she may be. May God be pleased to grant the Company to which you belong the grace of raising you, by its example and practices, to a great love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our father, our mother, and our all.” (V, 537)

Continue the work of Jesus Christ, imitate Jesus Christ, follow Jesus Christ... anyone who has not assimilated this can understand nothing about mission according to Saint Vincent, or Saint Vincent’s idea of a missionary. Rather than being judged and assessed on his or her methods, degree of insertion, material conditions of life and ministry, the missionary is judged by the quality of his or her relationship with Jesus Christ and fidelity in his or her imitation of Jesus Christ, whose work the missionary continues.

This is why Saint Vincent insisted so much on prayer that establishes and maintains contact with Jesus Christ, the contact between, on the one hand, Jesus Christ, and, on the other, our life, our charity and our commitments.

It would be interesting to speak more about the Vincentian understanding of prayer, but that would take a long time. Let me at least tell you that I am deliberately mentioning it here rather than in a discourse on spirituality. For Vincent, prayer was, properly speaking, a missionary activity, part, not of pious exercises, but of missionary life and missionary commitment. For Vincent de Paul, prayer was a real review of life, the moment when contact between Jesus Christ and missionary life was consciously and clearly reestablished: “Well, Sisters, what do you think of that sort of prayer? Aren’t you deeply edified by the perseverance of that good President, who could excuse himself on account of his many business affairs and yet does not

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because of his desire to be faithful in keeping his resolutions? And you, dear Sisters, aren't you courageous enough to try to follow God's plan to perfect you by the practice of your Rule? You can make your prayer in this way, which is the best way; for you shouldn't make it in order to have exalted ideas, ecstasies, and raptures - which are more harmful than useful - but only to perfect yourselves and make you truly good Daughters of Charity. So, your resolutions should be something like this, 'I'm going to serve some poor persons; I'll try to go to them with a simple, cheerful attitude to comfort and edify them; I'll speak to them as if they were my lords. There are some persons who seldom speak to me; I'll put up with it; I have the habit of saddening a Sister on such and such an occasion; I won't do it. She sometimes displeases me; I'll bear with it. One Lady scolds me, another finds fault with me; I'll try not to fail in my duty and will show them the honor and respect I owe them. When I'm with a certain person, it's nearly always harmful to my perfection; as far as possible, I'll avoid that situation.' I think that's how you should make your meditation, Sisters. Don't you think this method is helpful and easy? All the Sisters thought so, and Most Honored Father added, Well then, dear Sisters, please practice it in this way." (Coste IX, 26)

Here is missionary prayer that is connected to life: trying to anticipate and envisage the tasks, encounters or difficulties of the day and trying to see them as Jesus Christ would see them, in order to live them as He would live them. This is the prayer of a priest of the Mission or a Daughter of Charity: not a time for escape or ecstasy, but a review of life, a plan for life and the day, according to and with Jesus Christ. For Saint Vincent, what counted in meditation was the resolution made. Now, this wasn't the way that one began to pray, or how one prayed; it was more the way that one came from prayer to go to those who are poor: "Let us love God, brothers," Vincent said in a conference, "let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows."

"For very often many acts of love of God, of devotion, and of other similar affections and interior practices of a tender heart, although very good and desirable, are, nevertheless, very suspect if they don't translate into the practice of effective love. 'By this,' says Our Lord, 'is my Father glorified, that you may bear much fruit.' We have to be very

careful about many who, recollected exteriorly, and filled with lofty sentiments of God interiorly, stop at that, and when it comes to the point of doing something, and they have the opportunity to act, they come up short. They flatter themselves with their ardent imagination; they're satisfied with the sweet conversations they have with God in meditation and even speak of them like angels; but when they leave there, if there's a question of working for God, of suffering, of mortifying themselves, of instructing poor persons, of going in search of the lost sheep, of being happy when they lack something, or of accepting sickness or some other misfortune, alas! they're no longer around; their courage fails them. No, no, let's not fool ourselves: all our work consists in action. This is so true that the holy Apostle declares to us that only our works accompany us into the other life." (Coste XI, 32-33)

III – GOING TO THE POOR

The third essential feature of mission is a requirement that we could describe as sociological. Whoever wants to be missionary according to the mind of Saint Vincent, must be on the side of those who are poor and, more precisely, go to those who are poor.

Theologically, mission is obviously not confined to the poor. We read, in Mark's Gospel (16:15): "Go out to the whole world; proclaim the gospel to all creation." Mission is the proclamation of salvation to all. Participating in this proclamation, in whatever environment, is working for the mission and being missionary.

We have followed Vincent de Paul's development and the way he came to the Gospel through the door of Luke 4:18. Struck by how society and the Church had abandoned the poor of his time, Vincent took Jesus Christ and Isaiah literally: "In this vocation, we're very much in conformity with Our Lord Jesus Christ, who seems to have made His principal aim, in coming into the world, to assist poor people and to take care of them. Misit me evangelizare pauperibus. And if we ask Our Lord, 'What did you come to do on earth?' 'To assist the poor.' 'Anything else?' 'To assist the poor.'" (Coste XI, 98)

There we have it! If we believe Vincent, Jesus Christ, on earth, did

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nothing other than assist the poor. Obviously this exegesis is rather brief, but it reveals the secret of the extraordinary dynamism of a saint who sought to focus his efforts well. For Vincent de Paul, everything was centered on evangelizing those who are poor. For him, a missionary was he or she who, having been sent and continuing the mission of Jesus Christ, went to those who are poor. He specified clearly and frequently that it was a question of the truly poor, the economically and materially poor. For Saint Vincent, anyone could be missionary - man or woman, priest or lay person – and he or she could be one anywhere and in any situation, with the only requirement being to make the salvation of the truly poor his or her “principal aim” as Jesus Christ did.

Saint Vincent did not envisage for his sons and daughters any other sociological environment in which to fulfil their missionary vocation. For both of them, to distance themselves from those who are poor would be to contradict and irrevocably deny the missionary character of their vocation. A mission that is not for the poor is not a mission for the children of Saint Vincent. On the other hand, any mission, whatever it is, wherever it is, provided that it is for the poor, is also for them. It doesn't matter if it is a hospital or a little school, for rural residents or city dwellers, foundlings or refugees, French or Malagasy... as long as it deals with the truly poor and the sons and daughters of Saint Vincent are sent to them, following Jesus Christ, they are certainly missionaries as their Founder understood the term.

We recognize here themes that are familiar to us. For Saint Vincent, the character and the quality of the missionary are not connected to any specific environment, category, region, particular specialization or pastoral method; however, this quality and character are reserved for those who give their life for the poor, for the truly poor, whoever and wherever these may be.

To sum up, to be missionary according to Saint Vincent, you must be:

- sent by God and the Church,
- after the example of Jesus Christ, model missionary,
- to those who are poor and only to these.

IV – TO EVANGELIZE THEM

In 1617, Saint Vincent first encountered the spiritual and moral distress of a poor man whom he saw as someone abandoned by the Church. The problem of the “salvation of poor country people” was presented to him for the first time and touched him deeply.

After sending François du Coudrai to Rome with the task of obtaining the approbation of the Congregation of the Mission, he wrote to him in 1631: “*You must make it understood that the poor are being damned for want of knowing the things necessary for salvation, and for lack of confession. If His Holiness were aware of this necessity, he would have no rest until he had done all he could to set things right. It is the knowledge we had of this situation that brought about the establishment of the Company, so as to remedy it in some way. In order to do this, we must live in a congregation...*” (Coste I, 112) For Saint Vincent, salvation, especially for the poor, was an obsession.

After Gannes, Châtillon brought physical and material misery to his attention, but the number one goal consistently remained salvation of the poor, something to be achieved through evangelization. For the priests of the Mission, this did not create any difficulty; it didn't present a problem, either, for the Daughters of Charity. For Saint Vincent, a Daughter of Charity who didn't evangelize wouldn't be a missionary; a Daughter of Charity whose first concern wasn't the salvation of the poor wouldn't be a missionary. You are familiar with many texts where Vincent recalled this fundamental truth: “*The love of the Daughters of Charity is not simply tender; it's effective, because they actually serve persons who are poor, corporally and spiritually. It's your duty to teach them how to lead good lives-I repeat, Sisters, to lead good lives; that's what distinguishes you from many nuns who care for the body only, without saying a good word. There are only too many like that. Now then, mon Dieu! let's not talk about that any longer; now then, mon Sauveur! the Daughter of Charity mustn't be concerned only with assisting the sick poor corporally; unlike so many others, she must instruct the poor. You have to do this in addition to what the Sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu and the ones at the Place Royale do; you also have to go to seek out poor persons in their homes, which, until now, has never been done, whereas they're content to take in those God sends them. So then you must take the sick poor two kinds of food: corporal and spiritual...*” (Coste X, 466-467)

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So it is very clear: a Daughter of Charity is missionary to the extent that, unlike the Sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu and Place Royale, she evangelizes the poor.

How? Certainly by good words... and Vincent suggests methods that are completely unimaginable today, because the 17th century was a Christian era: some holy words but above all by example, goodness, respect and affection that shine through in ministry and give to those who are poor an idea of the goodness and love that God has for them: *“To do that,”* said Saint Vincent, *“is to preach the Gospel by words and by works, and that’s the most perfect way.”* (Coste XII, 73)

This evangelization is to be by the sweat of our brow and the strength of our arms, by the hand that *“must conform to the heart”* (Coste XI, 70)... Saint Vincent gives it a very important place, as much for the priests of the Mission as for the Daughters of Charity.

To evangelize is to announce the Good News to the poor. This good news is that God loves them and wants to save them. Making a bed, cleaning a wound, helping a sick person eat, all this done with gentleness, respect and love, is a way, perhaps the most perfect way, to speak to a poor person about the love of God and to announce the Good News to him or her: *“To do that, is to preach.”*

Here, then, are the essential components of the missionary state, four conditions required to be missionary according to the spirit of Saint Vincent:

- being sent,
- after the example of Jesus Christ,
- to those who are poor
- to announce the Good News to them.

Ecclesial requirement, mystical requirement, sociological requirement, pastoral requirement: it is on these four levels that we must regularly examine ourselves, we and our communities, in order to resituate ourselves in truth in relation to mission.

Father Jean Morin, C.M.

Saint Vincent’s heart; history of its preservation

When Vincent de Paul died, surgeons removed his heart in order to preserve it for respect and popular recognition, as well as veneration and prayer by the faithful when the Church would declare it to be an eminently important relic of a Saint.

The Duchesse d’Aiguillon presented a silver reliquary for Vincent’s heart. The reliquary was 35 cm high, while the heart itself was 22 by 15 cm. In the center, there was an opening in the form of a heart that allowed one to see and venerate the relic. The heart and reliquary were piously kept at Saint Lazare itself, in a quite ordinary cabinet which was carefully locked.

On July 14, 1729, the Sovereign Pontiff solemnly declared Vincent de Paul Blessed. For the feast on September 27, 1729, his heart was brought out of its obscure solitude to solemnly appear in the church of Saint Lazare. Later, the body, enclosed in a magnificent reliquary, would rest on an altar in this church. The heart would find its place on the same altar, in front of the body, until 1790.

On July 13, 1789 came the pillage of Saint Lazare. Fr. Cayla de la Garde, Superior General, thought it prudent to entrust the Duchesse d’Aiguillon’s reliquary and the treasure it contained to Fr. Sicardi, first Assistant of the Congregation of the Mission and the Director of the Daughters of Charity.

On September 1, 1792, the reliquary was taken away for the Mint. Fr. Cayla de la Garde allowed Fr. Sicardi to take the heart to Turin, with the promise to return it to the Superior General as soon as the Congregation is reestablished in France. He had to go to Turin with two confreres. At the same time as these three priests of the Mission left France, four Daughters of Charity left to found an establishment

Saint Vincent's Heart

in Turin: Sister Maltret, Sister Servant, and Sisters Calasson, Jolié and Lespinasse.

Vincent's heart and some of his clothes, including a soutane, were mixed in with the Sisters' luggage, and they put everything in transit. To more easily protect the reliquary and its relic from searches made by intrusive inspectors, Fr. Sicardi had the idea of making a hole in the shape of the heart in the pages of a large book, the second volume of the work entitled *Lives of the Saints* by R. P. François Géry, of the order of Minims. This volume must have been in the refectory at Saint Lazare because, inside the cover, you can read these words at the top: "list of lives to be read in the refectory," followed by a list, from July to December. The cavity was ideal for the reliquary and it fit perfectly: so it was easily hidden, and nothing showed from the outside.

Turin: For three months, the heart remained exposed on the altar of the Sisters' little chapel. The reliquary had been damaged during the journey. The heart had naturally dried out, leaving some portions detached; these fell out when the reliquary was removed to be placed on the altar. The Sisters gathered them up into four small reliquaries.

When Fr. Sicardi returned after an absence of three months, the Sisters showed him the four small reliquaries containing the fragments that had fallen from the large silver reliquary. He noticed the crack and had the reliquary re-soldered at the Congregation of the Mission. He left the four small ones to the Sisters.

1796: The Sisters found themselves obliged to withdraw to Vienna, Austria. It was there that the seal of the Congregation obtained by the Sisters was inserted.

1797: The Sisters seek refuge in Poland, each one carrying her reliquary.

1799: The Sisters are in Bohemia.

1801: They are recalled to France by Sister Deleau.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE HEART OF M. VINCENT?

The heart still remained in Turin. On January 1, 1805, Cardinal Fesch, Archbishop of Lyons, uncle of Emperor Napoleon I, wrote to the Archbishop of Turin to claim Vincent de Paul's heart and asked him to draw up a certificate. The Archbishop had a ventricle removed and this has remained in Turin ever since. The heart was again placed in the hollowed-out book that had been its resting place when it was transported from France to Turin. This volume, again enriched by its relic, was handed over to General Menou, Governor of Piedmont, with the certificate and a letter from the Archbishop to Cardinal Fesch.

Lyons: Cardinal Fesch obtained the heart of Vincent for his primatial church. This relic belonged by right to France. Bonaparte, unable to return it to its rightful owners as the Society of Priests of the Mission had not been reestablished, had it given to his uncle, the Archbishop of Lyons, because Vincent de Paul had served as pastor in his diocese.

The return of the relic to Lyons took place with all the formalities required by sacred canons. Cardinal Fesch had it placed in a chapel in his metropolis specially dedicated to Saint Vincent de Paul and afterwards named after him.

Here, they still venerate a rather large portion of this heart. The relic (heart) itself, was removed because it was so precious. The fragment enclosed in a thin layer of the heart has a surface measurement of 5 to 6 cm on each side and is kept in the silver reliquary donated by the Duchesse d'Aiguillon. This, covered with a domed glass, is given the place of honor in a gothic aedicule (shrine) decorated with a portrait of the saint.

Vicar General Courbon gave to the house of the Daughters of Charity in Saint Jean's parish (the Primatial church) the book that had served to preserve the venerable relic and to transport it from Paris to Turin and from Turin to Lyons. This gracious gift was accompanied by a certificate.

The Daughters of Charity had the following inscription in Latin and French printed. They had the Latin inscription placed inside, on the cover of the box that held the volume; the French translation was attached to the outside.

Saint Vincent's Heart

Here is the inscription:

"It is in the bosom and the shelter of this book that concealed it and that it filled with a sort of holy effusion of himself that, by a special protection from Heaven and to always be for us an object of veneration, escaped profanation by the impious of the last century, who laid waste to everything, the heart of our father Vincent de Paul, this great saint, so penetrated during his life by ardent love for God; so sought after even by kings to help them with his wisdom and his insight in their deliberations; so tenderly loved by the poor and the unfortunate as their benefactor and their father, and so honored everywhere as apostle and propagator of religion.

May this book, preserved, it seems, by such a holy trust, be forever the object of our veneration."

This book that contained the heart of Saint Vincent de Paul, was handed over to Sister Rogé, Superioress General, by Sister Blandine Delort, Visitatrix of Lyons, on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of Saint Catherine Labouré's death, celebrated in Fain-les-Moutiers in 1976.

It is now kept in the Archives of the Company at 140 rue du Bac.

Sister Claire Herrmann
Daughter of Charity

"Do whatever he tells you."

**Mary does not really ask something of Jesus:
she simply says to him: "They have no wine."**

Mary leaves everything to the Lord's judgment.

**At Nazareth she gave over her will,
immersing it in the will of God:**

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord;

let it be with me according to your word."

And this continues to be her fundamental attitude.

This is how she teaches us to pray:

not by seeking to assert before God

our own will and our own desires,

however important they may be,

however reasonable they might appear to us,

but rather to bring them before him

and to let him decide what he intends to do.

From Mary we learn graciousness

and readiness to help,

but we also learn humility and generosity

in accepting God's will,

in the confident conviction that, whatever it may be,

it will be our, and my own, true good.

Benedict XVI

Homily given on September 11, 2006

