

*E*choes *of the Company*



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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LIVING THE YEAR OF FAITH

International Session

organized at the Motherhouse

from April 22 to May 6, 2013:

Spiritual and Vincentian revitalization

for Daughters of Charity

of 11-24 years vocation

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Living the Year of Faith

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On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Benedict XVI offered the Church the opportunity to live a Year of Faith. This opened on October 11, 2012, and will conclude on November 24, 2013, Solemnity of Christ the King.

Living the
Year of Faith

This Year of Faith is a year of grace, a privileged time for opening ourselves to God and to welcoming His Presence in our lives, after the example of Mary, model of faith for believers. During the Angel's visit, Mary consented to what God was asking of her, trusted Him and committed herself: *"I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me."* (Lk 1:38) Mary expresses her faith in God and commits her life to Him.

At the Visitation, Elizabeth proclaims, *"Blessed is she who believed."* (Lk 1:45) At the end of John's Gospel, Jesus invites Thomas to share in this same beatitude: *"Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."* (Jn 20:29). Like Thomas, the Church must become part of Mary's faith; *"this heroic faith of hers "precedes" the apostolic witness of the Church, and ever remains in the Church's heart hidden like a special heritage of God's revelation. All those who [...] share in that mysterious inheritance, [...] in a sense share in Mary's faith,"* as John Paul II wrote in *Redemptoris Mater* (n° 27, 1).

The phrase used in Benedict XVI's encyclical, *Porta Fidei* also recalls that this "door" was already opened by Christ Himself on the day of our baptism. Like Mary, our entire existence consists of continuously passing through

this Door of Faith in order to enter and dwell in the Kingdom of God.

This Year of Faith is therefore an opportunity for us, Daughters of Charity, to renew our joy in following Christ, to re-center ourselves in our relationship with Him, to serve those in need by ever more contemplating the mystery of the poor, and to deepen our sense of belonging to the Company.

An essential aspect of our life of service is the act of completing the mystery of Christ in the person of the poor. Just as we receive Christ in the Eucharist, we receive the person who is poor as the mystery of Christ; therefore, the service of the poor is not an addition to the Year of Faith; it is part of it.

Numerous opportunities were offered in the Provinces to go deeper into the faith and the Vincentian charism.

Two international gatherings were organized at the Mother House. The participants had the happiness of following in the footsteps of the Founders, of entering into the experience of the internationality of the Company, of praying with the pilgrims in the Chapel of the Miraculous Medal...

- A session of spiritual and Vincentian renewal, from April 22 to May 6, 2013, allowed 87 Sisters of 11-24 years vocation and coming from 69 Provinces and the Region, to reflect on and deepen their faith in order to live it better in community life and ministry.

- An international retreat, preached by Father Patrick Griffin, Director General, offered the 73 participating Sister Servants, coming from 68 Provinces and the Region, a time of special formation for their mission, from May 11 to 19, 2013.

This special issue aims to be the echo of the revitalization session and to offer all Daughters of Charity avenues for deepening their faith.

“Lord, increase our faith”

Faith, gift and free response on a daily basis in prayer, community life and service of those who are poor

F

Faith, Gift
and Free
Response

“Amen, Amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.” (Jn 3:5)

I have been asked to speak about the faith that is at the heart of our experience as consecrated persons who believe, pray, love and serve! You can imagine this is no easy task! Faith is something so intimate, almost uncommunicable, even if faith in Jesus Christ is a communal experience, an adventure that we live out with others. Those who say that faith cannot be given are correct. The only thing that one can do is to witness to it and make others want to believe! And this is done with others.

I have to admit that I often feel my poverty in the face of the personal, ecclesial (community) and apostolic demands of my faith in Jesus Christ; I feel small and powerless before the range of challenges to my being a believer! Like the apostles, in this situation I can only turn to the Lord to beg Him: “Lord, increase our faith.” (Lk 17:5). Yes, Lord, give me a renewed dose of confidence in God, increase my faith!

The Lord’s response to the apostles is immediate but enigmatic. If truth be told, he offers a parable that is not just speech but a route (a path); he responds to the request made by telling a story that must be understood and that

should make us reflect: “The Lord replied, If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey you.” (Lk 17:5-6) Matthew’s version is even more audacious: “Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, Move from here to here, and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” (Mt 17:20) I can assure you that no tree has ever obeyed me, much less a mountain!

What then is the meaning of the parable Jesus offers here? The Master begins by comparing faith to a mustard seed: “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed”! This is what is astonishing! The mustard seed is so small...just a little bit of faith would be enough! The second part of the parable is even more surprising: “If one day our faith reaches the size of a mustard seed, then extraordinary things will happen! Huge trees, with deep, strong roots, will be uprooted and will plant themselves in the sea if we give them the order to do so... Even better, mountains will move! Nothing is impossible!” All this is at the very least, troubling.

We should focus our attention on the contrast between size (or dimensions) and power! A faith the size of a mustard seed could do extraordinary things. We could translate this as meaning a little bit of faith is enough to accomplish what is completely impossible. A minimal amount of faith can do extraordinary things!

What a contrast between the small size of faith and its unlimited possibilities! It wasn’t the first time that Jesus used the image of a mustard seed in the Gospel. Earlier, he compared the Kingdom of God to something that begins small and becomes large: Do you remember? “What is the Kingdom of God like? To what can I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that a person took and planted in the garden. When it was fully grown, it became a large bush and the birds of the sky dwelt in its branches.” (Lk 13:18-19 and Mt 13:31-32)

Jesus’ parables challenge, call into question, intrigue. They make us ask ourselves: and supposing it were true? If it were true that a faith “small in size” could uproot, transplant, transform? Let us repeat, the parable told by Jesus deliberately insists on the contrast between the smallness of faith and its unsuspected possibilities. Faith then is

Faith, Gift and Free Response on a Daily Basis

possible, accessible to all; it is human in dimension; no one can say that such a faith is impossible. This is Jesus' conviction; he recounted it to us and invites us to share in his certainty: with just a minimal amount of faith, a Christian can do things beyond what seems possible.¹

Based on this conviction that we share with Jesus, let's try to go forward in our reflection, using three questions as our starting point:

1. Who can have faith the size of a mustard seed?
2. How can we make faith grow in us?
3. How do we make our faith effective? How do we make it bear fruit?

I. WHO CAN HAVE FAITH THE SIZE A MUSTARD SEED?

In the light of Jesus' parable, the response to this question is simple, but it is far from trivial or routine: any person of good will, man or woman, can have a dynamic faith that increases and causes to increase, that grows stronger and makes strong, that evolves and causes evolution, that uproots and makes grow. In taking up again the second part of the Gospel parable, we could say that faith is first of all obedience (listening), and only then can it make itself obeyed (tell the tree to uproot itself or the mountain to move from here to there).

Obviously, when we speak about "faith", the human response must be understood in terms of God's initiative. It's true! God always has the initiative! We are referring here to what could be called **the bedrock of faith** (its immutable base, its foundation, what touches on the essential): faith is a human response to God's initiatives! By this we mean that a human being can say that he or she believes in God because God first believes in him or her. We often forget this! We forget to say that God is the first to believe in humanity. Perhaps we should add that God believes in us much more than we believe in ourselves. François Mauriac² was right to say that "believing is first of all realizing that we are loved" (by God).

1. Cf. Claude TASSIN, *L'Évangile de Matthieu*, Paris, Centurion, 1991 p. 186.

2. French writer, member of the Académie française (1885-1970), who was part of what was called the "intellectual resistance" and liked to say, "I weep over my sins! Those that I committed and those that I would have liked to commit."

The simplest definition of faith is that it is a response to God's love expressed throughout history in a definitive way in Jesus Christ whom He sent. If we look at Holy Scripture, we can see the truth of what we said earlier: Who is it who first looks for Adam and Eve? Abraham? Moses? The prophets? The people as a whole?... God and always God! He seeks out man as he has always done and will eternally continue to do. He never grows discouraged by His creatures' indifference. By looking for us, He makes faith possible. Faith is like an impetus of trust, a firm and stable commitment to God's plan! God's plan, which has no other goal than our happiness.

The New Testament unveils the infinite love of God for humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Through Him, God does everything possible to make us understand that He loves us, He is on our side, and He is continually acting for our good. Human faith, which is a decision, is thus invited to read in the incarnation of the Son of God the Divine Will to reveal Himself, to make Himself known and to dialogue with us.³ In effect, God, who is completely other, God Almighty, tells us all through His Son. Our faith, faith that can increase, goes through knowledge of this Son: **All of the Word of God is summed up in His Son.** Our decision choosing God goes through intimate belonging to the person of Jesus Christ.

On this subject, I really appreciate Origen's expression, repeated by Pope Benedict XVI in *Verbum Domini*: "*the word was "abbreviated"*"⁴ ... It is difficult to translate this idea into a single word: God was abbreviated, made himself very small, shrunk, condensed, summarized, simplified... to evoke an act of trust from us that echoes His. "*The Son himself is the Word, the Logos: the eternal word became small – small enough to fit into a manger. He became a child, so that the word could be grasped by us.*"⁵

If these signs of God's goodness do not touch our being, our intellect and our hearts, then what could touch us?

3. Cf. Letter to the Hebrews 1:1-2.

4. V.D. n° 12.

5. *Idem*.

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Using an image from the Old Testament, I would like to stress the fact that our faith rests on God Himself. It is He who is at the origin of deciding for faith, it is again He who animates it while respecting our freedom. The image is that of **the eagle** that teaches its young to fly by encouraging them: “*God found them in a wilderness, a wasteland of howling desert. He shielded them, cared for them, guarded them as the apple of his eye. As an eagle incites its nestlings, hovering over its young, so he spread his wings, took them, bore them upon his pinions.*” (Dt 32:10-12). I find a beautiful image of faith in these verses. They say it all! Faith is made possible by God, He is the one who brings it about, He cares for it, and it is He who supports and instructs it. Yet again it is God who is within faith and who protects and encircles it. Then comes flight! The metaphor of the eagle who encourages its nestlings to take flight is simply beautiful and moving. The eagle hovers over its little ones, goes ahead; it uses its entire wingspan, and finally it takes its eaglets and carries them on its own wings... Nothing is lacking, but freedom is preserved. Imagine the eaglets from time to time tiring and returning to rest on the wings of the father...how beautiful!!!

Yes, our faith can increase, this is completely possible (as it is also possible that our faith can diminish or, unfortunately, that we lose it); but we must not remain satisfied with our little faith. We should cry out like the father of the child possessed by a demon in the Gospel: “*I do believe! Help my unbelief!*” (Mk 9:24) To further illustrate this attitude, I would like to cite the spiritual experience of a Dominican priest, Ambroise-Marie Carré o.p.⁶: “*One night, in the little room that served as my bedroom, I felt in an incredibly powerful way, allowing no room for hesitation, that I was loved by God and that the life (...) before me was a wonderful gift. Overcome with happiness, I fell to my knees.*” Ambroise-Marie was only 14 years old! But he wasn’t satisfied with a faith established by this mystical experience. He always sought God; “*but rather than living from this truth, he sought new discoveries, new revelations, wanting new contacts by climbing ‘a staircase directed toward heaven’.*”⁷ Not being content with old and eternal truths that

6. *Chaque matin je me réveille*, Paris, Cerf, 1993. Member of the Académie française, chaplain to actors and artists (1908-2004).

7. Abbé Marc Guelfucci, « Sommes-nous spirituels ou fébriles », <http://revue.objections.free.fr/002/002.044.htm>.

are too simple but seeking out new experiences makes our faith deeper, more active and effective. I give you this example of Fr. Ambroise-Marie to encourage you to do the same.

Our founders, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, had a “contagious” faith (this will be repeated to you over and over again during these days, so I won’t insist on it). They sought God and tasted throughout their lives that the love of God always takes the initiative and that “*the love of our God is always at work.*”⁸ From this point of view, they are mystics.

Be careful! By our “little faith”, we run the risk of discouraging and disappointing men and women in distress!

II. HOW CAN WE MAKE FAITH GROW IN US?

If the apostles asked the Lord for more faith (Lk 17:5) it’s because growth in faith is possible; moreover, it is required and expected by the master. Where are we with this? Especially we ourselves as consecrated persons, who made the choice to follow the Lord in a more radical way! Where are we in relation to growth in faith?

It’s true that there’s no magic formula. Alas! Faith is a gift from God and at the same time a decision by man (and woman) who choose to respond freely to His loving initiative. This decision can be cultivated! The Lord whom we choose to follow is like the woman in the parable of the yeast and the dough: the Kingdom of faith, says Jesus, “*is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until the whole batch of dough was leavened.*” (Lk 13:21) The only purpose of the yeast is to make the dough expand; it is the same for faith. If God sows the seed of faith in us, it is so that it will increase and bear much fruit.

Saint Augustine sums up what has just been said in a few words: “*Believers strengthen themselves by believing.*”⁹ Faith is strengthened and increases by believing and by sharing it. This is simple, logical

8. Expression used by Patrice de la Tour du Pin (1911-1975), French poet

9. *De utilitate credendi*, 1,2

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and true: Pope Benedict XVI wrote about St. Augustine's statement: *"The saintly Bishop of Hippo had good reason to express himself in this way. As we know, his life was a continual search for the beauty of the faith until such time as his heart would find rest in God. His extensive writings, in which he explains the importance of believing and the truth of the faith, continue even now to form a heritage of incomparable riches, and they still help many people in search of God to find the right path towards the "door of faith".*"¹⁰ *The pope concludes by saying: "... there is no other possibility for possessing certitude with regard to one's life apart from self-abandonment, in a continuous crescendo, into the hands of a love that seems to grow constantly because it has its origin in God."*¹¹

I draw your attention to the phrase **"in a continuous crescendo"**. Isn't this what defines a disciple of Christ? All the baptized, and especially all consecrated persons? Let us ask ourselves, why do I stagnate in my faith life? Why is there this lethargy and routine that often invades our lives as believers? Why, finally, is there this sclerosis of the heart? The expression is close to that of the resurrected Christ to those travelling along the road to Emmaus, in a gentle reproach: "How foolish you are! How slow of heart." (Lk 24:24)

My suggestion of three practical means of growing in faith is not original. They are basic:

a) Prayerful reading of the Word of God

Lectio Divina has come back into the life of the Church, and I am delighted! It returns from a long and prolonged exodus. It is true that in former times, the faithful had such a respect for Holy Scripture that they often kept their distance¹². Today, in contrast, the teaching of the Church with spiritual, theological and pastoral reflection has put the Divine Word back to the center of our life as believers, for all believers. I am convinced that our growth in faith first of all happens through

10. Benedict XVI, *The Door of Faith*, n° 7

11. Idem

12. I repeat something said by Paul Claudel, *La vie intellectuelle* 16, 1948, p. 6. He lived from 1868 to 1955; playwright, poet and essayist; also member of the Académie française.

this. We should remember St. Jerome's beautiful words: *"Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ."*¹³ We now have considerable means at our disposal to allow us to approach and become attached to Holy Scripture (but it is true that we live in a world of unlimited means and unclear goals). May I recommend that you read and study *Dei Verbum* (the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation from Vatican II) and *Verbum Domini* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation by Pope Benedict XVI, 2010), to start with. I invite you to participate in Bible studies that are available in many places.

b) Personal and communal prayer

It's no secret for you or for me that one of the main causes of so many difficulties in consecrated life is the poverty of our spiritual life. We have a fundamental need for intimate communication with the Lord. I am going to use an expression that is intentionally provocative: we need this daily "mouth to mouth" with the Lord, this face to face time with Him. St. Vincent used several images when he wanted to insist on the need for prayer. For him prayer was "soul", "air", "food", "dew", "reservoir", "fountain of youth", "the sun", "daily bread", "the center of all devotion"... For him, prayer is the soul of action. He worked tirelessly because he prayed unceasingly: that was his secret!

Let's listen to what he told a young confrere, 27 years old Antoine Durand, when he was sent to carry out a difficult mission: *"Something important to which you must faithfully devote yourself is to be closely united with Our Lord in meditation; that's the reservoir where you'll find the instructions you need to carry out the ministry you're going to have. ... You must also have recourse to meditation to ask Our Lord for the needs of those whom you'll be guiding. Rest assured that you'll produce greater results by this means than by any other. Jesus Christ, who must be your model in all your ways of acting, was not satisfied with His sermons, His works, His fasts, His blood, and even His death, but He added meditation to all that."* (Coste XI, 311-312)

I'll just emphasize one thing: *"be closely united with our Lord in meditation"*. This is a point on which we can always make progress,

13. Sermon 179,1

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can't we? We can be sure: when we read the Word of God in a spirit of faith, each of us enters into a dialogue with the Lord!

Vincent de Paul was convinced that “*the grace of vocation depends on prayer*” (Coste III, 532). Do you have any doubts about this? I don't... I confess, however, that I have trouble putting it into practice... O My Savior!

Allow me to make a leap three centuries forward by quoting to you from *Dei Verbum*: “*And let them remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for 'we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine saying'.*”¹⁴ You see that for progress in the spiritual life there aren't separate compartments. Everything is intertwined: prayer, action, contemplation, the Word of God...

In short, the spiritual life is, above all, a constant dialogue with our creator. If we return to the beautiful image of the eagle from Deuteronomy 32:11, we could say that in prayer God is like the eagle who encourages his nestling and soars above his little ones, unfurling his full wingspan. It is He who lifts us up by taking us on His wings, who flies into our human adventures in the person of His Son, but who is always there for us to rest in Him through His Spirit... quite often He carries us on His wings!

More than ever we need to rediscover that only God fulfils the thirst in the heart of every human being, in our hearts. This is something we can be certain about and capable of making our faith and our trust in God increase. Now, to grow in faith, we need silence. God's silence also appears as an important part of the Word of God¹⁵. Very often, God is silent and invites man to greater depths... Silence can be compared to the night, which allows the silent growth of seeds: “*This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how.*” (Mk 4:26-27). God's silence, like that of man, is the extension of a fruitful dialogue!

14. *Dei Verbum* n° 25.

15. *Verbum Domini* n° 21.

c) Liturgy leads us into action.

Note the ending “urgy” in words like “metallurgy”, “surgery” and “liturgy”, indicating a “doing”, and action (from the Greek “ergôn”). Faith grows when it is celebrated, doesn't it? The opposite is also true: whoever does not celebrate his or her faith ends up losing it. Think about the dynamics of our faith. Our faith life sends us back to the celebration of it in the liturgy and the sacraments (especially that of the Eucharist and the Word of God). Why is there so much monotony in our celebrations? It is said that one believes as one celebrates and celebrates as one believes (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). Yes, the Christians we are believe as they celebrate!

Pope Benedict invites us, in his apostolic letter to help us enter the year of faith, to: “*rediscover the content of the faith that is professed, celebrated, lived and prayed, and to reflect on the act of faith, is a task that every believer must make his own, especially in the course of this Year.*”¹⁶ This session is a way of putting into practice the Pope Emeritus' recommendation: to rediscover the content of the faith and to reflect on the act of faith. The Pope gives the example of the Creed that the baptized, in the past, learned by heart: “*Not without reason, Christians in the early centuries were required to learn the creed from memory. It served them as a daily prayer not to forget the commitment they had undertaken in baptism. With words rich in meaning, Saint Augustine speaks of this in a homily on the *redditio symboli*, the handing over of the creed: “the symbol of the holy mystery that you have all received together and that today you have recited one by one, are the words on which the faith of Mother Church is firmly built above the stable foundation that is Christ the Lord. You have received it and recited it, but in your minds and hearts you must keep it ever present, you must repeat it in your beds, recall it in the public squares and not forget it during meals: even when your body is asleep, you must watch over it with your hearts.”*”¹⁷

The celebration of the liturgy expressed the prayerful reading of the Word of God and prayer.

16. Benedict XVI, *The Door of Faith*, n° 9.

17. Benedict XVI, *The Door of Faith*, n° 9 ; Cf. Sermon of Saint Augustine 251,1

III. HOW DO WE MAKE OUR FAITH EFFECTIVE? HOW DO WE MAKE IT BEAR FRUIT?

Let's look in Luke's Gospel (17:1-10) at what comes before and after the disciples' request that the Lord increase their faith (open your Bibles). Four themes are successively taken up without any apparent logical connection. The four themes are these:

- 1° the warning about causing scandal and the fall of one of these little ones (v. 1-3a)
- 2° the forgiveness offered to a brother up to seven times in a single day (v. 3b-4)
- 3° the request for faith and the parable about the mustard seed (a central theme for us, v. 5-6)
- 4° the servant's tireless, gratuitous and unconditional service (v. 7-10)

Do we wonder what the possible connection among them is? When we read these verses one after another, we can discover that each time, it is a question of community life with the personal responsibilities and ministerial duties it entails¹⁸. In fact, from the beginning of chapter 17, the disciples are the ones speaking to Jesus. It is they, in their role as disciples, whom Jesus addresses. We could say that the demands of faith Jesus proposes in these verses influence Christian life inside and outside the community (*ad intra* and *ad extra*). In fact, faith is a force that keeps us from making our brothers and sisters sin, makes us pardon them as many times as necessary while putting ourselves at the service of others without hoping for anything in return.

How can we make our faith active and effective? How can we make it bear fruit? In fact, it is not enough to say that we have faith (to confess), nor is it enough to celebrate it; it is also essential to witness to it. The witness of believers' lives is essential to its credibility. The apostle James is unequivocal: "*What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Will that faith save him?... Faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead. Indeed someone might say, 'You have faith and I have good deeds' Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works.*" (2:14,17-18) "Faith is strengthened by believing," said St.

18. Cf. François Bovon, *Saint Luc* 15,1-19,27, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 2001, p. 119

Augustine; and we could copy his words by saying that the life of faith is putting it into practice. Practice in everyday life, within our human and religious community, in the midst of our responsibilities. Here is another paraphrase of Jesus' response to His disciples "If, with the little faith that you're complaining about, you could get an unimaginable result (that mountains move and trees uproot themselves), all the more reason that, with the same little faith, could you also perfectly fulfil your vocation"¹⁹ within your communities and with regard to your responsibilities.

Faith, which is a gift from God and a response by man, cannot be reduced to a certain number of beliefs or rites or to more or less theoretical content. In that case, faith would become superstition.²⁰ Yes, it's a strong word, but it means what it means! However, professing the faith "*implies public testimony and commitment. A Christian may never think of belief as a private act. Faith is choosing to stand with the Lord so as to live with him. This 'standing with him' points towards an understanding of the reasons for believing. Faith, precisely because it is a free act, also demands social responsibility for what one believes.*"²¹

Do we wonder now if our faith is dynamic and lively enough to penetrate all our human, social, personal, affective, community, intra-ecclesial, and extra-ecclesial dimensions? Do we also wonder why consecrated persons quite often are "light on the outside and darkness on the inside"? Finally, why do we have so much difficulty in witnessing to faith in our local communities?

In all cases, in all circumstances, let us act so that our faith reemerges, resurrects... becomes dynamic and consistent.

Allow me to conclude my reflection this morning with a paragraph from the Pope emeritus Benedict XVI, who, in my opinion, sums up in a wonderful way what I have rather clumsily tried to say:

19. Cf. François Bovon, *Saint Luc* 15,1-19,27, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 2001, p. 119
20. Belief of practice not in conformity with reason or not recognized by a recognized religion.

21. Benedict XVI, *The Door of Faith*, 10

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“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. Indeed, many Christians dedicate their lives with love to those who are lonely, marginalized or excluded, as to those who are the first with a claim on our attention and the most important for us to support, because it is in them that the reflection of Christ’s own face is seen. Through faith, we can recognize the face of the risen Lord in those who ask for our love. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). These words are a warning that must not be forgotten and a perennial invitation to return the love by which he takes care of us. It is faith that enables us to recognize Christ and it is his love that impels us to assist him whenever he becomes our neighbor along the journey of life. Supported by faith, let us look with hope at our commitment in the world, as we await “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13; cf. Rev 21:1).”²²

Father Roberto Gomez, CM

22. The Door of Faith n° 14

The challenge of community life

Whenever I taught the book of Genesis for the seminary students, I always considered with them the nature of goodness. At the beginning, we know that God calls all things into existence and, having done so, God looks at everything which he has made and, as the text says, he saw that it was good; and, in the end, he saw that it was very good. **Everything which God makes is good.** All reality and all human beings are a part of that creation. After God called all things into existence, he said that it is “not good” for the first created human being to be alone, and so God makes a companion for the human being. The fundamental idea is not simply the complementarity of man and woman, but the **necessity for the human to be a social being.** It is not good for us to be without other human beings in our lives. We are not whole. The truest reflection of me is another person who shows me the best and worst in myself. I see in the other my faults as well as my possibilities and this is a holy and good thing. We are meant to live in community.

Remember Psalm 133, which explains community life so simply:

How good it is, how pleasant, where people dwell as one!

Like precious ointment on the head, running down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, upon the collar of his robe.

Like dew of Hermon coming down upon the mountains of Zion. There the LORD has lavished blessings, life for evermore! (Psalm 133)

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The Challenge of Community Life

The Psalmist insists that it is not only a good thing to be part of a human community since we depend on one another, it is also pleasant. He uses the image of rich perfume poured on the head and abundant dew watering the land. Community life is a blessing.

The human community is a gift from God, and religious communities are supposed to be symbols of the Kingdom of God in which all human beings are welcome and at home. We anticipate the joy and fraternity of heaven!

The Church has often reflected, in its writings, on the value of communities and the importance of the common life for consecrated persons. Two documents, *Fraternal Life in Community* (1994) and the Inter-Assemblies Document, *Open to the Transforming Spirit: Wellspring of Prophecy and Hope* (2009) can be useful for us in considering the nature of life in community.

I will organize my presentation around the three traditional images for consecrated life: the Trinity, Jesus and the Disciples, and the Community at Pentecost in the light of Scripture and the directions prompted by the Inter-Assemblies Document 2009-2015.

I. THE TRINITY AND LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

The primary symbol for a life of unity is that of the Trinity. Church teaching has repeatedly turned our attention to this living out of the divine life in absolute oneness and love. At the very heart of God is an intimate communion of persons **bound in love**, and this is the first and fundamental image for the Christian life. One can appreciate how the equality of persons, the commonality of purpose, and the sharing of one divine nature marks the triune God and offers the most profound illustration for the Christian life in community. This willingness to be gathered as one and joined in mutual love can offer a real challenge to those who choose to live the consecrated life, yet it lies at its very center. The consecrated life “*expresses in a particularly vivid way the Trinitarian nature of the Christian life.*” (*Vita Consecrata*, 14) Reflecting on the character of the Trinity draws from us an invitation to ponder some of the challenges of community life: equality, unity, and love.

EQUALITY OF MEMBERS

In the Trinity, the three divine persons are equal. One is not greater or more important than the other. Each shares in the same divine life and power. Within our community, we also need to have that sense of the equality of all the Sisters. Some, of course, are called to carry out particular roles of responsibility from time-to-time, but always temporarily and with the element of service encompassing their task. We insist on the Sister Servants as those who help with governance on the local level, and that spirit extends through the provincial and general level. We are all equals in the community—even with the respect which should be accorded to our older sisters, the understanding which should be granted to our younger sisters, the dependence which accompanies our sisters with special training, all the differences—whatever our particular calling. Our different backgrounds, cultures, and languages all contribute to the richness of our life together but do not separate us from one another. This sense of equality should characterize the way in which we expect to be treated and the way in which we treat one another.

For a long time I have been hoping—and I really do wish—that our Sisters would reach such a degree of respect among themselves that persons outside the community would never know which one is the Sister Servant. (St. Vincent de Paul. CCD XIIIb, 274: Council of June 19, 1647)

We are all Daughters of Charity who assist one another in carrying out our common mission.

UNITED FOR A COMMON PURPOSE

Our triune God works as one for the accomplishment of a single goal to which each divine person contributes in fullness. We, too, work together for a common goal. Our *Constitutions* defines our nature. In the total dedication of our whole life in the Company for the service of those who are poor, we find our direction and focus. We seek that goal together with each Sister contributing what she can, no matter how seemingly important or seemingly insignificant. We work together and we live together and we pray together. As Sisters, we are joined with a common charism and way of life. What no one can accomplish alone,

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we accomplish together with supportive words and actions. We value the contributions of one another and keep our eyes fixed on what we do together, taking responsibility for our common decisions and direction and sacrifices.

“Revitalize participation and co-responsibility to promote at all levels an ongoing attitude of discernment in view of decision-making.” (IAD p. 22)

We move forward together through our sharing and acceptance of a common Gospel mission.

BOUND BY MUTUAL LOVE

In imitation of the Trinity, we are bound together in a mutual love for one another. In presentations on the theology of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is the spirit of love which binds the Father and Son in a triune love. For us, it is not simply a common vision or task which binds us together, but the love which we have for one another. Our Inter-Assemblies Document encourages us to *“build communities where loving and trustful relationships flourish”* (p. 11). This flows from our common life in which we learn to live together and value the gifts and limitations of one another. With sisterly affection, we can depend on one another and we take care of one another in love and all which that implies—through sickness, successes, and failures. The love which we have for one another makes our life and mission possible and worthwhile.

“Physical separation does not prevent spiritual presence among person whom Our Lord has united by the bonds of His holy love. The stronger this love grows within us, the closer it binds us together. . . . This same love gently persuaded you to heed the call to the place to which you are going.” (LdM, SW. L.628b—“To my very dear Sister Carcireux,” Sept 15, 1659)

Summary

The importance of community for the Church and for those consecrated to religious life is highlighted by the communal character of the

Trinity—three divine persons sharing one divine nature. The perfect and equal balance of persons within our Triune God models for us the way in which community should be lived; in community, each person should be valued and respected and treated as an integral part of the whole. The Inter-Assemblies Document describes this as the effort to *“deepen our sense of belonging to the Company and take responsibility for the Company of the future”* (p. 15). If we look to *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we find an extraordinary quote from St. Gregory of Nazianzus as he speaks on the theology of the Trinity to the catechumens of Constantinople:

Above all guard for me this great deposit of faith for which I live and fight, which I want to take with me as a companion, and which makes me bear all evils and despise all pleasures: I mean the profession of faith in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I entrust it to you today. By it I am soon going to plunge you into water and raise you up from it. I give it to you as the companion and patron of your whole life. I give you but one divinity and power, existing one in three, and containing the three in a distinct way. Divinity without disparity of substance or nature, without superior degree that raises up or inferior degree that casts down. . . the infinite co-naturality of three infinities. Each person considered in himself is entirely God. . . the three considered together. . . I have not even begun to think of unity when the Trinity bathes me in its splendor. I have not even begun to think of the Trinity when unity absorbs me. . . (CCC para. 256)

The model of the Trinity offers wondrous encouragement to the common life.

II. JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES

We can imagine Jesus and this assorted band of followers rambling along the roads and visiting villages as they talked and argued and questioned one another. It is an attractive and ordinary picture that presents us an image of the consecrated common life and its challenges.

Let me identify three: living with a diverse group, learning from one another, and dealing with difficulties.

a) LIVING WITH A DIVERSE GROUP OF PEOPLE

The list of names of the disciples offers some hints as to their diversity: different places of origin, different professions; some were related. Some of the disciples were obviously trained with certain professional skills requiring education, and others were simple fishermen. There were clearly differences in political philosophy as well. For example, Matthew's cooperation with the Roman authorities as a tax collector would probably have been a problem for Simon, the Zealot party member. Some probably had deeper roots in the Greek Jewish world, while most emerged from the Hebrew Jewish world. Jesus called all these men to follow him. And they needed to learn to live together.

One can imagine the differences of personalities which emerge at different times. Peter's brashness and willingness to correct Jesus, as well as his desire to defend Jesus before fleeing, tell us a lot about him. We can imagine the uniqueness of his character. Thomas is presented as someone who needs hard proof for belief in the post-Resurrection story; Philip speaks to Jesus about the need to see the Father; the Beloved Disciple is presumed to have a particular intimacy with Jesus; James and John seek places at Jesus' right and left in the kingdom. Judas, of course, questions the wisdom of using costly perfume to wash the feet of Jesus and ultimately betrays him. The disciples are clearly a mixed bunch. And Jesus learns to deal with them and encourage them and make use of the gifts of each. Jesus does not simply call a particular kind of person to follow him, but each one brings his own limitations and abilities.

It is certainly a lesson for us with the diversity of our communities and the gifts which certain Sisters bring or lack: *"Be open to each Sister, with a faith perspective that accepts differences as enriching."* (IAD p. 21)

Learning to appreciate each other's gifts and the ways in which they can be utilized for the common good is important. We are also invited to carry out the ministry of encouragement which allows us to make use of the gifts of another which need to be summoned forth. (The New Testament figure of Barnabas reminds us of this important role for a community.) Sometimes it is only with our encouragement that a Sister can find and exercise her gifts. Being that sort of person for the

community is a true gift for the other and for the Church.

b) LEARNING FROM ONE ANOTHER

The best way to come to know myself is through another. When I see the weaknesses in another, I can begin to see the possibility for that weakness in myself and the different ways in which it is manifest. When I see the strength in the other, I can see that possibility within myself as well—what I can really do with application and desire. You show me who I am and what I can be. It is a blessing of community life.

"Right from the beginning, it is necessary to prepare to be not only consumers of community, but above all its builders; to be responsible for each other's growth; to be open and available to receive the gift of the other; to be able to help and to be helped; to replace and to be replaced." (Fraternal Life in Community [FLIC], 24)

One wonders how much the disciples learned from Jesus. They were wise enough to ask him about prayer, and he teaches them the "Our Father;" at other times they ask him questions about this matter or that matter. The opportunities to learn from Jesus must have been especially valuable to them. Oftentimes, it is only afterwards that they realize the implications of some of Jesus' teachings with the gift of the Holy Spirit. But that is okay. For many of us, we only realize the importance of some lessons after we have lived for a while.

The disciples undoubtedly also learned a lot from each other. One can imagine the kinds of conversations which took place among them as they reflected upon some of the lessons and actions of Jesus. The New Testament tells us that they puzzled over what Jesus meant by "resurrection from the dead," that they were surprised when Jesus told them that it was difficult for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, that they argued among themselves who was the greatest, that they were angered when James and John tried to get special places in the Kingdom with Jesus. When Jesus asked the disciples who people said that he was and who they thought him to be, Peter responds; the other disciples probably listened and learned. Any question asked of Jesus with its response, could have been their question and response.

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It can be the same for us when we allow the questions and the lessons to be addressed to us and when we learn from each other. It is in a community of dialogue and sharing that we learn from each other. Their experiences are opportunities to learn: their successes, their mistakes, their progress...

“Intensify the quality of our community sharing, in particular apostolic reflection, in an atmosphere of dialogue and listening to one another.” (IAD p. 21)

Louise understood this principle and recommended it to her sisters:

“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 by 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)

The disciples learned from Jesus and from each other; this should be true for us as well and an encouragement to a sharing of life and stories. As we ask questions of one another, as we listen to answers, as we share our opinions, we broaden our own experience and contribute to mutual growth. That is a real blessing of community life.

c) DEALING WITH DIFFICULTIES

Some of the best lessons that the disciples learned with Jesus arose from the difficulties they encountered, confirming, in way, the limited truth from Nietzsche, *“that which does not kill us makes us stronger.”* When Peter walks on the water and then takes his eyes off Jesus and begins to sink, he learns something. When James and John invite Jesus to call down fire from heaven to destroy the city which has rejected them and Jesus refuses, they learn something. When Jesus casts the moneychangers out of the Temple area and causes some disturbance among the Jewish leaders, the disciples learn something. When the disciples pick grain on the Sabbath, when Jesus works on the Sabbath,

when Jesus touches those who are unclean, when Jesus speaks to a strange woman, when Jesus eats with tax collectors, when Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, when Jesus summons the disciples to feed the hungry crowd, and so on: all are learning experiences which arise from disagreements and misunderstandings. As the disciples work through these events, they come to know Jesus and themselves and one another better.

You could list some demanding circumstances which Jesus and the disciples confront and which gives rise to a lesson for you. Actually, as I think about it, it is tough to think easily of a difficult situation which does not give rise to a lesson, or an important lesson which does not arise from a difficult situation. Should not the cross be placed firmly and centrally within this category—no greater love.....?

How about us? Do we learn from dealing with difficult situations with our Sisters? Do they make us wiser and gentler and more compassionate and understanding? Do they teach us about mercy and forgiveness and our own weaknesses?

“Courageously and honestly address the challenges of community life, availing of the benefits of reconciliation.” (IAD p. 21)

Do the difficult situations of the apostolate make us more sympathetic towards the people whom we serve and the circumstances with which they must deal each day? The experience of community taught to us by the disciples as they walked with Jesus is a rich source of education for us.

III. THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AT PENTECOST

The story of the early Church at Pentecost is the third example often placed in ecclesial documents to illustrate the character of a Christian community. Jesus has been raised from the dead and has ascended to the Father. The Christian Community, including Mary, is now gathered together waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit who comes to fill them with the light of grace and the indwelling presence of God. I will again suggest three circumstances which challenge us: a spirit-filled community, an ecclesial community, and a community for mission.

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a) A COMMUNITY FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

The community gathered together for Pentecost receives the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“Before being a human construction, religious community is a gift of the Spirit. It is the love of God, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, from which religious community takes its origin and is built as a true family gathered together in the Lord’s name.” (FLIC 8)

Jesus had promised this gift to the Church through his disciples: *“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you. . . The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name--he will teach you everything and remind you of all that (I) told you” (Jn 14:16-17, 26)*

Jesus tells his disciples that the Spirit will explain to them all which he has said to them. To be a community filled with the Holy Spirit is to be a community which is always open to and eager for new possibilities, new ways to express and live the Gospel message. How exciting and blessed it is to be a community that possesses and responds to the promptings of the Spirit! A community which opens itself to this transforming Spirit is one that knows its limitations and its need for assistance. As the first Christians expected this gift of the Spirit, so must we. Our Inter-Assemblies Document holds this encouragement out in its very title: *“Open to the Transforming Spirit: Wellspring of Prophecy and Hope.”*

We know the gifts which are associated with the Spirit: hope and wisdom and understanding and fortitude and knowledge and piety and fear of the Lord. The need for these gifts in any community, and particularly in a Christian community committed to living Christian values together, is clear. The Spirit enables the community to seek and apply the teachings of Jesus in their daily living, to make good decisions and to be faithful to its heritage.

b) AN ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY

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We gather together as Church. Listen to what has come to characterize the first Christian community filled with God’s Spirit:

“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” (Acts 4:32-35)

The sense of sharing and responsibility for one another is beautifully illustrated in this brief passage. The members of this Christian community had so interiorized their sense of family that the need of any one was accepted as the responsibility of everyone. This image might describe our own communities: we want to share our assets with generosity and not be so possessive of particular resources that they become our own to the exclusion of the legitimate needs of others. This runs contrary to the common current desire to protect oneself against the uncertainties of the future. We face the future as a community with the intention of providing for it together.

This ecclesial community is also described in the Acts of the Apostles in one extraordinary sentence describing the early Christian Church: *“They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42).* These four elements that suggest how the life of the Church was sustained and promoted are also suggested in our *Constitutions* as well as our Inter-Assemblies Document. Let me draw our attention in a particular way to the third element: the breaking of the bread, the term used for the Eucharist by the early Christians.

From the very beginning, the character of the community was defined by the way in which it gathered for the Eucharist: who was invited and who was excluded, how Jesus was welcomed and worshiped. In the history of the Church, the Eucharist has taught much about our theology and worship. In the current era, we speak about it as the “source and summit” of our Christian life. It must be so for our communities. It

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must be the place where we celebrate our unity and equality, the place where we hunger and satisfy our hunger for God.

“The coming of the Holy Spirit, first gift to believers, brought about the unity willed by Christ. Poured out on the disciples gathered in the Upper Room with Mary, the Spirit gave visibility to the Church, which, from the very first moment, is characterized as fraternity and communion in the unity of one heart and one soul (cf. Acts 4:32).” (FLIC 9)

c) A COMMUNITY FOR MISSION

At Pentecost, the First Christians received a gift which sent them forth: they began to speak in tongues. This was the beginning of the proclamation of the Gospel.

“When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.” (Acts 2:1-4)

Many of the documents of the Church acknowledge that a religious community is a community for mission. For example, we read in “Fraternal Life in Community” (1994):

“Recall that the apostolic mission is entrusted in the first place to the community and that this often entails conducting works proper to the institute. Dedication to this kind of community apostolate helps a consecrated person mature and grow in his or her particular way of holiness.” (FLIC 40d)

The men and women who comprise religious communities prepare themselves for service to others. The Company of the Daughters of Charity is an apostolic community. In our Inter-Assemblies Document we proclaim that we will “witness to the love of Christ through our service, our lives, and our proximity with persons living in poverty” (IAD p. 13). The vows of the Daughters of Charity proclaim that

they will give themselves “entirely and in community to the service of Christ in their brothers and sisters who are poor” (C. 7a). Charity in action defines and directs the character of our charism in every age and in every place.

CONCLUSION

By our very nature, human beings are communal; we are created to live together. This is the context for the Eucharist. The Church invites Christian communities, and in particular the consecrated life, to progress after the model of the Trinity, symbol of unity and diversity. The first Christian community calls for sharing and acting in the service of others. Communities are gathered by a mutual love which reaches out towards the divine and around towards the human. The Holy Spirit plays an essential role in creating, sustaining, and guiding communities as well as individuals. The consecrated life is strengthened and renewed by the persons who embrace it together. The document *Vita Consecrata* teaches:

“Consecrated persons, who become “of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32) through the love poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 5:5), experience an interior call to share everything in common: material goods and spiritual experiences, talents and inspirations, apostolic ideals and charitable service: “In community life, the power of the Holy Spirit at work in one individual passes at the same time to all. Here not only does each enjoy his own gift, but makes it abound by sharing it with others; and each one enjoys the fruits of the other’s gift as if they were his own”.” (VC 42)

There are challenges in living a community life, but these are more than balanced by the blessings which flow upon those who answer its call. We pray that the Spirit who brings us together in community may give us the desire and ability to live it well and to provide a support for the Sisters with whom we live, as well as for those who are poor whom we serve.

Father Patrick Griffin, CM
Director General

Called to be witnesses of Evangelical radicality

Introduction

F

Witnesses of
Evangelical
radicality

It is a joy to meet you, Sisters of between 11 and 24 years vocation, who have come from different countries and Provinces of the Company.

In addition to your group, there are another 1692 Sisters throughout the world who belong to your vocation age group; they share your dreams and your hope and, no doubt, confront the same challenges that you do.

This encounter, as you know, has as its goal spiritual and Vincentian revitalization. Indeed, this is the title that we chose in the General Council during our discernment about formation at the international level. This means that during this session you will enjoy a very special opportunity to look back on the years you have spent in the Company, to thank the Lord for the gift of your vocation and open your heart to the grace that the Lord does not fail to send us, each of us, each day.

Why are you here? For a break: “*come away awhile.*”¹

I would like to invite you to take a pause on the side of the road, to meditate in the secret of your heart in order to examine, with the eyes of faith, how your journey has progressed since your first call. This will allow you to see where you are now and where the Holy Spirit is

1. Mk 6:31

leading you. I am sure that you keenly desire to listen to the Lord in the silence of your heart and to experience His love for you.

You are well aware that the Company, since its origins, has opted for a radical adherence to the gospel in order to follow Christ and carry on His mission.² Do you often ask yourselves, in reflection and prayer, how you live your vocation, where your energy goes, what your preoccupations and priorities are, how you feel on a spiritual level? When all is said and done, this is a matter of a review of life, of seeing how you respond to the call of the Lord and what you do to cultivate the gift of vocation, this treasure that all of us, whatever our age, carry in earthen vessels.³

I would like share with you some very simple reflections on the theme I have chosen, “Called to be witnesses of evangelical radicality” with those who are poor, in the Church and in the world.

This reflection will be developed in three phases:

- I. Evangelical radicality from the perspective of love
- II. The call to witness to evangelical radicality
- III. From the past to the present day: witnesses to a radical response to the gospel

I. EVANGELICAL RADICALITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LOVE

1.1 LET YOURSELVES BE FASCINATED BY JESUS CHRIST

At the beginning of this reflection, I would like to evoke the Gospel passage in which Jesus invites his disciples to go out into the deep⁴ because I am sure this image will help us to grasp what following Jesus radically, leaving everything for Him, implies.

Let’s travel in our mind to the seashore (or to the place where you clearly perceived the Lord’s call). At your side, Jesus invites you anew, as He did that day, to climb into the boat, to move away from the banks and head for the open sea, the high seas.

2. Cf. C. 8b

3. Cf. 2 Cor 4:7

4. Cf. Lk 5:4

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Evangelical radicality, in fact, has as its starting point, its fulcrum, the joyful, wondrous experience of the encounter with Jesus, an attraction and fascination with His person. After encountering Christ, nothing is the same. It is a decisive experience that changes us and leaves its mark on us forever.

The Gospels show us how first Andrew and John, and then Peter, Philip, Nathaniel, and Matthew let themselves be fascinated by Jesus Christ. Later, many more people met the Lord Jesus, and their life changed totally because *“they left everything and followed him.”*⁵

Leaving everything out of love is the key to evangelical radicality. It seems important to me that we understand clearly that the heart of radicality is love. Radicality is distinguished from rigidity, from tension, from stoicism focused on the human will and from elation; it is also different from perfectionism, which can pose a threat to all of us.

For us as Daughters of Charity, living evangelical radicality involves going to the root of our vocation and going deeper into the call to love Jesus Christ without putting anything above this love, for the service of the poor.

Saint Vincent perfectly describes this radical response to the call when he says that, in order to be a Daughter of Charity, one must leave everything: father, mother, possessions, plans for the future and renounce oneself. This is what the Lord teaches us in the Gospel.⁶

Have you left on the bank everything that could keep you from living your vocation with generous and joyful love?

1.2 WATCH OVER THE TREASURE OF YOUR VOCATION

Whoever discovers the treasure of her vocation and receives it as the most wonderful gift ever received in her life looks after it and remains vigilant so that nothing and no one can separate her from the love of

Christ.⁷ Do you radiate the joy of someone who has found the treasure of her life? Do you guard your treasure well?

In order to care for this treasure, we must cultivate a deep prayer life, nourished by listening to the Word of God and by the liturgical and sacramental life (especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation) because *“if you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.”*⁸

I would like to bring out the importance of the Eucharist because it is nourishment for our vocation. Saint Louise often expressed her love for Communion and her concern to prepare well for it. Her thinking is remarkably subtle: *“The other reason that we have for giving ourselves to God to communicate worthily is the gratitude we should have for the great love which He reveals by giving Himself to us in Holy Communion. We can only do so by testifying a reciprocal love of Our Lord, by desiring with all our heart to receive Him since He wishes with all His heart to give Himself to us. His love appeared to me to be all the greater from the fact that, His Incarnation having sufficed for our Redemption, it would seem as if He gives Himself to us in Holy Communion solely for our sanctification, not merely by the application of the merits of His Incarnation and death, but also by the communication which His goodness desires to make to us of all the actions of His life, and to establish us in the practice of His virtues, desiring to make us like unto Himself by His love.”*⁹ We find Saint Louise’s thought in Constitution 19 b: *“The Sisters are conscious of the vital importance of the Eucharist, center of their life and mission and an indispensable meeting each day with Christ and their brothers and sisters.”*

How do you celebrate the Eucharist? Do you have a moment to prepare your heart, mind and body and then a few minutes of silence for adoration and thanksgiving? Do you regularly receive the sacrament of Reconciliation?

Saint Vincent encouraged the Sisters to draw near to this fire in order to, first of all, let themselves be flooded with the love of Christ and

5. Cf. Lk 5:11

6. Cf. Saint Vincent de Paul, Conference of July 5, 1640; Coste IX, p. 13

7. Rom 8:35

8. Is 7:9

9. Saint Louise de Marillac, Spiritual Writings, A. 71, p. 779

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then, through their charity and good example, attract to Christ those they served. *“The person who has made a good communion does everything well.”*¹⁰

Union with Christ, nourished by daily Communion and prayer, will help you to discover His presence even in moments of difficulty or disillusionment, as was the case with the apostles who, after a night of fruitless effort, went to Him to tell Him about their disappointment.¹¹

In your vocation journey, you have surely experienced certain difficulties, periods of darkness and temptations. In such times of crisis, it is necessary to understand clearly what is happening and look for the causes; pray in trust, seek out assistance, let yourself be guided. You have a Sister Servant at your side who accompanies the Sisters of the local community in their daily vocation journey. Open yourselves up to her. The Visitatrix and the Provincial Director are also available to help you.

Take your own pulse and regularly check if your vocational journey is maturing and developing, which is a sign of good health. If you feel symptoms of tepidness or cooling off, quickly apply remedies before it is too late.

Because of your age and your years of vocation, you find yourselves at a critical stage that requires taking a clear stand in relation to the demands of your vocation. Fidelity to vocation involves clear ruptures and specific detachments. Sometimes, the words “rupture” and “detachment” surprise or can even frighten when someone has not yet gone deeply into the evangelical value of the Lord’s call to leave everything for love of Him. When this is understood well and the vocational ideal of the Daughters of Charity is taken on, these words become meaningful, because it is a question of ruptures and detachments that are born from love and make love increase. The person who loves is ready for anything.

10. Saint Vincent, Conference of August 18, 1647; Coste IX, p. 261
11. Cf. Lk 5:5

Allow me to repeat that your main concern should be a preoccupation with being faithful to your vocation. You can count on the support of your local community to learn to go forward and live in authenticity, joy, availability and unconditional giving. Love life together, participate with joy and interest in community life, and make your Sisters happy.

Saint Louise encouraged the Sisters to maintain affectionate and cordial relationships: *“I praise God with all my heart for the grace His goodness has granted you to be a source of edification where He has seen fit to place you. However, be sure to thank Him for it through the practice of the virtues He asks of you, especially great cordiality and mutual understanding among you. Am I not wrong in recommending this virtue to you, my dear Sisters, because without it you would be unable to be not only good Daughters of Charity, but even good Christians?”*¹²

A valuable tool for growth in your vocation is formation, which is a path of conversion, source of revitalization and renewal with a view to the evangelical radicality of your gift, the quality of your community life and your witness.

Take great care to continue the practice of personal reading and reflection. Carefully prepare for community meetings, for sharing and formation, and participate actively. Conscientiously cultivate interiority, an essential factor for personal equilibrium and vocational harmony. It is essential that you study in depth – as a local community if possible – the documents of Church, reread and interiorize the writings of the Founders, be imbued with the spirit of the Constitutions and Statutes, and be attentive to the Company’s orientations.

In addition, I would like to emphasize the importance of ongoing formation, the ability to learn from daily life (self-formation), which is a school of formation and an essential dynamic for living evangelical radicality. Remain deeply rooted in the love of Jesus Christ; in this way, you will courageously confront difficulties that arise.

1.3 SEEK WHAT PLEASES THE LORD THROUGH EVANGELICAL DISCERNMENT

12. Saint Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, L. 276, p. 314

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You are part of a generation misled by ideological trends which, like a powerful tsunami, shake our current world, undermine what we thought was very solid and force us to make appropriate discernment. I would like to insist on the need to use evangelical discernment in order to live radicality and to clearly confront the challenges of today's world.

Discernment is a permanent attitude, a way of living everyday life attentive to the Spirit. Saint Paul encouraged the recipients of his letters not to conform themselves to or model themselves on this world but to be transformed by the renewal of their minds so that they might discern *“what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*¹³

Evangelical discernment is a path toward love. We know that love that is alive finds nothing difficult, and even if it finds difficulties, it transforms them into something gentle and pleasant. Saint Louise said to the Sisters sent to Serqueux: *“Be so stout-hearted that you find nothing difficult for the most holy love of God...”*¹⁴ The person who loves is able to make difficult situations easy.

In a society where values and counter-values are both evident and sometimes confused with each other, it seems essential to me that you, Sisters of 11 to 24 years vocation, be aware of the need for discernment in order to thoroughly test current realities and hold fast to what is good.¹⁵

You can see in today's world how much people thirst for spirituality and, at the same time, how much ground secularism is gaining. In many circles, one breathes a sort of neo-paganism whose idols are called pleasure-seeking, image-worship and thirst for power.

Today, some trends in spirituality stray from the true faith, from the Creed of the Church. Among them, I point out the enneagram, which does not conform to the Catholic faith and has no scientific basis but nonetheless enjoys a certain popularity. The faith of the Church teaches us that Jesus Christ is the one who reveals the truth about the human person and gives us the grace to live life to the full.

13. Rom 12:2

14. Saint Louise de Marillac, Spiritual Writings, L. 344, p. 139

15. Cf. 1 Th 5:21

Discernment is educational and leads to decision making. It is a path for true freedom against the tactics of the evil one. If we let ourselves be enlightened and led by the Spirit, we will be able to support everything that contributes to the dignity of the human person, the defense of life, the promotion of justice, peace and solidarity. We will be prepared to adopt a critical attitude toward counter-values opposed to life; we will be able to react courageously to the traps of secularism, the temptation to hedonism and to all forms of injustice.

Our daily life is also subject to discernment concerning, for example, life style and how we use our time. The Inter-Assemblies Document asks us to readjust the rhythm of our lives to nurture our being as Daughters of Charity.¹⁶ Review of life¹⁷ is a daily exercise of evangelical discernment in order to discover the action of the Lord in our life, to let ourselves be guided by the Spirit and grow in fidelity.

I'd like to make some comments on the difference between what's normal and what's frequent, that is, what is done habitually. We might think that what happens frequently is normal, but if we discern properly, we see that isn't the case. We are convinced that the Gospel and the Constitutions and Statutes are the reference for discernment, not fads, what others do, nor what we frequently see done.

II. THE CALL TO GIVE WITNESS TO EVANGELICAL RADICALITY

2.1 LIVING YOUR VOCATION WITH AUTHENTICITY AND CONSISTENCY

Authenticity is related to truth; as for consistency, this means adjusting one's life to the vocational project one has chosen. Authenticity and consistency reveal one's identity. Both go further than words and are seen in attitudes and actions that are themselves a way of evangelizing.

When someone's identification with her vocation is weak, she lives in a superficial way, like a social worker who carries out humanitarian

16. IAD, 2009-2015, p. 20

17. Statute 4

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of service of the poor without being completely identified with being a Daughter of Charity.

If identity is weakened, personal projects will take precedence over the mission of the Company. The sister's vocation drags along unenthusiastically and, imperceptibly, she slips down the slope of routine, passivity and indifference; disenchantment occurs, identity crumbles, fades; sometimes it even becomes a source of embarrassment, and she tries to hide it. Do you feel happy and proud to be Daughters of Charity?

When we lose sight of the ideal of following Jesus Christ and belonging totally to Him by serving Him in the person of the poor, alarming symptoms crop up: individualism or superficiality; mediocre work that leads to doing the minimum, looking for the easiest way, choosing what is most convenient; lack of interest and passivity in community life. At this point, effort no longer has any meaning, and we think more about rights than about responsibilities. We look to play the starring role in ministry, and this leads to practicing a profession or to acting out of routine, without charismatic fervor.

It would be a good idea for each of you to ask yourselves about the way you live your vocation as well as how the people around you see you living it. Do they see a Daughter of Charity, or instead a nurse, teacher, educator or social worker? Once, a Sister was told something in confidence that is touching in its innocence: "Sister," one of her students told her, "I can only imagine you as a Sister."

Let us try to show others the signs of our vocational identity and belonging to the Company, the family traits common to the Daughters of Charity - the way of behaving, thinking, living, and serving that characterizes us where we live. When love of vocation is well-rooted, then spirituality is fully integrated, lines of communication are open, and the sense of belonging is lived in communion with all the members of the Company. Are you recognized as Daughters of Charity wherever the Company has sent you?

I suggest in your personal reflection and in the group work you are going to do, that you make a sort of sketch, a description of identity

and belonging, indicating the essential characteristic traits.

2.2 FOLLOWING THE LIFE PROJECT OF THE BEATITUDES AND PRACTICING THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS

The Catechism of the Church explains that the Beatitudes are at the heart of Jesus' preaching. Their proclamation takes up the promises made to the chosen people since the time of Abraham. They fulfil them by relating them no longer merely to the possession of a territory, but to the Kingdom of heaven. They depict the countenance of Jesus Christ and portray His charity.¹⁸

The Beatitudes respond to the desire for happiness that God has placed in the human heart. The beatitude we are promised places decisive moral choices before us. It invites us to purify our hearts and to seek the love of God above all else. It teaches us that true happiness is not found in riches, well-being, success, human fame, power, or in any human achievement, however beneficial it may be, but in God alone, the source of every good and of all love.

The Beatitudes change and broaden the horizons of our way of thinking, feeling and acting. They are a life project related to attitudes, actions and relationships with others. The spirit of the Beatitudes offers newness, beauty and wonder. The blessed are those who are poor, persecuted and afflicted. The meek, merciful and the pure of heart are strong; those who are humiliated, misunderstood or persecuted are the ones who triumph.

A poor heart is able to suffer and sympathize. It lives in peace and joy in the midst of difficulties, even persecution. The poor person holds on to God as her only treasure, and in her heart, there is nothing that separates her from God. Meekness is letting oneself be guided simply by God's will without resistance. The person who weeps is one who suffers for others, struggles and prays to fight the sin of the world. A pure way of judging and a compassionate and merciful heart make life and living together more attractive. Radiating peace and acting with justice build a better humanity.

18. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1716-1717

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The Founders lived deeply imbued with the evangelical spirit, their eyes fixed on Jesus Christ. The main virtue of Saint Vincent, according to his first biographer, Abelly, was the imitation of Jesus Christ, whom he kept always before his eyes in order to conform himself to Him. Jesus was his book and mirror. He looked at himself in Him at all times. He liked to ask himself how our Lord would have acted. *Quid nunc Christus?*

Saint Louise had the practice of reading the Gospel daily, and had it written into the Sisters' order of the day in order to encourage them to practice virtue and to serve those who are poor, in imitation of the Son of God.¹⁹

Saint Vincent and Saint Louise wanted the Company to be animated by the evangelical spirit. *"It's God's Will that the Daughters of Charity devote themselves particularly to the practice of humility, charity, and simplicity,"*²⁰ this evangelical spirit that animates the servant of those who are poor. With this same spirit, the Daughters of Charity adopt and practice the evangelical counsels in order to accomplish the purpose of the Company: the service of persons who are poor, after the example of Jesus, servant and evangelizer.

Is our life imbued with the lifeblood of the Gospel that leads us to live the Beatitudes and evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, which we take on through the vows?

In the life of the Church, the vows have always been a spiritual impetus, an expression of radicality in following Christ. By making and renewing vows, the Daughters of Charity confirm their commitment, a total gift to God, a radical way of following Christ, by serving Him in the person of the poor. This given life is a response to God's call to live the demands of the Gospel that are part of one's baptismal consecration.

As we all know, service is the expression of one's total gift to God in the Company and, at the same time, a vision of faith and the concrete expression of that love.²¹ If the vision of faith is weakened, service is indistinguishable from social volunteerism, like that of people who

19. Cf. Saint Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 55, p. 726

20. Saint Vincent de Paul, Conference of February 9, 1653, *Coste IX*, p. 469

21. Cf. C. 16b

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."*²²

It is essential, therefore, that we develop the mystique of service that leads to recognizing, contemplating and loving Christ in the person who is poor.²³ It is absolutely essential that we fully live the evangelical attitudes of a servant, an attitude of unconditional giving and joyful dependence. This will help the poor discover that God loves them and that He is with them. We should make clear our motivations and the "why" behind what we do, even going as far as explicitly proclaiming Jesus Christ and His Gospel, as the best service we can offer persons who are poor.²⁴

In the context of a hedonistic culture, the evangelical counsel of chastity is a gift that *"frees the heart and gives it the dimensions of the heart of Jesus Christ for an unconditional gift and total availability in the service of those who are poor."*²⁵

The total gift to God involves offering our entire person, what we are and what we have. The time that is given to us no longer belongs to us; health, talents, strength and potential are all transformed into a joyful offering.

I'd like to note an important point, that of affections that can drift into attachments and dependencies. It would be a good idea to periodically review where you are on this level, because where your thoughts, feelings, affections and heart are, there your treasure is. I would like to encourage you to look clearly at what attachments and dependencies you should break off. The Lord never stops calling you to live the radicality of total giving.

In the context of our global consumer society, Daughters of Charity live poverty after the example of Christ who assumed it in a spirit of abandonment to the Father and as a sign of His mission in the world.²⁶

22. Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, n. 14

23. Cf. C. 10a

24. Cf. C. 10, C. 24

25. C. 29a

26. Cf. C. 30a

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Poverty and trust in Divine Providence are solid cornerstones for the Company. Saint Vincent tells us, “*As long as you keep this Rule and love poverty, God will bless the Company,*”²⁷

This is an urgent appeal to accept the living conditions of those who are poor, misunderstandings, suffering and difficulties, in solidarity with them, identified with these people who are excluded from a society who do not value them. Those who are poor put up with everything! And we should be happy to be treated like them, never better than they are treated.

In the context of our current society that puts a high value on liberty and personal autonomy, the Daughters of Charity, following Christ and under the influence of the Holy Spirit, make to God the offering of their freedom.²⁸

The vocation of a Daughter of Charity will hold firm if she lives obedience, if she seeks and accepts God’s will. “*As long as the Company has this holy virtue, it will subsist, but, when it doesn’t, it will crumble.*”²⁹

I am sure that obedience is not always easy for you, and I’d like you to share with each other on this topic and ask questions. I hope you have had the opportunity to read the document on the service of authority and obedience, published by the Congregation of Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life.

2.3 RADIATING THE JOY OF BELIEVING AND GIVING REASONS FOR YOUR HOPE

Radiating joy and giving reason for the hope that is in you; this is a great challenge! It is said that the world is sick from lack of hope and that joy is bought at a very high price. What is the reason for this? Why?

We have the terrible sight of every type of violence everywhere: wars, terrorism, the inability to live together, and abuse. In each of your countries, living together in society is complicated by major economic

27. Saint Vincent, Conference of August 20, 1656, Coste X, p. 179

28. C. 31a

29. Saint Vincent, Conference of May 23, 1655, Coste X, p. 63

and social differences between persons and the lack of solidarity, justice and peace on the level of international relations. All this tarnishes joy and weakens hope.

Pope Francis, in his Palm Sunday homily, invited us to live in joy, to fight against discouragement and sadness. True joy is born from meeting Jesus. We are aware that He accompanies us, and this is where we find our joy and the hope that we must share with the world. Let us give everyone the joy of faith. “*Christ’s cross embraced with love never leads to sadness, but to joy.*”³⁰

Joy and hope have their source in a life centered on Christ, unified in Him. These things are contagious; they shine out. Let us rediscover the joy of believing, the enthusiasm of communicating the faith, of sharing it.³¹ Let us believe, believe even more in the strength of the Spirit that can, working through our poverties and weaknesses, change the world.

Joy and hope allow us to look at reality in a positive way and note what is constructive and beautiful in all events. Hope “*is a gift that changes the life of the one who receives it, as the experience of so many men and women saints demonstrates.*”³² How forcefully Saint Paul addressed the Christians in Thessalonica: “*Do not grieve as do others who have no hope.*”³³

I would like to encourage you to radiate joy and bear witness to your hope. Continue to work with enthusiasm and perseverance in youth and vocation ministry. New generations need guides who mark out clear and lofty goals. They need to receive guidance that helps them ask questions about the meaning of their life and the question of their vocation.

Our Constitutions emphasize the role of witnessing to the generous gift of self and to joy in vocation ministry: “*Each Sister, striving to live fully her personal response to the Lord, strengthens the fidelity of her Sisters and does her part to foster other vocations.*”³⁴

30. Pope Francis, homily, March 24, 2013

31. Cf. Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 7

32. Benedict XVI, *Angelus* of December 2, 2007

33. 1 Th 4:13

34. C. 59

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Continue to open up paths for young people, by showing them the beauty of following Christ and the greatness of serving those who are poor. We have to promote a vocation culture that will recognize and accept that profound human aspiration which brings a person to discover that Christ alone can tell us the whole truth about life.³⁵

Help them to become aware of their responsibility in the Church and to commit themselves to the service of the most marginalized.³⁶ Talk to them about your vocation; show them through the language of your life that Daughters of Charity are happy. May those who are poor and those around you realize that Jesus Christ truly is your only hope!

III FROM THE PAST TO TODAY: WITNESSES TO EVANGELICAL RADICALITY

3.1 WITH THE STRENGTH OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Jesus' apostles and disciples experienced a radical change in their lives when the Holy Spirit descended on them on the day of Pentecost.

It is fascinating to note the radical change that occurred in the lives of Peter, Paul, Saint Augustine and other saints at the time of their encounter with Jesus Christ. We see how His call touched their hearts and how they couldn't offer any resistance to him. They let themselves be captivated by His love, and they left everything for Him.

The transforming strength of the Holy Spirit is seen in them. Neither rejection, imprisonment, persecution, martyrdom nor death separates them from the love of Christ.

3.2 URGED ON BY THE CHARITY OF CHRIST

Now, let us turn towards Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. They gave witness to evangelical radicality. Their life, totally given to God, and their total commitment, inspired and motivated by love, spoke forcefully. Nothing and no one could restrain their desire, enthusiasm,

and joy in serving persons who were poor, as urgently as one runs to a fire.³⁷

Our first Sisters, as well, like so many other generations after them, were perfectly able to assimilate the message of evangelical radicality that our Founders lived out.

Marguerite Naseau lived her vocation, her total self-giving, with a spirit of sacrifice to the point of heroism. *"She often fasted for entire days and stayed in places where only the walls were left standing. Sometimes she worked day and night teaching not only little girls but even the older ones, doing so with no motive of vanity or self-interest and no other intention than the glory of God."*³⁸

Jeanne Dalmagne, whose charity was not confined to Nanteuil, wanted, with the permission of her Superiors, to serve the inhabitants of the neighboring villages despite her fatigue and illnesses. Sister Andrée reproached herself for having taken too much pleasure in serving the poor: *"I used to fly, I was so overjoyed to serve them."*³⁹

Let's go off to Brazil, in 1853, where just a few months after the Sisters' arrival, a yellow fever epidemic killed seven of them. They were martyrs of Charity because they refused the authority's offer to help them withdraw. We are ready to die, said the Sisters, rather than leave the service of the poor.

A few years later in China, from 1876-1877, six Sisters died from typhus fever. They were also martyrs of Charity. They were Sisters your age, more or less. The youngest two were 26 and 29 years old, and the next two were a little older; the oldest was 45 years old.

How the love of their vocation shone in them! What joy they had in facing death! To die as a Daughter of Charity in China, what an honor, one of them said. Another Sister sang the *Ave Maris Stella*, calling upon the Virgin Mary, star of the sea, requesting her help for their last journey.

35. Cf. John Paul II, Message for the 30th World Day of Prayer for Vocations

36. Cf. IAD 2009-2015, p. 15.

37. Cf. Saint Vincent de Paul, Coste XI, p. 25

38. Saint Vincent, Conference of July 1642, Coste IX, p. 65

39. Saint Vincent, Conference of May 25, 1654, Coste IX, p. 537

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The geography of evangelical radicality, lived out in charity, knows no limits or borders. On every continent, in very remote locations, audaciously, whether in the turmoil of the barricades like Sr. Rosalie Rendu or in the courageous silence of daily service like Saint Catherine Labouré, it is truly the charity of Christ that urged them to give all, to give themselves so that those who were poor might live and, above all, know God and discover that He is their Father. Let us also call to mind our recently beatified Sisters: Sister Lindalva, Sister Guiseppina, Sister Marta, Sister Marguerite, and those who will be beatified this October, the martyrs for the faith in 20th Century Spain...all, in one way or another, gave their life for Christ and for those who are poor.

To conclude, I'd like to mention an event that took place here at the Motherhouse in the retreat room, not exactly in the place where we are today. It was in 1870. Thirty Sisters had just died in Crimea as a result of the cholera they contracted caring for the sick. The Superioress General, Sister Félicité Lequette, spoke to the Sisters making their retreat at the Motherhouse. She asked volunteers to replace the deceased Sisters to stand up...all the Sisters stood up.

3.2 BY MAINTAINING LIVELY CHARITY

There can be no doubt that a deep conviction lived in the hearts of all the Sisters about whom we have just spoken and who were witnesses to evangelical radicality: there is no greater love than to give one's life for a friend.⁴⁰

I am sure that this same conviction is found in you who are 11 to 24 years vocation, and that's why I am addressing this appeal to you today in the name of the Company:

Sisters, there are numerous people living in poverty everywhere, but some situations are even more critical than others and need reinforcements. That is where the Lord waits for you, where people living in poverty are hungry, where they are dying, where they need God!

Are you available to go to the mission ad extra or ad intra, where the poor urgently need us? During the Youth Jubilee in Rome, Pope John Paul II spoke to the young people in the enthusiastic words of Saint Catherine of Sienna: "*If you are what you should be, you will set the whole world ablaze!*"

I would like to conclude this reflection by turning to the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Company. I ask her to accompany you on this path of vocational revitalization, to stimulate and renew your love and your self-giving to Our Lord, in order to joyfully and passionately live the service of Christ in poor people, in union with your Sisters.

Sisters, go in the name of Our Lord. Go out to meet others, bring them the fire of faith, the joy of hope, and the gentleness of the love of God the Father that has been poured into your hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to you.⁴¹

Sister Evelyne FRANC,
Daughter of Charity

40. Cf. Jn 15:13

41. Cf. Rom 5:5

MARY'S FAITH

At the heart of our life as Daughters of Charity

“And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

M

Mary's
Faith

INTRODUCTION

We all know the Virgin Mary well; we love her and we know that she accompanies us each day on our way of faith. Each one of us has a particular way of looking at our Mother in Heaven, the only Mother of the Company; I am going to share simply with you my way of seeing her.

Mary's faith, her openness and total availability to God that allow her to give herself entirely to Him are clearly evident in the Gospel texts. This faith of Mary nourished the meditation of our Founders. Saint Vincent and Saint Louise dwelt especially on three mysteries: the Immaculate Conception, the Annunciation and the Visitation. These mysteries are interconnected and are the door for entering the mystery of the Incarnation. Father Chenu, the great Dominican theologian, said that, “*a good Marian theology is the test of a good theology of the Church because it reveals the profound law of the Incarnation.*”

Today we are going to take some time to revisit these three mysteries to see how they connect to our vocation as Daughters of Charity and what they urge us to do in our everyday life. I will be telling you nothing new, nothing that you don't already know; I will simply try to put it into words, and these words will resonate in you, one way or another, according to your personal experience.

Before beginning, here is a preliminary observation: we study Mary, not for herself, but because of her relation to the work of salvation. The heart of Christian Revelation is Christ, Man and God: Jesus is the intersection where the road of God and the road of man cross. All the other Christian mysteries are relative to this gift God gave to humans. The Word of God took flesh of our flesh, he became our companion on the road to allow us to enter into communion with the Father. God didn't pretend to become “one of us”: conceived in the womb of a woman, he became a little child and grew up among his contemporaries.

Mary captures our attention because of her role in the gift that God made of his divine life in the person of Jesus. Sometimes, people wonder if Mary is an exception among humans, if she is above the Church or below Christ.

Mother of the Church, Mary is neither above nor below; she is within, like a mother is **within** a family. When we speak about a mother, we wouldn't think of saying she is outside of the family but, quite the contrary, she is at the heart of the family. Mary is therefore not at the periphery of the Christian mystery, she is not at an intermediary level; she is **at the heart of the mystery of Christ and of the Church**; she is the first creature to benefit from the Resurrection (the fruits of which were applied to Mary even before she was born).

Mary is a **woman “from among us”**, more truly human than we are since we, unfortunately, because of our sin, rejected our status as created beings. Indeed, we are only truly human when we are open to God and to others, not turned in on ourselves. For Mary, the totality of her thoughts, her will and her action are shaped by grace; she speaks with the words of God, she thinks with the thoughts of God and she is the dwelling place of God.

1 – THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

The first resurrected one, Mary the Immaculate is the *entrance* into grace, the *entrance* by which God can give Himself without meeting any obstacle. The mystery of God's grace in Mary from the moment of her conception is a closely related to the mystery of the Incarnation. The Immaculate Conception of Mary is related to the virginal conception of

Mary's Faith at the Heart of our Life as Daughters of Charity

the Son of God. December 8th only has meaning when seen in relation to March 25th and Christmas.

2 – THE ANNUNCIATION

In the Annunciation scene Jesus is not visible, but He is made mysteriously present in the encounter of the angel with the Virgin Mary. At the end of this dialogue, Jesus is very concretely present in the heart and the body of Mary. The mysterious presence of Jesus becomes real presence.

3 - THE VISITATION

The account of the Visitation is the very friendly and joyful encounter of two women who know each other. But this encounter between Mary and Elizabeth gives rise to another encounter: that of Jesus and John the Baptist. Elizabeth allows us to see what is really happening: it is “earth” and “heaven” that meet.

Conclusion

“*First Christian*” (C. 15a), “*teacher of the spiritual life*” (C. 23), “*Door of Faith*”, Mary leads us, not by words but by her very life,

- to give ourselves entirely to God
- to live our community relationships every day in the way that Mary acted at the Annunciation.
- to live our service of those who are poor as Visitations because the Marian mystery is also our mystery. Like Mary, we, too, are called to become the “mother of Christ” in order to give Him to those who are poor.

I – THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION: Mary, totally open to the Spirit, is completely given to God. (cf. C. 15b)

“*Following the example of Mary Immaculate, the Daughters of Charity give themselves entirely to God.*”

INTRODUCTION

The Immaculate Conception is an astonishing reality, not an abstract reality, but the most practical reality possible. When the Church proclaimed this dogma in 1954, it was not to add another jewel to Mary's crown that already has many, but because the Immaculate Conception leads us **to the center of the mystery of salvation**. The dogma is more than the expression of a formula; it is a light that expresses the gift of God in **Jesus**, the dignity of **Mary** and **our own** dignity. To experience this, we must pass from the literal level of the words to the spirituality that the text expresses. This is what we are going to try to do.

THE GOSPEL SCENE

I. “FULL OF GRACE”

The name that Anne and Joachim chose for their daughter at her birth is Mary. This is the name used in her relationships with her friends, Joseph and the people of Nazareth... *it is her identity according to public records*. When Mary was a child or an adolescent, she didn't appear any different from her companions, except perhaps for a fire in her eyes. Everything was simple in her, the simplicity that denotes fullness and not that something is lacking.

On the day of the Annunciation, the Angel Gabriel does not greet her by her usual name; rather, he gives her a new name. The name that God gives her is “*full of grace*”. *This is her identity in the Kingdom of God*. From the moment of her conception, God secretly filled the heart of this young girl to make her capable of perfectly fulfilling her vocation as Mother of God: to human eyes, a mysterious, invisible and indiscernible preparation. Grace worked on all levels of her personality: she is full of all the graces of God because she is entirely offered to Him, totally available without the least consideration for herself. This name expresses a way of being, a mission, and a vocation: her being is only grace; in her there is only God.

Mary did not choose her identity; she didn't choose her deepest being; it is God who gave it to her. The Immaculate Conception allows us to better understand the Heart of God whose only desire is to eternally establish His dwelling place in the heart of each one of us. “But how can this be?”

Mary's Faith at the Heart of our Life as Daughters of Charity

The mystery of the Immaculate Conception reveals a **threefold grace**:

- The gift of God is welcomed by a creature,
- The gift of God extends even to Forgiveness to make a new creation,
- The gift of God makes life fruitful.

1 - THE GIFT OF GOD IS WELCOMED BY A CREATURE

* The Immaculate Conception reveals first of all that God gives Himself unconditionally; He gives Himself eternally. As far as God is concerned, everything is gift, grace offered continuously. He has the initiative, and this is especially evident in relation to Mary. The privilege of the Immaculate Conception does not come from Mary, but from God. Everything that Mary is comes to her from God. All that she is, she is through grace.

* The Immaculate Conception also expresses this complete openness to the gift of God. This is because, if God gives Himself to every human person, He can only offer Himself in freedom. Grace is not given in a vacuum, so what is asked on the part of the creature is to welcome the gift of God. In Mary, the "God who gives Himself" and "the creature who says yes" to God are brought together.

THE GIFT OF GOD EXTENDS EVEN TO FORGIVENESS IN ORDER TO MAKE A NEW CREATION

* The Immaculate Conception reveals that God does not stop giving Himself, even where He is rejected. God gives Himself to His creatures without becoming discouraged by their rejection. The gift of God becomes Forgiveness, and His Forgiveness is not simply a return to what was before, but a new creation.

* The Immaculate Conception is the first fruit of the Forgiveness that comes even before Mary's existence; she is not an exception to the universality of Salvation. Saint Thérèse understood this mystery when she dared to compare herself to Mary Magdalen, out of whom Jesus drove seven demons: "Simply," she said, "I was forgiven in advance." Mary is the first created being reestablished in grace; she is the first and the perfectly saved one. She is the new creation, drawn from the source of the Cross. She witnesses to the victory of Love crucified, the power

of Christ's death and resurrection: "*The blood of Christ redeems her, but she is its source.*" (Hymn for the Office of Readings for December 8) Without the mystery of the Cross, the Immaculate Conception is incomprehensible. Mary invites us to enter in turn into this dynamic of forgiveness and to let ourselves be reconciled and recreated by God.

THE GIFT OF GOD MAKES LIFE FRUITFUL

* The Immaculate Conception also reveals that God gives everything; He shares everything, not only His Son, but also his paternity. God gives life and makes our life fruitful. Grace is always given to be shared with others; it is never about possessing and monopolizing. Any privilege in God exists only to be shared.

* The Immaculate Conception is therefore not "private property." Mary does not receive the grace of divine maternity for herself alone; she receives it in order to share it. The Immaculate One receives everything from God. *She gives everything that God gave her; she gives "God" herself.* Welcoming God's life commits her to letting His Presence of love shine through, to lighting the fire of charity.

2 - GRACE AND SIN

With Mary Immaculate, we realize that **grace is more original than sin**. As serious as it is, sin is only an accident in the course of history. It prompts God to accomplish a wonder even greater than the creation of the world: a new creation, a creation of which He Himself is the cornerstone. The mystery of God's Forgiveness reveals to what point Love is merciful and inventive, able to find ways to reach this world that refuses Him.

If there hadn't been the Immaculate Conception, God wouldn't have been able to give Himself to the world. It's not that he absolutely needed Mary, but Love could not do without consent, acceptance, and response: Love could not impose itself and could not be satisfied with a partial response. An entirely free heart was needed, one that would not close up on God's gift, as did our first parents, Adam and Eve. God found a creature who totally accepted His grace and let herself be adapted continually to the gift that He was giving her. From then on, the world

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is open and grace can make its way.

In a sinful world, the mystery of the Immaculate Conception allows us to understand that nothing, not even sin, stops the gift of God because he goes to the point of becoming Forgiveness. Sin is thus only a “hiccup”, it does not have the first word nor the final word here below. **The first and the final word, here below, is grace welcomed by a creature.**

The Immaculate Conception helps us to expand our perspective on sin and to think about **sin from the perspective of forgiveness** and not forgiveness from the perspective of sin.

Let's think about this comparison: when we contemplate a waterfall in a mountain, we are not going to see in it only a means of washing our dirty laundry. Of course, if we thrust our dirty laundry into the waterfall we will clean it, but the waterfall wasn't made for that. The waterfall gives itself gratuitously; it flows gratuitously; it never stops! This image tells us something about the grace of God who gives Himself. The gift of God reaches the point of making Himself Forgiveness, nothing stops Him, not even our sin, neither original sin nor actual sin. Forgiveness is from eternity and forever.

Within the context of this always-offered Forgiveness, the Immaculate Conception makes us understand that it is grace that is natural. Sin is a rupture of this love, but it does not have an autonomous existence. It exists, unfortunately, but it exists as a parasite. Ivy needs the tree, but the tree doesn't need ivy; a cavity needs a tooth, but a tooth does not need a cavity. Let's not reverse things! What is natural is grace; it is supernatural. **So the Immaculate Conception is not an exception, it is the rule of existence according to God; we are the exception.** We are the ones who do not allow ourselves be fashioned and let God's plan work through us. Truth is not measured in terms of quantity but according to depth; the true depth of our humanity is the Immaculate Conception. This is what we are and what we will be eternally... because God loves us.

Of course, this does not mean that the seriousness of sin should be seen as relative because, in terms of love, sin is serious; in the context of love no sin is “venial” Sin is putting oneself at the center of the world;

it is wanting to be independent, to be its rule, origin and goal. The Immaculate Conception invites us to submerge our roots constantly in God's Forgiveness that renews us.

3 - THE DIGNITY OF EVERY PERSON

If Mary is immaculate, it is not so that we may admire her but so that we may understand the vocation of the Church, the vocation of every Christian, and the vocation of every person. Our origin is in God, and we are called to become “beings of grace” in Jesus Christ, “*holy and faultless before him in love*” (Eph 1:4). God accomplished His project of love in Mary's womb; He also wants to accomplish it in us.

The mystery of the Immaculate Conception reveals the importance of our life and the dignity of every person. To believe in the God of Jesus Christ is to believe in human persons. What is most difficult is not believing in God but believing that God believes in human persons, that He acts in us and in others, even in this sinful world. Believing in God means believing in every person, believing that God gives Himself to each one and that each one is capable of accepting Him and giving Him to others. At the end of the Council, Paul VI said, “*We, more than any others, honor mankind!*” John Paul II never stopped saying this throughout his pontificate.

II. THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY GIVE THEMSELVES “ENTIRELY” TO GOD (C. 7)

The Founders invite us to *contemplate the Immaculate One, totally open to the Spirit* (C. 15b, §1) because, in Mary Immaculate, we discover who we are. The privilege of the Immaculate One is ours!

1 - BECOMING “IMMACULATE ONES”

We have to understand that God does everything in our life. As a result, we must also do everything to receive what God gives us. When Constitution 7 says that the Daughters of Charity “*give themselves entirely to God,*” we need to understand well that this means, because our language is very inadequate. The mystery of the Immaculate Conception gives us the meaning: the “God who gives Himself” and

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“the yes of her heart” are brought together in Mary.

Giving ourselves to God means “accepting God who gives Himself to us”. **It is not we who can give ourselves to God, but we can open ourselves to His Love who gives Himself**, who forgives us and who makes us divine. It is a matter of “*disposing ourselves, with all the fervor of our hearts, to receive God who gives Himself to us.*” God needs our “yes”. He does not give Himself without a response on our part; without our consent and our participation. Love is received when we give ourselves and to the extent that we give ourselves. This is what is expressed in Constitution 8: “*Christ is the Rule of the Daughters of Charity*”: our rule of life is to welcome Christ into our heart and to place Him at the center of our life, as Mary Immaculate did.

2 - “I MUST STAY AT YOUR HOUSE!”

Of course, we are not the Immaculate Conception; we are only miserable sinners, pitiful and poor. However, by His Redemptive Incarnation, Jesus did not come to earth to stick a bandage on an injured limb; he came to start from the inside, to renew, to recreate.

If we turn the pages of Saint Luke's Gospel, we see that God's grace is not reserved for exceptional people. The Gospel about Zacchaeus, in the 19th chapter of Saint Luke, shows clearly that the grace given to Mary is available for all. The episode of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus is a good example of God's desire to give Himself and to dwell in our heart. Zacchaeus is a great sinner as we all are, very far from being immaculate in his conception as well as in his profession. Nonetheless, Jesus says the same words to him as the Angel Gabriel said to the utterly pure Mary: “**Today, I am coming to your house**”, that is, “*The Lord is with you*”... It's the same!

Then, Jesus waits for Zacchaeus' response because Love never imposes. Zacchaeus allows himself to be touched in the depths of his being by these words of love and, we know the rest: he becomes a “person of grace”. From then on, in the specific circumstances of his life, he acts according to God's ways: “*Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.*”

Salvation, then, does not consist only in being purified of our sins; it is this Forgiveness that comes to recreate our sinful being from the inside. Of course, there is also the mystery of our response. However, if we welcome God, His Word of love is always creative; He always does what He says. In the same way that His Word took flesh in Mary and that it happened in Zacchaeus, the reign of God is established within us. We who were unlovable and undesirable, before God, become people who are loved and lovable, people who are desired and desirable.

3 - “BE BORN THROUGH WATER AND THE SPIRIT” (Jn 3:5)

However, it is not enough to hear the Word of God and to accept it in the depths of your heart; you must also commit yourself to living it. After the account of the Wedding at Cana, Jesus explains to Nicodemus the need to be born of the Spirit. Since original sin, our life is turned in on itself, shaped by suspicion and self-interest! The Spirit, on the other hand, is complete openness: openness of the Father towards the Son, openness of the Son towards the Father, it is the flow of life and love. This is the life that we should welcome, we should be reborn to this offered life, that is, we must struggle against our “self”, our egoism, our self-love; we must make this long journey that goes from ourselves to God. “*To depend on the Holy Spirit is to allow oneself to be molded into a resemblance to Christ, gentle and humble of heart. According to Saint Vincent, this evangelical spirit must animate the Company.*” (C. 18)

Mary is there with us to help us be reborn in the Spirit: “*Do whatever he tells you.*” Her role is to teach us to be born to the divine life because we are not yet truly born, we have not yet arrived at our state of immaculate conception (for in heaven there will only be immaculate ones). Mary leads us to put God first in our life, to let ourselves be transformed by His thinking, His way of seeing and acting, to be reborn from on high. This is the task of our faith life, the path of our human life: to learn, little by little, to conform ourselves to this divine life that will be ours for eternity and that is the life of a child of God.

Mary Immaculate teaches us to love ordinary life, to be born to the divine life in our daily life, in the practical reality of our days. For her, “*looking up to the Father*”, the Source of all grace, “*being born of*

Mary's Faith at the Heart of our Life as Daughters of Charity the Spirit", is not looking to be born to a different, ethereal, detached, spiritual life nor to reject the routines of our everyday life. God united Himself to our humanity, and it is on this earth that we should look for Him. We will not find Him elsewhere. God is nowhere else than in our daily life. The gift of God does not fall on us from a parachute. We must welcome Him into our life such as it is. The Daughters of Charity marvel "*that a God should somehow be unable or unwilling to be separated from man*" (C. 17b). This is what we must convert ourselves to: to looking at our everyday life, our local community, our ministry, our workplace, the oven in the kitchen or the dishwashing sink: this is where God is found. In our everyday life, everything is grace, and the Immaculate Conception witnesses to this.

CONCLUSION

Mary's Immaculate Conception is an essential truth for our vocation. It reminds us of the primacy of grace and the need to open ourselves unreservedly to God: "*My grace is sufficient for you.*" (2 Col 12:9). The **Spirit of humility** allows us to become "*beings of grace*", true "*adorers of the Father*" (cf. C. 8a), drinking from the source of Love in order to become for those who are poor (cf. C. 16a/b) a fountain from which "*rivers of living water will flow*" (Jn 7: 38).

II- THE ANNUNCIATION: Mary, "Servant of the Father's Loving Plan" (cf. C. 15b)

"In community to live with God and accomplish his will"

I. THE GOSPEL SCENE

The Gospel of the Annunciation is very complex, and its significance is inexhaustible. It is familiar to us, and we know it well. It brings out many very important themes whose deeper exploration could go on forever. It is relatively long, and its length allows us to understand that above all else it is a dialogue between the Angel and Mary. In the announcement made to Zachariah, the encounter with the Angel Gabriel leaves Zachariah mute. In the Annunciation, the encounter of the Angel Gabriel with Mary gives rise to an animated dialogue that activates the young girl of Nazareth. In the course of this conversation, Mary lets

herself be transformed and, at the end, she becomes this young woman who turns herself entirely over to God and trusts in His promise

Let us look more carefully at how this exchange unfolds because the Angel Gabriel reveals to us God's way of acting and speaking. With Him, we can learn how to better communicate with the Sisters of our local community.

1 - GOD'S WAY OF EXPRESSING HIMSELF (V. 28-29)

When the Angel comes before Mary, he **greet her and bows before her**. Taken by surprise, Mary lets him come close. However, the Angel's act of humility that expresses the mystery of God astonishes her. The "Most High," the "Infinitely Great", respectfully bows before His creature like a Servant. In fact, bowing down before the grandeur of another is no more than loyalty and courtesy, but for the greater one to kneel respectfully before someone of lesser importance shows deep humility.

Then the Angel approaches Mary as a person who "*has found favor with God.*" He addresses **gentle and tender words** to her **in greeting**: "*Rejoice, full of grace, the Lord is with you.*" The Angel assures her that God Himself is with her.

Mary is deeply disturbed by the infinite respect of the Angel and his wondrous words of blessing. The Angel is aware of Mary's inner feeling as she asks herself "*what this greeting could mean.*" She wants to understand and get to the bottom of this situation.

The Angel **respects Mary's feelings**. He rephrases her inner words and reassures her in a calm tone: "*do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God,*" for God has looked on her with love.

In a **warm silence**, he waits for Mary to recover interior peace before continuing the conversation. His patience and love touch Mary's heart. Confidence restored and feeling comfortable, she can discern God's loving presence that calms her in the depths of her being.

2 - AN AUTHENTIC GOSPEL DIALOGUE (V. 30-34)

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The Angel then utters more unexpected words: “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus.” Again, he leaves Mary the time she needs for these words to resonate in her heart. He does not pressure her to understand more quickly, he does not impose himself, he does not cry out, he does not assert himself either by force or seduction; on the contrary, respecting Mary’s freedom, he advances humbly at her pace, allowing her to be herself, and patiently awaits her reaction.

Through the Angel’s sensitive attitude, Mary understands that she is truly loved, so she becomes able to receive these surprising words in her heart and reflect on them: she really wants to understand them and learn how this promise could come true.

In complete freedom, she speaks up to ask the Angel to clarify what he means, to explain to her in a more precise way the deep meaning of his words: “How can this come about?” This question shows Mary’s interest in what the Angel just said. It is also a request for further information. Mary wants to know the connection between her life plan, the situation that is hers, and the Father’s Loving Plan. We could say that she is in a state of discernment.

The Angel is not surprised by Mary’s questioning; he is quite prepared to give her the necessary explanations concerning the announcement of this virginal birth and to bring to light the spiritual content of this great mystery: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you... Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth has also conceived a son... for nothing is impossible for God.”

3 – MARY’S RECEPTIVE LISTENING (V. 38)

The Angel is able to clarify the situation because Mary does not interrupt him. This is a sign of Mary’s great ability to listen: in her, there is no self-importance, no attempt to place herself above the one she’s speaking to or to put herself at the center of the discussion.

Mary receptivity accepts this information inviting her to a radical reversal of perspective and departure from her familiar points of reference by the Angel’s announcement, Mary understands that God

is coming to her to receive her heart’s hospitality and to offer her His life. In order for Jesus to be the “Prince of Peace” in the world, there must be a “yes” of love.

Then Mary proclaims herself “*the Servant of the Lord*,” showing that she defines herself only in relationship to the Lord; she recognizes that God is the center of her life. Her desire is simply to do God’s will: “*may I act according to His word!*” Completely given to God without the least consideration for herself, Mary commits herself freely just as she is, abandons herself to God, and commits herself to Him on His Word in an act of the greatest obedience. Filled with complete trust, she accepts from God the unknown and unpredictable, which she doesn’t have control of: she accepts not knowing where this will lead her.

II. A COMMUNITY OF “SERVANTS OF THE FATHER’S LOVING PLAN”

Our Founders invite us to be influenced by Mary so that we may learn how to live our everyday community relationships after the pattern of the Annunciation. Even if this encounter with the Angel is an extraordinary moment, nonetheless, it takes place in disconcerting banal circumstances: Mary is “at home”, the Angel Gabriel comes before her, and that is where the dialogue begins that brings Mary into God’s world.

This conversation between the Angel and Mary highlights several important points for our life as Daughters of Charity and leads us to become, like Mary, “servants of the Father’s loving plan.”

1 – EXPRESS GOD’S PEACE

Initially, the Angel Gabriel shows us the way God wants us to act towards others in order to offer them His love: we need to have a humble and respectful attitude. Humility in our way of seeing people and our self-effacing manner witnesses to our respect for others. This is said without a word; it reflects a way of being.

The Angel Gabriel also reminds us of our mission to say **joyful and kind words** to others on God’s behalf in order to create an atmosphere of trust and peace.

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The Angel's word, which takes flesh in Mary's womb, constantly sends us back to the mystery of the words that we speak. Each day, in our local community, we speak to each other, and it is very important not to forget that the words we speak always produce an effect on our Sisters: whether they sadden or wound them, whether they heal or cause feelings of joy in them.

The way that we speak and the words that we use have a decisive impact. The mystery of the Annunciation encourages us to be more conscious of the words we say and speak more prudently so that our words have the effect of encouraging and filling our Sisters' hearts with joy such that what we say becomes for them true "words of God."

Jesus' invitation, "to whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this household'" (Lk 10, 5), sums up this first point. We are not just good professionals in the service of those who are poor; we are above all Sisters called to have a heart filled with God's peace in order to impart it to our Sisters. We are responsible for speaking to them on behalf of God and for allowing them to find God in their life. This is our way of collaborating in God's Salvation and being "servants of His loving plan."

2 – DIALOGUE TOGETHER TO DISCERN GOD'S WILL

The Angel Gabriel shows us the **way of entering into dialogue** with others: it is a matter of expressing ourselves by offering a statement, without imposing it or forcing others to accept it. Today's society accustoms us to a mentality that seeks to influence or manipulate the other person, and we risk being carried away by this deviation that distorts dialogue, trying to impose our point of view or to ask questions in order to hear the response that we want to hear. On the contrary, the Angel urges us to convert to God's way of speaking. We can never contemplate this mystery of the Annunciation enough in order to learn how to dialogue, especially about the most ordinary things. We are so attached to our point of view, our customs, our knowledge... we hold on to them, and it is very difficult to receive what the other brings. We so often expect that the other person will come over to our way of thinking.

If we look at Mary, we discover something else: she makes us understand that **listening** is a sort of interior hospitality. Not only did she not put

herself at the center of the discussion, but she let herself be troubled by the Angel's words, considering him more important than herself. With Mary, we discover that dialogue with our Sisters is only possible if we love them, if we consider them more important than we are, if we accept that they might be right, or at least that they could have valid reasons for believing what they believe, for saying what they say, for seeing differently than we do. All this comes back to recognizing that they have the right to be different, that is, to be themselves, and not like me.

Finally, this conversation between Mary and the Angel also shows how a discussion can succeed: *it is a matter of questions and responses that are exchanged until each one understands the other*, and, suddenly, something new is born, something greater. Mary is consulted as a free person; she is not told: "you must; you are obliged to; I am giving you an order." Truth is only found together, when each one can express her truth to the other in order to put their intuitions in common "to advance towards the Lord" (C. 32b), and seek God's will.

3 – BEING A SERVANT OF THE FATHER'S PLAN MEANS GIVING SPACE TO GOD

Lastly, in the account of the Annunciation, we note the central place of God towards whom everything converges. The "Servant of the Lord" invites us to make space for God in all the aspects of our existence: our thoughts, our words, our actions, the little decisions we make, and our difficulties. We should regularly examine ourselves on the place that we give to God in **our way of speaking** and the **faith perspective** with which we look on our Sisters. When we know each other well and are used to speaking to each other, we risk stereotyping people and speaking words that judge by appearances: "it's the carpenter's son," in which case the necessary conditions for dialogue no longer exist. Mary reminds us of the importance of living in God's presence in order:

- to express ourselves "plainly and simply" because every word leaves its trace and can have major consequences.
- to be able to recognize in our Sisters the "angels" that the Lord places in our life in order to bring us, in some way, into the Kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

Mary, the Servant of the Father's Loving Plan, shows us this other fundamental truth for our vocation: it is the **spirit of simplicity** that allows us to be "servants of the Lord" looking only for God's will and striving to accomplish it with an open and obedient heart.

III – THE VISITATION: "Mother of God, Mother of Mercy"... Ark of the Covenant

"THE SERVICE OF THOSE WHO ARE POOR"

INTRODUCTION

The Visitation is a very simple scene: a woman visits another woman, her relative. What could be more ordinary and commonplace? However, this mystery is greater than it first appears. Saint Luke does not tell us that the two cousins see each other for the first time, so we can assume that they had already met and that they know each other. Next, the evangelist brings to light the central importance of another character: the Holy Spirit. Luke shares a deep conviction: the Holy Spirit is this presence of God among us who is at the service of the encounter.

I. THE GOSPEL SCENE

After the Annunciation, stirred by the impulse of the Spirit, Mary sets off on the road to Elizabeth. The Evangelist presents Mary as a model of charity, as a loving and practical person who doesn't settle for lofty feelings because the life of God unfolds in human relationships. Mary comes to bring her assistance to her elderly cousin, but she also hopes to see the sign that will confirm what the Angel Gabriel told her. She does not only want to offer Elizabeth her help, but also to accept help from Elizabeth: these are two essential aspects for establishing the reciprocity necessary for any true relationship. The two women's encounter is first of all one of mutual recognition, which opens a new future to each of them.

1 – MARY'S GREETING

We have to imagine Mary knocking on the door of Zacharias' house. Having received God's greeting from the lips of the Angel Gabriel, she can greet Elizabeth in the same way, very gently and appropriately. Mary carries the life of God in her, and this presence in the depth of her heart has an effect on the greeting. The grace that fills Mary is reflected on her face, her smile and the look in her eyes. Carrying "the Prince of Peace" within her, she brings God's peace to Elizabeth.

It is no longer just Mary of Nazareth, like the officer on the side of the road would have read after asking for her identity card: "Name: Mary – Birthplace: Nazareth." It is no longer Mary alone; God is there, the little embryo who will greet Elizabeth through Mary's greeting. Through Mary's visit, it is God who visits His people; through Mary's greeting, it is God who makes His greeting to His people heard.

2 – ELIZABETH'S REACTION

The moment Elizabeth opens the door of her house and hears Mary's greeting, she receives God's peace. This has a twofold beneficial effect on her: her heart is filled with the fullness of the Spirit, and John the Baptist leaps in her womb: "*For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.*" (Lk 1: 44) So, thanks to Mary's approach, the Spirit that was to fill John the Baptist (cf. Lk 1: 15) is granted him. So it is through Mary that God imparts His Spirit to Elizabeth and to the child she is carrying.

Then, her heart filled with the joy of the Spirit, Elizabeth perceives Mary's beauty. Dazzled, she speaks **words of blessing and happiness** about Mary, who certainly wasn't expecting them: "*blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*" These words, full of respect and sensitivity, are also a confirmation of what Mary is experiencing. It is surprising to note the degree of understanding Elizabeth gains from Mary's greeting; but the brilliance of Mary's countenance, the kindness of her smile, the gentleness of her gestures, are not all these the sign that she is aglow with the Spirit? Elizabeth understands that her young cousin is no longer the same as she was the last time she saw her; she notices Mary's mystery; she recognizes God's action in Mary and welcomes her as "*the mother of my Lord.*" She does not say, "How does it happen that my cousin should come

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to me?" but "How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" This means that she welcomes Mary in reference to God and not in reference to the family relationship that connects them. For Elizabeth, Mary is the new "Ark of the Covenant." She makes God's presence visible and palpable; she carries in her the life of God. Elizabeth's exultation makes us think of David's leaping before the Ark of the Covenant, the presence of God in the midst of His people.

So the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth is first of all one of mutual recognition. The two women become blessing for each other: first Mary for Elizabeth, then Elizabeth for Mary, revealing to her what she held hidden in her heart and confirming for her that her motherhood was the work of God: "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." The gentleness of Mary's glance and gestures allowed Elizabeth to see that she believed.

II. OUR LIFE OF SERVICE OF THOSE WHO ARE POOR

What happens between Mary and Elizabeth is not something exceptional, exclusively reserved for them. As for all Scripture, what is shown here concerns us. Our Founders asked us to let ourselves be guided by Mary in order to live our service of those who are poor in the spirit of the Visitation. The Visitation is the visit par excellence and service par excellence. The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth invites us to look with new eyes at the service we are given to live daily with those who are poor. How are we in relation to our service of those who are poor? Are we not too often superficial? The mystery of the Visitation reminds us that our life as Daughters of Charity means going out to our brothers and sisters living in poverty in the name of God, to enter into communion with them. The Visitation highlights that the foundation of our life of service is found in God's primacy: to be a servant is to give all the space to God and to make His presence visible in order to enter into a communion that may be silent but where the heart sings praise.

1 – SERVING THOSE WHO ARE POOR "IN CHRIST"

We give ourselves entirely to God in order to serve Him in the person of the poor with the Spirit of Christ.

At each Eucharist, we receive Him in order to bring Him to those who are poor. It is His presence in us that make our greetings beautiful. If we are filled with His presence, each of our visits to those who are poor is a visit by God.

As it was for Mary at the Visitation, Jesus is hidden in our hearts in a way that may be mysterious, but no less real, and we can say that through our service, God comes to those who are poor, loves them and gives Himself to them. Even if we do not say the name of Jesus, by serving those who are poor, it is Christ who serves them, simply through our attitude if we are gentle, smiling, and completely given to God. Often, we believe that our service is related to our abilities, our intelligence, our know-how, but we are mistaken. It is related to our knowledge of Christ. It is only Christ's presence in us that makes us able to love and serve those who are poor with humility and simplicity. The best gift that we can give to the poor is to let them discover Christ's love for them and meet Him.

We must continually remind ourselves of the importance of keeping God's presence alive in us. Jesus gave us Mary so that she could teach us to give him the place that is His and to destroy in us all that is not of Him. Mary's role is to teach us to welcome God, to allow Him to give Himself through us and to be the "Ark of the Covenant" for those who are poor because we can only bring Christ's peace if we have it in the depths of our heart. Therefore, even if our service doesn't have results as spectacular as those of the Visitation, at least initially, it will always be like a Visitation. Our ability to serve those who are poor with humility, simplicity and sensitivity expresses our faith and reveals the face of God in whom we believe.

2 – SERVING "CHRIST" IN THOSE WHO ARE POOR

Like Mary who set off in haste to recognize God at work in her human sister, we also go out to meet Christ present in those who are poor, and we serve Him by serving them.

Serving those who are poor is not just providing service with the love of Christ in our hearts; it is also encountering a human brother or sister and recognizing Christ in each one: "How does this happen to me, that

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the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk 1: 43) This saying applies to all our encounters: we recognize poor persons for what they really are when we bow before them respectfully, looking on them as "the mother of our Lord." Grace allows us to discover the greatness and the dignity of the poor, to be aware of God's work in their hearts and lives, and to discern all the good that God says about each one of them. Poor people need to hear words full of gentleness and sensitivity and to have confirmation about the way they live and the good that is in them: "what you do is right, what you have in you is true..."

CONCLUSION

By repeating Elizabeth's words, "*How does it happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"* we give thanks to God for having given us Mary as our Mother, and we ask this Mother of Mercy to obtain for us the **Spirit of Charity** so that we can become an "Ark of the covenant" like her, a loving servant who is close to the underprivileged and tireless in serving them.

And if those who are poor say some words of thanks to us, Mary teaches us to respond with the Magnificat. After Elizabeth's kind words, Mary does not thank her but opens her heart to God and thanks Him. Her prayer expands, embracing the universality of God's action for all humanity. This is the vertical dimension of service!

TO BRING THIS JOURNEY TO AN END

Even if the Founders had a particular preference for these three mysteries (the Immaculate Conception, the Annunciation and the Visitation), this does not mean that they excluded the others. The whole of Mary's life is a source of inspiration for our life as Daughters of Charity because throughout her life, she is the one "totally given to God."

I would like to end by saying that it is remarkable to see how, in the Chapel of the Medal of the Immaculate One, these three mysteries of Mary are lived out in a very special way. Even if we do not "see" the Immaculate Virgin, we can see the "witnesses" of today, messengers of the Immaculate One who are the first reached out to by God and who bring their God's gratuitousness: they are the least among us, the

sick, and the poor.

How can we not be grateful to Saint Louise for having asked the Company to take Mary as our "Only Mother"? As the place where God's gift meets acceptance through faith, Mary is our model for learning how to accept God's grace and to receive His Spirit of humility, simplicity and charity so that, through our person and our service, it may be the Lord who loves those who are poor.

Sister Anne PRÉVOST
Daughter of Charity

Saint Louise's faith journey

Notes taken from a recording of a talk given to the Sisters of the Motherhouse. We have deliberately retained the oral style.

L

Saint Louise's Faith

We are going to speak about the long journey that Louise travelled over 60 years, a journey in which we see that her faith was challenged by the circumstances of her life and the events that guided her. It was a life filled with doubts and worries but also with joys and wonder. We will go deeply into Louise's way of life which can serve as a model and consolation for us where we experience difficulties.

In the document *The Door of Faith*, Benedict XVI says that the journey of faith begins with baptism and ends in the eternal light of God. This is more or less the journey that Louise de Marillac would travel.

Baptism was important for her. She wrote in one of her texts: "*on the day of my holy Baptism, I was vowed and dedicated [that is, consecrated to God] to my God to be His daughter*" (A.3). She is therefore aware that baptism made her a daughter of God, and she would try throughout her life to live that faith. Baptism was something important for her, and she would often speak of it; we know that at the time she made vows in 1642, the formula, like ours, began with the words, "*I renew the promises of my baptism.*" Many Sisters, in the early years of the Company, would make their vows for the first time on their baptismal anniversary, aware of its importance. Vincent and Louise always insisted on the fact that Daughters of Charity should first be good Christians in order to be good Daughters of Charity.

What was Louise's life like during her early years?

We do not know much about her early years; we do know that she was in Poissy and that she received a very good education and religious formation. At that time, the Dominican nuns had just received the writings of a Dominican "Catherine of Sienna" who was considered saintly at her death, and they read Catherine of Sienna's writings, which made frequent references to the blood of Christ. I think that this idea deeply impressed Louise de Marillac, because in her writings she often spoke of Christ's blood. She would speak, for example, of souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. She refers to this several times in her letters as well as in her prayers. We know that she made miniature paintings, and one of them represents Christ with one of the sheep drinking the blood of Christ coming out of His side, so it is an idea that must have remained with her.

But what is striking, when we read Louise's writings, is that her first years were marked by suffering. She wrote in one of her meditations, "*God... led me to understand that it was His holy will that I go to Him by way of the Cross. His goodness chose to mark me with it from my birth*" (A. 29).

So, suffering was part of Louise's life. It is true that she did not know her mother, she had no family life, she was somewhat rejected by her family, and at the age 13 she would be taken away from the convent of Poissy to go to a boarding school run by a poor woman who accepted middle class girls. For Louise this was a step down on the social scale, and here she would learn completely different things, mainly practical skills. All this disturbed her a little.

In 1606, she nevertheless had a "light." In 1606, there was a major procession that led the Capuchin nuns to their new monastery. Louise took part in the procession, and she was fascinated by this life of poverty and mortification, and she felt drawn to it. She had no other desire than to become a Capuchin nun. For her, her future became clear, and she prepared herself to become a Capuchin nun; she would often go and pray with them. It seems she had some degree of fulfilment at this point, but her joy would very quickly fall away because her guardian, Michel de Marillac, sent her to see the Provincial of the Capuchins, who

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would tell her that she was not made for the life of a Capuchin nun, that she didn't have the health for it, but that God had another plan for her.

This was a shock for her, and a new form of suffering, but this idea nonetheless remained in her heart: "God has a plan for me." Over many years, she would seek God's plan for her. What did He want of her? After the Capuchin Provincial's refusal, the Marillac family would set to work to arrange a marriage for her.

For a long time, Louise would certainly consider that marriage was God's plan for her. She would, then, enter into married life joyfully because, for her, it was what God wanted for her. She brought a child into the world; she was happy, happy with her husband, and she would later say that she had very good memories of her husband. With him, she prayed and had a spiritual life which was actually very austere. During her years of marriage, especially at the beginning, there was her guardian Michel de Marillac, a man of great devotion, who sent her letters giving spiritual direction. Let's look at how he guided his niece.

Letter from Michel de Marillac

"Be patient and humble yourself before God for the failures you may have in the peaceful submission of your soul before God, waiting for the graces you need from Him, and do not endeavor to force God to give you more graces than he wants. Remain at peace and humble before your faults, for it is our lot, and we must expect nothing else of ourselves than this" (September 2, 1619).

There was, then, a focus on faults, on humiliation before God, a God who grants graces when He wishes. This is a rather distant God, not close at all, who asks each person to recognize their poverty and to humble themselves. This is not very motivating, but it is the spirituality that Louise had at this time.

Louise was able to think of her marriage as God's plan for her. But then, around 1622, that is, 9 years after her marriage, her husband Antoine fell ill. For Louise, this came as a shock. She did not understand how happiness could just disappear. Her husband became difficult, his character changed, and Louise no longer understood anything. She

began to imagine that God was punishing her through her husband's illness because she had not kept the promise she had made to God to become a Capuchin nun. She imagined this and would try, as she said, to overcome God's justice by multiplying her prayers, fasts and all sorts of mortifications. Nothing worked, but with all that she fell into a state of depression, had a gloomy view of everything, was confused, and even got to the point of wanting to leave her husband and son and, above all, no longer believed in the immortality of the soul and, in the end, doubted God's existence. She herself wrote in the first days of May 1623 that she was suffering terribly. It was then that, in June 1623, on the day of Pentecost would come that famous "light", an account of which she would write down, and this would give her back some hope. She would write at the end of her text, *I doubted God, but God exists because "it was God who was teaching me these things"* (A.2). She clearly says that it was God who spoke to her, who showed her that she should remain with her husband and son and would have a new director, and the future was opened to her by telling her that she would one day be in a community. So thanks to this light, Louise would rediscover a certain joy and balance, but it would take a long time for her to recover completely. Just before Christmas 1625, her husband died. Now she was, a widow with a 12 year old child, and, at this time, she met M. Vincent.

She was a widow when she met Vincent de Paul. Neither of them wanted this encounter, but they did meet, and this was surely out of love for, and in memory of, Francis de Sales whom they had both known. After some time, Vincent de Paul realized that Louise, beneath her sad and very anxious exterior, had a strong personality. Little by little, he would direct her toward the Confraternities of Charity that he had founded. So there she is in the Confraternities of Charity, and in May 1629, Vincent de Paul asked her to go with him to Montmirail. It was the beginning of a whole new life for her. She went to Montmirail and then continued to visit the Confraternities. On February 5, 1630, she experienced a very special event, and she wrote down what happened.

Visit to the Confraternities of Saint Cloud (1630)

"I left on the Feast of Saint Agatha, February 5, to go to Saint-Cloud. At the moment of Holy Communion, it seemed to me that Our Lord inspired

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me to receive Him as the Spouse of my soul and that this Communion was a manner of espousal. I felt myself more closely united to Him by this consideration which was extraordinary for me. I also felt moved to leave everything to follow my Spouse; to look upon Him as such in the future; and to bear with the difficulties I might encounter as part of the community of His goods." (A. 50. February 1630, Spiritual Writings p. 705)

That February 5, Louise experienced something extraordinary. February 5 is the anniversary of her marriage with Antoine. It had been five years since his death, but Louise liked to celebrate her wedding anniversary. Each year, she asked Vincent de Paul to say the Mass for a wedding, in memory of her marriage. And then it happened that day, February 5, 1630, that Our Lord had her experience what she would call a mystical marriage. Jesus told her that He would be her Spouse, and Louise accepted Him. It was a discovery for her, and she would share a "community of goods" with Him, as a man and woman often do when they are married: they put their goods in common, and Louise accepted to "put her goods in common" with Jesus. Sharing goods means sharing joys and sharing sufferings, and following Him. So, this was really quite an extraordinary moment. From 1630 onward, Louise's spirituality was transformed. Up to that time, she had been focusing on an austere God.

Now, her spirituality focused on Him whom she had just discovered: Jesus Christ, who had become her Spouse. Her retreat in 1632 shows how much she is attentive to the Gospel, meditates on all the actions of the Son of God related in the Gospel, from His birth to His death. For example, she would say about his birth: "*Jesus Christ made himself a little child so that we would have greater freedom to approach Him.*" She would speak about the washing of the feet, when Jesus knelt down before His disciples. Louise felt much more fulfilled.

1630 is also the year of Marguerite Naseau's arrival and that of other young women who came to serve in the Confraternities. At that time, Louise would perceive that God really had a plan for her, a vocation.

Retreat of 1632

"Kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament, I felt interiorly moved freely to place myself in a disposition of total availability in order to receive the call of God and to carry out His most holy will. I considered that I was unworthy that the goodness of God should have a design for my soul. But I desired that it be fully accomplished in me and I offered my entire life to Him for this end." (A. 5)

We can sense a certain joy in Louise. She is no longer the sad woman; she was happy and felt that God was calling her. She now has but one desire, to accomplish God's will. Throughout her retreat of 1632, we see her thinking about what God will ask of her. She saw that the young women in the Confraternities needed to be brought together, to be brought together in a group, but she asked herself many questions: am I capable of this? She would not commit herself without having reflected, because she could foresee that she would be living among peasant women. We need to understand what it meant for a great Parisian aristocrat to live with peasants; these two social classes didn't speak to each other. It was for her something entirely contrary to what was customary in her world and she anticipated that she would be criticized, harshly criticized. So she would have to accept these criticisms, and she asked herself: will I have the courage to do it? She would reflect at length on the "community" life of Saint Joseph, the Virgin Mary and Jesus. She told herself, they lived together for thirty years in order to show us the importance of community life. She concluded, I will do it. Yet, she still worried, asking herself: is this really God's will or my own?

Louise seems to be a woman who questions herself, who reflects, who sees the vocation that God suggests to her but who doesn't enter in blindly. She added: "to be sure it is really God's will, I will wait for my director's agreement." Vincent de Paul had to agree to this, and he didn't do it right away because he, too, thought that it was beyond Louise's ability or that it wasn't necessary. It was only at the beginning of September 1633 that Vincent de Paul would give his consent.

The beginnings of the company: on November 29, Louise welcomed the young women who wanted to join her in this venture. She was happy but knew that the task would be a hard one. The first thing that she did, apart from the human and professional formation of the Sisters, was to teach them to live the Gospel. At noontime, when they returned from

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serving the poor, Louise had the Gospel read to the Sisters and taught them to meditate on it. Louise would continue to reflect on the mystery of the Incarnation, which was the center of her spiritual life at that time.

“Your admirable Incarnation might be the source of the graces of which souls stand in need in order to reach their end...Neither could [the soul] become so closely united to God who is its object since He is inaccessible to all beings except through this most admirable of means which makes God man and man God who, continually present to the soul.” (A. 13b)

This is Louise's fundamental meditation on the Incarnation: for her, it is a marvel that God would become man and that this God who, she said, had been inaccessible, would come close, and above all that this God comes close so that man can be closer to God. God became man so that man might become God.

This is the meditation that she would try to put into simpler language for the Sisters.

Thoughts on the Incarnation and the Holy Eucharist (A. 14)

“This thought came to me after a long period during which I prayed for a great love for the humanity of Our Lord as a means for moving me to practice His virtues especially gentleness, humility, forbearance and love of my neighbor.” (Spiritual Writings, p. 785)

Here, Louise used an expression that she would repeat frequently in her meditations: she considered the holy humanity of Christ, which means she looked simultaneously on Jesus the man, his humanity and his holy humanity, that is, without sin, and it is the humanity of Christ, the Son of God. She united Jesus the man, and God. She noted all His qualities, all His virtues, and she would invite the Sisters to meditate on Jesus, man and God.

Her letter to Anne Hardemont in 1648 sums up her spirituality:

“My dear Sisters, we must continually have before our eyes our model, the exemplary life of Jesus Christ. We are called to imitate this life, not

only as Christians, but as persons chosen by God to serve Him in the person of His poor.” (L. 217)

Louise's spirituality can be summed up as **following Jesus Christ in order to serve Him in the person of the poor, thereby recognizing His presence in those who are poor, and imitating His virtues.** When the Sisters did not do this, Louise would call them to order.

To the Sisters in Angers, she wrote:

“Where are the gentleness and charity that you must preserve so carefully when dealing with our dear masters, the sick 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.” (L. 104b)

This is why contemplating Jesus Christ, going deeper in prayer and living this in the service of those who are poor was so important. Louise integrated this well in order to be able to transmit it to others.

For Louise, God had a plan for the Company, the very precise plan “of giving themselves to God to honor Jesus Christ by serving Him in the person of the poor.” Louise was aware that God's project for the Company was very important. She told herself that it was essential that the Sisters live this plan well.

In 1644 she would go to Chartres to ask Mary to watch over the Company so that it might accomplish its purpose.

“On Monday, Feast of the Dedication of the Church of Chartres, I offered to God the designs of His Providence on the Company of the Daughters of Charity. I offered the said Company entirely to Him, asking Him to destroy it rather than let it be established contrary to His holy will. I asked for it, through the prayers of the Holy Virgin, Mother and Guardian of the said Company, the purity of which it stands in need.” (L. 111)

Louise went to Chartres to entrust God's plan for the Company to Mary's care because Louise thought that if the Daughters of Charity

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were not faithful to God's design, it would be better that the Company disappear. She is categorical about this because she considered this plan so important, and she asked for the purity needed by the Company to preserve this plan. It was a question of carefully watching over this divine plan, without altering it, without deviating. She said to Mary: "Be its guardian and help the Sisters to be careful to remain faithful to God's design, and you will be its Mother to breathe life into this group so that it may live well."

This is the meaning of the act of consecration in Chartres. Louise is filled with awe at the thought of God's plan and wants it to be well protected.

However, **in 1647, difficulties arise.** The Sisters no longer live according to the plan. The first warning is for Nantes. The Sisters had arrived in Nantes in August 1646, and now in 1647, the local community was divided into two groups. One of the Sisters was a little too close to the hospital chaplain, so the Sister Servant called her to order, but she didn't listen, and the community divided into two groups that argued and kept watching each other. In the end, the service of the poor was not carried out properly. A patient died without the sacraments, Louise received letters about the situation, and she wrote back.

To the Sister at the Hospital in Nantes (L. 174)

"O my dear sisters, what great reason I have to fear that it was my bad example which placed unfortunate impressions in your minds. If that is the case, do me the charity of asking God's forgiveness for me; and I ask you to forgive me as well by doing better than you have seen me do."

What is Louise's reaction? She accuses herself; it's her fault! She wasn't able to listen and accompany the Sisters. Louise would sink into a deep sense of guilt because, following this letter, there would be a visit to Nantes, and two Sisters would be called back to Paris, but these two Sisters would leave the Company. Then there would be a wave of departures from the Company: Sisters from Nantes, Angers, Fontainebleau, Pontoise, and the Mother House, from just about everywhere.

The result was that Louise was very sad and she blamed herself. In November 1649, she wrote a letter to Vincent de Paul: "*Another of our sisters left [...], she is one from Saint-Cloud. [...] It seems to me that God wishes either to strengthen or destroy us through these episodes*". She adds this terrible line: "*let me know in all honesty if I am the Jonah who must be removed [for the Company to recover its calm]*" (L. 268). Louise feels guilty. How will she get over these failures? Will she overcome them? How will she pull through? Guilt, in fact, is wounded pride: we are not happy, we thought we were better than that, and we are hurt to see that we were not able to accomplish the task we had to do. As a result, we feel bad. So, how could Louise improve the situation?

This was the time of the **wars of the Fronde**. In Paris there were many poor people, and soup distribution was organized in various parishes. Louise said: 3000 are served at Saint Paul, 2000 at Saint Laurent, and the same number in several other parishes. Louise reflected and said to herself: God has pity and mercy on these poor people; perhaps I am also one of these poor people. That would transform her, and rather than thinking about her guilt, she would admit that she made mistakes, that she was inadequate, but she would place all her faults and mistakes in her hands and offer them to God, saying, 'I am but a poor person.' She would accept God's forgiveness after the example of the tax collector who placed himself humbly before God, who accepted his poverty. Louise discovered and welcomed God's mercy. She wrote a very beautiful letter to Barbe Angiboust in 1652 because Barbe had experienced something similar to what Louise had suffered. Barbe was in Brienne where there was war, and Barbe was crushed by the number of sick and wounded whom she couldn't manage to care for.

Letter to Sister Barbe Angiboust (June 11, 1652)

"In the name of God, my very dear Sisters, do not be impatient with your trials, and at seeing yourselves as receiving no other consolation but God's. Oh, if we only knew God's secrets when He places us in this state, we would see that this must be the time of our greatest consolation.... If the goodness of God does not expose us to the worst miseries, let us be truly thankful to Him for this, and let us believe that it is due solely to His mercy and is in no way merited." (L. 353)

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Louise recognized after the fact that this was for her good. She finally understood God's mercy, the mercy of this God who never tires of forgiving, but we must go to him in a state of poverty. She thanked God for this period in her life because now she could help the Sisters to persevere and understand God's mercy.

From 1652 onwards we see that Louise would enter into a period when her meditations showed her wonder at God's love; she would continue to **meditate on the Incarnation** because she could never meditate enough on this extraordinary mystery.

"The design of the Blessed Trinity from the creation of man was that the Word should become flesh so that human nature might attain the excellence of being that God willed to give to man by the eternal union... Is it not glorious for souls to cooperate with God in carrying out this plan?" (A.26, A. 27)

Louise was always filled with admiration at this great mystery of the Incarnation, understanding that God wanted to make man reach glorification, and she added, *"Is it not glorious for souls to cooperate with God [in human salvation]."* She thereby put service of the poor as a way of cooperating with God, with Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. For her, service of the poor carried out well, and in accordance with God's designs, is like an extension of the Redemption. Through the service of the poor we allow people to live well, to die well, but also to recover their dignity as persons and as children of God. This is what Jesus Christ did when he came on earth: he allowed humans to be welcomed by God with a great forgiveness for their faults. So we are there to cooperate with God in the salvation of the world. Louise emphasized the importance of our service being carried out with a concern for the good of people because this is Jesus Christ's desire. Louise didn't just meditate on the Incarnation. She would meditate at length on the **Eucharist**.

"We must try to discover in God some motive for this admirable and, in a human sense, incomprehensible action. Since there is no apparent reason, other than His pure love, we must render honor and glory to God by acts of praise, adoration, love, and gratitude for His loving invention which unites Him to us." (M. 72)

"A loving invention which unites Him to us"! Louise takes up what Vincent de Paul said about the Eucharist: *"[God] is inventive to infinity"* (Coste XI, p. 131). Louise said that God couldn't be satisfied with the Incarnation and wanted to remain present among us so He invented the Eucharist. For her, the Eucharist is something extraordinary.

In her *Spiritual Writings* (M. 72), we find a conference Louise gave to the Sisters on the Eucharist: she explained to them the three things we need to consider for making a good communion: how to prepare well, how to receive communion, and how to thank God. Near the end of her text, she said, *"God... give[s] us the capacity to live in Him."* The Sisters said that Louise was always very emotional when she received communion and had a little handkerchief to wipe away her tears. She was so happy that she cried for joy on receiving her God.

All her meditation did not keep Louise from directing the Company. There were foundations in Poland, on the battlefields, in Ussel, Narbonne, and Cahors... She led both her practical life and her life of spiritual reflection.

In 1657, she made her retreat, meditating on the **Holy Spirit**. Until then she had hardly spoken of the Holy Spirit at all. She loved the feast of Pentecost because it held the memory of her Light of Pentecost. However, when she spoke about her Light of Pentecost, she only spoke about God; she only knew God. There was another important event in 1642 when the floor collapsed on the day of Pentecost. But in 1657, she devoted her retreat to meditating on the Holy Spirit. Her text is rather complex. She said that the Holy Spirit is a strength, a strength that would help the apostles to bear witness, and that the Holy Spirit will also give us the strength to bear witness. She also says that the Holy Spirit is a source of unity which will allow the Church to develop and be united, but she also insists on the action of the Holy Spirit within us: the Holy Spirit comes to create unity in ourselves because we are often divided within ourselves. She speaks of our three faculties: understanding, judgment and will, and we realize, as Saint Paul said, that we do not do the good that we wish to do but do the evil that we do not wish to do; the will does not manage to be consistent with what is desired. Finally, she said that the Holy Spirit is love, and she has a beautiful prayer:

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Meditation on reasons for giving oneself to God in order to receive the Holy Spirit (A. 26)

“O Eternal Light, lift my blindness! O Perfect Unity, create in me simplicity of being! Humble my heart to receive Your graces. May the power to love which You have placed in my soul no longer stop at the disorder of my self-sufficiency which, in reality, is but powerlessness and an obstacle to the pure love which I must have as a result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.”

Louise would put this into a simpler language for the Sisters:

“I beg the goodness of Our Lord to dispose our souls for the reception of the Holy Spirit so that, burning with the fire of His holy love, you may be consumed in the perfection of this love which will enable you to love the most holy will of God.” (L. 429)

So, Louise is totally fulfilled. At this time, she would overcome the difficulties that would present themselves within the Company without sinking into a sense of guilt; she would accept difficulties peacefully even as she suffered from them. We know that Marie Joly would refuse to obey, the Sisters in Angers would refuse to accept their new Sister Servant, and the Sister who was supposed to go to Cahors left, taking with her the money given her for her food, etc. There were difficulties, but Louise bore them, went forward calmly in joy, aware of God's love, and would approach death peacefully.

But in January 1660, a letter from Louise shows that she was haunted by a terrible fear. Louise asked herself: “what if I was mistaken about God's plan for the Company?” She no longer knew what to think. For in the Company there were some Sisters who wanted to divide the Company into two groups: a first group for “coming and going”, those who would continue the service of the poor, and the other group who would have a much more religious life, with a veil, who would be called “Mother” and not “Sister”, and who would have much more time to read the Word of God. Louise asked herself, “But what does God want of me?” She sent a very anxious letter to Vincent de Paul where she explains all this.

Letter to M. Vincent (L. 655)

“I am truly distressed to cause you this trouble. If your Charity sees that God wills something other than what has been done until now, then in the name of Our Lord, be the one to declare and order it.”

However, as Vincent is sick, she asks that M. Alméras be sent. I suppose that M. Alméras and Vincent de Paul reassured her. But why did she have this fear at the end? I think that she can be compared to Francis of Assisi. In fact, a short time before his death, Francis of Assisi had the same torment because he saw that some of his brothers wanted less poverty and changes in the community. Louise saw the same thing; she saw that some wanted to modify this work of God, and you get the impression that God wanted to ask her to put into His hands this community that she had so loved, and that Louise, at the moment of her death, considered too much as her own work. She had struggled to keep it going, she had done everything so that the Sisters might be faithful to God's designs, and it was her work. Now we feel that God was asking her to let go of her work, to offer it to Him and to place the future of the Company in His hands. Louise did so, and she could die in peace on March 15, 1660. She would say at the beginning of her spiritual testament: *“I...pray that [God] will grant you the grace to persevere in your vocation.”*

Conclusion

I will end with some lines from Saint Vincent in the first of the two conferences he held on the virtues of Louise de Marillac.

“O mon Dieu, what a beautiful picture! What humility, faith, prudence, sound judgment, and always the concern to conform her actions to those of Our Lord! It's up to you, Sisters, to conform your actions to hers and to imitate her in all things.” (Coste X, p. 585)

Sister Elisabeth CHARPY
Daughter of Charity

INTRODUCTION TO THE MESSAGE OF POPE BENEDICT XVI

*On the occasion of the 28th World Youth Day 2013
from July 23-28, 2013 at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

“Go and make disciples of all nations.”

Dear young friends,

I greet all of you with great joy and affection... we are preparing for the next World Youth Day, which will take place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in July 2013...

The celebrated statue of Christ the Redeemer overlooking that beautiful Brazilian city will be an eloquent symbol for us. Christ's open arms are a sign of his willingness to embrace all those who come to him, and his heart represents his immense love for everyone and for each of you. Let yourselves be drawn to Christ! Experience this encounter along with all the other young people who will converge on Rio for the next World Youth Day! Accept Christ's love and you will be the witnesses so needed by our world.

[...Meditate] even now on the theme of the meeting: *“Go and make disciples of all nations!”* (cf. Mt 28:19). This is the great missionary mandate that Christ gave the whole Church, and today, two thousand years later, it remains as urgent as ever.

This mandate should resound powerfully in your hearts. The year of preparation for the gathering in Rio coincides with the Year of Faith, which began with the *Synod of Bishops devoted to “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith”*. I am happy that you too, dear young people, are involved in this missionary outreach on the part of the whole Church. To make Christ known is the most precious gift that you can give to others...

