

*E*choes *of the Company*



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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Letter of August 15, 2013

Dear Sisters,

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

Faithful to the Company's tradition, you have been so kind as to send me feast day greetings for August 15. I thank you deeply for them. I was happy to read your letters and in that way share a little of the life of local communities and the joys and difficulties of the services that you provide to those who are poor. Some situations especially attracted my attention, for example, that of a hospital in Mozambique where the Sisters manage "the post-flood period", that of a new local community in North India where education and evangelization of youth are crucial priorities, that of a house of elderly Sisters in Europe that has adopted a mission in Africa through its spiritual and material support, that of a local community in Latin America where welcoming people living on the streets mobilizes all their energies and... I could easily lengthen this list. I am also very grateful for the prayers that you offer for me. May the Lord reward you a hundredfold!

Today, with the Church, we celebrate the Virgin Mary, assumed body and soul into the glory of heaven. The texts that the liturgy offers us present Mary as the Woman par excellence, completely close to God and completely close to us:

*"All glorious is the king's daughter as she enters, her raiment threaded with gold; in embroidered apparel she is led to the king."*¹

1. Psalm 44 (45):14-15



Spiritual Life

Letter of August 15, 2013

“A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.”²

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.”³

Let us reflect on the meaning of this feast in order to deepen our Marian devotion and thus, as Saint Louise tells us, draw closer to the Lord: “I am entirely yours, most Holy Virgin, that I may more perfectly belong to God.”⁴ In the formation she provided for the first Sisters, Saint Louise often showed them the example of the Virgin Mary, her humility, the purity of her love for God, and her fidelity to the mission she received to give the Word of Life to the world. She wrote: “Each day, let us implore her to help us to render to God the service we have promised Him and to be as submissive as she was in accomplishing His holy will.”⁵

In my travels, I have come to know and love Mary under different titles: I was recently in Amazonia where we took part in a beautiful celebration to honor Nossa Senhora de Nazaré; in Santo Domingo, in the Province del Caribe, we meditated on the very wide-spread devotion to Nuestra Señora de la Altagracia. Today, let us turn our attention to three other titles of Mary and contemplate her:

Mary, Mother of Life and Queen raised up to heaven. She reminds us of the greatness of our human condition. By celebrating her Assumption, we make an act of faith in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting, we proclaim the dignity of each human person and we give thanks to God for our redemption and His infinite mercy. The Church proclaims that our body is destined to be transfigured by God, this body that is sometimes reduced to the level of something that can be bought and sold, or loved to the point of idolatry, this body that is often suffering, sometimes tortured.

Through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Life and Queen raised up to heaven, let us entrust to God women and children victimized by

2. Rev 12:1

3. Lk 1:46-48

4. Saint Louise, Oblation to the Blessed Virgin, A. 4. *Spiritual Writings*, 695

5. Saint Louise, Devotion to the Blessed Virgin, M. 33. *Spiritual Writings*, 785-786

human trafficking, youth who are dependent on false paradises, and all our contemporaries caught up in the spiral of violence. Let us also pray for health care professionals and our legislators, that they may respect life from conception to death and protect the stability of the family. Let us ask God, through Mary, for the grace to be attentive to signs of life, goodness, beauty and truth that the Spirit raises up in the world.

Believing Virgin, model for our faith. She teaches us to listen to the Word and to put it into practice. By celebrating the Assumption of Mary, we give thanks for her who went ahead of us, who showed us the way of faith. From *Marialis cultus*, passing through Redemptoris Mater, to Porta fidei and Lumen fidei, Paul VI, John Paul II, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have all cited Mary's faith as an example: “Let us turn in prayer to Mary, Mother of the Church and Mother of our faith. Mother, help our faith!”⁶

Through the intercession of Mary, believing Virgin, model for our faith, let us entrust to God Pope Francis, all those who seek God in the purity of their heart and all those who have forgotten Him. Let us also entrust to Him the exciting challenges of the New Evangelization. Let us ask God, through Mary, for the grace to shine forth our faith ever more through our Vincentian service of charity and our community life.

Mary, only Mother of the Company. From the origins, Saint Vincent and Saint Louise took her as patron, and throughout the 380 years the Company has existed, the Virgin has demonstrated her affection and her protection. In 1830 she made a gift of the medal to Saint Catherine, declaring to her, “The Community, how I love it,” while also pointing out laxness in Community... in 1840, she entrusted the green scapular of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to Sister Justine and in 1846, the red scapular of the Passion of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary to Sister Apolline. Beyond these extraordinary revelations, let us remain faithful to daily recourse to Mary and to the spirit of a servant, of which she is the perfect model.

Through the intercession of Mary, only Mother of the Company, let us entrust to God our upcoming Domestic and Provincial Assemblies, that they may provoke a “new missionary momentum” in all of us.

6. Pope Francis, *Lumen fidei*, n°60

Letter of August 15, 2013

Happy feast of the Assumption! On this day, we present to Mary the entire Company and especially our Sisters who serve in Egypt, Eritrea and Syria...

With my repeated gratitude for your feast day wishes and your prayers, I assure you of my devoted affection,

Sister Evelyne FRANC
Daughter of Charity

P.S. Allow me to take advantage of this letter to share a piece of information with you:

In 2004, the Company created IPS in the USA, an organization to which many of you appeal in order to finance holistic development projects for our most destitute brothers and sisters. Recently, the Company decided to create another legal entity under French law, the Rosalie Rendu Fund. This fund will seek resources in order to help those who are poor served by the Daughters of Charity, particularly in the areas of education, women's promotion, health and rural development. It will collaborate with IPS for the financing of your projects. However, out of concern for good coordination, your projects will continue to be sent directly to IPS.

We have placed it under the patronage of Sister Rosalie with the hope of imitating her concern for those who are poor, her simplicity – and her effectiveness – to solicit assistance for them.

www.daughtersips.org and www.rosalierendu.fr

International Retreat for Sister Servants
Mother House, May 2013

A PLACE AT THE FEET
“Faith: The Service of Mind, Heart, and Will”

“Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen.” (Heb 11:1)

During this “Year of Faith,” I would like to draw our attention to the matter of our faith. Keep in mind our role as Sister Servants and our service “at the feet” of our Sisters to support their faith and promote its growth. Let's focus on the personal character of faith.

“The “door of faith” (Acts 14:27) is always open for us, ushering us into the life of communion with God and offering entry into his Church... To enter through that door is to set out on a journey that lasts a lifetime. It begins with baptism (cf. Rom 6:4), through which we can address God as Father, and it ends with the passage through death to eternal life, fruit of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus...” (PF 1)

Entering by the door of faith lasts a lifetime, from our baptism to our death; and as members of a Society of Apostolic Life, the Vincentian charism characterizes the way we live our faith and consecrated life. We live as a community of faith and grow in that faith together as we witness to it by our words and actions, in our ministry and mutual support.

During the past two years, I have come to a deeper appreciation of how much Peter is a foil for the teaching of the Gospel, for coming to know the identity of Jesus, and for growing in faith. I have wondered if that is especially true because he is to take on a role of leadership—like that of a Sister Servant.

A Place at the Feet

Why not Paul: the more urbane, multicultural, multilingual, Paul? Perhaps, because Peter's particular cultural prejudices are challenged and need to grow and change. We can learn more through Peter. He needs to become multicultural and develop a broader vision as he grows in his faith.

In the Acts of the Apostles, he describes his vision in Joppa: he saw a sheet filled with "unclean animals" lowered from heaven. Peter doesn't understand the meaning of the vision right away, but later, he recognizes what God told him (Acts 10:28) and learns how the Christian community embraces the whole world. We will look to Peter for some lessons about faith.

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT FAITH

First of all, however, let me say something about the meaning of the word "faith," and in particular its expression in the verb "believe." When we say, "we believe," it oftentimes is just another way of saying, "we think." But no, that in which we have faith needs to be much more carefully defined. When I say that "I believe," I want to engage that deepest part of myself which affirms a level more profound than any knowledge or proof. I want it to be what I know to be the truest expression of myself and the universe in which I live and the one who is God.

Pope Benedict's letter encourages us to make an effort to confess our faith. Perhaps, we might think that we need to make it known to others, and that is undoubtedly true and useful, but first of all, and most importantly, I think that we need to confess our faith to ourselves. I must be able to tell myself in the deepest part of my being that I am a believer and the difference which that makes in my life. Only then am I prepared to express that faith to others. Here are some biblical images that help me to think about our faith.

The simplest expression of our faith is: "I believe in God." In this year of faith, I want to come to a deeper appreciation of what I mean when I say that phrase. It is fundamental and the basis for every other statement. We begin with God. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we find this opening statement:

"Our profession of faith begins with God, for God is the First and the Last, the beginning and the end of everything." (CCC, para. 198)

That seems pretty clear. Sometimes people of faith ask me if I believe in angels, or if I believe in hell, or if I believe that there are dogs in heaven. My answer to these types of questions enables some people to categorize me on one side or the other of a theological spectrum: liberal or conservative. Actually, I refuse to answer these questions as "yes" or "no", and that makes people even more frustrated. My response is that I believe in God who is all powerful and all good. That's why I believe that God does communicate and care for us, which is the function of angels; I believe that God is just, which says something about holding people accountable for their lives; and I believe that God wants us to be happy with him for all time, and that means different things for different people and sometimes includes dogs. And so, I don't care to talk about "believing" other things: I believe in God and all the rest falls into place.

There are many levels to our faith. Mother Guillemin captures much of my thinking of how faith needs to engage us personally:

"Faith is not only an act of the intelligence; it is the adherence of the heart and the source of life. An ardent and convinced faith animates all the thoughts of our mind, influences the decisions of our heart and determines the acts of our will." (January 1, 1968)

Mind, heart, and will all play a part in the exercise of our faith. The Bible offers us the basis for our reflection.

I. PERSONAL PROFESSION OF FAITH:

A MATTER OF MIND: "WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?"

When Jesus poses the question of his identity to the disciples, he develops the question in a particular way. Listen to how he engages his disciples and us:

"Once when Jesus was praying in solitude, and the disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They said in

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reply, “John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, ‘One of the ancient prophets has arisen.’” Then he said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter said in reply, “The Messiah of God.”” (Lk 9:18-20)

Note the development here. Jesus first asked the disciple who other people said that he was. Jesus wants the disciples to keep their ears open, to learn from the experience of others. And the disciples tell him what the word is “on the street.” Some say John the Baptist; others Elijah; still others, one of the prophets. Jesus wants the disciples to gather information, but that is never going to be enough.

One can never truly believe based on what someone else thinks. Jesus ultimately gets to the most important question. As easy as it is to hide behind the opinions and thoughts of others, sooner or later a person must take responsibility for his or her own life. And so, Jesus asks: “But who do you say that I am?” Jesus wants to know what the disciples believe, and Peter is equal to the task. He tells Jesus, “[You are] the Messiah of God.” Peter could not have made a more powerful statement; in these words Peter captures everything which he could think of saying. Jesus is, of course, the Messiah but also much more. Peter’s heartfelt answer starts him on a path which will not see its peak till the experience of the Resurrection.

The lesson for us with regard to our own faith in this story is that we too need to converse and learn from other people. What does the Bible tell us about Jesus? What does the catechism say? What does the Pope have to say about who Jesus is? What do theologians have to say? What does the newspaper affirm? This dynamic is not less important for our modern world than it was in an ancient one.

There are many people of deep faith who can teach us about what it means to be believers by both their words and actions. Like you, I have my favorite authors, and I do not believe that any of them has all the answers, nor do I even agree with the positions of some. Yet, they all challenge me and invite me to think and rethink what I believe about Jesus and the Bible and the Eucharist, and thus to grow in my faith.

The circular letters of Mother Guillemin are a real treasure. It is really easy to see her faith expressed in her letters. She knew what she believed

and she said it with clarity and conviction. She did not preach but simply stated what had become deeply rooted in her heart and experience. During the last Year of Faith, which was declared in 1967 by Pope Paul VI, she reflected deeply and richly about the meaning of faith.

There are other sources of writings about our faith. Some people really do believe and are able to share that with us. Perhaps you know other sisters or confreres or persons who really model faith for you. I confess that Dorothy Day (an American laywoman and advocate for the poor) has always been a model of faith for me. Her story reveals a genuine search for and discovery of God in a life that was not easy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is another such person.

But once we have heard what other people believe, we can only allow Jesus to ask us the key question itself, as he asks it of the disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” Knowing the beliefs should draw us to a deeper conviction ourselves. Who is Jesus for me? It needs to flow from what I know but more so from what I have come to experience of him. This is why the experience of Jesus in others and in the poor is so essential. This is why reading the Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is so effective. This is why receiving the Lord reverently in the Eucharist and realizing what it is which we hold in our hands needs to change us. This is why praying the rosary and meditating on the cross has led so many men and women to personal sanctity. We need to think about what we believe.

Few books of the Bible consider the question of the nature of God or God’s way of acting as reflectively as the **Book of Job**.

The Book of Job begins with the story of the misfortunes of Job and ends with the restoration of the blessings of Job. In the middle, the book presents a debate on the nature of God and the way in which God deals with human beings. Are people who act virtuously rewarded in this life and people who do evil punished in this life?

The debate of these 40 chapters takes place around these questions without resolving the question. The resolution to the question of the goodness of God and why God acts certain ways in particular circumstances is recognized as being beyond human understanding.

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The greatness of the universe suggests the greatness of God, and one must learn ultimately to just trust God.

Job is questioned by God on the wonders of the universe, and he can only respond that he does not know the answer to any of these questions and can only stand humbly before the majesty of the one who created all things. He recognizes that everything comes as a gift to a human being. And so, ultimately, we must stand silently in awe and trust in the one who brings such beauty, such grandeur into being. That can also be the position of faith as we engage our minds.

The first Daughters of Charity were directed to know the basics of their faith themselves and then to teach these fundamental truths to the people, even as they served their essential physical needs.

“[The Daughters of Charity] will not forget to say a good word to the [sick poor] occasionally to dispose them to be patient, to make a good general confession, to prepare for a happy death or to lead a good life, and, above all, to teach them the things necessary for their salvation.” (Common Rules of 1655, VII.2; Coste XIIIb, p. 151)

What was important for the Daughter of Charity herself to believe was also important for others. Today, we should know the fundamental truths of our faith so that we can confess them.

In this year of faith, one of the efforts which we can make is to study our faith. We can read (again) the documents of Vatican II, the writings of the Founders, the biography of a person of faith... There are numerous ways to nourish our minds around our faith and all of them contribute to our ability to understand and express our faith better. Sharing our faith is the gift of God that we offer each other.

II. PERSONAL PROFESSION OF FAITH:

A MATTER OF HEART: “DO YOU LOVE ME?”

After the resurrection, Jesus encounters Peter and eats with him by the lake. He asks him a question: “Do you love me?” (Jn 21:15-19)

Jesus asks this same question three times and each time, Peter responds, “Yes,” but (perhaps) with a deeper appreciation at what that means with each repetition. It is not enough to know the truth about who the Lord is, one must also love the Lord. It is only with this commitment of the heart that Peter is ready to hear the call to serve God’s people, that he is willing to lay down his life, and that he is finally able “follow me [follow Jesus]” totally. As his profession of love of the Lord grows, so does his ability to embrace all of God’s people.

In this “year of faith,” we might ask ourselves if we are prepared to allow the Lord to ask us this question three times: “*Do you love me?*” With each asking and with each response, we are invited to enter more deeply into that commitment to the Lord.

St. Vincent and St. Louise taught the first Daughters of Charity that the Spirit of the Company resided in the love of God, of one another, and of the neighbor. Love was essential to the way in which they practiced their faith. More than simply knowing God, we must love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength. The seal of the Daughters of Charity proclaims this truth: “*The Charity of Jesus crucified urges us.*” We continue to live this belief founded on the love of Christ.

In the Gospel, the story of Jesus at the death of Lazarus offers an opportunity to reflect upon what faith means in moments of real difficulty.

Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary has died. They are all friends of Jesus. One would expect that Jesus would come rapidly to be with them during Lazarus’ illness, but that is not the case. When Jesus finally gets there, he is confronted by the always aggressive Martha:

“Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died [But] even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise.” Martha said to him, “I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus told her, “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the

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one who is coming into the world.”” (Jn 11:21-27)

This wondrous dialogue tells us a lot about faith. Martha is a good and knowledgeable Jewess. When Jesus tells her that Lazarus will rise again, she says that she knows this: *“in the resurrection on the last day.”* This is a belief of the Jews. Jesus then speaks words to her which will change her life. He calls her to believe, not simply in the doctrine of the resurrection, but in Jesus himself.

We are asked to believe in the Lord and the Lord’s promises because we know that he loves us and we are called to love him. The heart is an important part of our coming to the Lord. Faith engages our heart.

In the Gospel, one of the powerful places in which this level of faith is made evident is in the Magnificat of Mary.

She has already agreed to be the mother of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, and she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Mary is overwhelmed as she considers the goodness of God and is prompted to make her special prayer of praise, truly a prayer of the heart.

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

Mary lifts herself up in a song of praise that expresses the inmost truth of her faith. She knows God with her mind and heart and believes in God’s promises for her and for her people. Mary makes a prayer of the heart. And it spreads out to include her nation.

We need to love the Lord deeply and discover the way in which this gives rise to a more profound and personal faith. A beautiful quotation from Blaise Pascal expresses this truth:

“The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things. It is the heart which experiences God, and not reason. This, then, is faith: God felt by the heart, not by reason.” (Pascal, Pensées, paragraph 263)

As we reflect in this year of faith, perhaps we will discover that we need to write our Psalm of Love, our Magnificat, for the Lord’s action and direction in our lives. It is an expression of our faith in the heart. It is a way in which we respond to the faith question: Do you love me? As we confess our love for the Lord, we are called to a more intimate care for our Sisters as their servant.

III. PERSONAL PROFESSION OF FAITH:

A MATTER OF WILL: “WHY DID YOU DOUBT?”

Faith also involves us in a choice to follow the Lord completely or not. It engages our will and then our actions: I choose to be faithful! I choose to live in such a way which gives expression to my faith.

In the Gospel, Jesus walks on water.

We can again look to Peter and his experience with Jesus to help us to understand this truth. On one occasion, Peter sees Jesus walking on the water, and he wants to do that as well.

“Peter said to [Jesus] in reply, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how [strong] the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him, and said to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”” (Mt 14:28 -33)

This story offers us some points for reflection about faith. First of all, we see Peter’s ability to follow the Lord’s direction when he puts his confidence in him. As long as Peter keeps his eyes fixed on the Lord, he can do what is asked of him. When he begins to let other matters distract him, however, he begins to sink. The clear symbolism of the story makes its lesson about faith truly evident. When Jesus is that important person in one’s life, when there is no one else who comes close, then we are true believers. We allow our vision of the Lord to determine our actions and direction.

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There are, however, lots of other things which can draw our attention. For Peter, these are the waves and the movement of the wind and all the other things which tell him that he cannot do what he is actually doing. These other voices become too strong for him and keep him from listening to Jesus. He forgets to look for Jesus, he forgets to put his faith in Jesus. Once this happens, Jesus is immediately at his side to support him and says to him, “*O you of little faith, why did you doubt?*”

In our lives, the issue is the confidence that we place in Jesus to help us to do those things which we need to do as believing Christians. When we place our faith truly in him, we can ask him to invite us to come to him walking on the water. But when we begin to allow all kinds of doubts and other factors to enter into our thinking and acting, then we are fated to sink. Walking on the water is an acquired art and comes with steady vision and resolve. It is not enough to believe, we must also act on our belief. Our faith is a matter of the will; it is involved in the decisions which we make and the way in which we choose to act on these choices.

“Let us love God, brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows.” (C. 25, Coste XI, p. 32)

For Vincent and those who embraced his charism, the expression of one’s faith must take the form of action. The first Daughters of Charity demonstrated that forcefully in the physical care which they took of the poor. Carrying food through the streets of Paris, ministering to the sick at home, in hospitals, and in prisons, caring for the wounded on battlefields, attending to the orphans... they expressed their belief in Christ present among the needy. We continue those efforts in various ways today.

Vincent was not enthused with those whose faith never led them to action:

“They flatter themselves with their ardent imagination; they’re satisfied with the sweet conversations they have with God in meditation and even speak of them like angels; but when they leave there, if there is a question of working for God, of suffering, of mortifying themselves, of instructing poor persons, of going in search of the lost sheep, of being

happy when they lack something, or of accepting sickness or some other misfortune, alas! they’re no longer around; their courage fails them.” (C. 25, Coste XI, p. 33)

Our belief in Christ present among the needy must be expressed in flesh and blood and through our hands and feet.

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead... For just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.” (Jas 2:14-17, 26)

Thus, faith involves us in a choice to follow the Lord completely or not.

The rich young man

In this story, a man comes up to Jesus and asks him, “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Jesus takes the question seriously and answers the man with the response which might be expected of any pious rabbi: “*keep the commandments.*” When the man answers that he has always done that, Jesus begins to take a particular interest in him and gives him the opportunity to be an even better person: “*You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me*” (Mt 19:21).

Jesus goes right to the heart of the matter. He sees what could be holding this man back from allowing God to be the absolute center of his life: his possessions. Jesus invites him to rid himself of these possessions, to give away his wealth for the benefit of the poor, and then to come and follow him personally. He offers the man the opportunity to be a disciple!

But the man must choose: “*At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.*” The eagerness of the man to do what was right has been deflated. He wanted Jesus to tell him some particular action which he needed to do, but he was not prepared for

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Jesus' solution. He was comfortable with all that he had; he felt secure in his wealth, so he goes away sad. One can imagine that Jesus, too, is a little saddened and he turns to his disciples to give them a lesson on too much dependence on material goods.

When Jesus invites him to a deeper discipleship, he is not prepared to surrender what is most important in his life at that moment: his security in his possessions. When we listen to this story, we should not think that Jesus would say the same thing to us that he says to this rich man. We, too, can say that we keep the commandments, but when Jesus tells us the deeper reality that we must surrender to follow him, it may not be material possessions. For us, it might be something different. Are you prepared to identify that one element of which you would need to let go in order for Jesus to genuinely be the most important value in your life?

Jesus wants us to follow him and points out the way in which we can do that, but he says it to each of us personally when we are prepared to listen. We are asked to look at our vocation and pay attention to the demands of our charism. We are asked to recognize our special "need" and to be willing to surrender it in order to allow him to take the central place in our lives. As he regarded the rich man, Jesus looks on us with love and invites us to deeper discipleship.

CONCLUSION

Mind, heart, and will. They are all part of how our faith needs to be expressed. The personal commitment of our faith as Sister Servants is a blessing for our community and enables us to contribute to the faith commitment of our Sisters. We pray that each of us may be attentive to the call which the Lord gives to live lives of faith. Paul tells us that "*The just shall live by faith*" (Rom 1:17).

Father Patrick GRIFFIN, C.M.
Director General
International Retreat for Sister Servants

ON THE OCCASION OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

Based on the Second Vatican Council and the teaching
of Paul VI and John Paul II

Mary in the life and mission of the Church

INTRODUCTION

The Church is now celebrating the 50th anniversary of Vatican II. On this occasion, Christians are called to reread the Council texts and to be inspired by them in order to nourish their faith.

Vatican II, the 21st ecumenical Council, was opened on October 11, 1962, by Pope John XXIII, and closed on December 8, 1965, during the pontificate of Paul VI.

The Council was intended to be a return to the sources in order to respond to the two major questions posed by John XXIII:

- Church, what do you say about yourself?
- Church, what do you have to say to the world?

Two major Constitutions would respond to these questions:

- *Lumen Gentium*: the life of the Church in its mystery
- *Gaudium et Spes*: the Church in the present-day world, specifically opening itself to contemporary culture.

Studying the mystery of the Church, the Council Fathers asked themselves about the role of Mary. In chapter 8 of *Lumen Gentium*, they shed light on Mary's role in the Church. It was the first time in history that a Council had put forward a Marian synthesis in this way, something which would develop under Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

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We are going to follow the development of Marian doctrine in the Council and then in the Magisterium of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II based on the 5 following themes:

- I – Mary in the mystery of the Church.
- II - Mary, Mother of the Church.
- III – Prayer and Marian devotion.
- IV – Mary’s maternal mediation.
- V – Mary and the mystery of woman.

I – MARY IN THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

The final chapter of Lumen Gentium explains the mystery of Mary, “pre-eminent and singular member of the Church” (§ 53).

A specific document concerning the Virgin Mary was initially planned, the document De Beata (*The Blessed Virgin Mary*). However, many Council Fathers wanted to include their text in the Constitution on the Church. They had to vote: just 40 votes out of 2000 separated the two options, resulting in favor of including it. There were 1074 votes against including it and 1114 for it. Father Laurentin gave this testimony: “*Leaving Saint Peter’s that day, I saw tears flow.*” Above all, some feared the dilution of Marian devotion and that, in the end, it would be abandoned.

In fact, the Council wanted to break with what was called the “Marian movement” that tended to continually address new praises to Mary with a false interpretation of the principle that “*You can never speak enough about Mary,*” as if the multiplication of praises expressed the mystery better. Of course, we will never exhaust the mystery of Mary because it is the reflection of the mystery of God: she is the created being entirely in the image and likeness of God. However, there was a risk of making her a sort of intermediary between Christ and humankind.

The Council did not in any way intend to relativize the mission confided to her, nor the qualities with which God desired to favor her so that she could respond to it: mission and grace go together. “*Mary...received the Word of God in her heart and in her body and gave Life to the world, is acknowledged and honored as being truly the Mother of God and Mother of the Redeemer...she is endowed with the high office and*

dignity... Because of this gift of sublime grace she far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth” (§ 53).

Article § 54 specifies that she “*occupies a place in the Church which is the highest after Christ and yet very close to us.*” We understand that it is a matter of elevation in the order of love, a proximity with Christ the servant whose humble servant she would be.

So Vatican II shows that Mary is at the heart of the mystery of Christ and of the Church, as the title of chapter 8 of Lumen Gentium indicates: “*The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God in the Mystery of Christ and the Church.*” This is why following the Council, when we speak of Mary, we must situate her in the mystery of Christ and of the Church.

Mary is the pivotal point of Salvation. In her, God and man meet in such a way that they become one. The Council of Ephesus (431) had already emphasized this role of Mary in Salvation.

When asked the question, “When does the Church celebrate the Virgin Mary?” we answer: the Annunciation, the Visitation, Christmas, Advent, and we often forget the essential event: the Paschal mystery.

In each Eucharistic celebration, the Church acknowledges that Mary is at the heart of the Paschal mystery. In the texts of the first Eucharistic prayers, we “recall the memory of the Blessed Virgin Mary” present at the heart of the Paschal mystery. This is not simply a sentimental reflex; the Mass is not a private matter but is lived as Church around Mary. By remembering Mary, we are supported by her prayer. The Church is carried by Mary’s faith, it is born of her faith and draws from her the source of its praise and intercession. The Council quoted St Augustine who said, “*Because she cooperated by charity that the faithful might be born in the Church, Mary is at the heart of the Church, this fountain from which the life of God, shared with believers, springs forth, today as in the past, through the pure grace of the Spirit.*”

II – MARY, MOTHER OF THE CHURCH

The Council did not use the expression “Mother of the Church,” but used an equivalent phrase: “*The Catholic Church...honors her with*

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filial affection and piety as a most beloved mother" (§ 53).

We can call Mary the "**Mother of the Church**" because she is the mother of Christ and, therefore, of all the members of his mystical body, even if she still remains our sister.

We read in Saint John's Gospel: "*Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother... When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son'*" (Jn 19: 25-27). In the Greek, it doesn't say, "*he saw his mother*" but "*he saw the mother.*" There is no possessive pronoun, and the article "**the**" is enough because it is clear the reference is to "*his mother.*" From then on, Mary is **the** mother; she is completely taken up in her maternal mission. She is **only mother**; her whole being and vocation are here; it is her grace and her special vocation: she is the mother, she whose life is totally given. There is no need to look for a more evangelical title.

This is why the whole Church wants to be recognized in Mary because the Church must continually bring new children of God into the world: the Church is Mother. In this sense, Mary is the model of a Mother-Church: Mother and virgin, the Church will only be so in the grace of Mary's faith receiving the Word of God in her heart (cf. § 63-64).

In a homily for the Immaculate Conception (2005) given at the Piazza di Spagna in Rome, Benedict XVI recalled the Council Fathers' emotion when Paul VI stressed this title of Mary in this speech: "*It is thus for the glory of the Blessed Virgin and our comfort that we proclaim Mary the Most Holy Mother of the Church, that is, of all the people of God, both the faithful and its pastors, who call her most loving mother, and we wish that from now on, with such a sweet title, the Virgin be even more honored and invoked by all the Christian people.*"

At these words, all the Council Fathers stood up and applauded.

At the Council, Pope John Paul II was part of the group of bishops who requested that this title, "Mary, Mother of the Church," be adopted. To show his attachment to this invocation, he had a mosaic of the Virgin and Child placed under one of the windows of the Apostolic Palace on Saint Peter's Square. He also placed there his blue coat of arms with

the yellow cross and M above it, and this prayer that accompanies it: "*Totus Tuus,*" adding: "*Mater Ecclesiae.*"

III – PRAYER AND MARIAN DEVOTION

IN MARY, THE DIALOGUE OF SALVATION

In *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), Paul VI's first encyclical on ecclesiology, the Pope insists, among other things, on the necessity of Marian devotion in the mission of the Church.¹ He writes that the root of the dialogue of Salvation is the moment when God met man. But God never came as close to anyone as He did in Mary's womb. In Mary, God and creation are united to become one.

The Council of Ephesus had already affirmed that everything that is said of God can be said of man, and vice-versa. In Jesus Christ, God is born, suffered and died; but one can also say that in Jesus Christ, creatures became eternal. It is the heart of our faith. We proclaim it in the third preface of the Nativity. So in Mary, the dialogue of Salvation is perfectly fulfilled. The Fiat of the human servant is in perfect accord with God's Fiat pronounced in Jesus Christ. The creature's response matches God's gift; it is the same "yes."

MARIAN DEVOTION

Then, Paul VI would comment on the Council's expression, "*Marian devotion*" in five major documents:

- *The Month of May dedicated to Mary* (1965)
- *Signum Magnum* (May 13, 1967). This apostolic exhortation "*A great sign in Heaven,*" written on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the apparitions in Fatima, proposed "*veneration and imitation of Mary, Mother of the Church, model of all virtues.*"
- *The Mother of Christ* (1968)
- *The month of October, month of the Rosary* (1969)
- *Marialis Cultus* (1974)

1. In an ecumenical context, this insistence will be renewed a few years later in the *Marialis cultus*.

In *Marialis Cultus*, Paul VI recalled the honor given to Mary during the Council of Ephesus in 431 when she was hailed as “Theotokos,” Mother of God.

- In the introduction, Paul VI stressed that: Marian “*devotion fits into the only worship that is rightly called “Christian,” because it takes its origin and effectiveness from Christ, finds its complete expression in Christ, and leads through Christ in the Spirit to the Father*” (MC, introduction).

- In the first part, Paul VI invites the faithful to consider several questions concerning the relationship between the liturgy and devotion to the Blessed Virgin.

- In the second part, he offers considerations and directives suitable for promoting the development of Marian devotion.

- Finally, in the third part, a number of reflections are put forward about praying the Angelus and the Rosary in a more dynamic manner.

1st part: DEVOTION TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY IN THE LITURGY

1 – THE VIRGIN MARY IN THE REVISED ROMAN LITURGY

Paul VI shows Mary’s place in the revised liturgy. Marian devotion is therefore not a private devotion; it is at the center of Christian worship dedicated to Christ. “*The reform of the Roman liturgy...include[s] the commemoration of Christ’s Mother in the annual cycle of the mysteries of her Son.*”

MARIAN FEASTS

Paul VI comments on the Marian celebrations of the Roman Missal, again showing the connection that unites commemorations of the Blessed Mother in the annual cycle of the mysteries of her Son:

- **Advent**, considering the love with which the Virgin awaited her Son.
- The **Christmas Season** with the Solemnity of Christmas and the veneration of His Mother.

- To the two solemnities of the **Immaculate Conception** and **Mary, Mother of God**, the celebration of March 25th should be added, as all three are more directly related to the mystery of the Incarnation.

- And the **solemnity of August 15th** celebrates her glorification and perfect configuration to the Risen Christ.

- After these solemnities, particular consideration must be given to those **celebrations that commemorate salvific events** in which Mary was closely associated with her Son (the Birth of Mary, the Visitation, and Our Lady of Sorrows).

- The feast of **February 2nd** is a joint commemoration of the Son and of the Mother.

EUCHARISTIC PRAYERS COMMEMORATE MARY

Paul VI does not fail to mention how all the Eucharistic Prayers of the Eastern and Western Church commemorate the Mother of the Lord in a significant way (cf. MC § 10).

“In union with the whole Church we honor Mary, the ever-virgin Mother of Jesus Christ our Lord and God.” In a similar way the recent Eucharistic Prayer III expresses with intense supplication the desire of those praying to share with the Mother the inheritance of sons: “May he make us an everlasting gift to you (the Father) and enable us to share in the inheritance of your saints, with Mary, the Virgin Mother of God.” This daily commemoration, by reason of its place at the heart of the divine Sacrifice, should be considered a particularly expressive form of the veneration that the Church pays to the ‘Blessed of the Most High.’” (MC § 10)

The Liturgy of the Hours also contains examples of devotion to the Mother of the Lord, for example, in the hymns, antiphons and prayers of intercession at Lauds and Vespers. The Blessed Virgin is frequently commemorated.

2 – THE BLESSED VIRGIN IS THE MODEL OF THE CHURCH IN DIVINE WORSHIP

Paul VI describes Mary as the model of true divine worship. He examines more closely a particular aspect of the relationship between

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Mary and the liturgy: Mary, model of the spiritual attitude with which the Church celebrates and lives the divine mysteries. The Church has devotion to Mary (MC § 16) and recognizes her as the **model of its prayer**. She is the Virgin who listens (MC § 17), the Virgin who prays (MC § 18), the Virgin who gives birth (MC § 19), and the Virgin who presents offerings (MC § 20), the one who is eminently united to the Redeemer. Model of the entire Church in the exercise of divine worship, Mary is a teacher of the spiritual life for all Christians (MC § 21).

2nd part: THE RENEWAL OF DEVOTION TO MARY

In the second part, Paul VI offers recommendations for Marian devotion: this worship should be directed towards the Trinity, Christ and the Church. He thereby recalls the **Trinitarian, Christological and Ecclesial aspects** of devotion to the Blessed Virgin.

“Christian worship in fact is of itself worship offered to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit... From this point of view worship is rightly extended, though in a substantially different way, first and foremost and in a special manner, to the Mother of the Lord...In the Virgin Mary everything is relative to Christ and dependent upon Him. It was with a view to Christ that God the Father from all eternity chose her to be the all-holy Mother and adorned her with gifts of the Spirit granted to no one else.” (MC §25)

Then, following the path traced by Conciliar teaching, Paul VI adds that Marian devotion should be built on a **biblical** foundation and, as a result, be acceptable from an **ecumenical** perspective, all this without neglecting **anthropological** emphases.

Marian devotion is rooted in the Bible and Tradition. It is not made up of a series of private small feasts but flows *into the great mystery of the covenant between God and man*. Mary is present throughout salvation history. She is the new Eve who accompanies the new Adam on his journey; she is the human creature most fitted for what God desired of the Covenant.

From an anthropological point of view, Mary certainly appears as a strong woman who, with other holy women, stands firm in this place of anxiety that most of the male disciples have deserted. Mary lives totally at the service of her Son and must let Him use her as He needs and wishes. Veneration of Mary is the surest way of concretely drawing closer to Christ.

By meditating on Mary’s life, we learn what it is to live for Christ and with Christ in everyday inner closeness.

3rd part: OBSERVATIONS ON TWO EXERCISES OF PIETY: THE ANGELUS AND THE ROSARY

In the third part, Paul VI encourages us to recite the Angelus and the Rosary as the extension of the Liturgy of the Hours, continually immersing people into the eternity of God. Indeed, Marian prayers always lead us into this concrete proximity with the Lord and with the entire mystery of redemption.

THE ANGELUS

The three brief invocations of the Angelus are Christocentric: the announcement of the Incarnation, the consent of the Blessed Virgin and the fulfilment of the Incarnation itself.

“The Angelus does not need to be revised, because of its simple structure, its biblical character, its historical origin which links it to the prayer for peace and safety, and its quasi-liturgical rhythm which sanctifies different moments during the day, and because it reminds us of the Paschal Mystery, in which recalling the Incarnation of the Son of God we pray that we may be led “through his passion and cross to the glory of his resurrection.” These factors ensure that the Angelus, despite the passing of centuries, retains an unaltered value and has unfailing freshness.” (MC § 41)

THE ROSARY

This type of Marian prayer gathers together all Salvation history, the concrete representation of the mysteries of the life of Jesus: His youth,

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His ministry, the end of His public life in the Passion, His Resurrection and glorification, into which he also introduced Mary, who is archetype of the Church.

Mary is given a supporting role. In her, the mystery of the Trinity breaks forth for the first time. She then accompanies the incarnate God from the cradle to the grave and, beyond, to the glorified life. Mary is associated with Jesus' journey even to the point of her Assumption into Heaven.

IV – MARY'S MATERNAL MEDIATION

In 1987, Pope John Paul II proclaimed a Marian Year to emphasize the special presence of the Mother of God in the mystery of Christ and His Church (RM § 48, 2) and to accompany the Church in its journey toward the Jubilee of 2000 (RM § 49). John Paul II chose:

- to begin that Marian Year on the Solemnity of Pentecost (June 7, 1987) to stress that the Church should rediscover its identity by taking Mary as its starting point,
- and to close it on the Solemnity of the Assumption (August 15, 1988), a feast which refers to Mary's already redeemed humanity.

The choice of these two dates is a way of highlighting that Mary is at the beginning of the life of the Church and that she accompanies it until its end.

To celebrate this Marian Year, John Paul II published the encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (RM) March 25, 1987, in which he repeated the teaching of Vatican II and shared his spiritual experience of the presence of Mary in the life of the Church and of each Christian.

THE MOTHER OF CHRIST IS GIVEN AS MOTHER TO HUMANKIND

In the words, "*Behold your mother,*" John Paul II sees Christ's testament delivered from the cross: "*Mary's motherhood... is a gift: a gift which Christ himself makes personally to every individual*" (RM § 45). The Pope continues his meditation on the words with which the Calvary scene concludes: "*And from that hour the disciple took her into his*

home" (Jn 19: 27), and he gives a very nuanced interpretation. When this sentence is translated literally, you could read: *He welcomed her into his home (his personal house)*. This means, according to John Paul II, that he creates a very intimate relationship between the disciple and Mary. "*Thus also is exercised that motherhood in the Spirit which became Mary's role at the foot of the Cross and in the Upper Room*" (RM § 45, 4). This is why, through entrusting himself to Mary in a filial manner, the disciple comes under the influence of Mary's faith and participates in it.

MARY'S MEDIATION

Then, John Paul II developed the theme of Mary's mediation. Of course, Vatican II had already mentioned the title "*mediatrix*" and explicitly spoken of Mary's mediation, but the subject had never been developed in such a detailed way in a document from the magisterium. The encyclical does not go further than the Council, but it deepens the principles by giving them new weight for theology and devotion. This expression, "*Mary's mediation*" is the title of the third part of the encyclical.

The Pope strongly emphasized Jesus Christ's mediation: there are not two mediations; there is only one, that of Christ. Mary's mediation is not added to that of the only Mediator, any more than that of the saints adds to that of Mary. There is not a series of mediations between us and God, but total union of God and man through Jesus. However, we must enter into that union; it is in that union that we find the active presence of Mary and the saints.

Christ's mediation is accomplished **in Mary**, and Mary's mediation rests on her participation in Christ's mediating role: it is "*a mediation of Christ*", "*the subordinate role of Mary,*" comparable to service (RM § 38, 4). This mediation by Mary "*flow[s] forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rest[s] on his mediation, depend[s] entirely on it, and draw[s] all [its] power from it.*" (RM § 38, 2), "*a special and exceptional mediation, based upon her 'fullness of grace'*" (RM § 39, 4), a mediation that is always "*a sharing in the one unique source that is the mediation of Christ himself*" (RM § 38, 5).

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John Paul II went further. Even if Mary's mediation is always on the level of the "*participation of all creatures*" in the Redeemer's work, it nonetheless takes on an original character. The Pope qualifies this mediation as "maternal." This adjective, "maternal," refers to Mary's very being; Mary's mediation is closely linked to her maternity: it is the "**mediation of a Mother,**" that of the one who brought Jesus into the world. Mary is therefore associated with the mission of Christ the mediator, like a mother: "She puts herself *"in the middle," that is to say she acts as a mediatrix not as an outsider, but in her position as mother*" (RM § 21), and she exercises her maternal mediation through her intercession: "*Mary's motherhood continues unceasingly in the Church as the mediation which intercedes*" (RM § 40, 2). Mary's intercession is the beginning of the coming of the Spirit.

MARY'S MATERNAL MEDIATION PROMOTES THE IMMEDIATE UNION OF BELIEVERS WITH CHRIST.

The Pope quotes an essential paragraph from chapter 8 of Lumen Gentium (§ 60): "*The Church knows and teaches with Saint Paul that there is only one mediator: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5-6). The maternal role of Mary towards people in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but [this is not a 'but' indicating opposition] rather shows its power....In no way do they impede the immediate union of the faithful with Christ. Rather, they foster this union*" (RM § 38, 1-2).

These last two sentences are very disconcerting for our human way of thinking. Mary allows the grace with which she is filled to pass through her. Mary's mediation promotes the immediate union of the faithful with Christ. So, in a way, we could say that her maternal mediation promotes the absence of mediation! Without this maternal mediation, there would no longer be the immediacy of union with Christ because we are only poor sinners, who always put ourselves at the center and who reason in a way that is based on ourselves... so that we always remain at a distance from Christ. Without Mary's maternal mediation, we are only connected to Christ in an imperfect way, to the extent of our poor faith whereas in her, we are born to God's life. It is her role as mother: to make us children like the child she had on earth.

THE CHURCH PARTICIPATES IN MARY'S FAITH

Maternal figure of the Church, Mary is the "nursing place" that Jesus shares with us and where we can meet Him. She makes us live in this life of grace that Christ alone communicates.

There is a close connection between the Incarnation of Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church by the action of the Holy Spirit:

"The person who links these two moments is Mary... In both cases her discreet yet essential presence indicates the path of 'birth from the Holy Spirit.'" (RM § 24, 4)

"Mary belongs indissolubly to the mystery of Christ, and she belongs also to the mystery of the Church from the beginning, from the day of the Church's birth. At the basis of what the Church has been from the beginning, we find [Mary] ... Mary's faith ... "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, and in a sense share in Mary's faith." (RM § 27, 1)

At Pentecost, the Church participates in Mary's faith. Mary accompanies the apostles in a profound way through prayer, and she continues to accompany us. **At the heart of the Church,** Mary is therefore a **believing presence** who perfectly allows the power of the Spirit to pass through her. Her maternal action is for the Church as a whole, which she prepares and disposes to receive Christ's grace.

With John Paul II, we understand that we also have to participate in Mary's faith in order to help the Church advance on its pilgrimage. Without the mediation of our Mother by faith, we remain at the level of our poor faith, and our ability to welcome Christ is limited and thus imperfect. In the faith of Mary's heart, divine life is communicated to us. Becoming one with her, we are totally receptive to the gift of the Holy Spirit.

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Standing at the foot of the Cross, Mary is the figure of the Church, she is the heart of the Church united to Jesus' heart. John Paul II explained that when Mary stood at the foot of her Son's Cross, we witness the deepest level of self emptying, the cruelest that could be experienced in human history, because not only must Mary give what she herself has already offered, but even what God gave her: her Son, her only Son, He whom she loved. Mary had already offered her entire self to be open only to the Gift of God. She must go all the way in sacrifice because the Father goes all the way: He hands over the Son of His Love, and the mother does the same. She is there, belonging entirely to Jesus. Her surrender is an echo of Jesus' cry from the cross (cf. RM § 18).

By participating in Mary's faith when she stands at the foot of her Son's Cross: "*Mary shares through faith in the shocking mystery of this self-emptying. This is perhaps the deepest "kenosis" of faith in human history...perfectly united with Christ in his self-emptying*" (RM § 18, 3), we learn to follow Christ to His self-emptying, He who "*did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself... being born in the likeness of men...unto death*" (Ph 2:6-8).

Mary draws us along the path of Easter. With her, we learn to let God take us where He Himself wanted to go: we learn to empty ourselves of "our rank" to let God's place in us increase. The path that Christ's disciple should follow is that of humbling and humble love. This is what Joseph lived, he who was closest to Mary. He learned with her to renounce his human inheritance in order to receive from God alone.

MARY IS AT THE HEART OF THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH, AT THE HEART OF THE EUCHARIST.

In 2004, John Paul II wanted a Year of the Eucharist to follow the Year of the Rosary (October 2003-2004), stressing that Mary introduces us into the mystery of the Eucharist because the Mother of God can be called, in a way, Mother of the Eucharist because the Blessed Sacrament is the very Body of the Son of Mary. She is the "Eucharistic woman" par excellence.

"At the foot of the Cross was his mother."

At the foot of the Cross, Mary is totally united with her Son's sacrifice. When the Roman soldier pierces the heart of the already dead Jesus, it is Mary standing at the foot of the Cross who receives the blow in her soul, according to the prophecy of Simeon, "a sword will pierce your heart." It is Mary's open heart that receives the blood flowing from the open heart of Jesus. Mary's existence is entirely drawn from the open side of Him who is only "Gift."

From then on, no Mass can be celebrated without Mary being present. As the Mass is the sacrifice of the Cross made sacramentally present, the Blessed Virgin is there at the foot of our altars, the figure of the Church who offers and receives the gift of God.

God gives Himself at the foot of the Cross, and the altar is placed at the foot of the Cross; that is where we are. And, if we are there, it is because Mary is there...otherwise we could be like the disciple John who did not believe. He was there at the foot of the Cross, he had followed Jesus as best he could, but he only had faith on the next page of the Gospel, when he saw the burial cloth heaped on the ground: "*then, he saw and believed.*" Up to then, he did not believe. However, even if no one believes, God nonetheless gives himself because there is someone who believes totally, someone who receives Him with a perfect 'yes': Mary. Without her, God could not have given Himself because there would have been no one to receive Him.

The faith of the Church

Mary shows us the path of faith. She is the faith of the Church; she is the first believer. It is through her and with her that we learn trust, self-abandonment, and faithfulness. In answer to the question, "*Who in the Church can truly grasp all the grace offered in a sacrament and respond to it?*" Urs von Balthazar responded, "*Only the Immaculate Church!*" Of course, the members of the Church are the imperfect "recipients" of God's gift, but behind their feeble acceptance, there is that of the one who received Him with the perfect yes.

Urs von Balthazar made an interesting commentary on the place of Mary at the heart of the prayer of the Church before communion: "*Who among us at Holy Communion receives the Son as perfectly as He offers*

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himself? Rightly, the priest says before communion, 'Lord, look not on our sins but on the faith of Your Church.'"² He then observes that, if the Church is the priest and the assembled people, it is better that the Lord should not look too closely on the faith of His Church! But if **Mary, this perfect act of faith, pure and complete, is at the heart of His Church**, then God can look at this clear source of Mary's faith, her immaculate yes, free from any hesitation or limitation of God's plan. If, behind the feeble yes of the members of the Church, is she who received Him with the perfect yes, then God can give Himself entirely. In Mary's perfect yes, the Church is already the *spouse without spot or wrinkle* (Eph 5: 27).

V – MARY AND THE MYSTERY OF WOMAN

MULIERIS DIGNITATEM (1988)

To conclude the Marian Year on August 15, 1988, John Paul II published an Apostolic Letter: *Mulieris dignitatem* or *The Dignity and Vocation of Women*. This Letter offers a very beautiful and sound meditation on the human being conceived in the image of God and on the Christian vocation of women. Mary at Christ's side is the Woman, Humanity at the fullness of time. She is the most authentic human subject, completely united with God, servant after the example of Christ the Servant.

At the beginning of the Letter, he recalls an essential passage from the Council, emphasizing that Mary lets herself be considered in the light of Christ, exists only in relationship with him, and invites us to look, in this light, at every man and woman in this Christ who "*fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear.*"³

Mary cannot be an isolated aspect of our faith. She is completely united to God; she offers man the face of a creature finally reestablished in her vocation of existing in the image and resemblance of her Creator. "*A human being, whether male or female, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self.*"⁴ Christ is of course humanity realized in all its fullness; he is the New Adam, but he had to be accepted into a totally available humanity, without which his love couldn't have

2. Hans Urs von Balthazar, *Marie, première Eglise* (1998).

3. *Gaudium et Spes*, § 22

4. *Gaudium et Spes*, § 24

been imposed, and he would still be at our door. But he found himself a woman who offered availability and was ready to give birth to life without the least desire for power. Beside the New Adam, the Son of God made man, we can see, from creation's side, the New Eve, the Woman, totally full of grace from her God.

John Paul II meditated at length on this mystery of humanity finally recreated, man and woman, in the availability to love, thanks to Mary's yes. Docile to the Holy Spirit, she is the one who opened humanity to a Covenant relationship. She is the witness of the first relationship that remained unbroken.

So, "*all humanity, masculine and feminine, should find itself in an essentially receptive attitude.*" That's why the model of humanity is essentially "feminine." We have to insert ourselves into this "**feminine humanity**" in order to receive God's gift. Women are open to a Gift that goes infinitely beyond them. Humanity does not give Salvation, it receives it.

CONCLUSION

Mary leads, then, to a rediscovery and deepening of the mystery of God and the human mystery. We are **at the heart** of the mystery of faith. We move away from sentimental devotion interpreted according to individual taste. Mary introduces humanity into a relational existence: humanity needs to allow itself to be born to this life of God. It needs a Mother to have the experience of God's Fatherhood and that of true human fraternity.

Associated by her faith and by her yes to the gift of grace, Mary is truly the mediatrix of unconditional love, the place where the Spirit comes to rest. She gives birth to the new humanity, the Church. She is herself this Church in its first outpouring and in its final fulfilment.

This reflection by the Council Fathers, the Magisterium and the Christians of our time on the life of the Church and its mission allows us to recognize the work of God perfectly accomplished in Mary, model of the mystery of humanity's vocation.

Mary in the Life and Mission of the Church

How can we not be grateful to Saint Louise for having asked the Company to take Mary as our “Only Mother”? At the intersection of God’s gift and its reception in faith, Mary is our model for learning how to receive God’s grace, receiving 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

TODAY’S CHALLENGES

Province of Pamplona

Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Saint Joseph School
in Saragossa

“A place for everyone”

The historical heart of the city beats to the rhythm of openness to the world. *Today's Challenges*

For several years, the locality has been inhabited by migrants, the majority of whom are gypsies. Marginalization and social exclusion remain significant factors here: it is Saragossa’s poorest area where people are most marginalized.

In this old neighborhood of the city, many of the streets are very narrow, dark and significantly lacking in cleanliness. Most of the houses are run-down, and some have fallen into ruin while other types of houses are being built.

Often, several families share the same house, and this has negative consequences such as conflicts caused by cultural differences.

There is a great linguistic diversity: Spanish, which facilitates integration for those who come from Latin America; many Africans speak Arabic, but since they are from different regions, they often speak different dialects; there are Portuguese people, families from Eastern Europe (Romanians, Bulgarians, and Ukrainians) and even families from China.

Today's Challenges

With regard to religion, many people are Catholic, but there are also Muslims, Orthodox, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other sects. And more and more people say they've never heard of God.

Several local communities of Daughters of Charity are in this area and are engaged in various social works. Our school is a private institution, under contract, which accepts students from 25 nationalities from every continent, all living in this area; this school has a history.

HISTORY

In the second part of the 19th century, the school was founded by a pious woman, Benita Lobo, who gathered together some children to give them a Christian education. She called her school "*Charity School for Poor Children*" and placed it under the patronage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and of Saint Joseph. The people christened it "*Carmel and Saint Joseph Home.*"

In 1896, the Daughters of Charity took on the administration of the home. From the beginning, the goal was clear: to receive children from poor families all year-round.

When the original building became too old, the Sisters looked for another location to continue to take in more than 300 children, constantly calling on the public's charity.

In 1940, after many trials and thanks to the Sisters' creativity, a new building was constructed, which is the school we have at present. Newspapers decided to make the initiative known, architects who were friends designed the plans, public subscriptions were organized, and the people collaborated generously.

The environment changed over time: many migrants moved into the area, as well as gypsies living in trailers, all of whom enrolled their children in the school. Then middle-class families enrolled their children in other schools. As a result, the current situation is this: almost 80% of the students are children of migrants, and are of 25 different nationalities.

RESOLUTIONS MADE BY THE COMMUNITY

"At the end of this life, you will be judged on your LOVE"... we do not know what the final judgment will be like, but we must prepare for it day after day in order to:

Allow ourselves to be evangelized

We are strongly convinced that our social environment influences our way of looking on migrants as well as the way we relate to others... We live in the same neighborhood as the migrants and, for us, this is a real gift from God.

Allow ourselves to be challenged by the causes of immigration

The education center gives us the opportunity to look together at where the majority of our students come from. The families and the students have lived through situations that we see in the media... they struggled to leave their country and to pay for their travel: mortgaged their homes, put their family into debt!... how many times, in our communal prayer, have we asked God to give them courage in the midst of so much suffering to come here, leaving everything behind.

Act in such a way that each one can grow according to his identity, culture, religion ...

The students grow up in the school, well aware of their situation. They know that they must respect each other in their differences and that many things unite them; they must know the religion of their classmates in order to enrich themselves, without denying their own identity, and not reject others because of their differences. This is how the motto of our school comes to be: "A place for everyone."

In our school, we celebrate "All Creeds and Peace Day." On this day, we emphasize this truth: God is Love in all religions, and He wants us to pray together and act together for peace. At Christian Easter each year, we celebrate Life, because God wants all men and women to have life in abundance, as Jesus taught.

Today's Challenges

These are small actions, but we hope that they will help our students to acquire solid foundations from which they can build a future of peace in order to live and work together, to share friendship and love, all of this quite naturally because it is what they have learned since childhood... This is a dream that can become reality.

Believe that humanization is evangelization

The school is a privileged place for learning to become human and to develop one's potential. It is first of all the quality of our openness, our listening, and respect for the young people's progress that evangelizes.

Did Jesus' way of looking change when He met foreigners? What did He do in that situation? Vincent de Paul invited the Sisters to frequently ask themselves, "What would Jesus do? What would Jesus say?" Jesus was Jewish, and he met many foreigners and talked to them. For example, the Canaanite woman: she "cried out," and the disciples wanted her to go away...and Jesus let himself be touched by her, listened and understood this woman's way of thinking and ended up admiring her.

This Gospel about the Canaanite woman reveals to us that human suffering is the same, whether one is Jewish or not, and stimulates our commitment to be present wherever we are and to recognize God's presence in the hearts of others, whoever they are.

OPEN DOORS...BUILD BRIDGES

I have been greatly enriched by living with people who are different. After nearly 20 years of service following Christ, I am grateful and convinced that my life has meaning alongside those who experience the most difficulty, those who left their countries and their families to look for a better future.

The school has always been at the service of poor people, but the arrival of migrants, families in great need and gypsies...all this opened the doors of our school once and for all to a broad diversity.

This decision was not accepted by everyone. A number of families left

the school, and teachers feared that the educational standards would be lowered...but we have started on a road of no return, and we are well aware that this choice for the poorest of the poor will require effort. Changes were necessary in terms of the school's structure, pedagogy, and overall organization, but the most important change was a change of heart.

Little by little, I discovered the treasure in linguistic, religious and cultural diversity. Fear of the unknown was dispelled. Now, these people had specific names and faces for me; they helped me to understand that simplicity and proximity are what help to build a more fraternal world. They are the Gospel message for me and help to build up the Kingdom of God.

In this particular situation, creating positive educational experiences within the school is not an easy task, but the fact that the entire educational community is involved makes me think, more than ever, that "love is inventive even to infinity."

There is much more that could be said, but there is no doubt that in this process, we have all learned that it is important to have a heart that is open to difference with a place for all.

Sister Maria Carmen SAZ
Daughter of Charity

HERE ARE A SOME TESTIMONIES FROM YOUNG PEOPLE.

I left my country to look for my mother

A student at this school, I am now 17 years old and come from Nigeria, a wonderful country where kind people live. I lived with my parents and two brothers. Problems began when I was 8. My father abandoned us; he didn't love my mother, and she didn't have the money to raise and feed us. She thought of going to Spain to find work. When she left, we went to live with our grandmother.

Today's Challenges

However, soon afterwards, our grandmother died. Life became very hard. We didn't have any friends or money, and no one took care of us. We were alone. We had to go to our grandfather who lived with another woman who didn't like us, and I never went to school.

I would rather not speak about this time. I ran away from this house with my two brothers. I began to look for work, which I found after two weeks: hard work cleaning, although I was only 11 years old. The salary was very low, but I was happy because it allowed me to pay rent for the house and buy food. This situation lasted several years; then, I told my brothers about my desire to go to Spain to find our mother. I seized the opportunity to leave the country on a trip organized by some men on a little clandestine boat. They were leaving the next morning. I left a little money with my brothers, and I set off, telling them I would come back soon to get them.

There were ten of us making the journey. I was afraid because I knew it was very dangerous. When we arrived in Spain, the police arrested several members of our group who were immediately sent back to Morocco. I had asked God to help me, and He did. Then the sailors were handcuffed, and I was able to escape. A woman helped me find my mother in Saragossa.

Our experience of meeting others

We are secondary school students, the oldest in the school, and soon we will leave it. Our first names tell of our origins: Precious, Chao Zhou, Marta, Yassine, Jhoymmer, Andrei, Marie Paule, Isabel, Judith, Alioune...

We remember that when we came to the school, we didn't understand anything that was being said. When we went into the schoolyard and then the classroom, we were homesick for our countries and those whom we had left, fearing we would never see them again. Each morning, the nightmare began anew.

However, at the school, something touched us: no one thought of us as foreigners; there were many classmates from our country who spoke the same language and had the same religion.

Very quickly, we felt "at home," and we came to know our classmates who are now our best friends, even if their religion, customs and cultures are different.

We thank the people who welcomed us, the teachers who supported us in our studies and our difficulties, those who taught us that learning is not just being educated, but also being enriched by differences and growing in tolerance and sharing. Our gratitude also goes out to those who have proved to us that each one of us is very important.

Finally, we want to say to everyone that living with others is a precious enrichment. This is what we experienced in this school.

Students from 3rd year of secondary school

Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General and Sister Zofia Daniscakova, General Councillor

Visit of the Province of Slovenia and Region of Albania

November 4-11, 2012



News from the Provinces

“Hold firm to hope!” These are the encouraging words Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, addressed to the Sisters of the Province of Slovenia and the Region of Albania, in Kosovo.

VISIT TO THE REGION OF ALBANIA (Albania and Kosovo)

On November 4, 2012, the Regional Superior, Sister Tonja Tushi, and her Council and the Visitatrix of the Province of Slovenia, Sister Bernarda Trcek, had the joy of welcoming Sister Evelyne and Sister Zofia Daniscakova, General Councillor, at the new Kosovo airport in Pristina.

November 5 was a very full day. After prayer and the Eucharist celebrated in several languages, the Sisters of the 5 local communities in Kosovo and several Sisters from Albania gathered to meet Sister Evelyne, who was very happy to see the young face of the Company in Kosovo: 57 Sisters, 22 of whom are in initial formation; the average age is 41.



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In Kosovo and in Albania, Islam is the main religion, and Catholics are very much in the minority. There are many persons living in poverty in these two countries marked by long years of communism and by the war in Kosovo in 1999.

All the Sisters very much appreciated Sister Evelyne’s talk on fidelity to the charism and to the spirit of the Company. The discussions strengthened our sense of belonging and broadened our perspective to new horizons. Then, the Councillors of the region of Albania shared their joys and their concerns. We ended the day by praying

vespers with the poor and the residents of Letnica, a place of pilgrimage, the sanctuary of Holy-Mother-of-God. A local community of Daughters of Charity were here until 2002 when an earthquake forced them to leave their home. That day, the bishop of Kosovo, Mgr. Dodë Gjergji, came to bless and inaugurate the new house in Letnica. Then, the inhabitants of the village, some priests, Sisters from several local communities, and Italian Daughters of Charity from the Province of Naples who serve in Mollas, Albania, gathered for a toast.

The next day, Sister Evelyne met the Sister Servants of Kosovo and Albania, assuring them of her support and prayer for their mission. Each Sister Servant presented her local community, and then there was a dialogue on the joys and challenges of the ministry of a Sister Servant.

VISIT TO THE PROVINCE OF SLOVENIA

The Province of Slovenia consists of three countries: Macedonia, Croatia and Slovenia.

Macedonia

The visit continued in Macedonia, a neighboring country (formerly Yugoslavia), where two local communities of Daughters of Charity belonging to this Province work. This country, with a population that is 65% Orthodox and 33% Muslim, regained its independence in 1991.



In Bitola, after a meeting with the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, Sister Evelyne shared with the three Sisters of the local community serving the elderly and abandoned in this remote area with very few Catholics.

In Skopje, Macedonia’s capital, the Sisters help the most destitute, providing various services and basic supplies. Those from distant villages are welcomed into the Sisters’ house while they await their appointment at the hospital or their administrative appointment for documents they need. In the evening, Sister Evelyne arrived in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, which, like the other countries of former-Yugoslavia, became independent in 1991.

Slovenia

The members of the Provincial Council, the Provincial Director, Father Rock Gajšek, and all the Sisters of the Provincial House in Šentjakob welcomed Sister Evelyne and Sister Zofia. They were anticipated and welcomed everywhere with enthusiasm and a great spirit of faith.

On November 8, after the Eucharist celebrated by the archbishop of Ljubljana, Mgr. Anton Stres, CM, all the Sisters of the Province listened to Sister Evelyne speak about belonging to the Company. Next, a discussion gave her the opportunity to answer many questions and offer guidance. The day concluded with a festive evening highlighting the beauty of Slovenian music and songs.

On November 9, after Mass celebrated by the Visitor of the Congregation of the Mission, Father Pavle Novak, Sister Evelyne went to Mirenski Grad for a meeting with the Sisters and the local community of Vincentians who operate a spirituality center and carry out pastoral ministry.

Then, she visited Mengeš, with the elderly Sisters at the new “Saint Catherine Labouré” retirement home. After hearing the news of the Company and the encouraging words of Sister Evelyne, the elderly Sisters, glowing with happiness, committed themselves to pray even more ardently for the whole world.

The Vincentian Marian Youth eagerly awaited the visitors’ return to the Provincial House in order to share their spiritual journey and their apostolic activities with them. They are grateful to have found support in the Sisters who open their doors to families, children and all those who hope for a better life.

Croatia

On November 10, Sister Evelyne and Sister Zofia left for Croatia. The first stop was in Volosko, where the Daughters of Charity are preparing to make alterations to their house: one part for the service of the elderly and the other for the Sisters who want to remain close to those who are poor.

The second stop was in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. There, Sister Evelyne made another historic visit to the Sisters of Mercy of Zagreb, a branch of the Vincentian Family that has lived, since its foundation, according to the Rules of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac. This Congregation wishes to come closer to the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Visit of Superiors

In Zagreb-Dubec, after listening to several songs sung by children, the evening continued with a sharing on the life of the Daughters of Charity and their ministries in this country where the main religion is Catholicism (87.8%).

On November 11, the visit concluded with the parish Mass celebrated in a church filled with young families and their children; it was difficult to find a place. Before their departure, the Visitatrix expressed her deep gratitude and that of all the Sisters for the grace of this visit and the support and guidance offered.

Sister Cveta JOST and Sister Donata BARDHAJ
Daughters of Charity

TESTIMONIES OF THE SISTERS

Province of the Philippines

After the disaster of the typhoon in Davao, we reach out to the poor

On December 4, 2012, super-typhoon “Pablo” crossed eastern Davao, in the southern part of the Philippines, severely hitting four towns: Boston, Cateel, Baganga and Caraga.

The strong gusty winds came howling and whirling in the night and caused such devastation that it changed - and claimed - lives, forever. A month after the disaster, the towns are still in their wretched state and the people are moving on but tentatively, slowly...

In the villages, destroyed houses, crumpled to the ground, look like a pile of rubbish. Across the fields and nearby hills or in the mountains lining the horizons, endless hectares of coconut trees toppled down like sticks or were seemingly hacked in the middle by an unseen reaper. Both the ancient and young trees lay uprooted, roof materials shredded to pieces, iron posts and beams grotesquely twisted. Most of the schools, churches and buildings were destroyed or lost their roofs. Along the roadsides, makeshift shelters sprang up, sometimes so small with just a tiny space for a family to sleep in, and only with the bare ground for flooring.

As in past disasters in the country, the Daughters of Charity of the Philippine Province initiated awareness campaigns and collection of aid in their different institutions. With the leadership of Sr. Maria Teresa Mueda, Daughter of Charity, two groups of Sisters coming from different communities were mobilized to respond to the needs of “Pablo” survivors, from December 17, 2012, to January 4, 2013. In collaboration with the local bishop and other groups formed to increase aid to the cyclone victims, the Daughters of Charity, in partnership with the Camillan Fathers who were given the task of spearheading the medical assistance to the

Testimonies of the Sisters

survivors, made themselves available for health ministry to the people of St. James Parish in the town of Cateel.

In a series of medical missions to the different barangays of Cateel, the Sisters served the survivors: making friends with them, paying attention to their ailments, treating their wounds, attending to their needs, encouraging them, and listening with compassion to their stories and questions. Some walked several kilometers from their mountain abode to the site of the mission just to see a doctor. When we asked them where they live, they would say: “We no longer have a house to live in.” Some shared stories of their miraculous escape from certain death, or voiced their hopes of starting all over again though they did not know how.

The Cateel survivors believe that God has not abandoned them but continues to walk with them and will provide for them, however uncertain tomorrow seems. In their simple but deep faith, they know that God cares for them even when the face of tragedy is still so real and present. One of the touching stories retold by many “Pablo” survivors is this: When the typhoon struck, the parish churches and the small chapels in the barangays were destroyed, but the altars remained intact. People saw this as a sign that God is alive and in their midst.



For us, Daughters of Charity, who were privileged to share the survivors’ grief and to be there for them in their time of need, the days spent with them were a blessed time of witnessing to the Vincentian spirit and charism. Our going in haste to our suffering brothers and sisters, as our Founders did, helped them rediscover a taste for life.

What we experienced made our celebration of Christmas even more real. The Child Jesus was born again as we welcomed the reality of the poor “Pablo” survivors into the manger of our hearts. They gifted us in their turn: evangelizing us by their ardent faith that shone even more brightly than stars in their darkest of nights.

Daughters of Charity Team
Volunteers in Cateel

SISTERS’ TESTIMONIES

PROVINCE OF BELGIUM

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the
Vincentian Renewal group

A tiny seed that has flourished

During the weekend of March 9 -10, 2013, we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Vincentian Renewal Group for youth, young adults and families with children in Flemish Belgium.

In 1988, during a Provincial Assembly, we expressed the desire to offer young people times of formation in the Vincentian charism. Following the Assembly, a commission was established and given the name “Vincentian dynamism.” Three Sisters in particular put a lot of effort into the project. The initial concern of the Sisters on the commission was to form themselves by participating in youth gatherings in other places and with other congregations in order to learn how to bring young people together and lead reflection weekends. Then, they began to bring these young people together.

From the outset, three weekends a year were scheduled (from 2pm Saturday to 5pm Sunday), first in monasteries or abbeys and then in a youth hostel.

Each weekend allows them to explore a topic in depth, from four different perspectives:

- Jesus, you are the source who gives life
- Vincent, your hands are the extension of your heart
- Young people, you are a pearl in God’s hands
- On the road to change (with Paul).

How do we reach young people and where do they come from?

Testimonies of the Sisters

The young people come from different regions. We meet them during annual gatherings in Taizé, by means of flyers (mailed or emailed), announcements in parish bulletins or a web site, or individual invitations... Around fifty young people are brought together, and 20 to 30 attend regularly.

What happens during the weekends?

Each weekend begins with time for welcoming the participants, then follows the presentation of the topic, sharing in small groups or the large group, times for reflection and silence that end with prayer, a celebration or the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is celebrated by a young priest from the Abbey of Grimbergen, a former member of the group. He has taken part in pilgrimages to Taizé and our weekends for many years.

Celebrations are led by a young married deacon. He and his wife are part of a team that leads our weekends. They also accompany us on our meetings in Taizé. Their children also come to the weekends and take part in the program for children.

Over the years, the young people have grown up, started a family and continue to come with their young or older children, welcoming newcomers. For about five years, the young people themselves have prepared the program for the weekend and make a good team to lead them. We, the Daughters of Charity, continue to be present, especially during the times for sharing.

How is young people's spirit of service translated into action?

The spirit of Vincentian service is very much in evidence: the group welcomes several young disabled people (4 with autism and a youth using a wheelchair); those who are stronger put themselves at their service, and everyone is comfortable. Some young people are involved in their parish or in other activities that offer service.

- In one struggling family, a child with autism was baptized after completing a baptism preparation course with the group. The

godparents, who are members of the group, took their commitment seriously and follow up with the family on a regular basis.

- Marc, the deacon, and his wife also allow the youth group meet in their home.

- Another couple provides catechism classes for children and prepares them for First Communion, in conjunction with their parents. The wife gives Flemish classes to Polish people. Each year, she goes to Poland with young people to build a crèche with a group of builders. Each month the husband leads a "Taizé Evening" in their parish and shares in the preparation of Sunday Eucharist and the homily.

- Anne-Marie went to India three times to help Mother Teresa's Sisters.

- Ria is a member of the youth choir and is a catechist.

- Wim is a member of the pastoral team.

- Karine prepares the program for youth meetings and adapts the topics to suit the youngest participants.

We are proud of, and at the same time grateful for, the solid team of committed lay people that takes on spiritual animation of youth. We also thank all the Daughters of Charity, especially our elderly Sisters, for their interest and their union with us in prayer for this intention.

Sister Gilberte HAESSENDONCK
Daughter of Charity

Saint Vincent's spiritual experience

In no way is Vincentian spirituality a book of rules for holiness to be studied and then put into practice. It is a life, an experience on which we have to reflect, in order to develop the working of grace in a human life.

We are going to try and follow Vincent de Paul's spiritual experience step by step in order to grasp its main orientations, touchstones and significant moments. We might think of this process as developing in five steps, as outlined in the summary. These periods sometimes overlap since it is not easy to cut up life as with a knife! Nevertheless, we will see that overall, dividing his spirituality into these stages is appropriate.

I-1581-1595: FAMILY

In our day, we are more aware of the role of family in the spiritual journey of saints. In the past, we were often led to believe that some saints came into the world endowed with a sort of miraculous holiness and that grace accompanied them from the moment of their birth until their inevitable triumphal entrance into heaven! Such was certainly not the case for Vincent de Paul, and we could say that from his first fifteen years of life he knew

- the experience of a deep family affection
- the experience of a rural and peasant mentality
- the experience of poverty and manual labor.

These are three decisive experiences that directed the life of the man who benefited from them.

H

History
of the
Company

FAMILY AFFECTION

At the beginning of the conference on the virtues of village girls, Saint Vincent says: *"It will be very easy for me to speak to you about the virtues of good village girls because I know them by experience and by nature, since I'm the son of a humble tiller of the soil, and lived in the country until I was fifteen"* (Coste IX, 67). Vincent de Paul said this on January 25, 1643, when he was nearly sixty-three years old.

This reminder allows us to believe that Vincent de Paul recalled the memory of his mother and two sisters, Marie and Claudine, on more than one occasion.

With regard to village girls, Vincent said, *"they don't boast of what they have, don't talk about their relatives... Their language is truly simple and sincere... [they] are satisfied with their food and clothing... Most of them often make do with bread and soup, although they're constantly engaged in hard work... If they're praised, they don't know what is meant... They come home from work, worn out and fatigued, wet through and covered in mud, to eat their meager lunch, and they're barely there when, if the weather is suitable for work or if their father and mother tell them to go back to it, they do so at once, without paying too much attention to their weariness, or the mud, or how they look..."* (Coste IX, 68-75).

These characteristics are expressed in a tone of voice and with a level of detail that prove their authenticity, showing the relationship between the spirit of the Daughters of Charity and this period of Vincent de Paul's life from 1581 to 1595. You were envisaged and conceived on the model of young women from the Landes region of the village of Pouy, and perhaps on the model of Vincent's mother and sisters.

There is no doubt that Vincent de Paul experienced an affectionate and unified family life. Afterwards, he would always show great affection for his mother, brothers, sisters and nephews. In speaking about community and relationships in community life, he often used expressions taken from family life and, perhaps more particularly, from his own experience of family life: *"How is your family? Give my greetings to all your little family. The family in this house are doing*

Saint Vincent's Spiritual Experience

well..." Similarly, in the first rules of the Confraternities or of the Daughters of Charity, "They will cherish each other like sisters..." With regard to those who are poor, the Daughters of Charity are encouraged to behave "like their mother," etc. Here, too, we discover a link between Vincentian spirituality and the period from 1581-1595. Consciously or not, the memory of what Saint Vincent experienced at Ranquines surfaced in his spirituality of community.

A RURAL AND PEASANT MENTALITY

Vincent de Paul remained a peasant at heart even though he lived in the city for more than fifty years.

His progress, his psyche, what was called his slowness, his attitude towards the great personages of society or towards money, the examples that quite naturally surfaced in his conferences or letters, his sense of Divine Providence... all of this is deeply marked by his peasant origins, origins of which at the beginning he was sometimes ashamed and then which he accepted by using them, first to humble himself, and sometimes even to boast!

Quite naturally, this rural and peasant characteristic also had an impact on the spirituality of Vincent de Paul and that of his disciples, especially its evangelical aspect. Vincent de Paul thought of Jesus as essentially someone from a rural background, and there must have been a real complicity between Vincent de Paul and the Gospel. How was this complicity made manifest in Vincent? Perhaps through his preference for action and for the concrete, through his distrust of theories that fall short of expectations, through his taste for simplicity, through his realistic humility about his rural roots, and through his simple, practical and direct approach to things and to people.

POVERTY AND MANUAL LABOR

This was also a fundamental experience that had deep and lasting reverberations. He was only "the son of a poor farmer"; a farmer who had to depend on his work for a livelihood and to support his family. There was no school for the poor, and girls and boys, from a very young age, were involved in the work of the little farm.

Vincent watched over the herds on the banks of the Ardour River. He knew about the life of poor children, the life of a family weighed down by taxes and fees of all types.

His first reaction at the age of fifteen was to escape, to become free, to seek his fortune and to obtain a situation to get himself and his family out of difficulties. He did not know that God intended him for the poor, and especially for poor country people. This family experience from 1581-1595 prepared him to live this vocation more fully. Paradoxically, it would be poor peasants in Folleville and Châtillon who would reveal to him the direction his life should take.

After Vincent had lived in the city for forty years, we find this expression of his nostalgia for the peasant land of his childhood on his lips: "*I cannot restrain myself and must tell you quite simply that this gives me renewed, greater desires to be able, in the midst of my petty infirmities, to go and finish my life near a bush, working in some village. I think I would be very happy to do so, if God were pleased to grant me this grace*" (Coste V, 204, Letter to a priest of the Mission, October 17, 1654).

This first step was significant and even decisive in Vincent de Paul's spiritual journey. We are in 1595: Vincent, at the age of 14, still lives with his family on the farm at Pouy, and perhaps is still illiterate.

II-1595-1610: CAREER

Abelly narrates the first turning point in young Vincent's life: "*His father soon realized that this child was destined for other things than pasturing animals. He planned therefore to send him to school, encouraged by his acquaintance with a prior in the neighborhood. This man was from a humble family like himself, but it was known that he supported members of his family from the revenues of a benefice he enjoyed. In his simplicity the father imagined that with a little schooling Vincent too might receive a benefice, and while serving the Church might help to support his family*" (Abelly Book I, ch.2).

The same Abelly specifies later that, before his death in 1598, Vincent's father stipulated by will that Vincent "*should be helped by the remainder*

Saint Vincent's Spiritual Experience

of the estate" (Abelly, Book I, ch 3) to continue his studies.

Things seem clear, especially with regard to the practice of the time in this social and regional context: it was indeed a sort of investment, a family contract. They were betting on the most gifted member, and they would do everything for his success. It would be his responsibility thereafter to give back a hundredfold to his family, once his fortune was made.

In my opinion, this is the main motivation that clarifies and explains Vincent's behavior and spiritual journey over the years to come. Vincent himself confirms this approach on two occasions:

- in the letter to his mother dated February 17, 1610,
- in the account of his last visit home in 1623.

When we read these two documents carefully, we recognize what dominated Vincent's concerns: his family contract, even after 1617.

In the letter dated February 17, 1610, the only question is about business, advancement and return home, "*so that I may spend the rest of my days near you*" (Coste I, 15-16).

As for the account of his final visit to his home, what seems to worry Vincent most is the feeling that he had betrayed the contract: "*The day I departed, it was so painful for me to leave my poor relatives that I did nothing but weep all the way back, and wept almost constantly. Those tears were followed by the thought of doing something to assist them and to better their situation, to give this to one, that to another. My mind was deeply moved and I was sharing in this way what I had and what I didn't have...This troubling passion for improving the lot of my brothers and sisters plagued me for three months; it was a constant weight on my poor mind*" (Coste XII, 180).

What Abelly tells us about the father's decision in 1595 and what Vincent writes to his mother in 1610 allow us to glimpse a continuity, of which Vincent's departure for school is a perfectly logical part. So in 1595, Vincent enters the Capuchin school in Dax. He soon proves to be a good student who can be trusted: he finds himself responsible for

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tutoring the young children of M. de Comet who thereafter welcomes him into his home. What a promotion! Perhaps his reaction is not surprising when someone at the school announces that his father has come to visit him. He refuses to come out and see him, being ashamed (he admits this later) at his father's rustic appearance.

In 1596, advised by his teachers, M. de Comet, a lawyer in Dax and his benefactor, he goes to Bidache to receive the tonsure, symbolizing entry into the ecclesial state, and minor orders, the first steps towards the priesthood.

In the period from 1595 to 1597, two things are very evident:

- There was a real family contract, that is, a sacrifice on the part of the family confirmed by the father's will, so that Vincent could study in order to help his brothers and sisters afterwards;
- During his first two years of studies in Dax, Vincent strongly felt the difference between his former and his present situation; perhaps he even felt a certain glee in what seemed to him to be the beginning of his promotion.

Probably in 1597 Vincent entered the University of Toulouse, because in 1604, after seven years of study, he gained his bachelor's degree. Even if universities were not at the time what they are now, we note, on the one hand, the talent of our student who is above average and, on the other hand, his ambition. Going to university allows him to aim much higher than a little country parish (cf. Vincent's feeble effort to enter into possession of the little parish of Tilh, and, on the contrary, his eagerness to go in 1604 to Bordeaux, where he would have some opportunity to be granted a bishopric in the region.)

Meanwhile, Vincent progressed rather quickly down the path that he had chosen: tonsure and minor orders on December 20, 1596, in Bidache when he was just fifteen and a half; sub-diaconate in Tarbes on September 19, 1598, at the age of 17; priestly ordination in Château-l'Évêque at nineteen and a half, on September 23, 1600.

Apparently, Vincent was in a hurry. This is troublesome for some people like Abelly and those who came after him, who didn't hesitate to move his birthdate up to 1576, which would have made Vincent de

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Paul a priest at the age of 24, the minimum age, recently set by the Council of Trent!

We know little about his stay at the University of Toulouse: student life, at that time and in this hotspot, was rather turbulent. We also know that, in order to pay for his studies, he took responsibility for a small boarding school where he received young students, first at Buzet-sur-Tarn, and then in Toulouse.

Vincent de Paul obtained his bachelor's degree in theology in 1605. That's when the serious financial difficulties arose that led him to go to Marseilles. The dark years become very dark! All we have from this time are two letters (Coste I, 1-15) to M. de Comet to shed a curious light on the three years that seem to have been marked by stops and starts (cf. *Saint Vincent et la Charité*, coll. Maîtres spirituels, A. Dodin, pages 144-148).

Just two letters! This does not allow us to go very far in our deductions. However, in the current state of documentation, it seems to me that we aren't straying far from reality if we imagine a Vincent who is primarily concerned with his own promotion and fulfilling his obligation. Moreover, it is this same Vincent whom we find in the letter dated February 17, 1610. What happened between these dates? Nothing, in any case, that changed the plan and the outlook of Vincent de Paul.

According to official documents, it is at the end of February that we find Vincent de Paul in Paris. He is advisor and chaplain to Queen Marguerite, Duchess of Valois (Coste XIIIa, 20). He is staying near the Seine, in the Saint-Germain-des-Près neighborhood, across from the palace of the queen. One might say that the time of his hoped-for success had arrived. It is at least within grasp, as suggested by what Vincent wrote to his mother and his family. Let's reread the beginning of this letter: "*But I have such trust in God's grace, that He will bless my efforts and will soon give me the means of an honorable retirement so that I may spend the rest of my days near you*" (Coste I, 15-16).

The letter is dated February 17, 1610. Exactly three months later, Vincent signed a document that made him the owner of the Cistercian abbey of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaumes, in the diocese of Saintes (Coste

XIIIa, 8-11). In actual fact it was a bad business deal, but Vincent didn't know this yet. Vicissitudes and uncertainties followed one after another. The first half of 1610 was influenced by the family contract. Vincent was firmly persuaded that it would soon be the time to return home, where he would spend the rest of his days near his family.

It was around this time that a first problem occurred, one which seemed to tear the whole plan to pieces, a trauma that Vincent, when he had grown old, would recall with the surprisingly vivid memory that sometimes characterizes elderly persons. Vincent was 75 years old when he recounted, "*There's someone in the Company [he was referring to himself] who was accused of having robbed his companion and was denounced for his in the house, although that wasn't the case. Nevertheless, he was unwilling to justify himself and, seeing that he was being falsely accused, he thought to himself, 'Are you going to justify yourself? You're being accused of something, but it's not true. Oh no.' he said, raising his heart to God, 'I have to bear that patiently.' And that's what he did. What happened next? Here's what happened, Messieurs. Six months later, when the thief was a hundred leagues from here, he acknowledged his fault and wrote to ask forgiveness for it. You see, God sometimes wants to test people, and that's why He allows similar things to happen*" (Coste XI, 305).

As with the account of his final visit home, the old Monsieur Vincent drew a moral from the event. He recounts it in order to point out a lesson, and so he orients or changes the significance of the dramatic event.

We find ourselves confronted with two possible levels on which to read this. The more interesting one for us is not to turn to Vincent narrating it in his seventies but to meet Vincent, accused at the age of 29, and quite a different person.

Abelly has his own version of the event: Vincent shared a room in Paris with one of his fellow countrymen, a judge from Sore (Landes). While Vincent was sick and confined to bed in the house, an errand boy came in and most likely made off with the judge's purse. Vincent was immediately suspected (was he open to suspicion?), and Abelly continues, in a very lively style, "*The judge furiously demanded restitution for his loss. He forced Monsieur Vincent to leave the*

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apartment and spoke against him everywhere as a thief and a liar to anyone who knew him or had any contact with him... calling him a thief and formally serving a writ upon him" (Abelly, Book I, chapter 5).

This 'writ' was a public accusation, read from the pulpit at all the Masses for three consecutive Sundays in the parish of the accused. Imagine a priest, chaplain to the Queen, subjected to such a humiliation. Imagine Vincent de Paul who thought he had entered a happy phase of his existence, and who was planning to return home soon. He had developed influential relationships, he had undertaken good business dealings (among others, acquiring Saint-Léonard abbey)... And here he was, suddenly discredited before all his friends and acquaintances, and denounced from the pulpit! "*God sometimes wants to test people,*" was the interpretation Vincent had of the event forty-six years later: a trial sent by God, undoubtedly with a good dose of bitterness. The disastrous 'writ' obliged Vincent to move to another district and parish.

In the course of Vincent's human itinerary, in a mere fifteen years, a young peasant who was practically illiterate and on his own had climbed the social ladder, created relationships, found a relatively stable position, and had acquired a fortune that would prosper, at least so he thought.

As the adventurous son who left to make his fortune, he only had to go to his home to receive his income on the agreed dates, help his family that had assumed the risk at the beginning, himself live honestly from his retirement, which, really, could have required more time. He was only 29!

Vincent wanted to succeed, and, humanly speaking, we could say he had succeeded. Despite some misadventures, he had made a career for himself.

This period from 1595-1610 was important in Vincent de Paul's spiritual development because this human success made him aware of all the possibilities open to him

This success also allowed him to get to know the world, the leading figures in the Church and society and those who had an important influence culturally. Both from 1605-1607 and from 1608-1610 he

perhaps met members of the criminal world.

This, added to the knowledge he already had of the poor and country people: what an experience! And what a field of knowledge that humanly predisposed him to plurality and universality in his perspective and options!

The more rapid his ascension and the nearer his success, the darker the night would be, then would come the blinding and decisive light. This is how it was for the people of Israel from the captivity in Egypt and the Passover; from the exile of Babylon and the deliverance of the Lord's poor.

The sequence of events from the second, third and fourth steps, constitutes a logical progression of an especially dynamic conversion. Let us try to imagine briefly the passage from the first to the third stage via the second one; in this period (1595-1610) an aspect of his dynamism and universalism become rooted in Vincent de Paul, qualities that he continuously demonstrated.

III – 1610-1617: THE DARK NIGHT

We know that the dark night of the soul has been part of the experience of numerous mystics and great saints and that it is so, in different degrees, for the majority of people. Adulthood leads each person to awareness and then acceptance of their limitations. It is often on the level of awareness that the dark night is experienced: that impression of failure, resulting in a gap between aspirations and possibilities, between plans and reality.

For Vincent de Paul, this seems to have begun in 1608-1609 with a life of poverty in the Saint-Germain district, and especially with the theft, which we analyzed above. Following this human drama, doors were closed to him, his fellow Gascons distanced themselves from him, and he found himself alone in Paris. It was probably at this time that he tried to come closer to Father Bérulle.

His short-lived Oratorian vocation has been recorded: indeed, at the end of 1611, Vincent entered the Oratory when Bérulle was gathering his first

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disciples. Abelly provides a detail about this vocation: Vincent entered the Oratorians, but “*he had no intention of joining the community, as he himself later said. He wanted only to shut out social engagements*” (Abelly, Book I, chapter 6).

Whatever Vincent de Paul's motivations, we can easily understand his need to feel a bit protected, in the same way that we understand that his vocation was only a fleeting one, if we know that Bérulle was able to write forty chapters on the life of Jesus in the womb of His Mother, and if we then read what Vincent said on the love of God! “*Let us love God, but let it be in the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows*” (Coste XI, 32). It is understandable that Vincent de Paul's Berullian experience was not pursued and that it may have even given rise to a certain tension that existed afterwards between the two men (Coste II, 442).

It would be interesting to deal here with the relationships that would be established later between Monsieur Vincent and what is called the French School of Spirituality. Vincent certainly was a follower of this school... perhaps a bad disciple, in any case a very original and surely inspired follower if only in striving to translate lofty considerations, based on what we would today call Christocentric thinking, into action and the service of the poor. In the domain of faith, and especially of religion, the **French School** had the great merit of bringing Christ back to the center of everything. Vincent, for his part, focused this center on human beings, and the person of the poor: “*You are serving Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as that we are here*” (Coste IX, 199). But let's move on!

So in November 1611, Vincent de Paul was “safe” with the Oratorians, and probably he wasn't so comfortable... Therefore, when the pastor of Clichy, François Bourgoing, decided to enter the Oratory, Vincent didn't have to be asked to leave, and he took the priest's place in Clichy. (*Le grand saint du grand siècle*, Coste I, 73).

Here as well, it was just a passing experience that lasted sixteen months, yet one that was among the most influential and most profitable of these black or gray years.

Vincent had been a priest for twelve years, and he'd never been involved in a pastoral situation; the only goal of running the boarding school in Buzet was to help him make ends meet. However, from a psychological point of view, in a time of depression or doubt, nothing is as effective and beneficial as success. Indeed, the sixteen months in Clichy were, in Vincent's opinion (which was important then for him!), a real success. The echoes of those months that he gives us are enthusiastic, and all the more remarkable at this stage.

It was a real case of love at first sight: “*I was once a country Pastor (a pretty miserable Pastor!). I had such good people, who were so obedient in doing what I asked of them that, when I told them they should come to confession on the first Sunday of the month, they didn't fail to do it. They came to confession, and I saw from day to day the progress these souls were making. That gave me so much consolation, and I was so pleased with it, that I used to say to myself, 'Mon Dieu! how happy you are to have such good people!' And I would add, 'I don't think the Pope himself is as happy as a Pastor in the midst of such good-hearted people.' And one day Cardinal de Retz asked me, 'Eh bien! Monsieur, how are you?' I said to him, 'Your Eminence, I can't tell you how happy I am.' 'Why?' he asked. 'Because I have such good people, so obedient to all that I tell them that it seems to me that neither the Holy Father nor you, Eminence, are as happy as I am'” (Coste IX, 507-508).*

“In the midst of the people”... Vincent is again happy and at ease.

Despite this, he does not entirely abandon concern for his career, and while keeping the benefice from Clichy, he accepts a new offer through Bérulle: a position as tutor in the de Gondi family, one of the most influential families in the kingdom. He goes there. To tell the truth, it was without any real joy that he went back to high society, and he soon found himself subject to spiritual bombardments from a very scrupulous directee, Madame de Gondi.

In 1614 a long period of temptation against the faith began, in the course of which he devoted himself to reading the rule of perfection by Benoît de Canfield. He had the time to not rush his reading, because in 1615, he suffered a serious illness which affected his legs for the rest of his life. It was surely because of his poor state of health that,

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when he became treasurer and canon of the chapter of Ecouis in the Diocese of Rouen, receiving the benefice thanks to M. de Gondi, he delegated a procurator to take possession of it in his place on May 27. It is probable that Vincent de Paul did not remain canon at Ecouis very long. On October 29, 1616, he gave up the abbey of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaumes, which he had possessed for five years. The benefices that he had ardently sought weighed more heavily on him as he gradually understood the importance of the duties entailed and the need to live on site. He kept Clichy, which was close enough for him to still care for his flock.

From 1615 Vincent de Paul tended to direct the thoughts and activities of his directee toward poor people, and it seems he tried a therapy on her, which he would later use with well-known benefit for himself, for Louise de Marillac and for the ladies of the Confraternities.

Even only skimming through this period from 1610-1617, it seems to have progressed unevenly (which is the usual growth curve of crisis periods) and in a generally somber atmosphere.

As for what concerns ministries, if he didn't try everything, Vincent was at least concerned with many things: the honest retirement and return home first of all, then chaplaincy at the court of Queen Margot, the stay at the Oratory, pastoral ministry in Clichy, and tutor with the de Gondis – as if he didn't know what to do with his life!

On the moral level, he seems rather inconsistent: by getting rid, for example, of an important bequest, whereas on the other hand he accumulated benefices (Clichy, Saint-Léonard, Ecouis, not to mention the position as tutor that must have generated a good income).

In the area of faith, he knew great joy in Clichy, but then he had to confront long months of terrible temptations against the faith.

In terms of health, he experienced sickness and especially suffered from violent pains in his legs; although he was only 34 years old, at times he must have felt quite weakened.

So, we are far from the previous period: the intrepid and adventurous eldest son of Gascony has been taken over by an anxious, distraught

man who doubts himself and even God! He didn't know where to go or what to do: it was the dark night of the soul.

However, on his journey, this was a valuable period: apart from the destitution-failure in which his faith and trust in God will be rooted, Vincent had three decisive experiences-acquisitions.

Resumption of contact with those who are poor. As chaplain to the Queen, he was primarily responsible for distributing alms, obviously to those who were poor. The Queen regularly had money distributed to the unfortunate at the charity hospital, where the patients were in a wretched situation, something which certainly troubled Vincent, knowing the predilection he would later show for the “sick poor”. The gift of 15,000 livres that he received surely didn't allow him to relieve the suffering of many, and perhaps that made him discover the extent of the blight of poverty.

The revelation of Clichy was the only real joy of these seven years, the only real light in the night, the **first pastoral experience** of the priest Vincent de Paul: a priest is never as happy as among the people. This experience was also one of an **encounter with the laity**. Backed up by the later experience in Châtillon and by his memories of family, this double experience would not only lead to the birth of the Confraternities and Ladies of Charity, but it would also be the basis for the secular foundation of the Daughters of Charity.

The experience of being **spiritual director** to Madame de Gondi, a tormented, scrupulous, and demanding soul, also left a deep impression on this period. It was openness to those who were poor that would allow Madame de Gondi to regain her moral and spiritual balance. So, NIGHT, but a decisive and fruitful period. Vincent de Paul's spiritual journey stabilized; it appeared much more direct and certain than one would have thought, or than even he himself thought!

(to be continued)

Father Jean MORIN, CM

Sister Justine Bisqueyburu and the Green Scapular

September 8, 1840

Justine Bisqueyburu postulated at the hospital in Pau. She travelled from Pau to Paris in order to enter the Seminary on November 27, 1839, in the company of Father Aladel.

The main November retreat having just ended, Justine had to wait until January to make her entrance retreat.

The retreat conferences took place in a room above the chapel that had an altar with a statue of the Blessed Virgin. This statue is well known to Daughters of Charity: today we call it Our Lady of the Mission. So it was in this room, and in front of this statue, that the young Sister made her entrance retreat. It was during this retreat, on January 28, 1840, that the Blessed Virgin appeared to her for the first time.

“The Sister was praying when, suddenly, the Blessed Virgin appeared to her. She was dressed in a long white dress that fell to her bare feet and a very light blue cloak, without a veil, her hair falling over her shoulders. In her hands she held her heart, from which abundant flames came out of the top. She combined majesty of bearing with the brilliance of an entirely celestial beauty. Seeing this, the young Sister was struck with awe and was so frightened that she nearly let out a scream.”

She was favored with the same apparition toward the end of the retreat as well as four or five times during the course of her Seminary, on the principal feasts of the Blessed Virgin.

Up to then, this favor seemed to her to be personal and to have no other purpose than to increase her tender devotion to the Immaculate Heart

of Mary. But what followed showed that God had other plans for the scapular and that these would soon be revealed.

After receiving the habit, Sister Bisqueyburu was sent to Blangy, in the district of Seine Inférieure, to teach there. Soon after her arrival, on September 8, 1840, feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, she had a new vision. The Mother of God appeared to her during mediation, holding her heart surmounted with flames in her right hand, and in the other, a sort of scapular, or rather half of a scapular. It was a single piece of green fabric, rectangular in shape and of medium size, suspended on a cord that was also green, closed at the top, and it seemed designed to rest on the person's neck. On one of the two sides of this fabric medallion was the image of the Blessed Virgin, as she had shown herself in the previous apparitions; on the other side was a heart totally inflamed with rays brighter than the sun and transparent as crystal.

This heart, pierced by a sword, was surrounded by an inscription in an oval shaped frame and surmounted by a gold cross. It read:

*“Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us,
now and at the hour of our death.”*

At the same time, an interior voice made itself heard to reveal to the Sister the meaning of the vision. She understood that this image would, through the mediation of the Daughters of Charity, contribute to the conversion of souls, especially unbelievers, and obtain a good death for them; the Sister must have it made as soon as possible and distribute it with confidence.

The Sister shared this new favor with Sister Buchepot only, through a letter dated October 8, 1840. The same apparition was repeated on August 15 and September 13, 1841. Sister Buchepot informed Fr. Aladel. He received this new confidence on September 16 but, either because he didn't attach enough importance to it or because he thought it prudent not to rush things in order to test whether these supernatural appearances came from God, he seemed not to be actively involved in the production or distribution of the scapular.

The Blessed Virgin complained about this to the Sister in a new vision during morning meditation on May 3, 1842, a communion day.

Sister Justine Bisqueyburu and the Green Scapular

Sister Bisqueyburu gave an account of her vision to Sister Buchepot in a letter dated May 20, 1842: *“I seemed to hear a voice that told me that she was not happy that there was such a delay in making the scapulars. She was so beautiful!... I promised her I would let you and Fr. Aladel know, so that the two of you could seriously consider if it was indeed His Holy Will and at the same time to ask you to see to it as soon as possible...”*

After several letters were exchanged about the making of the scapular, a small batch was finally made and distributed with little confidence. The results were not very satisfactory.

The Blessed Virgin made her displeasure known several times during 1846.

In July 1846, Sister Bisqueyburu wrote a letter to Sister Buchepot saying, *“I believe I saw, yes, I saw, I am sure of it. Fr. Aladel absolutely must take an interest in the scapular, he must propagate it, and do so with confidence... I ask him to do this not for me, but I ask him in the name of Mary to do it for those poor souls who die without knowing the true faith; yes, if it is given with confidence, there will be a great number of conversions.”*

The apparitions of 1846 had this special feature, that the Blessed Virgin’s hands were “full of rays”. This is what the Sister said to her former directress in a letter sent from Versailles on August 10, 1846:

“... I had forgotten to tell you that he (Fr. Aladel) had asked me if the scapular (as he had it made with M. Letaille’s drawings) was accurate. I told him yes, I thought so, but perhaps I agreed too easily because, as far as I can remember, it seems that it didn’t have rays coming from the hands of the Blessed Virgin, which should extend to the bottom of her dress. And, yet, it seems to me that I saw it this way last time. It seems to me, please understand me well, because I have always looked on this as an illusion from the devil who perhaps makes use of this that I might be lost, by making me believe things that are not. But I told you that I would tell you everything; I want to be true to my word.” She asked that a drawing of the scapular be sent to her, on which she would draw the rays in pencil, as she had seen them in the last apparition.

It was not considered necessary to redesign the engraving, which would remain without rays, thinking that this omission of detail would not keep the scapular from substantially responding to the Blessed Virgin’s desires.

What were the necessary conditions for this scapular to be efficacious?

There was only one way that this question could be answered: the Sister must pray that the Blessed Virgin would kindly tell her what these conditions would be.

“I will obey,” she wrote to her former directress, *“but it will be difficult. I do not feel capable of asking anything, I am in such a sad state.”*

On September 8, 1846, the Blessed Virgin appeared again, her hands filled with rays. Here, in substance, is her response: *“This scapular not being, like other scapulars, a confraternity’s garment but simply a double pious image placed on a single piece of fabric and suspended on a cord, as a medal would be, there is no need for a special formula to bless it, and one must not be imposed. It is sufficient that a priest bless it and that it be worn by an unbeliever or a sinner whom one wants to benefit from its influence. It can even be placed, without his knowing it, in his clothes or bed, or in his room.*

As for prayers to be recited, there is just one to be said each day, the prayer which forms the oval inscription surrounding the holy Heart on the scapular:

*“Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us,
now and at the hour of our death.”*

If the person for whom the scapular is applied does not say it, the person who offers it in his place must say the prayer.

This scapular can be used in France and abroad. The greatest graces are attached to its use, but these graces are greater or lesser according to the degree of confidence of those using it. This is what is meant by the last apparition with the longer or shorter rays coming from the

*Sister Justine Bisqueyburu and the Green Scapular
hands of the Blessed Virgin.*

Has this devotion been approved by the Church?

Pius XI gave permission for the scapular to be made and distributed. “*I give full permission for this. Write to these good Sisters and tell them that I authorize them to make and distribute it.*” Pius XI had the green scapular beside the Miraculous Medal on his work table.

In accordance with Canon Law at the time, the Superior General had to grant permission, and Father Fiat did this on July 8, 1911.

- Excerpt from the book by Father MOTT, CM
December 2006

Note

The above text was taken from the writings of Father Marie-Edouard Mott, Priest of the Mission, based on the indications of Sister Buchepot, former Seminary Directress, and from some handwritten notes by Father Aladel.

*Lord,
thank you for the trust you place in me.*

*Today, I want to look on my Sisters
with eyes of love;
to be patient, understanding and gentle;
and look beyond outward appearances,
seeing my Sisters as you yourself see them;
seeing the good in each one of them.*

*Turn my eyes away from any calumny,
guard my tongue from speaking ill
so that my mind has only thoughts of blessing.*

*I want to build a spirit of fraternity in Community,
and with my Sisters seek your Will.*

*When I meet difficult situations,
don't let me think just about myself.
Help me to overcome doubts and trials,
enlighten my mind in situations that are unclear.*

*Lord,
After the example of Mary, “full of grace,”
teach me to welcome your grace each day
so that I may love in the way that You do.*

A Sister Servant from Chile

