

*E*choes *of the Company*



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

MAY

JUNE

2014

No. 3

“Open to the Transforming Spirit”

International Session

held at the Mother House

March 31- April 14, 2014

for Spiritual and Vincentian

Revitalization

of Daughters of Charity

25 to 40 years vocation

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The Word of God: Five Smooth Stones for Listening Well

Our *Constitutions*, our *Inter-Assemblies Document* and so many of our other texts urge us to reflect upon and live the word of God, which is the fundamental call addressed to every Christian. Jesus often encourages us to this:

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“While he was speaking, a woman from the crowd called out and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed.’ Jesus replied, ‘Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.’” (Lk 11:27-28)

“[Jesus said,] ‘Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock. And everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. And it collapsed and was completely ruined.’” (Mt 7:24-27)

And we could cite many more examples. Clearly, paying attention to God’s word and acting upon it is a key to being whom the Lord calls us to be. The way our Jewish brothers and sisters treat the Scripture reminds us of the reverence with which we should treat our holy text: they place the scroll of God’s word in a place of prominence, and they reverence it with the same attention which we usually reserve for the Eucharistic presence.

The Scriptures form an essential part of our prayer tradition with the Psalms and readings of the Liturgy of the Hours, *Lectio Divina*, etc. The Scriptures are a fundamental part of the Eucharistic celebration, the documents of the Church, many writings by our Founders, our vocabulary and the way that we look at the world.

In this presentation, I would like to invite you to consider the first of five concepts that are essential for understanding the Bible well. All five ideas must be understood together in order to really grasp each of them. Whenever I have taught the Bible to groups, I always spent time on these ideas, and I invite you to consider them well today. In approaching this question, three important documents are provided for us by the Church: the 1965 *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum*, from Vatican II; the 1993 *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* of the Pontifical Biblical Commission; and the 2010 *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Verbum Domini* of Pope Benedict XVI (September 30, 2010).

It would be easy enough to simply define the five concepts in a few sentences, but I want to really unpack what they mean and how they are used in Biblical study. The concepts are these: Revelation, Inspiration, Interpretation, Inerrancy, and Canonicity.

I. REVELATION

The immediate question which can be asked is: “What is revealed to us in the Scriptures?” The Bible is not simply a book of “do this and do not do that.” It is not a book which simply recounts historical events. It is the way in which God chooses to reveal God’s own self to the human community. What is revealed in the Bible is God’s own self — God’s will and God’s ways.

Why do we use words? Why do we speak? Well, at least one reason is so that we can get that which is inside of us, outside of us. You can look at me and be guessing how I feel or what I am thinking or where I am going, but until I speak about it, you will not really know. I tell you how I feel and what kind of a day that I am having; I tell you what I think about this or that and why; I tell you where I am going and what I hope to do. By speaking, by using words, I get what is inside of me outside of myself. I self-communicate, self-reveal. And I do that with words.

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Note the way in which we speak. We take breath in, and then as we let the breath out, we speak. The air moves over our vocal chords and causes them vibrate and thus make a sound—our speech. The ancient people were also aware of the fact that air was necessary for speaking. They knew that the words which they spoke were borne on their life breath. Without breath, there could be no words, no conversation. And so, words are connected up with life even as they are the means of self-communication.

In the first story of creation (Gn 1:1vv), God calls all things into being by the divine word. God says, “Let there be light,” and there is light. God says, “Let there be dry land” and the dry land comes to be. In this first story of creation, God creates by the power of his word. Everything which is comes to be through the power of God’s word, which he speaks into the darkness. This word brings creation and order and light into the universe.

Two things should be noted here. First of all, God speaking. In the human analogy, God speaks by sending forth the divine breath. The word for this in Hebrew is “ruah” and in Greek is “pneuma”—a word which means “breath” and “wind” and “spirit.” The universe is created through the sending forth of the divine spirit: the Holy Spirit that brings forth life and order. Everything that comes to be in the created order does so through the power of God’s spirit. Everything is sustained in existence by the divine will.

And the second thing that should be noted is that, in the created order, God is revealed. As God calls all things into existence, God self-communicates, God makes himself known, God tells us something about who he is and what he wants. This is made evident, first of all, in the creation story itself.

a) God calls all things into existence, and so God’s power and God’s rule over all creation is expressed. We know God to be all powerful. What is humanly impossible is easily accomplished by the power of God’s Word.

b) The abundance of existence teaches us that God is generous beyond all comprehension. When we look at what science has to teach us about the universe, we are overwhelmed by its size and power. It is unimaginably large. When I lived in Rome, one of my confrere friends used to ask me the same question regularly: “Why did God make dinosaurs?” His issue

was that no human being has ever seen a dinosaur; they existed millions of years before human beings came to be. And so, why have dinosaurs if no person ever did or ever will see one? My answer to him was always the same: God made dinosaurs so that you can wonder about them. I think that is the truth. There is so much in our universe that we will never see and can hardly imagine, but God put it there so that we can wonder about it. These realities point us to a God who is beyond our imagining both in his generosity and his very nature. The universe reveals that about God to us.

c) The created order also tells us that God is orderly. God brings creation into being out of chaos. And God sets everything in its place and gives it an order. The earth spins on its axis, it rotates around the sun, and the solar system revolves through the galaxy. There is day and night, and there are seasons. There are laws of gravity and light and speed. Plants grow and give seed, which causes other plants to grow. People breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide, which plants take in and give off oxygen. You get the picture: we live in an orderly universe, which reveals to us that God is a God of order and not of chaos.

d) And the universe reveals to us the unimaginable beauty of God. Everywhere we look, we see the beauty of creation in the sky, in the fields, in the faces of children, in the microscope and in human imagination. “The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” as Gerard Manly Hopkins tells us in his poetry. All this reveals to us the beauty of God as we can comprehend it through our eyes. But also our ears: the beautiful sound of the wind blowing in the trees, a bird singing, a child laughing or the music of instruments. And our noses pick up the wondrous scents of the created order in flowers and food and the freshness of a morning. What does our sense of touch reveal to us about the beauty of creation? It is clear that the beauty of the world surrounding us reveals to us the beauty of the one who called it all into being. We learn this about God.

e) The created order reveals to us the goodness of God. God was under no pressure to create the universe or us, and God did not need to create it as he did in such wondrous fashion, with its colors, movement and smells. God does all this solely out of God’s own goodness, and the universe that God has made reveals this goodness to us and invites us to goodness and to respond to our God with praise and thanksgiving.

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Thus, when we look at the first story of creation, it tells us about how God calls all things into existence by the power of God's word and how that created order reveals to us something of the nature and will of God. It tells us about the power of God's word and how we can come to know God through the way that word reveals God to us in the world which God has made.

The second story of creation (Gn 2:4vv) offers us an additional insight into the way God makes God's self known to us. In this second story, God forms the human being from the clay of the earth—which of course reminds us that we are part of the created order—but then God breathes the divine breath into the human form, and it comes to life. This teaches us, of course, that we share in the very life of God differently than the rest of creation, but it also suggests something else. God chooses to make us in “the divine image and likeness.” When one asks what it means for humans to be made in the image and likeness of God, various answers emerge. One which makes sense to me, however, is this: when God breathes the divine breath into us, it means that now it is possible for us to communicate with God. We speak and God hears; God speaks and it is possible for us to listen and be attentive. This second story of creation continues and complements the first. God reveals God's self in the created order, and God invites us to enter into an interpersonal relationship with him. We are urged to recognize God's presence in the world around us, and we are offered the chance to speak with our God. God wants us to know and be in relation with him.

Thus the Old Testament stories of creation tell us something about the way we are invited to enter into communication with God and come to know God. The revelation of God's ways to the people Israel and particularly the gift of the Law and the guidance of the Prophets continue this arc of God's gift of self-revelation to us. As we move into the New Testament, we are immediately drawn to the message of John's Gospel and in particular the Prologue of the Gospel:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (Jn 1:1-5)

The volumes which have been written to interpret the first verse of this chapter alone are intimidating. The writer of this Gospel has gone back to the story of Genesis to give meaning and context to his Gospel. He recognizes that God called all things into being by the power of his word, certainly, but also note the way in which the word is identified with God's own self. It is this word which brings life and light to the world, and nothing comes to be without this word. Once again the power of the word is presented and now intensified as the Gospel writer insists on the absolute power of the word. All this leads to the most powerful line in all of the Scripture: *“And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth”* (Jn 1:14). This is John's story of the incarnation so succinctly and wondrously phrased. “The Word of God became human.” Jesus, who is the word of God, became one of us.

What must be clear for us is that Jesus not only speaks God's word and witnesses to the living of God's word, but actually is God's Word. He comes to be in the womb of Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is literally God's own self spoken into the world. While the created order imperfectly reflects God's self in the world, Jesus is the perfect expression of God's self in the world. Literally, every word he speaks is the word of God, and every action he carries out is the act of God. To come to know Jesus is to come to know God's own self. And so, we come to know the life-giving power of Jesus' words. We appreciate why we give his words special reverence and power for transforming our lives.

Our study returns us to the first concept which we need to appreciate in order to understand the Bible properly: revelation. The Scripture reveals more than simply rules and formulae and history. What is revealed in the Bible is God's own self, and thus the Bible must be treated with reverence and as an interpersonal communication with God. Granted, some parts of the Bible are easier to read than others, but our attitude in reading the Bible must be one of reverence with an openness to hear what God has to say to us about the divine self and God's relationship to us. Some of the other concepts that we will be considering soon may help with that attitude. When we listen to the Word of the Lord, let us hear it as God's self-communication and allow it to reveal God's ways to us. That is the meaning of “revelation”.

II. INSPIRATION

The second concept we take up is “inspiration.” The heart of this concept has to do with the movement of God’s Spirit within the author and the reader of the text.

“Sacred Scripture is committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. . . . In composing the sacred books, God chose people and while employed by him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with him acting in and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which he wanted.” (Dei Verbum, 11)

The writing of Scripture takes place through the Holy Spirit who inspires the biblical authors to write what God wants written. This is not dictation, however, which would mean that the biblical authors have no part in the way in which the text is written. The biblical authors write in their own language and use the conventions of their own time. If the biblical author is a poor speller or writer, then there will be spelling or grammatical mistakes in the text. The biblical author uses the literary styles of his time in writing history or poetry or myths. He employs the knowledge of the people of his time, and so there can be mistakes in science or geography or history. The biblical author is a true author in the style and structure of the writing, but the intent of the writing is as directed by God.

Thus, the text is written under the direction of the Spirit and teaches God’s message in the way in which God wants it communicated despite the limitations of the human author. It is not simply the author of the text who may be said to be “inspired,” but the text itself. After the author has finished the writing of the text under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the text itself may be spoken about as being the inspired word of God. Meaning may be contained in the text that may be intended by God but was not part of the intent of the biblical writer.

Finally, besides speaking about the author and the text itself as being inspired, we may also speak about the reader of the text as being “inspired.” The reader may pick the Bible up and read it, and come to an understanding that was intended by God for this person in this time and place. God’s Spirit is at work in the reader of the text. Thus,

when we begin to read a scriptural text, we should pray that God’s Spirit may be at work in us and help us to understand the meaning of the text for ourselves, for our lives. This is the action of the Holy Spirit in our minds and hearts. Jesus tells his disciples about this gift that he is going to give them:

“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you. . . . The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name--he will teach you everything and remind you of all that (I) told you. . . . When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me. . . . I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming.” (Jn 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:12-13)

Notice the role of the Spirit. She is not given to teach new truths but to help the community to understand the truths Jesus has already spoken to them. During the course of Jesus’ earthly ministry, the disciples could not understand all that he had to teach them. They could not understand completely who he was or how he was calling them to live and act. That gift would be given to them only after he had suffered and died and been raised to new life. And so, he promises the community the gift of the Holy Spirit as in this passage from John. This Holy Spirit, promised and received at Pentecost, remains with the disciples and helps them to understand the message of Jesus.

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

Filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples finally understand the message and actions of Jesus more clearly, and this fills them not only with courage,

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but with the ability to proclaim the message more firmly. And as they do so, the people understand what is being said. This gift of understanding the Gospel message more clearly comes through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit when we read the Bible. The Holy Spirit is poured out upon the individual and the community; people are inspired to hear that word and allow it to find application in their experience.

It is because of the gift of the Holy Spirit that the word of God resonates ever new in our lives. We cannot listen to the Scripture at one point in our lives and hear its message, and then hear that same Scripture at a different point and hear the same message. Through the gift of the inspiring Spirit, we hear the way a single passage has multiple meanings and applications for our lives. The parable of the sower and the seed suggests this to us.

“And he spoke to them at length in parables, saying: ‘A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep, and when the sun rose it was scorched, and it withered for lack of roots. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. But some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold. Whoever has ears ought to hear.’” (Mt 13:3-9)

The problem in the parable is not with the seed but with the soil. Unless we prepare the soil well and open our ears to God’s word, unless we allow it to penetrate into our lives, we will never be able to hear the Word of God well. This is the role of the Spirit. The Spirit helps us to listen well and allows the word of God to find deeper root in our lives. And so we continually hear God’s word in new and enlivening ways. We are inspired in the way we hear the word and in the ways we allow it to take hold in our lives.

Note further, however, in this parable that the contrast is not simply between the seed which bears fruit and the seed which does not. There is also the seed which yields fruit thirty or sixty or a hundredfold. Any of these yields would be extraordinary for a sower. Yet, we are told that we cannot read the text and be satisfied with a simple and worthwhile understanding. If we receive the thirtyfold, perhaps the Lord is calling us to a yield of sixtyfold; and if we receive the richer sixtyfold meaning,

perhaps the Lord is calling us to a hundredfold. The idea is that the Spirit continues to work in the Christian community and in the individual Christian always inviting us to be more deeply inspired, to be more richly blessed, with the guidance and encouragement which God’s word provides for us. Paul had great regard for the power of the word of God and its usefulness for Christian teaching and growth. For example, he writes to Timothy:

“But you, remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it, and that from infancy you have known (the) sacred scriptures, which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:14-17)

Paul reminds Timothy that all Scripture obtains its meaning from God; all Scripture is received through the gift of God’s Holy Spirit, and thus it can be applied in a variety of ways. We can hear that same encouragement.

Thus when we speak about “inspiration,” we are talking about the way the Spirit was present in the biblical author, how the Spirit safeguards the inspired text, and how the Spirit continues to be at work in the one who reads the Bible in every time and place. This concept emphasizes for us the role of the Holy Spirit in the composition and the understanding of the biblical text.

III. INTERPRETATION

The third concept we will consider, after revelation and inspiration, is that of interpretation. While inspiration focuses our attention on the way God causes the text to be written through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, interpretation pays attention to the text from the particular point of view of the reader. The document *Dei Verbum* (12) helps focus us:

“Since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by

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means of their words.”

Every reading of the Scriptural text involves the reader in an interpretation. As *Dei Verbum* suggests, there are at least two elements which must be taken into account from the beginning in interpretation.

First, the intent of the human author of the text needs to be kept in mind. What did the writer hope to communicate by composing the text in this way with the particular literary forms and vocabulary which he employed? Seeking the intent of the biblical author is a primary task when reading a biblical text, and this is often referred to as the literal meaning of the text. What does the text actually teach and express? Seeking this meaning of the biblical text might seem obvious, but it is sometimes not as easily discerned as one might think or hope because of the differences in culture and language between the author and the reader. Coming to know the circumstances that gave rise to a text has often been pursued by a biblical method of interpretation called the “Historical Critical Method,” which takes into account the circumstances of the time and place of the author, the literary genre of the passage, and the process leading to the final form of the text. This effort to uncover the intent of the writer of the text is important as a first step.

But one must also seek a further meaning in the text, a meaning intended by God but not (completely) intended by the biblical author. This is sometimes called the “fuller meaning” of a text, the “sensus plenior.” Since God is the author of the entire Bible and not simply a particular passage or book, God can intend other meanings and interpretations that are beyond the biblical author’s desire. The careful reader of a text can discern this meaning within the bosom of the Church.

There are numerous useful methods for interpretation of a biblical text. One can discover them in various documents of the Church, for example, in the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. Some of these methods focus our attention on the author of the text, some on the text itself, and some on the readers of the text.

One type of biblical interpretation that focuses on the reader is sometimes called a “contextual approach.” The context here, however, is not that of the original author of the text but the context of the reader of a text. It is

not possible to read a biblical text without bringing our own background into the effort. We are men and women of the 21st Century who live in a specific country and who come from our particular backgrounds. We read the text with that perspective. Some would want to try to remove this perspective since it seems to bring a personal prejudice to the reading, but contextual approaches take the opposite position. A contextual approach invites us to dynamically read a text from our own perspective. Thus, we are invited to seek the meaning in a text to give particular direction to our lives and ministry.

I would like to invite you to approach the interpretation of a text with “Vincentian eyes.” Reading a text from this perspective encourages us to be attentive to what it says about the poor or how they are addressed or how they are treated. When I listen to the word proclaimed from this perspective, how does it create an additional or different meaning for me? What does the story of the woman caught in adultery teach us about the way the poor are used as tools in political struggles? What does the parable of Lazarus and the rich man tell us about the invisibility of the poor? What does the story of the woman with the hemorrhage tell us about the powerlessness of the poor before established authorities? How do you find yourself urged by the charity of Christ in the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fish or the parable of the lost sheep? What does the story of the healing of the blind man or the washing of the feet tell you about treating the poor as your Lords and Masters?

Reading the Scriptures with Vincentian eyes is an invitation to interpret the stories of the Gospels in a way that speaks to our charism and which leads us to serve Christ in those who are poor. This method seeks a particular type of “inspiration” and enables a focused “interpretation.”

text written by Father P. GRIFFIN, CM,
and read by Father B. SCHOEPPER, Director General

to be continued in the next issue

THE BOLDNESS OF CHARITY: Spirituality, Involvement with the World, Persons Who Are Poor

B

*The Boldness
of Charity*

1. THE RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC: “IT APPLIES TO ME”

“The boldness of charity for a new missionary momentum” is the theme of our Domestic and Provincial Assemblies as we prepare for the next General Assembly. But it is much more than a theme; it is an appeal of the Spirit who asks the Church to respond to a pressing need of the People of God. We can see this all around us: the boldness and courage needed for evangelization are in short supply in many places across the globe.

I would like to remind you of three elements of the boldness of charity: spirituality, involvement in the world’s reality, and focusing on persons who are poor. I firmly believe that this topic requires our memory, reflection and prayer. Pope Francis told us this very clearly in the Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: “The primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him ...; we need to pray insistently that he will once more touch our hearts. We need to implore his grace daily, asking him to open our cold hearts and shake up our lukewarm and superficial existence” (E.G. 264).

As consecrated persons, this theme applies to us and affects us personally. The entire life of Jesus expresses

the boldness of his love for the Father and for humankind. The Gospel makes this abundantly clear. Jesus heals sick persons, restores sight to blind persons, makes deaf persons hear and feeds hungry persons from among those in the crowds who seek him out. Boldness, creativity and inventiveness are united in his gaze, his hands and his heart. The boldness of his charity allows the compassion in his heart and the mercy of the Father to shine forth. “[I]t is exactly what others need, even though they may not recognize it” (E.G. 265).

The first Christians exhibited this quality of boldness, as we see in the missionary thrust of their evangelization. They truly attracted others to believe in Jesus by the boldness of their charity: “See how they love one another.” The initial persecution against Peter and John was instigated because of the boldness of their charity towards the paralytic who was begging at the entrance of the temple (Acts 3:1-26). They knew that the boldness of charity is the heart of Jesus’ teaching: “This is how they shall know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:35). And they recalled what he said after washing their feet: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15: 13). This deep love for God and neighbor was the secret of the martyrs’ boldness, the source of the strength they had to forgive their persecutors as they laid down their lives.¹

The boldness of charity has been the foundation of the Church from its beginnings up to our time. The boldness of charity lies at the heart of the distinctive charism of each religious congregation and Institute of Consecrated Life in the Church. All Founders were bold in this way, which they put into practice through docility to the action of the Holy Spirit. St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac stand out in the Church of God because of the boldness of their charity. The Confraternities of Charity, the missions, the ministry among the galley slaves, the care of foundlings, and confreres and sisters sent to battle fronts are all results and expressions of the boldness of their charity.

The Instruction *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*, issued by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, recognizes

1. Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 42.

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how very much fear exists in our world and the need for boldness in witnessing to the mercy of God in today's world.²

The same document speaks of “A society with its positive and negative forces in which ‘not only are technology and economy globalized but also insecurity and fear, crime and violence, injustices and war’. In this situation, consecrated persons are called by the Spirit to a continual conversion to give new vigor to the prophetic dimension of their vocation.”³ This topic is of special concern for consecrated persons because both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have said that our radical commitment to living the Gospel and the boldness of our charity are the best example we can offer the People of God.

Benedict XVI's entire pontificate was marked by an urgent appeal to the boldness of charity. His encyclicals *Deus Caritas Est* and *Caritas in Veritate* along with the *Motu Proprio Intima Ecclesiae natura* on the Service of Charity show this emphasis. Mariano Fazio, philosopher and historian, points this out in his book entitled *From Benedict XV to Benedict XVI*⁴: “The present age demands that Christians live in a manner that is consistent with their belief so as to act courageously and effectively in the public forum. They must overcome the obstacles that militant movements promoting secularism wish to place in the way of anything that references the spiritual.”

The Synod on the New Evangelization, which took place in October 2012, made some important statements related to this topic: “We must form welcoming communities in which all outcasts find a home, concrete experiences of communion which attract the disenchanted glance of contemporary humanity with the ardent force of love — ‘See how they love one another!’” (Message from the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, 3)

In *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis warns us that the insularity and despondency felt by someone who is complacent, selfish and obsessed

2. *Starting Afresh from Christ*; Rome, May 2002.

3. *Starting Afresh from Christ*, 1; Rome, May 2002.

4. Fazio, Mariano, *From Benedict XV to Benedict XVI*. Ediciones Rial, 2009, p. 175. This priest is a professor of the History of Political Science on faculty of the School of Church Communications at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome.

with pleasure-seeking go hand-in-hand with a lack of boldness: “Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ” (E.G. 2).

Following this analysis, the Pope invites all of us to courageously take the risk of professing our faith and witnessing to the boldness of charity. “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since ‘no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.’⁵ The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk” (E.G. 3).

Evangelii Gaudium warns against taking the scriptures for granted so that they have no effect on how we live: “How dangerous and harmful this is, for it makes us lose our amazement, our excitement and our zeal for living the Gospel of fraternity and justice!” (E.G. 179)

So that is why this topic is relevant to me personally and applies to each of us as Daughters of Charity. We cannot avoid it. We need to look to the bold charity of Jesus Christ, of the first Christians and of our Founders so that we, too, can follow Christ in a radical manner, doing what he did and continuing his mission. We will be witnesses and prophets of God's love in our world only because of the boldness of our charity.

Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac were innovative and forged a new path for consecrated life for women. They looked for alternatives to the structures put in place by the Council of Trent: “having for monastery only the houses of the sick and the place where the Superioress resides; for cell, a hired room; for chapel, the parish church; for cloister, the streets of the city; for enclosure, obedience, with

5. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete in Domino*, 22 (May 9, 1975)

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*an obligation to go nowhere but to the houses of the sick or to places necessary for their service; for grille, the fear of God; for veil holy modesty; making no other profession to ensure their vocation and that, by their constant trust in Divine Providence and the offering they make to God of all that they are.*⁶ And so we must be obedient to the Church and faithful to the charism of our beginnings! This directly concerns us.

2. A THEOLOGICAL AND ECCLESIAL FOUNDATION

We are very familiar with the meaning of the word “boldness”: courage, strength, passion and daring, the ability to take risks and overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of accomplishing a goal. At first glance these characteristics are highly valued today as humankind faces the globalized apathy that Pope Francis has so energetically denounced.⁷

If we consider this from a faith perspective that motivates our actions, boldness is an expression of the cardinal virtue of fortitude. But when joined to charity, boldness becomes a gift of the Holy Spirit since one’s living proceeds from the inner dynamism of a heart filled with charity and animated by the gift of fortitude. The boldness of charity leads us into the very center of Jesus’ heart, to his feelings and actions. We are impelled to extend his mission and to be witnesses and prophets of his love in today’s world, not in a world which no longer exists. This includes prayer life, a spirituality of communion, being “within” in the world and having a deep desire to be a people. The creativity and courage to face the risks encountered in our service come from the boldness of charity, examples of which our history of charity is full.

From the perspective of biblical theology, the boldness of charity is full participation in the *spirit of Pentecost*, the interior force of the Holy Spirit which a person possesses in order to do good and be a witness of the charity of Jesus Christ. This is the underlying meaning of no. 24 of *Redemptoris missio*: “*The coming of the Holy Spirit makes them witnesses and prophets (cf. Acts 1:8; 2:17-18). It fills them with a serene courage which impels them to pass on to others their experience of Jesus and*

6. Coste X, p. 530. Conference of August 24, 1659.

7. Pope Francis, Homily at Lampedusa, July 8, 2013.

the hope which motivates them. The Spirit gives them the ability to bear witness to Jesus with ‘boldness.’”

In this second part of my presentation **let us listen to** some biblical texts and passages from the Church’s magisterium that will help us to construct a Scriptural basis for the topic. The boldness of charity is the visible fruit of the evangelizer’s gifts of fortitude and wisdom. By the gift of fortitude we receive the interior strength, creativity and courage to act knowing that the Holy Spirit is guiding us and moving with and in us. Sacred Scripture expresses it in this way:

“I command you: be strong and steadfast! Do not fear nor be dismayed, for the Lord, your God, is with you wherever you go.” (Jos 1:9)

“They that hope in the LORD will renew their strength, they will soar on eagles’ wings; They will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint.” (Is 40:31)

“Hear, O Israel! Today you are drawing near for battle against your enemies. Do not be weak hearted or afraid, alarmed or frightened by them. For it is the Lord, your God, who goes with you.” (Dt 20:3-4)

We can see this promise of strength, energy and boldness clearly in the call and mission that Moses received (cf. Ex 3:7-12). Standing before the burning bush, he senses a call and receives a mission which requires that he be bold and courageous. He recognizes and voices his incapacity, but God’s own strength confers on him the boldness he needs to carry out his mission. He receives three surprising signs that make him believe in the Word of God: the serpent mounted on a pole, his own leprous hand, and the river water that turns into blood. His boldness comes from God, from the power of God’s Spirit. He puts his faith in God and welcomes the unconditional gift of strength that God promises to give him to carry out his mission of leading his people out of Egypt to freedom. And so Moses’ mission was marked by the boldness of charity.

In Psalm 62 the believer clearly expresses that the boldness of charity is also a fruit of the gift of wisdom: “*My soul, be at rest in God alone, from whom comes my hope. God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not fall. My deliverance and honor are with God, my*

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strong rock; my refuge is with God. Trust God at all times” (Ps 62:6-9). Faith and trust give strength and energy for the mission and give it new momentum. The psalmist is sure of God’s strengthening power, as were the saints and our Founders. We, too, have this certainty, even though we are sometimes doubtful or confused. This is why the boldness of charity requires a deep experience of God.

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus explains to us that love is the secret of his Incarnation and the boldness of his ministry: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life”* (Jn 3:16). The Gospel offers us three supreme examples of the boldness of charity as Jesus expressed it: the Incarnation, the Eucharist and the Paschal Mystery of his passion, death and resurrection. In those events of Jesus’ life, Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac found the source of their spiritual and apostolic dynamism to be witnesses and prophets of charity. This is why they insist that we, too, should drink from the same source.⁸

The life of the early Christian community, as described by the Acts of the Apostles, is characterized by the boldness of charity. Misunderstood and persecuted, the first Christians gathered in homes for worship and catechesis, practicing mutual charity: *“They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved”* (Acts 2:42-47).

In *Perfectae Caritatis*, the decree on the renewal of consecrated life, Vatican Council II urged us to live boldly: *“Institutes should promote among their members an adequate knowledge of the social conditions of the times they live in and of the needs of the Church. In such a way...*

8. *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*. A. 14, p. 784-785.

*burning with apostolic zeal, they may be able to assist men more effectively.”*⁹ Article 2 of the decree points out characteristics of the boldness of charity:

- 1) Sufficient knowledge of the reality of the world today.
- 2) Knowledge of the needs of the Church and the signs of the times.
- 3) The ability to calmly assess each situation, and then engage in discernment.
- 4) Evangelical prudence, being aware of the resources and means at our disposal, as we hear in the Gospel: *“Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion?”* (Lk 14: 28)
- 5) Professional competence.
- 6) Determination to benefit our world and to go out to the fringes of society with passion and zeal.
- 7) Perseverance in our undertakings and the ability to overcome difficulties and failures.

Vita Consecrata, John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation, urges us to live the boldness of charity: *“Institutes of Consecrated Life are thus invited courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today’s world”* (V.C. 37).

Pope Francis continually emphasizes the evangelizing effect of boldness: *“The Church must be attractive. Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world.”*¹⁰ He reiterates that *“We need to move away from the central position of calmness and peacefulness.”* In *Evangelii Gaudium* he spurs us on by writing *“Wherever there is life, fervor and a desire to bring Christ to others, genuine vocations will arise”* (E.G. 107).

We cannot remain passive, arms folded, claiming insufficient health, not enough resources, lack of vocations or the aging of our congregations. We can always give more by rekindling the ardor of our first love and by relinquishing any narrow and pessimistic outlook that focuses on ourselves.

9. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.

10. Pope Francis to Religious, November 29, 2013.

3. ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF THE BOLDNESS OF CHARITY

In this section we will delve more deeply into the topic by reflecting on the three components already mentioned: a spirituality of compassion and communion centered on Christ, insertion in today's world, and preferential care of persons living in poverty. *“Courage in proclaiming the Lord Jesus must be accompanied by trust in Providence, which is at work in the world and which ‘orders everything, even human differences, for the greater good of the Church’”* (V.C. 81).

Trust in Providence, so dear to our Founders, is closely united to boldness. When we trust in Providence, we know that our service is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's inspiration and guidance, and never our own personal undertaking. We can continue Jesus' mission only if we are open to the Spirit and trust in God's Providence. Herein lies the source of the boldness of charity. Saint Vincent stresses this repeatedly such as when he says, *“You're well aware, Sisters, that you're not the ones who give yourselves the strength and courage to take on all that you do through charity. Wasn't it this confidence that caused the Apostles to undertake all the great works they did and made them speak with such assurance to both great and small? Wasn't this what made Saint Paul say, ‘I can do all things in Him who strengthens me’?”* (To Two Sisters Being Sent to La Fere, July 29, 1656. Coste X, p. 163).

Saint John Paul II set before us a realistic and attainable path to boldness:

* **The spirituality of communion** as Jesus lived it is communion with God and with our brothers and sisters. We look *“to make the Church the home and the school of communion”* (Novo Millennio Inueunte 43). Living this spirituality means *“that everyone, in all the diverse vocations, regularly dedicate, every day, appropriate times to enter deeply into silent conversation with him by whom they know they are loved, to share their very lives with him and to receive enlightenment to continue on the daily journey”* (Starting Afresh from Christ 25).

* **Involvement with the world.** *“Consecrated persons must...be aware of the challenges of their time, understanding the profound theological meaning of these challenges through a discernment made with the help*

of the Spirit” (V.C. 73). . . . *“The new evangelization demands that consecrated persons have a thorough awareness of the theological significance of the challenges of our time. . . with a view to renewing the mission”* (V.C. 81).

* **Give preference to persons living in poverty**

Pope Francis has reminded us of these three elements of the boldness of charity:

*In terms of spirituality of communion, he challenges us *“to imagine innovative spaces and possibilities for prayer and communion which are more attractive and meaningful”* (E.G. 73). *“What is called for is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values. It must reach the places where new narratives and paradigms are being formed, bringing the word of Jesus to the inmost soul of our cities”* (E.G. 74).

*Being involved in the reality of today's world, as Pope Francis urges us to be, means that we must give a resolute *“yes to the challenge of a missionary spirituality”* which will help us to overcome *“an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation”* and change our service from activity as a *“mere appendage to [our] life”* into an expression of our very identity. Accepting the challenge to be animated by missionary spirituality will require us to overcome temptations which prevent us from living the boldness of charity: *“individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervor”* (E.G. 78).

*Priority for those who are poor: *“God's heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself ‘became poor’ (2 Cor 8:9)”* (E.G. 197). *“I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us”* (E.G. 198).

In our reflection we are called to review, pray, discern and advance this missionary spirituality of communion for which the New Evangelization is calling from our ecclesial communities. . . .

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3.1 - BEING ANIMATED BY A SPIRITUALITY OF COMMUNION, A MISSIONARY SPIRITUALITY WITHIN THE CHURCH

This implies:

a) “A [new] way of thinking, speaking and acting... in this way communion leads to mission, and itself becomes mission, [especially among persons who are poor and rejected.] *Indeed, communion begets communion: in essence it is a communion that is missionary.*”¹¹ Thinking, speaking and acting in ways that promote communion are essential facets of the boldness of charity that shine brightly through our service. In that way our lifestyle becomes entirely evangelical and evangelizing, harmony grows and service has more vigor.

b) *Formation for communion* has a place in both the initial and ongoing stages and for clergy, consecrated persons and lay persons. There is only one mission—the mission of Christ and his Church. This is why we should look back at the first Christian communities (Cf. Acts 4:32-35)

c) Fidelity to the charism. Our *adoption as children of God, Christian community and mission* all spring from the heart of the Trinity. The spirituality of communion makes all members of the Church part of the discipleship of the followers of Christ.

d) *Promote communion for the mission.* This is what Jesus taught and how the first Christians lived. “*That they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me*” (Jn 17:21). This was also what our Founders understood and how they lived. Saint Vincent sought to collaborate with lay persons in the Confraternities of Charity, as well as with Jesuits and members of the Oratory in the popular missions. He turned to the Company of the Blessed Sacrament for help with the ministry to the galley slaves and he was the director and superior of the Religious of the Visitation from 1622 until his death in 1660. Even this long ago he gave us the example of communion for the mission.

e) *Participating in the life of the Church.* The spirituality of communion

11. John Paul II: *Vita consecrata*, 46; Cf. *Christifideles laici*, 31-32.

strengthens the Church’s life and mission. That is why John Paul II presented it to each state of life as a guide for its evolving role in the Church. *Christi fideles laici* speaks to the laity; *Pastores dabo vobis* is directed to priests, *Pastores gregis* to bishops and *Vita consecrata* to consecrated persons. This spirituality of communion contributes what the Church today most needs: **dialogue, participation, collaboration and co-responsibility.**

3.2 - INVOLVEMENT IN THE LIFE OF SOCIETY AND THE CHURCH

Involvement, “insertion among”, is the way we are present in the world and in the Church. We are influenced by the social reality of the world in which we live, as well as by ecclesial and institutional contexts.

In our world today, the Church is losing its influence in society as her credibility is often called into question and she is persecuted in some countries. She faces a lack of vocations and the aging of a great number of members of congregations. This situation could bring about disillusionment, pessimism, disinterest and apathy. But the boldness of charity turns these same circumstances into a challenge and opportunity. That was the perspective of the first Christians. The persecution of the Church caused the faith to spread, and Christians grew more determined to be courageous witnesses of it. The same thing took place in Spain during the first half of the 20th century. We have martyrs who responded with great valor and boldness.

The fundamental objective of our involvement in society is to be able to listen to the appeals of persons who are poor and give a courageous response of service and liberation. This is what the Church is asking of us: “*Just as a century ago it was the working classes which were oppressed in their fundamental rights, and the Church very courageously came to their defense by proclaiming the sacrosanct rights of the worker as a person, so now, when another category of persons is being oppressed in the fundamental right to life, the Church feels in duty bound to speak out with the same courage on behalf of those who have no voice. Hers is always the evangelical cry in defense of the world’s poor, those who are threatened and despised and whose human rights are violated*” (*Evangeliium Vitae*, 5).

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The recent Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* tells us, “Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid” (E.G. 187).

The way we are inserted in society at this moment in history is directly related to our ability to be attuned with a discerning ear to the appeals of those who are poor. We need to bear in mind that listening to the appeals of poor persons calls us to live poverty more radically, to courageously respond to their needs in the service we offer. “No to an economy of exclusion... no to the new idolatry of money... no to a financial system which rules rather than serves... no to the inequality which spawns violence... no to a culture that gives priority to the outward, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial and the provisional... no to secularization that tends to reduce the faith and the Church to the sphere of the private and personal” (E.G. 53-64).

The Pope adds: “no to relativism [that has] led to a general sense of disorientation” (E.G. 64). He has called attention to being cautious about the use of means of communication: “We are living in an information-driven society which bombards us indiscriminately with data – all treated as being of equal importance – and which leads to remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment. In response, we need to provide an education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values” (E.G. 64).

In his pastoral plan for the Church, Pope Francis denounces ways of being in the world that are contrary to the Gospel: “Pastoral workers can thus fall into a relativism which... proves even more dangerous than doctrinal relativism. It has to do with the deepest and inmost decisions that shape their way of life. This practical relativism consists in acting as if God did not exist, making decisions as if the poor did not exist, setting goals as if others did not exist, working as if people who have not received the Gospel did not exist. It is striking that even some who clearly have solid doctrinal and spiritual convictions frequently fall into a lifestyle which leads to an attachment to financial security, or to a desire for power or human glory at all cost, rather than giving their lives to others in mission. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm!” (E.G. 80)

He continues by asking us to respond “no to selfishness and spiritual sloth... no to a sterile pessimism... no to spiritual worldliness... no to warring among ourselves...yes to the new relationships brought by Christ” (E.G. 80-97).

3.3 - GIVING PREFERENCE TO PERSONS LIVING IN POVERTY

Pope Francis presents us with the means to put it into practice: “We incarnate the duty of hearing the cry of the poor when we are deeply moved by the suffering of others. Let us listen to what God’s word teaches us about mercy, and allow that word to resound in the life of the Church. The Gospel tells us: ‘Blessed are the merciful, because they shall obtain mercy’ (Mt 5:7). The apostle James teaches that our mercy to others will vindicate us on the day of God’s judgment: ‘So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy, yet mercy triumphs over judgment’ (Jas 2:12-13)” (E.G. 193).

This is what drove Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac to found the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Saint Vincent told us: “We should sell ourselves to rescue our brothers and sisters from destitution.”¹² To encourage the priests of the Mission to go out to poor persons, he said, “To be a Christian and to see our brother suffering without weeping with him, without being sick with him! That’s to be lacking in charity; it’s being a caricature of a Christian; it’s inhuman; it’s to be worse than animals” (Coste XII, p. 222).

Saint Louise emphasized the need for a faith perspective as we approach them: “If we deviate in the slightest from the conviction that they are the members of Jesus Christ, it will infallibly lead to the weakening of these beautiful virtues (gentleness and charity) in us” (L. 104b, p. 113).

In a letter to Sister Barbe Angiboust, she specifies: “we are obliged to satisfy everyone and to carry on patiently the work of God, doing everything without haste. Our vocation of servants of the poor calls us to practice the gentleness, humility and forbearance that we owe to others. We must respect and honor everyone: the poor because they are

12. Coste IX, p. 390.

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the members of Jesus Christ and our masters; the rich so that they will provide us with the means to do good for the poor” (L. 424, p. 468).

4. PRACTICING THE BOLDNESS OF CHARITY: SOME SUGGESTIONS

At the dawn of the third millennium, John Paul II wrote in his encyclical *Novo Millennio Ineunte* “Christians must learn to make their act of faith in Christ by discerning his voice in the cry for help that rises from this world of poverty. This means carrying on the tradition of charity which has expressed itself in so many different ways in the past two millennia, but which today calls for even greater resourcefulness. Now is the time for a new “creativity” in charity, not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by “getting close” to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters” (N.M.I. 50).

Now is the time to be bold, to re-imagine charity, which should lead us to make concrete commitments.

4.1. - WAYS TO PROMOTE THE SPIRITUALITY OF COMMUNION

* “Receive the Boldness of Charity from Christ” (*Assembly Document 2*) implies carefully cultivating our personal relationship with Jesus Christ in prayer, contemplating Him in the Gospel, allowing ourselves to be challenged by His Word, allowing His feelings to fill us and making His wish a reality: “*that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you ... that the world may believe*” (Jn 17:21).

* Welcoming the spirituality of communion involves three actions: **seek** God’s will for ourselves today, **listen** to God’s Word and the cry of persons who are poor as Moses and Jesus of Nazareth did and **offer** all that we are and all that we have in our service of poor persons.

To do this we must:

- Safeguard times of personal and communal discernment,
- Share the Word of God with those who are poor and utter simplicity of heart and with open doors in order to make the community a home

and a school of charity.

- Participate in parish and diocesan groups for liturgy, Bible studies, ecumenical prayer groups and interreligious dialogue.
- Create bonds of communion and encounter by sharing prayer and charism with other institutions and associations for the mission of charity that we carry out in the Church.
- Promote and demonstrate fraternal communion and apostolic zeal that becomes a radiant and attractive witness so that those who see us can admire how we love one another...

4.2. - WAYS TO PROMOTE INSERTION IN SOCIETY

We should open ourselves up to learning about current situations by seeking out information about problems and needs that exist around us, go out to the peripheries, discern as community, increase our radical practice of evangelical poverty, be ready to offer responses, no matter the risk, dare to be courageous prophets in defense of justice and human dignity, work to make our communal relationships true witnesses of communion and sources of strength to animate service. All this should be done in collaboration and communion with other actors in the Church.

This is what Saint Vincent and Saint Louise did: care for the galley convicts, uneducated children in villages and poor neighborhoods in cities, foundlings, those wounded in wars, the elderly, people living on the streets, persons with mental illness...all these works confirm their boldness of charity as they involved themselves in the social reality of their time.

At this time in the Church, our presence in the world demands that we respond to Pope Francis’ calls in a concrete way:

- Avoid “*spiritual worldliness*” (E.G. 93-97) and oppose it so that the Gospel is credible, realizing this will entail sacrifice.
- “*Renew our structures so they can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation,*” making them “*more mission-oriented*” (E.G. 27).
- Cooperate in reorganization on the level of the Company, focusing on the mission, not on a survival instinct.
- Encourage our going out to the peripheries where persons live in

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poverty after communal discernment and review of our lifestyle.

-Welcome volunteers who want to become involved and collaborate in groups serving persons who are poor and in missionary initiatives, offering them opportunities for Christian formation and possibilities for collaboration in the mission.

-Invite young people to share in our prayer and service, passing on our apostolic zeal and joy as those who continue the mission of Jesus Christ among persons who are poor. This is a very appropriate means of vocation ministry today.

- Provide spiritual accompaniment for young people seeking meaning in their lives.

4.3. - WAYS TO BE BOLD WITNESSES OF CHARITY WITH PERSONS WHO ARE POOR

Let Jesus Christ's compassionate love of persons who are poor fill our hearts so we go out to them with His perspective and sentiments, offering them:

- A perspective that is new and fraternal, not authoritarian nor paternalistic.
- An attitude of joy, gratitude and enthusiasm for the gift of our vocation.
- A merciful attitude toward those around us and behavior that is an expression of humility, proximity, tenderness and courage to seek solutions and deal with difficulties.
- Creative and practical responses to their needs: situations of unemployment, the real poverty of many families, problems of violence and the break-up of the family, suffering and loneliness of children and elderly persons, drugs...seeking collaboration from other public and Church institutions.

In conclusion, let us be those who pass on joy and mercy through our acts and words so that, through us, the charity of Christ can reach all people without exception or excluding anyone.

Sr. Maria Ángeles INFANTE
Daughter of Charity

Spirit-filled Service of those who are poor in Community

Preamble: What does the title of our reflection mean?

Spirit-filled service of those who are poor in Community!
The title given to this talk takes its inspiration from Pope Francis! In effect, Chapter 5 of his Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*¹ (*Evangelii Gaudium*), has a startling title: “*Spirit-Filled Evangelizers.*”² The Pope explains himself in number 261:

“Whenever we say that something is “spirited”, it usually refers to some interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity. Spirit-filled evangelization is not the same as a set of tasks dutifully carried out despite one’s own personal inclinations and wishes. How I long to find the right words to stir up enthusiasm for a new chapter of evangelization full of fervor, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction! Yet I realize that no words of encouragement will be enough unless the fire of the Holy Spirit burns in our hearts.” (no. 261).

We could say what the Pope says about evangelization about our life of service, our apostolate. Serving those who are poor in a “Spirit-filled” way means that we do it with love,

1. Published November 24, 2013, for the conclusion of the year of faith, on the Solemnity of Christ the King.

2. In English: “*Spirit-Filled Evangelizers*”; in Spanish: “*Evangelizadores con Espiritu*”; in Italian: “*Evangelizzatori con Spirito*”. Spirit is always capitalized.

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are Poor*

Spirit-filled Service of Those who are Poor in Community

enthusiasm, with others and driven by a renewed fervor because the fire of the Resurrected One's Spirit burns in our hearts. We are going to reflect together on the apostolic life of a Daughter of Charity, but apostolic life, when lived too personally (in an individualistic way), without a deep spirit of faith, and without an intense spiritual life, can become a source of unbalance and hinder our personal, spiritual and human growth. Our mission should not plunge us into activism, exhaustion, anxiety and fatigue or lead us to seek personal glory or our personal well-being rather than seeking God's glory.³ Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), a Dominican mystic from the thirteenth century, liked to say:

*"People ought not to consider so much what they are to do as what they are; let them but be good and their ways and deeds will shine brightly. If you are just, your actions will be just, too. Do not think that saintliness comes from occupation; it depends rather on what one is. The kind of work we do does not make us holy, but we may make it holy. However 'sacred' a calling may be, it has no power to sanctify; but rather as we are and have the divine being within, we bless each task we do, be it eating, or sleeping, or watching, or any other."*⁴

Three ideas stand out for us:

- 1 - We shouldn't be especially concerned about what we should do but about what we should be;
- 2 - We will not be saved because of what we do but because of what we are;
- 3 - Apostolic life for us is much more than the various apostolates that we carry out. "Apostolic life is a way of life!"⁵

The challenge is the same for us today: how can we find a *new missionary momentum*, as invited by your upcoming General Assembly? How can we find a fruitful balance among our apostolic life, our spiritual life and our community life? As you well know, these are not three parallel lives,

3. *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 93.

4. Talks of Instruction, no. 4. *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, Harper & Row, 1941.

5. Quoting the former Master General of the Dominicans Timothy Radcliffe, *I Call You Friends*, London, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2001 (on the apostolic life).

but three dimensions or aspects that are at the service of our gift, our vocation, the offering of ourselves to the Lord for "the praise and glory of God's name, and for the salvation of the world."

The Apostolic Life of a Daughter of Charity Today:

The service of Christ in persons who are poor is the fundamental activity of a Daughter of Charity wherever she may be. That said, and as we just mentioned, this life of service cannot be separated from the two other fundamental components of your life as consecrated women following Christ in the way of Vincent de Paul; we are referring to spiritual life and community life. Your Constitutions dedicate their second chapter to "Vocation and Mission of the Company"; here is the summary of it: "**Given to God, in Community, for the service of Christ in persons who are poor, in an evangelical spirit**".⁶

Let's take a closer look at the most important elements: the first component of your Vocation and Mission is *the gift of self to God*. Indeed, there is no consecrated life without a willingness and an intention to offer oneself to God. The second component refers to life in common, to the *ecclesial and communal experience*, because a Daughter of Charity cannot be one all by herself. The third explains two things: first, that the service of those who are poor cannot be separated from a *faith perspective*; therefore, serving those who are poor is also serving Jesus Christ; and secondly, *the corporal and spiritual service of those who are poor after the example of Christ* constitutes your specific charism (cf. Mt 25:40). The final component indicates the evangelical way to give yourselves, live and serve. It is *in the way Jesus did, like him*, that you are called to live your mission in humility, simplicity and charity.

It has been some years now since you knocked on the door of the Daughters of Charity; do you remember the ardent desire that filled you? Never forget that you left everything, with a deep desire to give yourselves to God with others, in a Congregation that has as its purpose the service of Christ in persons who are poor; you did this in order to discover the unity of your being in the evangelical purpose that was just mentioned. I invite you to recall this "first love", to establish or reestablish your unity

6. Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity, no. 7-13.

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of life around these three elements: “*The Daughters of Charity, given to God for the service of Christ in persons who are poor, find in this aim their unity of life.*”⁷

But, how can you be faithful in the current world (where you are) to the vocation and mission that are yours? How can you preserve the evangelical spirit that is at the root of your vocation? It is not always easy, is it? In our current context, how can you not lose the courage, dynamism, and generosity that your apostolic life demands? Perhaps some of you are discouraged right now, or “in crisis”, as they say! How many of you suffer from a sort of division between apostolic life, community life and spiritual life? Certainly, working conditions in present-day society divide and tear apart. We painfully recognize that modern life does not promote the balance that your Constitutions ask of you. We want to be generous toward the Lord and those who are poor, but for the reasons noted above, the apostolate is often a source of tension, problems, and discouragement.

In the Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis describes in great detail the temptation to “selfish acedia”⁸ that the entire People of God experiences; perhaps we do as well. I invite you to read numbers 81 and 82 on this subject. I will simply quote one part:

“The problem is not always an excess of activity, but rather activity undertaken badly, without adequate motivation, without a spirituality which would permeate it and make it pleasurable. As a result, work becomes more tiring than necessary, even leading at times to illness. Far from a content and happy tiredness, this is a tense, burdensome, dissatisfying and, in the end, unbearable fatigue. This pastoral acedia can be caused by a number of things. Some fall into it because they throw themselves into unrealistic projects and are not satisfied simply to do what they reasonably can. Others, because they lack the patience to allow processes to mature ... Others, because they are attached to a few

7. Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity no. 16a.

8. “Acedia is a suffering of the soul, manifested by boredom and distaste for prayer, penitence, spiritual reading, and apostolic activity. Acedia can be a temporary trial, but it can also be a state of the soul that becomes a real spiritual torpor and withdrawal into oneself. It then becomes a spiritual illness” (Cf. Wikipedia). Some symptoms : lack of passion, spiritual sadness, laziness, loss of faith where doubt has the upper hand over faith ; letting oneself go, neglect of religious practices and service of one’s neighbor... Ultimately, it is a sort of melancholy, generalized discouragement ; it is a depression due to spiritual relaxation (Cf. Mt 13,24 the weed and the good seed).

projects or vain dreams of success. Others, because they have lost real contract with people and so depersonalize their work that they are more concerned with the road map than with the journey itself. Others fall into acedia because they are unable to wait; they want to dominate the rhythm of life. Today’s obsession with immediate results makes it hard for pastoral workers to tolerate anything that smacks of disagreement, possible failure, criticism, the cross.” (no. 82)

Each one of you can recognize yourself in this and ask yourselves why the apostolic life is a source of sadness and tension and not of evangelical joy or fulfillment. In the context of our reflection, we can return to the first sentence: “*The problem is not always an excess of activity, but rather activity undertaken badly, without adequate motivation, without a spirituality which would permeate it and make it pleasurable.*” Yes, the lack of a truly evangelical spirituality causes apostolic enthusiasm and motivations to be lost. The consequences of such a reality are not long in coming:

“... faith is wearing down and degenerating into small-mindedness ... A tomb psychology thus develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum. Disillusioned with reality, with the Church (with the Company, we would say) and with themselves, they experience a constant temptation to cling to a faint melancholy, lacking in hope, which seizes the heart like ‘the most precious of the devil’s potions’. Called to radiate light and communicate life, in the end they are caught up in things that generate only darkness and inner weariness, and slowly consume all zeal for the apostolate. For all this, I repeat,” the Pope concludes, “*Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization!*” (no. 83)

Weakening of faith, lack of a spirituality that motivates and permeates activity and the fact of often working all alone can account for some difficulties encountered in our apostolic life. What do you think about that? Each of you can and should examine herself.

Apostolic Life after the example of Jesus:

In speaking about “Spirit-filled” service of those who are poor, we want to stress that our activities called apostolic or our apostolates need to be lived and considered in light of Christ’s example, in accordance with the

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Spirit of the Risen Lord. You are well aware that Jesus had an intense apostolic life! Our apostolic life following Jesus's example is both demanding and simple. So, let's go back to the Gospel! In the Gospel of Saint John, there are some verses that can help us to restore meaning and passion to apostolic activities lived in community with an evangelical spirit. Indeed, in the fourth Gospel Jesus presents himself as the one sent by the Father; He states:

"I do nothing on my own... The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, because I always do what is pleasing to him." Because he spoke this way, many came to believe in him" (Jn 8:28b-30).

Based on this statement, we could say that there was no moment in Jesus' life when he did not feel sent by the Father and in communion with Him. Always and everywhere, He is His missionary and in intimate relationship with Him. Always and everywhere, he recognizes Himself as His son, who came from His bosom (Jn 1:18). After the conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus confides to His disciples, *"My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to accomplish his work"* (Jn 4:34). Doing the will of the Father and accomplishing His work are what gives Jesus life. He really has a clear awareness of being the son and missionary of the Father; thus, His mission and His person correspond perfectly. *"Every event, every encounter in the life of Jesus is experienced in the light of this relationship with the Father: the person he encounters, the sinner, the sick person, the event, even rejection. All this is looked at in the perspective of the Father...Jesus lives all this in the form of entrusting himself. Thus Jesus shows us the perfectly successful person; (Gaudium et Spes 22),"*⁹ the perfect apostle.

The disciples didn't understand what we just said right away. It was only after Jesus was lifted up on the cross and after his resurrection that they entered completely into the mystery of the Son of God. Such was the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus: *"Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?"* (Lk 24:32) Jesus had to be raised from the dead for their minds to be opened and for them to realize that the one

9. Paolo Martinelli, OFMCap, *The Consecrated Person of Apostolic Life: A Theological Reflection*; www.vidimusdominum.org

sent by the Father was able to remain faithful even to the Cross and that the Father had not abandoned Him to the power of death.¹⁰ Now, once resurrected, Jesus returned to His frightened disciples and said to them, *"Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you"* (Jn 20:21). Apostolic life thus turns out to be a participation in Jesus' mission! He who was sent sends in turn. In the Bible, every sending, every mission comes from God! The one sent is endowed with the same authority as the one who sends; this is why, in turn, Jesus sends His disciples.

The apostolic life about which we are speaking now is an expression that comes from the Bible itself and should be understood in a theological way. In fact, "apostolate" (αποστολή, in Greek) means mission or authorization; "apostolate" is derived from the verb "to send", "apostolein" (ἀπόστολειν, in Greek), and means envoy, messenger. We run the risk of thinking that the apostolate consists exclusively in 'doing', in action. In the New Testament, however, the first ones sent, the Apostles, were first chosen, elected, called, or, as Paul would say, "predestined". It was only after they had learned to be disciples that they were sent, "pémpro" (πέμπω, in Greek).

It is also important to understand that as disciples of Christ, we have inherited a heavenly vocation. The Letter to the Hebrews says so: *"Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession"* (3:1). Apostle and High Priest means that Jesus is the *"qualified representative, both of God toward men and of men toward God."*¹¹ Since the risen Lord sends His disciples as He Himself was sent, that means that each mission, each apostolate and each vocation is understood and lived in reference to the person of Christ. Otherwise, the apostolate does not bear fruit, and the messenger falls into the "apostolic acedia" Pope Francis describes so well.¹²

Chapter 15 of Saint John's Gospel contains the image of the vine and illustrates what I just articulated:

10. The Cross is not an end, but a new beginning, cf. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, New York: Doubleday, 2007, p. 258.

11. Cf. Note in the Ecumenical Translation of the Bible (TOB).

12. *Evangelii Gaudium* no. 81 and 82.

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“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and everyone that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.... Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.” (Jn 15:1-2, 4-5).

This is a parable of apostolic life following Christ’s example. A deep relationship exists among the three characters or significant figures in the story: the vine, the vine grower and the branches. The “**true vine**” is the Incarnate Christ (ἄμπελος □ ampelos in Greek); this Greek word indicates the vine plant, made up of the stock and the branches; **the vine grower** is the Father (γεωργός □ georgos in Greek), a sort of “gardener” who cares for the vineyard in general, for each vine in particular and for each branch; **the branches**, finally, are the disciples or believers in general (κλήμα, klema in Greek) who should bear fruit.

- Christ, the “true vine”, is connected to the Father and the branches. He is unique because He comes from God, was planted on our earth and is connected to with the branches. It’s through Him that the sap flows to the branches. The image of the true vine expresses the fact that Jesus is inseparable both from the Father and from His own.

- “My Father is the vine grower”: this assertion yet again places Christ in relationship with the Father because He says, “My Father”. By describing God as the vine grower, Jesus makes Him the owner of the vine, thus affirming His dependence on God.

- It is by taking care of the branches that the vine grower promotes the growth of the vine bearing fruit. The vine grower removes what is dead (with the goal of bringing it back to life) and purifies, that is, he makes it capable of life.¹³ The point of the whole parable is the fruit. A vine is only cultivated in anticipation of its productivity, and we know full well that fruit doesn’t magically appear! That’s when the verb “remain” (*ménein*, μένειν) arises. Its appearance is significant: it means that fruit

13. Remove and purify, *airo* and *katairo*, (αἶρω – καθαίρω in Greek). In the Greek text, there is a play on words that is impossible to put into our modern languages.

appears to the extent that the believer remains faithful to the relationship that Christ formed with him or her by the gift of His Word. “The disciple is not invited to achieve a goal, but to remain attached over the long haul in an already-existing relationship and to live it fully in the present moment of faith.”¹⁴

Note that there is a sort of reciprocal immanence or intimacy: “Remain in me, as I remain in you.” ... If the disciple does not remain in Christ, he will not be able to bear fruit. The same goes for a branch that, separated from the vine, would dry out and die. The branch alone is incapable of giving fruit! In the end, “the believer who thinks he can bear fruit counting on his own effort is condemned to failure.”¹⁵ God is glorified when the believer bears fruit and loves; in this way, he can know joy: “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become My disciples... These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (Jn 15:8, 11).

Benedict XVI, in his reflection on the first part of chapter 15 in John, wrote a brilliant paragraph, which I quote in its entirety:

“Purification, fruit, remaining [abiding], commandment, love, unity— these are the key words for the drama of being in and with the Son in the vine that the Lord’s words place before our soul. Purification - the Church and the individual need constant purification. Processes of purification, which are as necessary as they are painful, run through the whole of history, the whole life of those who have dedicated themselves to Christ. The mystery of death and resurrection is ever present in these purifications. When man and his institutions climb too high, they need to be cut back; what has become too big must be brought back to the simplicity and poverty of the Lord himself. It is only by undergoing such processes of dying away that fruitfulness endures and renews itself.”¹⁶

Studying this famous parable of the vine allows us to understand our apostolic life in community in light of Jesus’ example with His disciples. In faith life, community life and apostolic life, the close and reciprocal

14. Jean Zumstein, *L’Évangile selon Jean* (13-21), Genève, Labor et Fides, 2007, p. 100.
15. Idem, p. 101.

16. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, New York: Doubleday, 2007, p. 260-261.

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relationship between the one sent and He who sends him is a promise of fruitfulness: “without me you can do nothing.” Let us ask ourselves if the difficulties that we experience in our apostolic life might be governed by the fact that we resist the vine grower who wants to prune us and purify us in order to then produce new growth. Purification and fruit go together! Let’s also ask ourselves the question about our ability to “remain united to the Lord,” which the Fathers of the Church translated into Latin as *perseverantia*. Have we been able to patiently stand firm in communion with the Lord in the midst of the vicissitudes of our mission? Let us accept to remain united to the Lord and to our brothers and sisters. Without the Lord and without others, our apostolic life falls into ruins! “The New Missionary Momentum” depends on all this.

Saint Vincent de Paul and trust in God

One day, Saint Vincent asked the priests of the Mission this question: “Do you want to know why we won’t be successful in a certain ministry?” His response is clear and succinct: “It’s because we rely on ourselves.”¹⁷ Jesus demonstrated his total trust in His Father: “I do nothing on my own... The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, because I always do what is pleasing to him” (Jn 8:28-29). Vincent de Paul, following Christ, put the Lord’s words into practice and recommended the same to his collaborators:

“Let’s trust in God, my dear confreres, but let our trust be total and perfect, and let’s rest assured that, having begun His work in us, He will complete it; for, I ask you, who has established the Company? Who has set us to work in the missions, or with those preparing for ordination, or the conferences, or retreats, etc.? Is it I? No way! Is it M. Portail, whom God associated with me from the beginning? Not at all, for we weren’t thinking of all that and had made no plan for it. So then, who is the author of all that? It’s God, it’s His paternal Providence and sheer goodness. For we’re only insignificant workers and poor ignorant men; and few or none among us are noble, powerful, learned persons or men capable of anything. So, it’s God who has done all that and has brought it about through whatever persons He has seen fit, so that all the glory may revert to Him. So, let’s put all our trust in Him; for, if we put it in human persons

17. From a conference on *Trust in God*, Coste XI, p. 31.

or rely on some advantage of nature or fortune, then God will withdraw from us... Do you want to know why we won’t be successful in a certain ministry? It’s because we rely on ourselves. This preacher; that Superior; or that confessor relies too much on his own prudence, knowledge, and intelligence. And what does God do? He withdraws from him and leaves him on his own; and even though he works, whatever he does produces no fruit, in order to make him aware of his own uselessness and so that he’ll learn from personal experience that, whatever talent he may have, he can do nothing without God.”¹⁸

It is obvious that we need God and others in our apostolic life. Vincent frequently insisted on trust in God and the ability to work as a team. He undertook nothing on his initiative alone. M. Portail and Louise de Marillac could testify to that!

Pope Francis traces out a similar path in his exhortation: “*Though it is true that this mission demands great generosity on our part, it would be wrong to see it as a heroic individual undertaking, for it is first and foremost the Lord’s work, surpassing anything which we can see and understand. Jesus is ‘the first and greatest evangelizer’. In every activity of evangelization, the primacy always belongs to God, who has called us to cooperate with him and who leads us on by the power of his Spirit. [...] The life of the Church*” - and especially the apostolate according to Vincent de Paul - “*should always reveal clearly that God takes the initiative, that ‘he has loved us first’ (1 Jn 4:19) and that he alone ‘gives the growth’ (1 Cor 3:7). This conviction enables us to maintain a spirit of joy in the midst of a task so demanding and challenging that it engages our entire life. God asks everything of us, yet at the same time he offers everything to us.*”¹⁹

May Saint Vincent and Saint Louise intercede for us, they who served those who are poor in the way that our Lord did, with others and with an evangelical spirit!

Father Roberto GOMEZ, CM

18. *Idem*, p. 31.

19. *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 12; Cf. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no 7.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPIRITUAL WRITINGS OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC

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Writings of
Louise de
Marillac

It is a pleasure to be here and to share with you on the *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*. However, if we really want to know Louise, to make her a model, a formator for each of us as Daughters of Charity, and a friend, we have to let her speak for herself. This she does clearly in her letters and, even if sometimes in a more complex way, in her *Thoughts*. It is my hope that during these two days together we can engage in a journey of discovery that will lead all of us to a life-long personal relationship with Louise. I can only promise that it is well worth the effort.

We live in an era when letter writing is becoming a lost art. Even e-mail, which in some ways imitates correspondence, is vanishing in favor of texting, Facebook and Twitter. Think about it for a moment, Sisters: if Louise de Marillac had texted or even e-mailed the early Sisters and they, after responding, carrying out her request or following her advice, had simply hit delete and gone on with their lives and service, we would not really know our Foundress or who we are called to be as Daughters of Charity.

One of the newest Seminary Sisters in my Province, Sister Amanda, maintained a blog on the Vincentian Family website as a Postulant. In one of her posts, she speaks of *“Letter Writing: A Long Lost Ministry of Words.”* She discusses why, in her view, letters, among all the social media, have a particular power to touch minds and hearts. She says: *“With each sentence I write, I think more about*

*the person and subsequently pray for them. It makes me feel a spiritual connection with them despite the distance.... My letter actually becomes a form of prayer... it is my way of showing love (...and showing the love of God). ...I send it in the hope that it brings a smile to someone’s face and lets them know that someone cares. Someone cares enough to console them, to congratulate them, to encourage them or even simply to say hello from miles [kilometers] away. And when someone cares, it’s a sign that God cares. Letter writing allows me to be a Daughter of Charity from miles [kilometers] away.”*¹ Earlier in her post, Sister Amanda speaks of Dorothy Day, Founder of the Catholic Worker’s Movement, who was a prolific letter writer and whose letters she had read. Sister Amanda quotes Ms. Day concerning the ministry of letter writing: *“Writing is an act of community... It is part of our human association with each other. It is an expression of our love and concern for each other.”*²

As you take the time these days to prayerfully and reflectively read the letters of Louise to a particular Sister or group of Sisters, I invite you to keep Sister Amanda’s thoughts on letter writing in mind. Louise’s letters are a rich source of our community history. In them we discover how the “Little Company” developed from that tiny group of five or six Sisters who gathered together in Louise’s home on November 29, 1633, to some 250 sisters and 67 houses at the time of her death in 1660. Each new ministry has its own story revealed in a very personal way in Louise’s letters to the Sisters.

Besides looking for the nuances, however, there are some other essential factors to bear in mind when reading Louise’s letters. We have an advantage with her correspondence that we do not have with Vincent’s. We certainly have many more letters from Vincent which give us insights into his views on a broad range of topics. However, he writes to a wide gamut of persons having little relation to the Company or the service of those who were poor. On the other hand, Louise’s letters deal almost exclusively with the infant community and the Sisters. She writes to Vincent; to the Abbé de Vaux who was the Vicar General of the Diocese of Angers and filled the role of Director for the Sisters in the absence of

1. Amanda Kern, “Letter Writing: A Long Lost Ministry of the Word,” FAMVIN.org, Sept. 27, 2012.

2. Dorothy Day quoted by Amanda Kern in “Letter Writing: A Long Lost Ministry of Words,” FAMVIN.org, Sept. 27, 2012.

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the Priests of the Mission; to Father Portail who was the first Director General for the Company; and to certain Ladies of Charity who were instrumental in establishing works of the Company. Other than a letter to her son Michel, one to Chancellor Séguier to advocate for the Foundlings and another to a certain “Madame” that reveals Louise as a spiritual director to lay women, all her letters are to the Sisters.

From these letters, which constitute the majority of Louise’ writings, we come to know her as well as the Sisters with their individual personalities, their joys and sorrows, their successes and struggles, their life together, their relationship with the Ladies of Charity, the parish priests, the doctors and administrators in hospitals, and the poor whom they served. It is all there for us not as a historical account, however well researched and written it may be, but with the women themselves, these pioneer Daughters of Charity who have gone before us in the service of those in need and on whose shoulders we now stand: Barbe and Cécile Angiboust, Françoise Carcireux, Anne Hardemont, Laurence Dubois, Jeanne Lepintre, Julienne Loret, Elisabeth Turgis and many more. These are our forbearers who, as Vincent would say of Marguerite Naseau, “showed us the way.”³ These are the Daughters of Charity to whom Louise would write to comfort and confront, to encourage and to challenge, and always to show her deep respect and love for each of them and that, no matter how busy or far away she was, they were in her thoughts and prayers and that she cared.

Back in the late ‘80’s early ‘90’s, when I was completing the translation into English of Louise’s writings, Heather, a student working in the Foreign Language Laboratory at Niagara University where I was a Professor, was typing the manuscript. I had spoken of Vincent and Louise as part of a culture course on seventeenth-century France, but the students essentially came to know her from transcribing her letters in chronological order. One day I returned to the office from class, and Heather was typing. She looked up at me, pointed to the text and said, “You know what, Sister, she is one ‘cool’ lady.” Heather was an out-of-wedlock expectant mother from Brooklyn, New York, who at age 22 had seen it all and was impressed by very little, so coming from her, this was

3. Cf. Coste: IX, p. 65. “The Virtues of Marguerite Naseau.”

high praise indeed. I asked her, “Why do you think so?” Her response has always remained with me. She answered: “*She is the most caring person I have ever known. When she writes to the Sisters she doesn’t just care about the quality of their service although she pushes them to excellence. She doesn’t just care how holy they are although she calls them to it. She cares about them; who they are and how they are. And where in the world does she find the time to learn how their families are and to write to them about them?*”

As we read and reflect on these letters, we will discover much of Louise’s personality. The tone and content of her letters, however, vary in keeping with their purpose. Remember, once the Sisters moved beyond Paris, letters were the sole means of communication. And this was a young community, young in terms of its existence and young in terms of its membership.

The Sisters went to take over the nursing care in the Hospital of Saint-Jean-l’Évangéliste in Angers in November 1639, just six years after the founding of the Company. These young women needed formation: human formation since few knew how to read or write; professional formation since they had to be taught how to care for the sick in their homes and later in hospitals as well as how to teach poor little girls; and spiritual formation since they were dedicating their lives to God to serve him in the person of those who were poor while living together in community. It was principally Louise de Marillac who was responsible for this. In no way does this minimize the importance of Vincent de Paul in this work.

However, just as the volume and breadth of his correspondence indicate the vast number of persons with whom he was dealing, they also show the divergent situations competing for his attention. Vincent’s conferences to the Sisters played a vital role in the foundation of the infant community. Louise placed a very high value on them, suggesting topics and transcribing them for us. Nevertheless, there are only 110 of them, most of which were given during the last ten years of his life and were an explanation of the Rule. While there certainly were other conferences which, for one reason or another, have not been preserved, the formation of the early Sisters fell largely on Louise although she certainly conferred closely with Vincent on all matters of importance.

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Their relationship had moved from one of director/ directee to one of collaboration and friendship, which transformed the service of those in need in seventeenth-century France.

By 1636, Louise's home on rue Saint-Victor, in the Parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, which had been small for even the first five or six Sisters, had become overcrowded with the increasing number of young women seeking to join them. So it was that the Motherhouse for the little community was transferred to the village of La Chapelle, outside the city walls. Today it is part of the 18th arrondissement, and there is a small park, Square Louise-de-Marillac, marking the spot where the Sisters' house was located. In 1641, the Motherhouse was once again relocated, this time to the Saint-Denis District, today the 10th arrondissement. It was established in the Parish of Saint-Laurent and directly across from Saint-Lazare. The Sisters would remain there until the French Revolution and the suppression of the Company in 1793. This is the place where the young community began to take form.

The governance was put in place and roles defined; there was a Superioress with a Council; a seminary with a Directress; there was also an infirmary for sick and elderly Sisters, a training program to prepare Sisters for their ministry, and a school for poor little girls. Vincentian spirituality, combining a life of prayer and of the service of Jesus Crucified in the person of the poor, was defined. This spirituality is captured in the seal Louise designed and began using on her letters in 1643. We know it well as the seal of the Company: a heart encompassed by flames, with the figure of Jesus Crucified surrounded by the motto as Louise had modified the words of Saint Paul, "***The Charity of Jesus crucified urges us.***" It is fitting that this seal would be attached to the letters of Louise to the Sisters as she became for them the Daughter of Charity formator from a distance.

As we look at the early years of the Company, it is possible not to fully appreciate what a remarkable achievement this was. It was scarcely ten years since they had come together; barely twenty since the desperate young wife and mother had had her Pentecost experience which foreshadowed it. The Company was developing into a new manner of consecrated life for women within the Church, and neither Vincent nor Louise had a model for it. The form of consecrated life that is ours and

which is the norm today did not exist at the dawn of the seventeenth century. Francis de Sales and Jane Frances de Chantal would attempt it but failed. So there was no blueprint for this life that called for a blending of contemplation and active service outside the cloister.

But perhaps even more extraordinary is the fact that Louise de Marillac, supported by Vincent de Paul, was the one called by God to bring it about. How unlikely was that? Think about it for a moment. Louise de Marillac grew up in the Royal Monastery of Saint-Louis in Poissy. She was steeped in Dominican spirituality. She loved liturgical prayer. She was happy there. She didn't leave because she wanted to but because the Marillac's withdrew her. At age fifteen, she wanted nothing more than to enter the cloister, and not just any cloister but the Capuchins, a very austere penitential order.

Back in 1997, I was at the Provincial House of the Daughters of Charity in Fribourg, Switzerland. On the morning I was leaving, I went to Mass in the Capuchin Monastery just up the mountain from the Provincial House. There were just two of us present, another woman and myself. The priest had his back to us facing the grill. The nuns sang beautifully, and when time came for the reception of Holy Communion, I counted about thirty of them approaching from an opening in the grill. I admit I was very distracted. I kept thinking back to Louise. What would have happened if Henri de Champigny, Provincial of the Capuchins, had not refused her admittance? Had he not told her, "*God has other designs on you?*" Would we be here today? Who knows? And Louise herself? Would she have become a saint had not the freeing guidance of Vincent de Paul opened her to the workings of the Spirit within her, calling forth her full potential of nature and of grace? Louise seems to be reflecting on all of this in the only conference to the Sisters we have from her, called, "On the Pure Love We Have Vowed to God."

"Therefore, let us love this love and we will thereby grasp its endlessness since it depends in no way on us. Let us often recall all the actions of the life of our Beloved so that we may imitate them. Not content with the love that He bears for all chosen souls, He wishes to have some very cherished ones raised up to the purity of His love... My Lord, I received a kind of new light concerning the uncommon love that You wish to receive from those whom you choose to exercise the purity of Your love on earth. Look

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*upon this little flock of Yours and see if we may dare to hope for such a thing. It seems that we hold this wish in our hearts.”*⁴

What is clear from this passage, which appears in the *Thoughts* section of Louise’s *Spiritual Writings*, is that Louise “dares” to call these mostly uneducated peasant girls to a deep spirituality, to contemplation. This was part of the religious life from which the early Sisters were excluded because of their social class. And the call is all the more daring because this contemplation is to be joined to the total gift of themselves to service of Jesus Crucified in the person of all those who suffer. Just as Vincent, in his conferences and by an occasional letter to individual Sisters, will reinforce this unique quality of the vocation of the Daughters of Charity, so Louise will support and strengthen the Sisters by her letters as they strive to attain the necessary balance of prayer and service amidst the challenges of their daily lives.

What do we learn about Louise from her letters? Before attempting to answer that, let me point out one other important point. The letters we have are the ones that the recipients chose to save and then give to the Company. Also, some Sisters lived in close proximity to Louise, so there are fewer letters. There was no need. The same thing can be said, I might add, of Louise’s letters to Vincent. The lack of correspondence at a given period may simply be due to the fact that the Motherhouse was across the street from Saint-Lazare and nothing more than that.

I will offer some general comments here about Louise and her correspondence with individual Sisters. The essential is for you to put yourself into the place of the recipient of the letter to see what it says to you as well as what you learn of Louise, the Sister, the ministry and the Company. You will discover, I hope, that certain letters will touch you or speak to you differently at times because of where you are in your own life when you read them.

One of the blessings for me in doing these types of presentations is to realize the power of Louise’s words to move us regardless of our background, country of origin or ministry. Certainly we do not care for the sick in the twenty-first century in the same way as the Sisters did in

4. *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, A.27 “On the Pure Love We Have Vowed to God,” p. 829.

the seventeenth, but there are constants in that service - the manner in which it is carried out, respect for the patient, dealings with doctors - which do not change and where Louise’s advice is as valuable now as it was centuries ago. And living together in charity and union has the same joys and the same challenges as it did at the time of the early Sisters. Louise’s reminders of the constant need for mutual support resonate wherever two or three of us are together.

Now let us look together briefly at some of Louise’s letter to individual Sisters.

I will begin with **Barbe Angiboust** because we have numerous letters of Louise to her and, most importantly for us, she saved them. Barbe entered the community on July 1, 1634, very early in the history of the Company. She was at Vincent’s first conference to the Sisters. She came from a rather well-off farming family and knew how to read and write. She and Louise would become good friends, and Louise knew that she could rely on Barbe’s considerable gifts to be a solid “foundation stone” in numerous houses. She had a strong personality as well as leadership and administrative ability. Of Norman origin, she was also very independent. Barbe knew this, sometimes signing her letters, “Barbe, the Proud.” While Louise appreciated Barbe’s giftedness and her love for the Company and the poor, she also confronts her when she sees the need. She complements her initiative while reminding her that central authority is in Paris with Monsieur Vincent, her Council and herself. And, of course, there is Letter 11 “To Sisters Barbe Angiboust and Louise Ganset” at Richelieu dated October, 26 1639, which, even today, is a blueprint for conflict resolution for the Vincentian Family.⁵ Read it; reflect on it, and I am sure you will have occasion to use it in your own lives or in dealing with others.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Barbe, not only for saving the letters she had received from Louise but also for encouraging her younger sister, Cécile, to do the same. The tone of Louise’s letters to Cécile is different from that of her letters to Barbe. A Daughter of Charity friend of mine, who edited the translation of the *Spiritual Writings* with me, used to say, “Poor Cécile! Barbe opens a hospital and then informs Louise, and she is told

5. *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, L. 11 “To Sisters Barbe Angiboust and Louise Ganset,” p. 18-20.

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to talk to Monsieur Vincent first the next time, while Cécile is receiving directives for all aspects of her life and ministry.” My friend was right, but Cécile’s situation was very different from Barbe’s. Cécile was a new, young Sister Servant at the hospital of Angers. She was named in 1648.

The role of the Sister Servant was still evolving. In the beginning, the Sisters lived in Louise’s home and went out during the day to the parishes where they were assigned to work with the Confraternities of Charity but returned each evening. This changed when the Motherhouse moved to La Chapelle and the Sisters began living where they served. Thus the role of the local superior was established but the lines of authority were not as yet clear. Remember also that these were mostly French peasant women for whom individualism and independence were in their genes. Consequently, the responsibility of the Sister Servant needed to be clarified for all. Not only did Cécile’s youth and inexperience enter in but also the nature of the ministry, a hospital; the direct involvement with city officials with whom Louise de Marillac had negotiated the contract for the Sisters to assume the management of the nursing care; collaboration with the doctors; a challenging local community of Sisters and, with all of this, distance. Today you can be in Angers by high-speed train in an hour and ten minutes. It took Louise and the first Sisters assigned there three weeks by carriage and boat. When they arrived Louise was ill, so it was not a journey that she was likely to undertake again. Through her letters, Louise became Cécile’s Daughter of Charity mentor from a distance. In her letters to Cécile and to the Sisters of the house, which were also kept, we have a manual for the Sister Servant and for the place of each Sister and the group as a whole in living this relationship together.

A year ago, I was asked to do a presentation on Louise for a Sister Servants Weekend. For it, I chose to use Louise’s letters to Cécile. I later learned that the Sister Servants would be receiving the updated *Guide for Sister Servants*, and I was pleased indeed to discover so many quotes from Louise’s letters to Cécile that introduced the various sections of the new Guide. If you are being named Sister Servant or if you are looking at your own relationship with your Sister Servant, the letters to Cécile provide much to reflect upon.

Sister Jeanne Lepintre is another early Daughter of Charity (she entered the Company in 1638) who preserved her letters from Louise. She was

a capable woman whom Louise placed in positions of responsibility. Among them was that of “Visitatrix”, that is, she “visited” houses on Louise’s behalf. This was before there were provinces in the Company. As the years passed, however, she began to show signs of emerging mental illness. Louise’s kindness, patience, gentleness and caring throughout it all is touching as she and Vincent were always there for this troubled woman who died in a mental institution.

I will mention just one additional Sister here: **Françoise Carcireux**. There appears to be a bond of friendship between Louise and Françoise. There is a letter I recommend you read in its entirety. It is dated c. 1656 and is an example of Louise the spiritual director. She is advising Françoise about her approach to her spiritual life, and it echoes Vincent’s advice to her during those early years. She admits this, telling Françoise, “*I am repeating to you what I was told long ago.*”⁶ Because she knows she must continue to heed her own advice, Louise then goes on to say, “*I beg you, my dear Sister, to help me by your prayers, as I will help you by mine, so that we may obtain from God the grace to walk simply and confidently along the path of His holy love, without too much introspection...*”⁷

Before leaving Françoise, however, there is another letter that is one of those that lead me to compare reading and reflecting on Louise’s writings to mining for diamonds. In that process, one unearths much carbon to extract the diamonds. When reading Louise, we find out how to pack pears, what fabric to purchase, in a word, all the details of ordinary living. But the mail service was difficult and unreliable, so when a secure way was found (the time-honored Daughter of Charity practice of confiding letters to Sisters going in the direction of the recipient), the everyday often can almost hide the gems of wisdom. I will conclude with a quote from such a letter where the reasoning behind annual vows is in the midst of words on thread and apples. Louise writes: “*As for the desire [to make perpetual vows] you have expressed, I consider it praiseworthy. It is not enough to begin well, one must persevere as, I believe, you intend. Nevertheless, in such matters, we must be submissive to the guidance of our Superiors who, for very important reasons, have determined that*

6. *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, L. 557B “To Sister Carcireux,” p. 521.

7. *Ibid.*

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it sufficient to make this offering for one year and to renew it annually. Do you not think, my dear Sisters, that this will be very pleasing to Our Lord since, having your freedom again at the end of the year, you can sacrifice it to Him anew? This is why, my dear Sisters, I advise you, if you are still in these good dispositions, not to put it off any longer... ”⁸

I would invite you now to begin or continue mining for your own gems. Let Louise speak to your hearts. Let her be your formator, mentor, spiritual guide, and friend from a distance.

Sister Louise SULLIVAN
Daughter of Charity

8. *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, L. 300, “To Sister Charlotte and Sister Françoise,” p.346.

A METHODOLOGY FOR READING THE WRITINGS OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC

Yesterday we examined together Louise de Marillac’s ministry of letter writing, which enabled her to be a formator, mentor, spiritual guide and friend for the early Sisters from a distance. By reading her letters to particular Sisters, we become aware of how she adapted this ministry of words to the needs, situation, temperament, spiritual and human maturity as well as the physical and mental health of each Sister. She also reveals that she is keenly aware of the dynamics of the group in which they are living and the challenges of their service. Even with the same Sister, Louise’s tone and role will change. Sometimes she is the formator, sometimes the friend. The mentor is also often the spiritual guide. Sometimes the Superioress is warm and caring. Sometimes she can be harsh but caring. This is the Louise who speaks from her heart to her companions and, if we let her, she will speak to each of us from the heart.

The topic I have been asked to speak about today is a methodology or a way of approaching the reading of the some 665 letters and the 115 documents gathered under the heading *Thoughts* that we have in the original French in the *Écrits Spirituels* published by Sister Elisabeth Charpy in 1983 and in the English translation which appeared in 1991. Some method is needed; otherwise, reading Louise, particularly in the original French, can be daunting. Vincent’s style, both in letters and conferences is simple and direct. Years ago I lived for five years in a house of the Daughters of Charity on the rue Oudinot here in Paris.

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Reading the Spiritual Writings

If you cross the Motherhouse garden and the Parc Catherine Labouré, which used to be part of the garden, you reach the house. At that time we still had reading in common. I recall that on occasions, when we were a tired group, we would ask Sister Marguerite Lalanne, the Sister Servant, to read from the Conferences of St. Vincent. Sister Lalanne was from Toulouse, in southwestern France, not far from Dax and Vincent's birthplace. She spoke with the same regional accent. All you had to do was close your eyes, and you were transported back three centuries in time and were listening to the Founder himself speaking to the early Sisters.

Despite our fondness for Louise, no one would suggest such a thing for her although we had a Sister in the house with a Parisian accent. Louise's style is literary and very complex. She admitted herself, and I have to agree with her, that she needed to "simplify" the workings of her mind. There are two lovely little books, published recently, called *Praying 15 Days with Vincent de Paul and Praying 15 Days with Louise de Marillac*. Elisabeth Charpy did the book for Louise, and I remember talking with her when she was working on it. She said how difficult it was to find short, easy to read quotes from Louise. These quotes certainly exist, but they are harder to find because Louise's sentences are very long. The English is easier reading precisely because, while remaining faithful to the original, I cut the longer sentences into shorter ones. Long or short, Louise's writings, particularly her "Thoughts," are challenging. Yet, despite that, the woman herself shines through. Having said that, let us now turn to some of the possible ways we can come to know her better.

Before using any method, however, it is important for the reader to have at least a general knowledge of Louise's life experiences. For her, as well as for Vincent, everything is rooted in life, in events and in their personal experiences. Any attempt to define their views and the resultant works for the service of those who were poor must take into consideration, as applying equally to both of them and to all their undertakings, the oft-repeated statement with which Vincent concluded his letter of August 5, 1642, to Bernard Codoing, "Such is my faith and such is my experience."¹

1. Coste II, p. 282

The first method consists of reading Louise's letters to an individual sister, such as Anne Hardemont or to the Sisters of a particular local community, the Sisters at Angers, for example.

This method seems to work well with a great number of different groups: Daughters of Charity, young and less young of whatever national origin; Sisters in formation: Seminary Sisters, Sisters under Vows, Sisters under 10 years of Vocation; others in formation: discerners, pre-postulants, postulants, Vincentian Novices. Then there are lay groups, members of the Vincentian Family: the AIC and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. With these latter groups, usually because of time constraints, a selection of letters can be provided. This has the advantage of giving them material that can become a part of their personal prayer and sharing with others later on.

Whatever the group, it is also important to provide time for personal reading and reflection as well as a time for group sharing and questions or comments. Frequently, as the time is drawing to a close, I ask the participants to take a moment to reflect and then to share, if they wish, on this question: "If you forget 95% of all that we have read, reflected on and shared during our time together, what will you hold on to and make your own and why?" The results can be very moving. I recall that, on one occasion, I was sharing on Louise with a group of Vincentian novices. I had presented Louise's life experiences, and they had read and shared on her letters to different Sisters. I had asked the question about what they would hold on to, given them time to reflect and then silently waited. The first novice to speak said something I shall never forget. With tears in his eyes, he began:

"I am a child of divorce. I experienced all that the young Louise felt: the anger, the rejection, the sense of abandonment, the isolation. Yet she was able to overcome all this and, in her letters, to help those early Sisters to overcome the pain in their lives. I came to realize that if she could do this and go on to live her Vincentian vocation to the full, so can I."

Across the centuries, Louise had touched this young man's heart and transformed his life. She will do the same for all those who let her.

Reading the Spiritual Writings

Another method for reading and reflecting on Louise's writings is to do so chronologically, in the order in which they were written.

In some ways, this is more difficult. With letters, we have only half of the correspondence. By reading one person, the situation and the person become clearer. Chronologically, the letters to individuals are separated by letters to others with varying situations and circumstances. This is what makes reading Coste such a challenge. But this method has certain advantages, and Louise can certainly reveal herself and touch hearts.

As you read this way, you will surely note that the placement of the letters and *Thoughts* does not follow the numerical order. At the end of the nineteenth century, Sister Geoffre, Secretary General, collected all of the autographs, that is letters and thoughts either in Louise's own hand or signed by her, and numbered them. When Sister Elisabeth Charpy was compiling the 1983 *Écrits Spirituels*, she examined each entry and realized that some texts were of an earlier or later date from where Sister Geoffre had placed them. So while retaining Sister Geoffre's numbering, they are now in the order Sister Charpy's research revealed they should be. For example, in Sister Geoffre's time, it was believed that A. 26, on preparation for the Feast of Pentecost, was written very early in the history of the Company. Research has shown, however, that it dates from 1657 after the collapse of the ceiling at the Motherhouse where no one was injured. It was only after this dramatic event that Louise began to look back and recognize the vital role of the Holy Spirit in her own life and in the development of the Company. It is a striking example of the human condition even for saints such that it can take a long time before the presence of God in our lives becomes apparent.

There is another advantage to reading the writings in order. It shows all that was happening at a given period. My student was conscious of this in her remark, "Where did Louise find the time?" The number of different Sisters to whom she was writing at a time when works were developing and new services were being created shows the importance Louise placed on her ministry of letter writing. In the busyness she never loses sight of her role of formator, mentor, spiritual guide and friend from a distance.

Louise's letters to Vincent are best read in chronological order.

They show the evolution of their relationship from that of director/directee to that of collaborator and friend. Of note is the fact that we have only three letters of Louise, all to Vincent, prior to the founding of the Company. There were surely more, but, probably because of their highly personal nature, they were not kept. In order to fill this void, I urge you to read Vincent's letters to Louise for this same period in Volume I of Coste.²

Vincent has obviously seen the giftedness and deep spirituality in this troubled, wounded woman. Gently but firmly, he draws her out and frees her enough to send her to visit the Confraternities of Charity in May 1629 as the first and, I would add, the most successful Vincentian leader formed at his school.³ Vincent's accompanying of Louise became a model for her accompanying of the Sisters. While it took on her personal qualities, it retained the best of what she had learned from him. Louise's letter to Françoise Carcireux that we quoted yesterday attests to this.⁴

Another benefit of reading the letters chronologically is the discovery of certain situations that we might otherwise miss. As we look back at the early Sisters, we tend to think that they were all Marguerite Naseau or that everything Vincent, Louise, and these Sisters touched turned to gold; that everything was a success. We all do what the French call "enjoliver le passé," that is, to make the past pretty. If this past is to be beneficial for us as we face an uncertain future, it must be seen as a whole with its high points and lows, its successes and failures. The Company was a completely new undertaking and these pioneers were willing to take risks; risks with personnel and with services. And risk-taking occasionally means failure. Had they not, the Company would not have continued to grow, and we likely would not be here today.

I will cite just one small example of a work that did not succeed, which also shows Louise's support for the Sisters and her own courage and strength of character. It has to do with the service of the Daughters of Charity in Chars. The Sisters went there in 1647. Their ministry involved a hospital, a school and the visiting of the poor in their homes.

2. Coste I, p. 23-221.

3. Ibid. p. 64.

4. *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, p. 521.

Reading the Spiritual Writings

After beginning well, things deteriorated quickly. The problems were with the parish priest whose demands were in direct conflict with the practices of the community. The Sisters were subjected to public humiliation by being refused Holy Communion at the altar-rail and asked to do public penance. After conferring with Vincent and the Lady of Charity who had requested the Sisters, Louise informed the Pastor that the Sisters were withdrawing. She says with obvious sadness, to Madame de Herse, the Lady of Charity involved, "... it is not by our choice that we are leaving a work which Divine Providence has confided to us only for a short time."⁵ This was in 1657. This risk-taking had failed, but far more flourished. By reading Louise's letters in chronological order, we discover just how all this happened and how Louise and the Sisters responded to both success and failure.

Another advantage, perhaps the greatest one in this approach to reading the writings, is that we discover Louise's vision of community life and service and those qualities and virtues necessary to make that vision a reality. Community practices such as annual vows are instituted and explained. We discover the beginnings of subsidiarity with the appointment of Sister Servants and of Visitatrixes, who were not Provincials, since there were no Provinces, but Sisters sent by Louise to "visit" the Sisters particularly in far-off missions to see how they were and how well the service of those who were poor was being carried out.

A recurring element in Louise's letters is her request to the Sisters to write to her to tell her how they were. While Louise was directly involved in the establishment of new works, she always placed the Sisters at the center of her ministry of service. It is from her example that we learn that our Sisters are our first poor. This is the caring Louise for whom every Sister mattered. She wanted the local communities to be what the late Cardinal Bernardin called "families of faith" where each Sister felt valued and supported, in a word, felt that she belonged. Louise's letters were her instrument for helping to build and maintain such communities amid the challenges of persons of very different character and personality living and serving together in ministries which themselves were often exhausting and stressful.

5. *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, p. 561

Another method for reading Louise's writings is by theme or topic.

This is the way we most often approach her. We are preparing a community sharing, a presentation to a group, personal reflection prior to the Renovation or a liturgy, and we would like some quotes from Louise. We want to know what she shared with the Sisters about our vocation, our vows, our role as a Sister Servant, or our relationships with our companions, our collaborators and with those whom we serve.

Sister Elisabeth Charpy foresaw this when she compiled the fifty-page annotated Index to her 1983 edition of the *Writings*, which appears translated in the English edition. Many indices are not too helpful because they are limited to names of persons and places. Sister Elisabeth certainly includes all the significant ones, but she breaks down the topic so we can better find what we are looking for. Instead of the entry "Nantes" followed by page numbers, Sister Elisabeth briefly tells the story of the hospital by the sub-headings under it. We are directed to the establishment of the work; Louise's journey to accompany the Sisters; the contract; the Sisters who were sent there; the difficulties. The same type of detail is found under "Angers" and the other major establishments of the young Company. Under the Sisters' names we find a page reference for a biographical sketch as well as the places where they served.

Perhaps of more practical use to us than places or even Sisters are the topic headings. We are very aware of Vincent's conferences on the vocation of the Daughter of Charity, but the Index will lead us to Louise's words about it. And, unlike the index of persons and places, it leads us into her *Thoughts*.

These texts are sometimes more difficult, but, coupled with the letters on the same topic, they give us a clear understanding of Louise's ideas, many of which are a direct outcome of her prayer. And it is in texts such as these that we find the quotations we are looking for. With this approach we discover her understanding of the virtues of our state, our vows, and the manner in which we are called to live with one another in community and to serve those who are poor. These texts also show us Louise the formator and spiritual guide. With one Sister she calls for obedience; with another, humility; with all, trust in Divine Providence and abandonment to the Will of God.

Louise's prayer follows the rhythm of the Liturgical Year.

In her letters, as well as in her *Thoughts*, we find references to the principle mysteries in the life of Our Lord and the great feasts of Christmas, Easter, Ascension and especially Pentecost. The place of the Holy Spirit in Louise's life and in the life of the Company is rooted in her prayer, reflection, and letters to the Sisters on this subject. It is not without reason that we elect the Superioress General on Pentecost Monday, following a retreat from Ascension to Pentecost. Louise made her annual retreat at that time and urged any Sister who could do so to do the same.

It is easy when reflecting on the extraordinary accomplishments of Vincent, Louise and their daughters, which take form in Louise's letters, to be dazzled by the extent to which they discovered and alleviated the miseries of the poor and, consequently, to lose sight of the unifying force behind it all: the vision of Jesus Christ suffering in the poor whom they served.

The centrality of Jesus Crucified in Louise's spiritual evolution is evident from her earliest writings. Life had taught her that her vocation was to unite herself to Jesus on the cross. A text in her *Thoughts*, dating from the period prior to 1633, is revealing in this regard. She writes:

*“God, who has granted me so many graces, led me to understand that it was His holy will that I go to Him by way of the Cross. His goodness has marked me with it from my birth and He has hardly ever left me, at any time without some occasion for suffering.”*⁶

This is not self-pity on Louise's part. Her faith and her experience, as well as Vincent's gentle guidance, have led her out of herself and toward the total gift of herself to the service of Jesus Christ suffering in the poor. She will later urge her Daughters to imitate her: *“my dear Spouse...I am going to follow You to the foot of Your Cross which I choose as my cloister.”*⁷ What we are seeing here is a unique blending of the contemplation and the service of Jesus crucified in all forms of human misery, which is our charism. Reading and reflecting on this and other topics, using the index

6. *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, p. 702

7. *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, p. 828.

as a guide, will enable each of us to deepen our own understanding of our Vincentian vocation and to help others to do the same. It also makes it very clear how much of what we call our Vincentian vocation comes to us from Louise.

Before leaving this method for reading Louise's letters and *Thoughts*, there is one theme that I believe deserves particular attention, and that is **Mary**. We are all conscious of the importance of Mary in the Company. Louise's dying wish for us is clear, *“Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only Mother.”*⁸ However, a study of Louise's Marian devotion as seen in her letters and *Thoughts* shows us how theologically sound and spiritually deep it is. Look in the index under Mary, and you will discover a rich source for your own devotion. The possibilities for sharing here are limited only by your own creativity. Prayer, reflection and sharing on Louise and Mary also allow us to move effortlessly back and forth between the letters and the more complex *Thoughts*.

The “Take and Read Method”

There is one more approach that I would like to suggest you consider. The ones we have just discussed are more formal and require more time. On a personal level, they are best suited to times of retreat, sessions, or group presentations. Although reading and praying with Louise's writings on the coming of the Holy Spirit leading up to Pentecost or her Advent reflections is certainly possible and profitable, this approach is much simpler and can be more frequent, even daily. It is what I call the “Take and Read Method.” Any of the above methods can be adapted for it. It can be a letter or a paragraph of one of Louise's thoughts. It can be from letters to one Sister or on a special theme. It can be from the letters or thoughts in chronological order. Or, if you want to leave it entirely up to Louise and the Spirit, you can, as with the Bible, just open the book and read what is there.

A former student of mine from Niagara University uses the “Take and Read Method.” Every night before he goes to bed, he reads at least a paragraph from Louise. He graduated in 1991, so he is now in his forties. He has a very responsible, stressful position as the Director for

8. *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, p. 835

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Health Services for the Prison System for the State of California. Yet he continues with Louise. Sometimes she makes him smile. At other times she touches his heart or helps him with a difficult decision. He told me, “*She always gives me something to think about and something to pray about and eases me into sleep.*”

Louise is coming more and more into her own. Her life experiences - the troubled childhood, the disappointments, the ill husband, the widow with a difficult child, the consecrated woman, the Foundress, the innovator, the educator, hospital administrator, and social worker - all resonate with persons of the twenty-first century, in the Company or outside of it.

So many people can now find encouragement, inspiration and comfort in her. And her writings enable her to speak to us and to them. It is my hope that these possible approaches to them may help you to get to know her better; that she may speak to your hearts and to the hearts of those with whom you share her words as a real person, a formator, mentor, spiritual guide and friend, carrying out her ministry of letter writing from a distance.

Sister Louise SULLIVAN
Daughter of Charity

OPEN TO THE TRANSFORMING SPIRIT

IN THE UPPER ROOM, MARY PRAYS FOR AN OUTPOURING OF THE SPIRIT FOR OUR OWN SPIRITUAL FRUITFULNESS.

It was appropriate that the first outpouring of the Spirit upon her, which had happened in view of her divine motherhood, should be repeated and reinforced. Indeed, at the foot of the Cross Mary was entrusted with a new motherhood, which concerned Jesus' disciples. It was precisely this mission that demanded a renewed gift of the Spirit. The Blessed Virgin therefore wanted it for the fruitfulness of her spiritual motherhood. While at the moment of the Incarnation the Holy Spirit had descended upon her as a person called to take part worthily in the great mystery, everything is now accomplished for the sake of the Church, whose image, model and mother Mary is called to be.

IN THE UPPER ROOM, MARY PRAYS FOR THE OUTPOURING OF THE SPIRIT ON THE DISCIPLES AND ON THE WORLD.

In the Church and for the Church, mindful of Jesus' promise, she waits for Pentecost and implores a multiplicity of gifts for everyone, in accordance with each one's personality and mission. Mary's prayer has particular significance in the Christian community: it fosters the coming of the Spirit, imploring his action in the hearts of the disciples and in the world. Just as in the Incarnation the Spirit had formed the physical body of Christ in her virginal womb, now in the Upper Room the same Spirit comes down to give life to the Mystical Body. Thus Pentecost is also a fruit of the Blessed Virgin's incessant prayer, which is accepted by the Paraclete with special favor because it is an expression of her motherly love for the Lord's disciples. In contemplating Mary's powerful intercession as she waits for the Holy Spirit, Christians of every age have frequently had recourse to her intercession on the long and tiring journey to salvation, in order to receive the gifts of the Paraclete in greater abundance.

NEW ENERGY IS GIVEN TO THE MOTHER OF CHRIST AND TO THE DISCIPLES.

The Holy Spirit bestows the fullness of his gifts on the Blessed Virgin and those present, working a deep transformation in them for the sake of spreading the Good News. The Mother of Christ and his disciples are granted new strength and new apostolic energy for the Church's growth. In particular, the outpouring of the Spirit leads Mary to exercise her spiritual motherhood in an exceptional way, through her presence imbued with charity and her witness of faith ...

John Paul II, General Audience May 28, 1997

