

*E*choes *of the Company*



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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of Daughters of Charity

25 to 40 years vocation

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Letter of August 15, 2014

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Dear Sisters,

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

Spiritual
Life

For several weeks now, your many messages for the feast of August 15 have been arriving at the Mother House. I was touched as I read them and want first of all to express my gratitude for your prayers, your very warm wishes and the news that you have shared with me.

Today, we can sing with Mary: “*For He has looked with favor on His lowly servant; from this day all generations will call me blessed. The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.*”¹ On this feast, the Assumption, the body of Mary was transfigured in God, a prelude to our own transfiguration. From then on, Mary, along with Jesus, watches over her brothers and sisters in humanity who continue to walk on this earth. She is Comforter of the Afflicted, Mirror of Justice, Gate of Heaven... and the Only Mother of the Company.

Comforter of the Afflicted, she looks compassionately and tenderly on all those who are victims of natural disasters, epidemics and violence, those who are forced to flee their countries...

1. Lk 1:48-49

Mirror of Justice, she supports those deprived of their rights, who are persecuted because of their religion or ethnicity... She strengthens the courage of those who do not passively accept inequalities, who *take up the cause of those who are poor and work for social transformation to change the unjust structures that cause poverty.*²

Gate of Heaven, she usually is the one who opens the way of prayer to children; she is also the one who welcomes those who are dying and takes them by the hand to bring them across the threshold of Life.

Only Mother of the Company, she is the model for us of the humble and available servant. In a letter to Saint Vincent written in March 1646, Saint Louise described her Marian devotion in this way: “*ask God, through the Incarnation of His Son and the prayers of the Blessed Virgin, for the purity necessary for the Company of the Sisters of Charity and for the steadfastness of this Company in keeping with His good pleasure.*”³

The Councillors and I attentively follow, as do all of you, the tragedies relayed to us by the media... the threat from Boko Haram in Nigeria and in northern Cameroon, the Ebola virus in West Africa, violence in Libya, in the Central African Republic, and then in the Middle East, the suffering of the Syrian people that has already lasted so long, confrontations in the Gaza Strip, the exodus of Christians from Iraq, not to forget the troubles in Ukraine and, everywhere, the economic crisis and the sad fate reserved for migrants... As you well know, I could add to this list and give details. But today, on this feast of August 15, the Church presents us with the Virgin Mary as a sign of hope. She is a sure support, a woman who is so weak and at the same time so strong, who also lived in a time marked by violence and inequality but who never wavered in her faith and trust. Let us look to her and bring her these sufferings.

We can entrust to Mary the four Sisters from the Province of Pamplona who served persons who are poor in Tripoli (Libya) and who for the second time had to leave this country taken over by chaos. Insecurity in the city, in fact, prevented them from performing their usual service for

2. Cf. Constitution 24e

3. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, L. 303b, p. 140

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sick persons, the children of the Filipino school and large numbers of refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa in Tripoli. Therefore, they returned to their countries of origin, Spain and the Philippines, hoping to return soon to Libya.

Pope Francis and our Bishops, who energetically condemn violence, rejection of foreigners and sometimes our own lack of commitment, remind us of our duty to speak and act and of the power of prayer, of recourse to Mary.

I was delighted to receive so many excellent reports from your Provincial Assemblies. Some just finished, but the majority have been over for several weeks. It strikes me to observe how much the Sisters sincerely expressed their desire to forge ahead, to be bold in the practice of charity, in order to respond to today's calls with a new missionary momentum. The Spirit is at work, and I am convinced that the General Assembly will reap the fruits of your labor into a great harvest for the good of those who are poor and for the Company.

The General Council will increase its meetings in order to work on the more immediate preparation of the General Assembly. I know, and your letters prove it to me once again, that you hold this intention in your prayers.

I repeat my gratitude to you and assure you of my prayer to Mary for each one of you. Happy feast of the Assumption!

With my devoted affection,

Sister Evelyne FRANC
Daughter of Charity

Letter of July 18, 2014

Dear Members of the Vincentian family,

As we celebrate the feast of St. Vincent de Paul, on behalf of the Vincentian Family and the leaders of our various branches, I write to inform you that we have decided to dedicate this coming year to the "New Evangelization." We will do so as a Vincentian Family by focusing on three key areas of fidelity in following Jesus Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor:

- a need for personal and communal conversion;
- a need to go beyond ourselves by listening to the cry of the poor, especially those who live on the periphery of our cities, and on the margins of society today;
- a need to evangelize and provide new ways of pastoral care for the family.

From October 5-19, 2014, Pope Francis will convene a Synod of Bishops to discuss "pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization." This is a significant theme advanced by Our Holy Father for the good of the Church, as this Synod will demonstrate.

Early in his pontificate, Pope St. John Paul II initiated the call for a 'new evangelization' to encourage a fresh fervor and innovative ways to encounter Jesus, to deepen our relationship with Christ, and grow in living our Christian faith. This call of John Paul II came at a time of general malaise among Christians, particularly in countries in the developed world. John Paul II believed Christians were becoming less fervent in their practice of the faith, so he called for conversion and a new evangelization. These dynamics for renewal have been articulated and encouraged by both of his successors, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and Pope Francis.

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A key aspect of this new initiative is to rediscover and re-encounter Jesus with love in our hearts, deepening our relationship with him to grow in discipleship. It is a personal deepening of our faith in the God of Jesus Christ, a fruit of the Holy Spirit. This love guides us on the path of devotion to God and to others, especially the poor. As truly committed Christians and disciples of Jesus, we share the Good News of God's love, found in the Holy Scriptures and sacraments. The role of every baptized Catholic who lives faithfully is to make Jesus known to all people.

To do so, the Church calls us to conversion, a new way to encounter and believe in God and share the Good News with others. To live this experience of conversion and follow a new way to encounter God, we must leave our comfort zones and listen as the Lord speaks to us in the depths of our hearts. As Vincentians and members of the Vincentian Family, how can we respond to this call to conversion and new evangelization? The charisma that St. Vincent de Paul shared with St. Louise de Marillac and that was carried on by Blessed Frederic Ozanam, along with many others in the Vincentian tradition, was to care for the poor and needy. However, this also included the "care of souls" as an essential part of the mission.

In the Vincentian vocation, mission and charity are inseparable. The corporal and spiritual works of mercy and service are always united. These words of instruction to Daughters of Charity in their service of the poor speak to us: a "primary concern to make God known to them, to proclaim the Gospel, and to make the Kingdom present" (Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity, C.10a). Blessed Frederic Ozanam stressed that material aid was not the only aspect of the Society's service to the poor. Rather, he reminded them that their spirituality and loving Christian witness to the love of God helped many Christians return to the faith and served to evangelize many non-Christians. This is a key virtue of our Vincentian spirituality: to develop and deepen our relationship with Jesus, and help others to encounter Christ. This is faith in action.

There are many challenges for us in everyday life. But now is a favorable time to announce the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. Although we live in the midst of an environment often indifferent to religion, people still have a true thirst for higher values. There is a hunger for God among God's people, especially as they aspire to a new way of life, one different from the prevailing societal norms. We could give in to the way

people today live this environment of religious indifference and acclimate ourselves to accept how little importance people show toward the essential questions of faith and the meaning of life in this world.

But are we aware of the reality of what happens when people forget God? Many times, this is indicative of true spiritual and material poverty. St. Vincent was deeply affected by the situation of people in his day: those who lived in misery and ignorance, and who did not know anything of God, nor of God's love. It was for this reason that Vincent said with strength and conviction, "*It is true then, that I am sent not only to love God, but to make him loved. It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor doesn't love him*" (Coste XII, p. 215, Conference of May 30, 1659).

If we had only a little of this love, would we look away with our arms crossed? Never! Charity cannot be idle. Charity moves us to look for the comfort and salvation of those who suffer. Our vocation as Vincentians is to inflame the hearts of others: to do what the Son of God himself did. He came to bring fire to the world, to inflame it with his love. What should we hope for ourselves, except to burn for Christ and to be consumed by that love.

As members of the Vincentian Family, we are called to be agents of evangelization by providing loving service. Charity is the principal value of life and the challenge for the Christian community to make active in today's world. Never should we separate nor oppose the intrinsic relationship between faith and charity. We are Jesus' disciples when we extend God's love, and commit ourselves to fully participate in the life and mission of the Church. We have been conquered by Christ's love! Accordingly, under the power of that love, we are profoundly open to loving our neighbor in concrete ways. Here, we can recall the motto of the Daughters of Charity, words taken from Scripture: "*The love of Christ crucified impels us*" (2 Cor 5:14).

Faith enables us to recognize the gifts that our good and generous God has entrusted to us. Charity makes them fruitful. Through faith, we enter into friendship with the Lord. In the virtue of charity, this friendship is cultivated and lived out. The relationship between faith and charity is magnified in this intimate link. This is what it means to make the Gospel

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effective in people's lives. The encyclical *Lumen Fidei* speaks of the repercussions of faith in the world, telling us that, "The light of faith is concretely placed at the service of justice, law, and peace" (LF, 2013, 51). The apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* speaks about the service of charity as a constitutive element of the Church's mission, reflecting the essence of who we are as a Church.

As the Church is missionary by its nature, it is also indelibly linked to the virtue of charity, particularly in providing effective charity for our neighbor. When we accept the challenge of mission imbued with the charity of Christ, we can identify with and serve those living in poverty. Thus, our Vincentian hearts accept with joy the call of *Evangelii Gaudium* to be instruments of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, to enable them to attain integral promotion into society (EG, 2013, 182). Thus, we should be docile and attentive, listening to the cries of the poor and willing to run to their aid. We do that by leaving our own comfort zones, going to the periphery and the margins to meet those living in poverty.

We go out of ourselves and to the poor with haste with a burning love of God. In the fourth chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium*, we find a number of ideas that are consonant with our charism. The words in this chapter seem to describe the lives and actions of Saints Vincent and Louise, along with our other saints and beatified. Here is a sample of what Chapter 4 tells us: the poor are those preferred by God; the poor occupy a privileged place in the Church; and the poor are our evangelizers. If those ideas from *Evangelii Gaudium* sound familiar to you, they should!

The New Evangelization is an initiative to help us recognize the salvific force those living in poverty have in Christ, and to put them at the center of the Church. We discover Christ in the poor; we give voice to their causes; we are their servants; we listen to them; and they call us to ponder the mysterious wisdom of God, often revealed to us by their very lives.

In the context of the sufferings and struggles that families endure today, the New Evangelization can meet an urgent need, as demonstrated by the document on pastoral care of the family issued by the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. The doctrines of the Church regarding marriage must be presented in an efficient and understandable

way to reach the hearts of many and transform their lives according to the will of God made manifest in Jesus Christ. Additional Church documents speak of the pastoral needs of the family as an essential dimension of evangelization. It is a call to renew our understanding of the sacrament of marriage and the Christian vocation of married couples and to strengthen the family for Church and society. As members of the Vincentian Family, we should ask ourselves what we could do to evangelize the families we serve and those with whom we will come in contact.

Here I speak of the families we encounter in our parishes, schools, social services, and many other ministries where we collaborate as a Vincentian Family to serve those living in poverty. Without a doubt, the family is an immense field for mission. Many families whom we serve today need protection and suffer many disturbances. They are often threatened, even to the point of death. As a Vincentian Family, we can and must move forward to establish "Lines of Action" that give an impulse to pastoral work with families, and in particular, those who live in poverty.

With all the Vincentian Family, we pray the Church will seek authentic ways to adopt the pastoral means to help families cope with their present realities in the light of faith, and with the strength that comes from the Gospel. As we celebrate the feast of St. Vincent de Paul, we must dedicate ourselves in this year to the New Evangelization. We need creative responses to meet the challenges presented by the new evangelization, and personal and communal conversion to meet the pastoral needs of the family, especially those living on the periphery of our society.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory GAY, C.M.
Superior General

Sent on Mission

Following our reflection on “A New Missionary Momentum,” I would like to take a different direction. Sister Evelyne’s powerful letter of February 4, 2014, is challenging and in some ways, like Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation, discomfiting. She sets the tone: *“This year I wish to reflect with you on the missionary spirit of the Company by connecting it to the fourth theme of our Inter-Assemblies Document, ‘Deepen our sense of belonging to the Company and take responsibility for the ‘Company of the future’ (cf. C. 59)... Let us take it up again in the context of the missionary mandate that Jesus Christ gave to His Church and the context of the missionary tradition of the Company”* (p. 2).

The strength of her presentation rested upon the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, as well as the lessons of our founders: the Company is missionary.

When a sister is sent from one apostolate or house to another, we say that she is “missioned,” not simply “moved.” There is a considerable difference between these terms that touches on the nature of our charism, our service of the people of God, and the intent of our vows. To consider the nature of “mission” is to ponder the character of our call.

In his Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Francis reminds us of our missionary vocation and of how it centers on the Gospel message and person of Jesus:

“In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization... Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries’, but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples’... So what are we waiting for?” (EG 120)

Pope Francis draws our attention particularly towards the poor. How Vincentian of him!

“This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the sensus fidei, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the center of the Church’s pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.” (EG 198)

The Congregation of the Mission has also incorporated the idea of “mission” and “being sent” in the theme for its 2016 General Assembly: *“Let us allow ourselves to be renewed by the missionary vitality of our Vincentian vocation,”* and the Scripture quote that drives this theme is taken from the prophet Jeremiah: *“To all whom I send you, you shall go”* (Jer 1:7).

As we begin, we are attentive to how Jesus sends the disciples forth:

“After this the Lord appointed seventy [-two] others whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit.” (Lk 10:1; cf. Mk 6:7)

The Lord sends the disciples out in pairs. One might argue that more territory could be covered if they were sent one-by-one, but the importance of community overrules that possibility. In pairs, the new disciples can encourage and influence each another, and they can pray together.

We, too, are called to live and serve in community, challenge each other and help each other to live faithfully and thus to respond more effectively to our mission. When one is sick, the other can take care of her. When one is happy, the other shares in the joy. When one has gotten lost, the other can aid her to find the way back.

Community has always been important to our life and charism. Our Constitutions call us to this life style:

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

We are women who live together and support one another in freely becoming whom we choose to be. In this way, our mission responds in service and compassion to those who are most poor. In the vision of St. Louise, both the “coming” and the “going” have importance.

Now, let us consider some of the elements of the mission that help us to understand our present circumstance. I am truly tempted to look to the great missionary of the early Church, Paul, for some guidance in this area, but I have chosen, rather, to study the Missionary Discourse of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel (10:1-42).

As you may know, Matthew structures his Gospel around five great discourses of Jesus (perhaps modeled on the five books of the Torah). The second one is the “Missionary Discourse.” In it, Jesus speaks about his sending the disciples forth and the character of their missioning.

1. BEING SENT

“Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them...” (Mt 10:5)

The nature of a missionary is to be sent. Jesus considered himself as being the instrument of the Father: *“Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me”* (Jn 13:20; cf. Mk 9:37; Mt 10:40; Lk 10:16). In being sent, Jesus envisioned himself as carrying out the mission entrusted to him, and he shares this mission with those who are to be his disciples—those whom he sends forth (Mt 10:5; Mk 6:7; Lk 9:2; 10:1). Accepting the mission implies a trust in the one who sends as well as the message that one brings.

“But the LORD answered me... ‘To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak.’” (Jer 1:7)

Several elements highlight the notion of “being sent.” A primary one is

obedience. A Sister chooses to follow the direction and directives given to her by the one who sends her forth. One recognizes the authority of the other and the responsibility to carry forth the task assigned. The prophets knew this call:

“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?’ ‘Here I am,’ I said; ‘send me!’ And [the Lord] replied: ‘Go and say to this people...’” (Is 6:8-9)

The willingness to respond in obedience to the call is key. One does not surrender one’s freedom, but chooses to go where one is sent and to do what one is asked to do. A missionary does not hold all the pieces and is not familiar with all the circumstances, but reasonably places her faith in the sender and the task. One can discern here a sense of trust and an openness to commit to a common ministry. Obedience defines the response as one is sent forth.

2. PROCLAIMING THE KINGDOM OF GOD

“Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them... ‘As you go, make this proclamation: The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give.’” (Mt 10:5, 7-8)

The message that a missionary brings is the “Kingdom of God,” the reign of God, healing and life to the human community. It involves the missionary in acceptance of God’s will and driving out demons of every type — greed, violence, prejudice, and so on. Leprosy of pride, selfishness, and indifference is to be cleansed. The moribund of the present age are to be healed and raised to life, justice, and compassion.

At the heart of this proclamation of the Kingdom is Jesus with in his word and in his actions. His love and mercy are to be the essential center of the message. Our lives are to be a proclamation of the Gospel vision. We can imagine the disciples going forth and trying to imitate Jesus. They may have told some of his stories; perhaps they encouraged the practice of some of his principles like charity and pardon; perhaps they attempted to perform some of the signs that he did. They called people to repentance, they cast out demons, and they anointed the sick.

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Consecrated life is an anticipation of the Kingdom of Heaven. It reflects the recognition of God present in our midst and of the love that binds us all together in faithful service and worship. It is a proclamation of God's reign in the here and now. As we are sent forth on mission, this truth defines our message.

3. ASSUMING THE MISSION WITHOUT BURDENS

“Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them, ‘Do not take gold or silver or copper for your belts; no sack for the journey, or a second tunic, or sandals, or walking stick. The laborer deserves his keep.’” (Mt 20:5, 9-10)

The missionary is to go forth without all those items that would usually be taken for a journey to make it more efficient and easier: money, clothes, and walking stick. This surrender emphasizes the poverty of the missionary, the ability to travel readily, and the need to be dependent on the people with whom she lives and whom she serves. All of these are important as we reflect on the nature of our mission.

We need to be identified with those we serve, and so a simplicity of life and an avoidance of consumerism need to be practiced. Other elements might also burden us: presumptions, anger, etc. These cannot be items that we take with us. Our difficulties with some decisions and our antipathy for moving to some communities must not burden our missioning. Let me speak a bit more about these burdens in light of current realities.

When the Sisters left this work that they had done since the time of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, everyone was saddened. Should we be saddened by these decisions? Or should we be asking: is this where the poorest people are unserved? People may have different opinions on the answer to these questions, but we should ask these questions. Furthermore, mourning the past should not be our habit.

When a Sister had been doing a particular work for 25 years and she was moved, the people wrote letters to superiors protesting. We do want those who are marginalized to love us, but we want more that they love our charism and the Gospel work to which we are devoted on their behalf. They should be drawn closer to God. In obedience, we need to be ready and able to move when and where required.

When we left that ministry, it fell apart. Perhaps we are not doing what we should to support people and invite them to take up the ministry. Vincent and Louise called forth the gifts of individuals and communities. We should be doing the same and so empowering our brothers and sisters that they can take responsibility.

We must also trust Providence and those who can support us financially so that we can live in houses that are characterized by simplicity within the area of our ministry.

4. DEPENDING ON THE GOODNESS OF PEOPLE

“Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them... ‘Whatever town or village you enter, look for a worthy person in it, and stay there until you leave. As you enter a house, wish it peace. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; if not, let your peace return to you.’” (Mt 10:5, 11-13)

Be sure of this: people are basically good. From the first moments of creation, the Lord God recognized our goodness and reminded us of the goodness that surrounds us. Missionaries should be confident of this truth and learn to depend on the people for whom we care. This kind of trust builds strong relationships. We need to see Christ in those whom we serve and who serve with us. This is a very Vincentian attitude.

On our missions, we rely on the goodness of people. The Gospel prohibition of taking extra possessions is the same as the encouragement to have little and to allow the people of God to express their support for and participation in the mission by their generosity. This offers a blessing both for them as well as for us. There are always good people who can be our collaborators and with whom we can share the blessing of helping others.

Vincent taught that we rely on the goodness of the poor:

“We live on the patrimony of Jesus Christ, on the sweat of poor people. When we go to the refectory, we must always think, ‘Have I earned the food that I’m about to eat?’ I’ve often had this thought that puts me to shame: ‘Wretched man, have you earned the bread you’re about to eat, that bread that comes to you from the labor of the poor?’ If we don’t

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earn it like them, at least let's pray for their needs... Poor people feed us; let's pray for them; and not a day should pass that we don't offer them to Our Lord that it may please Him to grant them the grace of making good use of their sufferings." (Coste XI, p. 190-191, Repetition of Prayer on July 24, 1655)

Thus, we remember those who support us and those to whom we offer support. It is a responsibility of the consecrated life.

Jesus calls us to simplicity, to be satisfied with what we have and where we are. Jesus says: "*Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave.*" We should be grateful for the gifts received and use them to the best of our abilities. We do not want more or something different, but only what the Lord places in our hands.

This willingness to enter a home and live there in peace suggests a joy on the mission. We find this thought captured in another remarkable passage at the outset of *Evangelii Gaudium*:

"The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus... With Christ joy is constantly born anew. In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come..."

"The Gospel offers us the chance to live life on a higher plane, but with no less intensity: 'Life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others'. When the Church summons Christians to take up the task of evangelization, she is simply pointing to the source of authentic personal fulfillment. For 'here we discover a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means'. Consequently, an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral! Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that 'delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow... And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the

good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ'" (EG 1, 10)

5. BEING SHREWD AND SIMPLE

"Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them... 'Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves.'" (Mt 10:5, 16)

This Gospel verse offers us quite a menagerie: sheep and wolves, serpents and doves. Two of the animals are offered in particular as models of how we are to act as we are sent forth: to be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves. Both are important in the way in which we live our lives and carry out our ministries.

* Shrewd as serpents.

From a biblical point of view, the serpent is usually associated with the Garden of Eden and the temptation of the first humans. We hear in the Genesis story of creation: "*Now the snake was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made*" (Gen 3:1). Of course, we do not usually think of this cunning as being the most admirable of traits, considering the result of the serpent's intervention. The point, however, is that the Lord has created us with good minds and intelligence, and he has made us free so that we can make good decisions about how to live our lives and how to use our resources wisely. The Lord invites us to be aware of the problems in the world in which we live in order to seek solutions to problems and ways to use resources for the betterment of the human community. The shrewdness that is said to characterize a serpent can be a good guide and a valuable tool in mission for ministry.

* The simplicity of doves.

Sometimes we can be charmed, and sometimes we can be embarrassed at the simplicity of children, at the way in which they express themselves without concern for consequences. We know that simplicity is a virtue for which Vincent had particular affection—calling it the one that "*I love the most*" (Coste I, p. 265)—and describing it most plainly as "*speaking*

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the truth” (Common Rules II, 4). Louise also is often convincing in her affirmation of this important virtue for a Daughter of Charity.

“Because I am firmly convinced that you love your vocation and are well-rooted in it, I do not hesitate to tell you quite frankly whatever comes to my mind. That is also why I give you all the advice I believe it is my duty to give and which I hope will be beneficial for those sisters whom I foresee God wants to use to maintain the Company in the spirit of humility and simplicity of Jesus Christ. If I did not know you well and if I were not convinced that you would accept what I am telling you with forbearance, I would be very careful not to speak to you in this way.” (Spiritual Writings, p. 668-669, L.647b — To my very dear Sister Carcireux. Dec. 30, 1659)

Speaking and acting forthrightly, without artifice or a desire to make others think more of us than what we are, is a characteristic of a Daughter of Charity, which keeps her close to the Lord. She would also understand its value when someone speaks to her with simplicity.

Vincent valued both simplicity and shrewdness:

“But while Christ recommends the simplicity of a dove He tells us to have the prudence of a serpent as well. What He means is that we should speak and behave with discretion.” (Coste XIIIa, p. 435, *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*)

Let’s summarize some of the guidance which Jesus gives as we are sent forth: be joyful; expect and look for the gifts that God has in store for us; be wise in what we choose; be simple in our needs and our expressions; trust that God loves us and willingly depend on his presence—let it lead us to action! These virtues can enable us to respond to the Lord with genuine and heartfelt devotion.

6. BEING PROPHETIC AND DEPENDING ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

“Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them... ‘But beware of people, for they will hand you over to courts and scourge you in their synagogues... When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. You will be given at that moment what you

are to say. For it will not be you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you... You will be hated by all because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved.” (Mt 10:5, 17, 19-20, 22)

Working on the edge moves most of us outside our comfort zone. To be truly prophets, we need to expect rejection and persecution because we speak out against oppression, injustice and greed:

“The dignity of the human person and the common good rank higher than the comfort of those who refuse to renounce their privileges. When these values are threatened, a prophetic voice must be raised.” (EG 218)

If that is not true in our lives, we need to ask, “why not?” Have I so softened or compromised the Word of God and the message of Jesus that it no longer disturbs people?

The Gospel reading also turns our minds towards dependence on and trust in the Holy Spirit.

“When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. You will be given at that moment what you are to say. For it will not be you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”

Both Vincent and Louise had a deep sense of dependence upon the Lord, which was often expressed in their trust in Divine Providence. They frequently spoke about it and our need to submit ourselves to its direction. It was an essential part of their spirituality. They firmly believed that God was guiding the Company and that what was required was a submission to the movements of that Providence by the action of the Holy Spirit. Oftentimes, they knew neither from where help was coming nor what they should do next. However, they believed that God had a plan and they wanted to adore the Divine will. They surrendered to the work of the Holy Spirit without being able to identify easily how something would come to be successful.

“Who would ever have thought that there would be Daughters of Charity? ... I didn’t think of it... God thought of it for you.” (Coste IX, p. 93, Conference of June 14, 1643)

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It was the Holy Spirit at work, and this trust produced results: those who were needy were fed and clothed; those who were abandoned were placed in homes; those who were wounded were bandaged and healed; those who were forgotten were recognized and valued. Dependence upon God led to deeds and deepening in the charism. Our Inter-Assemblies Document reminds us of our need to be “open to the transforming Spirit, wellspring of prophecy and hope.”

7. IMITATING JESUS

“Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them... ‘No disciple is above his teacher, no slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, for the slave that he become like his master.’” (Mt 10:5, 24-25)

Jesus invites his disciples to fashion their lives after his own. As he has taught them by word and example, they are to be. His gentleness, forgiveness, resolution, commitment and spirituality are to be guides for them. He makes that point explicitly at the Last Supper when he washes their feet and insists that the servant must be like the master.

We may also hear Jesus speaking to us and inviting us to model our lives on the practices and virtues of our Holy Founders. That is a marvelous encouragement for us. To look to Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac and recognize the ways in which they responded to the Gospel and served the Lord with their lives is a blessing that offers lots of guidance for us. To model ourselves on them enables us to be effective and faithful in our ministries.

8. SPEAKING BOLDLY AND KNOWING OUR WORTH

“Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them... ‘What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops... Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s knowledge. Even all the hairs of your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.’” (Mt 10:5, 27-31)

Listen to the dynamic character of this instruction! We are reminded that

the Christian message is not for the privileged and for those who have special access to wisdom or guidance. The message is for everyone, and it is to be proclaimed to everyone equally:

“What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops.” (Mt 10:27)

Children can understand the heart of the Christian message; great theologians can as well. What Christ has given us is to be shared and valued by people of every background and culture. It is meant for everyone and the salvation of all. This is the energy with which we are sent forth on mission.

The Gospel discourse also reminds us of the importance of every human being, who is a child of God and thus incalculably valuable:

“Even all the hairs of your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

As we come to appreciate how important we are in the sight of God, it deepens our awareness of how important all human beings are in the divine plan. This is a wonderful truth. We are encouraged to value ourselves, the Sisters with whom we live in community, and those who are poor whom we are called to serve. Recognizing the importance of every individual prompts us to a deeper and respectful service. Pope John Paul II wrote that when God gives the gift of life, it is forever. Eternity stretches out before every human being, and that is why it is so important to teach people how to live properly so that they may be welcomed into the Kingdom of God forever. We can offer no greater gift to our brothers and sisters. It makes our mission impossible for us to resist.

9. BRINGING CHALLENGE AND DECISION

“Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them... ‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. I have come to bring not peace but the sword... Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever

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loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Mt 10:5, 34, 37-39)

This part of the teaching of Jesus is almost unbearably difficult to hear! There is enough war, enough violence and enough separation already. We do not need Jesus to bring any more. What we really need is peace! Yet, Jesus says that he has come to bring the sword. The sword in this case is the symbol of decision and choice as suggested by its ability to divide and separate. Those who choose Christ must make a powerful and exclusive decision for him, a decision which makes no concessions.

Care for one’s family emerges as the highest and most rigorous of human loves; it becomes the measure for any human relationship. Yet, the Lord’s invitation to be specially “his” is more powerful and pervasive. No family ties of whatever intimacy are allowed to be stronger than our attention to the Lord. Is it possible that Vincent makes the same point even more graphically?

“God so earnestly desires you to follow and carry out the vocation to which He’s calling you that, as one great saint has said, if your father and mother were to throw themselves across the threshold to prevent your departure, step over them.” (Coste IX, p. 23, Conference of August 2, 1640, “Fidelity to Rising and Mental Prayer”)

The point is that when one chooses to take up the mission, one chooses to do so with one’s whole life and for the whole of one’s life. It is a choice freely made, but a choice, once made, that binds us for the effective carrying forth of our calling. Louise offers guidance:

“I believe that God, in His divine love, desires you to love Him uniquely, entirely and unselfishly and to have no other concern or even satisfaction except those which pertain to Him and to your neighbor.” (Spiritual Writings, p. 480, L.448)

Listen to the prayer which Vincent offers with his Sisters: “O my God, we give ourselves entirely to you. Grant us the grace to live and die in the perfect observance of true poverty... to live and die chastely... [to live] in the perfect observance of obedience. We likewise give ourselves to you my God, to honor and serve our lords the poor all our lives.” (Coste IX, p. 22, Conference of July 19, 1640, “The Vocation of a

Daughter of Charity”)

CONCLUSION:

Nine points taken from the Missionary Discourse. Obviously, we have neither touched on all the lessons that are offered in this powerful teaching of Jesus, nor have we given exhaustive thought to any of the points which we did consider. What is clear is that there is much for us to contemplate for our missionary vocation. The Gospel, our Constitutions, the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, the letter of Sister Evelyne and the theme of our General Assembly all invite us to ponder the importance of “being sent” — to whom and by whom and for what.

Let us conclude with these words from Sister Evelyne: “We are Daughters of Charity, sent on mission in a continuous way throughout our lives. Let us allow ourselves to be evangelized by those who are poor” (Letter of February 2, 2014, p. 8).

Presentation given during the
Session for Sisters 25-40 years vocation

I - At the School of Mary Immaculate, Servant and Mother

M

Mary in the
Company

INTRODUCTION

One of the seven last words of Jesus on the Cross, which is part of His spiritual testament, is: **“Behold your Mother”**. It is something extraordinary that Jesus says to the beloved disciple, that is, to the Church. Jesus entrusts the Church to His mother and His mother to the Church, and neither would exist without the other. Mary is thus not someone apart, she is in the Church, and there is no Church without Mary. We don’t wonder if God could have done otherwise. Theology is not wild imagining about possibilities. It seeks to understand what God has done, as he did it and how he did it. This is why we need the Holy Spirit to understand the mystery of Mary.

In her Spiritual Testament, Saint Louise also gives a final piece of advice: **“Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only Mother.”** Like John, the beloved disciple, our founders had a dynamic relationship with Mary. In the Virgin Mary, Saint Louise saw what a good Daughter of Charity would look like. She thus taught the first Sisters to also have a filial relationship with Mary (cf. C. 52c, 2nd point), to truly welcome her into their home and heart.

We know that as our Founders contemplated the mystery of the Son of God made man, they emphasized three particular characteristics of Christ: *adorer of the Father, servant of His loving plan, and evangelizer of those who are poor* (C. 8a). We could also say that the Founders recognized these same characteristics in the person of Mary. C. 15b says, *“The Founders inculcated in the Daughters of Charity the love and imitation of the Virgin Mary, inviting them to contemplate her as the **Immaculate One...the Servant... and the Mother of God.**”*

* Like Christ, Adorer of the Father, **Mary Immaculate**, *totally open to the Spirit*, is the only human being who is completely the perfect example of the adorer of the Father.

* Like Christ, Servant of the Father’s Loving Plan, **Mary** is the only human being who is totally *“servant of the Father’s plan”*; she is the woman whose will perfectly corresponds to God’s will, to His loving plan for humanity.

* Like Christ, Evangelizer of those who are poor, the **Mother of God** is also the Mother of all people and hope of the lowly, *“the first evangelizer of the poor.”*

In this first presentation, we will revisit these three characteristics of the Virgin Mary, contemplated by our Founders. We contemplate Mary because she leads us to Jesus; she helps us encounter Him. In her and through her, we can discover God’s secrets. She who is closest to God and thus closest to us can also help us discover the essential in our humanity; she allows us to contemplate our future.

Secondly, we will explore these three characteristics of Mary in light of the apparitions of 1830. And, to conclude, we will see in what ways and how the Virgin Mary can help us in our everyday lives.

What I am offering you is a perspective that comes from my faith and convictions that I hold dear and interpret based on my experience. It is up to you to take what touches you, what is for you. It is up to you to make them your own if you consider them useful. What is important is for us to let ourselves be worked on from the inside because the mystery of the Virgin Mary exists to nourish our daily life.

At the School of Mary Immaculate, Servant and Mother
**BEFORE TREATING THE QUESTION, I WOULD LIKE TO
MAKE THREE CLARIFICATIONS**

1) These days, we hear many questions about Mary: is she an **exceptional being** in our humanity? Is she **above** the Church or **below** Christ?

Generally, we consider **God**, we consider **Christ** and...Mary...we see her on the side, like a spare tire that is useful. When we try to give her a certain place, we have the impression that Jesus is no longer everything for us, because there is a part for Mary. We risk seeing in Mary just a sort of devotion that could even, if it's exaggerated, become superstitious... and thus we are sort of uncomfortable: "Do I have a right to be so attached to her?" and, after reflection, we say to ourselves. "Yes, I do go too far; I should turn toward Jesus and leave Mary to the side."

When I was a child, I understood that Jesus was greater than Mary, so when I said a decade of the rosary, I said one Hail Mary and 10 Our Fathers, thinking that they must have made a mistake when explaining it to me and that, for me, it was only fair to give each one his due, according to his greatness. Since then, of course, I understood that it is not a question of giving 80% to one and 20% to the other because one does not exclude the other.

2) It can also happen that some people say, "Me, I pray to the Holy Spirit, and that's enough for me; I don't need Mary!" Of course, each individual has the right to feel what she feels. However, we have to look at what the Word of God says and ask ourselves what the standard is in our lives: is it our thoughts and feelings, or is it the Word of God? And when feelings are different from the Word of God, the Lord invites us to be obedient to what we do not feel. As far as what concerns the Virgin Mary, it is **God who chose her**, it is **the Holy Spirit who "espoused" Mary**; we're not the ones who decided; God did. And if we feel otherwise, we should question ourselves to determine who has priority in our lives: God or us!

3) **God could have done without the Virgin Mary, but He didn't want to.** God wanted a mother for His Son. And from all eternity, the Father has considered His Son as the Son of Mary, and He likes to recognize Mary as the "mother of His Son." In the Incarnation event, Christ and Mary are inseparably associated. It is in Mary's **heart**, Mary's **breast**,

Mary's **womb** that *God and man met in order to no longer be **but one in Jesus***. Saint Matthew expresses this very clearly at the beginning of his Gospel. He indicates that the Magi, entering into the stable, see "the child and his mother" (Mt 2:11), but they will prostrate themselves before the Child and not Mary, so as to emphasize that the heart of the mystery is the Child Jesus, God made man. However, the evangelist emphasizes that the mother is there, whereas he doesn't mention Joseph. Writing for a Jewish audience, Matthew, himself a Jew, makes explicit that Mary is indeed a creature, but a creature who is totally associated with the mystery of the Incarnation. This Word of God, revealed by Matthew, indicates that Mary's indispensable role is in the mystery of the Incarnation. Separating Christ from His mother would mean separating Jesus' divinity from His humanity.

The Second Vatican Council did a good job of putting Mary back into the context of the mystery of Christ and of the Church. Mary is not on the margins of the Christian mystery; neither is she at an intermediary level between Jesus and us; she is *at the heart of the mystery of Christ and of the Church*. Of course, the heart of our faith is Jesus; everything else is relative to him. But Mary is the *path by which Jesus, the Son of God, came to us*.

So, there are **not two mysteries**, that of Mary and that of the Incarnate Word; there is only the **mystery of God who gives us His Son through Mary**. And Mary is at the meeting point of the mystery of salvation: it is she who opens the door to God. In the person of Mary, God found an "entrance" to become flesh in our humanity. We could say that the **three characteristics of Mary** that our Founders contemplated are the "entrance" into the mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation. Mary was immaculately conceived so that she could be the obedient servant of the Father's plan and so that God, through her, could be born as a human child. December 8 is directed toward March 25, and March 25 leads to December 25. These three characteristics of Mary are inseparable and hinge on each other.

I – MARY IMMACULATE

*“Adorer of the Father”,
completely focused on God because entirely unfocused on herself*

INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of the world, God chose Mary to be the Mother of God, and, from the first instant of her conception, He filled her with His grace to prepare her to fulfill her special vocation.

We shouldn't suppose that Mary Immaculate didn't need to be saved; on the contrary, she is the “saved one” par excellence. Immersed in God's forgiveness even before sinning, she is the first creature saved in advance; she is the new creation drawn from the source of the Cross; she is the first fruit of God's forgiveness, which precedes her existence; she is its perfect fruit, the only person who is **within the mystery of the Cross** and who **is shaped by it**.

The Immaculate Conception is thus not an exception to the universality of salvation. Without the mystery of the Cross, the Immaculate Conception is incomprehensible: *“The blood of Christ redeemed her, but she is its source.”* (Hymn for the Office of Readings for December 8).

THE GRACE OF THE IMMACULATE ONE

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin ... [whose] name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, “Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.” (Lk 1: 26-28)

The day of the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel does not greet Mary with her usual name but gives her a new name: *“Full of grace,”* a name that expresses her identity in the Kingdom of God.

1 - WHAT DOES THE NAME “FULL OF GRACE” REVEAL TO US?

a) This name, *“Full of grace,”* first of all reveals **who God is**.

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As a created being, Mary, “full of grace,” teaches us who God is. To say “full of grace” is the same as saying “full of God”, so God acknowledges **that He fills Mary** with His grace.

Another statement, *“the Lord is with you,”* is connected with this name, *“full of grace,”* which emphasizes God's identity as **“being with”**. *“Being with”* is part of God's very being. God's desire is thus to be with humans and to fill them with His grace. In Proverbs (8:31), it is written: *“rejoicing in His inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men.”* God, who is the Fullness of Being, finds His joy, His delight in dwelling among us, in living in us. And the womb of the Virgin Mary is God's dwelling place par excellence. Of course it is God who does everything, who gives everything - Mary does not take God's place, she does not add anything to God - but the Lord chooses her. We can never fully imagine this mystery of God nor understand it, nor experience it, but God wished to dwell within the Virgin Mary and to establish a dwelling place for Him in her. We must become aware of how God looked on this woman, on the Virgin Mary, and contemplate God's choice.

The Immaculate Conception thus reveals to us that everything is **gift** on God's part: God gives Himself, He gives Himself unconditionally, eternally. Even where He is refused, God never stops giving Himself, without growing discouraged by His creatures' rejection of Him. God's gift becomes forgiveness, and this forgiveness springs forth constantly from God's heart and doesn't let anything stop it. Mary Immaculate is the first fruit of what preceded her existence; she bears witness that God's forgiveness is not just like a restoration to what was but a new creation.

b) The name, “Full of grace,” also tells **who Mary is**.

As we've already said, all that Mary is comes to her from God; Mary is all that she is by grace. But God who gives Himself does not give into emptiness, He must be **received**. So, on God's part, grace is always offered, but what is asked on the part of human creatures is **to receive**. The “God who gives” **and** the “creature who says yes to God” are held together in Mary. By her ‘yes’, the Immaculate One is she who completely on the side of reception, she is *the fullness of reception of God's gift*, from the beginning to the end. It is because Mary is entirely willing to receive God's grace that we can say that she is truly an *“adorer of the Father.”*

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2 - THE GRACE OF THE IMMACULATE ONE IS OFFERED TO ALL

When we look at Mary Immaculate, we tend to say, “She was lucky! Why not us?” Why was Mary chosen? Because God wanted to; there’s no other explanation. If there were a reason, it would no longer be God’s choice, it would no longer be God’s way. Moreover, the Gospel does not tell us that Mary sought or asked anything at all from God. (Obviously, before her conception, she couldn’t have done much!) The angel just says to her: “*you have found favor with God*”, so **Mary encountered God without asking anything of Him**. But, she did agree to welcome the unconditional nature of the gift and to allow God to act.

As for us, we are quite willing to listen to God as long as He gives us his rationale; we want to verify everything ourselves. If God had given all the explanations to Adam and Eve, maybe they would have obeyed, but then they would have obeyed logic: they wouldn’t have obeyed God. But God only asked one thing of them: to trust Him. Yet it is difficult for us to trust because we always reason according to the logic of original sin. Sin and suspicion close us in on ourselves and limit our trust.

YET GOD NEVER STOPS OFFERING US HIS GRACE.

Mary Immaculate is not an exception; she is actually the **standard of existence in accordance with God**; she is the most human creature, without any turning in on herself. We are the ones who are the exception; we are the ones who don’t let ourselves be acted upon and who don’t let God move through us.

In order to see how this grace of the Immaculate One is not reserved to exceptional beings, we have to turn the pages of Saint Luke’s Gospel. The evangelist clearly says that the grace accorded to Mary is made for all. In fact, in the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel, the Virgin Mary hears the words, “*The Lord is with you,*” and, further on, chapter 19 is especially suggestive.

Luke writes about a tax collector, Zacchaeus! This man, short in stature, but also short on morality, was not especially well considered by his neighbors: he is a public sinner and far from being immaculate either in

his conception or in his profession! For Zacchaeus, God is high up in the clouds, very far, even very far from his tax forms: God has nothing to do with his daily life. Yet Zacchaeus wants to hear this itinerant preacher who is coming through his town of Jericho. He doesn’t want to be in the first row because he’s afraid of being hit by a stray pebble, nor in the last row because he wouldn’t be able to see or hear him. Therefore, he finds the ideal place to see without being seen: the branch of a sycamore tree. But wait! What he didn’t expect is that the preacher would stop beneath his tree.

If it weren’t Jesus but John the Baptist beneath his tree, Zacchaeus would have heard, “*Zacchaeus, come down quickly, because if you don’t the tree will be cut down and thrown in the fire, and you along with it!*” But it isn’t the prophet John the Baptist beneath the tree; it is the Son of God Himself who wants to meet Zacchaeus. So, God doesn’t want to teach us a lesson from high on his judgment bench; our God is below, at the foot of the tree, and we must bend down to Him. Zacchaeus finds God at his feet: God is there, lower than he is. And what does the Son of God say to this sinner Zacchaeus? The same thing that the Angel Gabriel said on behalf of God to the most pure Mary: “*The Lord is with you.*” Jesus said to him: “*Today I must stay in your house,*” That is, “*today, the Lord must stay in your house.*” It’s the same! God gives Himself unconditionally; there is no prior condition required. What is especially clear about Mary is also true for Zacchaeus.

As for Zacchaeus, he, too, says yes to God. Welcoming Jesus’ attention and words, here’s what happens: Zacchaeus is made divine, he becomes love, divine love; he no longer counts the cost: “*Half of my possessions I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.*” It is more than a moral conversion; it is a conversion to Love.

II – MARY THE SERVANT

“Servant of the Father’s Loving Plan”

INTRODUCTION

Just because Mary is immaculate doesn’t mean we should imagine her as a demi-god. The Virgin Mary is a very real earthly woman. We must not place her apart; otherwise we will deprive her entirely of her role. Just because she is full of grace from the moment of her conception, doesn’t exempt her from living and believing. Mary “Immaculate” is also “*the Servant of the Lord*,” she who **believes** and who seeks what is pleasing to the Father.

MARY THE SERVANT

To consider Mary, the “servant of the Father’s loving plan,” we must first look at Mary’s faith; we must follow her in her way of obedience all the way to the Cross. The Virgin Mary’s attitude from the Annunciation to Pentecost is a model of faith. What’s incredible is not so much that she bore the Word of God in her womb but that she believed in the Word of God, even if she did not understand everything.

* In God’s words, Mary is “**full of grace**,” that is, a truly human woman, in no way turned in on herself.

* But the Virgin Mary herself proclaims that she is the “**servant of the Lord**.” In men’s words, Mary is “*the first believer*,” *the believer par excellence*. Elizabeth is the one to give her this beatitude: “*Blessed are you who believed*.” The definition of Mary, as her elderly cousin proclaims it, is being the *believer*; belonging totally to God.

1 - MARY’S FAITH

From the beginning of her life, Mary’s life is governed by faith; her journey is like ours: a journey of faith. John Paul II used this expression: “*the first in the pilgrimage of faith*”: Mary is the first believer, not just chronologically speaking, but in an ongoing way because it is her very

being; she is the “*servant of the Lord*.” But Mary will go much further still when she says, “*May it be done to me according to your word*,” that is, “*May I act according to your word*.” She explains what she experiences interiorly: a servant does not abandon her master, but Mary goes so far as to abandon herself entirely to God’s will. She goes all the way to the truth of her being, to the ‘why’ she was made; she is in perfect accord with grace. By saying, “*May it be **done** to me according to your word*,” she uses the same verb that God used for man’s creation: “*Let us **make man in our own image, after our likeness***” (Gen 1:26). Thus, by turning herself completely over to God, Mary agrees to be fashioned by Him, to let herself be shaped by Him again.

For the Virgin Mary, *being a “believer”* is to commit herself, **to espouse God’s will** with a perfect “yes.” Mary shows us that faith is not an opinion (as when we say: I believe it will be a nice day tomorrow), nor an intellectual acceptance but rather an **act of self-gift**, a complete commitment of oneself.

In the Gospels, we can follow her faith journey. The Virgin Mary’s life didn’t flow by without any problems. After the Annunciation, Mary surely didn’t expect what would happen: giving birth to her child in a stable, needing to leave for exile in Egypt, losing her child at the age of 12 in Jerusalem, going out to look for him, not understanding his reaction: “*Didn’t you know that I must be in my Father’s house?*”, then waiting years and years in Nazareth for the promises of the Angel Gabriel to come to pass, and, finally, being at the foot of the Cross. Mary obviously did not understand God’s will, yet she accepted it, she meditated on it, and she allowed faith to be born in her, day after day. The “yes” of the Servant of the Lord is not a ‘yes’ for a day, it involves **orientating her entire life in accordance with God** and ratifies, in advance, all Jesus’s choices, from Bethlehem to the Cross. The first disciple, she follows Jesus to the very end; she continues to believe even if the struggle, in human terms, nearly rips her apart.

2 – THE KENOSIS OF MARY

The *servant of the Lord* should be contemplated at the foot of the Cross: there, we can contemplate the source and secret of her mystery. Amid the anguish and fear before the horror of her Son’s death, Mary is nothing

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but offering of herself, emptied of herself. At the foot of the Cross, we understand what the new name “*full of grace*”, given by the Angel Gabriel, could mean. Mary is “*full of grace*” because she is “**emptied of herself**,” “*empty of everything else.*”

At the foot of the Cross, Mary is emptied of herself, not only of all that she had already offered to God (her life plans, her reputation, etc.), but also of what God had given her: her Son. At the foot of the Cross, Mary is, par excellence, “*the servant of the Father’s loving plan.*”

In order to really grasp all its depth, we must contemplate **Jesus’ kenosis**. Kenosis is the Greek expression that means “self-emptying”. In his letter to the Philippians, Saint Paul writes, “*Jesus...did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself* [in a way of his divine status] ...*He humbled Himself* [He descended out of love] *in the likeness of men...to the point of death.*” In order to make himself in the likeness of men, Jesus emptied himself of his divine power that He could have claimed all the same.

And the **Virgin Mary**, like every disciple, *must follow this same process of humbling*. This defines Mary’s role: **follow Christ in this humiliation**. At the foot of the Cross, Mary didn’t claim being the mother of the Messiah as something to be grasped; she didn’t demand anything. She welcomed God’s gift and, therefore, she let herself be emptied of any claim that she might exist on her own or to control God’s gift. She went so far as to give up what God had given her.

In his Encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater* (no. 18), John Paul II discusses the **kenosis of Mary**; he does not hesitate to say that hers is the strongest and cruelest kenosis ever experienced in human history. At the Annunciation, the Angel Gabriel spoke to Mary about Jesus in these terms: “*He will be great...and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end*”... “*He will be called the Son of the Most High.*” This is the messianic promise made to David and his descendants forever (2 Samuel 7:1-17), as Mary will sing in the Magnificat, “*to Abraham and to his descendants forever,*” through the intermediary of David.

Now, at the foot of the Cross, Mary is the witness of a total contradiction, in human terms, of those words. The promises of the Angel are complexly reversed; everything that Mary might have understood the day of the Annunciation is accomplished to the letter, but in such a surprising way! Yes, Jesus is raised up above all men, crowned, clothed in a scarlet cloak like a king, but we must admit that this scarlet cloak was an object of derision; his crown, a crown of thorns; the scepter, a scepter of reeds; and his throne, the horror of this Cross.

However, the mother of Jesus “**is there**”; she says nothing, she does nothing, but she is there. Mary believes in the fulfillment of God’s promises that the Angel had spoken to her at the Annunciation. **Her presence is the active response of her faith.**

There is a physical communion between Jesus and Mary, but this is based on a spiritual communion that establishes a special “us” of an infinite depth between Mary and Jesus. Mary is but one with her Son; the two of them become only one for the salvation of the world. At the foot of the Cross, *the servant of the Lord* says as she did at the beginning, “*Let it be done to me according to your word.*”

Mary’s beatitude, “*Blessed are you who believed,*” is repeated at the end of Saint John’s Gospel when Jesus says to Thomas, “*Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed,*” that is “Blessed are the believers although non-seers.” Thomas, the disciple who hesitates and doubts, must look toward Mary, the believer; he must follow the model of Mary’s faith. Through Thomas, it is the whole Church that must embrace Mary’s faith.

III – MARY THE MOTHER

“Evangelizer of those who are poor”

INTRODUCTION

For Mary, being the mother of God is not simply a duty; it is the secret of her life. Her being is identified with her mission: if Mary is the *“mother of Jesus,”* it is because she is the *“servant”* who is perfectly obedient to God’s plan for humanity. And if she has this perfectly available heart, it’s because her person is **immaculate**. Mary was conceived without sin only to receive and share the Gift of God, the Son of God. Totally receptive to the very being of God, she can communicate Him to the world; in her, all we find is God.

Let us look again at this mystery as it is presented in the Gospel: what happens once Mary proclaims herself the *“servant of the Lord”*? After receiving God’s visit through the Angel Gabriel, Mary is immediately driven forward along the roads of men to share what she has received; she sets off in haste through the hill country of Judea. Mary carries the life of God in her, and this presence in the depths of her heart gives weight to the visit.

When Elizabeth hears Mary’s greeting, she receives God’s Peace, which produces a two-fold beneficial effect: her heart is filled with the fullness of the Spirit, and John the Baptist leaps in her womb: *“When the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy”* (Lk 1:44). Thus, thanks to Mary’s coming, the Spirit with whom John the Baptist is to be filled (cf. Lk 1:15) is granted to him. It is thus through Mary that God communicates His Spirit to Elizabeth and to the child whom she bears. Mary’s visit produces quite a contagious effect of the Holy Spirit: after the child and the mother, it’s the father, Zachariah, who, filled with the Holy Spirit, will prophesize (Lk 1:64) and, finally, it is all their friends and relatives: *“all those living around them”* will bless God (Lk 1:65). Therefore, Mary of the Visitation is **the first model of an evangelization in which the Holy Spirit is the main agent.**

Let’s go deeper in the Virgin Mary’s process of evangelization through her special mission as Mother of God. This word “Mother” is familiar to us, perhaps too familiar, and we run the risk of not capturing all its richness.

A REMINDER ABOUT THE MYSTERY OF MARY’S DIVINE MOTHERHOOD

1 - Mary’s divine motherhood is first of all the mystery of she who *brought the Son of God into the world, who births Jesus to His human life.* She is the “Mother of God.”

2 – But there’s more! Mary’s divine motherhood expands through her *spiritual motherhood.* At the foot of the Cross, Jesus entrusts to His mother the mission of *birthing “his brothers” to the life of God.* The *“mother of Jesus”* becomes the “mother of the disciples”. And this spiritual motherhood of Mary does not end in time; it continues still today.

Each evangelist has his own way of speaking about Mary. John has his. There are similarities among the Gospels, especially Luke and John. But John deepens the reflection of the other Gospels; he is the one who offers the *spiritual meaning of Mary’s motherhood.* Why? Because, at the foot of the Cross, the beloved disciple heard Jesus’ words: *“Behold your mother.”* And from that moment on, he *“took Mary into his own home”*: that is, into his house, but also into his heart. Mary was an intimate part of John’s life. Consequently, we better understand why Mary has a very significant role in his Gospel.

I would like to suggest that you reflect on the mystery of Mary’s divine motherhood in light of Constitution 14. It says, *“...the Company...joins service and presence as Christ did when he revealed the love of the Father...”* In the 1983 version, the two words “service” and “presence” were in bold print, which further highlighted the importance of these two words. Their order emphasizes that a service, carried out without quality presence, is incomplete. On the contrary, when they are lived well, they *“reveal the love of the Father”*; they reveal God’s face (cf. C. 14).

In his Gospel, John especially stresses the way Mary **“joins service and presence.”**

At the School of Mary Immaculate, Servant and Mother
“THE MOTHER OF JESUS” (MARY’S SERVICE)

* In his Gospel, John uses a single expression to designate Mary: “*the mother of Jesus.*” Mary is not called by her name according to public records; so, it seems that for John she doesn’t have a name of her own. Why?

John means to tell us that Mary is **only** “*the mother of Jesus*”: she is **only** that, she is **only** “*mother*”, everything about her is related to Jesus, she is nothing in herself, she exists only to give the life of God, she is the ***mother par excellence***, she is *mother with her entire being*, not just from the moment a little child comes out of her womb, but rather she is the “mother of Jesus” from A to Z.

* The Church, for its part, has proclaimed Mary the “***Mother of God.***” We don’t specifically find the title *Mother of God* in the Gospels. However, the expression “*the mother of my Lord*” (Lk 1:43) springs forth from the lips of her cousin Elizabeth during the Visitation. The title “*Lord*” belongs to God and is given to Jesus after His resurrection. Thus, even if the title of *Mother of God* is not in Scripture, the content is there, and the faith of the Church has taken it on and explained it: Mary is one with her Son like He is one with the Father.

“THE MOTHER OF JESUS WAS THERE” (MARY’S PRESENCE)

In addition to her maternal mission, John emphasizes another quality of Mary. It’s something that isn’t so much defined as observed: presence. “*The mother of Jesus was there.*” In John’s Gospel, Mary intervenes in two episodes that are particularly important for Jesus’ ministry:

* First of all, at Cana: “*the mother of Jesus was there*”, that is, *at the beginning of Jesus’ first sign* that he must accomplish to show that the Kingdom of God is breaking through. John presents the Virgin Mary’s apostolate to us: it is she who makes it possible for Jesus to go further and to show His glory.

* Then, at the Cross: “*standing by the cross of Jesus [was] His mother,*” that is, *at the completion of her Son’s mission*, when Jesus is able to say, “*It is finished!*”

Thus, Mary is at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and at its completion; she is at the **beginning** and the **end**; she thus encompasses it. This means that, even if John doesn’t say any more about it, this is enough! She is there, all throughout the Gospel; she accompanies Jesus from one end to the other. Of course, as with all deep things, presence is not something measurable, neither in volume, nor in weight, and it can’t be locked into a formula.

Thus, in John’s Gospel, **Mary “is there” where God gives Himself**, which means that Mary’s presence is much more than a simple question on a physical level; it’s not just being there, seated or standing.

In order to understand the power of the phrase, “*the mother of Jesus was there,*” we must go back to the name the Angel Gabriel gave her: “***full of grace,***” that is, “empty of everything else.” Full of grace, Mary is the heart where God gives Himself. In her, **God is present in all fullness.** “*Full of the presence of God,*” Mary is **fully there, present**, because, through her, it is **God who becomes present**. Wherever she is, Mary **transmits** the Presence of God. We could say that “*the overabundance of grace in Mary*” communicates “*the Presence of God in overabundance.*”

When we speak about “the Presence of God in overabundance”, let’s not get the wrong idea!

* **We** know well that there are persons who are “omnipresent”; we see them everywhere. Others have an imposing presence. Still others try to seduce, to attract us to them... And we so often try to monopolize others’ attention, either by dominating them or by flattering them to make them indebted to us. Obviously, these various presences have nothing to do with God’s way of being.

* **God** is infinitely respectful. His presence is fullness, overflowing with love. God gives all and gives fully, **but** God can possess nothing. He surrenders to our freedom without ever imposing Himself, without ever dominating. He does not constrain, He does not threaten, and He never comes to see us with dynamite in order to open our hearts by force. However, once a heart opens, God gives Himself abundantly and fills it with His grace.

At the School of Mary Immaculate, Servant and Mother

* Mary's presence reflects God's presence. The "mother of Jesus" is humble and discreet, gentle and respectful. At Cana, Mary doesn't draw people to herself; she demonstrates attentiveness to their needs. It is a presence that inspires trust and directs toward Jesus. Such a presence changes everything because there is no trace of self-centeredness in her.

Conclusion

By this expression alone, "*the mother of Jesus was there*", John magnificently illustrates how Mary **joins Service and Presence**, how she is an evangelizer. Totally given to God, Mary perfectly fulfills her maternal mission, and her presence *lets God shine through* (cf. C. 14).

In the second presentation, we will continue our meditation on Mary's divine motherhood in light of the Apparitions of 1830. Then, we will see in what ways and how the Virgin Mary, our Mother, can help us in our vocation as Daughters of Charity.

Sister Anne PRÉVOST
Daughter of Charity

SISTER A. PRÉVOST, DC

II - In 1830, the Virgin Mary and Catherine Labouré

INTRODUCTION

We have seen how much we mysteriously need Mary's presence, not as a compensation for our spiritual aridity but because Jesus gave her to us as a Mother to birth us to the divine life.

In this second phase, we will first walk in the footsteps of Saint Catherine to try to relive her spiritual experience and, in that way, let her guide us to Mary. Then, we will see in what way and how the Virgin Mary **can help us** in our everyday life.

SOME COMMENTS ABOUT THE APPARITIONS

The apparitions add nothing to the Gospel, but they are novel offerings of the Good News that is sometimes forgotten. While they always send us back to the Gospel, they can help us to rediscover certain aspects.

They also remind us that the Virgin Mary is not up above, in Heaven, but **here with us, near us**. Just because we don't see the Virgin Mary doesn't mean that she isn't there. She is not here, within our vision, perceivable with our senses, but, when she wants, she makes apparitions in the physical world, and we know to what extent the Company has already been favored by her visits.

Since 1830, the Chapel of the rue du Bac, in Paris, has been *a place of grace*, and we experience this every day. The constant stream of pilgrims is a real popular vote for the Virgin Mary and Saint Catherine. But the real miracle is that by coming to this place where grace made itself visible, the pilgrims realize that these are not events from the past that have been dug up, but that they experience a **grace for today**. When the pilgrims

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pause in this chapel, they hear a presence, they see a presence, there is Someone; and, mysteriously, they relive Catherine's experience and hope breaks into their lives. In fact, when there is a spiritual phenomenon, it is **always present**. It is like the Gospel: we can know it by heart, have opened it hundreds or thousands of times, but it is **always new**.

Therefore, even if we know these apparitions well, we will never have explored them deeply enough. Let us first of all turn our attention to what is essential in the message of Mary's apparitions to Catherine Labouré.

A) THE FUNDAMENTAL MESSAGE OF THE TWO APPARITIONS

In Lourdes, the Virgin appeared 18 times to Bernadette; here, she appeared three times to Catherine, but we know that the third apparition was basically an echo of November 27, which, in contrast, is crucially important. Here are some comments about the apparitions of July 18 and November 27.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE TWO APPARITIONS

We often speak of the message of the Medal, but the fundamental message of the apparitions cannot be reduced to the Medal, as original and rich in symbolism as it is. In order to explore the abundant Gospel message revealed by the Blessed Virgin to Catherine, the two apparitions, which complement each other, must be taken into account. We know that the first one prepared the second, which is crucially important because it made the mission confided to Catherine concrete. But there's more! During the night of July 18, the Virgin Mary revealed her spiritual motherhood that is the extension of her divine motherhood: "*The Mother of God is our mother...*"¹ November 27, Mary introduced her to the grace of her Immaculate Conception. Yet these two intimately connected graces, the Immaculate Conception and divine motherhood, encompass each other: the grace that Mary Immaculate is filled with is united to her motherhood. That's why Mary's spiritual motherhood, glimpsed and experienced by Catherine on July 18, gives meaning to the assertion of her Immaculate Conception revealed November 27: "THE NAME OF JESUS' MOTHER

1. "*In the order of grace, Mary's maternity is a constitutive element of the plan of Salvation.*" (Académie Mariale internationale p. 174).

IS 'FULL OF GRACE'" AND "JESUS' MOTHER IS ALSO THE 'MOTHER OF THE DISCIPLE WHOM JESUS LOVED'" because Jesus truly identifies himself with his brothers and sisters.

THE FIRST APPARITION: MARY'S SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD

The night of July 18, it was *the face of a mother who made herself known in a privileged encounter*. All throughout the apparition, Mary proves to be very maternal with Catherine; she also presents herself as the "*mother of men.*" Mary's tenderness for humanity is hinted at, as something of the mystery of her divine motherhood.

THE SECOND APPARITION: THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

November 27, through the radiance of her face and the beams of light streaming from her hands, *Mary Immaculate* appeared "*resplendently reflecting the beauty of God.*" Through the invocation, "*O Mary conceived without sin,*" the Virgin reveals her identity: "*full of grace from the moment of her conception.*" In Mary, filled with the Spirit, Catherine contemplates a perfect image of God.

Then, the reverse side of the Medal places the *Immaculate Conception within Salvation history*. The letter M topped with a Cross presents the mystery of the Cross that is the source of the Immaculate Conception and without which it is impossible to understand. This places Mary completely centered on Christ the Redeemer, as His Mother and the Servant of the Lord.

THE QUALITY OF THE WITNESS: CATHERINE LABOURÉ

The message of the apparitions cannot be summed up by a series of words and gestures by the Virgin Mary; there is also a face: Catherine. I repeat what Cardinal Gerlier, Archbishop of Lyon, said at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris:

"Catherine Labouré collaborated in this work of Providence, the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception... The Blessed Virgin chose a privileged soul, a confidante, a young woman who was modest and humble, a pure and upright soul, incapable of inventing

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*the message she did not understand. She was a **precious but obscure instrument** of a divine work which was revealed to the eyes of humanity through the incredible spreading of the Miraculous Medal and by the wondrous propagation of devotion to the Immaculate Conception.”*

Catherine agreed to be the instrument Mary used and then to remain in the shadows. Catherine was delighted to be useful, but she shows us that being useful is also accepting to not get in the way. What was important for her was the message; everything else mattered little. She stepped completely aside in favor of the message and kept total silence about herself. God’s glory was her only goal. She was only the humble messenger of Mary Immaculate and the humble servant of Christ in the person of the poor.

“**In silence**” Catherine is just as useful and **just as luminous** as at the moment of the apparitions. If there had only been the apparitions, we wouldn’t have Saint Catherine. It even could have been exactly the opposite if, after the apparitions, she put herself in the forefront because she would have been acclaimed; but then she wouldn’t have been this luminous instrument that she more and more became by living the charism every day with her extreme humility in word and deed. Through her life in Reuilly, we can glimpse the silent mystery of Mary of Nazareth, about which almost nothing is said except her profound attitude as the humble Servant of the Lord.

THE CHOICE OF THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY

Given the place that Mary (the Immaculate One, Servant and Mother) had in the life of our Founders, the apparitions of Mary to Saint Catherine have been considered as a ratification of their Marian devotion. This is understandable. Moreover, we could imagine that the Virgin Mary, through the sign of the Medal, wanted to give a nod to Saint Vincent, repeating, in her own way, one of the main faith convictions of the Founder: “*turn the medal, and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, who willed to be poor, is represented to us by these poor people.*” Without any fancy theories, the Virgin Mary makes the same thing known: the back of the Medal provides meaning to the Immaculate Conception that is revealed on the front. However, we must avoid limiting the apparitions of 1830 by considering them as a privilege entrusted just

to the Vincentian Family because the apparitions are a **mission** for the entire Church and a message for the world today and centuries to come.

“ONLY MOTHER OF THE COMPANY”

At the time of the apparitions, Catherine was a **young Daughter of Charity in formation**, and Mary takes an interest in her life as a “*mother*” and “*teacher of the spiritual life.*” Today, each of us is also in formation, initial or ongoing formation; these apparitions are a reminder that Mary is close to each one of us and wants to help each one of us to live on an even deeper level of faith.

B) THE NIGHT OF JULY 18-19, 1830: “THE MOTHER OF THE DISCIPLE” IS THERE

Following these comments about the apparitions, let’s turn to the spiritual path that Catherine traveled during the night of July 18, 1830.

A PRELIMINARY REMARK

We must not be confused by the moment Saint Catherine saw the Blessed Virgin! We must not imagine that the Virgin Mary was absent before the apparition and that she arrives in the chapel just that night because Mary “*is there*”; she “*is always there.*” But, that night, Mary “*makes herself seen*”; she “*shows herself*” to Catherine. It is like with the Resurrected Jesus: He is always there, near to us, but at the time of His apparitions after the Resurrection, He “*shows Himself*” to his apostles.

1 - THE “SPIRITUAL MOTHER” OF CATHERINE

In order to understand this apparition well, we must take into account the personality of the witness, her family environment, her relationship with God. We know that Catherine lost her mother at the age of 9 and, at that moment, she turned to Mary and chose her as her mother. For her, this act of faith was a foundational moment in her relationship with Heaven. Placing her life under Mary’s influence, Catherine entered into a special relationship of loving proximity with her in the same way John, at the foot of the Cross, “*welcomed Mary into his home.*”

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This is why, when the Blessed Virgin appeared in 1830 to Catherine as a mom who sits down with her daughter to speak with her and the angel said to her, “*Here is the Blessed Virgin,*” we can suppose that Catherine heard the echo in her heart of what Jesus on the Cross said to the disciple, “*Behold your mother.*” *However, as we will see, the stages Catherine went through are not so easy.*

THE STAGES OF THE ENCOUNTER

THE VIRGIN MARY IS THERE

Mary is there in front of Catherine. Her attitude is a reflection and extension of God’s attitude as revealed in Jesus when he said to Zacchaeus: “*Today, I must stay in your house.*” Mary takes the risk of offering herself to Catherine without imposing herself; she turns herself over to Catherine’s freedom.

CATHERINE DOES NOT RECOGNIZE HER!

But Catherine is not ready to meet her. This is the **essential moment of the apparition**. Mary is there and, yet, Catherine says, “*I didn’t see the Blessed Virgin.*” It is strange to hear from Catherine’s mouth, she who so wanted to see Mary! She had heard the call to get up: “*The Blessed Virgin is waiting for you;*” she had agreed to walk to the chapel because she knew she was expected... her mind is consumed with thoughts about the Blessed Virgin, and yet, she does not see the woman who has come to visit her. Despite the deep desire of her heart, Catherine seems paralyzed, blocked by the barrier of appearances; she perceives “*someone*” but does not recognize the Blessed Virgin... a little like Mary Magdalene who, at the tomb, sees Jesus who was there, but “*did not know that it was Jesus*” (Jn 20:14). At this point, Catherine is incapable of meeting Mary and entering into relationship.

It is the moment of doubt! Catherine is shaken up (26 years later, she would write down this hardly flattering episode in her 1856 handwritten account. In 1876, that is, 46 years later, she would tell it again to Sister Dufès with the same precise level of details.)

So, if matters had stayed as they were, nothing would have happened.

WHY DOES THIS MEETING SEEM IMPOSSIBLE?

We could see how Catherine’s episode of doubt is similar to the accounts of the Resurrection that show how the Apostles to whom Jesus appeared did not recognize Him immediately; they perceived ‘someone’ without recognizing him. Perhaps this also connects in a certain way to the experience of John the Baptist who, from prison, questions himself and worries, wondering if Jesus is indeed the Lamb of God or if he must wait for another. At that moment, John the Baptist did not recognize God in the person of Jesus; he was not mature enough to accept that the greatness of God would be made manifest in poverty and infinite stripping of self.

Catherine, as well, seems surprised by Mary’s simplicity. Catherine is limited by her ideas; she thinks based on her universe; she perceives what is around her according to what she is; in other words, she is “the center” and cannot access the reality of the Other, in this case, Mary.

If Catherine were to remain with her heart full of her own sufficiency, her certainties, her fixed ideas or her complaints, her eyes and ears would not open to the light offered to her. If she were to stop at a simple perspective of curiosity or observation, she would only see the exterior of Mary, her physical appearance, and she would never interiorly reach the mystery of her presence.

WHAT DOES THE VIRGIN MARY DO?

Mary’s presence is beautiful and touching because of her wonderful patience, like the ever-so respectful attitude of the Resurrected Jesus when he approached Mary Magdalene as a friend. *Mary is there, and she remains there, calmly;* she doesn’t leave, slamming the door, turning away from Catherine or writing her off. Mary remains in silence, not a polite indifferent silence, but a silence that opens to God’s presence. Looking at Catherine, Mary is flawless offering, pure generosity, and sheer selflessness. And even if Mary wants to give her happiness, she does not rush nor force her way through the distance; she respects Catherine’s freedom.

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Under the influence of this loving Presence, Catherine grows peaceful. Mary gives her the time to open herself to the mystery, to lose sight of herself, to prepare herself to hear another word than her own and, in that way, to move into another register because there are realities we look at but do not see, we know but are not aware of, we have already tasted but never experienced. Now, Catherine is gently drawn from within toward Love.

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

The little angel then says, “*Here is the Blessed Virgin.*” Catherine must hear this message three times in a row in order to allow herself to be touched by the grace. The first two times, she hears but remains on the outside; the third time, she listens to it and allows herself to be instructed and shaped by the Word. The words of God introduce her into the reality that they evoke. The Word is fulfilled, and Catherine opens herself to the depths of the mystery.

Abandoning what she knows to go toward what she does not know, what is new, Catherine lets God be God, be Other. From then on, Catherine is able to recognize Mary’s presence, to give her heart to her and to enter into relationship. Now Catherine is placed on equal footing with Mary. There is a sort of “elevation” of Catherine: the leveling is not a lowering, but a raising.

GRACE ALONE GIVES ACCESS TO THE KINGDOM

We should be attracted to the spiritual, symbolic meaning to this account and not just to the trivial details. Catherine couldn’t have access to God’s presence through her own efforts; desire is not enough. All of Catherine’s work consists in allowing herself to be transformed from within in order to move from her personal reality to God’s reality, from her own world to God’s world. The true encounter with God takes place when we decrease that He may increase.

This spiritual experience of Catherine helps us to understand that our entire existence is contained in this choice: “*I am either centered on myself or on God.*” There is no middle ground.

- When I stop focusing on myself, it means God is truly present.
- When I lose sight of myself, it’s because I’m looking at Him.
- When I no longer hear myself, it’s because I am listening to Him.

It is simple, but Catherine shows us that it is difficult to achieve. I cannot empty myself of self by myself; it is the *encounter with God’s face* that heals my self-love or my turning in on myself. *Welcoming His Word of Love* is what progressively changes my ways of thinking, looking, and speaking and gives access to the Kingdom of Heaven.

MARY’S PRESENCE MAKES CATHERINE FULLY EXIST

“*Looking at the Blessed Virgin,*” Catherine is irresistibly drawn to her, as Elizabeth was the day of the Visitation. With an attitude just as familiar as she had in her childhood, she “*was at her side in a single bound*” and saw the Mother of God as she is: completely welcoming and entirely gift of self.

In terms of the description of the heart to heart with Mary, Catherine remained discrete. It was her secret, and she didn’t tend to express her intimate feelings. However, we know that Catherine’s heart was flooded with happiness and love she could never have imagined: “*There, a period of time passed, the sweetest of my life. It would be impossible for me to say what I experienced.*”

In this interpersonal exchange, Mary and Catherine are united *by the gift that each of them makes of herself* by welcoming the other’s reality as expressed simply by her presence. Catherine experiences the Kingdom of God as a place of communion based on the gift of self lived in welcoming the other. It is *in giving of self that we exist*; we lose everything that we keep for ourselves.

2 - THE “SPIRITUAL MOTHER” OF MEN

In Mary’s eyes, Catherine discovers that she fully exists, that God is there *for her, for her alone*, as if she were *unique* in all the world. “*Behold your son*” Jesus said from the Cross, and *not* “Behold your sons.” Because of the fact that Mary personally went out of her way for her, Catherine realizes deep inside that she, too, is “*the only son (child) of*

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God”! But it is not in the way that the Jewish people said, “*We are the chosen people, and the others are locked out!*” No! This personalized love that she receives is a call for Catherine to live it, in turn, with those who are poor so that each one of them might believe that he, too, is “*the only son of God.*”

MARY’S COMPASSION

Thus, Mary loves her children, not in a general way, but with a personal love as if they were the only ones in all the world. Catherine is overwhelmed by *Mary’s compassion that extends to all persons, especially to those victimized by violence.* Mary suffers with those who suffer, and she accompanies them as she accompanied her Son on the Cross. November 27, when she would hold the world in her hands, she would say, “*the globe represents each person in particular.*” The Blessed Virgin’s maternal love is *incomparable, unique*; it embraces each individual personally.

THE REAL PRESENCE OF THE EUCHARISTIC

Then Mary, completely subordinate to Jesus, quite naturally directs Catherine toward Christ: “*Come to the foot of this altar*” ... feed yourself with the *real Eucharistic presence* because the one true Presence of God, which fills you and transforms you, is found there. When we are filled with the presence of Christ, our presence becomes a gift for others and brings the Light of His Love.

CONCLUSION

The Founders inculcated in the Daughters of Charity the love of the Virgin Mary, imitation of the Virgin Mary (cf. C. 15b) and Marian prayer: “*daily meditation of the Rosary...and the prayer of the Angelus*” (Statute 7). For them, Marian devotion is not an optional subject.

If we truly want to become Daughters of Charity, we must live from Jesus’s spirit and the imitation of the Virgin Mary. In order to do this, we must love her as Jesus loved her. The only solution is taking all the events of the Christian mysteries, all the words of Jesus, all the words that Mary spoke and allowing them to enter our hearts, meditating on them

throughout our lives about how to put them into practice; otherwise, we will continue to have the spirit of the world.

1 – Why did the Founders ask us to LOVE Mary?

IN ORDER TO DO WHAT JESUS DID

The first one to love Mary was God Himself. He became a little embryo in Mary’s womb, choosing to dwell in her, to be radically dependent. As a child and then an adolescent, Jesus loved Mary. Jesus introduced her more deeply than anyone into His heart and caught her up in the wake of His redeeming life, the summit of which was Calvary. And there, on the Cross, just before dying, he asked the *disciple to love His mother as He had loved her.*

IN ORDER TO DO WHAT GOD ASKS OF US

At the moment when he *handed over His Spirit*, Jesus *gave His mother* to the disciple; it is a matter of *passing on the same inheritance.* Jesus wants us to receive everything from Mary; He wants *new life*, given in abundance from the Cross, to *pass through His Mother.* At the foot of the Cross, Mary receives Jesus’ *Spirit IN ORDER to give it to the disciple.* Mary will thus teach the disciple to make his home the dwelling place of the Spirit. It is through Mary that John will receive divine life and will allow himself to be born to the life of the Risen Lord - in whom he does not yet believe because he does not understand anything. In fact, it is only in turning the page that everything will become clear for John, that is, the first day of the week when, having entered the empty tomb, he will see the shroud folded. Only then could he believe: “he saw and believed” (Jn 20:8).

2 - Why did the Founders ask us to IMITATE Mary?

IN ORDER TO DO WHAT JESUS DID

“*And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men*” (Lk 2:52). The Son of God obviously could have come into our world at an adult age without needing to be raised and educated, but He preferred to truly be one of us. Mary was Jesus’ teacher and not just

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His mother. We don't know what methods Mary used to raise Jesus, but we do know that one can only teach what one already lives personally. Ever since the Annunciation, Mary had turned herself over in complete confidence to God's good pleasure: "*not my will but yours be done.*" Jesus would say this several times, most notably in the Garden of Gethsemane.

IN ORDER TO DO WHAT GOD ASKS OF US

God wants to repeat in each one of us what He did in Mary the day of the Annunciation. He calls us to become not only Immaculate Ones and Servants but "*mothers of Christ,*" to give birth to Jesus in our hearts. Imitating Mary is "*receiving Jesus in us*" and *allowing Him to grow*: Mary shows us that Jesus' growth in us requires that we respond "yes" to Him and that we do His will.

3 – PRAY To Mary

For the Founders, Marian prayer is not optional, but necessary because, in order to love and imitate the Virgin Mary, this assumes having a **living relationship** with her, looking at her in terms of what she is, what she does, her "yes," and her participation in the mystery of God's incarnation, and also letting ourselves be looked at by her, letting ourselves be flooded with her regard. Thus,

WHEN WE PRAY TO MARY, WE FOLLOW GOD'S EXAMPLE

Because the first one who greeted Mary was God Himself: "*Hail Mary, full of grace.*" By praying to Mary, we closely follow God and naturally go toward Him.

WHEN WE PRAY TO MARY, OUR PRAYER RISES DIRECTLY TO GOD

Because Mary Immaculate *does not keep anything for herself*, she hands everything over to God. All that she receives, she offers to God without self-interest. If there is one thing Mary doesn't know how to do, it's to look at herself in the mirror. "There was no mirror in Nazareth!" So when we pray to Mary, our prayer sets off like a rocket toward the Heart of God.

WHEN WE PRAY TO MARY, WE CONTEMPLATE WHO GOD IS

It's because what the angel said to Mary, "*The Lord is with you*" is said for each of us, including tax collectors and sinners. "Being with us" is the heart of God: God spends His eternity thinking about each one of us as individuals. Each of us is His only son. (In a large family, each child in the family is unique. So if even we can realize this mystery, how much more can the Lord who is infinite! We aren't going to be shocked just because there are billions and billions of us: that doesn't bother God because He is infinite.)

Mary reminds us that God is just waiting for us to welcome Him and open our hearts to the mystery that is offered to us in our everyday lives.

WHEN WE PRAY TO MARY, WE RECEIVE THE SPIRIT THAT FILLS HER

This is because Mary's distinctive role is to open us to the grace that comes to us through Christ. This is her role as a mother, a unique role that she receives from the Spirit. *Full of grace*, Mary is the heart where God gives Himself in abundance, she *perfectly receives grace and transmits it with perfect purity*; she is not an intermediary; she is "*a perfect image of God.*"

Therefore, we can *always go through Mary IN ORDER to truly welcome God's gift.*

Of course, we have direct access to God who makes Himself close to each one of us. But this access happens to the extent that we are able to go toward Him, to welcome the gift that He makes to us. For, God is *very close*, but we are *far away*; we are only poor sinners, we put ourselves at the center, we reason based on ourselves, we close our eyes and ears, and we do not know how to receive...because of all that, we always remain at a distance from Christ. But, *at the heart of the Church*, there is a **believing presence**, Mary; she is completely "**capacity to receive.**"

In 1830, the Virgin Mary and Catherine Labouré

In *Redemptoris Mater*, John Paul II repeats forcefully what the Council had asserted, which is that Mary's mediation *fosters our immediate union with Christ*.² This sentence is very disconcerting for our human logic. And, in a certain way, we could say that *her maternal mediation promotes the absence of mediation*; in the same way, *if this maternal mediation did not exist, there would no longer be the immediacy of union with Christ* because we remain limited by our poor faith as our capacity to receive and welcome Christ is limited and thus imperfect! If we want to bypass Mary to go directly to God, we have to, unfortunately, go through all the detours of our sins, our difficulties and our lack of understanding.

Mary is there to promote our union with Christ. "*Perfect recipient*" of grace, Mary does not get in the way, standing between us and God; she is not an intermediary; she is a **transparency**; she is a "*passageway*." If we agree to go through her, then, through her faith, we will understand who God is, this God able to become flesh, able to suffer and die for us.

This is an essential truth of the faith. Without the maternal mediation of Mary, we are only connected to Christ in an imperfect way, to the extent of our partial and limited faith. But, in Mary's heart, we are begotten to the life of God. Thus, by becoming one with Mary, with her we become totally receptive to the Spirit. It is through Mary that Jesus entered into the world; it is also through Mary that Christ enters into our souls.

2. Cf. RM 38, 2, which quotes LG no. 60.

III -FOR US, TODAY

I – LOVING AND IMITATING MARY IMMACULATE

1 – CONTEMPLATING IN MARY WHAT WE ARE CALLED TO BECOME

In his letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul says, "[God] chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (1:4). Saint John says the same thing: "We are children of God... any one born of God does not sin" (1 Jn 3:2, 5:18). In God's mind, we are all "blameless," "immaculate," and grace is always offered to us so that we might become "holy and blameless." It is up to us to welcome that grace.

In Mary, we contemplate what we are called to become because, for the time being, we are in the process of becoming, we are still our "old selves," but we already have an immaculate dimension within us.

2 - BECOMING "ADORER OF THE FATHER"

God gives Himself to each individual, but He can only offer Himself within our freedom because the only thing the Almighty cannot do is force a heart to open. Mary Immaculate tells us what we should offer to God: to say "yes" to Him, to focus on God and thus take the focus off ourselves. This is true Christian conversion; this is an ongoing "Copernican revolution": the sun doesn't revolve around the earth; the earth revolves around the sun. Mary Immaculate helps us discover the importance of taking the focus off ourselves in order to put God at the center of our lives.

All too often, we tend to lapse into an erroneous understanding of religion. We turn Christianity into a moral system to make us better, we place ourselves at the center, and we make God into an instrument for our moral perfection, confusing a life of grace with moral perfection. Then God is no longer at the center; we are. But grace doesn't exist to make us perfect or more beautiful; grace is meant to help us **to become more loving and become nothing but Love.**

In 1830, the Virgin Mary and Catherine Labouré

Becoming blameless or immaculate is thus not a matter of “climbing” to become the best in terms of perfection but, quite the contrary, of learning to welcome, listen to and look at someone other than ourselves. Mary Immaculate teaches us to welcome God’s gift. This is what is the most difficult. It is hard work to accept second place and allow God to move through us.

What calls can we draw from this for our everyday lives? Here are three, among others, to allow God to accomplish His plan in us, in accordance with our vocation as servants of those who are poor.

3 – RECOGNIZING THE GRACES GRANTED TO ME

God never stops offering us His grace in order to free us from our limitations and fill us with His presence. Grace opens all our faculties to Love; it causes us to enter into a **living covenant with God** in a dynamic rather than static exchange because grace is also a **call to growth and a mission to fulfill**.

IN NAZARETH, **MARY** let God visit her. She fully welcomed the *special grace* of “*her Immaculate Conception*” **for her mission** as Mother of God.

For her, this grace was also **a call to growth**: God became an embryo in Mary’s womb so that this mother would grow with Him and help others to grow. Mary went forward along a faith journey that would go all the way to the foot of the Cross, this cross that was with her from start to finish.

IN PARIS, **CATHERINE** let God surprise her. She welcomed the *special grace* of the July 18, 1830, *encounter for the mission* that she had to fulfill: have a medal struck representing Mary Immaculate. For Catherine, this grace was **a call to see all things in God and God in all things**. We also know that this mission was the “*martyrdom of her life*.”

HERE, AT THIS MOMENT, **EACH ONE OF US** exists in God’s thoughts, but, nonetheless, this must be recognized.

a) A personal and special grace

Each one of us has received *a special grace... for a mission*. This special grace is entrusted to us personally. And it is always a *call to growth*, to further awakening to the life of God, to his way of seeing, thinking and acting. We must *cultivate* this special grace because no one else can do this for us.

b) Our “Nazareth”

Each day, God gives us His grace right in the heart of our lives, just as they are. Mary teaches us to discover “*our Nazareth*”, the “*Nazareth of our hearts*,” the “*Nazareth of our lives*” where God gives Himself. She can help us to not just focus on what we ask of God because, then, we no longer take into account *what he grants us each day*.

But, let’s not be mistaken! Welcoming God’s grace is not an insurance policy that allows us to “breeze through” life’s hardships. When Saint Paul says, “*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*,” he adds, “*the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me*” (Gal 2:20), that is, this goes *all the way to the Cross!* Thus, we should not be surprised that it isn’t always easy! We are forewarned: it takes us all the way to the foot of the Cross. So, if we are looking for comfort, a permanent siesta or personal fulfillment, we should go to a health spa, but that’s not going to the Lord’s side because He died on a cross.

II – LOVING AND IMITATING MARY, “SERVANT OF THE FATHER’S LOVING PLAN”

1 – PARTICIPATING IN MARY’S FAITH

Mary’s beatitude, “*Blessed are you who believed*,” is repeated at the end of Saint John’s Gospel when Jesus says to Thomas: “*Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed*,” that is, “*Blessed are the believers although non-seers*.” Thomas, the disciple who hesitates and doubts, must look toward Mary, the believer; he must follow the model of Mary’s faith. Through Thomas, it is the whole Church that must embrace Mary’s faith.

With Mary and through her, the Church learns to follow Christ, even to his self-emptying. Jesus chose to give His mother to us from the Cross

In 1830, the Virgin Mary and Catherine Labouré

because we need her maternal mediation so as to not remain limited by the capacity of our poor faith. Without her mediation, our ability to welcome Christ is limited and thus imperfect. Mary teaches us to strip ourselves of our status in order to allow the place for God in us to increase and to become humble servants of the Lord.

2 – BECOMING A SERVANT

Because Mary lived these words totally: “*May it be done to me according to your word,*” she can say to others: “*Do whatever He tells you*”: do not act according to your own ideas, but according to His Word! Through her complete availability to God, Mary teaches us that being a servant is not reduced to doing, to rendering services, but is fundamentally an interior spiritual attitude that seeks to do what pleases God; it is a predisposition of the heart that wants to accomplish God’s will in all things. What is important is not what we say and do but our capacity for obeying God’s will. And Mary can help us to re-center our will on God’s will, to act in such a way that our will corresponds to God’s will.

III – LOVING AND IMITATING MARY, “MOTHER”

1 - LOOKING AT OTHERS IN FAITH SO THAT THEY MIGHT “APPEAR”

Apparitions depend on the person who appears but also on the way this person looks at others. We often say that *Mary appeared to Catherine*, and it’s true. But we forget to say that *first Catherine had to appear to Mary*. Indeed, on July 18, Catherine was the first person to appear. No one noticed Catherine in the Seminary; she went unnoticed; she didn’t “appear” to anyone. But, in the light of God, Mary **looked at** Catherine, she **saw Catherine’s unique and priceless beauty**. We could say the same thing in a different way: “*in Mary’s eyes, Catherine’s interior mystery ‘appeared’*” or, in yet another way: “*in the light of love, Catherine ‘appeared’ to Mary.*”

Quite often, people around us pass by unnoticed: we do not hear them, we do not see them, or we look at them as mere objects, and we describe them on an external level without drawing close to them because we are blinded by our self-centeredness. In our everyday life, others do not

“appear” to us. If we learn to open our eyes, we will see our brothers and sisters in the light of God. Only a faith perspective allows us to recognize others as they are and not as we would like them to be; we can thus discern their presence and inner beauty. This apparition is a call to allow the mystery of the people we live with “to appear” in the light of God, to begin to remove all the masks that we put on them.

If we are able to say to each person: “*I love you because you are loved by God,*” or even, “*It is the Lord,*” and really believe it, then they can believe this and feel comfortable enough to reveal their true face. In that way, we allow them to “*appear*”. And if we do the same with our Sisters, this will immediately transform our local communities.

2 - BEING THERE WHERE GOD NEEDS US

- In the Gospel, Mary **is there** where God needs her.
- The night of July 18, Catherine **is there** where God needs her.
- Today, our vocation is “**being there**” where God needs us.

BEING THERE

We should always be asking ourselves, “*Am I really here in this moment?*” because we are often “half there”! We are a little tired, a little worried, a little preoccupied...we are always a little bit elsewhere, a little farther along or a little ahead.... When we are in the chapel or in a meeting, we are already thinking that it’s almost time to go, that we forgot to lock our office door or turn something off, etc.

Similarly, we can be beside someone but absent, just as we can be present to someone who is thousands of kilometers away. This means that it’s *not a question of physical presence*. So, it isn’t enough to “be there” physically for something to happen. We are not really present just because we are sitting or standing there; we are truly present *when we make ourselves present*.

In 1830, the Virgin Mary and Catherine Labouré

For others, our presence is always a radiating center... and what radiates is either luminous or obscure, according to the choices we make. Each day, God wants to come into the world and fill it with His presence. God is fullness, outpouring of fullness, but...He can do nothing without us; He needs us. He entrusts His presence to us.

However, God can only give Himself to *poor hearts* who make space for him. Poverty of heart, as opposed to self-sufficiency, is the key to the Gospel. Mary, who exists as welcome, teaches us this fundamental attitude that consists in welcoming the other with his difference, that is, not just to imagine that he could be different but also to free ourselves from any claim of possessing the key to every reality. If we believe that, whatever way you look at it, we are better than others, holier than they are, etc., no real encounter is possible.

BEING THERE WHERE GOD NEEDS US

If we are where God needs us, *we love the concrete reality* of our days; *we love the present moment* because God is found nowhere else than in our everyday life. We love:

- being there “in the chapel” when it’s time for prayer, and not just physically or intellectually there.
- being there “for times in community” in our gift of self to others, giving up anything that is too individualistic.
- being there “in service”... whether this is in direct service of those who are poor or in an office, the sacristy, the kitchen or at the dish sink... that is where God is. With the mystery of the Incarnation, we must seek God “here below,” in the midst of our lives.

Mary helps us understand that the greatness or difficulty of what we do is less important than the presence of love in whatever we are asked to do. The apparition of July 18, 1830, traces out the path of a “ministry of presence” consisting of proximity. *Presence*, if it is a gift of self, is the *greatest treasure that we can share*. Presence is something that goes beyond “doing”, even if we must also do a job and take care of various tasks.

When persons who are poor meet us and are sure that we are truly “*present*” before them and ready to listen to what they want to tell us, their hearts are touched, and we make God’s presence visible. The place where we are becomes the place of the “*real presence*” of God where hearts are touched and the world is transformed. Even without our knowing it, *those who cross our paths become more luminous and more loving*. This is because those who experience this “quality presence” know deep within that it restores peace in their hearts. We have all had this experience at one time or another: the human faces that remain alive in us are those through whom we have been able to glimpse the infinite Presence of God.

Sister Anne PRÉVOST
Daughter of Charity

The Word of God: Five Smooth Stones for Listening Well (continued)

W

The Word
of God

The five concepts that can help us study the Word of God are revelation, inspiration, interpretation, inerrancy and canonicity.

Having spoken about the first three concepts (see May-June 2014 *Echoes*), let's consider inerrancy (the conviction that the Bible is without error) and canonicity (a rule derived from the trace of its divine author).

IV. INERRANCY

We can often hear the sacred text of the Scriptures referred to as being “inerrant” or containing “infallible” teaching. The meaning of this affirmation must be clearly understood in order to know what it is that God chooses to reveal to us in the biblical message. A passage from the *Sacred Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* of Vatican II is most helpful in this regard:

“...since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.” (DV 11)

The qualification on what the Bible teaches must be noted here. The sacred text is written under the guidance of

the Holy Spirit, and thus it can be said to teach “*solidly, faithfully and without error,*” but the matter which is covered by this statement is “*that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of salvation.*” It is this final phrase which is key. The Bible teaches inerrantly the truth which God wants to reveal for the sake of our salvation.

The Bible is not a geography or history book; it is not a science or sociology text. It expresses the history and science and sociology as it was understood by the people of its time. The authors do not receive infused knowledge about the creation of the world or the origin of humankind or the migration of peoples. There are many examples of how this is true, and in the modern era, these ideas are often grouped around scientific principles. Let me begin with the story of Galileo.

For most of human history, when people thought about the question at all, it seemed like the sun revolved around the earth. When we go outside and watch the sun move across the sky, it seems that it is the sun which is moving and not us. To this is added the seeming truth that we do not feel any motion. This was the common sense belief of most people for a long time. In one biblical story, Joshua asks the Lord to halt the movement of the sun while the people of Israel are in battle. This was interpreted by some as teaching infallibly that the sun moved around the earth since Joshua stopped the sun (Jos 10:7-15) and Isaiah caused it to move backwards (Is 38:1ff). When Galileo demonstrated that the sun is, in fact, at the center of our solar system and that the planets move around the sun, it seemed like he was contradicting the Bible as well as the common sense of most people. But the Bible was not teaching astronomy or physics; it was expressing the belief of the people of the time. Whether the sun moves around the earth or the earth moves around the sun is not necessary for our salvation — only that God aids his people.

One can make similar arguments around the question of creation or evolution. How God made the universe or brought human beings into existence is not necessary for our salvation; the truth is that God caused these things to happen in some way according to the divine will. It is not how God created the universe or humans that is inerrant, but that God created these realities and us.

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The Bible teaches “*solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which is necessary for our salvation.*” If the teaching does not contribute to our salvation, it is not inerrant. We cannot look at the Bible as the answer book to every issue of science, history or sociology. People do not need to find the answer to every question hidden within the biblical text as if it were some mysterious and arcane text. The truth the Bible has to teach is clear for the simplest of believers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Its meaning does not need to be twisted and turned to find the responses to questions that the biblical writers never posed or even imagined. It is true that we need to study the biblical text in order to discern all its meaning and that deeper insights arise as we spend more time with text, but this is all on the level of our faith and not our knowledge of the mechanics of the world.

The inerrant teachings of the Scriptures are those which are necessary for our salvation, and these hold true in every time and place.

V. CANONICITY

The final concept we will consider is “canonicity.” Of all the terms, this may be the one which is least familiar to you, but it points to some very important ideas, which illuminate the biblical text.

Simply said, “canonicity” refers to the selection of certain texts which make up our Bible. All the texts that are part of our Judeo-Christian Scripture are called the “canon.” There were numerous texts available in the first centuries of the Christian era, which could have been included in our Bible. The Church selected those which would be included and disallowed others. It is the Church that decided under the guidance of the Holy Spirit which books would be part of the canon. It made this decision based on the evaluation of which texts speak to the heart of our faith and communicate the message of God most clearly. This selection process did not happen immediately in the first century. Without the benefit of a printing press and modern communication methods, individual units of the early Christian community had different books in their canon. One might have the Gospels of Mathew and John and the Book of Revelation and three of Paul’s epistles; another might have had the Gospels of Mark and Luke and the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of Peter and Jude; and so on. In some

of these local canons, other texts, which did not make it into the final canon of the “Great Church,” might have been included. It was not until the 4th Century that the Church gathered together all the books and decided which were to be part of the canon. It was a considerable effort but gave rise to the canon that we use today.

It is not the author of the text that determines whether or not it will be canonical; it is the Church — the People of God — that recognizes which texts communicate the true faith and are to be included among our sacred books.

There is a criticism which claims that the Church included some texts in the Bible and chose to exclude others. That is true and is the nature of Bible. Not everything written in the first centuries is the inspired word of God. The Bible comes to be within the bosom of the Church, and its authentic interpretation takes place in this context. The Bible belongs to the Church and each individual within the Church. No individual is able to place himself or herself outside the Church (which is to say the Judeo-Christian community) and authentically interpret the Scripture. Within the Christian community, however, there are numerous possible ways of listening to the Scriptures and discerning the will of God. The word of God is greater than the Church, but its meaning comes to fruition within the Church.

This first point about the character of canonicity leads to a second one. All the books included in the Bible are canonical in their entirety, and only all the books together make up the canonical Bible. We cannot pick and choose which books to consider canonical; we cannot select favorite phrases and reject the rest of the Scripture. The Bible is only canonical in its entirety. Only the Bible in its entirety is the revealed word of God.

What this means is that we must read the entire Bible in order to understand what God has revealed to us. Each part of the Biblical text helps in the interpretation of another.

We must also note that there is no such thing as “the” biblical text. We do not have the autograph of any biblical writing — the original text as hand-written by a biblical author. And thus we do not have

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an unqualified source from which to draw. Each biblical book has hundreds of manuscripts that witness to the text, and there are slight differences among each of them. It is in the whole that the revelation takes place and not in individual passages removed from their biblical context. This is the purpose and meaning of the canon. It includes all the biblical books in a canonical order and with a canonical text as presented and approved by the Church.

CONCLUSION

When we pick up the Bible and begin to read, it is not the same as reading any other book. We are confronted with the Word of God, which needs to be treated with respect and understanding. Lots of people make assumptions and insist on positions that are not justified by the biblical text. They do not recognize the reality of what God has given us. We can envision the Bible in somewhat the same terms as the mystery of Jesus, true God and true man. It is a divine and human reality. The Bible contains the inspired word of God, which reveals the divine will for the human community, but it is also a human construction, which contains the limitations of being part of the created order. The two concepts together allow us to approach the Bible with a proper eye.

To read the Bible properly, we must make use of the gifts which God has given us as human beings. First of all, of course, is the gift of the Holy Spirit who enables us to read the text with understanding and find its proper application. But, there is also the gift of human intelligence which encourages us to reflect upon the text and compare different portions of the text and discern what it is that God is teaching us (and me) at a particular time and place. Making use of the gifts that God has given us and opening ourselves to divine inspiration allows for the communication that the text is meant to initiate. We do not simply read the text, but we listen to it before God, we contemplate it in the divine presence and we seek the guidance it has to offer us and insight for our words and actions.

The five concepts illustrated in this talk on the Word of God can help us to listen to this Word with greater reverence and respect. We recognize that it is the Lord who reveals the divine self to us. We know that this

text was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and needs to be read under that same divine inspiration. We know that the Scripture has meaning for our time and place, and we are called to interpret it accordingly while being attentive to the meaning it had for the earliest Judeo-Christian communities. The inerrant truth the Bible teaches us is meant to lead to our salvation when we study and believe what we read. And we know that the Bible belongs to the Church and that it is within the Church, in the midst of a faith-filled community, that its meaning is ensured and protected.

The Bible is one of the great gifts the Lord has given to us. It is a means of divine-human communication. As we continue to read and pray with the Bible, we ask that the Lord will open our ears and our mouths to hear and speak it with faith.

text written by Father P. GRIFFIN, CM,
and read by Father B. SCHOEPFER, *Director General*
during the Session for Sisters 25-40 years vocation

Province of Slovenia

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Testimonies

Slovenia was formerly part of Yugoslavia, became independent in 1991 and joined the European Union in 1997. I grew up in a communist regime, which affected my youth. I was never persecuted or discriminated against personally although religious people were considered second class citizens at that time. If a person wasn't a member of the communist party, he or she could not have a prominent job as a teacher, manager, policeman, director, etc. Despite the democratic regime now, people still have this mentality that means religious people, families with more than three children and farmers are treated as second class. The older generation, including my parents, suffered a lot after World War II. My three uncles were murdered after the war, and one of them had been a theology student. However, I wasn't obstructed in my studies like young people a decade or two before. When I was in school, I still remember whispering about those teachers who lived their faith privately, going to mass at other parishes and sitting hidden in some corner of a church.

I joined the Daughters of Charity because I wished to work in the medical profession. At that time the main work of our sisters was medical because they were prohibited from doing anything else. I admired the charm and spirituality of St. Vincent and felt it was my life mission. The Sisters were exiled to Serbia, so I made my Seminary there. I'm very grateful I can serve mentally and physically ill people.

I have been working for seventeen years now as a primary care doctor within the national health system, which cares for the majority of people including the marginalized and poor. Our health system has been based on solidarity, but, increasingly, people's income is too low to afford basic insurance, especially foreign workers from different parts of former Yugoslavia living in Slovenia. They are exploited, poor and without rights. Too often they lose work if they speak out or call an inspector. Usually I treat them free or find some way to organize treatment.

I currently work in a health center in a small town in the countryside. I work in a team with a lay nurse who is a great help to me. I believe that I understand my patients much more if I share their living and working conditions. As a Sister, I'm expected to work more for less. Slovenia is the most corrupt country in Europe as a consequence of the former regime. I try to offer equally beneficial help to everyone. Sometimes I do even more for the poor, who are too often unable or too humble to get proper help. Primary care work enables me to see or find people with various problems or needs: medical, social, family problems, problems related to immigration, violence or loneliness. I have the opportunity to see them in their homes and accompany them in their lives. I can counsel or just listen to them when they need. I can send a nurse to help them or call a social worker or a psychologist. I can direct them to different clubs or associations. Of course, my main work is medical treatment.

To be a doctor or a nurse is a gratifying profession, which offers us inner satisfaction daily. One of Jesus's main works was to cure sick and disabled people. He knew how destructive suffering can be, and he strongly sympathized with ill people. He cured them, body and soul.

Nobody knows how terribly the pain aches until we experience it in our own bodies. It is so different when I say to a patient, "You've got this or that disease," from when I get it myself. I have learned that every problem becomes a real problem only when it is mine. I try to be sympathetic with sick people. I make an effort not to generalize, because every person is an individual worthy of respect. I don't treat angina; I treat the person who has angina. My patient is not an object, and a clinical approach should not take precedence over the human

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person. The industrial model of a doctor working faster and cheaper leads to routine and the dehumanization of patients, which strips them of their dignity.

I suppose that my preoccupation with paper and computer work is similar to what you all experience. Instead of being focused on a patient, I must fill out so many forms, write down the same thing three times in three different places. Unfortunately, bureaucracy seems to overpower our lives. If I want to take more time for my patients, I must take it from my own spare time.

In my work I can see how people long for God nowadays.

In my country we have a lot of declared atheists who look for the meaning of life in money or career. When they get ill, especially with a serious disease, they fight it to the point of exhaustion. If somebody dies, relatives want to find who is guilty for the death. Too often they accuse a doctor or the treatment. Even some religious people lose their faith in God during their illness. In the past people felt that an illness was a penalty for sin; nowadays, they think it is a penalty for an unhealthy life. So illness makes them start caring for their bodies to the extreme. They start all sorts of diets, gymnastics and spiritualities like yoga. Their time and thoughts become preoccupied with themselves. They do everything to feel fit, no matter if they neglect all other duties or people. Having a trained healthy body has become the modern god.

There is one other unbelievable situation with old, isolated or terminally ill people. They do not have proper support or care from their families. Nobody has time or energy for them. Patients' relatives sometimes come to me to show how they wish the best care for their parents, but do nothing to help. They expect all care from the public health system including nursing and transport to the doctor. On the other hand, old people don't want to be a burden to their families, and many times they ask me to do what their relatives should do. Our health system does not have hospices or hospitals established for care of the terminally ill. So they usually stay in hospital wards or rotate through different hospitals until they die. There used to be quality nursing home care in Slovenia, but it has started to decline recently because of the economic crisis. It is becoming too expensive for the poor. Since fewer people can afford

it, they stay at home regardless if somebody is there to care for them or not. In this social domain, I can try to organize help or care for them.

Apart from my professional work, I invest some time in parish work, which is in one way a balance to my living in a medical atmosphere and dealing with suffering and dying all the time. I work with children and youth as a catechist and as part of a team involved in different parish projects. The main emphasis of our work is to create a homey atmosphere where people feel accepted and loved. In such an environment, people can more easily find a loving God. In Slovenia first the communist regime and savage liberalism afterwards created a hostile climate against religious people and clergy especially. Of course, the recent financial affair in Maribor in which the Church lost huge amounts of money through incorrect investments has increased hatred for the Catholic Church, which was the majority religion in Slovenia in the past. In such a hostile climate, only the sincere and open example of my life and personal relationships can witness to God's love. In my experience, working with Vincentian priests can bear greater fruits through the practical and spiritual aspects of collaboration between men and women.

In the Province of Slovenia, there are a lot of possibilities to serve the poor today and a lack of young sisters, in contrast with the past, when we had enough sisters, but they weren't allowed to do their mission publicly. I believe strongly that God has His own way to reach our hearts and support all different services to the poor no matter how well our plans are made. What I wish in my life as a Daughter of Charity is to witness to a loving God, to be a person who is with people in their suffering and loneliness, a person who shares their problems and struggles, who relieves their pain with tablets or holding their hand.

Sister Marta JERMAN
Daughter of Charity

**Who is more open
to God's Will
than someone who does it in everything,
who doesn't seek himself
in anything...?**

**Is anyone freer
and better disposed
to do the Divine Will
than that person?**

**And how can purity of intention
be better practiced
than by doing God's Will?**

**Is there anyone who has more
perfect purity of intention
than to will and to do
whatever God wills and
in the way He wills it?...**

**God takes works into account only
when He sees himself in them
and they're dedicated to Him.**

(Coste XII, p. 128)

