

*E*choes *of the Company*



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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“Renew your courage so that you may serve God and the poor with more fervor, humility and charity than ever.”

(SW p. 600, L. 581)



“Grace is necessary to begin and we need more to persevere to the end.”

(Coste I, p. 346 L. 245)

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Letter to the Daughters of Charity

August 31, 2014

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Letters

Dear Sisters,

On Tuesday, March 25, on the feast of the Annunciation of the Lord, Father Gregory Gay installed me as Director General of the Daughters of Charity. Since then, I have participated in several Council meetings, formation sessions for Sisters, the Provincial Assembly of the Quasi-Province, and various meetings... I thank Sister Evelyne for her listening, advice and encouragement.

2014 is an important year for me. On May 4, I celebrated 25 years of priesthood, and I will be 30 years vocation in September. Father Gregory's call caused astonishment, trust and peace in me. In the rite of ordination, there is an expression that dwells deep within my heart: "*May God Himself bring to completion what He has begun in you.*" I deeply believe that God is at work in our lives. Saint Vincent told us that "*wisdom consists in following Providence step by step*" (Coste II, p. 521).

I took my first steps in priestly ministry in 1989. I was sent to the Diocese of Amiens, which was where Saint Vincent had a spiritual experience in January 1617 in Folleville. We were three confreres living out our mission in Saint Riquier, in the western part of the Somme. For more than 8 years, I criss-crossed this region. Rural ministry allowed me to visit families, support catechists, establish baptismal preparation teams, bring choirs together for liturgy, etc. We were responsible for animating pastoral life in about thirty

villages. We tried to form the baptized to take responsibility for their “Church”. Various groups were established to respond to the reality of people’s lives and to the expectations of Christians in this area.

In 1998, I joined CIF (International Formation Center). For 3 months, fifteen confreres and I engaged in a review of our missionary life in light of the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission. It was a beautiful experience of the internationality of the Congregation. At the conclusion of this formation period, we renewed our “yes” as disciples of Christ, the evangelizer of the poor.

Then, for 6 years, I was part of the team responsible for the Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. Welcoming pilgrims, the sacrament of reconciliation, celebration of the Eucharist, and praying the rosary were experiences of faith and joy but were also encounters with persons with difficulties, wounded by life, suffering... They are pilgrims who come to entrust their lives “at the foot of the altar”. This is one of the places where, when the priest says, “*Go in peace,*” many pilgrims come forward toward the altar to pray, implore, and speak to Mary...

While participating in the life of the chapel, I shared life with Vincentian seminarians for their formation to priestly ministry. I am happy that I was able to accompany a number of confreres from various countries in their formation process.

I was named superior of the Mother House in Paris in 2004. I handed this over to Father Bertrand Ponsard, today, Sunday, August 31. It was ten years of leading a multi-generational and multi-cultural community of confreres. Each day, at least three continents were represented around the table. I think that I experienced the internationality of the Congregation of the Mission by being responsible for this community. So many events, sessions, meetings, changes, renovations, joys and trials throughout these years of service. I tried to accompany my confreres with patience, perseverance and humor. Through experience, we know that living in a community is an act of faith. We did not chose each other. We receive each other from Christ in order to live the Church’s mission.

During these years as a priest, I have also been the spiritual advisor for the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and the national chaplain for the

Letter to the Daughters of Charity

International Association of Charity in France. I am grateful to all these men and women. With the members of the Vincentian Family, I learned to share and grow more deeply in our shared charism. As I recall the faces I met and the activities we carried out together, I make Saint Paul's words to the Corinthians my own: "*What do you possess that you have not received?*" (1 Cor 4:7)

Now, I wish to fully live my service for the Company of the Daughters of Charity. I welcome this new mission in a spirit of trust and availability. Father Patrick Griffin initiated me in my first steps in this wonderful ministry. He taught me about the role of the Director General with three verbs: accompany, animate and form. Thanks to Patrick for his commitment and fraternal friendship.

With you, I will learn to follow the path of life, the path of faith. Like the Virgin Mary, let us learn each day to say, "Here I am"; in that way, "the boldness of Charity" will transform our hearts for "a new missionary momentum." May Saint Vincent and Saint Louise help us to accomplish not our works but those of the Lord, at the service of the least among us!

Thank you so much for your letters, messages and prayers at the time of my appointment and for the feast of Saint Bernard.

I assure you of my brotherly prayers.

Father Bernard SCHOEPFER, CM
directeurgeneral@cfdlc.org

Letter of September 27, 2014

My dear Sisters,

May the Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you always!

In a conference to the Priests of the Mission, on May 30, 1659, Saint Vincent spoke this phrase which has often been repeated since:

*“It’s true then, that I’m sent not only to love God, but to make Him loved. It’s not enough for me to love God, if my neighbor doesn’t love Him.”*¹

This year, I have chosen these few lines to offer you my best wishes for a happy and holy Feast of St. Vincent. Our Founder was animated by a passion for Our Lord recognized and served in those who are poor and with a contagious enthusiasm to put out into the deep, *to do more*, two features which the theme of our General Assembly echoes.

Let us listen again to St. Vincent speaking to us of the persons who are poor, of yesterday and of today, and of the radical nature of our gift to God:

*“The poor, who do not know where to go or what to do, who are suffering already and who increase daily, are my burden and my sorrow.”*²

*“We must go straight to God and seek only to please Him...”*³

*“Hold yourselves in readiness to do whatever He wants you to do.”*⁴

1. Conference 30 May 1659, ‘Charity’. Coste XII, p. 215

2. Letter to René Alméras, 8 October 1649. Coste III, p. 492

3. Council of 8 April 1655. Coste XIIIb, p. 319

4. Conference of 9 June 1658, ‘Trust in Divine Providence’. Coste X, p.409

Letter of September 27, 2014

Let us ask the Lord, by the intercession of St. Vincent, to be faithful to the spirit of the Company.

I have just returned from a visit to Belarus with Sister Zofia Daniscakova. Our first stop was at Minsk where we participated in a gathering for formation and for exchanges regularly organized by the Sisters who serve in the countries of the ex-USSR, that means Sisters in Belarus, in Ukraine, in Russia and in Kazakhstan. They number about forty and belong to the Provinces of Chelmno, Krakow, Warsaw and Slovakia.

The Sisters who live in Ukraine told of the consequences of the political tensions for the people: in the East many are displaced, and in the West families are anguished seeing the young people go into the army. The Sisters in Kazakhstan recounted how they had organized a one-month mission in Uzbekistan, a country where access is very difficult for foreigners. The Sisters working in Russia and Belarus shared with us the joys and the challenges encountered in their services.

Sister Zofia and I, in the company of the Visitatrix of the Province of Warsaw, then visited the Community of Shumilino and the Annex at Minsk in Belarus. We praised God for the services that the Sisters provide for isolated persons, the elderly and those who are sick, as well as the welcome and solid formation they offer to the youth, in collaboration with the local Church.

At the Mother House, the fifth session on Spiritual and Vincentian Revitalization, which gathered 79 Sisters from 7 – 10 years vocation, is coming to a close. They are preparing a message which will be presented during the General Assembly. We are happy to see that all these sessions by age group have given the Sisters a memorable experience of the internationality of the Company and of the relevance of the Vincentian charism.

Two days ago, we celebrated the Sending on Mission of two Sisters from the Province of Vietnam to the Chinese Province. The Eucharist was celebrated by Father Bernard, and all the Sisters of the session participated. Let us pray for these new missionaries and those who will follow.

A Commission will meet next month, here in the Mother House, to prepare the synthesis of all the documents from your Provincial Assemblies. I know that you are praying for the preparation being made for the General Assembly, which is taking place according to the timetable.

Today, we will remember very specially Father Gregory, our Superior General, the Priests and Brothers of the Congregation of the Mission and the members of the Vincentian Family.

Happy and Holy Feast of St. Vincent! Let us present to the Lord the intentions of Pope Francis and the Synod on the Family, which is now very close. Let us also unite our prayers for peace in our world undermined by so many injustices and conflicts and for the poor who are the first victims.

With my devoted affection and the assurance of my prayers for each one of you,

Sister Evelyne FRANC
Daughter of Charity

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“Open to the Transforming Spirit”

*International
Session*

International Session

**held at the Mother House
from May 5 - 19, 2014**

**for Spiritual and Vincentian
Revitalization**

**of Daughters of Charity
over 40 years vocation**

Being Happy on the Second Side of Life

“SOMEONE IS WAITING FOR ME”

SPIRITUALITY OF AGING

INTRODUCTION

The subtitle of this conference was inspired by the title of the book, *Someone is waiting for me, aging and spirituality* by Jacques Sylvestre, a Canadian Dominican, published by Media-Saint-Paul in 2010.

We find this type of topic or question treated more and more in articles, lectures or books. The European Year for Aging in 2010 intensified this trend. First, let's reflect a little on the second part of the title.

THE SECOND SIDE OF LIFE

This is a loose and flexible phrase that includes all the steps of aging - approximately from retirement from professional life until the very last step of life. I see among you - according to the list of participants from all your Provinces - Sisters who are just crossing into the second side of life and others who are already well along in it - like myself. I am 85 years old.

This second side of life suggests a *descent after an ascension, a decline after a rise*. A decline: what kind? of physical strength? of mental energy? Starting at what moment, at what age, do we tip into the second side of life, and what implications are there for us as consecrated persons? Perhaps it is once we become aware of it and admit it to ourselves - even though others have realized this before we did!

Being Happy on the Second Side of Life

Diversity of situations

Because situations are so diverse when traveling through this second side of life, how can I speak of a spirituality of aging such that everyone feel implicated? The palette varies from the senior still in excellent shape and very active to the extreme case of a person struck by Alzheimer's. Between the two, every stage of decline is found. You will become well aware of this during your testimonies, your group work, etc.

Drawing upon mathematics

To get beyond this difficulty, I resorted to a graph that tries to present in a visual form the words of the great Apostle Saint Paul:

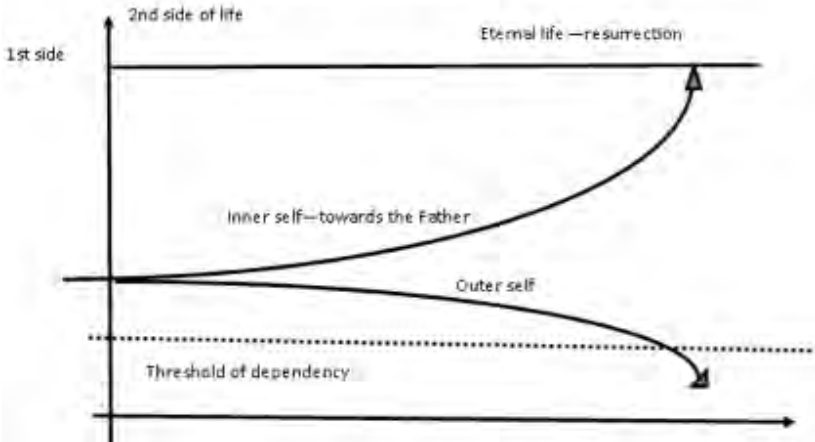
*“Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our **outer self** is wasting away, our **inner self** is being renewed day by day. For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison”* (2 Cor 4:16-17).

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor 5:1).

*“The pair **outer self/inner self** refers to our personality in its entirety. The **outer self** is not the material being, but man marked by sin that damages him. The **inner self**, on the contrary, advances more and more toward his future in Christ: he is renewed day by day”* (Maurice Carrez, *Commentaire pastoral de la 2ème épître aux Corinthiens*, 1996, Bayard Editions).

Being happy on the second side of life

"Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer-self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day." (2 Cor 4:16)



Commentary on the graph

In the space limited by the x- and y- axis, a point located on the vertical (y-) axis marks the beginning of the second side of life. Starting from this point, a DESCENDING LINE represents the path of the “outer self wasting away,” both the decay of the old self, under the influence of sin, and the part of ourselves that is mortal: **aging** and the deterioration in physical and psychological strength. It is up to us, to a certain extent, to slow down this decline: by leading a healthy life (food, physical exercise) focused on others.

As it goes down, more or less rapidly depending on the individual, this line ends up crossing FIRST a DOTTED HORIZONTAL LINE, which marks the beginning of loss of autonomy and of dependence;

then, the HORIZONTAL AXIS, which marks physical death and swallows up the old self.

But, starting from the same point on the vertical axis, an ASYMPTOTIC CURVE sets off. It represents the path, the takeoff of the “inner self being renewed day by day” according to our receptivity to the breath of

Being Happy on the Second Side of Life

Jesus's Spirit. This is the ascension of the sons of God - and daughters of God - to the encounter with the Father who resurrects us in Jesus Christ for eternal life.

The challenge in our lives as baptized and consecrated persons is to give as much momentum as possible to the asymptotic curve while the other is in the process of ebbing.

This graph shows how our route is analogous with that of Jesus:

“Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (Christ's kenosis), being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name ...” (Phil 2:6-9)

Concerning the first part of the title: “BEING HAPPY”

This can't be about a euphoric happiness that comes from good health and times when events aren't more frustrating than we'd wish. In this case, being happy is entering into the beatitude of the poor and merciful, even if one day aging and its share of sufferings will pierce us, body and spirit.

A short testimony by Sister Françoise de Niederbronn, who became blind, might help us. She said: “Despite my handicap, I can say that I am happy, which does not exclude suffering. Because MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU.”

I'm sorry for your sake, but I can only mention testimonies from France. I am sure you know others from your continents and your countries.

In addition, quotes from the letter by Pope John Paul II to elderly persons, which dates back to 1999, will be with us throughout my presentations.

1. THE DESCENDING CURVE OF THE OUTER SELF

Changes in ministry, the loss of status and decline in strength

Entering retirement is a first stage. For those of you who worked professionally, legal entry into retirement marks a step that is sometimes difficult to pass into. The exercise of a profession, a ministry, a service (teacher, nurse, care-giver, pastoral worker or other) is an important aspect of identity.

The image that this profession or service gives us of ourselves is more or less positive. In any case, we tend - and sometimes are too tempted - to identify ourselves with our job.

The end of leadership responsibility at various levels, which is also a fulfilling role, represents a loss of power, of status, at the same time that it can be a relief. It is time to accept rejoining the rank-and-file.

After entering retirement and no longer having that same status, the energy that was invested in professional activity or an important ministry becomes available for other tasks.

In your Constitutions, you can read in C. 35a and b: *“Regardless of age, duty, or ministry, each Sister is aware of her responsibility to contribute with all the wealth of her personality and culture to the common mission.”*

“...the sick and elderly Sisters truly share in mission. The community surrounds them with care and affection and helps them to accept, in peace and serenity, their limitations of age and health as a form of service.”

As age advances, the weight of aging will make itself felt.

THE WEIGHT OF AGING

John Paul II wrote in his letter to the elderly (1999):

“Dear elderly friends who feel insecure because of ill health or other circumstances, I assure you of my closeness and affection. When God permits us to suffer because of illness, loneliness or other reasons associated with old age, he always gives us the grace and strength to unite ourselves with greater love to the sacrifice of his Son and to share ever more fully in his plan of salvation. Let us be convinced of this: he is our Father, a Father rich in love and mercy!” (no. 13)

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All of us notice and must learn to accept:

Decrease in strength, in energy

More time is needed to do the same task; slowness settles in because of tiredness that quickly makes itself known. We must put more effort into things, and we can feel like we're becoming lazy.

Lessening visual acuity

Small type becomes illegible; we must use a magnifying glass. The time will come when it would be wise to no longer drive.

Decrease in ability to hear

We only understand bits and pieces of a presentation or homily. The same goes for conversations at meals. The meaning of a sentence escapes us, which can lead to misunderstandings. There is a sense of being cut off from community life. A hearing aid doesn't always manage to resolve these difficulties.

Memory lapses

I can't think of the word I was about to say. It will come back to me a few minutes later, too late.

Physical troubles

The progressive decline of physical forces: sight, hearing, memory, mobility...can result in a great deal of dependence.

Fear of these little disabilities can grow worse, and bitterness about aging and the sense of being useless or being a burden on others, etc., can make us lose our will to live and end in depression.

THE EXPERIENCE OF DEPENDENCY

A personal story may help us. Let's listen to Dominican Sister Jeanne Marie from Boscodon who, at age 85, described her experience in her book:

"In the autumn of 2010...I began to feel very tired, and, when I had a compression of the spinal column, a doctor ended up diagnosing chronic leukemia... I still don't know how to live this well. I experience

difficult periods of solitude when I am too worn out. And then, I have the experience of dependency: you lose control over your body, which requires a certain humility; others undress you... You are no longer the only master of your life, and at times you are not master of it at all...I have gone through moments when I no longer had any strength, dozing off, unable to say my prayers. I realized that death was becoming a real possibility, and, what's more, I thought about it a lot" (Sr. Jeanne Marie, *Les âges dans nos vies. Entretien avec Arnaud de Coral*, Cerf 2012, p. 92-93). She died in 2013.

We have the experience that the Holy Spirit leads us where we do not want to go:

Jesus Himself prepared his apostle Peter for this:

"Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, 'Do you love me?' and he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' [Jesus] said to Him, 'Feed my sheep. Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.' He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God" (Jn 21:17-19).

The advantages of aging

Becoming a senior and aging do not just have disadvantages; there are also advantages that balance it out.

No longer living with the pressure of things that must be done allows us to take a step back and look up at the horizon. Progressive loss of energy invites us to leave activism behind and refocus on the heart of the 'job' of consecrated life: following Christ, being more than doing.

In article 5 of John Paul II's letter, he says: *"In a certain sense, it is the season for that wisdom which generally comes from experience, since 'time is a great teacher'. The prayer of the Psalmist is well known: 'Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart' (Ps 90:12)."*

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What do you think of this reflection by the Orthodox philosopher Bertrand Vergely: “*The longer we live, the more opportunity we have to practice the extraordinary perspective that old age gives us.*” (in the magazine *La Vie*, special issue on aging well).

Many things still remain to be done...many services to offer within the local community. Modest services, but those that make life together easier... Aren't the little or major troubles of aging an opportunity to die to self as Christ invited His disciples who wanted to follow Him? “*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me*” (Mt 16:24).

There is a powerful invitation to die to self as the grain of wheat that falls to the ground: “*We would like to see Jesus.’ Philip went and told Andrew... Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat but if it dies, it produces much fruit’*” (Jn 12:21-24).

What is lost in terms of efficiency can become fruitfulness.

2. THE ASCENDING CURVE OF THE INNER SELF

Fruitfulness of aging

Pope John Paul II meditated in his letter on the deep meaning of aging; in article 8, he quotes Psalm 92, verses 13-16: “*Planted in the house of the Lord, the just will flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a Lebanon cedar; they flourish in the courts of the Lord, still bearing fruit when they are old, still full of sap, still green, to proclaim that the Lord is just; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.*”

The Pope continues in the same article: “*Thus the teaching and language of the Bible present old age as a ‘favorable time’ for bringing life to its fulfilment and, in God’s plan for each person, as a time when everything comes together and enables us better to grasp life’s meaning and to attain ‘wisdom of heart’... Old age is the final stage of human maturity and a sign of God’s blessing.*”

God's preference for weak means

In the Old Testament, living a long time and dying after many long years, surrounded by numerous descendants, are signs of God's blessing. But it is not so much because advanced age can be rich in experience and wisdom (*old age*, Dictionary of Biblical Theology) that God calls on elderly persons to implement his plan of salvation: Abraham and Sarah, Zachariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna. It is probably because, without any hope for descendants, they experienced the beatitude of the poor. Moses was old when God spoke to him from the burning bush, and he was an emigrant. He would be risking his life if he returned to Egypt.

This is a constant theme in the Bible: God prefers weak means. Far from being an obstacle, human weakness makes room for divine mercy to work. Saint Paul had this experience: “[*The Lord*] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Cor 12:9).

Couldn't we apply this spirituality of personal aging to the aging of our communities and sometimes even their death?

THE SERVANT'S FAITHFULNESS

Remember Nelson Mandela's perseverance (cf. the film *Invictus*). He spent many years in prison, without ever giving in despite invitations by the White government to collaborate in a regime that maintained apartheid. Having become an old man, he took on the office as the first Black president of South Africa.

Mother Teresa kept her smile while she lived many years feeling abandoned by God.

“In the evening time of a long life, crushed by pastoral responsibilities and physical suffering, Pope John Paul II always maintained his will to live and the desire to bear witness to it,” Jacques Sylvestre wrote in his book *Someone is waiting for me*.

To quote John Paul II himself yet again: *“In this spirit, dear elderly brothers and sisters, as I encourage each of you to live with serenity the years that the Lord has granted you, I feel a spontaneous desire to*

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share fully with you my own feelings at this point of my life, after more than twenty years of ministry on the throne of Peter and as we await the arrival, now imminent, of the Third Millennium. Despite the limitations brought on by age, I continue to enjoy life. For this I thank the Lord. It is wonderful to be able to give oneself to the very end for the sake of the Kingdom of God!” (no. 17)

He was that faithful servant who waited for his Master’s return until late in the night, his apron tied around his waist, like Christ the night of the washing of the feet: *“Gird your loins and light your lamps and be like servants who await their master’s return from a wedding, ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival. Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself, have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them. And should he come in the second or third watch and find them prepared in this way, blessed are those servants” (Lk 12:35-38).*

We give thanks to God for so many more of these faithful servants whom we know. The Master will gird his loins one day for them as well.

Following His example, many Sisters - perhaps including some of you here - serve our elderly or infirm brothers and sisters.

Here are two short testimonies from Sisters of other Congregations after their experience in this truly special ministry:

First, Sr. Christiane of Ribeuauvillé: *“In taking care of elderly persons, there are three key words: curiosity (interest given to the individual), flexibility (acceptance of being disturbed), consistency (with what is essential, the God’s loving plan for all people).”*

Next, Sr. Marie-Claude, a Little Sister of the Poor: *“Enter into union with God and with His Son in order to understand elderly people and make them happy through the Love we bring them.”*

RESPONSIBLE AGING – TRANSMISSION AND WISDOM

Responsibility toward younger generations

Because of their long life experience (human life and consecrated life) and acquired wisdom, elders contract a duty toward younger generations.

I quote Pope John Paul II: *“The Christian community can receive much from the serene presence of older people.... How many people find understanding and comfort from elderly people... At the very time when their physical energies and their level of activity are decreasing, these brothers and sisters of ours become all the more precious in the mysterious plan of Providence”* (no. 13).

WITNESSES TO THE FAITH

Saint Paul tells us: *“For I am already being poured out like a libation, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith”* (2 Tim 4:6-7).

During a gathering of about twenty senior-aged Dominicans, four young friars, who had come to help with the meeting, gave this testimony about their elders: *“They gave us a witness of life that, through its joys and difficulties, makes us say that it makes sense to make our profession ‘until death,’ even if, at 25 or 30 years of age, we don’t really know what those words cover... The challenges that will confront our generation can legitimately make our heads spin. But, in this domain, our elder brothers invite us to hope... they who entered the Order before the Council, who saw religious life change in a more radical way than ever before, prove that you can go through these storms by remaining profoundly young, that is, always open to the breath of the Spirit”* (Preachers, Newsletter of the Dominicans of the Province of France, September 2012).

Witnesses of joy

The witness of elders’ proven and joyful faith and continually renewed hope will have all the more impact when it is offered by women and men who are happy to be given to Christ and who know how to age without becoming old.

The actor Jean-Louis Trintignant, when he received the Palme d’or Award for the film *Amour* by Haneke, quoted the following line from a poem by Jacques Prévert: *“What if we tried to be happy, if only to give an example.”*

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In fact, to some extent, we chose how we age: *“It isn’t old age that destroys us but the image that we have made for ourselves of it. For those who expect decline, there is no possible illusion: it will come. Neither fortune nor misfortune comes to us without our having prepared its nest”* (Christiane Singer, *Les âges de la vie*).

We can age without becoming old by carefully guarding against remaining prisoner to our past, however glorious it may be. We must be attentive to not keep turning it over in our minds so much that we can no longer listen to younger generations, such as by rushing to give advice even before listening to the situation. In other words, this is not being able to abandon that teacher status when in fact it would be so beneficial to adopt the attitude of a student who still has much to learn from others. Here’s a saying by Chekhov to reflect on: *“The wise man likes to listen; the fool likes to teach.”*

TURNED TOWARD THE KINGDOM THAT IS TO COME

Aging, a moment of great significance

With all of us, the poet Saint-John Perse says: *“Great age, here we are. A date was made long ago with this moment of great significance.”* I do not know what meaning this poet gave to his advanced age. What I can say is that, at this age, the intense sense of having arrived at the last stage of life leads to evaluating our human undertakings, sub specie aeternitatis, that is, in the anticipation and light of eternity.

Thomas Stearns Eliot summed up his reflection on life by writing: *“My end is my beginning.”*

In one of his very profound meditations, Christian de Chergé, prior of the monastery of Tibihirine in North Africa, takes us even further, saying: *“Know that this very day, which is apparently incomplete, has eternal value.”*

Here, I would like to take up the letter by John Paul II again, article 14: *“If life is a pilgrimage towards our heavenly home, then old age is the most natural time to look towards the threshold of eternity. And yet, even we elderly people find it hard to resign ourselves to the prospect of making*

this passage. In our human condition touched by sin, death presents a certain dark side which cannot but bring sadness and fear.”

“If old age is the undeniable sign of humanity’s finite nature, accepting it opens up possibilities anew,” Jean Prévost said (in the magazine *La Vie*, issue on aging well).

John Paul II’s witness

“Who does not remember,” says Jacques Sylvestre, *“the image of the old man at his bedroom window, hardly able to speak a few words, inaudible to the crowds on Saint Peter’s Square, a farewell that he abruptly concluded with a tear? The strength and courage that witnesses demonstrate when facing death do not minimize in the least the hard fight that they had to fight to fulfill their mission to the very end.”*

Pope John Paul II himself wrote, *“Despite the limitations brought on by age, I continue to enjoy life. For this I thank the Lord. It is wonderful to be able to give oneself to the very end for the sake of the Kingdom of God! At the same time, I find great peace in thinking of the time when the Lord will call me: from life to life! ... at the hour of my death, call me and bid me come to you. ...”* (no. 17) *“‘Iube me venire ad te!’ - bid me come to you-: this is the deepest yearning of the human heart, even in those who are not conscious of it. Grant, O Lord of life, that we may be ever vividly aware of this and that we may savor every season of our lives as a gift filled with promise for the future. Grant that we may lovingly accept your will, and place ourselves each day in your merciful hands”* (no. 18).

CONCLUSION

SOMEONE IS WAITING FOR US; LET US GO OUT TO MEET HIM

In the response to the reading for Vespers on Monday of the 4th week, there is the following phrase: *“Beyond all suffering, endless joy awaits us.”* This joy is a person, it is God, luminous and eternal Love.

How much do we think about this in our everyday life?

Being Happy on the Second Side of Life

I learned that among the saints and blessed of the Vincentian Family, there is a young man from the 20th century, Pier Giorgio Frassati, who died at the age of 24 and whom John Paul II beatified and gave as an example to youth with the title of “man of the beatitudes.” One day, Pier Giorgio confided to his father’s driver, “*I would like to be old so that I would get to Paradise faster.*” God would then be “*all in all*” (1 Cor 15:28), in eternal life (cf. CCC 1050).

To conclude, I would like to quote J. Sylvestre one more time (p. 11): “*Supported by an effort of interiority and emptying, progressively experiencing all the trials connected to aging, why not live this great age with a flourish, thanks to the anticipation of a meeting which nothing here below could fulfill? Young people would want to know why we seem happy, to discover the sources and the secret of this lasting holiness. Is life so wonderful as all that, even at your age? Someone is waiting for me, I will answer them.*”

*“There are three stages in life:
the first is childhood (0 - 20)
the second, adolescence (20 - 60)
and the third, youth, which begins at 60.”*
(Gaston Bachelard, philosopher)

“*At midnight, there was a cry, ‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’*” (Mt 25:6)

As for me, Friar Jacques-François, I would like to be able to offer the face of a happy Dominican friar. Happy to have responded to Christ’s call 63 years ago. My mission is surely not over. If my health declines significantly, the task could become more arduous.

Friar Jacques-François VERGONJEANNE, OP

Mary and a Mature Spirituality at the Cross

By giving us the seal of the Company and the motto, *“The charity of Jesus crucified urges us,”* Saint Louise clearly wanted to focus our attention on the mystery of the Redemption. When we look at Jesus crucified, we see Mary present at the foot of the cross. Let us contemplate her experience at the cross and what she has to teach us about discipleship and the Vincentian charism. In particular, I would like to emphasize the way that Mary unites her feeling and her prayer to those of Jesus in this most intimate of moments: the death of a loved one. In the days that followed Good Friday, the experience of the hours spent at the foot of the cross must have been repeatedly *“pondered in her heart.”*

At the cross with Mary is a good place to reflect on our identity as servants of the poor. She who heard the seven last words of Jesus can teach us.

“FATHER, FORGIVE THEM, THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO.” (Lk 23:33-34)

“When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him and the criminals there, one on his right, the other on his left. Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.’” (Lk 23:33-34)

Even in the midst of his crucifixion, Jesus’ first thoughts are ones of forgiveness. During the course of his life, he has come to know the human heart well. He has come to know how much we can love because he had loved greatly himself and had been loved. He also knows our ability to hate and harm one another. Sometimes we do this without even knowing what or why we are doing it. Those who executed Jesus did it as part of their job. They did not know his innocence or even care who he was. All they wanted was to finish their task; his pain was not their affair any more than the pain of the criminals crucified with him.

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Perhaps, this lack of involvement draws Jesus' forgiveness. How often we hurt one another without any attention or regret because it is not part of our concern. How often the innocent — the poor, the vulnerable, the powerless — suffer in these situations.

Mary is there. She hears the words Jesus speaks. One wonders with what ease she is able to speak these same words and feel these same sentiments: "*Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.*" She sees the brutality and the faces intent on carrying out the task at hand without pity. They know their job, but they do not know what they are doing to her son. Only by seeking that truth within herself can she begin to understand what Jesus is saying and lift her prayer with his, calling upon the heavenly Father not to hold this act against them because they are acting without knowing what they are doing. Perhaps Mary understands most fully the ignorance of people and how we need instruction and intercession. Perhaps that prompts her continued loving presence with the human community throughout history. She knows the effects of sin — the ignorance that accompanies it — and she knows that we need help to know what we are doing and to stop harming one another. It is one of the truths which brought her here to Paris to our Chapel. She offered us the opportunity to intercede with her and to seek the graces which come from God through her.

At the Annunciation, Mary had said those words which are so characteristic of her: "*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word*" (Lk 1:38). This surrender to the will of God in her life expressed her willingness to accept whatever would come as being from God's hands. She could never anticipate that, so many years later, that attitude would bring her to the foot of the cross. One wonders how she may have asked God how this was part of the Divine Plan, even to the point of offering forgiveness to the ones who were bringing the greatest suffering into her life. Yet, Jesus was offering her the model. As Jesus wanted to give forgiveness to those who were most directly involved in her suffering, she too was called to do the same. How much she must have thought about these words afterwards and how much they must have influenced her guidance of the early Church, even as she continues to guide us!

What do these words of Jesus teach us as Daughters of Charity? At the

very least, we can find a very practical example of “love of enemy.” Jesus does it, and as Mary unites her heart and words to his, she does it as well. It summons us to be willing to forgive others and to pray for those who do the most harm to those whom we love and serve, our “Lords and Masters”. The poor are surrounded by oppressors, and we are also called to pray for their oppressors so that they come to discover the harm they do and change their ways. Look at St. Paul. I wonder how many in the early church prayed for his conversion despite his persecution.

One of the lessons Mary’s example teaches us is her forgiveness and love of those who harm us and those who are poor. Jesus crucified urges us to have this attitude of service for all God’s children.

“AMEN, I SAY TO YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE.” (Lk 23:43)

“Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us.’ The other, however, rebuking him, said in reply, ‘Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied to him, ‘Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’” (Lk 23:39-43)

We now turn to those who have been crucified with Jesus — his brothers in a particularly intimate way. These criminals are the one who have received the places at Jesus’ right and left as he comes into his kingdom — those “thrones” that James and John sought (Mk 10:35-37; Mt 20:20-23). Two strangers are condemned to die with Jesus and flank him on crosses. Religious leaders and soldiers mock him: *“He saved others, let him save himself if he is the chosen one, the Messiah of God.”* Even one of the criminals who are crucified with Jesus takes up this same refrain: *“Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us.”* This unfortunate man is undoubtedly among the poor and someone who would be worthy of our attention — remember how St. Vincent told us how disagreeable those who are poor can be? This man reminds us of how often those who are poor are unknowing participants in their own oppression as they take advantage of one another.

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Mary listens to this mockery. How difficult it must have been to hear these words from the leaders of her own faith; one might not expect anything different from the soldiers who were only amusing themselves; but the poor criminal who had been crucified as well—how truly unfortunate and lost he was. Hearing this faith question, “*Are you not the Messiah?*” Mary knows the answer is an unqualified “Yes!” The call for Jesus to save himself, however, misses the point. Jesus did **not** come to save **himself** (any more than he came to feed himself by turning stones into bread in the desert temptation). She knew that he came to save **us**. The unrepentant criminal has captured that part of Jesus’ mission correctly when he asks him to save not only himself but “us.” Mary knows that Jesus is doing precisely that, but she does not know how. She, too, is called to trust.

When the other criminal begins to speak, he steals the heart of Mary, as well as Jesus. He accepts his wrongdoing and chides the other criminal for partaking in the mockery. Then, when he speaks to Jesus, he asks for life with God forever and immediately gains Jesus’ attention. “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*” This man has recognized his own sinfulness and accepted his punishment; now, he seeks forgiveness and God’s bountiful mercy. And he receives it: “*Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*” To my ears, these words are among the most beautiful in the Scripture: I can imagine Jesus looking this man straight in the eyes and making this promise unhesitatingly and without conditions. And I can see the man condemned to death looking at Jesus and knowing the truth of his words. I wonder how much this experience eased his suffering and made his last hours that kind of purgatory that the just come to accept.

Mary is witness to all this. The pain that the words of the unrepentant criminal spoke must have occasioned in her were now more than balanced by the words of the repentant criminal. She saw this unfortunate human being turn to Jesus in his darkest moment to seek forgiveness. She knew what Jesus’ response would be: Jesus’ whole ministry was captured in this one moment, in these few words. Perhaps she was comforted with this little drama. Perhaps, it gave meaning to Jesus’ being on the cross on this day. It did not take away her own suffering, but she rejoiced in the blessing that the repentant thief had received, and she saw Jesus at his best: forgetting himself and concentrating on the needs of another. As Jesus offered him forgiveness for his sins, we can imagine how she

joined her heart to Jesus' heart and her prayer to his prayer. Even in this awful moment, someone had been saved. Blessed be God! Perhaps this was the sign that Mary needed to lift her spirit and know how God's plan continued to be accomplished.

What do we, as Daughters of Charity, learn from these words of Jesus and the accompaniment of Mary? The first criminal reminds us of the need to pray for those who are poor. In the repentant criminal, we can see our call to respond to the spiritual as well as the physical needs of our poor. We are called to help them approach Jesus and seek the forgiveness and reconciliation that will lead to eternal life. The Lord wills our salvation; we need to want it as well. We should not hesitate to say to poor persons what Mary said at the Wedding Feast of Cana: "*Do whatever he tells you.*"

I am drawn to see in the repentant criminal the serf from Gannes who changed the life of Vincent. This man, in his ability to finally accept and confess his sinfulness, achieves salvation. Vincent is touched and converted by the experience. He had helped someone to make peace with God and start on his journey to the Kingdom of God. Vincent then begins to encourage both the Confreres and the Sisters to take the opportunity to invite someone to confess their wrongs and seek God's healing. For example, Vincent suggests how they can raise the question "subtly." They can say things like:

"Eh bien, brother! How do you think you're going to make the journey to the next world?' Then to another, 'Eh bien, my child! ... Don't you want to go see our Lord?'" (Conference 85, "Service of the Sick and Care of One's Own Health," Coste X, p. 268)

The repentant thief takes advantage of the opportunity offered him by Jesus. He encourages us to this practice because the Lord is always eager and willing to forgive the penitent. Mary knew this truth and encourages us to its practice.

"WOMAN, BEHOLD, YOUR SON." ... "BEHOLD, YOUR MOTHER." (Jn 19:26, 27)

"Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. When Jesus saw his

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mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his home." (Jn 19:25-27)

One wonders whether the greatest pain for Jesus in his crucifixion was seeing his mother standing nearby and suffering with him. Jesus knew that with his passing, his mother would be a widow without her only son; again, his thoughts center not upon his own suffering and needs, but those of his mother. He gives her into the care of the "beloved disciple." He also knows how important her faith and guidance will be for his followers in the days and years and centuries ahead, and so he gives her responsibility for the beloved disciple and all beloved disciples to come: us. Perhaps for that reason, Mary has appeared so often to different persons through the centuries to speak of her motherly care and what one needs to do to follow her son faithfully.

As Mary feels Jesus' eyes upon her, she would not be surprised that he would give his attention to her because of their mutual love. She would always have a place with the followers of Jesus and would be able to offer them the guidance and support that she had always offered Jesus. No one knew her son better than she did, and as questions began to be asked and decisions began to be made, she knew that she would always be able to point to him and remind the community what Jesus said and taught and did. She recognized her place in continuing his work. As at the Annunciation, she did not know where all this would lead, but she had confidence that God would still carry out his work in the world through those whom he called. That would also be at the heart of her message for them.

A Christian is not to be left alone but belongs to the church. We are part of the Church and the Company, from which we draw strength and support: dividing sorrows and multiplying joys. Can you see Jesus spotting us at the foot of the cross with other members of the Company and saying to us, "Woman, behold your Sister?"

During Mary's visit to the chapel at the rue du Bac, she promised us support and care. How many people come "to the foot of the altar" seeking her motherly protection and intercession?

As Daughters of Charity, we can be like the beloved disciple and take Mary into our homes. She should be part of our local community life and devotion; she is a model for following Jesus and extending his care to those who need it. The scene at the cross reminds us of the love of Jesus crucified for us and the way that love is expressed through the gift of Mary who teaches and accompanies. She invites us to gather as Sisters under her motherly care and to tell stories about Jesus with our lives.

“MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?” (Mt 27:46)

“From noon onward, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o’clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ Some of the bystanders who heard it said, ‘This one is calling for Elijah’” (Mt 27:45-47; cf. Mk 15:33-35)

Listen to the heartfelt cry of Jesus. The coming of the darkness represents the effects of sin, this dimming sun as the “light of world” returns to the Father. The brilliance of the Easter morning will be the great symbol of the end of this sober period of loss. The light, which had come into the world at the birth of Jesus with the symbol of the star leading the magi and with the heavenly choirs of angels enlightening the shepherds, has its passing represented by the dimming of the sun.

Jesus has known all the effects that sin brings into the life of a person in terms of suffering and even death. At its core, however, sin is a separation from God. Knowing the devastating effect of sin, Jesus cries out. Jesus, who had never sinned, had never felt that separation from the Father, but its certainty may have touched him on the cross. He expresses the suffering of being without God through Psalm 22:

*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
Why so far from my call for help, from my cries of anguish?
My God, I call by day, but you do not answer;
by night, but I have no relief.
Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the glory of Israel.
In you our fathers trusted;*

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they trusted and you rescued them.

To you they cried out and they escaped;

in you they trusted and were not disappointed. . . (Ps 22:2-6)

This Psalm expresses the anguish of the one who feels the separation from the Lord but always turns to Him in trust. Just speaking the first words of the Psalm, Jesus intends its whole prayer. He knows anguish but also ultimately trusts in his Father.

Some of those nearby thought he was calling the prophet Elijah. So often, Jesus was misunderstood; it is no surprise that it happens till the last. Mary may have just shaken her head as she recognized the Psalm that Jesus had been taught and the Holy Family had prayed together. She knew its strength and its meaning. She, too, felt the sense of abandonment, yet maintained hope for ultimate triumph. She could join her spirit to that of Jesus and pray this Psalm with him as they had done before with Joseph in Nazareth. Perhaps, she recalled some verses with particular clarity: *“For you drew me forth from the womb, made me safe at my mother’s breasts. Upon you I was thrust from the womb; since my mother bore me you are my God”* (Ps 22:10-11). Mary could not deny the feelings of sadness, powerlessness, and solitude (the truth could have brought tears to Mary’s eyes), but neither could she deny God’s presence, grandeur and victory. Perhaps Jesus intended this Psalm as a particular encouragement for his mother as well as a message of trust to his Father.

Mary’s ability to find herself and meaning for her life in this Psalm and this experience with Jesus is also a lesson for us. Sometimes circumstances are really difficult, and there seems to be no hope. Sometimes it seems that one has been abandoned by God who is no longer active in his world or among his beloved poor because we think we know how God should act.

As Daughters of Charity, we can never forget that the cross is at the core of our faith. Not to see its reality in our lives or in the lives of those for whom we care is to be blind to what we hold most dear. With Mary we learn the lessons which the crucified Lord has to offer in these last hours: courage and perseverance in service. Like Mary, like Jesus, we are summoned to trust our God, and, as the Psalmist promises, we will not be disappointed.

“I THIRST” (Jn 19:28)

“After this, aware that everything was now finished, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus said, ‘I thirst.’ There was a vessel filled with common wine. So they put a sponge soaked in wine on a sprig of hyssop and put it up to his mouth.” (Jn 19:28-29)

The exhaustion and physical strain of all that had preceded brought Jesus to the limits of human endurance. He felt the needs of his body and the consequences of the loss of so much blood. The thirst, which gripped him at the outset of his public ministry during his forty days in the desert, now returns at the end of his public life. How often he had sat at table with his disciples and acquaintances and shared food and drink. He knew the needs of the human body well. After preaching to a crowd, he recognized their hunger and fed them with the loaves and fish. When he had decided to mark his presence with the disciples, he had also shared a meal with them, and he promised to continue his presence under the form of bread and wine — simple food in which they would remember him. When he had spoken about the works of mercy, he had told his followers: *“And whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple—amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward.”* (Mt 10:42; cf. Mt 25:35). One wonders if the person who gave Jesus the sip of wine on the cross was aware that he was doing a good deed.

As Mary watched her son and heard him speak of his thirst, her arms must have ached with the desire to bring him something to drink as she had done so often in Nazareth. Giving someone a cup of water is such a simple human act of kindness. Yet, Jesus had spoken about it as the type of act which marked the difference between eternal life and eternal separation from God (Mt 25:35). Mary knew well how important small kindnesses are. Her life was filled with small, daily acts of love, which made life easier for Jesus and for other people. She knew that Jesus’ statement of thirst offered someone an opportunity to do something compassionate.

Remember the story of Jesus at the well in Samaria (Jn 4:1-42) and the opportunity he offers to the woman who comes there to draw water. His request for a drink provides her with an opportunity to re-examine her life and amend her ways. When Jesus tells Zacchaeus, “I must stay at your

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house” (Lk 19:1-10), he offers Zacchaeus a chance to be transformed; when Jesus dines with Matthew, the latter takes up the challenge to follow Jesus. Eating and drinking with someone symbolized and realized these changes. Jesus’ profession of his thirst on the cross was an invitation to someone to act and be converted in the work of kindness.

As Daughters of Charity, we are called to hear the cry of the poor, their thirst and their needs. We are invited to hear and respond. The common wine which is offered to Jesus can remind us that our solutions do not have to be perfect and that the best resources are not required of us. We are only asked to listen and do what we can. Just as Mary would have longed to relieve the need of her son in that moment upon the cross, we should yearn to find ways to provide relief. A drink of cool water given with love would be a great sign of our attention to the needs of another and our effort to respond. The simple request of the crucified Jesus reminds us of this truth as we stand with Mary.

“IT IS FINISHED” (Jn 19:30)

“When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit.” (Jn 19:30)

The cross is the symbol of total dedication in the life of Jesus, and it should be so for every Christian. Jesus has given everything in his life to the carrying out of the will of the Father: every word, every action, every thought has been centered on doing what he has been asked in the plan of God. In John’s Gospel, the last words of Jesus are *“It is finished”*; he has accomplished everything he came to do, and now he is going to return to the Father. The “handing over of his spirit” suggests both his death and the Pentecost moment.

As Mary hears these words, they may have seemed puzzling to her. She was the mother of Jesus and had known him intimately from that first moment of conception. Now she was there for this last moment of life. From his first breath to his last breath, she had been present to him. Perhaps she thought Jesus simply meant the end of his life. Maybe she heard these words with a sort of relief that his suffering would be over! Or maybe she understood him to mean the end of his mission. But how could that be? Was this where it all came to an end? Was this the purpose

of his life and ministry? The words provided her with something more to ponder.

Jesus was faithful to the mission given him by the Father till the end. Mary was faithful to the end as well. That is what we profess in the doctrine of the Assumption: Mary is assumed body and soul into heaven because she had always been true to the call of the Lord and had never known sin in her life. When “it was finished” for her, she simply stepped from our world into the kingdom of heaven without the necessity of dying or judgment.

As Daughters of Charity, we too are called to be faithful to the end. We do not stop along the journey, as difficult as it might get, and surrender to the problems. We continue to act and to serve to the best of our abilities and allow the results to rest in God’s hands. When we come to the end of our journey, we accept that call in faith and tranquility.

“FATHER, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMEND MY SPIRIT.”
(Lk 23:46)

“It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon because of an eclipse of the sun. Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’; and when he had said this he breathed his last. The centurion who witnessed what had happened glorified God and said, ‘This man was innocent beyond doubt.’” (Lk 23:44-47)

Again, Jesus speaks of his spirit now handed over into the protection and possession of his Father. That spirit, that breath, which had been blown into the first human being in the Garden of Eden and which had been the gift to every subsequent human, is now given back to God (Eccl 12:7). These “last words” of Jesus are again taken from the Psalms. This time, Psalm 31:

*In you, LORD, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.
In your righteousness deliver me; incline your ear to me;
make haste to rescue me!*

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*Be my rock of refuge, a stronghold to save me.
For you are my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake
lead me and guide me.
Free me from the net they have set for me,
for you are my refuge.
Into your hands I commend my spirit;
you will redeem me, LORD, God of truth.
You hate those who serve worthless idols,
but I trust in the LORD.
(Ps 31:2-7)*

Again a Psalm of trust comes to Jesus' lips. The psalmist experiences suffering and rejection from all sides and turns himself over to God; we can see how it would come to Jesus' mind at the end.

As Mary listened to these words on Jesus' lips, she too recalled Psalm 31. She had brought Jesus into the world through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit; how appropriate that she would be there now that this spirit was returning to God once again. As she ponders the trust-filled words of the Psalm, perhaps Mary recalled its closing strophe:

*Love the LORD, all you who are faithful to him.
The LORD protects the loyal,
but repays the arrogant in full.
Be strong and take heart, all who hope in the LORD.
(Ps 31:24-25)*

Did her own Magnificat contain an echo of this strophe with its confidence in God who casts down the proud and lifts up the lowly yet always points forward with hope? Was the last verse, "*Be strong and take heart, all who hope in the LORD*" (Ps 31:25), a particular encouragement to her?

Again, the words of Jesus offer her an invitation to pray the Psalms. She knew how they had both loved to pray these Psalms that so well reflect the breadth of the human experience and the suffering of the faithful.

Joined with Mary, we, Daughters of Charity, can hear these last words of Jesus and the way they invite us to be attentive to the Spirit to the final breath of life. The title of our Inter-Assemblies Document encourages

us to be “*Open to the Transforming Spirit.*” Like Jesus and Mary, we need to remain confirmed in that guidance till the very end.

Perhaps we also need to pray Psalm 31 in order to become more and more women who place everything with confidence in the hands of God. From the cross, the crucified Jesus offers us a particularly convincing encouragement to that practice.

CONCLUSION

Mary can bring us many instructions about the Christian as well as the Vincentian life as we stand by her at the foot of the cross. She watches and listens to Jesus and invites us to do the same. Mary teaches us:

- 1) A willingness to get close to those who suffer and learn what they have to teach;
- 2) A desire to pray the Psalms and to hear the guidance which they offer; their expression continues to ring true in the human community and in the Company;
- 3) A resolution to be faithful and discern God’s will to the end despite whatever obstacles or problems which may come into our lives or the lives of those who are poor;
- 4) A willingness to forgive; this is the experience of Mary at the foot of the cross. To offer forgiveness to someone and to help them to seek and offer it to another is a special blessing and one which is close to the foundation of our charism and mission;
- 5) A commitment to support one another; Mary accompanied the first Christian community, a place of mutual support; our strength flows from the community of the Church and the Company. Our acceptance of Mary as “our only Mother” teaches us to welcome our companions as our Sisters, hearing Jesus invite us: “Behold your Sister;”
- 6) A reliance on the movement of the Spirit who is present in us and leads us to the Father.

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What other lessons can we learn from this experience of Mary at the foot of the cross? I am sure that you can list many from your own reflection and devotion. Our motto invites us to be driven by the love of Jesus crucified. Mary helps us from her privileged place alongside the crucified Lord. Her visit to our Chapel gives added impetus and urgency to the petition which we speak as a Company of Sisters in this place: “*O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you!*”

In his encyclical letter *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis calls our attention to the faith of Mary and how it reaches its maturity at the foot of the cross:

“Mother, help our faith!

Open our ears to hear God’s word and to recognize his voice and call. Awaken in us a desire to follow in his footsteps, to go forth from our own land and to receive his promise.

Help us to be touched by his love, that we may touch him in faith.

Help us to entrust ourselves fully to him and to believe in his love, especially at times of trial, beneath the shadow of the cross, when our faith is called to mature.

Sow in our faith the joy of the Risen One.

Remind us that those who believe are never alone.

Teach us to see all things with the eyes of Jesus, that he may be light for our path. And may this light of faith always increase in us, until the dawn of that undying day which is Christ himself, your Son, our Lord!” (LF, 60)

Father Patrick GRIFFIN, CM
text read by Father B. SCHOEPFER,
Director General

SAINT LOUISE AND THE VIRGIN MARY

Saint Louise was animated by a great love for the Virgin Mary: ***“I am entirely yours, most Holy Virgin, that I may more perfectly belong to God”*** (Spiritual Writings, p. 695).

Despite debates with opposing views within the Church, Louise was convinced of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God and wished that it would be recognized and celebrated because the Blessed Virgin ***“is the only pure creature who has always found favor in the eyes of God”*** (p. 830).

In 1644, Saint Louise consecrated the Company of the Daughters of Charity to the Blessed Virgin Mary during a pilgrimage to Chartres.

The final words of her spiritual testament express her Marian devotion: ***“Take good care of the service of the poor. Above all, live together in great union and cordiality, loving one another in imitation of the union and life of Our Lord. Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only Mother”*** (p. 835).



Louise de Marillac
Woman, disciple, collaborator, formator,
foundress, mother

Introduction

Saint Vincent de Paul, meeting with the Daughters of Charity in July 1660 to speak about the virtues of Mademoiselle Le Gras, firmly asserted: “*if you want to be good Daughters of Charity, you must consider her virtues.*”¹

“*To be good Daughters of Charity*” is the decision you embraced some forty years ago. This is the reason that you have set out, leaving behind your local communities and your ministries, in order to come to this session at the Mother House because, “*The Company gives great importance to both initial and ongoing formation, in order to strengthen and energize the Sister in her vocation, to offer quality service to those who are poor, and to know and discern the signs of the times*” (C. 49).

Speaking of Saint Louise, Saint Vincent stated, “*You must consider her virtues...*” Welcoming this guidance, I suggest that today we consider several key events in the life of Saint Louise de Marillac, exploring her as a woman, disciple, collaborator, formator, foundress and mother. Then, in a second conference, we will be able to listen to her blessing, in her own words, for the Company and her final wish, entrusted to the Sisters.

LOUISE DE MARILLAC: THE WOMAN

1. Coste X, p. 582

Monsignor Calvet, in his biography of Saint Louise, wrote, “*Like all her family, she was handsome. The portrait that we have of her is based on a painting ... made from memory after her death. It is therefore separated by time from the model, but tradition declares it to be a faithful likeness. It depicts a face which is very regular, within the lines of a perfect oval. The veil, covering her head and part of her face, casts over her features a shadow which the artist has preserved, but which tends to make her look plain, though we are informed that her expression was one of vivacious originality. The mouth is small, the lips thin, the chin prominent and firm. The eyes, lowered as is fitting in a nun, shine, as we may suppose, with a restrained fire. She so often spoke to her Daughters of Charity of the eyes..., that we may well believe her own eyes to have been beautiful, clear, luminous, the mirror of an impassioned soul. Yes, we may say that she was beautiful.*”²

1.- LOUISE IS A MARILLAC

Louise de Marillac was born in Paris on August 12, 1591. Louis de Marillac called her “*my natural daughter,*” spoke of her as his “*greatest consolation in the world,*” and stated that “*she had been given him by God for his peace of mind in the afflictions of life*”.

Louis de Marillac was the least influential of his siblings and would die a natural death at a young age, in 1604. There was another Louis de Marillac (it was not unusual at the time for relatives to have the same name in a family), who would manage to become Marshal of France; Michel de Marillac, Superintendent of Finances and the Keeper of the Seal of the Kingdom, and Valence, who was married to Octavien d’Attichy, head of the household of Marie de Médicis, leader of her Council and her minister of finance. Deeply implicated in political upheavals, the Marshal would be executed on City Hall Square on May 10, 1632, while Michel would die a few months later in the prison of Châteaudun. Valence and her husband had died fifteen years earlier, leaving seven orphaned children.

2. J. Calvet, *Louise de Marillac: A Portrait*. London: Geoffry Chapman, 1959. p. 28-29. The portrait is by Gaspard Dechange.

Louise de Marillac

Reflecting on the meaning of her life, Louise de Marillac wrote, “*God, who has granted me so many graces, led me to understand that it was His holy will that I go to Him by way of the Cross. His goodness chose to mark me with it from my birth and He has hardly ever left me, at any age, without some occasion of suffering.*”³

2.- WITH THE NUNS OF POISSY

The first biographer of Saint Louise affirms that her father “*placed her as a boarder in the monastery of the religious of Poissy, where he had some relatives, so that in that house she would be given the principles of Christian piety.*”⁴

Louise was probably taken to the Dominican royal monastery of Poissy some months after her birth and remained there until she was 13 or 14 years old. At that time, it was common for noble families to choose a convent as a place of formation for their daughters, especially if they wanted them to become a nun. In Poissy Louise would acquire a very solid **human and Christian formation.**

3.- AT THE HOME OF A GOOD, DEVOTED YOUNG WOMAN

In 1604, at the time of her father’s death, Louise left Poissy and moved into the home of a **devoted young woman.** She would remain in this boarding house until the age of 21, a little before she married. During these years (1604-1613), Louise continued her intellectual and artistic formation. The **watercolors** that she painted dating from this time expressed her religious feeling and depict:

- Jesus: The name of the One I love
- The Good Shepherd
- The Holy Family

3. Saint Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*. Ed. Louise Sullivan. New York: New City Press, 1991. A.29, p. 711

4. N. Gobillon, *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*. London: Anvil, 1984. p. 3

Her formation on the human level was completed by **practical formation for running a household**. Many years later, Saint Vincent would praise her good administration: “*Until now, by the grace of God, Mademoiselle has managed affairs well - so well that I know of no Sisters’ house in Paris in the condition in which you are... You should really thank God for that, finding yourselves in such a good situation that I know of no Sisters’ house so well provided for. No, I tell you, I know of none in Paris, and this is due, after God, to the good management of Mademoiselle.*”⁵

Certainly, during those years in the boarding house, Louise continued her **Christian formation**. At 17 years old she immersed herself into the spiritual life. As she had the time, she read the *Guide for Sinners* by Brother Louis of Grenade, *The Imitation of Christ* and *The Introduction to the Devout Life* by Francis de Sales and *Short Treatise* by Bérulle. She loved to listen to the Jesuit preachers and also the Capuchins. She devoted an hour each day to meditation, for which she had a facility. According to the testimony of Sister Mathurine Guérin, she was already making “*mental prayer from 15 or 16 years of age*”⁶. It is not astonishing that this created in her the desire to become a nun.

4.- MARRIAGE WITH ANTOINE LE GRAS

“*...he thought God had some other design on her;*” was the response Louise received when she expressed her desire to become a nun.⁷ The family arranged Louise’s marriage with Antoine Le Gras, secretary to Marie de Médicis (I already mentioned the Marillacs’ involvement in French political life).

Her marriage on February 6, 1613,⁸ and the birth of her son, Michel Antoine, allowed Louise de Marillac to develop her abilities in running the household, organizing the servants, taking care of their goods and caring for her son as he grew.

5. Coste XIIIb, p. 325

6. E. Charpy, ed. *La Compagnie des Filles de la Charité aux origines: Documents*. Tours, 1989. Doc. 822, p. 947

7. N. Gobillon, p. 4

8. Antoine Le Gras, secretary of the Regent Queen, Marie de Médicis, was 32 years old when he married Louise de Marillac (22 years old).

Louise de Marillac

Her social relationships demonstrated her **human qualities** of tolerance, respect, kindness, humility and even a simple elegance. The Le Gras family were **devout Christians**: they were given permission to read the Bible in the vernacular, and they were attentive to the needs of those who were poor. Louise belonged to several pious confraternities.

5.- THE LOSS OF HER HUSBAND

The death of Octavien d'Attichy in 1614 and his wife Valence, three years later, leaving seven orphaned children, changed the rhythm of life for the Le Gras family since it took on responsibility for the children. Thirty years later, Louise recalled this in a letter she wrote to Saint Vincent: "... *my late husband had devoted all his time and his life to looking after the affairs of the d'Attichy family while completely neglecting those of his own family...*"⁹

The political circumstances that would send the queen regent Marie de Médicis into exile had repercussions on Antoine Le Gras, her secretary, who was left without a position.

Antoine's illness, which lasted more than four years, and his death at Christmas 1625, show us Louise de Marillac's dedication in caring for her sick husband and accepting his death. She wrote to her cousin in the final days of December 1625:

*"I think that in this last illness, God wanted to give him a share in something like the pains of his death, for he suffered in his whole body, entirely losing his blood, and his mind was almost always occupied in meditation on the Passion. Blood poured abundantly from his mouth seven times, and the seventh took his life in an instant. I was alone with him to help him, at this important transition, and he gave proof of so much devotion that it was evident till his last sigh that his spirit was attached to God. He could never say anything to me except: Pray to God for me, I can do no more. These words will be forever graven on my heart. I ask you to remember him when you say Compline. He had such a special devotion to it that he hardly ever missed saying it every day."*¹⁰

9. *Spiritual Writings* L. 96, p. 97

10. Letter to Hilarion Rebours; Gobillon, p. 8

The way Louise mentioned her husband in her will from December 1645 expresses her feelings for him:

*“I ask my son to remember frequently to pray God for the eternal repose of his father and to call to mind his good life because he greatly feared God and was exact in avoiding sin, and above all his patience in suffering the great pains that ensued in his last years, in which he exercised great virtue.”*¹¹

6.- CONCERN FOR HER SON

If we limit ourselves to what Vincent de Paul wrote in his correspondence, Louise de Marillac was deeply affected by the path her son traveled, the cause of many worries. Allow me to recall three letters:

The first dates from 1639. Vincent de Paul writes to Louise Marillac: *“I have never seen a mother so much a mother as you; you are hardly a woman at all in anything else. In the name of God, Mademoiselle, leave your son to the care of His Father, Who loves him more than you do or, at least, do away with your anxiety about him.”*¹²

The second text was written by Saint Vincent in 1646, after her son had returned to Paris following an escapade with a young woman. *“Your son is not feeling well and is in bed at his doctor’s home. I offered him our house and anything we could do to make him feel better; or two Sisters to nurse him, in the event that he wanted to stay where he is. He preferred the help of the Sisters, who have been with him for several days now.”*¹³

The third letter dates from May 1649: *“In the name of God, Mademoiselle, do not worry about the bailiff [Michel]. Do you not see the extraordinary care Our Lord is taking of Him, almost without you? Let His Divine Majesty act; He is quite capable of showing the mother, who takes care of so many children, His satisfaction in this, by the care He will take of her child, and that she could never anticipate or surpass Him in goodness.”*¹⁴

11. Doc. 847, p. 993

12. Coste I, 576-577 (L. 400)

13. Coste III, 16 (L. 833)

14. Coste III, 432 (L. 1103)

Louise de Marillac

Louise de Marillac managed to incorporate her love for her son within God's plan and could sincerely write,

*"I must consider my son only as a child of God and love him as such. I must bear with the privation of not seeing him for the love of God."*¹⁵

Michel's marriage to Gabrielle Le Clerc de Chenevière on January 18, 1650, and the birth of the little Louise Renée, whom the Sisters called "the Little Sister," brought Louise de Marillac the joy of being a loving grandmother in the last years of her life.

7.- FRIENDSHIP WITH VINCENT DE PAUL

The correspondence between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac includes many expressions of the friendship they had in the Lord, their mutual respect, and, especially, their shared responsibility for the formation of the Sisters and for the service of persons who are poor.

These lines flowed from Monsieur Vincent's pen: *"And my heart is no longer my heart, but yours, in that of Our Lord, Whom I desire to be the object of our one love"*¹⁶ ... *"May Our Lord be in our hearts and our hearts in His, so that they may be three in one and one in three and that we may wish only what He wills."*¹⁷

The friendly language also appears in the letters Louise de Marillac writes to Vincent:

*"Permit me, my Most Honored Father, to make a very humble request of you, and please grant it. Please take tea, at least during your retreat. I am sure you can do so without any inconvenience. For a short time now, we have had some here which is very good and quite inexpensive. If you do not make this little effort, for the sake of your health, I am going to complain to our good God about it. You can take it after dinner, about four o'clock; I think it will do you a great deal of good."*¹⁸

15. *Spiritual Writings* A. 40, p. 749

16. Coste I, 172 (L. 119)

17. Coste I, 212-213 (L. 148)

18. *Spiritual Writings* L. 545d, p. 572

In agreement with Saint Louise, Vincent wrote, *“I have imposed on myself the law of not coming to see you unless I am summoned for some necessary or very useful matter;”*¹⁹ and gave thanks to God *“for having deprived me of the consolation of seeing you there.”*²⁰ Louise de Marillac, for her part, accepted that Vincent would not visit her in her final illness and peacefully welcomed the priest of the Mission bearing his message *“that she was going to heaven before him, and he hoped soon to see her there.”*²¹

8.- SELFLESS DEFERENCE TOWARD THE SISTERS

When Vincent asked the first Sisters what they had remarked in the life of Mademoiselle Le Gras, their testimonies converge to sketch a portrait of Louise de Marillac’s selfless deference toward them:

“Father, she showed as much affection for one Sister as for another in such a way that she tried to please everyone.” (Coste X, p. 574)

“I’ve always recognized that she had great charity and forbearance for us, so much so that she wore herself out.” (Coste X, p. 577)

“Father, she was so kind to me that sometimes, when she saw that I was troubled, she would treat me very gently.” (Coste X, p. 577)

“She had great love and charity for all the Sisters, always bearing with them and excusing them.” (Coste X, p. 578)

“She had great charity for the Sisters and was afraid of annoying them.” (Coste X, p. 583)

“I heard her say that she loved all our Sisters very much and wanted all of us to be as perfect as our model Jesus Christ.” (Coste X, p. 584)

19. Coste I, 576 (L. 399)

20. Coste II, 198 (L. 530)

21. L. Abelly. *Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul. Founder and first Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission.* New York: New York City Press, 1993. Volume I, p. 247

9.- ATTENTIVE CARE FOR INDIVIDUALS

Louise de Marillac's behavior toward the Sisters allows us to see how sensitive her attention was for each individual. We often find expressions of this sensitive care in her letters:

*"I beg you ...to accept the affectionate greetings of all our sisters... Please extend my very respectful greetings to the Pastor of Saint-Firmin and to Monsieur Pesset."*²²

*"Please extend my greetings to all our sisters. Assure them of our sincere affection and that our sisters think of them often. Sister Louise's mother and sister are well but Sister Françoise's grandmother and mother died six or eight weeks apart. Her father is very well, thank God. He, too, had been quite ill. Her two sisters in the Company are also in excellent health. They bore their affliction with great virtue and in a Christian manner. I beg her most earnestly to do the same; to give herself to God for the accomplishment of His most holy will, and to see her suffering in light of this admirable will and the guidance of Divine Providence. What more could she desire for the well-being of her relatives than to see them die as good Christians while she practices the same abandonment that these mothers showed? The virtue and submission manifested by their good father during this trial is incredible. I urge you to help our sister to carry this cross."*²³

Since it was her usual manner, Louise de Marillac could recommend that her Sisters have this same attentive care for others:

*"As for your conduct toward the sick, may you never take the attitude of merely getting the task done. You must show them affection; serving them from the heart; inquiring of them what they might need; speaking to them gently and compassionately; procuring necessary help for them without being too bothersome or too eager. Above all, you must have great care for their salvation..."*²⁴

22. *Spiritual Writings* L. 545, p. 569

23. *Spiritual Writings* L. 338, p. 423-424

24. *Spiritual Writings* A. 85, p. 773-774

10.- UNFLAGGING STRENGTH

“It is inconceivable how this pious foundress could meet so many demands of charity. She took on all kinds of needs, making no reservations” (Gobillon, p. 47).

These words, written by Saint Louise de Marillac’s first biographer, describe the tireless strength of a life dedicated to responding with love to the **cries** of the poor. From the beginning of her mission serving the Confraternities of Charity, which she began to visit in order to encourage them in May 1629, Monsieur Vincent appreciated her, writing, *“You are a skillful woman to have adapted the rule of the Charity in this way; I think it is fine.”*²⁵ And again: *“Mon Dieu, what a gallant woman you are to have done all that you tell me! Well now, you must not stop in mid-stream.”*²⁶

Although he would say in 1647 that he *“consider[ed her] as dead, according to nature, for ten years now,”*²⁷ it is the same Vincent who entrusted Louise with duties that she alone, with her unflagging strength, could make successful: *“Well now, you see that your work is growing more diverse. Strengthen yourself as much as you can.”*²⁸

Letters have come down to us written by her own hand dating from January 1660, just a few weeks before her death, an indication of Louise de Marillac’s unflagging strength.

LOUISE DE MARILLAC: THE DISCIPLE

1.- “ON THE DAY OF MY HOLY BAPTISM, I WAS VOWED AND DEDICATED TO MY GOD TO BE HIS DAUGHTER”

In her writing known as the *“Act of Consecration,”* St. Louise considered the significance of her **baptism**: *“on the day of my holy Baptism, I was vowed and dedicated to my God to be His daughter”*. Based on her recognition that baptism gave her new life of communion with God and entry into the Church, she resolved to live her baptism fully:

25. Coste I, 114 (L. 74)

26. Coste I, 293 (L. 205)

27. Coste III, 257 (L. 1002)

28. Coste I, 231 (L. 159)

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“I affirm and renew the sacred profession made to God for me at my Baptism. I irrevocably resolve to love and serve Him with greater fidelity and to give myself entirely to Him.”²⁹

At the school of the Master, Saint Louise discovered that the grace of new life in Christ develops throughout life through the action of the Holy Spirit.

“One of the greatest losses that a soul can experience by not participating in the coming of the Holy Spirit is that the gifts infused at Baptism do not have their effect... The lack of these gifts is apparent in the strange difference in comportment between persons who are animated by them and those who are not. The actions of the latter are earthy and unreasonable...”³⁰

And so, St. Louise begs the Holy Spirit for this gift of life-giving grace,

“that the Holy Spirit will deign, by the Divine Goodness, to come into my soul and to restore in it the graces with which Your goodness filled it at my Baptism.”³¹

We therefore understand that Saint Louise would suggest this same path for the Daughters of Charity: *“you will obtain all that you need to become true Christians and perfect Daughters of Charity. You will do so by entreating Him to grant you His Spirit as He did at your holy Baptism.”³²*

Since each of us receives Baptism into the faith of the Church, Saint Louise is very aware of and conscientious about **belonging to the Church**. She repeatedly uses the expression *“daughter of the Church”* to refer to herself and to the Sisters: *“we have the double happiness of being Daughters of the holy Church.”³³* When writing her testament, she states, *“before God and all creatures that I want to live and die in the Catholic Church... and commend my son, as long as I can, to do the same.”³⁴*

29. *Spiritual Writings* A. 3, p. 694

30. *Spiritual Writings* A. 26, p. 817-818

31. *Spiritual Writings* A. 26, p. 819

32. *Spiritual Writings* L. 647, p. 666

33. *Spiritual Writings* L. 179, p. 203

34. Doc. 847, p. 992

2.- ***“I MUST IMITATE JESUS... I RESOLVE TO FOLLOW HIM WHOLEHEARTEDLY”***

St. Louise is aware that to be truly Christian, she **must live as Christ**, becoming a true disciple of Christ:

“I must imitate Jesus as a spouse tries to resemble her husband.”³⁵ “...it is only reasonable that we should follow Him and imitate His holy, human life. This thought absorbed my mind and moved me to resolve to follow Him wholeheartedly, without any reservation. Filled with consolation and happiness at the thought of being accepted by Him to live my entire life as His follower, I resolved that in everything, particularly in uncertain or questionable circumstances, I would consider what Jesus would have done.”³⁶

On the medallion of the Lord of Charity, painted by St. Louise, there is an inscription on the right, *“learn from me...”* Louise had listened to the words of Jesus, her crucified Lord: *“learn from me...”* During the different stages of her life, she searched intensely to look only to him,

*“...neither to a greater nor lesser degree, than would an apprentice imitate his master if he wanted to become perfect.”³⁷ She had discovered that He alone is her **God and her all**: *“O my God... You are my God and my All. I recognize You as such and adore You, the one true God in three Persons, now and forever.”³⁸ “My heart is still overflowing with joy on account of the understanding, which, I believe, our good God has given me of the words, ‘God is my God!’”³⁹**

Attentive to God’s invitation to *“learn from me,”* Louise wanted to belong totally to God and do His will. Like some Biblical figures, it can be said that Saint Louise was *a person who walked with God.*⁴⁰ The Sisters

35. *Spiritual Writings* A. 5, p. 716

36. *Spiritual Writings* A. 5, p. 715

37. *Spiritual Writings* A. 8, p. 719

38. *Spiritual Writings* A. 3, p. 694

39. *Spiritual Writings*, L. 369, p. 341

40. Cf. Gen 5:22

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who lived with her testified to this attitude: “*Her confidence in Divine Providence for everything, and especially for anything concerning the Company, was admirable... Her submission to God’s Will was great, as was apparent during her last illness... She referred everything to God, saying that, without His grace, nothing would be done.*”⁴¹

This very special relationship with God, which Louise de Marillac described as a sort of “*espousal*”⁴², explains the strength, fidelity and the **strong commitment of this woman**: every type of work, however difficult it might be, is nothing other than a participation in the community of goods with Jesus Christ, the Crucified Lord, to whom she was united as “*Spouse of my soul... I felt myself more closely united to Him by this consideration which was extraordinary for me. I also felt moved to leave everything to follow my Spouse; to look upon Him as such in the future; and to bear with the difficulties I might encounter as part of the community of His goods.*”⁴³

3.- LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

A disciple of Jesus Christ listens to the Word, welcomes it and puts it into practice. Listening to the Word of God, in any of the varied forms that the Church offers it, makes the Word of God and, above all, the Gospel, more than just a book to read because the Word is an invitation to dialogue with God.

To the Word of God, read and meditated on privately and listened to in homilies and talks, Louise responded with sustained dialogue with God, which led her to belong totally to God, only to God.

The practice of reading the Bible was attested to in the ***Rule of Life in the World, written by Saint Louise***: “*Immediately after rising, I shall meditate for an hour or at least three quarters of an hour on a subject taken either from the Gospels or the Epistles to which I shall add a reading from the life of the saint of the day...*”⁴⁴

41. Coste X, p. 579-580

42. *Spiritual Writings* A. 50, p. 705

43. *Spiritual Writings* A. 50, p. 705

44. *Spiritual Writings* A. 1, p. 689

This practice also appears in the ***Order of the Day observed by the first Daughters of Charity***: “*When they have all returned to the house, they shall continue their work, study, and then after repeating the principal points of their faith in the form of a short catechism, they shall read a passage of the Holy Gospel so as to stimulate themselves to the practice of virtue and the service of their neighbor in imitation of the Son of God.*”⁴⁵

The Catechism written by Louise de Marillac and many of her meditations show us how familiar she was with the Word of God, especially the New Testament writings and specifically with Jesus’ attitudes as presented in the Gospel, from which she drew conclusions for the Christian life, for discipleship of Christ.⁴⁶

4.- FROM THE DARK NIGHT TO THE LIGHT BY THE GRACE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Written reflections by St. Louise that have been preserved for us clearly reflect her passage through the dark night in 1621-1623: *state of depression..., my heart was so depressed..., trials..., confusion..., suffered greatly..., incredible anguish...*⁴⁷ In the midst of darkness, the believer cries out with fervent supplications: “*My soul yearns for you at night*” (Is 26:9); “*How long will you hide your face from me?*” (Ps. 13:2); “*Why, LORD, do you stand at a distance and pay no heed to these troubled times?*” (Ps. 10:1). These cries from the great Biblical men of prayer must have fed Saint Louise’s prayer in the midst of her dark night. Above all, a text that she herself titled “**Light**” and always had with her, folded multiple times, refers to the experience of the day of **Pentecost, June 4, 1623**. The effects of the action of the Holy Spirit are described as *freed..., peace..., assurance..., and grace.*⁴⁸

The Holy Spirit freed her and allowed her to progress in her Christian discipleship. The Holy Spirit enriched her with gifts (“*obtained for me the happiness of giving myself to Him...*”⁴⁹) and lives in her. The Holy Spirit

45. *Spiritual Writings* A. 55, p. 726

46. Cf. Doc. 824, p. 958

47. Cf. *Spiritual Writings* A. 13, A. 15b, A. 2

48. Cf. *Spiritual Writings* A. 2, p. 1

49. *Spiritual Writings* L. 118, p. 127

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sealed her forever with the new law of love: “on this same day, God in His goodness placed in my heart a law which has never left it...”⁵⁰ “His goodness gave me light and understanding concerning the great anxieties and difficulties which I was then experiencing.”⁵¹

Shadows would return to hover over her in other times of St. Louise’s life, but the night of faith would not return because the light had definitively transformed her:

*“I shall honor the divine will by which the Holy Spirit led Our Lord into the desert to be tempted... I shall honor this mystery, secondly, by a lively and trusting faith that the will of God for me will be accomplished, provided I allow myself to be led by Him.”*⁵²

5.- ATTENTIVE TO THE GUIDANCE OF HER SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS

Beginning in 1625, Vincent was the spiritual director of Louise de Marillac, who would begin a new lifestyle, a missionary life, as visitor to the Confraternities of Charity: “Go therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord.”⁵³ With Vincent’s approval, she would soon undertake, in 1633, a form of life that was new for her and for the Church, assembling in her home a few young women “wishing both to serve the poor and belong to God.”⁵⁴ With Vincent’s approval, she would make a vow to dedicate herself to the young women’s formation for the service of persons who are poor (1634) and perpetual vows in the Company (1642). Although she considered herself a burden for the Company and the cause of all its problems, she would accept, at Vincent’s request, the lifestyle God wanted of her as Superioress until her death.⁵⁵ All of this was **with Vincent’s approval...** because she had resolved to always let herself be guided, “awaiting the plan of God in my daily life through the practice of holy obedience.”⁵⁶

50. *Spiritual Writings* L. 118b, p. 640

51. *Spiritual Writings* A. 75, p. 768

52. *Spiritual Writings* A. 5, p. 716

53. Coste I, p. 64 (L. 39)

54. A. Dodin. *Saint Vincent de Paul et la Charité*. Paris: Seuil, 1960, p. 38

55. Cf. L.64b; 315; 333

56. *Spiritual Writings* L. 111, p. 122

The writings of Louise de Marillac express on many occasions her determination to belong to God, totally to God. In order to achieve this, she sought guidance through spiritual direction, totally convinced that God's will was made known to her through those whom the Lord placed on her path to guide her.

The conscious and committed beginnings of Saint Louise's spiritual life took place in the years that she lived in the boarding house with a devout woman. Her first guidance came from the community of **Capuchins in the Saint Honoré neighborhood**, where she often went to church.

The guidance from the Capuchins of the Saint Honoré neighborhood was decisive for Louise's **choice of her state of life**. It was the Provincial, Fr. Honoré de Champigny, who assured her, "*God ha[s] some other designs on you,*" when Louise indicated her desire to become a nun.⁵⁷

Louise's marriage and her change in residence and relationships was significant because it made it possible for her to meet **Jean-Pierre Camus** (1583-1652), *the person whom the Lord had placed on her path to guide her*.

Jean-Pierre Camus' guidance coincided with an important period in the spiritual journey of Louise de Marillac: the years of the **Light** that shined in the midst of the darkness.

We still have some letters from 1619-1623 that **Michel de Marillac** (1563-1632) wrote to Saint Louise. In them, we can see that they are a real guidance for the spiritual life. We could think that, at least for some time and probably with some regularity, Louise relied on Michel de Marillac, recognized as a man of God and trusted as a relative who could assist her in her spiritual journey.

Louise de Marillac, a regular reader of the works of **Francis de Sales**, especially *The Introduction to the Devout Life* and *The Treatise on the Love of God*, and had the opportunity **to speak in person with him** during his extended stays in Paris. It seems that the Bishop of Geneva visited Louise in her home in 1619.⁵⁸ Louise considered the decisive experience

57. N. Gobillon, p. 39

58. Cf. N. Gobillon, p. 45

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of the Lumière of 1623 as a grace received “*from the Blessed Bishop of Geneva because, before his death, I had greatly desired to communicate these trials to him and because since that time, I have had great devotion to him and have received many graces through him.*”⁵⁹

LOUISE DE MARILLAC: THE COLLABORATOR

When Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac met, their mutual collaboration and deep friendship made possible not just major charitable accomplishments but also what we know as the **Vincentian charism**. Vincent invited Louise to participate in what he discovered. Both of them began to share **the same charism that the Spirit wished to raise up in the Church**.

In May 1629, Vincent entrusted Louise de Marillac with the visitation and animation of the Confraternities of Charity. The mission carried out by Saint Louise through these visits allows us to discover her skill in collaboration, with the Ladies and with the parish, as well as her initiatives to promote women’s participation in the Church of her time. The reports of these visits sent to Saint Vincent are the best witness to this. The Rules she drafted are also good testimonies.

*“It shall be instituted in the Parish Church... It shall be composed of a stated number of virtuous women and girls... they shall serve them ... on the days appointed; they shall assist at the Low Mass which the Confraternity shall have celebrated... they shall all pray... each morning and evening... They shall arrange to have a sermon preached on the first feast of each month...”*⁶⁰

Saint Louise was the foundress and first directress of the Confraternity of Charity in her parish in Paris.

The presentations Louise de Marillac made to the gatherings of the Ladies were very significant; they relied on her example and encouragement for their mission:

59. *Spiritual Writings* A. 2, p. 1-2

60. *Spiritual Writings* A. 46, p. 707-8

*“It is very evident, in this century, that Divine Providence willed to make use of women to show that it was His goodness alone which desired to aid afflicted peoples and to bring them powerful helps for their salvation.... since, from the origin of this noble group, their visits to the sick of this holy hospital have brought such apparent good to the place itself and to the souls who have found the way to salvation there. Through their ministry, some of the sick poor died a happy death as a result of their good dispositions following a general confession. Others recovered but their confessions led to admirable conversions. The Ladies themselves entered on the pathway to sanctification which is perfect charity, such as that which they have practiced in this place where they have frequently put their lives in danger by their service to the sick. All this has been accomplished by Ladies of noble birth such as princesses and duchesses whom we have seen spending entire hours at the bedside of the sick instructing them in the things necessary for their salvation and helping them to free themselves from the dangers surrounding them...”*⁶¹

To promote women’s participation in the life and mission of the Church, Saint Louise also acted as a retreat directress. As we can see from her correspondence with Saint Vincent and as described by her first biographer, she welcomed into the Mother House at La Chapelle all those who presented themselves, either to be restored to God’s grace or to grow more solid in their virtue.

*“Several ladies, including some of high society, were attracted by her zeal, and left Paris depriving themselves of the conversation of the world to spend some days in a village, to converse there with God. They left the comforts and delicacies of life, to think of their salvation in a place of mortification and penance. Without considering their rank and position, which raised them above others, they came into a house of servants of the poor and submitted themselves to the same discipline of a superior, to learn to despise riches and grandeurs by her instruction and example.”*⁶²

61. *Spiritual Writings A.* 56, p. 789-790

62. N. Gobillon, p. 28

LOUISE DE MARILLAC: THE FORMATOR

November 29, 1633, Louise de Marillac gathered together the first Daughters of Charity in her home. They came to be, as Saint Vincent called them, the foundation of the Company, the precious stones that Louise must cut.

*“When Solomon built the temple he was intending for the service of God, he had quantities of precious stones - diamonds, rubies, topazes, hyacinths, emeralds, opals - cast into the foundation... What do you think God might have wanted to teach you by that, dear Sisters? ...It’s that those who go to make a foundation are models for all who will come after them.”*⁶³

The young women who came were “*women wearing your poor headdress*” (this is Saint Vincent’s expression) who did not know how to read nor write.⁶⁴ Therefore,

*“When they have all returned to the house, they shall continue their work, study, and then after repeating the principal points of their faith in the form of a short catechism, they shall read a passage of the Holy Gospel so as to stimulate themselves to the practice of virtue and the service of their neighbor in imitation of the Son of God.”*⁶⁵

St. Louise had an enormous task before her: their spiritual life had to be built from their human poverty. Gobillon affirmed:

*“This superior, so enlightened and spiritual, took great care to form her daughters in the spirit of prayer, and she recommended the practice of it as an absolutely necessary means of remaining in their vocation.”*⁶⁶

In the conference of May 31, 1648, on prayer, when St. Vincent asked her what her reasons to live in prayer were, she said,

63. Coste IX, p. 203-204.

64. Coste IX, p. 17

65. *Spiritual Writings* A. 55, p. 726

66. N. Gobillon, p. 29

“I thought that one reason we should never omit making our prayer is its excellence, since when we pray we are speaking to God. And I saw great advantages in this, since in prayer God helps us to realize His goodness in abasing himself to this degree and in raising us up as He does. Another reason is the recommendation the Son of God gave so many times, by word and example, of praying to God His Father, both in vocal prayer, which He himself taught us, and in mental prayer, reminding us that God wants to be served in spirit and in truth. A third reason is that, since prayer is a gift of God, we must do our utmost to obtain it, not only because of the great help we may gain from it, but also because of the esteem we must have for the Giver.”⁶⁷

In her correspondence and in her writings, Saint Louise de Marillac adds additional **motives for living in a spirit of prayer:**

- in prayer, we find all the advice we need⁶⁸
- we can speak with Our Lord of our spiritual and material needs⁶⁹
- prayer adorns and embellishes the conscience and the will so that .. Jesus can be born in us⁷⁰
- it is like incense (referring to the feast of the Epiphany)⁷¹
- the Lord never fails us, but we must be careful not to fail Him by not corresponding fully to his Holy Love⁷²

The Sisters said that Saint Louise spoke of mental prayer as something that must be loved and never abandoned even if they had no desire to do it. It should be made with gratitude, humility and piety.⁷³

Louise de Marillac was constantly attentive to the state of the Sisters' prayer life, insisting on their fidelity and perseverance in meditation and prayer.⁷⁴ She spoke of the effects that it had on community life: unity, tolerance, etc.

67. Coste IX, p. 324

68. *Spiritual Writings* L. 126, p. 228

69. *Spiritual Writings* L. 383, p. 424

70. *Spiritual Writings* A. 45b, p. 735

71. *Spiritual Writings*, A. 45b, p. 736

72. *Spiritual Writings* L. 391, p. 440

73. Rec. 5, item 139

74. *Spiritual Writings* L. 18; 311; 326; 480; 531; 618

Louise de Marillac

*“My dear Sister, I would be very pleased if you told me a bit about your spiritual welfare; if your Rules are strictly observed; if sometime during the day you make repetition of prayer together; if you hold the Friday conference; and if you take time for your other little exercises. For the rest, I have no doubt but that your dear hearts beat in close union and that you share with one another what you are doing. If this were not so, my dear Sister, you would not experience the consolation that Our Lord promises to those who come together in His name, and in whose midst He is present. I believe, my dear Sister, that your mutual support causes you to feel the effects of divine consolation.”*⁷⁵

In several letters she spoke of a prayer book, liturgy of the hours, and meditations for the Sisters, and she proposed topics for their meditation and spiritual reading.⁷⁶

In all the horarium and rules St. Louise drew up or revised, she was specific about the time and the manner for the Sisters to make their prayer.⁷⁷ Louise de Marillac also instructed the Sisters in the practice of sharing their prayer in community, repetition of prayer, giving an account of their reading or meditation.⁷⁸

In the formation she gave for meditation, Saint Louise especially stressed the importance of **living in a way that promoted union with God**. To do so, she said one must:

- maintain interior recollection in the midst of one’s occupations⁷⁹;
- be very simple and speak in the presence of God⁸⁰;
- allow God to act in us, allowing him to have complete possession of our will⁸¹;
- promote union with God in all things⁸²;

75. *Spiritual Writings* L. 480, p. 510

76. *Spiritual Writings* L. 233; 345; 383; 461; 463b; 504; 613; 621; 651; 556

77. In every Rule, the Rules for particular works and specific offices, in those of particular foundations, and even for travels: *Spiritual Writings* A. 55, A. 80, A. 76, A. 91, A. 88; A. 91b; L. 134; A. 85; A. 78; A. 92; A. 93; A. 81; A. 95. Cf. Coste X, p. 454

78. *Spiritual Writings* L. 63, 311, 480, 439, 581, A. 55, A. 76, A. 91, A. 93

79. *Spiritual Writings* L. 581, p. 600

80. *Spiritual Writings* L. 566, p. 566

81. *Spiritual Writings* L.448, p. 480-481

82. *Spiritual Writings* L. 531b, p. 514-515

- always desire to act in union with the actions of Jesus: *“it would be well if every morning each sister would individually pray (so as not to multiply the prayers said under the Rule) for the blessing of our good God in order that they might act in the manner of His Son while He was on earth as they carry out the works of charity to which they have been called. Better yet, they should pray that the same Spirit that acted in Him should act through them. They should begin their day by reflecting that they are accompanied by Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin and their guardian angel”*⁸³;

- live in the presence of God: *“our interior conversation with God should consist in the continuous remembrance of His holy presence. We must adore Him every hour and make acts of love for His goodness, recalling, as far as possible, the thoughts that we received during meditation so that we may correct our faults and advance in this same holy love.”*⁸⁴ *“We must often abandon ourselves to Him; show Him our hearts filled with trust and gratitude; and try, from time to time, to whisper ejaculatory prayers to Him”*⁸⁵;

- not make excuses because of lack of time the importance of duties at hand to neglect prayer⁸⁶;

- not allow our prayer to be limited to just a specific amount of time, but that it be prolonged throughout the day and in the mission or service confided to us: *“A practice which our Most Honored Father taught us at one of his recent conferences will prove useful to you. It is, my dear Sister; to turn to God at the beginning of each action; to make an act of humility, recognizing that we are unworthy to perform it; then to make an act of love, undertaking it for love of Him and offering it to Him in union with similar actions which His Son performed while He was on earth. His Charity assures us that, if we go to the trouble to carry out this exercise for a week, it will become habitual and we will perform it effortlessly. I have no doubt that you will grow to love this practice which we must look upon as inspired by God for us”*⁸⁷;

In the time of trial, when we do not feel anything in prayer, we should

83. *Spiritual Writings A.* 85, p. 773

84. *Spiritual Writings M.* 73, p. 825

85. *Spiritual Writings M.* 73, p. 826

86. *Spiritual Writings L.* 326, p. 368

87. *Spiritual Writings L.* 461, p. 493

Louise de Marillac

not neglect prayer although difficulties arise.⁸⁸ In the process of prayer, we have to expect trials and purification and remain faithful.⁸⁹

LOUISE DE MARILLAC: THE FOUNDRESS

During her visits to the Confraternities of Charity in rural parishes, after having founded the first Charity in her parish in Paris (in 1630) and organizing others, Saint Louise felt a new call: it was necessary to assure ongoing service and, above all, people were needed who are available to carry out specific tasks (like carrying the soup pot, cleaning, etc.) that the Ladies of the Confraternities had been neglecting. These people would be good country girls, *“desirous to both serve the poor and to give themselves to God.”*

Saint Vincent didn't want to rush and imposed a waiting period on Saint Louise: *“With regard to your employment, my mind is not yet enlightened enough before God concerning a difficulty which prevents me from seeing whether it is the Will of His Divine Majesty... Let us persist, therefore, in our prayers...”* (Coste I, p. 200, L. 138).

In September 1633 it seems that Saint Vincent had finally decided, and he wrote her: *“I think your good angel did what you told me in the letter you wrote me. Four or five days ago, he communicated with mine concerning the Charity of your young women. It is true; he prompted me to recall it often and I gave that good work serious thought. We shall talk about it”* (Coste I, p. 216, L. 151).

November 29, 1633, the Company of the Daughters of Charity was born in the home of Louise de Marillac and under her direction. A few months later, *“On the last day of July 1634, in a third and final conference, M. Vincent gave the Rules to the little Congregation of the Daughters of Charity, and an instruction on how to practice them.”* Saint Louise pieced together and wrote up the first of the Conferences to the Daughters of Charity that we have preserved: *“I was saying that you've been residing together for some time now with the same purpose in view, but so far you haven't had any Regulations for your way of life.”*⁹⁰

88. *Spiritual Writings* L. 388, p. 52

89. *Spiritual Writings* L. 546, p. 575

90. Coste IX, 1

Saint Vincent's explanations are based on a document known as the *Order of the Day*,⁹¹ written by Saint Louise. Although it more specifically deals with the horarium of the first Daughters of Charity, Saint Vincent's explanations and the dialogue with the Sisters in his conferences show the originality of this form of life, which would take a more concrete form in later documents.

A little later, Saint Louise prepared a *Draft of the Rule*.⁹² Saint Vincent, in the conference of July 19, 1640, recognized the Company as part of God's plan and announced a future **General Rule**, in addition to **rules or regulations** for various places and types of ministry.

*"You've been guided by tradition in everything you've done these past years, Sisters, but, with the help of God, for the future you'll have your little Rules."*⁹³

The **approbation** of the Company and of the Rule (now entitled Statutes) by the Archbishop of Paris was dated November 20, 1646.⁹⁴ Having received the approval from the Archbishop of Paris and their Rule, Saint Louise wrote to Saint Vincent,

"Could not this unqualified term of 'dependence on the archbishop' be harmful for the future, since it allows us to be withdrawn from the direction of the Superior General of the Mission? Is it not necessary, Monsieur, that through this Act of Establishment your Charity be given to us as perpetual director? And these regulations which must be given to us - is it the intention of the Archbishop that it be those listed after the request? Is a separate act required for that, or does he perhaps want to draw up others since he mentions them separately? In the name of God, Monsieur, do not permit anything to take place which even slightly draws the Company away from the direction which God has given to it.

91. *Spiritual Writings* A. 55, p. 726-727

92. *Spiritual Writings* A. 54, p. 727-729

93. Coste IX, 17

94. Documents 427 and 428. See the request to the Archbishop of Paris (August-September 1645) accompanied by the Rule (D. 391 and 392). However, the following year, Father Portail continued to work on the final touches (Document 401; Cf. D. 394 and 669).

Louise de Marillac

*You can be sure that immediately it would no longer be what it is. The sick poor would no longer be helped...*⁹⁵

Saint Louise's insistence led to a **new Rule** with a **new approbation** by the Archbishop (January 18, 1655).⁹⁶

Saint Vincent reported the **new approbation** to the Sister during a Conference on August 8, 1655:

*“it was decided... that it would be a good idea to get some young women of the lower class and to instruct them in this matter. That's what Mlle Le Gras has been doing for the past twenty-five years, with great blessings from God... They've had Rules and have always lived under a Rule. In the beginning it was a little snowball, and that Little Company has grown so much and made itself so pleasing to God that we can certainly say that it's the finger of God that has produced this work because it's spreading everywhere... I want to read to you the approval of your establishment by the Archbishop of Paris and its confirmation by his Coadjutor, Cardinal de Retz. I also want to read your Rules to you. In fact, that's what He did, and our Sisters were so touched that they couldn't restrain their tears.”*⁹⁷

Saint Louise's contribution, as we can appreciate from this brief summary, helps us recognize her role in the Foundation of the Company. However, we should immediately point out that her contribution was not limited to writing these foundational documents; she was involved above all in developing this **new form of life** in the Church that was the Daughters of Charity.

Louise de Marillac tried by every means possible to assure there would be nothing in the new Company of the Daughters of Charity that could make them seem like nuns; this was a constant concern for her: *“they were afraid that the priests might want to make them religious. I fear, now that Sister Elisabeth is no longer there, that the others might be easily*

95. *Spiritual Writings* L. 130d, p. 187; cf. Coste III, p. 255-265, IV, p. 225 and XIIIb, p. 141-142

96. Coste XIIIb, p. 144-169

97. Coste X, 82-83

persuaded to do just that.”⁹⁸

Avoiding appearing like religious does not mean that the Daughters of Charity don't have to seek perfection like them; in fact, they have to do so even more: *“The Daughters of Charity are obliged, therefore, to strive to become more holy than religious.”*⁹⁹

Louise de Marillac showed a special interest in assuring the Sisters loved their own vocation and not be overly impressed by the lifestyle of religious:

*“Do you love your way of life? Do you esteem it as more excellent for you than all the hermitages and religious convents because God has called you to it? Do you believe that you have been assembled together for your sanctification by a secret action of Divine Providence? Does the stronger support the weaker lovingly and cordially as the need arises? Do you often recall the counsel our Most Honored Father gave us in a conference when he said that we, as well as religious, have a cloister, and that it is as difficult for faithful souls to leave it as it is for religious to leave theirs, although it is not a cloister made of stones but rather one constituted by holy obedience which must govern all our actions and desires? I beg Our Lord, whose example has enclosed us in this holy cloister, to grant us the grace never to violate it.”*¹⁰⁰

Louise found it necessary to explain well to all the young women interested in coming to the Company that *“it is not a religious house; nor is it a hospital from which they will never be moved. Rather they must continuously go to seek out the sick poor, in various places, in any kind of weather and at predetermined times. They will be very poorly clothed*

98. *Spiritual Writings* L. 48, p. 62. *“Please, Monsieur, let me know if in this first article of the Rule of our sisters there is anything which indicates a regular community and is different from the Rule of Angers. This was never my intention; on the contrary, I met with the Vicar General two or three times to explain to him that we were just a secular family and that because we were bound together by the Confraternity of Charity, we had Monsieur Vincent, as General of these Confraternities, for our Director. Once he understood our practices he then explained our type of establishment to the Bishop of Nantes who approved it so wholeheartedly that he signed his name along with the administrators of the city”* (*Spiritual Writings* L. 481, p. 293).

99. *Spiritual Writings* L. 627, p. 645

100. *Spiritual Writings* L. 377, p. 406-407

Louise de Marillac

and nourished and will never wear anything on their heads except a linen cornette in cases of great necessity."¹⁰¹

Just one year before her death, Saint Louise continued to insist on the identity of the Company, as reflected in this letter to Saint Vincent: "Some delicate spirits in the Company have a repugnance for the word 'Confraternity' and wish only the term 'Society' or 'Community.' I took the liberty of saying that this word [Confraternity] was essential: that it could be a strong barrier against innovation; that it signified our secular status; and since Divine Providence had added to it the words 'Society' and 'Company,' that we thereby understood that we must live regular lives by observing the Rules that we received at the foundation of our Confraternity, as they were explained to us."¹⁰²

LOUISE DE MARILLAC: THE MOTHER

Saint Vincent de Paul, in the conferences he held to speak about the virtues of Saint Louise, presented her to us as a **Mother** and did not hesitate to attribute intercessory power to her on behalf of her Daughters:

"Sisters...you can ask God for prudence through her intercession" (p. 572).

"Courage! You have in heaven a mother who has great influence and will obtain for you from God the grace..." (p. 576).

"...they should ask God to grant them the grace always to do better and better" (p. 589). *"We've seen this beautiful portrait before us; now it's on high. It remains for us to pattern ourselves on it"* (p. 582).¹⁰³

Saint Vincent wrote to Sister Nicole Haran about Louise's death: *"In the last mail I announced a sad piece of news to you, namely, the loss we have sustained in the death of Mademoiselle Le Gras. You must praise God for this and hope that He will take the place of father and mother in your regard."*¹⁰⁴

101. *Spiritual Writings* L. 561, p. 583

102. *Spiritual Writings* L. 609, p. 629-630

103. *Conferences on the Virtues of Mlle Le Gras*, Coste X, p. 569-590

104. Coste VIII, 317 (L. 3104)

As Foundress and Mother, Louise de Marillac is “*a mirror in which we have only to look at ourselves*” (p. 577). Knowing Saint Louise and drawing inspiration from her by conscientiously reading her writings is not a fad or just a nice suggestion for our local communities. It is responding to the call for **identity**, for **fidelity**. The arguments Brother Ducourneau presented to convince his companions of the need to collect and organize what Vincent had said could help us as well in relation to the writings of Saint Louise: “*The best legacy of fathers is the good instruction they leave to their children... Someone else may say that M. Vincent says nothing that cannot be found in books. I reply that this may be so; but we know that the best food for babies is their own mother’s milk, and that the loving instructions of their fathers make a greater impression on their minds than those of teachers because of the natural respect and affection God has given to all sorts of persons for those who have begotten them. In addition, it is very difficult to find in books the beautiful inspirations and good impulses we receive from the talks of this kind father because he gives them according to our needs and obligations, which differ in many things from those of other Companies they have written about what concerns them...*”¹⁰⁵

In order to be “*good Daughters of Charity*”, in the words of Saint Vincent with which we began this reflection, let us turn our eyes to our Mother and Foundress. This is what the Church calls us to do: “*The very charism of the Founders (Evang. nunt. 11) appears as an ‘experience of the Spirit,’ transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth.... The specific charismatic note of any institute demands, both of the Founder and of his disciples, a continual examination regarding fidelity to the Lord; docility to His Spirit; intelligent attention to circumstances and an outlook cautiously directed to the signs of the times.... Especially in our times that same charismatic genuineness, vivacious and ingenious in its inventiveness, is expected.*”¹⁰⁶

Father Corpus DELGADO, CM

105. Memo of Brother Bertrand Ducournau. Coste XI, p. xxvii, p. xxx

106. Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and Sacred Congregation for Bishops: Directives for the Mutual Relationships between Bishops and Religious in the Church, No 11, 12, 23

PRAYER OF SAINT VINCENT

**O my Savior Jesus Christ,
who become holy
so that we also might become holy,
and who spurned earthly kingdoms
with their wealth and glory,
having only at heart the reign of Your Father...
what should we not do to imitate You...**

**Ah, Lord!
grant that Your Father may reign in us,
and reign in us yourself,
causing us to reign in You
by faith, hope, and love,
by humility, obedience,
and union with Your Divine Majesty.**

Amen.

(Coste XII, p. 124)

