

*E*choes *of the Company*



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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Year of Consecrated Life

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Spiritual Life

Letter of January 1, 2015.....	2
Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General	
End of the Year retreat, 2014 “I want to say one word to you, and this word is joy.”.....	5
Father Bernard Schoepfer, Director General	
Best wishes and thanks.....	16
Father Bernard Schoepfer, Director General	
Letter of February 2, 2015.....	18
Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General	
Lent 2015.....	31
Walking the Way of Reconciliation, Peace and Humility	
Father Gregory Gay, Superior General	

News from the Provinces

Sisters’ testimonies

United Nations - Global Conference “Sparks of Hope and Calls for Action”.....	36
Sister Catherine Prendergast, Daughter of Charity	
United Nations “Rights of the Child”.....	39
Sister Monique Javouhey, Daughter of Charity	

International Session for Sisters Over 40 Years Vocation

Living times of change with Saint Vincent de Paul.....	43
Father Frédéric Pellefigue, CM	

Letter of January 1, 2015

Dear Sisters,

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

Happy and holy 2015 under the protection of Mary! I wholeheartedly express this wish for each one of you, for your local communities and, of course, for the Company, which will hold its ninth General Assembly this May.

Your letters, messages and cards truly touched me, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Your look back at the past year and the desires you express for the year that is beginning bear witness yet again to the relevance of the Vincentian charism and our passion for serving our marginalized, forgotten and exploited brothers and sisters, following the example of Christ, and for contributing to building a more just world that better respects the dignity of every person.

As Pope Francis invites us in his message for January 1, “*No Longer Slaves, but Brothers and Sisters,*” let us pray that this new year finds us faithful and innovative in the struggle against all forms of slavery. The Pope praises the activity of women’s religious congregations and mentions their undertakings “*in offering assistance to victims, in working for their psychological and educational rehabilitation, and in efforts to reintegrate them into the society where they live or from which they have come.*”¹ Let us give thanks for the many Daughters of Charity already involved in the three

1. Pope Francis, Message for January 1, 2015, no. 5

activities highlighted by the Pope and for all the Sisters who work to prevent the scourge of slavery in the 21st century.

We began the Year of Consecrated Life more than a month ago; I am sure that you have read or will soon read *Rejoice!* and *Scrutate*,² published by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, as well as Pope Francis’ Apostolic Letter on the occasion of this year that is so significant for the entire People of God. I also encourage you to participate fully in all the events planned in your dioceses throughout 2015. This initiative from the Holy Father helps us to grow more deeply in our vocation and the “*mystique of living together,*”³ to discern which geographic and existential peripheries we should explore and to strengthen our fraternal bonds with the various families of consecrated life.

In his Apostolic Letter, Pope Francis entrusts this Year of Consecrated Life to Mary: “*Let us look to her, the highly-beloved daughter of the Father, endowed with every gift of grace, as the unsurpassed model for all those who follow Christ in love of God and service to their neighbor.*”⁴

The Virgin Mary, Mother of God, is the one who opens the door of this new year for us today. During the *Synod on the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church*, an Anglican bishop, one of Pope Benedict XVI’s invited guests, gave a speech on the Virgin Mary that centered on four words: *fiat, magnificat, conservabat* and *stabat*. Allow me to develop them with you in order to offer the new year to God and give thanks for the past year.

Fiat so that, with the humble availability of Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, we accept in faith what God has prepared for us in 2015 on a personal and communal level and as a Company: *she continually acted in such a way that she never omitted anything that God asked of her.*⁵

Fiat as said by those who during this past year accepted an unforeseen illness, an unexpected missioning, a new responsibility...

2. Italian title

3. *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 87

4. Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter to all consecrated people, November 21, 2014, § III, no. 5

5. Saint Louise, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 31b, p. 831

Letter of January 1, 2015

Magnificat so that joy might shed its light on our everyday life and that we, like Mary, might be able to proclaim God's wonders in season and out of season and wake up our contemporaries who have been lulled to sleep by a sense of well-being or have become deaf to God's call by the hubbub of false prophets.

Magnificat for the joy of flying to the assistance of those who are poor, as did the Sisters of the Province of the Philippines in mid-December for the victims of Typhoon Ruby and the Sisters of St. Vincent's local community in Abuja (Nigeria) who decided a few months ago to make their house available for patients from their hospital, which had been expropriated by the government, and to themselves live in shipping containers...

Conservabat the Word so that our daily meditation always leads us deeper into the mystery of God's love and provides support for our apostolic discernment.

Conservabat the Word as we have all faithfully lived it out in our heart to heart conversations with the Lord, in fraternal communion among ourselves and with the entire Company, with those who are poor and as a Church...

Stabat in order to remain beside those who suffer, as did the Virgin Mary, and as this year our Sisters did in Damascus (Syria), northern Cameroon, northern Nigeria, Sufa (Central African Republic) and everywhere...

A very happy New Year to each one of you, with the assurance of my prayer and my devoted affection,

Sister Evelyne FRANC
Daughter of Charity

End of the Year Retreat, 2014
**“I want to say one word to you,
and this word is joy.”**

“I want to say one word to you, and this word is joy. Wherever consecrated people are, there is always joy!”

Pope Francis

A missionary heart is a heart that, aware of human limitations, has known the joy of Christ's salvation and shares it as consolation. *“This heart realizes that it has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel and in discerning the paths of the Spirit, and so it always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street” (Rejoice! 12).*

Paul Claudel believed that joy should be a commandment, a duty for Christians: *“We have no other duty,”* he said, *“than joy.”* Paul Claudel was a nineteenth-century French playwright, poet, essayist and diplomat. He converted to Catholicism, the religion of his childhood, while attending Vespers out of curiosity at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris on Christmas Day, December 25, 1886. *“I was standing by the second pillar on the right, the sacristy side. The children of the choir school were singing what I later learned was the Magnificat. In an instant, my heart was touched, and I believed.”*

I. LET US WELCOME THE MYSTERY OF JOY¹

Saint Paul did not fear the challenge of joy; he repeated his command twice: *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!”* (Phil

1. Source: Cardinal Godfried DANNEELS, pastoral letter: Words of Life for Christmas 2004

“I want to say one word to you, and this word is joy.”

4:4) Paul’s letters are filled with hymns and prayers that encourage us to experience the mystery of joy.

At the end of the Beatitudes, Jesus proclaimed, *“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven”* (Mt 5:12a). However, the joy of which he speaks is joy amid insults, calumnies, and persecutions (see the preceding verse). The commandment is still: *“May your joy be complete”* (cf. Jn 15:11).

In the garden of our hearts, joy is a hardy perennial through thick and thin. It endures the rigors of winter, sadness and discouragement. It makes its way through it all. The thirst for happiness is written into our genes. We are all seeking joy.

Yet, in the garden of our hearts, true joy is one plant growing among many others. They may resemble joy. This does not make them true joy. Quite a few beautiful Sirens try to seduce us, but it is rare that those who give into their charm find what they are looking for. Their magic vanishes like the morning mist. It lasts but a few moments.

True joy, on the contrary, is enduring. Its distinctive trait, moreover, is fidelity. Because it is fed by reliable springs, true joy is like the flowing of a peaceful river that trusts in the solidity of its riverbed, however varied the landscapes alongside its banks may be. Of course, joys can be found by constantly rushing to new horizons, to things further off or newer, a sort of restless “channel surfing” for joy.

True joy is also more than psychological well-being. It is not a surface feeling but rather consists of remaining in truth, goodness and beauty. In this way, it is a close relative of love.

Paul places joy second in his list of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, just after love (Gal 5:22). If there is a “joy in what I feel”, there is also a “joy in what I am”. This does not mean that true joy resides only in the soul. It radiates out, even into the body.

True joy is given to us. It does not satisfy. It always make you thirst for more. Its pressure remains steady, and it is never saturated. In a way, joy tends toward going further, toward more. It is borne on the

wings of gratitude. It takes the focus off myself and distances me from myself. Pleasure is always associated with luck or the fortunate coincide of circumstances: “I succeeded brilliantly!” Joy is a blessing; it has something of the divine, the eternal; it comes from on high: *“Freude schöner Götterfunken”* [Joy, wondrous spark divine] (chorus of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony).

In faith, we welcome Pope Francis’ words from his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation: *“The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew”* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 1).

The Constitutions of the Company of the Daughters of Charity tell us in article 9:

*“The Founders considered **community life** one of the essential supports of the vocation of the Daughters of Charity. This life in common is lived in a local community, where the Sisters accept one another in faith with simplicity of heart. They bear **joyful** witness to Jesus Christ and continually strengthen one another with a view to mission.”*

Community life and witnessing to Jesus Christ in our day renew our lives *“totally given to God in the service of persons who are poor”*. Welcoming Pope Francis’ questions presented in the first circular letter for the Year of Consecrated Life, I suggest that you meditate on the following ones in your personal reflection:

“This is a beautiful, beautiful way to holiness! Do not speak badly of others. “But father, there are problems...” Tell the superior, tell the [Sister Servant], who can rectify them. Do not tell a person who cannot help. This is important: brotherhood! But tell me, would you speak badly of your mother, your father, your siblings? Never. So why do you do so in the consecrated life?” (*Rejoice!* 12)

On this day of retreat, let us take the time to look at how we cultivate community life, here, at the Mother House, within our local communities!

“I want to say one word to you, and this word is joy.”

II. LET US LIVE THE MYSTERY OF JOY

Christian joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It thus comes from outside ourselves. It is not a passing fit of enthusiasm after an inspired homily that will burn out with the first trial. It is a lasting gladness that bears fruit even in times of trial.

Christians receive the Word, but with the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Thes 1:6). This same joy also calls forth great generosity on the part of the community (cf. 2 Cor 8:2).

Even amid trials, a great joy is ready to spring forth. Trials are actually the path by which to become a real disciple. As Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, wrote to the Christian community in Rome as he was on his way to martyrdom, *“Do not hold me back; do nothing to prevent my death. This is the only way that I will truly become a man”* (cf. Letter to the Romans).

Suffering criticisms, persecutions or indifference is an essential and inalienable part of any apostolate. No disciple can avoid it, and we shouldn't be surprised, complain or hold it against anyone. *“If they have treated me in this way,”* Jesus said to His Apostles, *“they will treat you in the same way.”* We can recall all our Sisters who have lived the mystery of the cross, the gift of their life, day after day, even to martyrdom. We should pray for those who are now living in dangerous missions or difficult ministries at the risk of their own lives.

Christians connect joy to the cross. Is there a greater paradox imaginable? Joy and sorrow flow from the same source! It even seems that according to Christian revelation, every suffering is understood, even justified, as if it were nothing other than joy.

In fact, Christians take suffering very seriously. Jesus' solitude on the cross and the anguished cry he addressed to the Father retain all of their tragic character. God really made His Son *“sin”* and *“curse”*. Saint Paul presents us with this aspect of the divine tragedy (cf. 2 Cor 5:21, Gal 3:13).

Some secret joy must be a part of Jesus' passion, like a pearl enclosed in its shell. It is the joy of submission to His Father, the elation of saying

“yes”. This joy is more than mere emotion since it relates to the deepest dimension of the human being: to what a person is, not what he does or feels. Joy can thus exist even when it is not felt.

This wonder can then occur in our very depths. That which was sorrow and anguish seems to coincide with the very essence of love: giving oneself to another person. This does not happen automatically; it requires an effort so that the possessive instinct changes into an instinct for self-gift, into an offering of one's life. But this is the cost of true love: the larva of suffering must metamorphose into the butterfly of joy.

Christians are at the service of others' joy. Operating in the magnetic field of divine joy, they pass it on to others. On this topic, Paul has this beautiful expression: *“Not that we lord it over your faith; rather, we work together for your joy, for you stand firm in the faith”* (2 Cor 1:24). Christians are messengers of joy. Joy is never a static asset that you can keep for yourself. It is a dynamic force that pushes you out toward others. Since true joy comes from God and is an outpouring of love, it is necessarily contagious.

Therefore, Christian joy doesn't just have to do with having a cheerful personality, an optimistic temperament, energy and confidence in life despite it all. Nor is it a question of natural disposition. Many a saint's soul had a dark side. Christian joy is compatible with sadness and worries. But joy always takes place in the sphere of relationships among ourselves and with those wounded by life. Modeled on and by virtue of the relationships between Jesus and His Father and between the Divine Persons and us, Christian joy is presence and openness to others and the source of respectful and loving exchanges.

As expressed in C. 29b, we believe that joy comes from participating in the Pascal Mystery:

“In a spirit of gratitude and joy, [Daughters of Charity] live chastity, a source of spiritual fecundity and a sign of the Covenant between God and His people. As a response of love to a call of Love, chastity involves participation in the Paschal Mystery, the mystery of death and life. It demands transcending a certain loneliness of heart and calls for behavior that makes it a clear, genuine Gospel witness.”

“I want to say one word to you, and this word is joy.”

Returning to the questions of Pope Francis, I invite us to listen to these questions in order to awaken our hearts to what is important, essential:

“Look into the depths of your heart, look into your own inner depths and ask yourself: do you have a heart that desires something great, or a heart that has been lulled to sleep by things?”

Has your heart preserved the restlessness of seeking or have you let it be suffocated by things that end by hardening it?

God awaits you, he seeks you; how do you respond to him? Are you aware of the situation of your soul? Or have you nodded off? Do you believe God is waiting for you or does this truth consist only of ‘words’?

We are victims of this culture of the temporary. I would like you to think about this: how can I be free, how can I break free from this ‘culture of the temporary’?” (Rejoice! 12)

III. LET US ENTER MORE DEEPLY INTO THE MYSTERY OF JOY: A LITTLE METHOD FOR LEARNING JOY

Christian joy is a free gift. A learning process is nonetheless necessary in order to receive this gift. Joy, as Paul VI said, is always based in a new way of looking at man and at God. This awareness must be awakened, directed and sustained. Although Christian joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, that doesn’t mean it escapes the principles of psychology. We all have the same eyes, but what each individual sees or does not see with them depends on upbringing and many other factors.

1. Learning to live in the present

The first requirement for experiencing joy is acceptance of what is. *“Nothing can be changed or improved that has not first been accepted,”* Carl Jung said. Above all, accepting involves experiencing everything calmly in the present moment. In general, two problems come to disturb the present and contaminate the good soil where joy could sprout and grow. These are the temptation to know the future and the temptation to refuse to forget the past.

The desire to know the future is often diametrically opposed to trust. It means taking and not wanting to let go. In the first covenant, God forbade any attempt to predict the future: the future belongs to God alone. Idols gave hollow answers, the prophet Zechariah said.

Jesus would say the same thing, but in a more positive way: *“Do not worry about what you will eat or drink or what you will wear. Look at the birds in the sky and the lilies of the fields... sufficient for a day is its own evil”* (cf. Mt 6:25-28, 34).

Joy is equally impossible for someone who cannot let the past be the past and who is ever after locked in it, locked in especially by sorrow and remorse.

For joy to be a possibility, memory must first be purified and healed. Without a doubt, forgiveness is the deep healing of memory. The Gospels describe great rejoicing every time Jesus grants forgiveness.

2. From utility to the person

If it is true that *“the other is God’s joy,”* this joy cannot become ours unless we look at the other as God looks at him. The other is loved by God, long before we judge him, even long before we know him, and surely before we consider him likable.

God looks on His children with a father’s eye, not that of a boss or owner who expects his servants to wait on him. Divine relationships are never utilitarian but always personalized, between father and child. And yet our world so often is otherwise. He or she is a postal worker or tram conductor, cashier or nurse, counter clerk or police officer, taxi driver or concierge. Real joy rarely comes from such a utilitarian approach; satisfaction or disappointment, frustration or fleeting happiness are more likely.

No, joy can only come to those who enter into another sphere, that of personal relationships. The person standing beside me is someone, and I am happy that he is there, even before I know if he might be able to do something for me or what he can do. It’s because God doesn’t look at him in that way. In any case, what could he give God that God does not

“I want to say one word to you, and this word is joy.”

already have? For God, he is unique. This is why God looks at him and rejoices in looking at him. God reveals the dignity of each individual as unique and loved by Him.

3. The joy of praise

If there is a joy characteristic of the Bible, it is the joy of being able to praise God. The prayer of praise is very close to another form of prayer, thanksgiving. Therefore, the Bible often mentions them together, as if in a single breath.

However, the prayer of praise has its specificity. Whoever practices it thinks of God for God alone. He doesn't even consider what God does or has done for us. Praise is sustained by an awareness of God as an infinite ocean of majesty, perfection and holiness: *“Bless the Lord, my soul! Lord, my God, you are great indeed! You are clothed with majesty and splendor, robed in light as with a cloak. You spread out the heavens like a tent”* (Ps 104:1-2).

The Old Testament abounds in such hymns. It is as if they are glued to the lips of the just, and they make up half the Psalter. Praise is an outburst of life, a cry of *joie de vivre*, the ultimate song of the living before their God since, according to the Old Testament, the dead can no longer praise God. *“The dead do not praise the Lord, not all those go down into silence. It is we who bless the LORD, both now and forever”* (Ps 115:17-18).

Two passages of the New Testament are concentrated praise and thanksgiving: Luke's infancy narratives and Revelation. In Luke, three hymns are found side by side: Zechariah's Benedictus, Mary's Magnificat and the elder Simeon's Nunc Dimittis.

In John's Book of Revelation, you read a hymn on almost every page. The songs of angels, the elders, the four living creatures, the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel and the countless numbers from every nation, tribe, people and language resound almost constantly (for example, Rv 5:12-14). The Church, for its part, weaves a fabric from its hymns throughout the day in the Liturgy of the Hours.

According to their charism, the Daughters of Charity participate in the prayer, praise and Eucharist of the entire Church. C. 33 reminds us:

*“Mindful of the Lord's promises, the Daughters of Charity, assembled in His name, find His presence in a genuine community of prayer. This community draws its strength from a shared faith, from the **Eucharist, and from praising the Lord.** It finds its peace, its hope and its joy in the Mystery of Christ, who died and is risen from the dead. This demands personal responsibility for decisions made in common regarding times, frequency, and forms of prayer.”*

Let us pick up Pope Francis' questions again. I have selected some questions for your personal reflection:

“We may ask ourselves: am I anxious for God, anxious to proclaim him, to make him known? Or do I allow that spiritual worldliness to attract me which impels people to do everything for love of themselves? We consecrated people think of our personal interests, of the functionality of our works, of our careers. Well, we can think of so many things...

Have I, so to speak, made myself ‘comfortable’ in my Christian life, in my priestly life, in my religious life, and also in my community life? Or do I retain the force of restlessness for God, for his Word that makes me “step out” of myself towards others?” (Rejoice! 12)

4. The way of happiness throughout the liturgical year

We too rarely note that for centuries the Church has designed a sort of pedagogical path that ascends toward joy, the path of the liturgical year. Twice a year, week after week, day after day, it offers us an ascent toward the summits of Christian joy, Christmas and Easter. Advent and Lent are training periods in order to learn to be happy by rejoicing in the Lord's birth and His resurrection.

One Sunday after another, the liturgy leads us to Jesus, guided by the Precursor who leapt with joy even before he heard the Bridegroom's voice. Beginning December 17, each day we climb one more step of the staircase that leads to the joy of Christmas.

“I want to say one word to you, and this word is joy.”

We learn of the angel’s joyful message to Zachariah and then to Joseph; we witness the tidings brought to Mary; we accompany her on her visit to Elizabeth and sing all the joy of her Magnificat with her. Don’t forget Zachariah’s joyful song at the birth of his son John. We are then ready for Christmas night when joy bursts forth among the angels in heaven and the shepherds on earth.

After Christmas, we remain in this same climate for a while as the liturgy recalls the joy of the home in Nazareth with the Feast of the Holy Family and the joy of the wedding feast of Cana. The final note sounds February 2, the Solemnity of the Presentation of the Lord, with Simeon’s thanksgiving: *“Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace...”* (Lk 2:29)

After Lent, we reach the very top of the mountain, the summit of joy, the paradox of the cross through which joy came to the whole world. There will be the acclamations of Palm Sunday, the intimacy around the table and the conversations of Holy Thursday, and the Alleluia of the Easter Vigil. Easter Sunday itself, we hear the first cries of joy after so many dark hours, those of Mary Magdalene in the garden and of the disciples in the Upper Room. Still later there will be Thomas’ joy when he places his hand in Jesus’ wounds and believes.

Then comes the great wind of Pentecost and the joy of the Holy Spirit. This joy has the time to continue thirty-three Sundays in a row until the Solemnity of Christ the King, preceded by All Saints’ Day when all of heaven is assembled around the throne of the Lamb, waving palms of joy.

5. Let us venerate the Virgin Mary, icon of joy

Christian joy seems totally centered around one person, Mary, the cause of our joy. The first word that she hears from the angel of the Lord is, *“Rejoice, full of grace”*. The angel’s greeting to Mary is thus an invitation to joy, a deep joy; it announces the end of sadness. It is a greeting that marks the beginning of the Gospel, the Good News.

Joy spreads around Mary: the Son whom she carries in her womb is the God of joy, of contagious rejoicing. Mary throws open the doors of her heart and runs to Elizabeth. Joyful in achieving her desires, sensitive in

her duty, thoughtful in her joy, she hurries towards the mountain. Where, if not towards the summit, should she set out so eagerly, she who was already full of God?

She went in great haste to bring the joyous news to the world, to bring all the uncontainable joy she held in her womb: Jesus, the Lord. In great haste: it is not only the speed with which Mary went. We are told of her diligence, the careful attention with which she undertakes the journey, her enthusiasm. The Lord’s servant ran in great haste, to become the servant of all people.

Conclusion

As 2014 comes to a close, in communion with Saint Vincent, Saint Louise and Saint Catherine, we want to **look to the past with gratitude**. During his meeting with Superiors General in November 2013, Pope Francis said, *“[Consecrated] life is complicated; it consists of grace and sin.”* During this Year of Consecrated Life, he calls us to acknowledge and confess our weaknesses, but we also want to vigorously and joyfully “proclaim” to the world the holiness and vitality that are present in the life of consecrated persons.

With Mary, the whole Church progresses together: in the love of those who go out to the most fragile; in the hope of those who know that they will be accompanied in their going out and in the faith of those who have a special gift to share. With Mary, may each one of us, driven by the wind of the Spirit, fulfil our own vocation to forge ahead!

Rejoice, Mary, beloved of God.

Rejoice, Mother of God.

Father Bernard SCHOEPPER
Director General

Best wishes and thanks

Dear Sisters,

Taking up the passage from the book of Numbers from the Eucharist of January 1st, I dare to invoke this blessing on the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Yes, throughout this Year of Consecrated Life,

“The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you! The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace!” (Nm 6:24-26)

In this year of grace, Year of Consecrated Life, year of the General Assembly of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, God Himself promises you His blessing. In Scripture, a blessing is first of all an act of God who speaks, desires and accomplishes good for us; for Him, saying and doing are one in the same.

Divine blessing begins with creation by the Creating Word, who is the Word of God; it culminates in the mystery of the Incarnate Word who died and rose for us: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens”* (Eph 1:3).

Our own blessing, that is, our thanksgiving for all the good the Lord grants us, should be in keeping with the blessing that continually comes to us from God through Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

Sure of God’s gracious promise toward His people in our human condition and confident in this initial blessing of the New Year, we call upon Him for peace in this world. We entreat God to send the Prince of Peace to transfigure relationships among men and women of this age.

Day after day, let us seek paths toward peace among individuals, peoples and the least among us. Let us welcome Pope Francis’ message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace: *“No longer slaves, but brothers and sisters.”*

Eucharist after Eucharist, we offer the psalmist’s prayer to the Lord for our world that is wounded, scorned, humiliated, torn apart, crucified...

*“May God be gracious to us and bless us;
may His face shine upon us.
May the nations be glad and rejoice!
May the ends of the earth revere Him”* (Ps 67).

For and with persons living in poverty of our time, we beseech God and ask Him to send the Spirit of His Son into the hearts of our contemporaries. The Holy Spirit will give us the strength and perseverance for a new missionary momentum.

Like Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, we believe that the charity of Christ urges us. Let us engrave on our hearts this saying of Saint Louise: *“When charity possesses our heart, it makes us desire and seek the Glory of God.”*

May the Virgin Mary, Holy Mother of God, teach us to better keep in our hearts the events that will mark our life journey in 2015. Let us take more time to meditate on them in our hearts. Then the *boldness of Charity* will awaken our hearts and the *Joy of the Gospel* will transform our lives!

Thank you for your good wishes and your prayers! Thank you for what you have shared about your missions and ministries! In a spirit of gratitude and faith, I assure you of my faithful prayer.

Father Bernard SCHOEPFER, CM
Director General

Letter of February 2, 2015

Dear Sisters,

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

I wholeheartedly wish you a holy feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple and Day of Consecrated Life!

In the context of the Year of Consecrated Life, we celebrate this feast in a special way, and I am sure that Pope Francis' words resonate in your hearts: *"I expect...that the old saying will always be true: 'Where there are religious, there is joy.' We are called to know and show that God is able to fill our hearts to the brim with happiness; that we need not seek our happiness elsewhere; that the authentic fraternity found in our communities increases our joy; and that our total self-giving in service to the Church, to families and young people, to the elderly and the poor, brings us life-long personal fulfilment."*¹

I was received on this very special day by our Superior General and, in simplicity and humility, presented him our request for Renovation, emphasizing that we **joyfully** live our total gift of self to God for the service of Christ in persons who are poor. I added that, if we are well aware of certain deficiencies in our consistency in living out our vocation, we are also very confident in the Lord's infinite mercy. I brought up with Father Gregory how much reflection and prayer on the theme of the General Assembly and on the Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life are a source of hope and energy to continue on this path.

1. Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, II, 1

Father Gregory grants us permission to renew our vows on the feast of the Annunciation, March 25, 2015. Through him, it is the Lord who offers us the grace to say Yes to Him again, a humble and unconditional Yes, modeled on Mary's Yes at the Annunciation, a courageous and faith-filled Yes like the one Mary had to speak in her heart upon hearing Simeon's prophecy.

To prepare ourselves for the Renovation this year, I suggest contemplating the Virgin Mary, the first Christian and the consecrated Virgin par excellence, present in the life of the Company from the beginning, as our Constitutions state so well.² She is the only Mother of the Company and constantly watches over each Daughter of Charity. Throughout our history, she has shown us undeniable affection, as she expressed to Saint Catherine: *"The Community, how I love it."*³

Let's consider how she accompanies us in our faith journey and in fidelity to our vocation as Daughters of Charity.

THE BLESSED VIRGIN IN THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

THE VIRGIN MARY IN THE HEART OF THE CHRISTIAN PEOPLE

Mary is first of all the mother of Jesus. Several texts designate her as such, in reference to her Son. The Gospels of Saint Luke and Saint John give the Virgin her specific place in salvation history. Saint Luke especially emphasizes the presence of the Holy Spirit in the mysteries of the Annunciation and Pentecost. By the action of the Spirit, Mary is the mother of Christ and the mother of the Church as well.

From the cross Christ gave her to us as our mother. At the supreme hour of the new creation, Christ led us to Mary *"because he did not want us to journey without a mother, and our people read in this maternal image all the mysteries of the Gospel."*⁴ In most cultures, the mother is in fact the one who welcomes, cares for others, encourages and consoles; the

2. Cf. C. 15a

3. *The Life of Catherine Labouré*, by R. Laurentin, Collins, p. 75

4. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 285

Letter of February 2, 2015

family gathers around her. The Apostles benefited from the presence of the mother of the Lord and, with her, they felt comforted; they prayed with her while awaiting the gift of the Holy Spirit. “*All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus.*”⁵

The Council of Ephesus marked a significant milestone in the Church’s Marian devotion. It condemned the heresy of Nestorius, and, by proclaiming Mary *Theotokos*, Mother of God, it confirmed the faith of believers in Christ, true God and true man.

Indeed, authentic Marian devotion always leads back to the fundamental mystery of Christianity: God became man to save us. For example, devotions to the “joys” of Mary - the Annunciation, the Visitation and the birth of Jesus in the manger of Bethlehem - stress the truth of the incarnation. God is truly “Emmanuel”.

The Second Vatican Council clearly explained that the cult to the Blessed Virgin is altogether singular but differs essentially from the cult of adoration which is offered to the Incarnate Word, the Father and the Holy Spirit.⁶

THE VIRGIN MARY, DISCIPLE OF CHRIST, CONSECRATED VIRGIN PAR EXCELLENCE

Mary was a disciple of Jesus, she welcomed His message in the depths of her heart, and she shared the simple hidden life of Nazareth, a life of communion with Jesus, the carpenter’s son. She later accompanied her Son in His apostolic missions; united to Him, she went forward in her pilgrimage of faith even to the cross. This is why she was the first to be called “blessed” for having believed in the Lord.⁷

Her Fiat led her from Nazareth to Ain Karim, from Bethlehem into Egypt, from Jerusalem to Calvary, and then to Pentecost. Without a doubt, it was difficult for her to understand the demands made by faith. The Gospel

5. Acts 1:14

6. Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 66

7. Cf. Lk 1:45

account stresses that she didn’t grasp what her Son meant when she found Him in the temple seated in the midst of the doctors of the law, but she faithfully kept these memories in her heart.⁸

Mary, woman of faith, teaches us to live attentive to the Word and to welcome the Lord’s will made manifest in life events and through mediations. She always leads us to Jesus and encourages us to do whatever He tells us.

Mary, consecrated Virgin par excellence, is the woman of the Eucharist, as Saint John Paul II states in the encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. It is unimaginable that Mary wouldn’t have participated in the celebrations of Jesus’ disciples, united for the breaking of the bread.

The Eucharistic Bread that we receive is the real Body of Christ, born of the Virgin Mary. “*As a result, there is a profound analogy between the Fiat which Mary said in reply to the angel, and the Amen which every believer says when receiving the body of the Lord.*”⁹ At the Visitation, Mary became, in a way, the first tabernacle. Similarly, there is a close relationship between the Eucharist and the Magnificat. When Mary exclaims, “*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior,*”¹⁰ she bears Jesus in her womb. She praises the Father for Jesus, but she also praises Him in Jesus and with Jesus. This is the true Eucharistic attitude. The Eucharist has been given to us so that our life, like that of Mary, may become a Magnificat.¹¹

Let us constantly renew our love for the Eucharist, center of our life and mission and an indispensable meeting each day with Christ and our brothers and sisters.¹² Let us remember that every commitment to holiness, every activity aiming at carrying out the Church’s mission must draw the strength it needs from the Eucharistic mystery and be directed toward it.

8. Cf. Lk 2:50-51

9. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 55

10. Lk 1:46-47

11. Cf. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 58

12. Cf. C. 19b

Letter of February 2, 2015

Charity is also a precious fruit of the Eucharist. Let us remain with Jesus in order to look around us with a contemplative gaze, discern the presence of the Spirit and shine forth His love. Mary, woman of the Eucharist, help us to bring Jesus to those whom we encounter and to bear witness to the charity of Christ for the least among us!

THE VIRGIN MARY AND THE FOUNDERS

Saint Vincent and Saint Louise had filial respect and ardent devotion to the Most Holy Virgin. They regularly sought her intercession: “*Let’s ask the Blessed Virgin to pray to Her Son for all of us.*”¹³ They found encouragement and inspiration in Mary. She was a guide and mother for them.

Our Founders’ biographers relate scenes that reflect their Marian devotion: as a child, Saint Vincent praying before the statue of the Virgin nestled in the oak tree of Ranquines, or celebrating his first Mass in a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Grace in Buzet. He attributed his liberation from slavery in Barbary to Mary. We find him in 1623 on pilgrimage with his family to Our Lady of Buglose. Later, he expressed his desire to go on pilgrimage to Chartres.

Although Saint Vincent did not dedicate any conferences to the Virgin Mary, his letters and conferences contain many passages that show us Marian devotion was an intimate part of his prayer life. He encouraged the Sisters to imitate the virtues of the Blessed Virgin and to celebrate the feasts dedicated to her; he particularly advised them to pray the Angelus and the Rosary. He often concluded his letters in this way: “*in the love of Our Lord and His holy Mother.*”¹⁴

Saint Vincent was convinced that “*when the Mother of God has been invoked and taken as patroness in important matters, everything can only go well and accrue to the glory of Jesus her Son.*”¹⁵

13. Saint Vincent, Coste X, page 85

14. Saint Vincent, “To Saint Louise de Marillac”, October 1627. Coste I, page 28

15. Saint Vincent, Coste XIIIb, p. 3

Mary is very much present in the life of Saint Louise as well. Saint Louise had a deep love for the Blessed Virgin: “*I am entirely yours, most Holy Virgin, that I may more perfectly belong to God.*”¹⁶ From her youth, she recognized in Mary the model of what God wanted to accomplish in His creatures; she placed all her trust in her since she thought it was impossible for God’s goodness to refuse anything to the Virgin Mary. We still have many of Saint Louise’s writings that capture the fruit of her highly developed meditations on the Mother of the Lord. As Statute 7 tells us, the prayer *Most Holy Virgin* gathers the insights and wishes of our Foundress.

Saint Louise liked to paint and give pictures of Our Lady. In all our behavior, she wrote, let us look to the Blessed Virgin and consider that the best way to honor her is by imitating her virtues, particularly her purity, since we are the spouses of Jesus Christ, and her humility, since God by this virtue worked so many great things in her and detached her from all earthly things.¹⁷

Our Constitutions ask us to be faithful to the Marian character of the Company, dissemination of the Miraculous Medal, promoting devotion to the Virgin Mary and working for the development of Marian Associations.¹⁸ Let us give Mary as a model to the young and less young!

MARY, PERFECT IMAGE OF THE SERVANT OF PERSONS WHO ARE POOR

MARY, MODEL OF FIDELITY

Saint Louise chose the feast of the Annunciation to associate her own gift of self and that of her daughters to the *Fiat* of the Virgin Mary.¹⁹ Mary is the perfect image of the servant of persons who are poor, the model of those who follow Christ and dedicate themselves to the service of others.

16. Saint Louise, *Spiritual Writings*. A. 4, page 695

17. Cf. Saint Louise, *Spiritual Writings*. M. 33, page 785

18. Cf. C. 26, S. 14

19. Cf. C. 28e

Letter of February 2, 2015

Each year, as we renew our total gift of self to God by vows, we ask the Lord for the grace of fidelity through Jesus Christ crucified and through the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin.²⁰ The spirituality of the Renovation, as the *Instructions on the Vows* indicates, demands a serious preparation because each year must mark a new stage in the deepening of our total gift of self to God for the service of persons who are poor.²¹

Do we strive to enter more deeply into our vows, a source of strength and a covenant deeply rooted in the mystery of the Church?²² Do we, like Mary, make of our lives an act of worship of God and our worship a commitment of our lives?²³

Our vocation presupposes and requires a profound affinity with the spirit that animated Christ the Servant and Mary, the Handmaid of the Lord.²⁴ We commit ourselves by our specific vow to serve those who are poor corporally and spiritually, in accord with the Constitutions and Statutes.²⁵

The total gift of self demands boldness and courage to abandon what makes us feel secure and brush aside obstacles that hinder a dynamic life in a missionary state. In the same way, our condition as servants requires a compassionate and kind attitude in order to remain beside persons who suffer, sharing in their sorrow, taking up their cause and working to change the unjust structures that cause poverty.²⁶

The evangelical witness that the world finds most appealing is that of concern for people and of charity toward the least among us and those who suffer. The free and unconditional nature of this attitude raises precise questions which lead to God. A commitment to peace, justice, human rights and human promotion is also a witness to the Gospel.²⁷

20. Cf. C. 28b

21. Cf. *Instructions on the Vows*, p. 38

22. Cf. C. 28a

23. Cf. C. 23

24. Cf. *Instructions on the Vows*, p. 117

25. Cf. C. 24a

26. Cf. C. 24e

27. Cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 42

May our service awaken the desire to get to know Jesus Christ and welcome His message! Let us prepare ourselves to receive the boldness of charity from Christ! We need to drink from the Source, without which our mission languishes and runs the risk either of indifference and lethargy or of activism and individualism.

How can we renew our apostolic zeal and go out towards so many of our contemporaries who “*are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life*”²⁸?

MARY, HUMBLE SERVANT OF THE FATHER’S PLAN

Contemplating Mary in the Immaculate Conception, the Annunciation and the Visitation, Saint Vincent traced the itinerary of the Virgin Mary’s spiritual journey and that of the Daughter of Charity.²⁹

The Immaculate One, totally open to the Spirit

The Immaculate Virgin remained totally open to the Spirit. Because of this, God did great things for her, and all ages will call her blessed.

Our Founders had a deep devotion to Mary Immaculate, well before the dogma was proclaimed. Saint Louise wished that the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God be recognized and celebrated “*since she is the only pure creature who has always found favor in the eyes of God.*”³⁰

“*As a response in love to a call of Love, perfect chastity lived in celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven frees the heart of a Daughter of Charity and causes it to burn with greater Love of God and the Poor.*”³¹

28. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49

29. Cf. Father Jamet, *The Daughter of Charity in the Church and the World of Today*. Volume II, page 445

30. Saint Louise, *Spiritual Writings*. A. 31b, page 830

31. *Instructions on the Vows*, p. 44

Letter of February 2, 2015

Chastity gives the heart the dimensions of the heart of Christ³² and helps open a Daughter of Charity's eyes to welcome all forms of sorrow and suffering because she has learned from Christ that no type of human distress should be foreign to her.³³ Chastity leads to loving unconditionally; it is complete transparency and holds nothing back for itself.

In an environment marked by unlimited permissiveness, chastity requires a patient learning process that lasts a lifetime to counter the tendency to prefer what is convenient and easy, physical well-being and avoidance of suffering. We must be vigilant, as Pope Francis frequently repeats, in order to courageously respond to the traps laid by secularism and all forms of superficiality.

The Constitutions tell us that, in order to live chastity, the Daughters of Charity "*place their confidence in the Virgin Mary and find sisterly support in friendship and charity within their community.*"³⁴ Is this a reality for us?

The Annunciation

I am the handmaid of the Lord. Mary is a courageous young woman who, even when faced with the unknown, maintains self-control. She is an interior woman who holds heart and reason together and seeks to grasp the context, the totality of God's message. In this way, she becomes the image of the listening Church.

The angel departed from her. Mary finds herself alone with the task entrusted to her and must continue the journey. Her obedience opens the door to God, to the Word of God.

Mary is the humble servant of the Father's plan. Her response to the angel bears witness to a total obedience to God's will. Mary's responsiveness anticipates that of Jesus, whose food is to do His Father's will and to accomplish His work.³⁵

32. Cf. C. 29a

33. Cf. C. 11a

34. C. 29d

35. Cf. Jn 4:34

*"Obedience, practiced in imitation of Christ... shows the liberating beauty of a dependence which is not servile but filial."*³⁶ Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Daughters of Charity strive to live in the attitude of the Son of God who, in order to carry out the Father's loving plan, became obedient unto death and the death of the Cross.³⁷

Obedience helps us to accept God's will as the unique standard for our lives. In the context of today's cultures, marked by a subjectivity that sometimes leads to extreme individualism, it is important to emphasize the necessity of discernment, as a light on our path in order to know what is good, right and pleasing to God.

The Word of God, the teachings of the Church, the Constitutions and the guidelines of the Company help us to not be swept along by every wind of teaching.³⁸ If the Holy Spirit guides us, we will be prepared to resist the sometimes seductive false values that are opposed to the Gospel.

Obedience is an expression of faith and love; it leads to constantly seeking the Father's will and accepting it joyfully. Are we aware that the vocation of Daughters of Charity can only be sustained by obedience to God's plan? "*...as long as this holy practice exists in the Company, it will get on well.*"³⁹

The Visitation

Saint Vincent, commenting on the Visitation, the third phase of Mary's spiritual journey, encouraged the Sisters to visit persons who are poor with a heart emptied of everything and filled with God. This visit must be made thinking of God alone and "*as the Blessed Virgin made it when she went to visit Saint Elizabeth, that is, with the greatest gentleness, charity and love.*"⁴⁰

36. *Vita Consecrata*, 21

37. Cf. *Instructions on the Vows*, p. 96

38. Cf. Eph 4:14

39. Saint Vincent, Conference of May 23, 1655. Coste X, page 63

40. Saint Vincent, Conference 26, July 1646: *Recommendations for the Visitation of the Paris Houses*. Coste IX, p. 204

Letter of February 2, 2015

Proportionately to how much a Daughter of Charity loves poverty, the love of God increases in her, Saint Vincent said: *“Her heart is in God and, as she deprives herself of the comforts of life for the love of God, He gives her the grace to love only Him and to love Him with her whole heart.”*⁴¹

Only poor and humble hearts can know God and give themselves to Him, holding nothing back. Jesus strips the disciples whom He sends on mission of everything; in the same way, poverty opens the heart of the Daughter of Charity to the Holy Spirit, who enables her to adopt the filial attitude of Christ the Servant.⁴²

A poor heart is capable of suffering and sympathy. It is at peace amid difficulties, including persecution. As the Constitutions recall, living evangelical poverty demands constantly working toward conversion.⁴³ Poverty is a powerful witness in a world where the consumer society reigns and where possessing material goods is synonymous with happiness.

Let us rediscover the freshness and radicality of the lived experience of poverty, being satisfied with what is necessary, accepting everything joyfully and indifferently, comparing our life to the precarious lives of persons living in poverty, and rejecting any privilege!

*What changes do we have to make in order to continue to move forward in a response of increasing fidelity to the commitments of our baptism through the practice of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience?*⁴⁴

MARY, MOTHER OF MERCY AND HOPE OF THE LOWLY⁴⁵

Jesus' mercy resounds in the pages of the Gospel. To the paralyzed man, He offers salvation for his soul and body; speaking to the woman with a hemorrhage, He assures her that her faith has healed her. On the cross, He

41. Saint Vincent, Conference of August 5, 1657. Coste X, p. 244

42. Cf. *Instructions on the Vows*, p. 64

43. Cf. C. 30b

44. Cf. C. 27

45. Cf. C. 15b

cries out, *“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do,”*⁴⁶ and then opens the gates of heaven to the good thief who acknowledges his sin.

Mary becomes the Mother through whom divine mercy comes to us: *“Everything is comprised in her title of Mother of the Son of God. How admirable are her deeds! With good reason the Church addresses her as the Mother of Mercy because she is also the Mother of Grace.”*⁴⁷

To this Mother of mercy, let us lead all persons living in poverty who are on the edge of despair and who need counsel, peace and hope...

Sweet Virgin Mary, turn your eyes of mercy toward children who need a loving and joyful family environment in order to grow; toward youth, often disoriented yet called to build the world of tomorrow; toward solitary elderly persons who thirst for a listening ear and a sense of being supported...

Sweet Virgin Mary, turn your eyes of mercy toward men and women who live in precarious conditions, toward persons who are sick and dying, toward broken families, migrants, displaced persons, prisoners, persons under the influence of drugs, alcohol and every form of addiction...

Sweet Virgin Mary, turn your eyes of mercy toward peoples at war, persecuted Christians, persons trapped in the spiral of violence and who sow terror...

Sweet Virgin Mary, turn your eyes of mercy toward the Church called to ongoing conversion and the evangelization of nations until the end of time...

Sweet Virgin Mary, turn your eyes of mercy toward the Company, which prepares for its ninth General Assembly, impelled by the boldness of charity for a new missionary momentum!

CONCLUSION: THE COMPANY UNDER THE PROTECTION OF MARY

Saint Louise wished to entrust the Company to the Blessed Virgin. This wish came true during her pilgrimage to Chartres in October 1644, during

46. Lk 23:34

47. Saint Louise, *Spiritual Writings*. A. 14b, page 775

Letter of February 2, 2015

which she offered to God the designs of His Providence on the Company and asked Him for the grace of fidelity for it through the merits of the Son of God and of Mary.

Later, in 1658, Saint Louise asked Saint Vincent to place the entire Company under the protection of the Blessed Virgin so that she might be considered its only Mother. Saint Vincent did this at the end of the conference of December 8, 1658, when he offered to the Virgin Mary the Company in general and each Daughter of Charity in particular, placing them under her protection so that she might be their guide.

In admiration and gratitude, we can assert that love for the Virgin Mary is at the heart of the Company and has remained alive through the centuries. *“In their service, the Daughters of Charity strive to be faithful to the Marian character of the Company.”*⁴⁸ The presence of the Virgin Mary has been the source of a constant stream of graces in the life of the Company. Mary’s message to Saint Catherine Labouré is one more proof of her maternal gaze especially directed toward the most destitute. *“Come to the foot of this altar. Here, graces will be spread over all those, great and the small, who ask for them. Graces will be especially shed upon those who ask for them.”*⁴⁹

Let us entrust our Renovation to Mary:

**You, humble and available Virgin, only Mother of the Company,
Our Lady of the free, joyful, faithful and courageous Yes,
pray for us who have recourse to you!**

Following tradition, I passed on a warm and respectful greeting in your name to Father Gregory, Father Maloney and Father McCullen. To our Director General, Father Bernard, and his predecessors, Father Patrick, Father Javier and Father Quintano, I sent a grateful greeting. Finally, I assured Mother Elizondo and Mother Duzan of our affection, along with our prayers for their intentions.

With my devoted affection and the assurance of my prayer,

Sister Evelyne FRANC
Daughter of Charity

48. C. 26

49. René Laurentin, *The Life of Catherine Labouré*, p. 80

Lent 2015

**Walking the Way of
Reconciliation, Peace, and Humility**

My dear Brothers and Sisters of the Vincentian Family,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be forever in our hearts!

The season of **Lent** is a time ripe for reflection on the mysteries of our faith. Once again, we are invited join Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem, to accompany him to Calvary, to wait quietly at the Tomb, and to know the glory of his Resurrection, which he shares with us. The Gospel for Ash Wednesday reminds us that, underneath the rich outward symbols of this season of grace, Lent is an inward journey: *“But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you”* (Mt. 6:6).

My theme for this Lenten reflection centers on **reconciliation, peace, and humility**, which I chose after insights I gained in pastoral visits I made to apostolates of the Daughters of Charity in South Korea, Nagasaki, Japan, and Mauritania and Tunisia, Africa. Amidst the worries, tensions, pains, and sufferings we experience for our world and in our own lives, Lent provides us with many occasions to enter the ‘inner room’ of the soul to encounter and embrace a concert of consolations that come to us through **reconciliation, peace, and humility**.

RECONCILIATION

When I visited the Daughters of Charity in South Korea, they brought me to “Reconciliation Park,” a strip of land between South and North Korea. Built after the Korean War in a collaborative effort between government

Lent 2015

and citizens, Koreans come there to reflect and pray for reconciliation on a peninsula made up of two nations but one people, who share the same history, language, and culture. The Daughters made our visit like a pilgrimage as we walked slowly through the park, meditating and praying. This experience relates to Lent, which calls us to seek reconciliation in our own lives, starting with **inner reconciliation**, as we realize we are God's beloved children. Only then can we reach out to our families, neighbors, religious communities, work, ministries, and associations we belong to with gestures of reconciliation. In doing so, we deepen our bonds as brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we allow this spirit of reconciliation to permeate our lives, we can identify with the Lenten story of the Prodigal in the Scriptures. We who were dead "come to life again"; we who were lost "are now found" by our Father who wants to "celebrate and rejoice" with us (Lk. 15:32). Saint Vincent de Paul, whose life was given over to bringing about reconciliation between peoples of all strata of society, said: "The blessing of peace and reconciliation... is something so great and pleasing to God that He says to each of us: *"Inquire pacem et persequere eam"* (Search for peace and seek to attain it.) (CCD: Vol. I, Letter 150, p. 214, 16 September 1633).

This Lent, let us pray for reconciliation between nations (i.e., North and South Korea), regions, countries, and in our families and communities, so we may be people whose lives and actions mirror the reconciling love of Christ. Only through the person of Jesus can we truly achieve an authentic reconciliation with a lasting effect upon our Church and society.

PEACE

A fruit of reconciliation is **peace**, which brings me to my second pilgrimage in Kobe, Japan, when visiting my Vincentian confreres and the Daughters of Charity. We went to Nagasaki, a city with the largest number of Catholics in Japan. As history records, Nagasaki endured the atomic bomb on August 9, 1945. After this horrific experience, Japan, along with people of good will, sought a visible way to promote peace amidst this tragedy. They constructed a "Peace Park" that we visited, one filled with symbols of peace donated by nations and people across the world.

The central symbol that caught my attention was the statue of a man, who sits with one arm outstretched, and the other arm raised to heaven, which is meant to be a call for peace. With one foot on the ground and the other crossed over his knee, it is meant to symbolize that seeking peace entails a need for contemplation (a crossed foot), and action (a foot on the ground). The outstretched hand also symbolizes the need for all people to be peacemakers, and the hand reaching upward points to the need for divine assistance in bringing about true works of peace.

The root of reconciliation is peace, necessary for each of us, and it begins in our hearts. Only then can it take root in our families, religious communities, neighbors, work, ministries, and the associations to which we belong. As a Vincentian Family, we must strive to cultivate peace and promote it in any way possible. Saint Vincent reminds us that, "Charity demands that we strive to sow peace where it does not exist" (CCD: Vol. V, Letter 2054, p. 602, 23 April 1656).

This Lent provides an ideal time to pray for **peace**, as we live among a backdrop of constant threats of war, terrorism, and violence in our world. A movement toward reconciliation, whose fruit is peace, comes about in practicing the virtue of humility. I saw this virtue in action in a very powerful way during my visit to the Daughters of Charity in Mauritania and Tunisia.

HUMILITY

To exercise their ministry of service to the poor in these countries, the Daughters of Charity must do so in an unassuming, humble way. In Mauritania, which claims to be 100% Muslim, the Daughters work with religious communities of Christian descent, which are not recognized as visible entities in that country. In these countries, the Daughters practice great humility, both as individuals and as a community, because they work in secular service associations that serve the poor. They are not in charge, and they must work with others who direct their activities.

To live and work in such an environment demands reconciliation and inner peace with one's status in life. Most of all, it calls forth a real humility, a "kenosis" to empty oneself. To live in an environment where you are not recognized nor acknowledged is difficult. It is more challenging when

Lent 2015

there is not the ability to make a public witness to the Church or to our Vincentian charism.

In so doing, this exercise in the virtue of humility is possible only by a strong interior life of prayer and mutual support in community. Letting go of the human ego's needs for control and to seek approval and recognition is never easy. The presence of the Daughters in the Province of North Africa is a quiet, but firm witness to the virtue of humility. It enables the continuance of our charism in serving the poor, especially those living on the margins. These are God's and St. Vincent's poor, the little ones whose personal dignity is often discounted and even negated.

Daughters of Charity and members of the Vincentian Family serve in similar situations across the world today. In their humble, often hidden service, they become one with the poor by their intentional witness. Saint Vincent said that "Humility... consists in emptying ourselves completely before God, overcoming ourselves in order to place God in our heart, not seeking the esteem and good opinion of others, and struggling constantly against any impulse of vanity... Humility causes us to empty ourselves of self so that God alone may be manifest, to whom glory may be given" (CCD: Vol. XII, Conference 211, p. 247, 22 August 1659).

From my own experience, to work for **reconciliation** and gain *peace* in one's heart, we must acquire and practice the *virtue of humility*. This is best done by examining oneself with total honesty and openness before God. It leads us to what Saint Paul called a 'kenosis', an emptying of oneself. Our model is Christ, who "*although he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself, becoming a slave, coming in human likeness, and found human in appearance*" (Phil. 2:6-7). The humbling experience of 'emptying oneself' in the Christian life is not only an individual endeavor, but a core part of our identity as Church. Lent calls us to personal and communal conversion of heart.

A HEART FILLED WITH MERCY

Pope Francis' 2015 Lenten Letter is titled "*Make your hearts firm*" (Jas. 5:8), a fitting theme for our reflection. Only by practicing humility, peace, and reconciliation can our hearts become firm and be grounded in

the mercy and love of Christ. Lent is the time to seek interior renewal in prayer, immersion in Scripture, the daily Eucharist, and living our Vincentian charism of service of the poor. All this calls for a firm heart. Listen to these words of our Holy Father:

"A merciful heart does not mean a weak heart. Anyone who wishes to be merciful must have a strong, steadfast heart closed to the tempter, but open to God. A heart that lets itself be pierced by the Spirit, to bring love along the roads that lead to our brothers and sisters. And ultimately, a poor heart, one that realizes its own poverty and gives itself freely for others. During this Lent, brothers and sisters, let us all ask the Lord, "Fac cor nostrum secundum cor tuum - Make our hearts like yours" (Message of His Holiness, Pope Francis for Lent, 2015, p.3).

May this Lent help us grow in love of Christ and our Vincentian charism, as we walk the way of reconciliation and take the path of peace, with "humbled and contrite hearts" (Ps. 51:19).

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Father G. Gregory GAY, CM
Superior General

United Nations
Global Conference:

Sparks of Hope and Calls for Action

N

United Nations, New York

News
from the
Provinces

Eight Daughters of Charity joined thousands of people from around the world August 27-29, 2014, to participate in the international non-governmental organization (NGO) conference at the United Nations in New York City focusing on sustainable development.

Organized by the UN Department of Public Information, the 65th annual conference drew more than two thousand participants on site, as well as millions of others connected via the Internet and social media. While some participants represented governments, most were members of NGOs, also known as “civil society.”

This year’s theme was “**2015 and Beyond ~ Our Action Agenda.**” The focus included Sustainable Development Goals to be adopted and implemented by UN member states for the period 2016 to 2030. They will build on the UN Millennium Development Goals to which UN member states agreed for the period between 2000 and 2015.

Overall, such goals focus on reducing and eradicating poverty, overcoming inequalities and upholding human rights and development. The new goals emphasize reducing and preventing climate change and promoting sustainable development.

Governments are responsible for adopting and implementing such international agreements. However, they are informed and held to account by citizens and members of civil society who advocate with and for those most affected by poverty, war, violence, disease and environmental degradation.

The 2014 NGO conference came less than a month before the UN Secretary General convened the climate summit on September 23, 2014, in New York City with world leaders from government, finance, business and civil society. The summit seeks to mobilize political will to achieve a meaningful legal agreement on climate action in 2015.

During the conference, many women and young people played skilled and impassioned leadership roles as part of collaborative networks. The conference highlighted the need for those most affected by injustice and environmental degradation to be consulted, heeded and actively involved in decision-making.

Courage and Commitment

Participants chose from a variety of informative workshops sponsored and led by NGOs. Scheduled time for midday networking offered opportunities for growth in collaboration and unity. The experience, courage and commitment of civil society leaders meeting from around the world sparked fresh hope for a healthier planet and a more just and peaceful world.

In presentations during plenary roundtables, NGO leaders urged that human rights be upheld for persons who are often excluded and vulnerable, facing discrimination and violence. They include girls and women, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and small family farmers.

The conference evoked key questions: How might we respond as local members of global networks of citizens committed to sustainable development and an end to poverty? With whom will we pray and act for greater social and ecological justice?

Sisters' Testimonies

With record participation, the 2014 conference drew more than 900 NGOs from 117 countries. This year marked the return of the NGO conference to the UN in New York City. Beginning in 2008, the global gathering was held in countries other than the United States. The next conference is planned for September 2015 in New York City during the UN's 70th anniversary year.

During the closing session of the 2014 conference, Ralien Bekkers said, "Politics, profits and power are overruling people and planet." However, the Dutch youth representative on sustainable development to the UN emphasized that young people are among those boldly acting to overcome injustice. "We all need to get out of our comfort zones and show real courage," she urged.

Participants strongly affirmed the final conference declaration, which recognizes 2015 as a "once-in-a-generation opportunity for transformational change." Offering a vision of sustainable development, the declaration also makes specific recommendations to monitor and achieve it. It is available on the conference website at: <http://outreach.un.org/ngorelations/files/2014/09/Declaration-Final.pdf>

In his closing remarks, Jan Eliasson called the UN a reflection of "the world as it is and the world as it should be." The Deputy Secretary General encouraged members of civil society to narrow the gap between the two worlds with both passion and compassion.

"In today's global landscape, no one can do everything, but everyone can do something," he noted.

We, the Daughters of Charity, have excellent opportunities to share our experience working with people who suffer deep poverty and exclusion in so many parts of the world through our Daughter of Charity UN NGO Offices in Geneva and New York. I am sure you will agree that our founders Vincent and Louise would encourage us to seize the moment boldly.

Sister Catherine PRENDERGAST
Daughter of Charity

United Nations Daughters of Charity NGO Representative

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

United Nations Rights of the Child

Introduction

Does the date November 20, 1989, remind you of anything? It was a global event that will celebrate its 25th anniversary on Thursday. I'm referring to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and I am going to take advantage of this gathering to speak with you about it.

1 - WHAT CAME BEFORE THIS CONVENTION

As in all situations, "law follows life". As society has evolved, it has become interested in what is particular about children and in their family relationships, which has led to respect for children's development.

This is how, as early as January 1, 1924, an initial text, called the Geneva Declaration, was signed by the members of the League of Nations.

In just **five chapters**, this document was the first to recognize specific rights for children: rights to normal development, to be fed, cared for, encouraged... the right to assistance, the right to earn their living free from exploitation and article 5:

"The child must be brought up in the consciousness that its talents must be devoted to the service of fellow men."

In 1947, after World War II, the **United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund** was created. Better known as UNICEF, the fund served European children and then children in developing countries.

December 10, 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated that

"all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights... and

Sisters' Testimonies

should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (Art 1).

The Declaration recognizes that “*motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance*” (Art 25 §2).

Eleven years later, **November 20, 1959**, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. With ten principles, the document

“calls upon parents, upon men and women as individuals, and upon voluntary organizations, local authorities and national Governments to recognize these rights.”

However, this text was not legally binding.

In 1966, other international texts were signed regarding rights to education and health, the right to have a name and a nationality, and then a Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict. In France, a teaching methodology was put in place that promotes children’s participation and initiative.

The United Nations declared **1979** the International Year of the Child and established a working group with the responsibility of writing an international charter, which would be adopted November 20, 1989.

2 - THE 1989 CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

This Convention is made up of **fifty-four articles**. Its goal is to recognize and protect children’s specific rights. It is an articulation of human rights, such as they are indicated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in their specify for children.

November 20, 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted. International Children’s Day is observed every November 20, in honor of this convention.

As usual, article one provides a definition:

“For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”

40

3 - FOUR MAJOR PRINCIPLES OF THE CONVENTION ARTICULATE THE GENERAL GUIDELINES SPELLED OUT IN THE VARIOUS ARTICLES

- non-discrimination (article 2)

- the best interests of the child (article 3). This is the essential point of this Convention.

- the right to survival and development (article 6)

- taking the child’s views into account (article 12)

4 - THE CONVENTION IS SUPPLEMENTED BY OPTIONAL PROTOCOLS

On **June 17, 1999**, the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention was adopted.

Three more protocols were then adopted:

a/ Exploitation: In May 2000, the optional protocol to the International Charter of the Rights of the Child regarding the participation of children in armed conflicts is ratified. It went into effect in 2002. This text **prohibits minors taking part in armed conflicts**.

b/ The optional protocol on the **sale of children**, child prostitution and child pornography (OPSC), went into effect January 18, 2002. It was ratified on October 11, 2007, by 115 member States and signed by 123.

c/ A third **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure** was established. This allows children who are abused or whose rights are infringed upon, either themselves or their representatives, to file individual or group petitions with the Committee on the Rights of the Child in countries that have ratified this protocol.

Alas, State parties to the Convention are free to ratify these protocols or not...

41

Sisters' Testimonies

Handicapped Children: Handicap International participated in the development of the Convention that was adopted in 2006 and went into effect **May 3, 2008**. The committee works to adapt the Convention for handicapped children.

5 - PRACTICAL ELEMENTS FOR US AS DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

a/ Be very attentive to assure that births are officially registered. Over the last ten years, the UN has estimated that 10% of children are not legally registered. They reach adulthood without legal papers and without receiving an education...

This lack of legal papers fosters human trafficking. Children without birth certificates become lucrative merchandise, and this opens the door to all sorts of exploitation.

Boldness in our vocation should press us to find solutions to help and encourage parents to legally declare all their children, even if it means bringing a civil service employee to remote villages each month.

b/ children's dignity...

Human dignity is the major concept that allows NGOs to defend human rights according to the 1948 Declaration (see above).

And for us, dignity takes on an even more important character:

- because the person is created in God's image
- Saint Vincent and Saint Louise passed on to us love of the poor and little ones, who are children of God.

Sister Monique JAVOUHEY
Daughter of Charity

FATHER F. PELLEFIGUE, CM

Session for Daughters of Charity
over 40 years vocation

Living times of change with Saint Vincent de Paul

Introduction

I would like to suggest that we start with the word "change" to help us consider with Saint Vincent de Paul's vision your current situation in life.

I think that the word 'change' describes rather well, in an overall way, the situation in which we live today, on this earth. We experience changes. I will mention a few major ones.

- Human beings will never stop saying and feeling: the world is changing, and this is surely because that is its nature. However, it seems that this shared phenomenon holds our attention more because it takes place in an accelerated and multiple way in our time and because it produces a sort of immediacy. The technological means humans have developed, with the internet as their archetype, make travel and communication from one end of the earth to another easier and more efficient. To illustrate this closeness and sharing among all people, we often compare the world to a village. More technically, we refer to globalization. I do not know where we are going, but it is evident that such a movement has begun, with its advantages and disadvantages.

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*Session for
Daughters of
Charity over
40 years
vocation*

Session for Daughters of Charity over 40 years vocation

- The Church, living in the world, is not exempt from change today. We could think on the one hand about what happened during the 20th century around the Second Vatican Council. Pope John XXIII opened it as an *aggiornamento*, and the Church strove to renew itself in its way of thinking and its life, attentive to the world. You may have in mind some symbolic images of these changes. But on the other hand, our thoughts are directed toward the evolution that our Church has experienced more recently. A radical change is under way, which may especially affect Christians in the Western world. Members are decreasing everywhere in old institutions, and new energies see the light of day within local communities. To simplify rapidly, I would mention that a consequence of this shift can be seen in what we call the “New Evangelization.”

- Your Company, which is neither outside of the world nor outside of the Church, is also affected by change. You know your history that shows the signs of this. I would like to suggest, as a simple example, the revision of your Constitutions in 2003. The upcoming General Assembly commits you to “the Boldness of Charity for a New Missionary Momentum.”

- But does this reality stop at the threshold of our own lives? Is it just a phenomenon that is external to people and only affects structures? As we well know, we experience changes even in our being, in our bodies, in our thoughts, our friendships... It is not a question, as a general rule, of a revolution coming to overturn everything that has structured our life. I do not want to speak to you specifically about “change” as being sent to a new mission, as we often use this word in French to indicate a change in position or responsibilities in public service (“I received my change.”). We also experience changes in our lives, but I don’t want to talk about the ‘little’ changes that we have initiated ourselves. Rather, I would like to speak of change in the context of the major stages that govern the rhythm of human life: birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, maturity, old age, end of life and death. I would like to focus our attention on change that occurs naturally and involuntarily.

Among the works I read preparing for this conference, I found the book by Robert Maloney, the previous Superior General, *Seasons in Spirituality*, with which you may already be familiar. For my presentation today, I especially read what he entitled “Wintertime”, but which I would prefer to give the new title “Autumn” because, in your group of Sisters over 40

years vocation, some may still find themselves fully employed if they entered the Company at a young age. My talk intends to focus on the end of full-time work.

Change is not always easy to live through. It demands that we move from one state to another, and we are not always willing or prepared. We must give up what we are used to and welcome what is new. This can be more or less difficult depending on each individual’s character, personality, history and psychology... according to personal needs for security and peace of mind... This is why I am suggesting that today you take the time to consider your life from this angle. In order to help you, let’s watch St. Vincent change, help others in their changes and reach out to you in yours.

I - CHANGE IN SAINT VINCENT’S OWN LIFE

You are certainly well aware that Vincent was not spared from external forces or pressures; they made change necessary in his own life. I haven’t made an exhaustive list, but I have chosen some of them that seemed significant to me.

1) Both weak and strong

Through his writings and accounts, we know Vincent as someone who was generally robust, demonstrating a sort of life force. Moreover, he lived to the age of 79, which, for his time, places him well above average (the mortality rate for men was around 40 years of age). We also know that he regularly had health problems. He frequently mentions his “little fever”, pains in his leg... He also suffered from “travel” accidents (in 1633, a horse fell on top of him).¹ I haven’t drawn up a chronological medical report,² but it simply seems interesting to me, by bringing this up, to see how Vincent reacted to illness, as his deteriorating health required that something be done.

1. Cf. *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents* (CCD) I, p. 199; falling from a carriage, cf. CCD VII, p. 68

2. See the text by Robert Maloney, CM, *Seasons in Spirituality*, New City Press, New York, 1998, p. 31-33; and a study by Bernard Koch, CM, “The Final Years of Saint Vincent and of Saint Louise,” written primarily in 1994.

Session for Daughters of Charity over 40 years vocation

He would especially confide in Saint Louise, who could give him advice and provide him with effective treatments. He didn't tell everyone about his sufferings to make them pity him, but he spoke as appropriate to ask advice or, most often, to explain his "inconveniences". As much as possible, Vincent cared for himself, but not scrupulously or out of negligence, having no other aim than to restore himself as quickly as possible in order to resume his mission.

We can also read that illness caused what he called "inconveniences": he could no longer do what was planned, such as making a visit, giving a mission or a writing a note. According to circumstances, he worked things out as they arose, by postponing his activity, entrusting it to another person or cancelling it.

Little by little, he had the experience of passing years, of which man can never be the master, and to which he must adapt. He had already begun to learn in his spiritual journey about the need to let go in order to let God live and act in him. As his body became more fragile, he also discovered this essential need to learn to divest himself even of his own body. *"O you wretch! You're an old man... small things seem big to you, and difficulties frighten you. Yes, Messieurs, just getting up in the morning seems a great affair to me, and the slightest inconveniences appear insurmountable"* (CCD XII, p. 82). Today we can be even more aware of the limits of our bodies given technological prowess and natural and artificial transplants because, at the same time, we clearly see that we have not managed to eliminate all limits from human life. There is a point, in any case, when technology can't do any more for our future...

Along with Robert Maloney, I have found it interesting to observe Vincent de Paul from the perspective of his **real vitality in his ability to move about**. As an example, recall his youthful journeys from Dax to Toulouse, then Marseille, Narbonne, perhaps North Africa - at a time when airplanes, high-speed trains and GPS didn't exist - to return through Rome and Avignon, before settling in Paris. However, arriving in the capital did not result in a definitive sedentary state for him; it became the home base for the mission. *"He was tireless and... was capable of covering hundreds of miles in very little time. In the first half of 1649, when he was almost 70 years of age, he traveled by horse through 375*

miles of western France," Robert Maloney writes.³ And it is precisely when he was full of life that he would experience **the need to change**, among other needs. Through his reading of Abelly, Robert Maloney helps us realize that Vincent's leg troubles began as early as 1615. Because of this, Vincent de Paul had to buy a horse around 1632 in order to make daily trips from Saint-Lazare into Paris. Around June 1649, he was no longer able to mount a horse and was obliged to use the carriage the Duchess of Aiguillon offered him. Some people might imagine that Vincent would find this very comfortable. You know how, quite the contrary, he referred to that means of transportation as "my shame." The word in French is strong, describing being subjected to a major disgrace. Vincent submitted to it as he had to respond to the needs of the Mission that called him elsewhere than Saint-Lazare.

Vincent de Paul thus had the experience of a loss of mobility and an increase in dependence whereas the Mission did not diminish. Required to use a cane during the last years of his life,⁴ he found himself progressively confined to Saint-Lazare. He was no longer able to leave Saint-Lazare in 1659 and ultimately had to remain upstairs. We can imagine, based on some regrets he expressed and that can be picked up in letters or conferences, that his **loss of mobility** cost him dearly.

2) And other losses

Seeing his ability for mobility reduce, we understand that this would also result in a **reduction of certain activities**, all the more for a missionary like Monsieur Vincent. The Mission called him to Paris to carry out the business of the Superior General and to the countryside to proclaim the Gospel to poor country people. In the last seven years of his life, his efforts would be focused on shoring up his works, regulating, through letters and in person, with various authority figures, the final modifications needed for them to continue in perpetuity (civil recognition by the Parliament of Paris, approval of vows by the Holy See, etc.).

3. Robert P. Maloney, *Seasons in Spirituality*, New City Press, New York, 1998, p. 32

4. *Ibid*, p. 32

Session for Daughters of Charity over 40 years vocation

A second consequence of this reduction of mobility was the **loss of direct relationships**. Practically speaking, we understand the Vincent could no longer endure all the visits that he previously could for the needs of the Mission. Yet even if meetings could decrease, he was able at the same time to sustain relationships through extensive correspondence. In this reduction of relationships, Vincent was also affected by the death of his first companions and close collaborators, including Jean-Jacques Olier (1657) the founder of the Sulpicians, and Alain de Solminihac (1659), Bishop of Cahors. The year 1660 was also when Antoine Portail and Louise de Marillac were called to leave this earthly life, before Vincent de Paul himself. In passing, let's note the basic attitude that the Superior General invited his confreres to have regarding their companions' deaths:

*“Speaking of confidence in God, we have good reason to ask Him to fill the Company with this virtue for the reason I'm about to tell you. His Divine Majesty has finally taken from us that great, holy man M. Blatiron, of whom you've so often heard me speak. That apostolic man, by whom God has wrought such great things, is no longer with us. God has taken him from us... Alas! where shall we find another M. Blatiron?... May the Goodness of God himself be pleased to choose the persons He desires to send in their place and to animate them with the same spirit! Confidence, Messieurs! Let's have **great confidence in God!** I trust that He'll help us and **grant us the grace to correspond with His plans for the Little Company.**”⁵*

It is not a time for lamentation but for renewed confidence. Thanks to his faith and his love of God, he maintained great missionary zeal and continued his activities to the very limit of his strength. He wanted to remain available for the Mission, according to his possibilities, motivated and supported by God's grace.

In the final years of his life, he also experienced **material losses**. The loss of the Orsigny farm in 1658 certainly represents, because of its value, a significant trial, all the more so given that the affair had to be decided in court against the Congregation. But there as well, Vincent de Paul

5. Repetition of Prayer, September 23, 1657, CCD XI, p. 379, 381

learned to go beyond the material event and recognize God's action in it. Do we cultivate this same faith perspective with regard to events that disrupt our life and well-organized mission? Let us learn from Vincent:

“So, let's reckon that we've gained a great deal by our loss; for, together with this farm, God has taken from us the satisfaction we had in possessing it and the pleasure we might have had in going there from time to time... Now, by the mercy of God, we're delivered from that danger and, since we're more exposed to temporal needs, His Divine Goodness wills also to raise us to greater confidence in His Providence, and to oblige us to abandon ourselves to it entirely for the necessities of this life as well as for the graces of salvation.”⁶

We should not read traces of pessimism in Vincent into these pages from his life; rather, they are signs of lucidity and high standards. Recall his energy giving conferences that comes through in the accounts we have. We can also hear from this biographical account that Vincent de Paul learned to live loss and diminishment in his life as opportunities for God to grow in us!

II - ADVICE TO THE PRIESTS OF THE MISSION AND THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY REGARDING CHANGES

1) Perseverance and fidelity in one's vocation

It seems to me that one of the most important demands in this new time of life for a Daughter of Charity after 40 years of vocation has to do with perseverance and faithfulness. Of course, these two virtues are not limited to a specific age in vocation. However, I believe that it is important to put them forward in the context of a reflection about this time of life because significant changes in ordinary life can occur. As a result, should everything be called into question in a context when involuntary inconveniences appear? The core must be kept, and a way to adapt must be found.

6. *On the Loss of the Orsigny Farm*, September 1658, CCD XII, p. 50-51

Session for Daughters of Charity over 40 years vocation

On this subject, we can recall what Vincent was able to share with the Sisters during a conference on *Perseverance in our vocation* (September 22, 1647, CCD IX, p. 272-284). He made the point that the reason that you find yourself in this vocation as Daughters of Charity is that God Himself has called you to it, and you answered that call, deciding one day to give yourselves entirely to Him, honoring Him in His Son through service given to persons who are poor, and renewing your vows each year. What more beautiful or powerful reason could cause someone to commit her entire life?

In order to hold fast in fidelity, Saint Vincent recognized, along with the Sisters, the importance of remembering: *“we should sometimes go over in our minds the motives that had led us to give ourselves to God in this vocation, and to recall the fervor with which we carried out what was prescribed when we began...”* (p. 273). *“What a great means that is, Sisters, for renewing your fervor! For, as a rule, when we are tempted, we forget everything else, and nothing seems reasonable to us except what inclines us toward the temptation”* (p. 273-4). Be on your guard, therefore, against forgetting your first enthusiasm so that it can continue to support and strengthen you.

By raising the question of continuity in fidelity and perseverance, I especially want to draw your attention to the risk of becoming lax, which can amplify with time and its wearing effect. There are certainly some aspects that are more difficult to live out according to temperament, and time may not make them any easier. It’s something like a spiritual battle that must be pursued to the very end in order to come out of it victorious. Vincent remarked: *“it’s useless to begin well if we don’t persevere so as to increase God’s glory...”* (p. 276). *“That a woman, a poor girl, can give joy to God! Yes, she can! God regards and takes pleasure in seeing our fidelity in the midst of temptations. And He rejoices when, **despite all the battles of flesh and blood**, despite all the cunning of the evil spirit, we persevere in what we’ve undertaken for love of Him”* (p. 281-282).

What we hear there can relate to any moment in a life, and it is important to take it up again now as well because it is a challenge that must be taken on until the end of one’s life. Perhaps the temptation to leave the Company fades after more than 40 years vocation, but leaving isn’t the only temptation that can divert from one’s authentic vocation. I think

especially of the temptation to want to settle in, to take on a role in the Company such that no other role could be imagined. This temptation can take on many forms, at many levels, in what concerns where we live as well as ministry and community life. We can see this type of temptation occur on the level of leadership positions as well as in any ministry where each person contributes to its good operation, having developed effective, personal and complementary expertise. We must nonetheless be able to envision handing over our ministry at any time because it can never be something owned in the mission. In our tradition, mission is always received, and we can, in fact, be called at any time to leave it for another mission that is completely new (even unknown), elsewhere, with other people. This is where the vow of obedience and the virtue of indifference, which Vincent de Paul gave the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity as fundamental attitudes, come into play in a very concrete way. They are nothing other than Gospel attitudes. *“So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’”* (Luke 17:10).

This temptation for settling in in a rigid way also shows up in everyday life. It may be less strong with women than men, but with age, habits can take on such importance that availability for any new request can lessen, even disappear. You know how much Vincent de Paul wished to keep himself from this and encouraged living like the Lord: *“Not only did [Our Lord] not have a stone on which to lay His head, but He came and went from one place to another to win souls for God.”*⁷ Availability to “go” is thus not an indication of impatience or instability but the fruit of being at others’ disposal, *“to win souls for God.”*

With Vincent, I would like to point out more clearly the stakes of availability: *“This is what the spirit of God is: to love like Him and His followers the poverty to which the spirit of the world is opposed, that spirit of ownership and ease that seeks its own satisfaction, that spirit of attachment to the things of this earth, that spirit of the antichrist - yes, of the antichrist - not of that antichrist who is to come shortly before*

7. Conference on *The Vocation of a Missioner*; CCD XI, p. 1

Session for Daughters of Charity over 40 years vocation

*Our Lord, but of that spirit of wealth opposed to God, and those maxims contrary to the ones the Son of God taught.*⁸ There is a danger of straying away from the fidelity with which a vocation started if we seek to settle in, whether in taking advantage of material goods or enjoying personal liberties already taken. There is a danger of reading the Constitutions in such a way that justifies all lifestyles, ways of serving persons who are poor, practices of community life and prayer life. Monsieur Vincent didn't change his missionary lifestyle according to his whims but rather according to his abilities and the needs of the mission. I insist on this because it seems to me that there is a fundamental question behind this temptation: what place do I give others in my life? How do I take on my vocation as servant of those who are poor, my Lords and Masters, whom I can recognize in everyone? Even in the Sister Servant or Visitatrix who calls me for a new ministry, even in each of my Sisters in community?

2) Individual change

To help us consider this aspect of individual change, I listened to Vincent speaking to the Daughters of Charity in a conference on *Uniformity*, from November 15, 1657 (CCD X, p. 280-292). The title of the conference alone makes it evident that the Superior General was exhorting the Daughters of Charity to take the exact opposite route of individuality. He even had this written into the Common Rules, whose corresponding article (number 17) he discussed here: "...they...will avoid all singularity as the cause of divisions and disorders in a Company. In keeping with that, they will conform in everything to the common way of living in the house where the Superioress lives, complying with all the maxims and customs taught there for their spiritual and temporal direction, and following no others, although they may seem good and even better... Nevertheless, if anyone feels in conscience that she needs **something special because of illness**, she may **mention it quite simply and with indifference** to the same Superioress, who will decide before God and with the Superior what is best to do in the situation" (p. 280).

We thus understand that the essential consists in seeking to live simply in the same way, at all levels (spiritual and temporal). You recall that in giving you the practice of uniformity Saint Vincent de Paul's goal

8. Conference on *Poverty*, August 6, 1655, CCD XI, p. 212

was charity and union among you (cf. p. 284). Once we've understood this principle, we can also notice a well-thought out concession by the Superior General; it's the last sentence from the passage I just read you. Vincent himself commented on it later on in the text: "*So, dear Sisters, understand clearly what the Rule is saying: that if someone thinks she needs something special because of her ailments, she may present that quite simply. How reasonable your Rules are, and how many times we reflected on them before giving them to you! When, in conscience, you think you need something, dear Sisters, you should say: 'My God, I think I need a certain thing; I'll ask for it and, if it's Your good pleasure that it be given to me, fine; if not, **Your will be done!**'*" (p. 291). It is an opportune concession, for it clearly shows Vincent's attentiveness to the complexity of our humanity and his pedagogical expertise (in which he doesn't suppose everything can be dealt with in the same way). Yet he was rigorous in the process: a request can be made to the Superioress alone (definitely not deciding individually or as a little group) based on ailments and not caprice or mood, and the response given must be followed obediently, that is, listening to the opinion given. On this subject, and to give you the means to avoid particularities that lead to division, Vincent de Paul emphasized the observance of the rules: "*The holiness of a Daughter of Charity consists in observing her Rules... Pope Clement VIII was accustomed to say, 'Bring me a religious of any Order you like, who has kept his Rules well and I'll canonize him.'* He asked for no other miracles, as a proof of his sanctity, to canonize him. In the same way, dear Sisters, those Daughters of Charity who fulfill well everything in their Rules are the ones who will become saints, and that's all that necessary" (p. 284-285).

After 40 years of vocation, perhaps with the beginnings of diminution of strength, the time has not come for easing up; quite the contrary: it is the time for exemplarity! Vincent himself warned the older Sisters about this: "*If a senior Sister were to say, 'I don't have to observe all those trifles. I've been in this house along time. It's up to the newcomers to keep them'; she should know that she's more obliged to do so than anyone else because she must give the example to the others.*"⁹

9. Conference on *Scandal*, November 15, 1654, CCD X, p. 40

Session for Daughters of Charity over 40 years vocation

3) The senior Sisters are examples

There is always the risk that a bad example be contagious: it could spread the risk to another Sister who would follow the unfaithful and self-indulgent Sister. Vincent de Paul called the Daughters of Charity to do the contrary: to draw each other to perfection of their vocation.

We understand why he gave such an important place to the elders. You have responsibility for the tradition, to pass on the vocation of the Daughters of Charity, such as it has come down through history from its origins, to those who join the Company today.

Vincent de Paul accorded exemplarity to the Senior Sisters as a result of simple chronology. But he also emphasized that they therefore receive an important role because they found themselves at the beginning of the work. Vincent de Paul spoke to the first Daughters of Charity on this topic: *“Well now, Sisters, think about God’s mercy in choosing you to be the first persons for this foundation. When Solomon wanted to build God’s temple, he placed precious stones in the foundation to show the excellence of what He was trying to do. May God in His goodness grant you, the foundation stones of this Company, the grace of being eminent in virtue!”* It’s a beautiful image to indicate the precious character of these first Daughters because they were at the foundation. The Superior General immediately warned them of the risk of giving bad example: *“For, by failing to be virtuous, you would do harm to all those who come after you, if God is pleased to bless this beginning. Just as trees bear fruit only according to their seed, those who come after you will probably not aspire to greater virtues than the ones you’ve practiced.”*¹⁰

Vincent regularly came back to this special and fundamental role of the first Sisters. For example, six years later, in the conference of July 5, 1640, *The vocation of a Daughter of Charity: “To be true Daughters of Charity you must do what the Son of God did when He was on earth... How fortunate you are, Sisters, to be called to a state of life so pleasing to God!... You, poor village girls and daughters of workmen, have the happiness of being among the first women called to this holy ministry...*

10. Conference on *Explanation of the Regulations*, July 31, 1634, CCD IX, p. 12

make up your minds to strive to be perfect and holy, for you shouldn’t hope that those who come after you to follow your example will be better than you because, as a rule, like produces like... don’t, by your example, be the reason that unsatisfactory young women are entrusted with such a noble ministry” (CCD IX, p. 14-15).

Again, to make them aware of their responsibility, Vincent brought up the risk of giving bad example. Even if he regularly recognized with the Sisters that the Company has God as its origin and that everything that happens is the sign of His blessing and benevolence, he also reminded them that the Sisters have full responsibility for directing the Company well, according to God’s plans. We can hear him speaking on this subject in another conference (Conference of May 25, 1654, *The Preservation of the Company*), in which he warns the Sisters: *“Our Sister was right in saying that God is the author of it. No other motive is needed to encourage you to improve and to strengthen your vocation. This is a work that God has placed in your hands. He will ask you for an account of it. Isn’t that just, Sisters? It’s a treasure you have in your care and whose loss you must prevent”* (CCD IX, p. 539).

Each individual is thus involved in God’s work and in its success. It is so true that these words of Vincent to the first Daughters of Charity, while granting the very first their special character, could be applied to those who follow in terms of this same responsibility of transmission. This is the point I wanted to make with you. Being among the elders of the Company today, with your more than 40 years vocation, you find yourself with this special and essential role of being an example, with all its responsibility: *“But, Monsieur, I’m a senior Sister; won’t I be allowed greater freedom than the young ones? Quoi! Am I always to be in a state of submission as if I just arrived!’ How you’d scandalize others if you were to commit that fault, Sister! You say that you’ve been in the Company for a long time; for that very reason you have to be the first before God in the practice of the virtues of a true Daughter of Charity. Senior Sisters are obliged to be more virtuous than those who come after them. Not only does God ask for greater perfection in a senior Sister than in a newcomer, but we’re obliged to strive after perfection in proportion as we advance in age. And I - who, as you know, am seventy-seven years old - must have greater perfection than a man who’s only sixty; and the older I get, the more I’m obliged to approach perfection by imitating*

Session for Daughters of Charity over 40 years vocation

*Him who never did His own Will...*¹¹ You remember that Saint Vincent presented the Rules as a means of sanctification. What is essential for you is observing them since there is nothing better to help you. The Superior General repeated it: they come to you from God Himself! What more could we ask for? The best remains therefore to be accomplished, as Saint Vincent indicated in his old age: “...*the older I get, the more I’m obliged to approach perfection...*” What could this be about?

III - SOME IMPORTANT POINTS FOR OUR WAY OF LIFE TODAY ACCORDING TO SAINT VINCENT

1) Surrendering oneself in order to give oneself

I would like to begin by reading you some thoughts from Saint Vincent on this question, which he shared in a letter written to the priest of the Mission, Pierre Du Chesne, when he praised a deceased confrere, Monsieur Pillé: “*There, Monsieur, you have the life and death of this good and true Missionary, or rather, of this saint, who is now praying for us as we may piously believe. ^aThere is a great deal to be learned and to profit from this for all categories of persons who make up our Congregation. The old will learn not to dispense themselves from the Rule; the young, to be submissive; the sick, to be encouraged and to be patient; the healthy, not to pretend to be working; the spiritual, to perfect themselves; and the sensual, to be ashamed at the sight of a sick old man mortifying himself... Those who complain of being unfit for preaching, hearing confessions and carrying out other mission functions because of their infirmity or ailments of body or mind, or because they are left at home to work at something else that they do not like, will learn here ^bit is great presumption to imagine that God needs their talent, as if He could not convert souls by some other means, and that obedience, mortification, prayer, patience and similar virtues win souls better than the lofty sciences and all human industry. All this was clearly seen in M. Pillé, as I have already mentioned ^che did more by himself in suffering than all of us by our activity.*”¹²

11. Conference on *The Practice of asking for and refusing nothing*, June 17, 1657, CCD X, p. 228

12. L. 634 to Pierre du Chesne, the first day of the year 1643, CCD II, p. 388

I would like to raise three points from what Saint Vincent wrote:

- ^a First, we notice that each individual can be helped by others in his or her human growth, whatever their respective situations in terms of age, activity (or none), and ability (or lack thereof)... You are in community in order to live charity among yourselves and in order to share it with the poorest of the poor, in accordance with the greatest commandment Jesus Christ gave and according to your vocation as Daughters of Charity. What relationships do you develop in everyday life with all those with whom you rub shoulders? You count for others, and others count for you. Relationships are a gift each individual can develop in any situation and which are an essential element for everyone. The Lord will recognize us as the “blesseds of His Father” because of the authenticity of our relationships.

- ^b Next, we could note that our birth to new life in the Spirit is never finished, which places us, like Nicodemus, in an ongoing learning period with Jesus the Teacher (Jn 3:4vv). We can feel that we have never really converted, never totally turned away from ourselves in order to entrust ourselves entirely to God. Don’t we sometimes let ourselves be lured or convinced by the world, imagining that we can always justify - even demand - recognition, as people do today, because of our talents, our knowledge or our virtues. If we really believe that God is there waiting for us in His infinite love, why are we looking for Him elsewhere? Who could claim to be done with Him? Here we are in the reality of our lives, with our desire to be loved and with our limits that, with age, can become more obvious; here we are called to continually surrender ourselves to God’s good guidance, to His loving care that does not weaken, to His Providence that is always at work in the depths of our lives and especially in our poverty. “*Jesus answered and said to them, ‘It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance’*” (Luke 5:31-32). This attitude takes on very concrete forms day in and day out in acceptance of our current situations and in our trust in God.

- ^c Finally, we can notice in this missionary’s experience, as Vincent de Paul recounted it, an essential issue of our life as servants of persons who are poor: “*he did more by himself in suffering than all of us by our activity.*” It is Saint Vincent de Paul who asserts this after having

Session for Daughters of Charity over 40 years vocation

recounted the life of this missionary. This man, Monsieur Pillé, was already a priest, with significant pastoral experience and a reputation for zeal, when he entered the Company. After his definitive admission, he began to participate in missions, but after the fourth one, illness forced him to stop. He was confined to the motherhouse of Saint-Lazare, he was so weak. For more than ten years, he offered all the services he could while admitting that he was *“so useless and such a burden”* (p. 372). Monsieur Vincent added in his letter: *“I shall tell you only that the more he went on extolling the grandeur of our Institute and exaggerating his low opinion of himself, the holier he appeared to me and the more useful to our entire Community, so that often I could not keep from saying aloud: ‘Monsieur Pillé, by his inactivity and by his suffering alone, is doing more for God and for the house than I and our whole Company are doing by constant activity and work’”* (p. 373).

And starting from that, Vincent described all the richness of this missionary by bringing out each of the virtues that was so alive in him. Through this example (Letter 634 to Pierre du Chesne, the first day of the year 1643, CCD II, p. 363-389), we see clearly what Vincent indicated as essential. The Superior General, who gave the missionaries the maxim, *“All our work consists in action”* (CCD XI, p. 33), was also able to recognize that what is essential is not reduced to *“doing.”* A situation like that of Monsieur Pillé makes us discover anew that the pivotal issue of vocation is found above all in knowing how to be, in this case for you as Daughters of Charity, *“given to God for the service of Christ in persons who are poor”* (C.16a).

It is thus mainly a question of a gift of self, for each individual, according to her limited possibilities, according to all that is possible to her, through the grace of God. But, to repeat, that doesn't mean that it is a matter of counting on our own strength but, quite the contrary, on the strength of others, in charity, simplicity and humility. The vocation journey is long, and surely there is still much to travel... The best, that is, universal communion, must still be achieved, through the gift of each person in the Only Son's gift, the first to give Himself, and this communion is yet to come, on the Last Day.

2) Strengthening ourselves along the journey

I am well aware that all of you have not yet entered the stage that in France we call retirement (the end of wage-earning activity), but I allow myself nonetheless to offer you some guidance from Michel Rondet, a French Jesuit, based on his simple question, *“How should these years be lived in accord with our faith?”*¹³ He can help us realize that in these years we can experience *“a double temptation”*: either *“forging ahead”* in which *“we try to deny the weight of our years and strive to continue as before”* and by which, in the end, *“we burn out”*; or *“glum resignation”* in which *“we are progressively limited by a negative outlook and don't seize the opportunities that are given to age differently.”* It is just these opportunities that I would like to discern with you. Michel Rondet expresses them in seven points:

- **“A time to love oneself”**

Confronted with the *“little troubles that come into our lives,”* Michel Rondet invites us to take the time to think of our needs, simply accepting the care that we need in order to avoid being self-centered and focused on our little troubles. It may be that the time has finally come, having completed our service, *“to love ourselves and to think of ourselves gently and charitably.”* Recall how Vincent himself experienced his illnesses.

- **“A time for deep faithfulness”**

In this new stage of life, we are *“free to dedicate ourselves to what is essential, this face of holiness that God continues to desire for us and that is our true face.”* There may no longer be the obligations of a ministry, and you can seek, in agreement with your Sister Servant and local community, to revive some talent or interest, what is important to you and possible, in order to contribute to the local community's service of charity. I'm going to take this opportunity to return to the importance of being an example. In community, younger Sisters count on you, even if they don't say so explicitly. They need to learn, not just a career, but also a way of living that is specific to the Daughters of Charity, *“totally given*

13. Michel Rondet, *“Un temps pour vieillir”* [A time to grow old], in *Ecouter les mots de Dieu – Les chemins de l'aventure spirituelle* [Listening to God's words - Paths of the spiritual adventure], Editions Bayard, Paris 2001, p.225-232

Session for Daughters of Charity over 40 years vocation

to God...” Young Sisters also want to taste the good fruit of Charity that has given you life up to now even as you have gone through trials. You can take advantage of more or less formal sharing to allow the hidden fruitfulness of your journey to spring forth, in a shared review of life. You will experience it all the more positively since you are free from trying to earn other’s esteem. You are already well positioned in the Company; your reputation is secured.

- “A time for humble hidden service”

You may have held an important position in a ministry or in the Province, and the time has come to leave these rewarding and difficult tasks to others. It is an opportunity to open yourselves to other missions, to new ways of being available, in the local community and in the neighborhood. We in the Church today are fortunate that a great missionary chapter is opening with the New Evangelization. Following the Synod, Pope Francis encouraged all Catholics to live encounter and presence with those who are poor in our world. Of course, you have lived this throughout all the ministries entrusted to you, but I would like to stress at this time the aspect of a free and unconditional service: you can still offer a humble and loving presence, without any claim of knowledge or ability, simply wanting to share from our human condition that Christ comes to transfigure. You know that Saint Vincent de Paul invites us to turn the medal in these encounters in order to contemplate Christ present in the lowliness among us.

- “A time for bare faith”

I would have thought I could tell you that the time of peaceful and regular spiritual deepening had arrived. It is indeed possible, and I wish it for you. But I trust the wisdom of the experienced spiritual teacher Michel Rondet. He writes: “We too easily imagine that the time freed up by slowing down activity would become a time of prayer and contemplation. Nothing is less certain!” I do not mean to tell you that you can ease up your efforts. However, in what Michel Rondet writes, I hear a warning about the wishful thinking we might have about having more time. He continues, “Old age is not the age of easy faith,” and he invites us rather to prepare to experience a bareness. In our Vincentian tradition, we could also suppose that you can reach out to poor persons through prayerful

presence. In France, more and more persons don’t even have a sense of the possibility of prayer. Who will give these children the chance to be born in the Spirit and let out their first cry?

- “A time for true poverty”

In this new stage, “poverty comes to us in a way that we have not chosen: our supports - health, intellectual strength, ability to work and autonomy - are taken from us little by little. Even our prayer ages with drowsiness and difficulty concentrating.” The time may have come to really learn to let the Spirit pray in us, groaning inwardly, waiting in hope for salvation (cf. Rm 8:23). We can try to listen to and read the Word of God, as much as we can, to let it soak into our hearts and recall it later. “When efficiency is taken from us, let us be able to welcome the fruitfulness of the Spirit who comes to transfigure our poverty.”

- “A time of the watchman” and “a time for paschal preparations”

I put these last two points together because they both relate to a way of living; they turn toward what is yet to come in our Christian faith. Michel Rondet suggests adopting the “Gospel figure of the watchman who waits for the dawn,” and I derive two attitudes from this:

* witness to hope amid all the limitations of our lives and the suffering of the world. Christian faith does not place us above others in the world, but confidently focused on the ultimate happiness to come.

* be filled as elders with Gospel teachings that contradict the world, which tries to hide death (the real limits of human life) and everything that is a sign of it (suffering, aging, etc.). Daughters of Charity serving elderly persons at the end of their lives in many countries bear witness to the value of all life until death. In this as well, you can contribute to this concrete and living witness that our world so needs.

Conclusion: Continue to live newness

To conclude, I would simply like to capture what is essential in what I have said by stating that, by entering into or already being in the category of Senior Sisters in the Company, you approach a ‘new state of life’. There

Session for Daughters of Charity over 40 years vocation

will inevitably be change in your journey as Daughters of Charity. Still, along with Saint Vincent de Paul, we were able to understand change as a renewal of faithfulness and trust.

If you think that you are not yet in this new stage, just accept my words as an invitation to prepare yourself for it in the short or long term. You will experience it with even greater acceptance.

From my perspective of forty years of age, I was bold enough to accept to offer you these words, but I imagine the Lord smiling down on us and saying humorously: *"We are never so well served as by someone younger than ourselves!"*

Father Frédéric PELLEFIGUE, CM

Mary...
truly teaches us
what entering into communion
with Christ is:
Mary offered her own flesh,
her own blood to Jesus
and became
a living tent of the Word,
allowing herself to be penetrated
by His presence in body and spirit.
Let us pray to her,
our Holy Mother,
so that she may help us
to open our entire being, always more,
to Christ's presence ;
so that she may help us
to follow Him faithfully,
day after day,
on the streets of our life.

Benedict XVI, homily on May 26, 2005

