

*E*choes of the Company



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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Holy Year of Mercy

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Letter of March 31, 2016

Dear Sisters,

“We are Easter people and ‘Alleluia’ is our song!”
(St. Augustine)

As the joyful song of Alleluia abounds during these Easter days, I thank you for your prayerful greetings. Let us rejoice in this holy season which celebrates Christ’s Resurrection. In faith, we believe that indeed everything is changed: life is changed, death is changed, we are changed, and there is new life; furthermore, as Daughters of Charity, we await the new life promised in renewing our vows on Monday, April 4! The mysteries of Easter and the upcoming Feast of the Annunciation inspire awe in us. Although much remains beyond our human understanding, our faith invites us to honor the unexplainable transformations: the cross, a symbol of suffering, has now become the symbol of salvation, resurrection, and eternal life; our vows, restrictive in the eyes of the world, liberate streams of unselfish love and serve as a source of deep joy and unity with God!

We have celebrated the sacred events of Easter and the Renovation of our vows in years past. It is my hope that with God’s grace we experience them with renewed fervor in 2016! May we enthusiastically go forth sharing the Good News of the Risen Christ’s presence among us. May our final preparations for renewing our vows rekindle our passion for Christ and for those who are poor!

Allow me to use this occasion to express my admiration of recent encounters in which the General Councillors and

I are grateful to have participated. We have personally witnessed the selflessness with which you give yourselves totally to those whom you serve. Through our visits to many local communities, our conversations with those of you who have attended gatherings at the Motherhouse during these past two months, and through your written communications, it is obvious that you are striving to live the convictions and respond to the challenges presented in our *Inter-Assemblies Document: The Boldness of Charity for a New Missionary Momentum*. You truly reflect to us an *Easter people!* Despite occasional difficulties, your dedication to service of Christ in those who are poor and your fidelity to prayer and community life clearly witness the essence of our vocation. May the reality of the empty Easter Tomb and the upcoming Renovation take us further. As faithful and hope-filled persons, let us never hesitate to boldly go forth where God is leading us. May the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and only Mother of the Company, continue to model for us the way to her Son.

May we all enjoy a wonderful Feast of the Annunciation, joining our Magnificat to songs of Alleluia! Please be assured, from the depths of my heart, of my prayers and my devoted affection in Saint Vincent and Saint Louise.

Sister Kathleen APPLER
Daughter of Charity

Renovation Retreat

His mercy is from age to age to those who fear Him.

Lk 1:50

Every evening during Vespers, we sing the Magnificat, making our own the mystery of mercy that reaches into our lives, day after day. We thus proclaim the love, tenderness, goodness and fidelity of God toward us and all humanity.

God's action on Mary's behalf manifests the Lord's constant attitude. Mary is the first to be filled with the Lord's mercy. Expressed in global terms, mercy opens up toward an unlimited future: *"from age to age"* (v. 50), an expression that echoes verse 48b: *"from now on will all ages call me blessed"*. Mary represents the remnant of Israel who awaited God's promise: *"He has helped Israel his servant, remembering His mercy"* (v. 54).

So much consolation is contained in this prophecy for the entire human race! The Lord has heard the voice of his faithful ones. God has answered the prayer that He Himself inspired in them when the psalmist entreated: *"Certainly you will again restore our life, that your people may rejoice in you. Show us, LORD, your mercy; grant us your salvation"* (Ps 85:7-8). Yes, in His love, God has had mercy on us, *"According to His abundant mercy... He has washed us thoroughly from our iniquity and cleansed us from our sin"* (cf. Ps 51:1-2).

Divine mercy is now poured abundantly into the heart of all those who welcome it as sons and daughters of God. *"Not only for me has He done great things,"* Saint Bede the Venerable reflected, *"but in every nation whoever fears God is sure to obtain His favor."* Fear of God

has nothing to do with being afraid. Through our conversion to this love that goes before us, we enter into an attitude of adoration, respect and filial trust that banishes all anxious fear.

"What is this mercy?" Saint Augustine asked; his answer: *"It is the Word whom God sent in the flesh to save humanity."* The true face of God emerges from a marveling contemplation of the love with which He loves us, a merciful love paradoxically demonstrated on the cross, where His only Son *"pours out His blood for us and for many for the forgiveness of sins"*. It is right and just to describe God as the *"Father of mercies"* because He is the Father of the Incarnate Word, who is mercy itself. Pope Francis often refers to this mystery:

"In the 'fullness of time' (Gal 4:4), when everything had been arranged according to his plan of salvation, he sent his only Son into the world, born of the Virgin Mary, to reveal his love for us in a definitive way. Whoever sees Jesus sees the Father (cf. Jn 14:9). Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God" (MV no. 1).

"His mercy is from age to age": the Virgin Mary's Magnificat offers us a wonderful summary of the entire Bible – the law, the prophets and the psalms. The great promise that runs through the Old Testament, the heart of its message, is precisely divine mercy. If we look and open our eyes, we will see that this promise is fulfilled from age to age, in ordinary everyday actions.

As we prepare for the renovation of vows, let us accept Pope Francis' invitation: *"We want to live this Jubilee Year in light of the Lord's words: Merciful like the Father. The Evangelist reminds us of the teaching of Jesus who says, 'Be merciful just as your Father is merciful' (Lk 6:36). It is a program of life as demanding as it is rich with joy and peace. Jesus's command is directed to anyone willing to listen to his voice (cf. Lk 6:27). In order to be capable of mercy, therefore, we must first of all dispose ourselves to listen to the Word of God. This means rediscovering the value of silence in order to meditate on the Word that comes to us. In this way, it will be possible to contemplate God's mercy and adopt it as our lifestyle"* (MV no. 13).

His Mercy is from Age to Age to those who Fear Him

Chapter 15 of Saint Luke's Gospel presents the revelation of God's mercy and forgiveness as at the center of Jesus' work of salvation. Three parables in this chapter develop this theme. The parables of the sheep, the coin and the son, all lost and then found, proclaim the mercy of God, whose joy it is to forgive. Let us reflect on these three parables.

1. The parable of the lost sheep

*The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So to them he addressed this parable. "What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it? And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders **with great joy** and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, '**Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.**' I tell you, **in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance**" (Lk 15:1-7).*

This is the very heart of Christian revelation, which is the expression of the very love of God. It is a unique love and an all-encompassing love. In fact, it is a unique love for each individual. Perhaps we have already had this thought: when we see the billions of people alive today and think of the billions who have lived and who will live after us, how can God be interested in and care for each one individually? In other words, some might imagine God's love as a sort of great unleashing of universal love, somewhat indistinct, somewhat confused, a sort of love 'in general' of humanity 'in general'.

The heart of our faith is the belief that God has a unique and personal relationship with each person. We cannot understand it ourselves; it would be more accurate to say we have a means to understand it. While we have such a limited ability to love, we still know that the only real love, the only thing that counts when we want to love, is that we can only really love someone. Our love only counts to the extent that it is truly unique, for a specific, unique person. This already indicates that what is most precious in us should be the reflection of the very mystery of God. Thus, because God is the Creator and because He wants to love

us in truth, He establishes a unique relationship with us.

In the parable, the shepherd takes the risk of abandoning the flock to dedicate himself fully to finding and comforting the lost sheep. This relationship between God and ourselves therefore does not concern just a part of God but the entirety of God who loves us in an all-encompassing way.

For Mary, the Lord is her love and her savior. Who is my savior: my strengths and talents, my virtues and personal skills, knowledge, power?

His mercy is from age to age to those who fear Him.

2. The parable of the lost coin

*Jesus told them this second parable: "Or what woman having ten coins and losing one would not light a lamp and sweep the house, searching carefully until she finds it? And when she does find it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says to them, '**Rejoice with me because I have found the coin that I lost.**' In just the same way, I tell you, **there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents**" (Lk 15:8-10).*

To begin, let's describe the components of this parable. The story is quite simple. There is a woman who had ten coins. Each coin has a value equivalent to one day's wage. These ten coins therefore represented what a person would earn for ten days' work. Some people think that these coins are the ones that women at that time would put in their hair. They made a hole in the center of coins, which allowed them to attach them to their hair as adornment. We have no indication in this parable that it is referring to this type of coins.

What is important is that the fact of losing one coin when she only had ten represented a large percentage of what she owned. If you had 1,000 coins and lost one, you probably wouldn't even notice. But if you only have ten, each coin you lose would impact you greatly. All of this intends to show just how precious the sinner is in God's eyes. You are someone precious for God. We are not just a number among a million others. God cherishes each one of us personally. If we do

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not respond to His call, God is concerned and saddened. But when we repent and in that way become part of the large family of Christians, no one is happier than God and His angels. All heaven rejoices.

So, we have this coin that a woman lost. But who is this woman? What does she represent?

When we look at the teaching of the New Testament and especially in the book of Revelation, we can observe that the Church is often represented by a woman. In other passages, the Church is represented by a virgin (2 Cor 11:2), a spouse (Eph 5:25) or the wife of the Lamb (Rev 21:9). In chapter 12 of Revelation, it appears as a woman draped with the sun. Obviously, we should not conclude that every reference to a woman in the Bible is a representation of the Church.

How can this statement be justified? Observe that in the first parable, the Lord Jesus speaks of Himself as the shepherd seeking out the lost sheep. How can He continue to seek out the lost sheep of our generation if not through the intermediary of His Church? How would you have been found if God had not shown His love and power through His Church? How can God find those who are spiritually lost without our intervention? God is at work, actively seeking out sinners through the mediation of His people, through the large family of believers, through His Church and, for you, through the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Mary is Mother of God and Mother of the Church, only Mother of the Company.

- Do I consider the Church and my community as my family?
- Am I able to rejoice in the different members who make up the Body of Christ?
- Do I care for my vocation as a Daughter of Charity?

His mercy is from age to age to those who fear Him.

3. The parable of the prodigal son

Then he said, "A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers."' So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began. Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found'" (Lk 15:11-32).

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Charles Péguy wrote, *“If all the copies of the Gospel in the world were to be destroyed, at least one page would have to be kept, the page that tells the parable of the prodigal son, in order to finally understand who God is: this Father who keeps watch, who waits, opens his arms, forgives and throws a huge feast for the return of his son.”*

The mystery of reconciliation of God with humanity is presented to us from the perspective of human freedom, haunted, as it were, by the memory of God. Because God’s presence manages to dwell mysteriously in the very heart of the sinner, the sinner is then able to remember this mercy and forgiveness of God and return to Him. In this parable, there is also the special figure of the father who waits at the threshold of the house, at the entrance, to see his son returning. This shows the attentive side of God’s grace and forgiveness.

This beautiful story told by Jesus helps us understand that God’s mercy is also expressed by God’s patience with sinners. This patience begins with acceptance of the other’s freedom. It is a patience that begins with the pain of separation and that remains waiting and watching at the edge of the road. Just as the two previous parables reveal the action of God who looks for us, this one shows us His capacity to welcome and forgive.

Jesus tells this parable because he is accused of welcoming sinners. The character of the older son represents those Pharisees and scribes who criticize Jesus. The younger son, for his part, represents the sinners who need healing and who, in their exile, heard the Good News of Christ and set off again on the road toward the Father’s house.

We should not overlook the importance of the father’s attitude toward the older son who refuses to enter the house where the feast is being held. The father goes so far as to come out to speak to him. He is invited to share in God’s great forgiveness. *“My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours.”*

Let us contemplate how much the father loves him, too, even as the older son seems unaware of this love the father has for him. The father even makes the effort to explain himself: *“But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.”*

Jesus teaches us today that our heavenly Father is a God of love and mercy and that in His pardon, we are healed. The words the father speaks to the older son are just as tender as those to the younger son because God loves all His children. We can be the younger or older son, the younger or older daughter at different times in our lives, but in this parable, Jesus invites us to go further. He invites us to become like the Father.

You know the saying, “like father, like son” or “like mother, like daughter”. We are told the parable of the prodigal son in order to reveal the true face of God to us and to invite us to become like Him, to bear the world’s sufferings with Him, to love all our brothers and sisters as He loves them, wherever they may be and whatever their situation. This is the distinctive sign of our belonging to God, the Church and the Company of the Daughters of Charity: *“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful”* (Luke 6:36).

All of us together are responsible for all human persons, near and far, each one of us, according to our possibilities, talents and resources. We all have a role to play in this ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us in the Church. As Saint Paul reminds us, we are all ambassadors for Christ, and the first step which leads us toward others is to bear another’s worries, not to remain indifferent or uniformed about others, especially those who are the most poor. We reflect the face of God when we are concerned for the least fortunate. This is Jesus’ invitation in telling the parable of the prodigal son.

Mary exalts the Lord. She is filled with His joy.

- Am I grateful to the Lord or, ungrateful, am I always complaining and lamenting to Him?
- Is Jesus my true joy?
- Do persons who are poor reveal His merciful face to me?

His mercy is from age to age to those who fear Him.

In the three parables on which we have just reflected, God’s joy is intended to be shared. After all, what interest is there in rejoicing all alone? Joy must be shared in order to be fully experienced. This same aspect appears in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who involves

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the innkeeper in his act of mercy that, on that instance, is expressed by coming to the assistance of a seriously injured traveler. We thus understand that Jesus calls His disciples, too, to act with mercy.

During this Holy Year, the Jubilee of Mercy, let us return to this call from Pope Francis: *“It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God’s mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. Let us rediscover these **corporal works of mercy**: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. And let us not forget the **spiritual works of mercy**: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead. We cannot escape the Lord’s words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged”* (MV no. 15).

On this day in preparation for the renewal of vows, let us listen to the voice of the Lord who announces to us, as He did to the disciples in the sermon on the mount, *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy”* (Mt 5:7).

We praise the Lord with the Virgin Mary: *“His mercy is from age to age to those who fear Him.”* Let us ask God to fill our hearts with His compassion.

*O Lord, responding to your call which invites me
to follow Christ and to be a witness to His charity
to persons who are poor;
I renew my baptismal promises and give myself to you
in the Company of the Daughters of Charity,
and in accord with its Constitutions and Statutes, I vow for one year
to serve those who are poor, and to live in chastity,
poverty, and obedience.
Grant me the grace of fidelity, through your Son
Jesus Christ crucified,
and the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin.*

Father Bernard SCHOEPPER, CM
Director General

Conference given at the Mother House on the day of the Renovation

Renewal of Vows

One of the major convictions of the General Assembly that developed the theme, *The Boldness of Charity for a New Missionary Momentum*, was that the Sisters must constantly return to the Gospel. Therefore, for this reflection on the vows, the last reflection that I will share with you, I have chosen the passage from the Gospel of Saint Mark in which Jesus proclaimed the parable of the sower to the crowd that had gathered around him on the shore of the sea (Mark 4:1-20). In addition, I will further develop my reflections by referring to the *Inter-Assemblies Document* and some of the challenges that the Sisters have been exhorted to confront.

I also have no doubt that the vows, when pronounced with great conviction, allow the Daughters of Charity to live the Charter, which describes the radical nature of your vocation. In that Charter we find the following words: “[The Sisters] will consider that, since their ministries oblige them to be out of the house and among the people most of the time, and often even all alone, they need greater perfection than Sisters who minister in hospitals and other similar places, which they rarely leave” (CCD:X:527). The vows, then, are instruments that enable the Daughters to become “perfect, just as the heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

The seed that fell along the path

The first seed is that which fell along the path and was subsequently eaten by the birds. This same reality is reflected in the many different situations in which the Word of God, which is the seed, is robbed of its power to impact life, situations in which the Sisters, individually or together as a local community, view themselves as self-sufficient.

Today, however, the gift of the vow of chastity, which you renew this day, reminds you of the urgency *to seek new ways of serving creatively, to come out of yourselves, your comfort zones, and your middle-class mentality in order to go out to the peripheries and to difficult areas*. The vow of chastity, viewed from the perspective of pure love, invites you to enter into new relationships and to *increase networking at every level in order to facilitate collaborative service with the Vincentian Family*. In turn, such collaboration enables you to make the good news effective.

The *Inter-Assemblies Document* dares you *to live in close relationship with those who are excluded and victimized by all forms of violence*. I see this challenge as closely related to the vow of chastity, which by its very nature is relational. Therefore, we must reflect on our relationship not only with those individuals who are excluded from full participation in society, but we must also examine our relationships with the other Sisters of our local community and our Province, as well as our relationship with God. All of these relationships are interconnected, and if one of these relationships is not being lived as it should, then all of these relationships are skewed. At this time of the renewal of your vows, I would encourage you to enter into dialogue with one another about the manner in which these various relationships are being developed among you. What more can be done to develop further each of those relationships? As you converse about those relationships, be mindful of the words of Mother Suzanne Guillemin: “*Let us reanimate within ourselves the meaning of our life in God and of our consecration to the service of humankind... Let us be unswerving in the service of the Lord, for there is now a greater need than ever for upright minds and strong hearts.*”¹

The seed that fell on rocky ground

Other seed fell on rocky ground where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep, but when the sun rose, the plant was scorched, and it withered for lack of roots. This symbolizes the situation in which individuals hear the word and immediately receive it with great joy. When confronted, however, with difficulties or trials or

1. *Circular Letters (1963-1968) of Mother Suzanne Guillemin*, p. 186; Letter of January 1, 1967.

Renewal of Vows

tribulations or persecution, such individuals reveal their lack of depth. I would dare to say that the vow that best counters this lack of depth is the vow of obedience. As you renew this vow, you proclaim that you will live your life in accord with the will of God; you proclaim that you will continually engage in a process of discerning God's will through a life that is completely given over to the service of those men and women who are poorest. Such a stance enables those who profess the vow of obedience to be firm and courageous in the midst of any difficulty or trial. Let us listen anew to the words of Saint Louise in this regard: "*May the holy will of God be accomplished in us and through us in time and in eternity... [and may we] accomplish his holy will by serving the poor in a spirit of submission and charity*" (L. 47, p. 33; L. 447, p. 478).²

I would again invite you to reflect on this from the perspective of the *Inter-Assemblies Document* that states: "*The charity of Christ impels us to be authentic servants and missionaries of the gospel and gives us the courage to adopt a simpler life style in solidarity with our brothers and sisters, the poor.*" Here it is important to note that the same document stresses the urgency to *simplify structures, to remove whatever creates clutter, and to break down external and internal barriers that create obstacles to your availability and generosity* to others. Sounds very easy, doesn't it? But let me place before you a specific example that reveals some of the difficulties involved in all of this.

I recently listened to a Sister speak to me about her ministry at a home for the elderly. Every day she cares for the men and women who reside in this home and participates in the Eucharist with those residents. She then said that she would like to renew her vows in the midst of this group of people whom she serves, but she knew that she was expected to be together with the other Sisters of her local community, who will renew their vows together at a special Eucharist celebrated by a member of the Congregation of the Mission. Might we not pause and ask: what does it mean to *undertake a courageous and systematic revision of our way of life in light of the Gospel and in the spirit of our Charter*; what does it mean to simplify our structures and make them more flexible?

2. *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, Edited and Translated from the French by Sister Louise Sullivan, DC, New City Press, Brooklyn, New York, 1991.

What is the significance of those powerful words of the Charter: "*as Daughters of Charity your monastery is to be the home of the sick; your cell, a hired room; your chapel, the parish church; your cloister, the city streets; your enclosure, obedience; your grille, the fear of God; your veil, holy modesty*" (cf. CCD:X:530)? Concerned with sharing the lot of those who are poor, may each one of you give witness to evangelical obedience as it was lived by Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul!

The seed that fell among the thorns

The seed sown among the thorns is another sort. It represents those individuals who hear the word, but worldly anxiety, the lure of riches, and the craving for other things intrude and choke the word and it bears no fruit. The vow of poverty enables the Sisters to live passionately for the Lord and in the service of the Lord on behalf of those who are poorest. Near the time of her death, Saint Louise stated: "*Oh, what a happiness, if, without offending God, the Company could be employed only in the service of those who are destitute of all things! To this end, this Company must never depart from nor change its poor manner of life*" (*Spiritual Writings*, A. 100, p. 833).

Here I would invite you to view poverty from a new perspective. Pope Francis states: "*We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature... Today, the analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from the analysis of human, family, work-related and urban contexts, nor from how individuals relate to themselves, which leads in turn to how they relate to others and to the environment*" (*Laudato Si*, 139, 141). Imagine what it would be like to evaluate our ministry from that perspective. Previously I have spoken about the fact that I am convinced that true collaboration, together with a systemic-change approach, is the manner in which we, all Vincentians, can make a unique contribution to the New Evangelization. The words of Pope Francis have strengthened my conviction in this regard. My constant prayer is that this conviction will take root in each and every member of the Vincentian Family.

Finally, there is the fertile ground on which the seed falls and produces fruit. This situation represents those who hear the Word of God and live in accord with its demands. All of those people will bear fruit to varying degrees. This fruitfulness is the result of the vow that orients all the other vows of the Sisters, the vow of service on behalf of the poor. This fertile ground is where you, as Daughters of Charity, find the fullness of life. Louise de Marillac, when speaking about the obligations of the Sisters who would minister in a parish environment, stated: *“The Sisters must also procure consolation for the sick when they are in true need of it, respecting them and speaking to them gently and humbly never thinking that the poor owe them anything for these services”* (Spiritual Writings, A. 91, p. 741).

During this special time, this Jubilee Year of Mercy, you might reflect on your service from the perspective that is outlined by Pope Francis in his Bull of Indiction, *Misericordiae Vultus*: *“Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church’s very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. The Church ‘has an endless desire to show mercy’”* (10). May all of you, as Daughters of Charity, be passionate in your desire to show mercy to those less fortunate members of society!

A final word

As I come to the end of my term of office as Superior General, I am most aware of the countless expressions of kindness to me during these past 12 years. It is difficult to put into words my gratitude for all the blessings that you have bestowed upon me. I would, however, like to take this opportunity to ask you, in the same way that Pope Francis does, to please continue to pray for me. Pray for me today, tomorrow, and the day after, and be assured of my prayer for you.

Father Gregory GAY, CM
Superior General

International Session for Spiritual and Vincentian
Revitalization

Reconciliation: An Encounter of Love

“The sacrament of Reconciliation, an encounter of love with the Lord who forgives, brings to the spiritual life renewed impetus and growth in grace. Motivated by such a conviction, the Sisters have frequent recourse to it, in accord with the directives of the Church. This source of personal conversion also contributes toward restoring the unity of the Mystical Body” (C. 20a).

From the beginning of the Bible, the question of reconciliation is raised. Let’s reflect upon the story that speaks of our “first parents”. I have wondered what would have happened to Adam and Eve after their act of disobedience if they had said to God: “We are sorry for what we did. We should not have disobeyed you, but trusted in your care. Please forgive us. We will try to do better.” What would have happened? I can only believe that God would have forgiven them, and their stories might have been different — and ours as well. Of course, God does forgive them their sin; he takes care of them after “the fall”, but the consequences of their actions have taken hold of them. They do not ask forgiveness; they do not seek reconciliation. They led each other into sin, and they sought to place the blame on others. Both man and woman are then cast away from the divine presence — they are forced to leave the Garden and its opportunity for intimate closeness with God and one another. Sin has entered their lives, and their relationships have been compromised. From the very beginning, we sense the need

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for forgiveness and reconciliation. We feel the pain of rejection and betrayal and loss. The story of “the fall” is the story of every sin, written in mythic terms. There is a sadness and a sense of missed opportunity. Why didn’t they tell God that they were sorry? Why didn’t they take responsibility for their actions? Why didn’t they seek to support one another in virtue and resist their common weakness? We can ask the same questions of ourselves. The story of our “first parents” is our story as well. They expose our weakness and our need for reconciliation.

Constitution 20a captures the elements of the biblical story in less dramatic terms, and it responds to them: the sacrament of reconciliation is “*an encounter of love with the Lord who forgives*”, it is “*a source of personal conversion*” and it “*contributes toward restoring the unity of the Mystical Body*”. Reconciliation does all this as it “*brings to the spiritual life renewed impetus and growth in grace*”. Thus, it restores the relationship with the Lord God, within ourselves, and with other people. Moreover, the sacrament provides strength for deepening our life in God and in community.

We will consider these different aspects of reconciliation and the way that it is essential for the life of the Company and the spiritual growth of an individual. We shall see the place which it must take in the life of a Daughter of Charity, using the insights of the biblical story, the Constitutions, the documents of the Church, and the Scriptures.

I. RECONCILIATION: “AN ENCOUNTER OF LOVE WITH THE LORD WHO FORGIVES”

Like many very early stories, “the fall” is incredibly rich in suggestive details that offer valuable prospects for our reflection upon sin and reconciliation. The extraordinary and almost unimaginable fact is that we are loved by God. As we listen attentively to the story of “the fall”, we can hear what it wishes to teach us about this truth and our response to it. After Adam and Eve have eaten from the tree, they have their first recorded conversation with God:

“When they heard the sound of the Lord God walking about in the garden at the breezy time of the day, the man and his wife hid themselves from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. The Lord God then

called to the man and asked him: ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid’” (Gen 3:8-10).

The context for “the fall” is almost painfully beautiful and ordinary. The Lord God has come to the Garden at the nice point in the day when it is cool and breezy, a good time to visit with his beloved creation, the human beings, and to spend time with them. Can you imagine walking with God in the wondrous Garden and talking simply to the Creator of everything? (It may remind us of the disciples walking around with Jesus.) Yet the humans hide themselves from God. The silliness of that effort seems evident, but that does not stop us from trying even today. When God calls out to them, the man answers, “*I heard you in the garden.*” These are the first words which the man speaks to God in conversation. I feel the weight of them. The man knew that he was loved by God and that God had created the garden for the humans and made it a place where the human beings would be taken care of and be near to God. When they heard God in the garden, they knew that he had come to visit them — perhaps as he often did in the coolness of each day — and ordinarily, they would have run to be with the Lord. But that would not be true on this day. When the man says that he heard God in the garden, he is saying that he knew the closeness of God, he felt God’s goodness and love, and he recognized his absolute connection to God in the very breath in his body. Now, however, the humans were not prepared to walk with God.

The man continues and says, “*I was afraid, because I was naked.*” He had never been afraid with God before. This was a new feeling, and it came about as a result of sin. The man attributes his fear to his nakedness, which is a recent issue, yet it is just another way of saying that he knew that he had disobeyed the Lord. The absolute openness and trust which had characterized the divine and human interaction had now been compromised. The human being, who should stand before his Creator without any fear or embarrassment, now insists that it is his nakedness which kept him from the divine presence. We feel the flimsiness of that reasoning and know the deeper truth.

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And then the man says the line which has often characterized the human relationship to the divine: “*so I hid.*” I feel sad to read that line. The human beings try to separate themselves from God. In the context of the story, it seems to involve the silliness of the couple attempting to conceal themselves from God among the trees of the Garden, and we know how little sense that makes, but it points us to a deeper hiding from God. People might try to conceal themselves in the responsibilities of work or the attractions of a group or the busyness of meetings, but these are all devices. More troublesome might be the hiding from God internally through unquestioned fidelity to a discipline, or strict obedience to a person, or acceptance of particular and unyielding ways of thinking.

One can hide from God in all kinds of external but also internal ways. We might be afraid to walk with God in many areas of our lives because we are not prepared for the conversations which might arise. We are not prepared to be questioned or challenged, and so we hide. We can understand the fear of Adam and Eve in the story. We feel their need to be reconciled because it is our need as well.

God responds to this need throughout the history of Israel. In the Old Testament, he gives the gift of the Law to instruct people how to live; he sends the prophets to point out the just way; he teaches humankind how to pray in the Psalms and with the Wisdom literature. He does all this because he loves us and wants us to be close to him. He forgives the sins and idolatry of Israel and always offers a path which leads back to him. Ultimately, God sends the “way” itself, which is Jesus. This is so because God loves his chosen people and he loves us.

The “hiding from God” is one of the truths which Jesus addresses when he comes to dwell among us. He wants to recover that which has gone astray: “*For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost*” (Lk 19:10; cf. 15:1-10). Jesus repeatedly invites people to walk with him and be his disciples, and many people respond well to that invitation. He also tells us that he shows the path: “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*” (Jn 8:12).

Jesus casts light into every aspect of our lives, and nothing can remain hidden or unexamined as it is exposed to the light. That is true of every element of our lives which requires healing and forgiveness. He shines that light on the lives of many people. He reminds us that God loves us and wants us to be reconciled to him. The marvel of this truth is expressed in one of the most powerful verses in the Gospel of John: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him*” (Jn 3:16-17).

Despite our sinfulness, our lack of trust and our hardness of heart, God still loves us. This love has been shown to us by no less a gift than sending Jesus among us to offer us forgiveness for our sins and to show us how to live. We try to hide from God, but he has sent Jesus to find us. Jesus spent much of his public ministry telling us about God’s overwhelming care and compassion, seeking out the lost and the hidden. The New Testament is filled with stories in which Jesus expresses this truth. Perhaps the most popular story is that of the Prodigal Son which illustrates this intent so concretely, but we also have the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin in which God leaves the rest of his possessions to retrieve us because he loves us. On the cross, Jesus offers forgiveness to those who have crucified him: “*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*” There is no limit to God’s love, and it is a truth of which we must be sure as we seek the Lord’s forgiveness in the sacrament of Reconciliation. God wants us to walk with him. Reconciliation is “*an encounter of love with the Lord who forgives*” (C. 20a).

II. RECONCILIATION: “A SOURCE OF PERSONAL CONVERSION”

When we go back to the stories of the Creation, we get a sense of the moral character of the human beings — of ourselves. We can say several things about how we are made.

1) Like the rest of creation, we are created good. At our very depth, we are good people. We must know that truth and believe it first of all.

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2) It is said that we have the very breath of God within us and that we are made “*in the image and likeness of God*”. Once again, our goodness is suggested, but also something more. We are reminded that we are oriented to God. Saint Augustine famously paraphrases Psalm 62 (v. 2-3, 6-9):

“Great are You, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Your power, and of Your wisdom there is no end. And man, being a part of Your creation, desires to praise You, man, who bears about with him his mortality, the witness of his sin, even the witness that You ‘resist the proud,’ — yet man, this part of Your creation, desires to praise You. You move us to delight in praising You; for You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You” (Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 1, Chapter 1 — New Advent translation).

We are made to be with God, and we can never be satisfied until we have accomplished that reality. Listen to the Psalmist:

“As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, the living God. When can I enter and see the face of God?” (Ps 42:2-3)

Every part of us hungers to be with God (Ps 84:3), but we resist that call in our sinfulness. In seeking to be reconciled with God, we accomplish our own perfection. We move towards that which fulfills our being.

3) We are created free. The story of “the fall” recalls our freedom. The introduction of the “tree of knowledge” into the Garden changes everything for the human beings. Before this, there were no limits on the humans. God establishes freedom for them in giving them a choice. He tells them that they may not eat of the fruit of this tree. And now, they must choose. Will they do as God asks, or will they do what they want? (Of course, the tree is just a symbol for this choice.) Our freedom becomes the basis for our salvation or condemnation. God allows us to choose Him or to choose ourselves. We are free. In choosing God, however, we choose our best self. We choose to live in accord with our fundamental nature. God created us to be honest and loving and generous. When we are these things, we are in truth whom we were made to be: God’s children.

In the story of “the fall”, the humans choose to reject their freedom as part of their sin. The account makes it clear: “[The Lord God asked] ‘Have you eaten from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat?’ The man replied, ‘The woman whom you put here with me — she gave me fruit from the tree, so I ate it.’ The LORD God then asked the woman: ‘What is this you have done?’ The woman answered, ‘The snake tricked me, so I ate it’” (Gen 3:11-13).

Note that the man blames the woman and even God, because God put the woman with him in the Garden! He does not mention that he was with her when she first ate. The woman blames the snake who tricked her; she does not mention how the fruit looked delicious to her and was “desirable for gaining knowledge”. Neither takes responsibility for his or her actions; both deny their freedom in the matter. Yet, they were both free and able to choose what God asked or not. To claim their human dignity, they needed to recognize their freedom, accept the responsibility for their choice, and seek the forgiveness of the one who loved them and whom they disobeyed.

We continue to recognize ourselves in the Genesis story. It is encouraging to know that we are good at the deepest part of our being, made to be virtuous and to live in harmony. Accepting the truth that we are made in the divine image and likeness explains a powerful urge within us that seeks something greater than the created world around us to explain our existence and destiny. That hunger, that orientation towards something greater than ourselves is what points us towards God. When we are at peace with ourselves, we sense this desire and its possible fulfillment. And we are free. Sometimes that may seem like more of a problem than a blessing when we use our freedom poorly, but it does suggest to us an undeniable element of our human dignity. We are not fated to do this or do that; we are free to choose where we will go and what we will do. As a consequence (and privilege) of that freedom, we are responsible and accountable for our lives and actions.

Saint Paul tells the Romans: “So [then] each one of us shall give an account of himself [to God]” (Rom 14:12). What that means is that we will each come before the divine presence and need to speak to God about our lives. There will be no lawyers with us who will explain or defend our actions, or the possibility to place the blame for our choices.

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We will simply speak to God about the choices which we have made and how we have lived our lives. God will know our weaknesses and selfishness at times, but also our efforts. Each of us will recognize his or her responsibility and freedom in the life which he or she has led.

The sacrament of reconciliation offers us an opportunity for personal conversion because we can lay claim to our sinfulness, to the choices which we have made against God and one another, to our fault. We admit what we have done in complete honesty before the one from whom we cannot hide any part of ourselves. We recognize the possibility of choosing rightly and for doing good, which we have rejected. We thus ask for forgiveness and open ourselves to healing with the intent to change, to be better. And God promises us help: with His grace, we can and do become better persons. We undergo conversion, and we let ourselves be drawn closer to the one who completes us. The story of the “repentant thief” is powerful in this regard.

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

If the story of “the fall” makes me sad, the story of this thief brings a tear of joy to my eye. It teaches us about Jesus’ concern for us even in the midst of his own suffering. Notice the way in which the “good thief” accepts in freedom the responsibility for his actions and the punishment which goes with them. Then, note how he turns to Jesus and asks for mercy, and Jesus offers it without hesitation or qualification. This man will live with God forever and find his completion in the divine presence. He will be welcomed back into the Garden and walk intimately with God. What more could one ask from reconciliation than this type of personal conversion which leads to God, who is our true destiny.

III. RECONCILIATION “CONTRIBUTES TOWARD RESTORING THE UNITY OF THE MYSTICAL BODY”

Let us return to the Genesis story to discover some essential points about ourselves and particularly our relationship to one another.

First of all, we are told that the second human whom God makes is meant to be a companion and helper: *“The Lord God said: It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suited to him”* (Gen 2:18).

We are meant to be people who live together. In community, we can be most fully human and help one another to live well. The other helps me to know my best self and I, in turn, help this other to live properly. When I see another man or woman acting badly, I recognize that possibility in myself. When we are very angry and see ourselves in a mirror, we see how ugly we can be. We can have a similar experience when we see that type of anger in another. It reminds us of the possibility within us, and it challenges us to be different, to change. The same can be said when we see the good in another. When we notice gentleness, or devotion or patience in one of our Sisters, we are moved by it, see the possibility within ourselves and change. In whatever efforts we make at reconciliation, we reflect upon ourselves and see what changes we can make to improve in ministry and community life.

The Genesis story suggests that sometimes we lead each other away from the Lord and our best selves through sin. The story speaks to us of how the woman offers the fruit to the man who is with her, and he takes it. It also tells us of how the man blames the woman for his fault. The woman then blames the snake. (We never find out whom the snake might have blamed.) Clearly, sin harms the human community. Yet, we are called to help each other to be good as members of one community.

Secondly, we are told how closely we are related to other human beings. The first human sees the second and says, *“This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”* (Gen 2:23). This is a wonderful way of expressing the close connection between us and leading us towards the responsibility which we have for one another. The early

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Christian community, by referring to each other as “brother” or “sister”, recognized this tight relationship. As a family, we help each other and care for one another.

Paul offers this encouragement to one of his communities:

“Be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God’s way in righteousness and holiness of truth. Therefore, putting away falsehood, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger, and do not leave room for the devil. The thief must no longer steal, but rather labor, doing honest work with his [own] hands, so that he may have something to share with one in need. No foul language should come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for needed edification, that it may impart grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the holy Spirit of God, with which you were sealed for the day of redemption. All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice. [And] be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ” (Eph 4:23-32).

It is wondrous to listen to Paul and appreciate the message which he brings. Sometimes, after reading a passage from his letters, I feel that I should just stop talking and let the message sink in. He is writing to a Christian community about reconciliation and living together and calls it to forgiveness and building itself up; the message is also for us as we need to hear this type of encouragement as well.

The document *Starting Afresh from Christ* calls communities of consecrated persons to service of this kind:

“Throughout the history of the Church, consecrated women and men have contemplated the suffering face [of Christ] even outside themselves. They recognized it in the sick, the imprisoned, the poor and the sinner. Their battle was primarily against sin and its fatal consequences: Jesus’ proclamation ‘Convert and believe the Good News’ (Mk 1:15) moved them to reach out to others and provided the hope of new life where discouragement and death reigned. Their service has brought many men and women to experience the merciful embrace

of God the Father in the Sacrament of Penance. Today too, there is a need to strongly re-propose this ministry of reconciliation (cf. 2 Cor 5:18) entrusted by Jesus Christ to the Church. This is the mysterium pietatis which consecrated men and women are called to experience frequently in the Sacrament of Penance” (SAFC 27).

We can recall how Saint Vincent called the Sisters to be attentive to the need for the sick to seek reconciliation and how they could help them in this. They could say things like:

“‘Eh bien, brother! How do you think you’re going to make the journey to the next world?’ Then to another, ‘Eh bien, my child! Don’t you want to be united with God? Don’t you want to make a good general confession so as to prepare yourself to die well? Don’t you want to go and see our Lord?’ In this way, always say something to them that will raise their hearts to God” (Vincent de Paul, Conference 85. “Service of the Sick and Care of One’s Own Health,” November 11, 1657. CCD X, p. 268).

Our own method of encouraging another to turn to the Lord may be different, but the importance of this support cannot be dismissed. We also know how both of our Founders encouraged a spirit of harmony and reconciliation among the Sisters.

“Above all, they [Daughters of Charity] will live in great union with their Sisters and never murmur or complain about one another, being careful to dismiss any thoughts of antipathy they may have for one another” (Vincent de Paul, “Mutual Charity and the Duty of Reconciliation,” March 4, 1658. CCD X, p. 368).

“May God be blessed for the true harmony and holy peace which exist among you. This is necessary in order to live as Christians. As Daughters of Charity we have an even stronger reason to live this way” (Louise de Marillac, L. 200, November 28, 1647. SW, p. 230).

IV. RECONCILIATION “BRINGS TO THE SPIRITUAL LIFE RENEWED IMPETUS AND GROWTH IN GRACE”

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When we consider together the elements that reconciliation offers to our faithful living, we sense the important direction which is given to us. We are made aware of our weaknesses and offered the strength to overcome them and to understand the weaknesses of our Sisters; as we offer and seek forgiveness, we draw closer to them. We approach our God without fear and hiding, and remain humble in the invitation to walk with him. Forgiveness and reconciliation are essential.

“By their frequent encounter with God’s mercy [in the sacrament of reconciliation], [consecrated persons] purify and renew their hearts, and through the humble recognition of their sins achieve openness in their relationship with him. The joyful experience of sacramental forgiveness, on the journey shared with one’s brothers and sisters, makes the heart eager to learn and encourages growth in faithfulness” (Vita Consecrata, 95).

After reflecting upon the story of “the fall” and the casting out of the human community from the Garden, we can be reminded of the fact that the rest of the Bible — throughout the whole of the Old Testament and the New Testament — leads to the final book. Jesus has achieved the victory over sin and death, and humankind is once again welcomed into the presence of God in an intimate living together. The story calls us to this goal: to be reconciled with God and dwell in the divine presence as integral children of God. The last pages of the Bible highlight these elements as the story of “the fall” is overturned with reconciliation:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them [as their God]. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away.’ The one who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new’” (Rev 21:1-5).

Reconciled to God, we are a new creation. It is our human destiny and the fulfillment of the promises made in Jesus. It is right for us to yearn

for this intimacy with one another and with God. Like the Psalmist, we can pray: *“O God, you are my God, it is you I seek. I long for you, O Lord. With all my heart I wait for you” (Ps 63:2).*

To achieve this union is the goal and grace of reconciliation. Our “walking with God” is disrupted by our sinfulness, our willful separation from our God. In the sacrament of reconciliation, we return to that walk which was interrupted in the Garden. When we hear God’s voice, we run to be alongside him.

Father Patrick GRIFFIN, CM

The Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Inter-Assemblies Document 2015-2021 form a whole

Mother House, December 9, 2015

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News of the
Company

During this presentation we will quite simply share some guidance to help us confront very serious world issues, based on current documents.

- the Inter-Assemblies Document 2015-2021, which expresses the charism for our time
- the Sustainable Development Goals
- the Encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

In order to address the needs of the poor, Saint Vincent and Saint Louise called us to read the signs of our times. Therefore, as we reflect on the theme of the General Assembly, *The Boldness of Charity for a New Missionary Momentum*, we should ask ourselves what this calls us to today.

We are challenged to reflect continually on the signs of the times as an essential dimension of our vocation. The Inter-Assemblies Document, the Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, and the Sustainable Development Goals are vital tools for us as a Society of Apostolic Life to understand the challenges of the present time.

Let us begin by considering the wisdom of Pope Francis, who urged heads of State and Ambassadors at the United Nations (New York) to “*redistribute wealth from rich*

to poor”, work for “*justice, an essential condition for achieving the ideal of universal fraternity*” and ensure no one should be “*permitted to bypass the dignity and rights of other individuals or other social groupings*”, not to forget the “*right of the environment*”.

The concern for the poor, the excluded and the Earth, solidarity, dignity, justice, the upholding of rights, and a change in lifestyle are major questions raised by all three previously mentioned texts as well as by Pope Francis’ speech to world leaders.

I - INVITATIONS ISSUED BY THE ENCYCLICAL *LAUDATO SI'*

In his encyclical, the Pope stresses the political and social aspects of ecology. He issues many clear challenges:

1. Shift from a centuries-old concept of “dominating” the Earth to a better understanding of intertwined relationships with God, people, and the earth itself. We are made to live in relationship with God, with each other and with the world in which we live. We are not called to control the world and dominate other creatures but rather to be responsible stewards. “*This responsibility for God’s earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world*” (*Laudato Si'*, 68).

2. Recognize that Earth is among the most abandoned and maltreated of the poor; she “*groans in travail*”.

3. Commit to a path of conversion. “*People may well have a growing ecological sensitivity but it has not succeeded in changing their harmful habits of consumption which, rather than decreasing, appear to be growing all the more*” (*Laudato Si'*, 55). It might feel natural for us as Daughters of Charity to place urgent needs of people above concerns for the Earth. And yet, Pope Francis challenges us: the earth “*is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor*” (*Laudato Si'*, 2); he stresses that “*There is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face*” (*Laudato Si'*, 233)... This ought to influence our choices: recycling, ride-sharing and products which do not exhaust resources.

The Daughters of Charity at the UN

4. Change the dominant technocratic paradigm. The ecological crisis cannot be resolved by partial solutions made in isolation by technical experts. *“To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system”* (Laudato Si’, 111). Each community, each individual must become involved and in that way put technology at the service of another type of progress that is more human and more integral. *“Ecological culture... needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational program, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm”* (Laudato Si’, 111). In preparation for the Forum of the Diocese of Fribourg on the “Common Good”, Bishop Morerod stated, *“We need a space for reflection... to go beyond emergency situations and become part of the long term solution... to think globally about what we do locally... to develop Christian social thinking, the foundation and fruit of the commitment to the common good, justice and peace... and to promote synergy among different approaches.”* The invitation was also addressed to individuals and organizations of other denominations, other regions and countries, researchers, teachers and people who are influential in the economy, who share the same concerns but are often isolated.

5. Recognize that the poor are harmed most by ecological damage and global warming: lack of drinking water, diseases, etc. *“Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest”* (Laudato Si’, 48).

6. See collaboration as key. *“As the bishops of Southern Africa have stated: ‘Everyone’s talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God’s creation’. All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents”* (Laudato Si’, 14). During the Forum of the Diocese of Fribourg, Professor Dembinski stated, *“The dominant mindset today is extreme individualism, which is incompatible with concern for the common good and solidarity. Something has to change.”*

7. Treat climate issues as justice issues among countries. The earth belongs to everyone. Take the example of the Tuvalu Islands, in the Polynesian archipelago, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The Copenhagen Conference in 2009 observed that the Tuvalu Islands were threatened by rising sea levels caused by global warming resulting from human activity. The Tuvalu Islands are projected to completely disappear around the end of the century, totally swallowed by the rising waters. Australia offered to welcome 1,000 men and their families, or three-fifths of Tuvalu citizens. But how could a new country be established in a foreign land? What type of agreement could be developed between Australia and the Tuvalu people? At the beginning of the discussions, the Tuvalu people agreed to leave all together, thinking that they would return to their islands once things returned to normal; now they think that their children will take root in Australia and remain there. Unresolved, the situation remains under study even as the Tuvalu Islands continue to lose population...

Conclusion

It is clear that we must demonstrate boldness to make sure the planetary and people issues are addressed. *“All of this shows the urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution”* (Laudato Si’, 114). Circumstances call for ‘holy boldness’, after the example of the disciples in the Acts of the Apostles: *“And when they had prayed, the place they were gathered together was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness”* (Acts 4:31).

II – THE BOLD ACTIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS

Now let’s turn to the Sustainable Development Goals, which were officially adopted by the United Nations on September 25, the same day that the Pope addressed world leaders.

These goals provide a vision for the next 15 years for the prosperity of people and the planet.

This ambitious vision is *universal* in nature and calls on all people to commit to transforming our world and freeing it from extreme poverty, hunger, disease, discrimination, and violence against women and girls.

The Daughters of Charity at the UN

It is an *all-encompassing* vision which promotes human rights: the rights to water, equality, decent work, and affordable energy.

It is an *ecological* vision in which the planet is protected and all life can thrive.

It is also a *compassionate* vision that wants to make sure that no one will be left behind and that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives.

The Sustainable Development Goals number seventeen; each one has additional targets (there are 169 in total). By March 2016, measuring tools, or indicators, will be confirmed. Here are the 17 goals:

- 1 - End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
- 2 - End hunger, achieve food security, and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
- 3 - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
- 4 - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- 5 - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- 6 - Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
- 7 - Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.
- 8 - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.
- 9 - Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.
- 10 - Reduce inequality within and among countries.
- 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.
- 12 - Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
- 13 - Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
- 14 - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.
- 15 - Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

16 - Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

17 - Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

Adopting these 17 goals and 169 targets addresses the concerns of people, planet, and prosperity, but member states do not guarantee an automatic implementation. The participation of all people around the world, governments and institutions is critical. As real partners, we need to remind our governments of their commitment to ensure that structures and systems for a holistic approach are implemented through a transparent process with follow up and evaluation.

Like *Laudato Si'*, the Sustainable Development Goals will require a global effort and collaboration among governmental agencies, the private sector, NGOs, charitable organizations, and each and every individual. No one can resolve the complex situation of our world alone. The Sustainable Development Goals prioritize not separating environment, economy, and society but rather addressing them together.

The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, observed in Geneva on October 19 with the theme "*Building a sustainable future: Coming together to end poverty and discrimination*", was the first observance since the Sustainable Development Goals were officially adopted. We must also stress the connection among development, social welfare and human rights. Persons who are poor have frequently expressed their need to be consulted and heeded in order to assert their rights to water, sanitation, health care, social coverage, and protection from all forms of discrimination... Persons who are poor are aware that environmental degradation contributes to poverty, almost like an 'ally'. We supported the Campaign of the International Franciscans, "*Make human rights a reality for persons who live in extreme poverty*", because extreme poverty isn't a simple question of lack of income, but a question of rights.

The Daughters of Charity at the UN

SOME PARALLELS BETWEEN LAUDATO SI', THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS, AND THE INTER-ASSEMBLIES DOCUMENT (IAD)

These three documents address concrete calls that require boldness.

1. Act boldly.

“We have an opportunity and duty to act, boldly, vigorously, and expeditiously, to turn reality into a life of dignity for all, leaving no one behind” (Synthesis Report, United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon).

“Let us dare boldly: to sharpen our focus each day in order to notice those who are truly poor; to develop great trust in Providence; to give up our routines, our securities, our comfort and our prejudices; to rekindle our passion for persons who are poor and go further in order to invent new ways of serving” (IAD, p. 14-15).

“All of this shows the urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution” (Laudato Si', 114).

“It's about everyone mattering... To say you don't want to leave anyone behind is to look to see who is the most vulnerable and smallest member of the family and what is it that we're going to have to do to ensure that they're not left behind, because that will be the litmus test and success of what we do,” said Amina J. Mohammed, UN Secretary General's Special Advisor on Post-2015 Development Planning. You can almost hear St. Vincent and Louise speaking those words. When we as Daughters of Charity work with the marginalized, we show the world that we wish to leave no one behind.

2. Develop sensitivity to cultures.

“Given the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes... Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality” (Laudato Si', 63).

“Let us dare... to be more open to our internationality: to value our differences as enriching, to intensify intercultural dialogue characterized

by listening and respect, to facilitate learning languages, etc.” (IAD, p. 19-20).

3. Invite youth, respond to their demands and involve them in building the world.

“Let us dare generously... to open up our local communities to young people in order to offer opportunities for sharing, for prayer and for concrete service of persons who are poor; to accompany them and to reflect with them on their experiences of faith and service; to take a more active part in ministry to young people and families” (IAD, p. 24).

“Young people will be the torch bearers of the next sustainable development agenda through 2030” (Ban Ki-Moon, *Road to Dignity*, p. 3, § 3).

“Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded” (Laudato Si', 13).

4. Revive a spirituality of creation.

We cannot underestimate the importance of our relationship with the environment, others and God. In order to develop a healthy relationship with creation, we must first understand who we are and then our mutual responsibility with others and nature. In Genesis, we see the garden is entrusted to the man and woman so they might protect it and make it bear fruit.

“...nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to 'till and keep' the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). 'Tilling' refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while 'keeping' means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature” (Laudato Si', 67).

The Daughters of Charity at the UN

“At this moment in time, we are called to lead and act with courage. We are called to embrace change... Change in our relationship with our one and only planet” (Road to Dignity, p. 3, § 4).

“Consider persons, events and creation from a faith perspective; make a dramatic shift in our consumer habits for an ethical use of the earth’s resources” (IAD, p. 11).

5. Collaborate with others.

“The creativity and shared sense of purpose that has emerged from across the human family is proof that we can come together to innovate and collaborate in search of solutions and the common good” (Ban Ki-Moon, Road to Dignity, p. 5-6, § 19).

“Let us dare courageously... to increase networking at all levels - particularly, Interprovincial and international - in order to facilitate collaborative service with the Vincentian Family and others for the defense and integration of migrants, refugees and victims of modern forms of slavery” (IAD, p. 17-18).

“Laudato Si’s prophetic message also invites collaborative healing action, recognizing that the Catholic Church cannot address the problems of Earth unilaterally yet emphasizing the Church’s capacity to be an excellent collaborative partner with others equally intent on innovatively healing the wounds that humanity has caused” (Sister Mary Ellen Leciejewski, OP, Embracing a New Anawim—Reflections on Laudato Si’).

6. Change our consumption habits and adopt a new lifestyle.

“Let us dare with conviction: to simplify our structures and remove whatever clutters our personal and communal spaces; to practice personal and communal responsibility in our use of material goods, including the means of social communication; to create and evaluate, together, budgets that reflect a simple life style that is closer to the living conditions of persons who are poor” (IAD, p. 12-13).

“Humanity is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warming or at least the human causes which produce or aggravate it” (Laudato Si’, 23).

Conclusion

There is hope! *“All it takes is one good person to restore hope!” (Laudato Si’, 71) “Although the post-industrial period may well be remembered as one of the most irresponsible in history, nonetheless there is reason to hope that humanity at the dawn of the twenty-first century will be remembered for having generously shouldered its grave responsibilities” (Laudato Si’, 165).*

These are some connections that emerge from these three major contemporary documents; we could find others. The important thing is to recognize that we no longer work in “silos”, but that a whole world must join together to create a life-giving future for everyone.

How are we going to understand the conversion to ecology in order to put our efforts behind a different lifestyle and type of education and to engage in an interior and spiritual process? Peace, joy and love, which draw their source from the Eucharist, are Christian values that underlie this conversion. The solidarity holding all people together is based on the mystery of the Trinity. The Vincentian virtues of humility, restraint and simplicity have a significant role to play.

The Sustainable Development Goals, *Laudato Si’*, and the Inter-Assemblies Document 2015-2021 call us to bold goals and bold actions. And so we must ask ourselves, in a world which is increasingly connected, dependent upon Mother Earth, and in which so many share our ministerial concerns, how can our lifestyle, spirituality, community life and ministry be transformed for a new missionary momentum? We stand at the threshold of unprecedented change. Let’s link arm in arm with the world in leaving no one behind and in preserving our common home.

Based on a presentation by
Sister Catherine PRENDERGAST and Sister Monique JAVOUHEY
at the Mother House on December 9, 2015, during COP 21

Introduction

Sent down the paths of an ever bolder charity and an always new missionary momentum, the entire Company has also entered fully into the Holy Year of Mercy, during which the Pope invites us to improve our practice of the works of mercy, traditionally considered to number fourteen: seven corporal and seven spiritual works. An expression of fullness, the number 7 implies the full breadth, length and depth of corporal and spiritual service. Clearly, all Daughters of Charity, by virtue of their vocation, carry out these works of mercy each day: each Sister responds to new or long-standing poverties in line with the ministry entrusted to her, according to her capacities and skills. They also believe that the works which they carry out are ineffective in themselves; rather, their fruitfulness depends on their union with the Lord.

The Inter-Assemblies Document 2015-2021 will help the Company live the Holy Year of Mercy as a privileged time for responding to the many challenges of today with renewed energy. The *Echoes of the Company* wishes to present in concrete terms some practices of what are called the works of mercy through the many types of ministries at the service of the poorest of persons who are poor. It is one means among others to highlight the richness of the international Company. What is experienced on the Provincial level interests the whole Company, and the *Echoes*, in addition to offering formation, contribute to keeping us attuned to the heartbeat of the Provinces.

This sharing of experiences thus intends to present, in all simplicity, the many practices of mercy in the various Provinces and in that way help us to consider contemporary cultural changes not just in terms of a crisis and loss of values.

M

Works of
Mercy

Province of Cali

**Listening as the door that opens up
to the other works of mercy**

In our times, when listening is less and less common because of noise pollution, rapid yet superficial communication, lack of time, increasing self-centeredness, individualism, indifference, etc., the Province of San Vicente de Paul - Cali has chosen to respond actively to this type of poverty by creating a **ministry of psycho-spiritual accompaniment** within the Provincial House. It serves pilgrims who come to the chapel and are anxious and desperate because of their personal problems, frequently stemming from the sociocultural context of our country.

Listening is the gateway to all the other works of mercy. Seeing another's needs is not enough; I must listen. Indeed, my way of perceiving things or situations may be different from what the person feels, wants or really needs. Jesus Himself acted in this way with the blind man in Jericho. Even though Jesus saw that he was blind, He first asked him, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" (Mk 10:46-52); once the blind man had expressed his needs, Jesus took action for him. As a result, living out "*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me*" (Mt 25:35-36) requires attentive and comprehensive listening, free from judgment and prejudice, such that our assistance responds to the real needs of the person, which he alone knows. This is the invitation that the Church, through Pope Francis, extends to us:

*"Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and **let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help!** May we reach out*

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*to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! **May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism!***" (MV 15)

In particular, what we wish to share about psycho-spiritual listening is how it reveals and continues God's mercy in this jubilee year, taking into account the criteria of systemic change, described below.

Participation

The psycho-spiritual process is carried out in its entirety by the client. The Daughter of Charity, who is a psychologist, accompanies this journey but does not assume responsibility for change. She promotes the person's confrontation with himself through the recognition and acceptance of his personal history and the process of forgiveness and self-forgiveness. The fact that a person has initiated the process makes it easier to develop a therapeutic relationship fostering openness, the expression of feelings, admission of weaknesses, difficulties and inner slaveries and the desire for freedom. In many cases, the person says, *"I've often confessed this, but I never feel forgiven. It's not that I doubt God's mercy, but I don't forgive myself."* Others say, *"This is the first time in my life that I've said this out loud to someone."*

We analyze the various dimensions of the person, taking into account his family, socio-cultural context, background, etc. In many cases, but especially when the person is a minor, this reality is confirmed by his family or during a home visit. This opens the door to other processes such as parenting classes and family therapy. The goal is to involve the family in the therapy and to work on the causes that may be creating character imbalance.

Social impact and multiplier effect

Given the situation in Columbia – violence, human trafficking, interpersonal conflicts, abuse, rape, injustice, suicide, forced relocation, sudden and violent death at young ages, existential emptiness, children's difficulties following their parents' separation, religious confusion, weak emotional bonds, superstitious practices, male chauvinism, domestic

violence, depression among the elderly resulting from loneliness, fear, anxiety, etc. – this type of accompaniment has a positive impact in society. In a number of cases, not providing treatment in time increased the risk of mental illness, perpetuation of the cycle of vengeance and family or social violence or suicide.

Thanks to this listening process, change in an individual has repercussions on his family, social context, professional and interpersonal relationships. Working through the psychology of forgiveness and reconciliation, we contribute to mending the social fabric and strengthening the emotional bonds among people and within their families. Pope Francis affirms this: *"pardon is the instrument placed into our fragile hands to attain serenity of heart. To let go of anger, wrath, violence, and revenge are necessary conditions to living joyfully"* (MV 9).

In this ministry, we have worked with people who had been treated for their illnesses in medical centers with medications alone. This is the case of "Julián"¹, who was diagnosed as psychotic and schizophrenic. He kept looking for a psychologist who would listen to him, as he said during our first appointment: *"I want to speak about myself; I want someone to listen to me. I am tired with so many medications, and no one ever asks me what makes me suffer or what makes me sick."* We thus initiated psycho-spiritual accompaniment. Through listening alone, his mental state improved, along with his family situation, his independence, recognition of his talents and his personal dignity. He now studies graphic design in an educational facility in the city.

"Andrés", age eight, was brought for therapy because he was aggressive and hyperactive. Thanks to psychotherapeutic listening, we learned that he was part of a school gang. As a social commitment after his treatment, he came up with the idea of a bracelet, which he offered to his friends as a sign: those who wore it promised not to fight either inside or outside school.

1. The names used in this article have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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“Milton” is a young man with homicidal ideas resulting from satanic practices and deep-seated hatred. After his liberation and healing, he threw a party for his birthday to which he invited all his family members and those with whom he had fallings-out or disagreements. That day he reconciled with everyone and gave his testimony that this listening process had brought him closer to the person of Jesus through an inexplicable attraction to Virgin Mary and that God had given him the tools he needed for forgiveness.

Sustainability

On a financial level, we ask those to whom we listen for an amount, not as a “payment for services”, but as a “personal investment”. This amount varies depending on the person’s needs and knowledge of what the process brings.

The most important type of sustainability is offering the person tools to continue the process begun, exercising his freedom and personal responsibility to manage his own life. Therefore, after the initial evaluation, we work with concrete objectives, aiming to meet long- and short-term goals, in line with the Constitutions. *“The Daughters of Charity are constantly solicitous for the development of every person in all the aspects of their being. That is why **they are alert** to ways of helping their brothers and sisters to become conscious of their own dignity and agents of their own promotion”* (C. 24e).

Innovation

Many people come to request this service because they are drawn by the ministry of the shrine. In most cases, they want to meet a professional who unites psychological and spiritual aspects so as to avoid moral or ethical confusion. Naturally, we serve those of other faiths as well.

The ministry of psycho-spiritual listening includes evaluation, diagnosis, care and treatment, not to forget evangelization and especially the opportunity to know and experience the mercy of God, shown through listening, welcome, respect, freedom, unconditional acceptance, forgiveness, self-forgiveness and mending their social fabric. This work is not limited to occasional listening, nor a course, nor giving advice,

nor crisis intervention: those services are also offered but are insufficient given the depth of the existential problems. Each individual must follow a program of short therapies over 14 sessions of about an hour each week.

Networking

Networking occurs through the participation of the family or significant others in therapy, which aims to strengthen and expand existing support networks and involve them in the person’s growth.

The shrine’s ministry prepares people to encounter Jesus and become aware of their personal, family and social reality up to the point that they are moved to conversion and to seek assistance.

Accompaniment begins with the welcome of the Sisters at the service of the pilgrims who come to the chapel with their needs. The Sisters refer many people to us.

Given the high demand for the service and the time invested in the process, we must also direct people to other organizations such as charismatic renewal and institutions of the Archdiocese, etc.

Sometimes we have offered support to other ministries carried out within the Provincial House, receiving some members of the residence for young women, the infirmary or the tutoring program, young women in formation, employees, our Sisters and Sisters from other congregations, who seek a counselor on their own initiative or are sent to us by their superiors.

Conclusion

Listening is one of the most wonderful works of mercy that there is and one of the most important for our time. To paraphrase Jesus, we could say, **“Listen to each other as I have listened to you.”** We have a merciful God who listens, hears the cry of the poor and oppressed and sees the suffering of His people. He is moved deep in His heart and acts on behalf of all, as it is written in the book of Deuteronomy: **“For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him?”** (Deut 4:7)

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True listening heals, frees, comforts and opens the mind, heart and will to new possibilities. It is a concrete way of manifesting God's love and love of God. It is a way to make a pilgrimage inside a person and to rescue him from the abyss and lead him to seek the truth that will free him and enable him to assume his own history as salvation history. This requires that we and the person concerned listen to the Word of God in order to discover His plan for each of us.

Listening involves going to the existential peripheries, touching a person's vulnerability, believing that God acts and will tirelessly continue to act until change and personal conversion take place, until their beauty and dignity as sons and daughters of God is restored. Listening is a way of participating in Jesus' mission: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord"* (Lk 4:18-19).

In order to listen, I must first have had the experience that someone has truly listened to me. This requires silence, contemplation, total availability for the other, interior freedom so as not to judge, humility and respect for the other's history, confidentiality and especially awareness of being a sinner who has been welcomed, listened to and forgiven by God. *"Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground!"* (Ex 3:5) Listening implies coming out of one's self in order to go out to meet the other, as Pope Francis has said: *"A Church which 'goes forth' is a Church whose doors are open. Going out to others in order to reach the fringes of humanity does not mean rushing out aimlessly into the world. Often it is better simply to slow down, to put aside our eagerness in order to see and **listen to others...**"* (EG 46).

This process cannot be reduced to its psychological aspect because that would be incomplete; it must be connected with the spiritual aspect. As the person makes a pilgrimage into his interior life, he is freed from an emotional burden and anxieties, heals wounds, becomes aware of God's action and ongoing grace in him and becomes more attuned to transcendence; his faith takes on new meaning, as do baptism, the reception of the sacraments and a Christian commitment to serve those most in need. An encounter with God impels the person to encounter

his brothers and sisters, beginning with those closest to him. This is why listening to a person extends into daily prayer for that person: that by allowing God to touch him, through the Virgin Mary who has led him to the shrine, he might find freedom, light, peace, joy and love as fruits of his interior renewal.

In this work that I accepted as a gift from God, my confidence lies neither in myself nor in psychological techniques and strategies; my hope and trust lie in God who never stops working in persons *"to sanctify and save them"* (C. 10a). This listening ministry is an ongoing call for my own conversion because I am convinced of what Saint Vincent said: *"neither philosophy, nor theology, nor discourses can act in souls; Jesus Christ must be involved in this with us - or we with Him - so that we may act in Him and He in us, that we may speak as He did and in His Spirit... So... you must empty yourself of self in order to clothe yourself with Jesus Christ"* (CCD XI, 311).

While it is true that the work described demands training and a full-time commitment, this takes nothing away from the ability we all have to listen to people in all circumstances and places. Attention and listening evangelize, heal and are a source and expression of mercy. Let us heed Pope Francis' invitation:

"We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God's love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives. But this always demands... patience" (EG 171).

Let us entrust this listening ministry to the Virgin Mary, *"the Mother of God, Mother of mercy and hope of the lowly, closely united with her Son, leading to Him those who place their trust in her"* (C. 15b), asking her to teach us to respond more fully to her Son according to God's will and the needs of those who ask our assistance, so that they might experience God's mercy through our actions, attitudes, words and listening.

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I give thanks to God for His listening. He opens my ears and my heart to the needs of those who humbly seek assistance. I thank my Provincial Superiors and my local community for their unconditional support and the opportunity to perform this ministry. I also thank the people who have allowed me to make a pilgrimage with them into their interior life.

Sister Flor Marina GIRALDO RÍOS
Daughter of Charity

WORKS OF MERCY

Province of Central America (Nicaragua)

Bear patiently

Education should be powerful and gentle, human and supernatural.

“La Recolectión” school and residence hosts a medical and educational service, offering shelter and support for young girls. It is located in the city of León, 95 kilometers from the capital of Nicaragua. Since its foundation for the least fortunate in society on November 22, 1880, the work has been administered by the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. During the country’s most difficult moments, the Sisters continued to serve those excluded by society. “La Recolectión” is distinguished by the attention it pays to the girls and to their holistic promotion for their success in today’s competitive world.

We, the Daughters of Charity, know that when children lack affection during the various stages of their development, this causes emotional problems that affect their personality and their ability to learn. In the residence, we continually face extremely difficult situations, which we must overcome with the grace of God. This is the case of Mabel (not her real name), a six-year-old girl who came to our school in 2015. Soon after beginning the school year with the other children her age, she responded unreasonably with behavioral changes, aggressive attitudes and reactions, etc.

Issue

The little girl would look out the window and get up all the time, showed anxiety, attacked her classmates, was kleptomaniac, cried, yelled, uncontrollably stamped her feet and hit her teacher several times. Very impulsive and capricious, she was incapable of following instructions. She would leave the classroom and walk through the

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hallways or in the yard. She sought attention and affection, did not finish what she began and used her family situation to her benefit.

Reactions

- Afraid of her reactions, her classmates rejected her and let her know that she bothered them.
- The children's parents requested her permanent expulsion, arguing that such attitudes ran the risk of destabilizing her classmates as well.

Further study of the situation

When we visited Mabel's family, we found a dysfunctional family. There are three children, and the oldest, age 12, suffers paralysis. The alcoholic father is in prison; he has already been incarcerated several times because of theft. At age 4, Mabel was operated for a tumor on the occipital region of her skull; since then, she has ongoing treatment (sedatives). Her mother, who lives with another man, does not have the resources to keep and care for her child. Therefore, during the day, Mabel stays with her maternal grandmother who lives with another woman; at the end of the school day, her grandmother picks her up. Then Mabel goes to spend the night with her father's relatives.

When her father is out of prison, her grandmother turns Mabel over to him, and he takes her to live with him in an apartment. Since the girl is unable to care for herself, her father hits her; sometimes, he attacks her so violently that the marks of a rope around Mabel's neck are visible. This child, a victim of abuse, is truly at risk.

Analysis of the problem

Mabel was born in an environment that reinforced her negative behavior as she endured domestic violence, alcoholism, feuding and yelling. Deprived of the care and affection necessary for children in their early years, Mabel did not develop self-control in a normal way, and her attitude does not promote a good relationship with her peers.

Action taken

Now, Mabel has psychological care, and several professionals help her explore her emotions. The educational community provides support, raises awareness and allows her to participate in activities that she likes in order to engage her. A program of individualized support has been established, with clear and consistent rules and exercises to modify her behavior. Finally, through catechism, she also is learning to open herself to beauty.

Mabel is still at our school, and we continue to provide her with a great deal of attention. As a result of our discernment and merciful professional support, with God's help, she is making a real effort to improve her behavior and her emotional balance. Now that she is calmer, she is better accepted by her classmates.

“La Recolección” local community

THE CHARTER OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

Consecrated because “more exposed”
Consecrated to reach all people...

“CELL”

*“In that, you resemble Our Lord more closely”
(CCD X, 530).*

WHAT SAINT VINCENT SAID

“You see, what I’ve just said well deserves to be said again, Sisters. I’m going to repeat it. Your monastery and your house is that of the sick - the only one you have. Your parish is your church, and you must assist devoutly at Divine Service;

your cell, a rented room; and you must say, ‘My cell is a rented room’;

your cloister, the streets of the city, through which you go in winter and in all sorts of weather to seek out the sick poor.”

*“In that, you resemble Our Lord more closely...”
(Conference of August 24, 1659 – *The Perfection required for Parish Sisters.* CCD X, 531-532; 530)*

[1636]

Mademoiselle,

The grace of Jesus Christ Our Lord be with you forever! The President’s wife, Madame Goussault, has not been in Beauvais. She has been back in Neufchâtel and I think that she is now in Groslet with her mother, so that she would not be able to do what you wish with regard to

Liancourt. I am ashamed that we have not yet drawn up the rules for that place. We have to work on them, with the help of God.

As for the Saint-Nicolas house¹, I beg of you to be patient and to pay the entire rent from the common fund; you may perhaps need it for your Sisters.

What shall I say to you about that good young woman who is with M. Lhoste, except that it is a fine act of charity. However, we must be careful not to make a practice of it. Would it not be better, since you are bound to it, to put Jeanne there along with that poor Suzanne? Two would live better together and perhaps it will do them no harm. I sent my apologies to Madame de Ligin, who is feeling better; so am I, thank God. And you, Mademoiselle, what was that little relapse you had? Oh! how true it is, Mademoiselle, that the world is full of misery! Courage! We must put up both with our own and with that of others as long as God pleases. Alas! good Madame Mesnard! O Dieu, how happy I believe her to be and how I beg her with all my heart to pray to God for me! Surely I can hope for this from her goodness. I beseech your heart not to be saddened on her account or on any other, except from the pure love of God. I am, in this same love, your servant. V.D.

Addressed: Mademoiselle Le Gras

(Letter 241 Archives of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, original autograph letter. CCD I, 339-340)

Saint Lazare, Sunday morning [February or March 1641]

Mademoiselle,

The grace of Our Lord be with you forever! I have many things to tell you here; I do not know if I shall remember all of them. The first is that our Sister Maurice, of Saint-Sulpice, has left the Charity; her mother went for her yesterday. These are the effects of our Sister Marie. The Duchesse cried out in my presence when she learned of it,

1. The house the Sisters had just left the preceding May for La Chapelle.

The Charter of the Daughters of Charity

for I saw her yesterday. She said that it was the bad treatment those Sisters were receiving from their parish and she wanted to give up everything herself. Oh well! we must attend to it. In the name of God, Mademoiselle, see whom you can give her, starting today. One of those remaining is ill and there is only one who can work. I entreat you, Mademoiselle, to do all you can about this matter. She spoke to me again yesterday about establishing those Sisters and I told her we would talk about it in two or three days.

I think you would do well to send Jeanne to Saint-Germain. Mesdames Le Roux and Lotin are insisting on beginning their retreat tomorrow at your house. What do you think, Mademoiselle? The latter is accustomed to eating meat. It would be difficult for me to go to your house because of my little ailment; they will have to come here. Do what you can for Saint-Jacques and for the galley slaves. I shall hurry M. Lambert with regard to the Sisters. As for the Angers affair, I forgot to speak to M. de Cordes about it yesterday; we shall see. You could use my little indisposition as an excuse, as far as the papers are concerned.

We must keep on praying for the house; I am not so worried about it as about the way to set you up right now in a rented lodging. O Jesus! Mademoiselle, your concerns do not depend on a house, but on the continuation of God's blessing on the work. I am going to ask Monsieur du Coudray whether he knows any suitable young women from Lorraine, and will have letters written everywhere on this subject. This is an avenue that just occurred to me now. Let me know as soon as possible how you feel about those good ladies and their retreat. Good day, Mademoiselle, I am your servant. V.D. I just wrote to Madame Le Roux to postpone the retreat.

Addressed: Mademoiselle Le Gras

(Letter 519 Archives of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, original autograph letter. CCD II, 187-189)

SOME REFLECTIONS

The Abbé Pierre Foundation estimated that 3.5 million people are poorly housed in France in 2015. Of that number, 700,000 do not have

their own lodging and 85,000 live in make-shift housing – a shack, campsite or camper car – year long. Much remains to be done so that every person might have housing conditions worthy to be called housing.

The law recognizes access to independent housing as a right to guarantee and a obligation of solidarity. However, the right to housing exists only on paper. The current context, described by many as a ‘crisis’ and which affects the poorest households more than others, bears witness to this. According to the general census of 1999, the number of ‘poorly housed’ reached three million, which includes those in uncomfortable and over-crowded situations. Dilapidated housing is a recurrent problem over history. Nonetheless, sometimes we see “intensifications” of these periods, especially during tragedies that put this problem on center stage. For several years now, although it seemed that the housing crisis had been resolved in the 1970s, we are unquestionably in one of these “intensifications”. We must, however, point out some particular aspects of the problem as it is today. The situation of housing unfit for habitation is paradoxically a burning question even as it concerns only the margins of our housing systems: quantitatively, this issue is not very important. Another characteristic is that the problem is invisible: only a tragedy brings out the issue, as was the case in 2005 with the fires that occurred in uninhabitable Parisian buildings. Moreover, the problem of poor housing currently takes on varied forms that go beyond housing unfit for habitation, with the emergence of new forms of precarious housing and difficulties maintaining it, etc.

There is no precise definition of precarious housing. It is generally defined in negative terms (in contrast to ‘ordinary’ housing) or by its status. Over the last few years, there has been a proliferation of labels (decent housing, dilapidated housing, unfit housing, undignified housing, poor housing...) which are revelatory of social developments and encompass varied situations.

The idea of ‘poor housing’ is used to describe in general terms the new forms of housing instability. From the perspective of the Abbé Pierre Foundation, poor housing covers several dimensions. Some situations are long-standing but still present (such as not having housing or

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poor housing conditions); others are more recent and correspond to difficulties that have arisen in modern times (difficulty in accessing or maintaining housing, limited possibilities for residential mobility). Five indicators help to describe the variety of situations experienced by those with poor housing: lack of housing, difficulty in access, lack of comfort and unfit conditions, difficulty maintaining it and limited ability to move, a virtual house arrest. The concept of poor housing primarily seeks to highlight the emergence of a multi-faceted phenomenon and to use a generic expression to encompass all of these situations.

In contrast, the notion of unfit housing, which appeared as early as the 19th century, is an institutional category that has been the basis for many renovation campaigns. In particular, it served as justification for the vast urban reorganization projects, which often had the effect of relegating the most poor to the outskirts and out of urban downtowns. According to the Code of Public Health, *“Any building, completed or not, is defined as unfit when it is dangerous for the health of its occupants or neighbors due to the fact of its state of occupancy conditions.”*

Unfitness is thus defined by danger, caused by the deterioration of the structure, for the health of its occupants. While this definition may seem clear, unfitness is in fact a vague reality whose limits are difficult to fix and that leaves broad power of judgement to accredited officials.

Decent housing is a more recent category. Decency was defined by the law on urban solidarity and renewal of December 13, 2000 (art. 187), which introduced this concept into rental agreements and social security law because decent housing has become a necessary condition for payment of housing subsidies (family or income-based). All renters, including those in subsidized housing (encompassing housing projects/ estates), have the right to challenge the decency of their housing, according to the same article of the law. In other words, decency aims to give more power to renters in their relationship with their landlords. It is clear that the objective of decency is quite different from that of unfitness, which justifies intervention by public authorities.

Finally, another category that has appeared in recent years is that of undignified housing. This classification refers to a set of situations that amount to a denial of the right to housing and undermine human dignity

(lead poisoning, makeshift housing, unhealthiness, dilapidation...). It is primarily a political concept. For Pascale Pichon,² the concept of undignified housing is an indication of the current way of dealing with the social issue. The adjective “undignified” is based on a moral judgement and distinguishes people from the place where they live: they are no longer assimilated with their habitat. The change from ‘unfit environment’ to ‘undignified environment’ indicates, in her opinion, a change from hygienic city to a humanitarian city: emergency responses are increasingly being put in place in the name of human dignity, which focus on the individual. We are witnessing a shift in social policies from the collective to the singular.

“We must keep on praying for the house; I am not so worried about it as about the way to set you up right now in a rented lodging. O Jesus! Mademoiselle, your concerns do not depend on a house, but on the continuation of God’s blessing on the work.”

For Saint Vincent, purchasing a house or becoming a homeowner is not an end in and of itself and must remain a means to an end, a necessary means for the mission. It is a preferable means, one that is less precarious because, indeed, it is less “exposed” than a “rented room” and being a tenant. What is important for Vincent is that the Daughters of Charity set themselves up (*set up* and *the work* are the two essential expressions here). Renting a room was much more expedient at that time and simpler than purchasing a house. It allowed greater flexibility and mobility.

2. International Colloquium: “Mobility, instability, hospitality: legacy and perspective of precarious housing in Europe”, September 29 and 30, 2005, University of Paris X-Nanterre.

QUESTIONS

- Our two congregations (the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission) own a good deal of real estate in good condition. On a collective level, we are rich. Where, then, can a form of simplicity, even precariousness, be found in our houses in order to “resemble our Lord more closely”, He who had “nowhere to lay His head”?

- In some way, faith in Christ makes us “precarious”. Faith is also an exodus that displaces us and makes us go “where we do not want to go”. Are we prepared to change our “rented room” promptly?

Father Jérôme DELSINNE, CM

Province of Fortaleza

In the Northeast of Brazil

**A local community on the move
from 1968 up to today (continued)**

The charity of Jesus crucified urges us.

The CHARTER – SOURCE OF STRENGTH

It has always been the case that persons who are poor, the pilgrim people of God, live a forced and ongoing exodus. Following the example of Moses, it is in the midst of this people that we should listen to the Lord, discern His will and seek the Promised Land and the real meaning of our vocation as Daughters of Charity in this time of transition.

For persons who are poor, exodus is a difficult existential condition; for us as Daughters of Charity, it was imperative to adopt it as a life choice. This faith pilgrimage demanded a change in our usual standards:

Life style

One of the first requirements was to live in a small house in the same conditions as poor persons, our neighbors, without water or light but open to the local people.

Spirituality

Unable to follow the traditional “regularity” of our life as Daughters of Charity (horarium, chapel, prayer books, etc.), we had to find a new way to pray and live out our consecration in response to the calls of those who are poor; a new way of being in the world without belonging

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to the world. The life and suffering of those who are poor necessarily became our prayer book, our Constitutions and our chapel (cf. C. 11; C. 12). We endeavored to develop our spirituality through privileged times of intimacy with the Lord (cf. C. 17) in order to know Him more deeply and recognize Him in the midst of impoverished people. “*The Sisters find Christ and contemplate Him in the heart and life of those who are poor...*” (C. 10a). Nourished by His active presence in the heart of the very poor, we return stronger to live in community and grow together in:

- rootedness in God (cf. C. 17; C. 21; C. 33)
- love of our vocation (cf. C. 7; C. 8; C. 16)
- the spirit of humility, simplicity and charity (cf. C. 13; C. 18)
- an attitude of servant (cf. C. 24d)
- frequent recourse to the Sacraments (cf. C. 19b; C. 20)
- an attitude of ongoing conversion (cf. C. 30b; C. 32b)
- enthusiasm and dedication in service (cf. C. 11; C. 16; C. 24; C. 32).

Community life

As Saint Vincent recommended, we tried to adapt our community life to those who are poor, “*our Lords and Masters*” (Constitutions, p.17). Our schedule should not be an obstacle to service. We strove to consider the questions that arose: What is the best time to serve those who are poor? When do they need us? When can we serve them? After prayer and reflection, we were able to plan our days: the time to wake up and go to bed, our comings and goings, prayer... Our life and service should not be planned based on ourselves but rather based on those who are poor, so we had to take this new context into account. What is most important in a community of insertion is its ability to be flexible and remain open to the unexpected. Working for and with those who are poor requires a great deal of creativity and especially attentiveness to their needs and requests, as Monsignor Cambron has said: “*A service that does not meet a real need is a bad service.*” Our mission was not to “do”, but to spark, encourage, support, accompany and detect the “seeds of the Word” in the lives of those who are poor. They are the real leaders and “agents of evangelization”.

Clothing

We quickly realized that our official habit “distanced” us from those who were poor and destitute: “...*the Daughters of Charity are not nuns, but Sisters who come and go like seculars...*” (CCD VIII, 277). After receiving permission to use a dress adapted to the context of this slum, we chose blue clothes in the same style as those of the working class.

Food

In this area, poverty and solidarity and the need to earn our living (cf. C. 30b) seemed a basic requirement. We thus began to work in places that matched our training and skills:

- teacher in a public school;
- artisan;
- salaried worker in a fish-processing factory.

Service

During the Province’s revision of works and motivated by it, we left the poor neighborhood of Pirambu for another neighborhood and established our mission in the parish. In a listening attitude, we decided on a way of serving that allowed those who are poor to actively determine and pursue their own liberation. With this intent, we chose to adopt the model of community organization using basic Christian communities (Medellin, 15 and Puebla, 617), supported by the Archdiocese of Fortaleza.

The Puebla Document

Through this document, we rediscovered “the evangelizing potential of the poor” (§ 1147), and we try to serve as mediators in a way that encourages them to discuss among themselves, thereby creating real bonds of friendship and shared experiences and insights such that together they can set common goals and commit to putting them and those we call “Operation Charity” into practice.

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Authority as service

We sought together how to live authority. At the beginning, we each took turns assuming the service of Sister Servant. With the promulgation of 1983 Constitutions, the Sister Servant was appointed for a three-year term.

Canonical erection of the local community

Some time later, the local community was officially established on a juridical level. We wanted to choose a name that was not just a tribute to a saint honored by the Church or the Company, but a name that highlighted our approach to community life and service. One day, we unanimously chose the name “Exodus” for our local community. This name defined:

- The “Pascal dimension” as a goal and life project;
- “Itinerancy” as a process and work method in the city and countryside: the mission is accomplished in movement (cf. Constitutions, pp 16-20 and Lk 10:1vv).

Itinerancy

Vatican II characterized the Church as the “pilgrim people of God”, which we took as a challenge to become, in turn, pilgrims, wanderers. Pope John Paul II ratified this invitation for us during the General Assembly of June 1985: “*Go, dear Sisters, through the entire world! The Church counts a great deal on you.*” We are always growing in our understanding of the flexibility and mobility of which Constitutions 12 and 25 speak. This led us to experience itinerancy as a process that demands greater attention and personal investment so that we do not become prisoners to what makes us comfortable. After five years in the “Cité Aflita” slum, we moved to another neighborhood with a group of ten families who participated in the “get out of the slum” project, in collaboration with the German charity MISEREOR. After ten years of work, due to the constant appeals of persons living in poverty in the countryside and the request of the Archbishop of Fortaleza, Aloísio Lorscheider, and the Visitatrix, the “Exodus Community” moved to another city 70 km away from Fortaleza called Chorozinho. We live in a house made available to us.

All of these changes required us to adopt a simpler lifestyle, lighter and not weighed down by heavy baggage. We had to draw more deeply from our Charter and open our doors wider to this experience of the evangelical life of “being in the world but not of the world,” as Jesus and our Holy Founders insisted,

“...having:

- for monastery only the houses of the sick...,
- for cell a hired room,
- for chapel the parish church,
- for cloister the streets of the city,
- for enclosure obedience...,
- for grill the fear of God,
- for veil holy modesty” (C. 12).

For us, this is the beginning of a new step in the light of the Charter of the Daughters of Charity.

(To be continued.)

Exodus local community

**“Say, My daughter,
that the Feast of My Mercy
has issued forth from My very depths
for the consolation of the whole world”
(Diary of St. Faustina, 1517).**

**“I desire to heal [humankind].
pressing it to My Merciful Heart”
(Diary of St. Faustina, 1588).**

**In one of His private revelations,
God revealed to Saint Faustina
the secret of His great mercy.
This message is for all people.**

**Saint John Paul II spread it
throughout the whole world.**

**Through the Year of Mercy,
Pope Francis invites us
to be witnesses
of the merciful Heart of Jesus.**

