

# *E*choes of the Company

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Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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# Holy Year of Mercy

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## Letter of May 9, 2016

Dear Sisters,

*Happy Feast of St. Louise de Marillac!*

Our hearts are filled with a joy that mirrors that of 96 years ago, on May 9, 1920, when Pope Benedict XV beatified St. Louise. Although our total number of Sisters (approximately 16,000) has diminished considerably from the number of Daughters of Charity who were serving in 1920 (approximately 38,000), I firmly believe that our commitment and enthusiasm match that of the Sisters who came before us.

We, her spiritual daughters, have always believed that St. Louise was a strong woman, endowed with exceptional gifts as well as a profound love of God and a deep respect for others. In placing her on the path toward sainthood, the Church recognized the depth of her spirituality, her creativity, her courage and her love for those who were poor. St. Louise, who boldly led us toward the peripheries from the beginnings of our history, continues to guide our common efforts to offer intrepid and risky responses in 2016 to the needs of those who are poor.

Following St. Louise's desire for continuous communication with her Sisters, I take this opportunity to share with you some news of the Little Company. I begin by asking you to join me in offering prayers of gratitude for the protection of our Sisters in the Provinces of Japan and Ecuador during recent earthquakes. Sister Janet Nunogami (Visitatrix of Japan) and Sister Ana Maria Maldonado Aguilar (Visitatrix

of Ecuador) assure me that our Sisters are unharmed, but each also shares her concerns for those who are poor, who are suffering so much from these catastrophes.

I also ask your prayers for our Sisters in the Province of Central Africa. Some of you have already heard that on April 24, 2016, one of our Sisters in Burundi was killed when the vehicle in which she was riding struck a tree. Sister Immaculée Ntawe was returning from a celebration of the Eucharist with many young people and the parish priest when this tragedy occurred. Sister Maria Remedios Lopez Sorlozano (Visitatrix of the Province of Central Africa) is grateful for the support which she has felt at the time of this sad event. I am sure that she will continue to appreciate your prayers for Sister Immaculée, as well as for the parish priest, the other victims of the accident, the wounded, their families and the Sisters of the Province.

Please pray for our Sisters in the Chinese Province, the Province of Japan and the Province of the Philippines who are completing final preparations for the unification of their Provinces. On June 4, 2016 (the anniversary of St. Louise's *lumière* of 1623), these Sisters will form the new *Province of St. Louise de Marillac – Asia*. All have prepared well for this and are to be admired for their boldness and their courage as they sincerely seek the best means of serving those who are poor now and into the future!

Sisters, let us pray for one another as well. I receive letters and emails daily that offer me a glimpse of the audacious ways that you are responding faithfully to your vocational call. I admire how you have creatively and concretely embraced our Assembly's invitation to *dare* to live *the boldness of charity for a new missionary momentum*. As we continue to give ourselves totally to the Lord during this *Holy Year of Mercy* and the *Year of Vincentian Collaboration*, may those around us benefit from our attempts to tangibly express the virtues which St. Louise modeled for us. Anticipating Pentecost, which she herself held so dear, on which Father Gregory will formally launch the celebration of the 400th Anniversary of the Vincentian Charism, may we continue to open our hearts in order to respond fully to the challenges we face as well as welcome God's blessings.



### Letter of May 9, 2016

As you read this letter, I am participating in the Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General in Rome. With the light of the Holy Spirit, this year's theme, "Weaving Global Solidarity for Life", will guide our discernment of resolutions which will strengthen our commitment to God, to those whom we serve and to one another as consecrated women. I count on your prayers for this inter-congregational meeting.

I repeat, "Happy Feast, my dear Sisters," and I humbly offer you the assurance of my prayers. May the intercession of St. Louise and the maternal accompaniment of the Blessed Virgin Mary lead us to Jesus and the plenitude of His love and abundant graces.

Affectionately,

Sister Kathleen APPLER  
*Daughter of Charity*

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FATHER B. SCHOEPPER, DIRECTOR GENERAL

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### **Through Him, with Him and in Him, our lives bear fruit**

The human being is a mystery that is only fully realized from its interior life. Its entire being and acting depend on this 'beyond' deep inside. With Saint Augustine, we sing: "*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*"

Pope Francis identifies prayer as the source of fruitfulness for the mission: "*Let us cultivate the contemplative dimension, even amid the whirlwind of more urgent and heavy duties. And the more the mission calls you to go out to the margins of existence, let your heart be the more closely united to Christ's heart, full of mercy and love.*"<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the Church, the Apostle Paul encouraged Christians to come to know the love of Christ: "*For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*"<sup>2</sup> This passage from the letter to the Ephesians powerfully tells us that God's presence fills the interior life of a believer.

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1. *Rejoice!* 6
  2. Eph 3:14-21

*Through Him, with Him and in Him, our lives bear fruit*

Christian interior life becomes part of personal experience when the pascal mystery of Jesus passes through and transforms the life of each one of us. The interior life first of all entails an ever-deeper awareness at the heart of the events of our lives of our essential union, our “incorporation” with Christ the Savior, the firstborn of the new creation (Col 1).

But this interior life goes beyond what I can humanly understand. By faith, the Word of God reveals to me precisely that “*God is greater than our hearts*” (1 Jn 3:20) and “*is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine*” (Eph 3:20).

The Christian interior life thus becomes a gift and a vocation. Jesus Himself asserts that it is a gift: “*Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him*” (Jn 14:23). This promise of Jesus supports our faith and allows us to confidently descend into ourselves and toward Him who is waiting for us and goes before us.

Another statement from Jesus further opens the eyes of our heart to the reality of His promise: “*On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you*” (Jn 14:20). The Lord Himself prays that this presence in us might become stronger: “*Righteous Father, [...] they know that you sent me. I made known to them your name and I will make it known, that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them*” (Jn 17: 25-26).

The Christian interior life is thus the space, this “field” of our mind, heart and conscience where the reality of the love of Christ for us can take root and dwell, develop and bear fruit. The Apostle Paul summarizes for us: “*may you be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self, may Christ dwell in your hearts through faith and may you be rooted and grounded in love...*” (cf. Eph 3:16-17). In this sense, the inner life is a vocation to respond to this love and promote its growth.

*“Being with Jesus shapes a contemplative approach to history which knows how to see and hear the presence of the Spirit everywhere and, in a special way, how to discern the Spirit’s presence in order to live in time as God’s time. When the insight of faith is lacking, ‘life itself*

*loses meaning, the faces of brothers and sisters are obscured and it becomes impossible to recognize the face of God in them, historical events remain ambiguous and deprived of hope.*”<sup>3</sup>

John the Evangelist invites us to go even deeper and leads us to explore the mystery of the vine: it is the symbol and figure not only of the people of God, but of Jesus Himself. He, Jesus, is the vine-stock, and we, His disciples, are the branches; Jesus is the true vine to which the branches are connected in order to have life.

During the Fifth Week of Easter, the liturgy invites us to meditate on this mystery of the vine and the branches. Let us return to the Gospel of John, chapter 15, verses 1-17.

**1. Remain in me, as I remain in you.**

*“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit. You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you. Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me.”*<sup>4</sup>

“Incorporation into Christ through faith and Baptism is the source of being a Christian in the mystery of the Church. This mystery constitutes the Christian’s most basic ‘features’ and serves as the basis for all the vocations and dynamism of the Christian life of the lay faithful (cf. Jn 3:5). In Christ who died and rose from the dead, the baptized become a ‘new creation’ (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17), washed clean from sin and brought to life through grace.”<sup>5</sup> “Baptism regenerates us in the life of the Son of God; unites us to Christ and to his Body, the Church; and anoints us in the Holy Spirit, making us spiritual temples.”<sup>6</sup>

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3. *Rejoice!* 6

4. Jn 15:1-4

5. *Christifideles laici*, 9

6. *Christifideles laici*, 10



### Through Him, with Him and in Him, our lives bear fruit

Going through the Constitutions of the Company, I noted this article that expresses the mystery of union with Christ: “*Children of God by Baptism and living members of the Body of Christ, the Daughters of Charity go to the Father through the Son and in the Spirit. They aspire to live in constant dialogue with God, remaining in God’s hands with filial confidence in Providence*” (C. 17a).

## **2. I am the vine, you are the branches.**

*“I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”*<sup>7</sup>

According to the Biblical image of the vineyard, all the other members of the Church are branches grafted to Christ the true vine, and from him derive their life and fruitfulness.<sup>8</sup>

“Baptism symbolizes and brings about a mystical but real incorporation into the crucified and glorious body of Christ. Through the sacrament Jesus unites the baptized to his death so as to unite the recipient to his resurrection (cf. Rom 6:3-5). The ‘old man’ is stripped away for a re-clothing with ‘the new man’, that is, with Jesus himself: *‘For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ’* (Gal 3:27; cf. Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:9-10). The result is that *‘we, though many, are one body in Christ’* (Rom 12:5).

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7. Jn 15:5-8

8. Cf. *Christifideles laici*, 9

In the words of Saint Paul we find again the faithful echo of the teaching of Jesus himself, which reveals the mystical unity of Christ with his disciples and the disciples with each other, presenting it as an image and extension of that mystical communion that binds the Father to the Son and the Son to the Father in the bond of love, the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 17:21). Jesus refers to this same unity in the image of the vine and the branches: *‘I am the vine, you the branches’* (Jn 15:5), an image that sheds light not only on the deep intimacy of the disciples with Jesus but on the necessity of a vital communion of the disciples with each other: all are branches of a single vine.”<sup>9</sup>

## **3. Love one another as I love you**

*“As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”*<sup>10</sup>

“The prime and fundamental vocation that the Father assigns... in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit is the vocation to holiness, that is, the perfection of charity. Holiness is the greatest testimony of the dignity conferred on a disciple of Christ.

The Second Vatican Council has significantly spoken on the universal call to holiness. It is possible to say that this call to holiness is precisely the basic charge entrusted to all the sons and daughters of the Church by a Council which intended to bring a renewal of Christian life based on the Gospel. This charge is not a simple moral exhortation, but an undeniable requirement arising from the mystery of the Church: she is the choice vine, whose branches live and grow with the same holy and life-giving energies that come from Christ; she is the Mystical Body, whose members share in the same life of holiness of the Head who is Christ; she is the Beloved Spouse of the Lord Jesus, who delivered

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9. *Christifideles laici*, 12

10. Jn 15: 9-13

Through Him, with Him and in Him, our lives bear fruit

himself up for her sanctification (cf. Eph 5:25 ff.). The Spirit that sanctified the human nature of Jesus in Mary's virginal womb (cf. Lk 1:35) is the same Spirit that is abiding and working in the Church to communicate to her the holiness of the Son of God made man.

Everyone in the Church receives and thereby shares in the common vocation to holiness. In the fullness of this title the lay faithful are called to holiness: *'All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.'* The call to holiness is rooted in Baptism and proposed anew in the other Sacraments, principally in the Eucharist."<sup>11</sup>

**4. It was not you who chose me**

*"You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. This I command you: love one another."*<sup>12</sup>

"Life according to the Spirit, whose fruit is holiness (cf. Rom 6:22; Gal 5:22), stirs up every baptized person and requires each to follow and imitate Jesus Christ, in embracing the Beatitudes, in listening and meditating on the Word of God, in conscious and active participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, in personal prayer, in family or in community, in the hunger and thirst for justice, in the practice of the commandment of love in all circumstances of life and service to the brethren, especially the least, the poor and the suffering."<sup>13</sup> Given life by the Holy Spirit, we strive to carry out works and acts of mercy with perseverance and patience.

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11. Cf. *Christifideles laici*, 16

12. Jn 15:14-17

13. *Christifideles laici*, 16

Let us make our own the celebrated admonition of Saint Leo the Great: *"Acknowledge, O Christian, your dignity!"* Saint Maximus, Bishop of Turin, addressing those who had received the holy anointing of Baptism, repeats the same sentiments: *"Ponder the honor that has made you sharers in this mystery!"* All the baptized are invited to hear once again the words of Saint Augustine: *"Let us rejoice and give thanks: we have not only become Christians, but Christ himself... Stand in awe and rejoice: we have become Christ"*.

The dignity as a Christian, the source of equality for all members of the Church, guarantees and fosters the spirit of communion and fellowship, and, at the same time, becomes the hidden dynamic force in the apostolate and mission of all of us.<sup>14</sup>

*"At the root of the life of every Christian, there is the fundamental movement of faith: the walk toward Jesus Christ to center life on Him. An exodus that leads to knowing God and His love. A pilgrimage that knows the destination. [A Christian's goal is God.] A radical change that turns wanderers into pilgrims. Being a pilgrim requires movement, activity and effort. The path to be taken involves risk, insecurity, and being open to new things and unexpected encounters."*<sup>15</sup> Our interior life "urges" us to go out toward Christ and in the peace of Christ!

God calls me and sends me to work in His vine. He calls me and sends me to work for the coming of His Kingdom, here and now. To use the words of Saint Vincent, we believe: *"We must endeavor to have God reign sovereignly in us, and then in others"* (CCD II, 113).

Indeed, God thought of us from all eternity and loves us as unique individuals, calling each of us by name like the good shepherd who *"calls his own sheep by name"* (Jn 10:3). But God's promise, made to Abraham and his descendants, is only made known to each one of us as our lives unfold over time with their joys and sorrows, day after day.

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14. Cf. *Christifideles laici*, 17

15. *Contemplate*, 11

*Through Him, with Him and in Him, our lives bear fruit*

In this month of May when we honor the Virgin Mary in a special way, let us learn to better “keep and ponder” in our hearts the events that make up our lives.

With confidence, let us pray:

Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church,  
you who were gathered in prayer  
with the Apostles in the Cenacle,  
awaiting the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost,  
implore his renewed outpouring  
so that we all might more fully respond  
to our vocation and mission,  
as branches engrafted to the true vine,  
called to bear much fruit  
for the life of the world.  
Amen.

**Sources:**

- <http://www.clarissesval.ca/clairedoc-04.htm>

-Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II on the Lay Faithful, 1988

*Lectio Divina:*  
**Praying the Word of God**

Ongoing formation is an important element in the life of every Christian, every Daughter of Charity. Our Constitutions have a wonderful focus for us as we reflect upon our need and privilege of formation:

*“Formation at all levels has as its goal, above all, the growth of each Sister in faith so that, animated by the Holy Spirit and the charism of the Founders, she becomes capable of:*

- *acquiring convictions that strengthen and unify her total gift of self to God,*
- *being a servant of Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ, in a spirit of humility, simplicity, and charity,*
- *living a life in common for mission” (C. 50).*

In *Guidelines for Initial Formation* (p. 12) we read:

*“The world today needs communities that are consistent with the Gospel values in order to be credible witnesses. Communities by their life in common, prayer and availability for the mission, contribute to formation by their witness.”*

Reflection upon the Word of God represents an important aspect of our continued growth and maturity in faith. We know how vital this Word was for St. Vincent and St. Louise.

One of the means which one can use to enter more deeply into God’s self-communication is the ancient practice of *lectio divina* which allows us to be formed by the Scriptures. Since Vatican II, there has been a great interest in this. Pope Benedict reminds us that the opening words of the Council document *Dei Verbum* immediately draw our attention to praying and reflecting upon this revelation:



### Lectio Divina: Praying the Word of God

“Hearing the Word of God with reverence, and proclaiming it with faith, the Sacred Synod...” (n. 1) (Benedict XVI, Address delivered at Castel Gandolfo, September 16, 2005).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* highlights the importance of a reverent engagement with the Scripture:

“The reading from the Word of God at each Hour... and readings from the Fathers and spiritual masters at certain Hours, reveal more deeply the meaning of the mystery being celebrated, assist in understanding the psalms, and prepare for silent prayer. The *lectio divina*, where the Word of God is so read and meditated that it becomes prayer, is thus rooted in the liturgical celebration.”

“Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. This mobilization of faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ. Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ, as in *lectio divina* or the rosary. This form of prayerful reflection is of great value, but Christian prayer should go further: to the knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus, to union with him” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1177, 2708).

All our most recent Popes have given a special emphasis to this means of deepening the faith of the Christian people. Pope John Paul II wrote:

“It is especially necessary that listening to the word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever valid tradition of *lectio divina*, which draws from the biblical text the living Word which questions, directs and shapes our lives” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 39).

Pope Benedict XVI offered these insights:

“I would like in particular to recall and recommend the ancient tradition of *Lectio divina*: ‘the diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to him with trusting openness of heart’ (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 25). If it is effectively promoted, this practice will bring to the Church -- I am convinced of

it -- a new spiritual springtime.

As a strong point of biblical ministry, *Lectio divina* should therefore be increasingly encouraged, also through the use of new methods, carefully thought through and in step with the times. It should never be forgotten that the Word of God is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path (cf. *Psalms 119[118]:105*)” (Address delivered at Castel Gandolfo, September 16, 2005).

Finally, Pope Francis uses *lectio divina* as a means of prayer and as his way of preparing his talks for the pilgrims who come to Rome. He writes:

“One of the most beautiful ways to enter into prayer passes through the Word of God. *Lectio Divina* introduces us to direct conversation with the Lord and opens the treasures of wisdom: intimate friendship with Him, who loves us and renders us capable of seeing with the eyes of God, of speaking with His Word in our heart, of preserving the beauty of this experience and of sharing it with those who are hungry for eternity” (Message to Prior General of Carmelite Order, August 22, 2013).

Many authors have written about *lectio divina*. While some agreement emerges on the basics, a difference in describing the actual practice and results is also evident. Recognizing that we are invited to this ancient practice both by the Church and our Inter-Assemblies Document 2009-2015 (p. 19): “[*Daughters of Charity* will] seek formation in the Word (biblical studies, *lectio divina*),” I would like to offer some thoughts on this topic:

- Basic observations on *lectio divina*;
- Elements in *lectio divina*
- *Lectio divina* in community prayer
- *Lectio divina* and the Vincentian heart.

Before beginning this analysis, however, let me mention the elements which comprise *lectio divina*. Most of those who write about its foundational components identify four steps:

- *Lectio*: an attentive and reverential reading of the biblical text;
- *Meditatio*: a reflection on its meaning;

### Lectio Divina: Praying the Word of God

- *Oratio*: praying with a focus upon the biblical text;
- *Contemplatio*: opening oneself to the presence and action of God.

Some writers give special qualifications for what should or should not happen at each step. Some authors include a fifth step which involves a resolution or action which should emerge from one's practice of *lectio divina*. Note that Vincent urged the confreres to make a resolution after reading a New Testament chapter, but he was not speaking about *lectio divina* (*Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission* X, 8).

In my interpretation of *lectio divina*, I will not speak about time, place, environment, or translations. All these decisions are important, but not my intent in this writing.

## I. BASIC OBSERVATIONS ON *LECTIO DIVINA*

### 1. *Lectio divina* as prayer

*Lectio divina* is prayer which emerges from one's use of the Scripture and which brings one into contact with the person of Jesus Christ. I say that clearly because many writings about this practice allow for other interpretations and applications. One could speak about the Old Testament and the way in which one is brought into contact with the Living God, but allow me to maintain a New Testament focus. *Lectio divina* is not a way of studying the Bible; it is not a practice which can lead to prayer; it has no goal to be accomplished; it is not a method which can be applied equally to documents or teachings of the Church. *Lectio divina* itself is a means of prayer which centers upon the Word of God and brings one to Jesus. Studying the Bible is a good thing, and one can learn something about the Bible from *lectio divina*, but that is not its purpose. Making resolutions which emerge from one's prayer is also a good thing, but that is not why one prays with *lectio divina*.

The Inter-Assemblies Document stresses the importance of the Word of God for our formation by presenting several possibilities: biblical studies emphasize an educational approach; *lectio divina* centers on praying with the Scripture. Each way is good, but each has a different purpose.

One of the great pleasures in life is sitting or walking with someone who is loved. We talk about what is going on in our lives. We share insights on particular situations. We tell stories about common friends. We suffer and rejoice with the other. When I am going to meet that friend, I do not plan my conversation. There is nothing so controlled about our conversation; one topic just naturally leads to another. Similarly, I do not think: "I need to accomplish this task in our conversation; I need to come away with a resolution which will change my life." Something like that may happen, but it is not why I am meeting my friend. With my friend, there is simply the joy of being together and coming to know each other even better by speaking and listening and valuing the times of silence together.

This description sounds simple and self-evident. It offers no new insights on prayer, but I mean to apply it to *lectio divina* as prayer. From beginning to end, *lectio divina* is prayer and not simply restricted to the activity of the third "step" (*oratio*). The Word of God allows us to enter into the presence of Jesus and to begin our conversation with him. Just as we should begin the celebration of the Eucharist with a period of silence to recognize what we are doing and into whose presence we are entering, so when we pick up the Scripture to enter into *lectio divina*, we should recognize into whose presence we are entering and who becomes present among us.

The first words of John's Gospel proclaim that most basic truth: "*In the beginning was the Word*" (Jn 1:1). The line draws our attention back to the story of Genesis and the beginning of God's self-communication in creation by the word, and it draws us forward to listen to the perfection of that self-communication in Jesus who is "the Word of God". The "Word" is borne on God's life breath and communicates God's self.

Have you considered that the whole life of Mary and Joseph with Jesus was a prayer? I do not mean that they were prayerful people — which, of course, they were — but rather that whenever they were with Jesus and every word which they exchanged so easily with him was a conversation and a being present to God. That is prayer. The same could be said of the Apostles and all the others who spent time speaking and listening to Jesus — even those who did not respect who he was. Every encounter with the word of the Lord which involves a genuine

### Lectio Divina: Praying the Word of God

listening and conversation is prayer. Academic exercises around the word of God are important, but they are not prayer. *Lectio divina* is prayer because it engages the living and life-giving word of God.

## 2. Lectio divina as listening

Listening is essential for conversation. *Lectio divina* begins and ends with listening. I mean that literally. We begin by listening to the Word of God, and we conclude by placing ourselves openly and quietly in the presence of God, ready to receive whatever God chooses to give — we can call that attitude “listening.” The steps between *lectio* and *contemplatio* can also be categorized as listening as we meditate on God’s word and enter into the formal action of prayer.

The first step of *lectio divina* draws our attention to “reading,” but the truer form of the effort is “listening.” We listen to God’s word and not simply read it, just as should happen during the Liturgy of the Word in the Eucharist. Some authors recommend reading the text aloud even when one is praying alone so as to allow the richness of the sounds to penetrate us on another level. When this practice is done in groups, many recommend using different voices and different media so as to listen to the Word in new and suggestive ways. Listening suggests an openness and a willingness to absorb what has been heard.

Numerous Scripture passages remind us of the importance of listening. When Elijah seeks to speak with God, he listens and is able to hear the Lord present in the “light silent sound” and then he speaks with him:

*“Then the Lord said [to Elijah]: Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord; the Lord will pass by. There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the Lord — but the Lord was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake — but the Lord was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake, fire — but the Lord was not in the fire; after the fire, a light silent sound. When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave”* (1 Kgs 19:11-13).

At the Annunciation Mary opens herself to God’s presence and proclaims herself prepared to listen: *“Behold, I am the handmaid of*

*the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word”* (Lk 1:38).

Pentecost is described in terms of listening to God’s word spoken through Apostles as those present wonder that *“we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God”* (Acts 2:11).

Isaiah similarly evokes this: *“Morning after morning [the Lord] wakens my ear to hear as disciples do* (50:4).

We can tell by the tilt of a person’s head, by the look in their eye, by the expression on their face that they are interested, or hurt, or in disagreement.

We are made to listen to God. In the story of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve knew that the Creator of all had come to visit with them *“when they heard the sound of the Lord God walking about in the garden at the breezy time of the day”* (Gen 3:8). One can imagine the easy conversations which they had with God as they walked about together in the Garden talking. Their problems arise later from an inability to listen well.

*Lectio divina* is not about simply reading but the dynamic process of listening.

## 3. Lectio divina as a personal practice

It is good to get together with our community to pray with the Bible together. A difficulty can, however, emerge. When we begin to apply the necessary strictures of a group, the practice of *lectio divina* can be compromised. For example, in a group, there needs to be a leader or coordinator who determines how and when the group will move through the different steps of the practice. Sometimes this facilitator will be the most knowledgeable person, biblically speaking, in the group and thus there can be an expectation (or even a desire) that he/she will explain something in the passage. Sometimes in a group, there is an anticipation that everyone will contribute to the sharing. This can lead people to devalue their own ordinary insight and seek something “smart” to say, or even to avoid the group involvement. It can lead others to have too much to say and to be leading rather than following the Spirit.

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The obvious problem is that one cannot apply these rules to prayer. Sometimes people are not ready to move on to the next step; sometimes, they are perfectly content with the Lord where they are. There is no need for an explanation of difficult passages; this is prayer, not class. The facilitator need not have any special knowledge of the Scripture. People need to be free to contribute or not according to their spirit and desire. A comfortable silence should always reign.

For these reasons, I think that it is valuable to begin one's experience of *lectio divina* on a personal and individual level before one begins to enter into a group. From the personal experience, one comes to grasp the richness of the practice and how it begins and ends with the Lord. One is not led by another person but guided by the Spirit.

Some people have a real gift in that, even surrounded by people, when they speak to one person, that one person gets all their attention, looking at that person, listening and responding appropriately. We readily recognize that kind of person because too often we can experience the opposite. Sometimes individuals give a false sense of interest and intimacy; they are already moving on to the next person or thinking about something else while they are in front of their current companion. I expect that Jesus was great in dealing with people and allowing them to hold his attention. When the blind man calls to him from the side of the road, Jesus invites him over. When the woman with the hemorrhage hopes simply to touch Jesus' garment, Jesus insists on speaking to her. The Samaritan woman at the well is astonished when Jesus begins a conversation with her. Remember how upset some people are with the way in which Jesus deals with sinners and the afflicted and the marginalized; sometimes, he even touches them. Remember how often Jesus' parables involve these kinds of people. Jesus was someone who made time for individuals and spoke to them personally. We should expect that in our *lectio divina* experience.

*Lectio divina* invites each individual to a personal encounter with the Lord, but that presence is acknowledged differently. We can help introduce one another to the Lord as we have come to hear his word, but we must begin from our own listening and need to act towards others in a way which does not control their experience.

And so, as I begin to consider the elements in *lectio divina*, I will do so from the point of view of the individual encounter with the Word of God and the presence of Jesus. From this reflection we will move to a briefer consideration of the community understanding.

#### **4. *Lectio divina* as a vehicle of the Spirit**

To enter into the process of *lectio divina*, one should place oneself in the presence of God by calling upon the Holy Spirit. That Spirit enables us to hear well the words and teachings of Jesus.

*“The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name — he will teach you everything and remind you of all that [I] told you”* (Jn 14:26).

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are led to Jesus and understand what he has to say to us anew. This Holy Spirit is present in each step of *lectio divina* and is our master teacher. Note how Paul instructs the community in Rome:

*“In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes with inexpressible groanings”* (Rom 8:26).

## **II. ELEMENTS IN LECTIO DIVINA**

Let us look to the Scripture to consider the four elements or “steps” that make up *lectio divina*: *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*.

*“[Jesus] came to Jericho and intended to pass through the town. Now a man there named Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man, was seeking to see who Jesus was; but he could not see him because of the crowd, for he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When he reached the place, Jesus looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.’ And he came down quickly and received him with joy. When they all saw this, they began to grumble, saying, ‘He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner.’ But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the*



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Lord, 'Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.' And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost'" (Lk 19:1-10).

Zacchaeus wants to "see" Jesus and does what is necessary to "see" Jesus clearly: like climbing the tree (*lectio*). As he comes to discover, seeing what Jesus looked like was not going to be enough; knowing Jesus' height, weight and hair color was not going to allow him to really "see" Jesus and understand his teaching and his thinking (*meditatio*). Jesus "saw" him in the tree, and he knew what kind of man Zacchaeus was, but the Lord desires to know him better, and Zacchaeus responds (*oratio*). Finally, Jesus goes to stay at Zacchaeus' house; one can only guess what happens in Zacchaeus' heart in the presence of Jesus and how he was called to listen (*contemplatio*).

Clearly, one can pick other Scripture passages which suggest the character of *lectio divina*, but this one may offer a starting image for us.

#### **1. Lectio**

*"In reading and meditating Holy Scripture, the living and efficacious Word, they deepen their knowledge of the person of Christ and His attitude toward those who are lowly and oppressed"* (C. 22a).

This first step is about listening to God's word by reading the Scripture passage carefully (perhaps taken from the readings of the day or a continuous reading). I encourage people, and myself, to listen to the passage as if we were hearing it for the first time. Nothing is more harmful for our listening to the Scriptures than a "remembering" of what this story is and what it is about. We have already cut off the conversation because we have stopped listening and already have the answer. We listen, we have insights, then we should listen anew. Can I discern the voice of Jesus? Remember how Jesus tells the story of the Good Shepherd who know his sheep and whose sheep recognize his voice: *"they will hear my voice"* (Jn 10:16). What is he saying to me that I need to hear? What is his tone of voice? I can roll over phrases in my mind and capture emphasis and challenge. I can allow myself to

be stopped by some teaching or situation as I continue to listen. What continues to stand out for me in these readings? Am I ready to tell this story to myself? What am I missing? What haven't I heard well? (Remember the parable of the sower and the seed?)

Before we respond to a friend, we need to make sure that we have heard what he or she has said, that we know what is important to him or her. We do not want to give answers before we hear the question. We cannot presume that we know how people feel before they tell us, that we know what is important before they emphasize it, that we have learned the lesson before we have heard the end of the story.

It is the same with the Scripture. Before all else, we must listen to what Jesus actually says. Only then are we ready to learn or respond.

#### **2. Meditatio**

*"Dear Sisters, you and I must take the resolution never to omit our meditation every day. I say every day, Sisters, but if it were possible, I would say never leave it or spend any time without being in prayer"* (St. Vincent, Conference of May 31, 1648, "Mental Prayer," CCD IX, p. 332).

After we have listened well to what Jesus has said, we cannot presume that we understand it all right away. How aggravating is it to speak to a friend who begins to speak as soon as the last syllable is out of our mouth! We want this person to think before she responds. We want her to ask questions to make sure that she properly understood what we said. We want this friend to engage her heart as well as her head. Giving our friend the respect which flows from a thoughtful reflection upon his words is a real blessing. The second step in *lectio divina* suggests this effort.

We can look to the example of Mary to help us to understand this second step. When the shepherds recount to Mary and Joseph what they had seen and heard, the Gospel tells us:

*"All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her*



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heart.”

Mary takes in all this information and mulls it within herself. Earlier she had wondered about the meaning of the greeting of the angel at which she had accepted the responsibility to become the mother of Jesus; later, she stores the words of Jesus after finding him in the temple. Mary desired to ponder her experiences in her heart (Lk 2:19).

We meditate on the words of the Scripture that we have read. We think about what they can mean and what they can teach as we repeatedly go back to the words. God’s word continues to have meaning and can only be appreciated by using the gift of intelligence that God has given us. We need to understand where these words fit into our lives, and that only becomes possible when we listen and think. Meditation allows God’s word to be God’s word as addressed to us and our experience.

Saint Vincent had such confidence in the power of prayer that he exhorted his followers to be people of prayer. One can feel the energy and the challenge of his words as he calls us to be pray-ers in our meditation:

*“Let’s all of us really devote ourselves to this practice of meditation, since through it all good things come to us. If we persevere in our vocation, it’s thanks to meditation; if we succeed in our works, it’s thanks to meditation; if we don’t fall into sin, it’s thanks to meditation; if we remain in charity, if we’re saved, all that is thanks to God and to meditation. Just as God refuses nothing in meditation, so he grants almost nothing without meditation: Rogate Dominum messis; no, nothing; not even the spread of his Gospel and what concerns His glory the most. Rogate Dominum messis.... No matter! Rogate Dominum messis. So then, let’s ask God very humbly to help us to adopt this practice”* (Conference 168, CCD XI, p. 361).

It is difficult to imagine him speaking any clearer. Prayerful meditation is the means which we use to stay in touch with the Lord and through which God responds to our needs.

### 3. *Oratio*

*“A highlight of [the Daughters of Charity’s] day is the time of personal prayer: listening to the Lord, praise and thanksgiving, contemplation, seeking to know His will...”* (C. 21b).

*“Prayer in common is an integral part of life and Gospel witness, signifying faith in the living Christ, in whose name Christians assemble”* (C. 19d).

*Oratio* is the part of *lectio divina* which is most formally called “prayer.” After we have listened carefully to what the Lord has to say, after we have thought about his teaching and challenge, we are ready to speak to the Lord from the heart.

The Book of Psalms is also referred to as the “Prayerbook of the Second Temple”. The Psalms were written over a period of some 500 years, and they express the experience of the people of Israel in dealing with their God. No emotion or feeling goes unexpressed in the Psalms. They have a remarkable openness and genuineness which is sometimes difficult for people to accept. “How can anyone speak to God like that?” “That statement is irreverent and crude!” For me, they are the essence of prayer because they are so personal in speaking to God. The Psalmist says exactly what is on his mind as he comes before God, and there is no rehearsal about what to say or how to frame it with greater tact. I would love that my own prayer could capture the simplicity and genuine flavor of the Psalmist at prayer. Mary captures that spirit in her Magnificat.

In *lectio divina* we seek that same type of focus. The Scripture provides the starting point for our conversation with God. While our prayerful listening (*lectio*) and prayerful reflecting (*meditatio*) kept us centered on the Word, our *oratio* can become more wide ranging, yet the text gives flavor and direction to our prayer. Prayer should be one of the most natural things that we do: like breathing and eating. It should come easily to our hearts because it reflects who we really are as children of God. It is a way of addressing that hunger deep within us which yearns for God “*as the deer for running streams*” (Ps 42:2-3).

As the Apostles watched Jesus, they were struck at how easy and fluid prayer was for him. He spoke to God out of the situation of the moment:

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at the tomb of Lazarus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the Last Supper, even from the cross. They asked Jesus for lessons in prayer, and he taught them the “Our Father”, which contains less the words which need to be said and more the way and matter which one can bring to the conversation with God. Our prayer needs to flow from the moment, and in *lectio divina* our moment emerges from the Word of God.

#### **4. *Contemplatio***

*“The apostolic action of the Daughters of Charity draws its strength from contemplation, following the example of the Son of God who, while remaining intimately united with his Father, often went aside to pray”* (C. 21a).

*“To respect each Sister’s intimacy with God and to allow all of them the recollection they need, times of silence are necessary. This stillness in the presence of God, accepted by mutual agreement, fosters the richest of spiritual encounters”* (C. 21c).

When I was in high school, I had a teacher who strove to train my class in English composition; he wanted us to write reports and stories in a creative and ordered fashion. He would tell us as he gave assignments: “Before you begin to write, reflect upon the beauty of white paper.” Now, I know what he meant. It can be too easy to sit down and simply begin to write, without allowing for content or insight. To write well, one needs to make room for inspiration. The same could be said for music which must begin in silence, or painting which starts with clean canvas. All these examples help us to understand the intent of contemplation. It is an attitude of coming before God with open hands and heart, an attitude of receiving. Contemplation is a “being with” that demands the stance of readiness to be given something.

To return once again to the illustration of conversing with a friend, contemplation suggests that state of simply being together and allowing for the possibility of something to emerge. A word of guidance from the Psalms can aid in this context as we are encouraged:

*“Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, exalted on the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob”* (Ps 46:11-12).

God becomes present to us in our stillness and willingness to wait. This stillness is again a gift of the Spirit who enables us to calm our hearts and listen with expectation. This Spirit also helps us to know the divine indwelling (cf. Jn 14:15-17).

As in the first step (*lectio*), *contemplatio* draws its strength from listening and allowing the personal presence of God to be made known to us. Think again about Mary and Joseph in the family home. They could just be gathered with Jesus as each attended to his/her own task, but they were all present to one another and prepared to enter into each other’s lives in a particular way as the opportunity arose. I think of Mary at home in Nazareth and always ready and eager to welcome the adult Jesus when he came for a visit. Again, it is an experience of prayer: thinking about Jesus and keeping a place for him in her life, waiting for him to speak and listening with eagerness. I am drawn back to the experience of Zacchaeus. We don’t know what happened between them, but the very openness which welcomed Jesus into his home, however, suggests the opportunity for contemplation for Zacchaeus. This is what *contemplatio* proposes.

In the presentation above on the elements in *lectio divina*, the focus has been upon the way in which it may be experienced as personal prayer, as a genuine listening, and as a place where the presence of the Holy Spirit can be sought and discerned. Now, let us turn to a consideration of this practice as it may be experienced as a community prayer.

### **III. *LECTIO DIVINA IN COMMUNITY PRAYER***

There are several ways for Christians to gather together around the Bible: instructions for studying it or examining a theme, sharing personal reflections... All these are good and can lead to prayer. *Lectio divina* has a different purpose and thus a different mode of proceeding. It is only about praying with the Scripture and looks to maintain a constant interpersonal awareness of the presence of the Lord.

### Lectio Divina: Praying the Word of God

In order to practice *lectio divina* as a group, some functional guidelines must first be determined: when and where to meet, the length of the meeting, the role of leadership, what should be read, and the size of the group.

I have three brief comments:

1 - The group should be small enough, perhaps 8-10 people, so that it provides for a certain intimacy and so that the sharing does not overwhelm the time for silence.

2 - The role of the leader is not to explain or adjudicate, but simply to enable the group to move through the steps of *lectio divina* in an appropriate fashion.

3 - The choice of the Scripture passage to be read should not depend on personal preference. Thus, the continuous reading of a biblical book or the use of the lectionary readings for the week could be appropriate.

The presentation on the group experience of *lectio divina* will be short. The session should begin with a time of silence as the group places itself in the presence of God and then a prayer for the gift of the Spirit.

#### **1. Lectio**

An advantage of communal *lectio* is that one can hear the word proclaimed by different voices and even perhaps different media. The goal is the invitation to listen most attentively to what the Lord is saying and to allow these words to penetrate our hearts. Listening to the proclamation in different voices can offer an insight into the particular lesson being taught, which could be lost when we are reading the passage alone and quietly. Silence should surround the times of listening in the group.

#### **2. Meditatio**

The group can be directed to reflect upon the meaning of the passage after it has heard it several times. In this group setting, after an appropriate silence, persons can be invited to share the insights of their

prayerful meditations if they so choose. The time together should not become simply a sharing on the Word, yet sufficient time should be provided so that those who want to share their reflections can do so. Paul's instruction to the Corinthians has special relevance here:

*“So what is to be done, brothers? When you assemble, one has a psalm, another an instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Everything should be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let it be two or at most three, and each in turn... Two or three prophets should speak, and the others discern. But if a revelation is given to another person sitting there, the first one should be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged”* (1 Cor 14:26-27, 29-31).

What is important is that everyone should keep focused on the reading. It is what brings us together, and it is directed to all of us.

#### **3. Oratio**

Time should be provided for silent personal prayer. Each person has heard the Word in different ways and may desire to offer praise or make petition or seek forgiveness or other kinds of prayer. The others lift their hearts with the one praying so as to allow that prayer to be theirs as well. Even if no one chooses to pray aloud, the intent of the *lectio divina* is achieved as the members of the community have the opportunity to be prayer-filled over the Word which they have heard as the Church. Each speaks to the Lord in his or her own way.

#### **4. Contemplatio**

Contemplation is the point when we only listen for the voice and presence of God. *Lectio divina* always needs to make a place for this last step, even if the time is limited. We spend so much of our lives running around that it is important to just allow for some time simply to “be with” God.

At the conclusion, the group experience of *lectio divina* needs some definitive sign of closure which focuses the community prayer. Perhaps, “Glory be to the Father...”

**IV. LECTIO DIVINA AND THE VINCENTIAN HEART**

“*[The Sisters] share their experience of God simply and spontaneously*” (S. 3a). The community practice of *lectio divina* is a possible response to our Constitutions.

*Lectio divina* brings together two elements which are essential to our Vincentian spirit: prayer and the Word of God. Vincent encouraged his followers to read a chapter of the New Testament each day “*reverencing this book as the norm of Christian holiness*” (*Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, X, 8).

Abelly writes: “*The life of our divine Savior and the lessons of the Gospel were the sole rule of [Vincent’s] life and actions. They were his book of morals and his book of politics, and they guided him in all the matters that passed through his hands. They were, in a word, the sure foundation on which he built his entire spiritual edifice*” (Abelly, Book I, p. 103).

For her part, Louise resolved to meditate daily on a theme from the Gospel or the epistles “*for an hour or at least three quarters of an hour*” (*Spiritual Writings*, p. 689, A.1). And again, she yearns: “*With the disciples, I desire to hear the precepts of the Holy Gospel of the day*” (*Spiritual Writings*, p. 698, A.17).

The Constitutions say: “*Preparation for the next day’s prayer is made by reading the Word of God*” (S. 3b).

For Vincent, one encounters in the Scriptures not simply the teaching but the person of Jesus. The Common Rules for the Congregation are filled with encouragements from the Gospels. Praying with the Scripture insists that our Lord has much to say to us and does say much for our spiritual growth.

How many of us have felt our Vincentian hearts uplifted and addressed with the tone of Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*:

“*Whenever we make the opportunity to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new*

*paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with meaning for today’s world*” (EG 11).

*Lectio divina* holds out that possibility for us in our personal prayer and in our gathering for a common experience. We continually return to the Gospel and we continually come away refreshed and enlightened. A Daughter of Charity cannot ignore the message of the Gospel for her faithful living any more than a priest of the Mission can. It is there that we encounter Christ, and the dialogue of prayer begins. *Lectio divina* offers us a process to enter into this practice more deeply.

As difficult as it might be to schedule a regular community practice of *lectio divina*, it can be a daily practice for each Sister.

**CONCLUSION**

Father Luke Dysinger, OSB, writes that the underlying rhythm of spiritual activity is “*inward - down into the depths of the soul where the Spirit of God is constantly transforming us, refashioning us in God’s image*”<sup>1</sup>. This is certainly the case with *lectio divina*. It begins with a reading of the Sacred Scripture and then leads us step-by-step to the deepest part of ourselves which seeks God’s direction and God’s presence. We begin by listening to God’s Word with our ears and heart, and we conclude by listening for God’s word with our soul and spirit. The invitation to speak to God is part of the way in which we seek direction and nourishment for this inward journey.

As Daughters of Charity, we are called to be women of prayer. *Lectio divina* is one of the ways in which we can pray with and through the Word of God. It involves us in listening and openness to the Spirit. Encouraged by the psalmist, we similarly yearn: “*Oh, that today you would hear his voice...*” (Ps 95:7). Let us listen for it and respond to it!

Father Patrick GRIFFIN, CM

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1. Dysinger, Luke. “Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina.”

Province of Portugal

## Missionary experience of the Our Lady of Fatima local community

Rio de Mouro, Sintra

### Introduction

Following the Domestic and Provincial Assemblies and contact with Provinces in Brazil and Mozambique and aiming to respond to the calls of the Church and the most recent General Assembly whose theme was “The Boldness of Charity for a New Missionary Momentum”, we became aware of the urgent need to:

- Make our charism more visible,
- Seek greater proximity with those who are poor outside of our institutions,
- Bear witness to the joy of a greater missionary momentum,
- Wake up the world to the beauty of a life totally given to Christ in the service of persons who are poor.

We therefore accepted the call from the bishop of the diocese of Lisbon to collaborate in the evangelization of the population in an underprivileged area of Rio de Mouro - Serra das Minas.

### Geographical context

The parish where we live is in the city of Sintra, Portugal. The population numbers 47,311 residents in an area of 16.43 km<sup>2</sup> (a population density of 2,879.5/km<sup>2</sup>). They include African immigrants and Portuguese from the north,

a heavy concentration of people with diverse cultures and faiths, which represents a major challenge for society and the Church.

### Sociological context

The local population includes middle-class workers and poor working-class.

### Religious context

According to the priest administering Our Lady of Bethlehem Parish, just 2,500 out of the 11,000 registered members attend Sunday Eucharist. Each year about sixty young people receive the Sacrament of Confirmation, but very few remain connected with the Church.

### The mission of Our Lady of Fatima

*“The Company is missionary by nature; it strives to retain the flexibility and mobility needed to respond to the calls of the Church in the face of every form of poverty...” (C. 25).*

At the request of the Auxiliary Bishop of Lisbon and the pastor of Rio de Mouro, the Visitatrix and her Council decided to establish a small implantation, an annex of the Provincial Curia, to carry out a mission of the Church in the service of those who are most poor. To bear witness to a Company without borders, the new community is composed of a Brazilian Sister, two Sisters from Mozambique and a Portuguese Sister. Sent on mission during a Eucharistic celebration at the Provincial House, the four Sisters received the cross given to missionary Sisters.

The Sisters were introduced during all the Masses on October 4, 2015, to the members of Our Lady of Bethlehem Parish. This parish is especially attentive to the diverse forms of poverty, and the Sisters immediately fit in. They quickly went out to meet migrants and those who are the most poor. Through simplicity in their listening, openness and proclamation of Jesus Christ “in words and deeds”, they serve children, young people, families and elderly persons going through difficult life experiences: lack of food, health and Christian human dignity.



### Sisters' Testimony

The Sisters live in a “rented” house; their chapel is the parish church and their cloister the streets of Rio de Mouro, religious education classrooms, food distribution centers and the homes of the sick and elderly. Pope Francis’ appeal that we be a Church that “goes forth”, toward the peripheries, has become a reality.

God is the witness of our immense joy in serving and living with our brothers and sisters who are truly poor. “Our Lords and Masters” wait for us with joy and a great desire to live fully. We experience the universality of charity and assure very concrete works of mercy. In this city of 45,000 people, we feel the constant call to open up spaces so that the Good News of Jesus Christ might be proclaimed and that we might live a new Pentecost together. We believe that Rio de Mouro is like an “Advent” that could make a renewal of the Company in Portugal possible.

Our local community, dedicated to Our Lady of Fatima, strives to heed these words from the Gospel: *“Do whatever He tells you to do!”* as we carry out home visits, minister with the elderly, provide catechism for children, adolescents, young adults and adults, prepare them for the reception of sacraments, offer support for funerals, prepare prayer vigils, times of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, communal prayer of the rosary and Vespers and care for the liturgical environment.

We wish to be instruments of the love of God who do good for all, suffering with those who suffer and rejoicing with those who rejoice. “Blessed be God,” Saint Vincent would say. All is gift and blessing from the Lord. We thank all the Sisters of the Province for their ongoing support and their promise of prayers that accompany us in our new mission.

Sister Maria Adélia Gomes LARANJEIRO  
*Daughter of Charity*

### WORKS OF MERCY

Province of Central America  
El Salvador

### **“As the Father loves, so do his children”** (MV 9).

*“Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life”* (Pope Francis, MV 2).

Located in the department of San Miguel, El Salvador, our local community, “Santa Sofia”, is made up of seven Sisters of different nationalities: two Sisters from El Salvador, two from Costa Rica, one from Guatemala, one from Panama and one from Nicaragua. It is an international experience of wealth in diversity in which we strive to be of one heart.

After the Provincial Assembly, we sensed as a local community that we needed to review our service to see how we might give it a new missionary momentum. This involved looking with fresh eyes at what we were already doing in our school, part of which had been privatized as a means to finance the needs of the work and the local community. As a result, some youth were financially unable to continue their education, even with our assistance.

In order to reduce fees so that the girls would have the opportunity for quality education, we took up the challenge of transforming it into a public entity; we therefore had to seek other forms of financial support for ourselves.

W

Works of  
Mercy

## Works of Mercy

God gave us a positive sign in January 2015: we were granted authorization to expand services and convert the primary school center into an educational complex, offering girls the possibility to attend from kindergarten through the end of secondary school. Not yet knowing that the mission would go beyond this change, we followed this path.

The first step consisted in becoming more familiar with the situation of the girls received in our school: their background and who was struggling the most. Our country suffers from a high crime rate. This situation worsens every day: gangs keep increasing, and they kill at least twenty people a day. This figure is very high given the country's small size. The everyday nature of these events creates despair, and young people are easy prey for these gangs. Our school community is affected as families must often move because they are victims of extortion. The little that they earn by working goes to pay "protection" so a family member will not be assassinated, and when they are no longer able to pay, they must flee, leaving behind the little that they have. When they do not manage to leave in time, they fall victim to this crime wave. Many families are in mourning, and we offer support to many students who have lost a loved one.

Motivated by the Year of Mercy and in response to this harsh reality, we wished to provide a breath of fresh air to our 1,200 students by helping them to develop a merciful heart.

*"Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness"* (MV 2).

In order to spark hope in the face of so many dark everyday realities, we first initiated formation projects in faith education classes at various levels and ethics classes in secondary school. We explained the message, *"Overcome Indifference and Win Peace"* and the Bull of Indiction for the Year of Mercy to the young people and then divided them into in small groups to carry out a work of mercy.

A group of girls decided to help one of the cleaning women: at the end of an activity, they would clean up the space they had used. Afterwards they shared quite simply that they never imagined how difficult the work was. Ever since, they are much more careful not to dirty the school so

that they might help not just one employee, but all of them.

With similar enthusiasm, another group of girls chose an activity related to the equipment on the kindergarten playground. It was no longer used during recess because it was in very poor condition. The girls set to repainting it during their free time. At the end, it was a great work of art! To their great satisfaction, the older girls immediately saw the little girls enjoying the refurbished equipment.

Given what is happening in the world today, new generations must be encouraged to change their attitude, as Pope Francis mentions in his Bull: *"Instead of depressing diagnoses, encouraging remedies; instead of direful predictions, messages of trust issued from the Council to the present-day world... all this rich teaching is channeled in one direction, the service of mankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need"* (MV 4).

Taking into account the many needs in our school and these positive experiences, the students decided to speak with the kindergarten and primary school teachers to learn about the youngest students' other needs. Learning that several kindergarten children did not have their school books, they found a way to obtain them and give them to the teachers. For first grade, the children needed writing notebooks. All these projects helped each student to get up to speed. The young women learned the joy of sharing when they saw the joyful faces of the poor young students who had suffered because of their parents' financial difficulties.

In a terrible situation where a second grade student suddenly found herself left alone with her mother and four siblings because her father had to flee with his oldest son to keep him out of a gang, several groups of students joined forces to help the girl continue to attend school by providing material assistance: a food basket, a backpack, shoes, books, etc.

Solidarity developed to help their classmates with limited financial resources and who sometimes didn't have enough to eat. A group of students decided to pay their fees for photocopies and meals or share what they had, but without saying anything to them.

## Works of Mercy

Some groups decided to take action for the environment, picking up on what Pope Francis has said about our “common home”. They planted seeds to grow plants and watered the green spaces of the campus so that the entire school community might benefit.

The younger children joined efforts with the group of teachers to begin assistance projects in order to help a sick classmate who needed an expensive medical test. They shared what they would have spent for their snack and held a chocolate sale and a raffle for a donated bicycle. The surplus went to buying a sport uniform for a poor girl and contributed to covering the cost of moving two teachers for medical reasons.

*“The mercy of God is his loving concern for each one of us. He feels responsible; that is, he desires our wellbeing and he wants to see us happy, full of joy, and peaceful. This is the path which the merciful love of Christians must also travel. As the Father loves, so do his children. Just as he is merciful, so we are called to be merciful to each other”* (MV 9).

These words from the Pope sum up our desire as Daughters of Charity to pass on to those with whom we work God’s love and His call to live as brothers and sisters of the same Father. We are evangelized by the creative commitments of these girls and their teachers to fight against indifference, sharing in the sufferings of others and doing everything possible to build a spirit of fraternity within our country. These experiences of solidarity continue and bring us great joy. We, too, as Christians who give our lives to follow Christ, work to follow in the footsteps of Archbishop Romero to bring the Gospel to life, inspire love close to home and change our world. It is through a close relationship with the Lord that we can maintain a peaceful heart, love our brothers and sisters and forgive those who commit so many acts of violence.

*“We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it”* (MV 2).

Santa Sofia local community  
Daughters of Charity

Province of Central America  
Antigua Guatemala

## Sister Angelica Soup Kitchen

*“At the school of the Son of God, the Daughters of Charity learn that no type of distress should be foreign to them. Christ appeals constantly to their Company through their suffering brothers and sisters, through the signs of the times, and through the Church”* (C. 11).

These words from our Constitutions challenged our local community and drew our attention to those who are the least fortunate in society.

Following our Domestic Assembly in 2007, we decided with the permission of the Provincial Council to open the Sister Angelica Soup Kitchen in a social center in order to offer meals to needy families, children living on the streets and impoverished elderly persons left alone. On July 1, after the new space was blessed by the Provincial Director in the presence of the Sisters of the Santa Familia local community, the employees and the children in the center, we opened our doors. More than 40 elderly persons, single mothers with their children and other poor persons came to share the meal that we had prepared for them. We prayed together and then served them.

This work began in adversity because at that time the media spread information accusing the Sisters and poor persons simply because of their physical appearance; then, the city threatened to close the soup kitchen to limit the presence of poor people downtown. Fortunately, the Lord came to our assistance, and volunteers and generous benefactors came forward.

With our poor brothers and sisters, we had wonderful experiences as well as times of real difficulty. Listening to them and sharing with them,

## Works of Mercy

we discovered other basic needs such as health care: national hospitals do not take care of them as foreigners with limited resources. In this case as well, the Lord sent us a sign: Doctor Arimany approached us and offered his services free of charge. Then the archdiocesan Caritas supported us by giving us medications.

In the beginning, we operated the soup kitchen five days a week; afterwards, the Franciscan Brothers agreed to take on two days. We thus have the joy of collaborating with them.

Among other anecdotes we could tell, there is the story of “Bin Laden” (nickname). We paid for his long-term treatment in a specialized center where we regularly visited him. But what would become of him when he finished the treatment and left the facility? He had left his family long ago and lived alone, poor and marginalized. We offered him the opportunity to help us at the soup kitchen. For the other persons living in poverty, his presence was a blessing: as one of their own, he understood them, spoke their language and showed interest in each person.

The soup kitchen serves about 150 to 200 people. They can have as much as they want, and some ask to take home what is left over for their evening meal. Despite financial difficulties, we have never run out of food. Divine Providence, of which our Founders often spoke, is truly effective.

We give thanks to God for these nine years during which we have successfully run this work, not without difficulties, misunderstandings and even aggressive behaviors by some individuals. Those whom we serve have become more respectful and more grateful.

Santa Familia local community  
*Daughters of Charity*

Province of Peru

### **Attentive to God’s calls**

*“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” (MV 15).*

Encouraged by Pope Francis’ message and attentive to God’s calls, we were led by the Lord to open, on February 26, 2015, a temporary shelter for children and adolescents suffering from all sorts of violence and high-risk situations.

The beginnings were modest. A social worker from the Administration of Protective Services in the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Groups, who had read about the charism of the Company on the Province’s website, asked the Visitatrix to house a 14-year-old victim of sexual violence. Trusting that it was God’s Providence calling us, we fixed up four bedrooms in the retreat house located at the Provincial House and began this experiment of taking in adolescents marked by suffering since childhood.

Encouraged by this initial experience, the Provincial House community presented a proposal to the Visitatrix to create a temporary shelter, “Saint Joseph”. All projects, of course, do not involve systemic change; sometimes emergency solutions are needed to resolve specific needs and thus fall into the category of legitimate assistance.

The purpose of the Saint Joseph’s Shelter is to offer minors a temporary residence while the Ministry of Women studies their case. At the end of the inquiry, the child or adolescent returns to his or her family or enters

### Works of Mercy

a residence. In Lima, there are three protective centers administered by the national police and two private centers. Unfortunately, youth often have a negative experience in these centers as the support offered does not correspond to their situations.

Given the growing demand for services of these at-risk children and youth, our shelter intends to offer something different, where they can feel loved and protected, knowing that no one will harm them and realizing that they are loved as they are. In that way, they can recover their self-confidence and their trust in others and look to the future with greater hope.

We accept children aged 1 to 17, victims of sexual violence (rape), physical abuse, domestic violence or neglect as well as victims of human trafficking (as sex workers, domestic servants or beggars and children who are sold).

Here are some examples:

Yfany, age 3, was born in Peru of a Thai mother who has been in prison for three years for drug trafficking and still has four years to complete her sentence. Young children up to age 3 can live in the prison with their mother. Then, they must leave the facility to live with a relative or in a residence. Yfany remained with us for 20 days and was then placed in the custody of an aunt who had come from Thailand. Now, he lives with his maternal grandparents.

The mother of Maria Angeles and Miguel, siblings aged 2 and 5, lives in the United States; their father is in prison in Lima. At the request of their mother, one of their aunts brought the children to the Mexican border and handed them over to a “gentleman” who was to take them to the United States but abandoned them at immigration control. After intervention by the police, the children were entrusted to the Peruvian Consulate in Mexico. They remained with us two weeks and now live in a SOS Children’s Village.

N.N. (no name) Monteza, a 12-day-old baby, was abandoned by his schizophrenic mother, like the foundling children in the time of Saint Vincent. He stayed with us one night before being entrusted to the care

of a maternal aunt.

Each child has his or her personal story and cross to bear. To date, 343 children and adolescents have come through our shelter. We share in their sufferings and try to witness to God’s loving care for them. Even if they only stay briefly with us, their lives take hold of our hearts, and we hear the Lord’s call to give ourselves more fully each day. Through our welcoming spirit and our support, we want to be a concrete face of divine mercy for them and hope that this shelter becomes ever more truly an oasis where God’s love reigns.

Thank you, Lord, for allowing us to serve you in these least among us!

Sister Karim ARROYO OVALLE  
*Daughter of Charity*



THE CHARTER OF THE  
DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

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

**“CHAPEL”**

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

*“[You will have] for chapel, the parish church, where you must always assist at the Divine Sacrifice and give good example, always being present there to edify the people, but all the same not abandoning the necessary service of the sick” (CCD X, 530).*

Conference of May 30, 1647, *The Rules*

*“If, on your return, you’re free to spend a little time in meditation or spiritual reading, very well! But, if you can’t do it, don’t become upset, nor think you’ve failed, for it’s not lost when you leave it for a legitimate reason. And if there is ever a legitimate reason, dear Sisters, it’s the service of the neighbor. To leave God for God is not leaving God at all, that is, to leave one work of God to do another, either of greater obligation or of greater merit. You leave prayer or spiritual reading or you break the Rule of silence in order to help a poor person. Keep in mind, Sisters, that doing all this is to serve Him. What a consolation for a good Daughter of Charity to think, ‘I’m going to help my sick poor, but God will accept this in place of the prayer I should be making just now,’ and let her go off cheerfully to wherever God is calling her” (CCD IX, 252).*

Conference of January 22, 1646, *Holy Communion*

*“Another infallible sign of a good Communion, Sisters, is when we see the opposite of what I’ve just told you; when we work zealously to make ourselves like Jesus Christ in our conversation and manners; when we obey with ease; when we rid ourselves of our particular attachments; when all the places to which obedience calls us are indifferent to us; and when we consider only the accomplishment of God’s Will in whatever He is pleased to have done with us - whether we’re sent to the country, or placed in a parish, or kept at the Motherhouse. In that case, dear Sisters, we can say in truth that a soul has done its utmost to dispose itself for the reception of the Most Blessed Sacrament” (CCD IX, 188-189).*

Conference of August 18, 1647, *Holy Communion*

*“‘And you, Sister, what other means do you think are necessary to make a good Communion?’ The Sister replied that she thought we should have an ardent desire for it.*

*‘How right you are, Sister. Consider what she is saying, Sisters; we should have an ardent desire for it - ardent, for God doesn’t wish to be desired coldly or lukewarmly, but with all the strength and ardor of our will, in the same way as He desires to communicate himself to us. When He instituted the Blessed Sacrament, He said to His Apostles, Desiderio desideravi hoc pascha manducare vobiscum, which means ‘I have ardently desired to eat this pasch with you.’ Now, since the Son of God, who gives himself to us in the Holy Eucharist, desired this with such an ardent desire - desiderio desideravi - isn’t it right that the soul who desires to receive Him, and of whom He is the sovereign good, should desire Him with all her heart?’” (CCD IX, 265).*

Conference of September 19, 1649, *The Love of God*

*“[A Sister] noted that one means of acquiring, and even of increasing, the love of God is the reception of the holy sacraments, especially Holy Eucharist. It’s impossible for us to come close to fire without being warmed, provided it be with the necessary disposition, that is, with the desire to give ourselves entirely to God and to ask Him ardently to give us His love. ‘I thank God with all my heart for the lights He’s given you on the present subject, dear Sisters. They are such that theologians could scarcely say more. They might perhaps say more beautiful things,*

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The Charter  
of the  
Daughters  
of Charity

## The Charter of the Daughters of Charity

but not better ones'” (CCD IX, 371).

### SOME REFLECTIONS

“Leave God for God.”

Or, to use another expression of Saint Vincent, “leave one work of God to do another”. Jesus reminded us that serving our neighbor is as just as “great” as serving God (Mt 22:36-40).

Our difficulty is not recognizing if these services are “great” or not, if one is more “legitimate” than the other. Our difficulty lies in knowing how or being able to “leave” or not, to come and go, to leave and return, to hear the new calls that God is constantly addressing to us and to respond to them.

Difficulty knowing how to “leave” comes from the two opposing faults perpetually threatening every Christian, every established organization and every institution in the Church: activism (hyper-activity without contemplation) and quietism (passive contemplation).

It’s true, we are in action all the time: eating, walking, providing care, sleeping, praying, reflecting, singing, keeping silence, crying, avoiding, resisting, listening, forgiving, resting, taking care of ourselves... All of these activities are important and necessary and, depending on circumstances, some are “of greater obligation”. Always called upon, we must discern.

Let us allow Pope Francis to provide great insight on this issue, through his commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke, delivered during the Angelus on July 21, 2013:

“The passage today is that on Martha and Mary. Who are these two women? Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, are the relatives and faithful disciples of the Lord, who lived in Bethany. St. Luke describes them in this way: Mary, at the feet of Jesus, ‘listened to his teaching’, while Martha was burdened with much serving (cf. Lk 10:39-40). Both welcome the Lord on his brief visit, but they do so differently. Mary sets herself at the feet of Jesus to listen but Martha lets herself become

absorbed in preparing everything, and so much so that she says to Jesus: ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me’ (v. 40). And Jesus answers scolding her sweetly: ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing’ (v. 41).

What does Jesus mean? What is this one thing that we need? First of all, it is important to understand that this is not about two contradictory attitudes: listening to the word of the Lord, contemplation, and practical service to our neighbor. These are not two attitudes opposed to one another, but, on the contrary, they are two essential aspects in our Christian life; aspects that can never be separated, but are lived out in profound unity and harmony. Why then was Martha scolded, even if kindly, by Jesus? Because she considered only what she was doing to be essential; she was too absorbed and worried by the things ‘to do’. For a Christian, works of service and charity are never detached from the principle of all our action: that is, listening to the Word of the Lord, to be — like Mary — at the feet of Jesus, with the attitude of a disciple. And that is why Martha was scolded.

In our Christian life too, dear brothers and sisters, may prayer and action always be deeply united. A prayer that does not lead you to practical action for your brother — the poor, the sick, those in need of help, a brother in difficulty — is a sterile and incomplete prayer. But, in the same way, when ecclesial service is attentive only to doing, things gain in importance, functions, structures, and we forget the centrality of Christ. When time is not set aside for dialogue with him in prayer, we risk serving ourselves and not God present in our needy brother and sister.

Saint Benedict sums up the kind of life that indicated for his monks in two words: ora et labora, pray and work. It is from contemplation, from a strong friendship with the Lord that the capacity is born in us to live and to bring the love of God, his mercy, his tenderness, to others. And also our work with brothers in need, our charitable works of mercy, lead us to the Lord, because it is in the needy brother and sister that we see the Lord himself.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Source : [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_angelus\\_20130721.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2013/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20130721.html)

## The Charter of the Daughters of Charity

*“For chapel, the parish church...”*

For Saint Vincent, this follows in the ‘logic’ or continuation of the Incarnation. If the Daughters were to go through the streets and alleys to enter the rooms of the sick poor people, they should also join with this same people and gather with all of the People of God on Sundays during the Eucharist, in order to give thanks with those who have been cured, those who are back on their feet, and to hold in prayer those who are still weak, bedridden; they should also pray with family members for their deceased loved ones. Whether it be in the rooms of the sick, on the streets, in alleys, in horse-drawn coaches, at the court of the Queen of Poland or elsewhere, they will give *“good example”*, and in the parish church as well. Saint Vincent reminds them that they should always be there *“to edify the people”* by their communal, prayerful and selfless presence.

It is interesting to note here that, as Saint Vincent understands it, to *“assist at the Divine Sacrifice”* does not consist merely in a believer’s personal relationship with God; a believer does not just come to listen to the Word, feed his or her faith, be edified spiritually, offer him or herself as a spiritual sacrifice, give him or herself to God in response to the divine gift. How many times have we heard this expression, which isn’t really appropriate: *“my mass”*...? Nor is it a question of gathering just to gather. It is a question of edifying a people, of good example, of witness, of growing together. The Eucharist is the place where the entire Body is built up. It is true that God speaks to me personally, but ultimately He asks us to witness to an *“us”*, one which is united and in communion. *“I no longer call you servants but friends.”*

In fact, everything is connected, interwoven, for Vincent as for Louise. There is unity of life. Unity and harmony, to use the words of Pope Francis. The religious demands of a monastery as adapted for the Daughters of Charity who come and go in the world expand participation in the Eucharist beyond the community of apostolic life, beyond a few Sisters going together to thank the Lord, outside of their *“monastery”*. As a result, a *“chapel”* that is closed, reserved for them alone, forbidden and inaccessible to others is inadmissible because they will have for *“chapel”* the parish church. There, they will also have to *“leave God for God”*. They will have to *“leave”* the rooms of the sick once their

corporal and spiritual care has been completed and leave their rented room, their house, for the parish church. Then, at the proclamation, *“Ite! Missa est!”*, they should *“leave”* the parish church to go out again on the streets and to the rooms of the sick. This type of itinerancy, entering-exiting, mirrors the itinerancy of Christ Himself. *“In that, you resemble Our Lord more closely...”*

A clarification: it is possible to *“leave”*, to *“miss”* or *“lose”* prayers, meditation or Mass when we are called to a *“work... of greater obligation or of greater merit”*: a sick person in need of care. In contrast, it is not possible to leave a sick person in the middle of attending to him if the clock strikes. It is not possible to *“miss”* or *“lose”* a life...

One last point: in other letters and conferences, we can note Saint Vincent’s advice to maintain a strong connection with parish priests and bishops; by observing it, the Confraternities of Charity and the local communities of Sisters as well as of the Priests and Brothers of the Congregation of the Mission are anchored in the parish in order to be at the service of all and to reach all people.

### QUESTION

How can we spiritually *“edify”* the people of God?

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 Charter's influence on the Province's reflection concerning living among those who are poor.**

During the first ten years that we lived in the slums, we were under the responsibility of a Provincial Councillor and the Provincial Assistant because those communities, not yet lawfully constituted, depended on a large institution.

Our experience of living among those who are poor in the slums was a sort of laboratory for continued study, as we had learned from those who are poor what poverty, solidarity, living from the 'sweat of our brow' and 'true religion' really are. *"If there's a true religion... what did I say, wretched man that I am...! God forgive me! I'm speaking materially. It's among them, among those poor people that true religion and a living faith are preserved"* (Saint Vincent, July 24, 1655).

We had a strong desire to find new ways to ensure that those who are poor in our day might be served ever better. *"The call heard by the first Sisters is ever the same. Throughout the world it continues to raise up and assemble Daughters of Charity, who strive to rediscover at the source the inspiration and intuitions of their Founders, so that they may respond with ever-renewed fidelity and availability to the needs of their time"* (2004 Constitutions, p. 19-20).

We know that a new direction and new commitments involve taking risks and accepting sacrifices, which can be frightening. It is always

difficult to leave behind our securities and change our routines; as a result, we felt uneasy at times, particularly given the fact that we needed:

1. to leave behind traditional structures and patterns of life, seek new ways to pray and live the vows, change our lifestyle and our way of relating to authority, etc. (cf. C. 2; 1991 and 2015 Inter-Assemblies Documents). Neither solutions nor methods existed; we had to create new structures and patterns that were more flexible and adapted to the people whom we would meet. On several occasions, we weren't sure what to do and felt a little lost.

2. to live like those who are poor. However, as we came to know the truly poor, with their particularities, we found the right equilibrium of Daughters of Charity as servants of those who are poor. As we developed a new presence among the poor, we benefited from the encouragement of Monsignor (later Cardinal) Aloisio Lorscheider and a number of priests and friends; for several years, the Conference of Religious of Brazil offered us assistance and specialized formation.

Given the extent of the challenge and as a support for our pursuit, we set up a group for reflection and study in order to share our experiences, insights, difficulties and suffering. This reflection group, called the "group from the slums" by the Sisters of the Province, followed its course of growth in our convictions regarding the Vincentian charism for about ten years. Then, the situation changed: the Province established a group of Sisters for the revision of works.

A few years later, Provincial planning provided for the creation of "specialized commissions" according to the types of poor persons served by the Sisters. We were part of the "Insertion Commission" made up of Sisters living in poor neighborhoods in the north and northeast regions of Brazil.

This commission explored styles of presence and service among those who are poor. Our discussions revolved around the Charter, whose power we would rediscover. When a new Province was created in the north of Brazil, there were less local communities in the Province of Fortaleza, but we wanted to maintain this way of life to be more faithful to our beginnings and put our Charter into practice even more.

### *The Charter in Practice*

Our thinking and convictions gradually took shape in our small local communities.

In order to respond to the question of what type of insertion to choose, the two Provinces in the north and northeast met, but nothing came of it. In 2003, the Province of Fortaleza organized the 3rd Interprovincial meeting of local communities in the peripheries. During that meeting, the Sisters focused their reflection on the Charter in order to rediscover its fundamental elements and find other ways of living out our mission with those who are poor in fidelity to our origins. The Sisters tried to express the shared elements of our spirituality, lifestyle, housing, clothing (cf. C. 12). *“The Daughters of Charity are not nuns, but Sisters who come and go like seculars...”* (CCD VIII, 277).

The Province continued to consider the question and had many insights; it also had the joy of celebrating the silver jubilee of its foundation.

With those who are poor in the outskirts and slums where we have lived, we prepared the celebration of a Sister’s 25 years of vocation. Claudio, a young man from a slum, who had developed his musical talents thanks to one of the Sisters of the community, put the words of the Charter to music as a gift for the Sister Jubilarian.

### **THE CHARTER OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY**

Words and music: Claudio Rodrigues

*R/ The words of Saint Vincent, in his great humility,  
The humble still go to live with the Daughters of Charity. (2x)*

Their monastery will be  
the homes of the sick  
They will live in community  
alongside those in need.

Their chapel will be  
the parish church of the Christian people,  
For cell, a rented room  
and holy modesty their veil.

For grill they will have the fear of God,  
the God of the oppressed,  
For enclosure, obedience,  
out of love for “brother commitment”.

They will have for cloister  
the slums and alleys of our cities  
Alongside the suffering poor  
on the margins of society.

(To be continued.)

Exodus local community



## The secularity of the Company

### I – THE ORIGINS OF THE COMPANY

Secularity is an aspect of the Company of the Daughters of Charity's identity in terms of its charism and on a juridical level, thanks to an intuition and spiritual inspiration Saint Louise had in order to obtain its ecclesial and civil approval. Above all, it is an essential means for maintaining and promoting the Company's availability for the service of persons who are poor.

For Saint Vincent, secularity provided a solid juridical status and conferred on him and his successors complete internal jurisdiction over the Company, with the exception of the Sisters' obedience to pastoral guidelines of the Bishops in the dioceses where they are established and their collaboration in the diocesan pastoral plan as daughters of the Church.

#### A) HISTORICAL CONTEXT

On November 20, 1646, the Company received approval from the Church on a diocesan level from Jean-François Paul de Gondi, Archbishop of Corinth, Coadjutor and Vicar General of the Archbishop of Paris. Once ecclesial approval was obtained, civil approval was needed in order for the Company to have its own juridical personality as an institution. Saint Louise prepared all the documents: a petition addressed to Parliament, a report, the Rules, the approval of the Archbishop of Paris, a draft of royal Letters Patent (December 1646). She presented all of them to the Procurator General in order to obtain civil approval.

This occurred at the beginning of 1647. In the petition Louise and Vincent expressed their desire for the *Company to be approved as a secular entity in order to be able to go wherever needed*.

On June 29, 1649, Saint Louise wrote to the Abbé de Vaux to thank him for his advice regarding the establishment of the community in the hospital of Nantes. She then recounted to him the conversation between the Bishop of Nantes and Sister Jeanne Lepintre.

She also asked him to review the rules and the contract signed by the hospital of Nantes in case "*there is anything which indicates a regular community*". Throughout her letter, Saint Louise vehemently asserted the secular nature of the Company.

*"I greatly fear that our good Sister Jeanne spoke of the vows in a way which does not make it clear that they are something other than what is professed by the devout laity. Again let me say that they are not the same, for the laity usually pronounce them before their confessor. We must honor the plans of God and bless Him constantly. I believe that Monsieur Vincent will write to Nantes next week. He told me that he would decide tomorrow what will be done.*

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

In 1650 Saint Louise had still not obtained a response concerning the civil recognition of the Company with its secular nature. One Friday in April that year, she visited the Procurator General, Blaise Méliand, the highest level magistrate who exercised the duties of attorney general at the Court of Appeals and the Revenue Court in case of appeal. The

## The Secularity of the Company

purpose of her visit was to learn how negotiations were advancing for the registration of the Company with the government as a civil institution.

The following day, she wrote Saint Vincent to report on what had happened:

*“Yesterday I had an opportunity to see the Procurator General. He did me the honor of receiving me most courteously. He immediately asked me if I was there concerning some business he had at hand. I told him that I had come to refresh his memory on the matter. He asked me if we considered ourselves regular or secular. I told him that we aspired only to the latter. He told me that such a thing was without precedent. I cited for him Madame de Villeneuve’s Daughters and pointed out to him that they go everywhere. He said many good things about the Company and added that he did not disapprove of our plan. However, he said that something of such importance merited much thought. I expressed my joy that he felt as he did about the matter, and I begged him, if he thought that the Company was unworthy to be, or for some reason should not be continued, to destroy it entirely. But if he considered it good, I said that we begged him to establish it on a solid foundation. I explained that it was this thought that had motivated us to give it a trial for at least 12 or 15 years, and that during this period, by the grace of God, no insurmountable obstacles have appeared. He replied, ‘Let me reflect on this, I do not say for months, but at least for a few weeks.’ He took the trouble to escort us to our carriage and showed us great cordiality in the courtyard. He asked us to extend his very humble greetings to you. He added that he would consider himself a usurer if he accepted the very humble gratitude that we offered him for the honor he shows to all our sisters when they dare to approach him with their needs for the poor galley slaves or for the little children” (SW, p. 318, L. 283).*

Saint Louise was convinced that secularity was an essential condition for being able to go everywhere for the service of those who are poor, even if there was no historical precedent. If the Sisters were to be recognized as “regular”, they would fall under the jurisdiction of bishops and, for Saint Louise, this presented a danger and a threat to a simple lifestyle of availability for service of those who are poor, required for the continuation of the mission of Jesus Christ.

## **B) PURPOSE OF THE SECULARITY OF THE COMPANY**

### **1 – Availability in order to be able to go everywhere for the service of those who are poor.**

Saint Vincent and Saint Louise were persuaded that availability to come and go to all types of poverty demands a flexible structure. This is the fundamental objective of secularity, which therefore entails greater virtue and asceticism than religious life that is protected by the monastery and cloister:

*“...you’re not nuns by name but you should be so in deed, and you’re more obliged to advance in perfection than they are. However, if some blundering, idolatrous person were to appear among you and say, ‘We ought to be nuns; that would be more noble,’ the Company would be ready for Extreme Unction, Sisters. Fear that, and if you’re still alive, prevent it, Sisters; weep, groan, tell the Superior about it. For whoever says nun says cloistered, and Daughters of Charity have to go everywhere. That’s why, Sisters, even though you’re not enclosed, you still must be as virtuous as the Visitation Nuns, and even more so... But no one goes among the people like the Daughters of Charity do and are so much at risk as you, Sisters. That’s why it’s so important that you be more virtuous than nuns” (CCD X, 527 – Rules for the Sisters in Parishes, August 24, 1659).*

### **2- Mobility and simplicity of lifestyle in order to serve those who are poor like Jesus Christ.**

*“...it is not enough to be Daughters of Charity in name, it is not enough to be engaged in the service of the poor in a hospital, although this is a blessing which you will never be able to esteem enough. What is necessary is to have the true and solid virtues which you know are essential in order to carry out well the work in which you are so happy to be employed. Without that, my Sisters, your work will be almost useless to you” (SW, p. 129-130, L. 121).*

In her correspondence with the Abbé de Vaux, Saint Louise indicated that it was not easy for young women who want to enter to understand the particularity of this vocation and of the Company. On June 29,

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1649, she wrote:

*“I believe, Monsieur, that the return of Sister Renee Priot will have greatly dampened the enthusiasm of any candidates wishing to join us. Great courage and steadfastness are essential in order to persevere here because we are bound only by obedience and are often exposed to the danger of discouragement in various circumstances. It is more than a little disheartening for us to spend so much time and so many years in testing and forming our sisters only to have them taken from us by weakness. So long as God is glorified by it, nothing else matters. It is this which leads me humbly to beg you, for the love of God, to help us, by your holy sacrifices and prayers, to be faithful to His holy will...”* (SW, p. 293-294, L. 481).

### **3 – Prevent bishops from being able to meddle in the internal life of the Community and to modify their identity in the charism intended by the Founders.**

To better enable the availability of ‘secular’ Sisters to serve those who are poor, authority fell to Saint Vincent, Director General of the Company, and then to his successors.

## **II – SUBSTANCE AND DEMANDS OF SECULARITY**

The Founders taught the Sisters that secularity entails:

### **1 – Living their baptismal consecration as good Christians and being configured to Jesus Christ, servant of those who are poor.**

During the conference held June 14, 1643, Saint Vincent said:

*“If you’re really faithful in the observance of this way of life, Sisters, you’ll all be good Christians. I wouldn’t be saying as much if I told you that you’d be good nuns. Why do people join religious Orders if not to become good Christian men and women? Yes, Sisters, really make it a point to become good Christian women by the faithful practice of your Rules. God will be glorified by it, and your Company will edify the whole Church. Don’t underestimate the grace God has given and will give you, if you render yourselves worthy of it. Reflect that lately*

*God has willed to provide His Church with a Company of poor country women - as are most of you - to continue the life His Son led on earth. Don’t make yourselves unworthy of your grace, Sisters”* (CCD IX, 103).

### **2 – Living complete trust in Divine Providence with joy**

During his conferences, Saint Vincent called the Sisters to trust in Providence.

*“Sisters, if you really understand God’s plan for you, you’ll consider yourselves fortunate for that mercy. May Our Lord grant you this grace!”* (CCD IX, 106, Conference of December 7, 1643).

*“...learn not to rely in any way on your own strength or ingenuity, but to put all your trust in Providence. If anyone alive needs this confidence it’s you, on account of the works entailed in your way of life. Those Sisters enclosed in their monasteries are far removed from the worries of the world and are, as it were, shielded from temptations. But you, there’s scarcely a moment or a place in which you aren’t exposed to temptation; therefore, you need great confidence in God...”*

*But the Sister who has placed all her trust in God fears nothing and says, ‘Since God is pleased that I be sent, He’ll give me the necessary graces for that. He’s my God; I’m confident, therefore, that He’ll never forsake me.’ You need, then, to give yourselves to God to obtain the grace to have great confidence in His goodness...”* (CCD X, 406-407, Conference of June 9, 1658).

### **3 – Leading a mobile and simple lifestyle in the world**

On August 24, 1659, explaining the particular rules for the Sisters who work in parishes, Saint Vincent read the second article:

*“They shall bear in mind that they do not belong to a religious Order because that state is incompatible with the duties of their vocation. Nevertheless, since they are more exposed to the occasions of sin than nuns bound to the cloister, having - for monastery only the houses of the sick and the place where the Superioress resides;*

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- for cell, a hired room;
- for chapel, the parish church;
- for cloister, the streets of the city;
- for enclosure, obedience, with an obligation to go nowhere but to the houses of the sick or to places necessary for their service;
- for grille, the fear of God;
- for veil holy modesty;

*making no other profession to ensure their vocation and that, by their constant trust in Divine Providence and the offering they make to God of all that they are and of their service in the person of the poor, for all these considerations they should have as much or more virtue than if they had made their profession in a religious Order...*” (CCD X, 530, Conference of August 24, 1659).

#### **4 – Working diligently to acquire the solid virtues of good Christians and perfect Daughters of Charity**

*“...therefore, they will strive to conduct themselves in all those places with at least as much reserve, recollection, and edification as true religious in their convent. To attain this, they must strive to acquire all the virtues recommended to them by their Rules, but especially profound humility, perfect obedience, and great detachment from creatures, and, above, all, to take every possible precaution to preserve intact chastity of body and heart”* (CCD X, 530, Conference of August 24, 1659).

*“...let us make every effort to acquire the virtues that God expects of us in thanksgiving for the graces His goodness lavishes upon us every day. I do not know if you received a letter which I sent you during the past month in which I exhorted you to the same purpose. In the name of God, Sisters, I beg you to strive to cultivate solid virtue, especially humility and gentleness... I often speak to you on this subject...”* (SW, p. 391, L. 341).

*“You will learn from Jesus, my dear Sisters, to practice solid virtue, as He did in His holy humanity, as soon as He came down upon earth. It is from the example of Jesus in His infancy that you will obtain all that you need to become true Christians and perfect Daughters of Charity. You will do so by entreating Him to grant you His Spirit as He did at*

*your holy Baptism. However, this time, there is an essential difference. At your Baptism, you did not have the use of reason so as to correspond with this precious gift, but now, O my dear Sisters, if you obtain this gift from Him anew, you will have the strength to strive to acquire the holiness He asks of you”* (SW, p. 666, L. 647).

Clearly, the Founders understood secularity along the same lines as what Pope Francis asks of Spirit-filled evangelizers:

*“To be evangelizers of souls, we need to develop a spiritual taste for being close to people’s lives and to discover that this is itself a source of greater joy. Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people. When we stand before Jesus crucified, we see the depth of his love which exalts and sustains us, but at the same time, unless we are blind, we begin to realize that Jesus’ gaze, burning with love, expands to embrace all his people. We realize once more that he wants to make use of us to draw closer to his beloved people. He takes us from the midst of his people and he sends us to his people; without this sense of belonging we cannot understand our deepest identity”* (Evangeli Gaudium 268).

*“Jesus himself is the model of this method of evangelization which brings us to the very heart of his people. How good it is for us to contemplate the closeness which he shows to everyone! If he speaks to someone, he looks into their eyes with deep love and concern: “Jesus, looking upon him, loved him” (Mk 10:21). We see how accessible he is... he eats and drinks with sinners (cf. Mk 2:16) without worrying about being thought a glutton and a drunkard himself (cf. Mt 11:19). We see his sensitivity in allowing a sinful woman to anoint his feet (cf. Lk 7:36-50) and in receiving Nicodemus by night (cf. Jn 3:1-15). Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is nothing else than the culmination of the way he lived his entire life.*

*Moved by his example, we want to enter fully into the fabric of society, sharing the lives of all, listening to their concerns, helping them materially and spiritually in their needs, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep; arm in arm with others, we are committed to building a new world. But we do so not from a sense of obligation, not as a burdensome duty, but as the result of a personal*



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*decision which brings us joy and gives meaning to our lives” (Evangelii Gaudium 269).*

**3 - CONCLUSION**

Lived well, the secularity of the Company places the Daughters of Charity in perfect harmony with the needs of the world and of the Church. It leads to our ongoing renewal and discernment, saves us from all forms of lethargy, individualism and identity crises and keeps us from going down the path that would lead us to a cooling of fervor (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium* 78).

Sister María Angeles INFANTE  
*Daughter of Charity*

**At the school of the Heart of Jesus**

**Contemplating  
the pierced Heart of Jesus  
brings out the perfection of His love  
for humankind and for His Father,  
which are inseparable.**

**His brotherly love  
is shown by  
His universal compassion  
and His preference for the poor,  
the sick and the afflicted.  
So many scenes from the Gospel  
come to mind!**

**His filial love for the Father,  
a love burning with the fire  
of the Holy Spirit,  
and His perfect obedience  
offer for our contemplation  
the image of the beloved Son,  
which we are called to imitate  
by participating in the same mystery  
of Trinitarian love.**



