

*E*choes of the Company



Seminarium

SEPTEMBER

OCTOBER

2017

No. 5



1617-2017 400th Anniversary of the Charism

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Pope Francis greets the disciples of Saint Vincent de Paul

from the Vatican, September 27, 2017

September 27, 2017, on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the Vincentian charism, Pope Francis addressed a special message to the Vincentian Family, in which he recalls that charity is “at the heart of the Church’s social doctrine”.

Dear brothers and sisters,

On the occasion of the fourth centenary of the charism that gave birth to your Family, I would like to extend my words of gratitude and encouragement and to emphasize the value and relevance of Saint Vincent de Paul today.

He was always progressing, open to seeking God and himself. Grace worked to supplement this constant quest: as a shepherd, he encountered Jesus the Good Shepherd in a striking way in the person of the poor. This occurred in a very special way when he allowed himself to be touched by the eyes of a man thirsting for mercy and by the situation of family lacking everything. At that moment, he was deeply moved by Jesus looking at him, inviting him to no longer live for himself, but to serve Jesus wholeheartedly in persons who are poor, whom Vincent de Paul would later call “our Lords and masters” (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents XI*, 349). His life then became steadfast service, up to his last breath. A verse from Scripture showed him the meaning of his mission: “The Lord has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor” (cf. Lk 4:18).

Burning with the desire to make Jesus known to persons who are poor, Vincent passionately dedicated himself to His proclamation, particularly through popular missions and most especially by attending to the formation of priests. He quite naturally used a “little method”: speaking first of all through his life and then with great simplicity, in a familiar and direct way. The Spirit used him as an instrument to raise up a generous impulse in the Church. Inspired by the first Christians who were of “one heart and mind” (Acts 4:32), Saint Vincent founded the Confraternities of Charity in order to care for those most in need. They lived in communion and joyfully offered their possessions, convinced that Jesus and persons who are poor are the most valuable treasures and that, as he liked to repeat, “When you go to the poor, you encounter Jesus.”

This “little mustard seed” sown in 1617 developed into the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity, branched out into other institutes and associations and became a great tree (cf. Mk 4:31-32), your Family. Everything, however, began with this little mustard seed. Saint Vincent never wanted to be a hero or a leader but a “little seed”. He was convinced that humility, gentleness and simplicity are the essential conditions for embodying the law of the seed that gives life by dying (cf. Jn 12:20-26). This law alone makes Christian life fruitful. According to this law, in giving we receive, in losing our lives we gain them and in remaining hidden we shine. He was also convinced that he could not do this alone but rather together, as Church and as the People of God. On this point, I enjoy recalling his prophetic insight of valuing the exceptional feminine qualities shown in Saint Louise de Marillac’s spiritual sensitivity and human understanding.

“Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40), says the Lord. At the heart of the Vincentian Family is the search for “those who are the poorest and most abandoned” and a deep awareness of being “unworthy of rendering them our little services” (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents XI*, 349). I hope that this year of thanksgiving to the Lord and of going more deeply into the charism might be an opportunity to quench your thirst at the source, to refresh yourselves at the fountain of the spirit of your origins. Do not forget that the sources of grace from which you drink sprang from steadfast hearts firm in love, from “lasting models of charity” (BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical letter *Deus caritas est*, 40). You will contribute the same freshness only if you look toward the rock from which everything gushed forth. This rock is Jesus in His poverty, whom you should recognize in those who are poor and voiceless. For

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The 400th
Anniversary
of the
Charism

Pope Francis greets the disciples of Saint Vincent

He is there. And you, when you meet fragile people broken by past difficulties, you in turn are called to be rocks: not to appear hard and unshakeable, nor insensitive to sufferings, but to become a secure support, firm in the face of the uncertainties of the times and resistant in adversity because you “look to the rock from which you were hewn, to the quarry from which you were taken” (Is 51:1). You are thus called to reach out to the peripheries of human existence to bring not your skills, but the Spirit of the Lord, the “Father of the Poor”. He scatters you throughout the world like seeds that sprout in arid land, like a balm of consolation for the wounded, like a fire of charity to warm so many hearts cooled by abandonment and hardened by rejection.

In truth, all of us are called to drink from the rock of the Lord and to quench the thirst of the world with the charity that comes from Him. Charity is at the heart of the Church; it is the reason for its action, the soul of its mission. “Charity is at the heart of the Church’s social doctrine. Every responsibility and every commitment spelt out by that doctrine is derived from charity which, according to the teaching of Jesus, is the synthesis of the entire Law” (BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical letter *Caritas in veritate*, 2). Following this path will make the Church ever more fully the mother and teacher of charity, with a love that increases and abounds for one another and for all (cf. 1 Thes 3:12): harmony and communion within the Church, openness and welcome toward those outside. The Church must have the courage to give up what might be an advantage in order to imitate in all things its Lord and to fully become itself, making the apparent weakness of charity its only reason to boast (cf. 2 Cor 12:9). The words of the Council, so relevant today, resonate in us: “Christ Jesus... ‘being rich, became poor’ for our sakes. Thus, the Church, although it needs human resources to carry out its mission, is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim, even by its own example, humility and self-sacrifice. Christ was sent by the Father ‘to bring good news to the poor’... Similarly, the Church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder. It does all it can to relieve their need and in them it strives to serve Christ” (ECUMENICAL COUNCIL VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 8).

Saint Vincent did this all throughout his life and speaks still today to each one of us and to us as Church. His witness invites us to seek always, ready to let the Lord’s Word and His eyes upon us surprise us. He asks us for poverty of heart, total availability and obedient humility. He impels us to fraternal communion among ourselves and

to courageous mission in the world. He calls us to free ourselves from complex language, self-centered rhetoric and attachment to material goods, which might appease us in the short term but do not give us God’s peace and are even often obstacles to mission. He encourages us to invest in the creativity of love with the authenticity of a “heart which sees” (cf. BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical letter *Deus Caritas est*, 31). Charity, in fact, is not satisfied with good practices of the past but is able to transform the present. This is all the more necessary today with the ever-changing complexity of our globalized society where some forms of charity or assistance, although justified by generous intentions, risk supporting forms of exploitation and illegal activity and do not produce real and sustainable progress. For this reason, envisioning charity, organizing close relationships and investing in formation are timely lessons from Saint Vincent. His example, though, also encourages us to give time and space to persons who are poor, to those suffering from the new forms of poverty of our time, to the too many people living in poverty today and to make their thoughts and difficulties our own. A Christianity without contact with people who suffer becomes a disincarnated Christianity, unable to touch the flesh of Christ. Encounter persons who are poor and give poor persons a voice so that our culture focused on the ephemeral does not reduce their presence to silence. I ardently hope that the celebration of the World Day of the Poor this November 19 will help us in our “call to follow Jesus in his own poverty,” becoming “an ever greater sign of Christ’s charity for the least and those most in need” and reacting “against a culture of discard and waste” (*Message for the First World Day of the Poor*, “*Let us love, not with words but with deeds*”, June 13, 2017).

I pray that you and the Church may be granted the grace of finding the Lord Jesus in your brother or sister who is hungry, thirsty, a stranger, stripped of his clothing and his dignity, sick and imprisoned but also doubting, ignorant, persistent in sin, afflicted, crude, ill-tempered and annoying. In the glorious wounds of Jesus, may you find the strength of charity, the happiness of the grain that gives life by dying, the fecundity of the rock from which water gushes forth, the joy of coming out of yourself in order to go out into the world, free from nostalgia for the past, confident in God and creative regarding the challenges of today and tomorrow because, as Saint Vincent said, “love is inventive to infinity”.

Pope FRANCIS

From the Vatican, September 27, 2017

Message of Pope Francis during the audience granted the Vincentian Family

Saint Peter's Square, Rome, October 14, 2017

October 12 – 15, 2017, over 10,000 members from the more than 200 branches of the Vincentian Family, coming from about 99 countries, celebrated the 400th anniversary of their charism in Rome. On Saturday, October 14, they met Pope Francis during an audience on Saint Peter's Square. After going through the crowd in the Popemobile, Pope Francis delivered this speech:

Dear brothers and sisters, good afternoon!

Thank you for your warm welcome, and my thanks to the Superior General for introducing our gathering. I greet you, and I thank the Lord together with you for the 400 years of your charism. Saint Vincent generated a passion for charity, which has endured through the centuries: a passion that came from his heart. This is why we have his relic here today, the heart of Saint Vincent.

Today I would like to encourage you to continue on this path, putting forward three simple verbs that I believe are very important for the Vincentian spirit, but also for Christian life in general: to adore, to welcome, to go.

TO ADORE

Countless times, Saint Vincent invited people to cultivate their interior life and dedicate themselves to prayer, which purifies and opens the heart. He considered prayer indispensable. It is the compass for every day; it is like a manual for life. It is, he wrote, "a great book for a preacher": only by praying do we draw from God the love that we then pour forth on the world; only by praying do we touch people's hearts when proclaiming the Gospel.¹ Prayer for Saint Vincent, however, is

not merely a duty and much less a collection of rote phrases. Prayer is remaining before God in order to be with Him, simply devoting ourselves to Him. This is the purest prayer, that which makes space for the Lord and for praising Him, and nothing else: adoration. Once discovered, adoration becomes essential because it is pure intimacy with the Lord, who gives peace and joy and dissipates the stresses of life. Therefore, to someone who was under particular pressure, Saint Vincent advised praying "*without mental strain, to immerse themselves in God by a simple consideration with no attempt to gain His presence by emotional efforts, to abandon themselves to Him.*"²

This is adoration: reverently and peacefully placing ourselves before God in silence, putting Him first, confidently turning ourselves over to Him; then, asking for His Spirit and directing our thoughts to Him. In this way, people in need, urgent problems and serious and difficult situations become part of adoration as well, such that Saint Vincent invited us to "adore in [God]" even the reasons that we struggle to understand and accept.³ Those who adore and regularly draw from the living wellspring of love are inevitably "infected", so to speak. They begin to behave toward others as the Lord does toward them: they become more merciful, more understanding, more willing; they overcome their own rigidity and open themselves to others.

TO WELCOME

Thus, we arrive at the second verb: to welcome. When we hear this word, we immediately think of something to do. In reality, welcoming is a deeper disposition: it requires not only making room for someone, but being a welcoming, available person, accustomed to giving oneself to others. As God does for us, so we do for others. Welcoming means putting things into perspective, setting right my way of thinking, understanding that my life is not my private property and that my time does not belong to me. It involves a gradual detachment from all that is mine: my time, my rest, my rights, my plans and my agenda. Those who welcome give up "me" and allow "you" and "us" to enter their life. A welcoming Christian is a true man or woman of the Church because the Church is Mother, and a mother welcomes life and supports it. As a child

1. cf. Letter 2591 to A. Durand, c. May 1658

2. Letter 2920 to J. Pesnelle, July 25, 1659

3. cf. Letter 2879 to G. Desdames, June 20, 1659

Message of Pope Francis during the audience granted the V.F.

resembles his or her mother, bearing her features, so a Christian bears the traits of the Church. Therefore, a truly faithful child of the Church is welcoming, creates harmony and communion without complaining and generously sows peace, even if it is not reciprocated. Saint Vincent helps us to build upon this ecclesial “DNA” of welcoming, openness and communion, so that in our life *“all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander [may] be put away... with all malice”* (Eph 4:31).

TO GO

The last verb is to go. Love is active; it comes out of itself. Those who love do not sit in an easy chair looking on, waiting for a better world to come, but simply get up and go enthusiastically. Saint Vincent said it well: *“our vocation is to go, not just to one parish, not just to one diocese, but all over the world; and to do what? To set people’s hearts on fire, to do what the Son of God did. He came to set the world on fire in order to inflame it with His love.”*⁴ This vocation is always valid for everyone. It leads each of us to ask ourselves, “Do I go out to encounter others, as the Lord wishes? Do I carry this fire of charity everywhere, or do I remain inside, warming myself at my hearth?”

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you because you are on the go on the streets of the world, as Saint Vincent would ask of you even today.

I hope you do not stop, but continue to draw God’s love each day from adoration and to spread it in the world through the infectious good of charity, openness and harmony. I bless you all and the poor whom you encounter. And I ask you, please, that you kindly not forget to pray for me.

Pope FRANCIS

4. Conference of May 30, 1659

**Toward a renewed culture of vocations
to the consecrated life**

To all the members of the Vincentian Family

Rome, 20 September 2017

My dear sisters and brothers,

May the grace and peace of Jesus be always with us!

In this Jubilee Year of the 400th Anniversary of the Vincentian Charism, we have so much for which to be thankful!

One thing for which we need to thank Jesus is the gift of thousands upon thousands of members of the different branches of the Vincentian Family, throughout the 400-year history, who kept the charism alive up to the present day. It is thanks to them that, by the grace of God, the charism was passed on from generation to generation. Thousands of them achieved the state of sanctity, among whom some are recognized officially by the Church as Blessed or Saints. They are now in heaven from which they intercede for us and accompany us on the journey of life, on our own pilgrimage toward a total and eternal union with God.

As we approach the ministry of fostering vocations to the consecrated life within the Vincentian Family and look to its future, as well as that of the Vincentian Charism as such, the depth of our personal engagement, fire, and conviction is of utmost importance. Let one of the concrete fruits of the 400th Jubilee Year be “a renewed culture of vocations to the consecrated life.” By culture of vocations to the consecrated life, I mean an environment where vocations



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Toward a renewed culture of vocations

to the consecrated life will grow naturally, where to respond to Jesus's invitation, "follow me," will be accepted and not be seen as a strange or objectionable life choice. We want an environment where it will be "normal" and not "abnormal" for any young man or woman to decide to follow Jesus, in our specific case, in the footsteps of Saint Vincent de Paul in one of the branches of consecrated life within the Vincentian Family.

When I speak of a renewed culture of vocations to the consecrated life in general, I am very much aware that, in many parts of the world, such a culture of vocations is present. However, in other areas, society is not at all favorable to nurturing a culture of vocations to the consecrated life; it often is opposed to it, using diverse means to undermine such an environment.

In my letter of 25 January 2017, at the beginning of the 400th Anniversary of the Vincentian Charism, I invited every member of the Vincentian Family to take one very concrete step; that is, every member is to bring one new candidate to one of the branches of the Vincentian Family. A little more than half a year has passed since then, and, as we celebrate the Solemnity of our Founder, every one of us can reply individually to the following questions:

- How have I responded to this invitation so far?
- How active have I been in the first half of the jubilee year in this area?
- Did I encourage someone to become active in one of the branches of the Vincentian Family, either in one of the women's or men's Congregations of consecrated life or in one of the lay branches?

As we enter the second half of the jubilee year, I fervently renew this invitation to each member of the Vincentian Family individually, this time concretely directed to the consecrated life, to put every effort possible into helping youth answer Jesus's call. I would like to highlight this goal very specifically as we celebrate the Solemnity of Saint Vincent de Paul on this 400th Anniversary of the Vincentian Charism. I ask each member of the Family to be open and to do all he or she can to encourage by prayer, personal contact, and accompaniment, depending on one's possibilities, a young person to discern if you sense that Jesus is calling him or her to the consecrated life.

Many within the Vincentian Family are working tirelessly in the ministry of fostering vocations, and I am convinced that, during this jubilee year,

we already have seen or will see concrete fruits through new candidates joining the consecrated life, more specifically one of the Congregations within the Vincentian Family. For this, I thank you from the bottom of my heart! Saint Vincent himself would concur:

I thank God for the special devotions you are planning in order to ask God, through the intercession of blessed Saint Joseph, for the spread of the Company. I ask His Divine Goodness to accept them. For more than twenty years I have not dared to ask this of God, thinking that, since the Congregation is His work, its preservation and growth should be left to His Providence alone. Reflecting, however, on the recommendation given us in the Gospel to ask Him to send laborers into His harvest,¹ I have become convinced of the importance and usefulness of this devotion.²

Moving toward a renewed culture to the consecrated life, I would like to suggest focusing on the following three groups:

• Members of the branches of consecrated life within the Vincentian Family

In writing this point, I also am very much aware that I am not saying anything new. The theme of consecrated life has been touched on and spoken about so much throughout the history of the Church. Therefore, I simply would like to add my voice, as well as to launch a new appeal to all the members of the Congregations of consecrated life within the Vincentian Family to work tirelessly to renew the culture of vocations to the consecrated life.

As members of a branch of consecrated life within the Vincentian Family, our priority must be to assume responsibility for vocation ministry and to keep building a culture of vocations to the consecrated life. Every single sister, lay brother, priest, deacon, seminarian, and novice should have this as a vivid and inseparable sign of love toward the charism we have inherited, toward the Congregation of which we are members, toward the Church, toward the Kingdom.

1. Cf. Luke 10:2

2. *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume V, p. 468-469; Letter 1956 to Étienne Blatiron, Superior in Genoa, 12 November 1655. Future references to this work will be indicated using the initials CCD, followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD V, 468-469.

Toward a renewed culture of vocations

• Members of the lay branches of the Vincentian Family

A few months ago, I was approached by an international leader of a lay branch of the Vincentian Family, who brought up a proposal to encourage all the lay branches of the Vincentian Family to become involved actively or continue participating in promoting the culture of vocations to the consecrated life in the Congregations within the Vincentian Family. This lay member expressed this initiative with the following words, “You – sisters, lay brothers, and priests within the Vincentian Family – did and are doing so much for us laity. We would like to do something for you in return.” What wonderful encouragement, support, and initiative coming from a lay member of the Vincentian Family!

I would like to invite and encourage every individual member of a lay branch of the Vincentian Family to continue or to start being involved actively in building the culture of vocations to the consecrated life and also to be involved personally in vocation ministry, in a special way for the different Congregations of the Vincentian Family. This will be a clear sign that building a culture of vocations to the consecrated life is not something reserved exclusively for persons in consecrated life – sisters, lay brothers, priests, deacons, seminarians, and novices – but it is a ministry for all members of the Church, all members of the Vincentian Family, laity as well as those in consecrated life.

The approach, the ways of participating, may differ at times from one branch to another, but the goal remains the same: we, as Vincentian Family, all participate in building the culture of vocations to the consecrated life. How can a lay branch participate concretely in this undertaking?

- Pray regularly, individually or as a group, for new vocations to the consecrated life.
- Be attentive to the signs that Jesus may be calling a young man or woman to follow Him as a sister, lay brother, or priest and encourage him/her in that direction.
- Put forth the option, when speaking with youth, of the consecrated life as a very concrete choice. When speaking of marriage, we also should speak of consecrated life, so it is seen as a very normal choice, a normal call and response to one’s lifelong commitment.

This jubilee year is a wonderful opportunity to continue or start encouraging renewed or new initiatives. The lay branches of the Vincentian Family together can build an environment, a culture, which will be receptive to the call to consecrated life as a normal response to one’s life mission. The lay branches carry on the same charism and spirituality. They are a natural environment where new vocations to the consecrated life are born.

• Persons outside the Vincentian Family

The culture of vocations to the consecrated life is not limited just to the Vincentian Family, but is to be continued, renewed, or undertaken in society as a whole, making it a regular, normal, and logical choice, among other choices, to respond to Jesus’s invitation to follow Him in one’s life mission. On the level of the Congregation, one of the ways we are trying to engage and participate in the renewal of the culture of vocations to the consecrated life is by developing digital and social media, taking new or renewed initiatives and approaches to get the message out to the largest possible audience.

As we prepare to celebrate the Solemnity of Saint Vincent de Paul in this Jubilee Year of the 400th Anniversary of the Vincentian Charism, let us continue to be engaged, to reengage, or begin engaging in building the culture of vocations to the consecrated life wherever we serve. We count on our own capabilities, but always with total commitment and inner fire, so that our love for pastoral ministry to foster new vocations always will be “affective and effective.”

Let us give thanks to God for all the vocations to the consecrated life we are receiving from Jesus’s merciful hands, because, in the end, it is His mercy toward the different Congregations of consecrated life within the Vincentian Family that makes this miracle a reality! As Saint Vincent reminded us,

Prize the honor He has given you in choosing you among thousands to bestow His kindnesses upon you and, through you, on His suffering members. Thank Him often for this in the spirit of humble gratitude, which I ask His Divine Goodness to give you; for, once you have it stamped firmly on your soul, it will increase in you the desire to please God alone and the concern to offer Him all your actions.³

3. CCD V, 614-615; Letter 2068 to Sister Françoise Ménage in Nantes, 17 May 1656

Toward a renewed culture of vocations

May Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, Saint Vincent de Paul and all the Blessed and Saints of the Vincentian Family intercede for us in this undertaking. Have a wonderful celebration! Let us keep praying for one another!

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Father Tomaz MAVRIC, CM
Superior General

SISTER K. APPLER, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Letter of October 3, 2017

Dear Sisters,

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

In this 400th anniversary jubilee year of our charism, I received many messages with your best wishes for the feast of Saint Vincent and the assurance of your prayer. I thank you for them as well as for your sharing about the celebrations for this occasion, held, in the case of most of you, with other members of the Vincentian Family and which, I am sure, will bear fruit in due time.

For my part, on September 27 I had the joy of being in Zaragoza to officially create the Province of España-Este, which brought together, after a long prayerful process, the Sisters of the Provinces of Barcelona and of Pamplona. In the current context of Spain, the birth of this new Province is a sign that the sense of belonging to the Company is stronger than anything. Let us pray for the Sisters and for the future of this new Province.

I reach out to you in particular today to give you news about our Sisters in the Provinces del Caribe and of Mexico, hard hit recently by natural disasters. I have constantly been in contact with the Visitatrixes and Sisters of these two Provinces to assure them of our prayer and assistance. I am very grateful to you for the messages of support and for your generosity.

We can give thanks to God that all of our Sisters are safe and sound. In all the places affected, they work courageously to offer their help to those who have lost everything. On every level, the people have experienced a major trauma. You have seen pictures in the media and can imagine the difficult situation in which the victims find themselves. Some houses of our Sisters have sustained serious damages. For all, reconstruction will require time as well as human and financial resources. The Company will continue to make its contribution, and

Letter of October 3, 2017

if you wish, you may send yours to the Treasurer General's Office. I continue to count above all on the prayer of each one of you for all those affected by these earthquakes and hurricanes.

In the very near future, some of us will meet in Rome for the Symposium of the Vincentian Family that will take place October 12-15. We will all be present in prayer. You will be able to follow what happens over these days on the Vincentian Family website and unite your thoughts and hearts with us.

At the beginning of this month of October, we entrust to Our Lady of the Rosary, "the Virgin who heeds and welcomes the Word of God, the Virgin who prays, the Virgin who offers..." (cf. C. 23) all our intentions and all those people who are waiting for a sign of God's loving care.

As Saint Vincent liked to say, "When the Mother of God has been invoked and taken as patroness in important matters, everything can only go well and accrue to the glory of Jesus her Son" (CCD XIIIb, 3).

Affectionately and with the assurance of my prayers,

Sister Kathleen APPLER
Daughter of Charity

FATHER P. GRIFFIN, CM

**Formation of heart and
formation of moral conscience**

"Alone with God"

Formation of the moral conscience

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths (Gaudium et Spes, 16).

In Gaudium et Spes, the Second Vatican Council gives a compelling description of conscience:

"Conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths" (GS, 16).

Each part of this description invites reflection and conversation. If its truth seems self-evident, we have responsibility for the proper formation of conscience in dialogue with knowledgeable partners under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (Pope Francis has precipitated this type of discussion in his 2016 Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*.)


Spiritual
Life

Formation of the moral conscience

This conference has four divisions:

- some thoughts on freedom, responsibility and consequences;
- the elements in the formation of a good moral conscience;
- the call for conversion which a moral conscience demands;
- a reflection on “being alone with God.”

1. THE FIRST CONSCIENCES

Moral conscience is the ability to recognize good and evil and is influenced by universal principles such as “do good and avoid evil”. In the book of Genesis, when we deal with the story of Adam and Eve and the so-called “fall”, the question inevitably arises: “Why did God put the tree in the garden if God did not want the first couple to eat from it?” A good question! The answer introduces us to the question of freedom. Before God places the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in Eden, the first parents are not free. They had no rules; they could do whatever they wanted because God had not set any limits on their actions. With the introduction of this tree, the couple encounters something that is forbidden: “you may not eat of the fruit of this tree.” And so, seemingly paradoxically, they are free: will they listen to God or to their own hearts? We know how that turns out.

After Adam and Eve have eaten from the tree, they have their first recorded conversation with God.

When they heard the sound of the Lord God walking about in the garden at the breezy time of the day, the man and his wife hid themselves from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. The Lord God then called to the man and asked him: Where are you? He answered, “I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid” (Gen 3:8-10).

The context for “the fall” is almost painfully beautiful and ordinary. The Lord God has come to the Garden at the nice point in the day when it is cool and breezy, a good time to visit with his beloved creation, the human beings, and to spend time with them. Can you imagine walking with God in the wondrous Garden and talking simply to the Creator of everything? (Perhaps it can put us in mind of the disciples walking around with Jesus as God again chooses to visit with humankind.) Yet Adam and Eve hide themselves from God. The silliness of that effort seems evident, but that does not stop us from trying even today.

When God calls out to them, the man answers, “*I heard you in the garden.*” These are the first words that the man speaks to God in conversation. I feel the weight of them. The man and woman knew that they are loved by God and that God had created the garden for them and made it a place where they would be taken care of and be near to God. When they heard God in the garden, they knew that he had come to visit them — perhaps as he often did in the coolness of each day — and ordinarily, they would have run to be with the Lord. But that would not be true on this day. When the man says that he heard God in the garden, he is saying that he knew the closeness of God, he felt God’s goodness and love, and he recognized his absolute connection to God in the very breath in his body. Now, however, the humans are not prepared to walk with God.

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

Then the man says the line that has often characterized the human relationship with God: “*so I hid.*” I feel sad to read that line because people have always tried to separate themselves from God. In the context of the story, it seems to involve the silliness of the couple attempting to conceal themselves from God among the trees of the Garden, and we know how little sense that makes, but it points us to a deeper hiding from God. People might try to conceal themselves in the responsibilities of work or the attractions of a group or the busyness of meetings, but these are all devices. More troublesome might be the hiding from God internally through unquestioned fidelity to a discipline, rigid obedience to a person, or acceptance of particular and unyielding ways of thinking. One can hide from God in all kinds of external but also internal ways. We might be afraid to walk with God in many areas of our lives because we are not prepared for the conversations that might arise. We are not prepared to be questioned or challenged, so we hide. We can understand the fear of Adam and Eve. We feel their need to be reconciled because it is our need as well.

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Adam and Eve have exercised their **freedom**, and now they are **responsible** for their actions because actions have **consequences**. In this case, as in all cases of sin, the consequence involves a separation from God.

The “hiding from God” is one of the truths that Jesus addresses when he comes to dwell among us. He wants to recover that which has gone astray:

“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Lk 19:10; cf 15:1-10).

Jesus repeatedly invites people to walk with him and be his disciples. Many people respond well to that invitation.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:16-17).

Despite our sinfulness, our lack of trust and our hardness of heart, God still loves us. We try to hide from God, but he has sent Jesus to find us, to offer us forgiveness for our sins and to show us how to live.

Like the stories Jesus tells, the story of our first parents draws together many of the important elements of a moral conscience: our freedom, our responsibility for decisions and the consequences that flow from our choices. The first stories of human existence catch us up in the arena of conscience. We can see it again in the tale of the first siblings.

The story of Cain and Abel quickly directs our attention to the violent harm that we can do to one another. Yet in this story, a warning also is offered:

“Sin lies in wait at the door: its urge is for you, yet you can rule over it” (Gen 4:7).

Cain is not fated to sin. He has the freedom and the ability to resist this urge; he can rule over his impulse. Yet, to do so, he must cooperate with the grace of God and control his passion. He need not harm his brother, but once he has made his decision, he stands responsible for his actions and their consequences. He has exercised his moral conscience, which in this case is found lacking.

And so, the second issue. How do we form a moral conscience?

2. THE FORMATION OF A GOOD MORAL CONSCIENCE

Moral conscience requires formation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* holds up the principle of “interiority” as important for conscience:

“It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience. This requirement of interiority is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection” (1779).

Assimilation of information and decisions cannot simply arrive inside a person from outside. They need to be the product of one’s own discernment and careful reflection upon experience. Jesus suggests this hierarchy when he speaks of the origin of human sinfulness:

He summoned the crowd again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile” (Mk 7:14-15).

Jesus says in another place:

“A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil; for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks” (Lk 6:45).

Thus, the formation of a good moral conscience requires a person to reflect and discern carefully on issues that affect his own life and those of others. Let us consider what can contribute to discernment.

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we read: *“The education of the conscience is a lifelong task... Prudent education teaches virtue... In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path, we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord’s Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church”* (1784-1785).

Conceding that the elements supplied in this paragraph are of greater and lesser influence, let me identify five elements which contribute to the lifelong formation of the conscience: the Word of God, the Lord’s

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Cross, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the witness and advice of others, and the authoritative teaching of the Church.

a) Guided by the Word of God

When Jesus invites the disciples to follow him, he does not mean simply to walk in the same general direction as he does in order to get to the next destination. He is inviting them to follow his way of thinking, acting and speaking. The discourses of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel and the parables throughout the Gospels gave direction and promoted thought among those who valued his presence and example. The questions asked of Jesus and by Jesus and the answers are meant to promote a deeper consideration of a truly human life. Jesus, who chose to become one of us to show us the path of authentic humanity, is the great guide in the formation of a healthy moral conscience. He requires our attention and commitment.

Judeo-Christian Scripture contains two great codes for human behavior: the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:2-17) and the Beatitudes (Mt 5:2-12). In different ways, they hold out the most important behavior in a truly human life. Their meanings are not simply "do this" and "do not do that," but a call to think about one's life and how one needs to lead it in fidelity to God and in relation to one's brothers and sisters. These codes provide real grist for the formation of the moral conscience and can be starting points for its formation as enabled through the Word of God.

b) Attentive to the Cross

The foundational Christian symbol is the cross. The cross points to the willingness to bear the burdens and struggles that confront us as we strive to follow the Gospel. It provides the context within which all Christian thinking takes place.

"When I came to you, brothers, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:1-2; cf. 1:22-25).

The importance of the cross within Vincentian theology hardly needs explanation. (See, for example, Robert P. Maloney, C.M. [1995] "The Cross in Vincentian Spirituality", *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 16:1, p. 1-23.) It abides at the center of the spirituality of Vincent and, perhaps more so, Louise.

The cross is more than the instrument of Jesus' execution. It also symbolizes his faithful following of the Father's will in his life, which led to his suffering and death. Nothing could dissuade Jesus from his mission. Reflecting upon following Jesus on that path of fidelity lies at the heart of forming a good conscience.

"If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23).

The cross can take many forms in the life of a Christian, but its substance is always the challenge to live as disciples of the Lord. That suggests a description of a good conscience: it directs a person to follow Jesus faithfully and gladly. The cross involves both surrender and espousal.

We speak about the need to "follow one's conscience", but we also insist that a Christian must "follow the way of the cross". Both lead in the same direction when the conscience is properly formed by the Cross.

c) Guided by the gifts of the Holy Spirit

The role of the Holy Spirit in living the Christian life cannot be exaggerated. The Spirit is the one who helps us to read the Scriptures with a mind and heart open to what God wants to say to us. The Holy Spirit helps us to interpret the authoritative teachings of the Church in a way that finds application in living and decision-making. The Holy Spirit uncovers the charism of our Founders and enables it to find application in a new world. The Holy Spirit can grace us with prudence as we evaluate the "signs of the times." But let me say this clearly: the voice of conscience is not the voice of the Holy Spirit. One is our voice and the other is God's voice. Yet, our voice needs to be informed and guided by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

"I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie; my conscience joins with the Holy Spirit in bearing me witness" (Rom 9:1).

In the Last Supper Discourse in John's Gospel, Jesus promises to send the Advocate who will guide the disciples:

"When he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming. He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn 16:13-14).

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The Holy Spirit supplies the applications and insights that lie hidden from the unaided human mind and guidance for living the moral life and for having confidence in one's convictions. Our Founders stress the role of the Holy Spirit in our actions. *"When we say that the Holy Spirit is at work in someone, it means that this Spirit, residing in that person, gives him or her the same inclinations and dispositions Jesus Christ had on earth, and they cause the person to act in the same way — I'm not saying with equal perfection, but according to the measure of the gifts of that Divine Spirit"* (CCD XII, p. 39. Conference 196 of December 13, 1658).

Clearly, the Holy Spirit works at strengthening and guiding the formation of the Christian conscience.

d) The witness and advice of others

The witness and advice of others are a treasure for the formation of the moral conscience. The example of friends and relatives, the counsel of a spiritual advisor, the guidance of a Sister Servant, the words of a homily or conference, a news story, a documentary or even a theatrical performance can encourage our moral life. When we open our eyes and ears, we can discern the many lessons that are taught each day by our local community and the world.

We can also look to the saints. Their lives offer lessons taught in flesh and blood of well-established and informed moral consciences. Paul recommends to the Christians at Corinth: *"Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ"* (1 Cor 11:1).

For ongoing education for our moral consciences, we can look to spiritual writings: *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis, *The Interior Castle* by Theresa of Avila and *The Introduction to the Devout Life* by Francis de Sales... Our Founders knew all of these works and valued them for the development of their own spirituality and the guidance of their life choices.

Turning to our Founders themselves for more instruction on how to live and make moral decisions offers an abundance of riches. Many of the conferences of Saint Vincent present solid guidance for the proper method of making decisions based on Christian values and virtue.

"By the expression spiritual retreat or spiritual exercises we should understand a withdrawal from all business affairs and temporal

pursuits to apply ourselves seriously to understanding well our interior life, examining carefully the state of our conscience, meditating, contemplating, praying, and preparing our soul in this way so as to be purified from all our sins and all our bad attachments and habits in order to be filled with the desire for virtue. We should also desire to seek and know the Will of God, and, once we know it, to submit to it, unite ourselves to it, and, in this way, to strive for, advance toward, and finally attain our own perfection" (CCD XIIIa, p. 161, Document 44).

"Therefore, Sister, have Him [Jesus] always in view so as to carry out your works according to His intentions, and form your entire interior life according to His example" (CCD VIII, p. 329, L. 3113).

Saint Louise regularly speaks to the Sisters about how they need to be attentive to the demands of their interior life, and she encourages them with her own experience.

Both Vincent and Louise deeply believed in the need for a regular examination of conscience. I am drawn to Vincent's focus upon the resolution to make. For him, the examination of conscience does not highlight the discovery of new faults; it involves the awareness of a particular aspect that needs attention, healing or development. In 1658, Vincent studied the Common Rule with the Sisters.

"But remember: you must never give an account of your conscience without asking what particular vice you should combat or what virtue you should try to acquire, and spend as much time as needed for this — one month, three months, a year, even three years, if necessary — if you find that you have not worked at it hard enough" (CCD X, p. 486. Conference 105 of 17 November 1658).

Louise is not shy as she writes to her Sisters on examen:

"I ask you, for His love, seriously to enter into yourselves to see whether you really belong to God. You will know that you do if you delight in renouncing your will, watching over yourselves in all circumstance, being very submissive to your Superiors, breaking any attachments you may have and excluding from your minds any desire other than to please God in all your actions" (Spiritual Writings, p. 262-263. L. 381, September 1649).

e) The authoritative teaching of the Church

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A final source of guidance for the formation of a moral conscience arises from the authoritative teaching of the Church. In *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council had some helpful things to say about the need for Catholics to form their consciences in this way.

“That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accepts that which is not just the word of men but truly the word of God. Through it, the people of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints, penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life” (Lumen Gentium, 12).

This teaching authority is entrusted to the pope and the bishops: *“Bishops, teaching in communion with the Roman Pontiff, are to be respected by all as witnesses to divine and Catholic truth. In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent. This religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff” (Lumen Gentium, 25).*

The intention is clear. The moral conscience is enlightened by an effort of intelligence brought to the teachings and tradition of the Church. Those with this particular responsibility have a particular claim on our ears, minds and hearts and deserve respect expressed through an attitude of humility and obedience.

One could add other elements that contribute to the formation of a moral conscience. In the end, the most central element remains in the movement of the Holy Spirit as sought and heeded.

There are two remaining parts to this conference. Both of them are much shorter than that which has preceded. The first draws its point through a story and the second, through meditation on a disposition.

3. THE CALL FOR CONVERSION WHICH A MORAL CONSCIENCE DEMANDS AND ENABLES

A conscience does not simply alert us regarding what must be avoided. It also necessarily directs us to what must be pursued in the moral life as we assume our thoughts and our actions. The story of the “repentant thief” offers powerful testimony in this regard.

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

The “good thief” accepts in freedom the responsibility for his actions and the punishment that goes with them. From that position of truth, he turns to Jesus and asks for mercy. Then, Jesus responds without hesitation or qualification. This man will live with God forever and find his completion in the divine presence. Moral conscience involves the experience of responsibility and should prompt our personal conversion, which leads us to God, our true destiny.

4. BEING “ALONE WITH GOD”

This final section will help us reflect on a disposition. The description of conscience as “being alone with God” comes from *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican II). *“In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that.”*

This description found many critics who insisted that it allowed for subjectivity and personal morality, which does not take into account the communal dimension of the Church and the particular authority of Church teaching. One can concede that when anything is pushed too far, the possibility for abuse and exaggerated interpretation grows. Nonetheless, I find the idea of a conscience as a place where one is alone with God compelling.

When one is genuinely “*alone with God*”, all artifice and defensive language disappear. No attempt can be made to explain and qualify that which is evidently and unconditionally true. The limits of one’s knowledge and experience form the foundation for the interpretation and decision, which must be reached under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We might think of the last judgment when we stand before God for that final and personal review of our life. Nothing remains hidden or outside the boundary of consideration. Every question is asked and answered, every decision is owned and judged, but now before the

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unmediated wisdom of God.

I am comfortable with the image of the conscience as that “lower court” in which we attempt to make good decisions based on all the listening and praying that have formed our conscience. We open ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and make the best decisions that we can in the sometimes complex events and competing values of life.

There will never be a “perfectly formed conscience”, but a well-formed conscience, which takes into account the many important elements contributing to moral decision-making, is a proper tool of the faithful Christian. One can employ that tool best when one recognizes the intimate presence of the God who inspires and encourages.

SOME GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Several general principles remain foundational in relation to the moral conscience. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* recognizes “some rules apply in every case:

- One may never do evil so that good may result from it;
- the Golden Rule: ‘Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.’
- charity always proceeds by way of respect for one’s neighbor and his conscience: ‘Thus sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience... you sin against Christ.’ Therefore ‘it is right not to... do anything that makes your brother stumble’” (1789).

We could add the familiar rule:

“A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience” (1800).

One must take all these principles into account as one strives to form a moral conscience and recognize its boundaries.

CONCLUSION

The formation of the heart and the formation of the conscience have much in common. Let me suggest a few means for growing in these dimensions of religious life.

1) A consistent and deliberate inner life

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Growing in virtue and in the development of a conscience does not happen without time set aside for serious reflection and prayer. Quiet and calm are essential.

2) ..An appreciation of the personal and interpersonal dimension of our relationship to God

Each of the virtues says something about that relationship, and the conscience takes shape in the acknowledgement of the divine presence.

3) Guided and developing study

We cannot speak of moral conscience without speaking of formation. The conscience needs the input of wise tutors, Scripture and established teachings. A good understanding of these teachings only arrive over time.

4) A regular “examination of conscience”

Both Vincent and Louise gave importance to the examen. Through it, we come to know ourselves better and more honestly. *“The unexamined life is not worth living,”* Socrates said.

5) Reading a biography of Vincent or Louise

One of my confreres told me that a Vincentian should always be reading a biography of Saint Vincent or Saint Louise. I have expanded that guidance to include their letters and conferences. I concede that I am not as faithful to the instruction as I could be, yet I absolutely believe in its intent. Our communities have been blessed with enlightened and practical Founders.

Consistent contact with their lives and words presents a very useful means of forming our own heart and conscience.

6) A well-read copy of our Constitutions

The carefully gathered words of the Constitutions describe who we are and should be as well as the means to be true to our identity, *“given to God for the service of the poor.”* Formation of the heart, mind and spirit can only be done well with these Constitutions in hand.

7) Finally, a loving community

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We demonstrate and challenge our deepest selves and needs for formation in the presence of one another.

Clearly, one could add other elements to this list, but I will not. I will conclude with the powerful encouragement that Micah offered his listeners. It holds true for us on this day and as a summary of this reflection:

*You have been told, O mortal, what is good,
and what the Lord requires of you:
Only to do justice and to love goodness,
and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).*

Father Patrick GRIFFIN, CM

SISTER N. GATTO, DAUGHTER OF CHARITY

The importance and need of ongoing formation for the formators

Province of St. Louise, USA

Introduction

I would like to begin by recalling the goal of initial formation. Once a woman, young or less young, has shown evidence of an ability for service, relationships, prayer and passion for those who are poor, we share with her how we live together in community, pray together and seek ways together to make the world a better, kinder place for those who live in circumstances of poverty.

Two stories might illustrate how we can carry out formation well:

1. Richard Fragameni, a priest of the Diocese of Albany (New York) told the story of how he would end phone calls with his mother by singing together the song “You are my Sunshine”, which she sang to him when he was a little boy. One day, shortly before she died, he said, “Mom, thanks for teaching me that song.” She said, “I didn’t teach it to you; I sang it to you and you loved it so much you learned it yourself.”

Is our love for our vocation so contagious that Sisters in initial formation love it as much as we do and are committed to their own ongoing formation?

2. Due to a birth defect, a young boy named Billy only had one arm. When he was seven years old, his mother enrolled him a month late in religious instruction classes in their new parish. The volunteer religious education teacher, who had been with this class for one month



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already, was afraid that one of the children would say something inappropriate to Billy or tease him. But at the end of the class, all had gone well, and the catechist had forgotten her worries about Billy. She told the children that it was time for their closing prayer, saying, "Let's put our two hands together and make the Church"...and then she remembered about Billy. She glanced over to where he was sitting in time to see the little girl who sat next to him putting up her hand and saying, "It's okay, Billy. I can make the Church with you."

Is this not what we do when we accompany someone on the path toward becoming a Daughter of Charity?

In order to form future Daughters of Charity, we can't do it alone. We must join our hands to the hands of:

- our Founders,
- our Sisters who have gone before us,
- our Sisters who formed us and continue to do so,
- those who form formators,
- young Sisters who humbly allow themselves to be formed.

During the Seminarium in May 2011, Fr. Amedeo Cencini said, "*All formation is permanent formation, not defined primarily by how long it extends in time, but rather by the depth/intensity it reaches in the life of a person.*"

Building on the work of Father Cencini, a clinical psychologist at a treatment center for religious and clergy said during a workshop for formators:

"If formation does indeed aim toward total identification with Christ, and reaches toward that depth, it will continue to engage one for the whole of one's life. If formation were simply a matter of changing behaviors and acquiring new ones, a limited amount of time would be sufficient. But if formation is about entering into the mystery of the heart of Christ, learning to pulse with his love for the Father and for humanity, then the formation process takes a whole lifetime" (Luisa Saffiotti, Ph.D).

The deeper one goes in initial stages of formation, the farther one will go in ongoing formation. It is clear that Sisters who undertake the ministry of the formation must continually form themselves.

Let us discuss attitudes, obstacles and some means of formation for the Sisters who are engaged in formation ministry.

FIVE IMPORTANT ATTITUDES/OBSTACLES

I. COMPETENCY AND SELF-CONFIDENCE

There are four levels of competence. Let's use a concert pianist as an example.

* *Unconscious Competence* or "*I no longer know that I know.*" This is the concert pianist who is so accomplished in her skill that she doesn't have to think about it. No music sheets, just beautiful playing.

* *Conscious Competence* or "*I know that I know.*" This concert pianist knows that she is able to play very well but must always think about it, practice much and keep her music sheets in front of her.

* *Conscious Incompetence* or "*I know that I do not know.*" Here is a budding concert pianist who knows what she doesn't know and how to learn it, and works very hard at it.

* *Unconscious Incompetence* or "*I do not know that I do not know.*" This piano player hasn't a clue how poorly she plays, but just plays on without a care, and thoroughly enjoys it, although her listeners may not.

As we reflect on this analogy, an obstacle for us as formators is in thinking we are supposed to be experts, unconsciously competent as formators. Of course, there is no such thing in the spiritual life, and this can keep us from continuing to learn and be formed ourselves. The best level to be at is consciously incompetent because that is what enables us to listen to the other with openness and attention, not assuming that we know what they mean but always, in simplicity, willing to ask clarifying questions.

II. ESSENTIAL FREEDOMS AND THE SEVEN CAPITAL SINS

How much control do you think we have over what we say, think and do? The hardest is to control what we think. We may never express in words our frustration with other people or take any action to hurt them, but we are more likely to allow the negative thoughts about them to fester in our mind without even realizing it. We thus need to understand some essential freedoms and the sins that limit us.

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1. The freedom to make choices, which depends on having a clear sense of our values. Without them, it would be impossible to choose, especially between two good things. The sin that gets in the way is **avarice**, the excessive pursuit of material possessions, but not limited to possessions. It could also include experiences and relationships.

2. The freedom to take charge of one's own life, or autonomy, self-directing freedom. Although we depend on God's Providence, we also take charge of that for which we are responsible. The sin of **anger** limits us when our feelings are uncontrolled. To the extent that we can, we should control our reactions.

3. The freedom to make and keep commitments has to do with responsibility, the opposite of which is the sin of **lust**, defined as an uncontrollable passion or longing that takes away our attention from other things and keeps us from honoring our commitments. Lust is not limited to sexual desires.

4. The freedom to care and be cared about concerns the quality and intensity of our relationships, the opposite of which is **pride**, an excessive consideration of one's self without regard for others. Pride is also in conflict with true humility, knowing who we are and who we aren't and understanding our need for others.

In the conference held March 15, 1654, Vincent addresses "Secret Pride". "*It is the cause of all the sins we commit,*" says Vincent (CCD IX, 530). This conference is well worth reading.

5. The freedom to change is dependent on our self-discipline, and the sin of **gluttony** prevents us from this kind of discipline because it is excessive and ongoing consumption, not just of food and drink.

6. The freedom to contribute requires self-confidence, the honest assessment of one's abilities and the courage to be oneself and share one's gifts. The opposite is **sloth**, defined as excessive laziness or the failure to act and utilize one's talents.

7. The freedom to choose our attitude no matter what the circumstances (cf. *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl). This spiritual freedom is robbed when we give in to envy. The desire to have an item or experience that someone else possesses keeps us from living in our own circumstances with freedom.

Here is a definition of essential freedom on a more humorous note.

*"If you can sit quietly after difficult news,
If in financial downturns you remain perfectly calm,
If you can see your neighbor travel to a fantastic place without
a twinge of jealousy,
If you can eat happily whatever is on your plate,
If you can fall asleep after a day of running around without the
help of a sleep aide,
If you can always find contentment just where you are,
You are probably... a dog"* (Jack Kornfield).

III. CONVERSION

Theologian Bernard Lonergan offers what he calls the transcendental precepts:

- "Be attentive": listen and notice what is before you.
- "Be intelligent": ask questions so as to understand.
- "Be reflective": once you understand, ask, "What's it got to do with me?"
- "Be responsible": act based on this reflection. Change your behavior. Insight doesn't change behavior; behavior changes behavior.

Our obstacle to conversion is failing to be aware of the present moment, inattentive to what lies before us and not becoming responsible. Instead, we merely react because we fail to reflect on what presents itself to us. The result is that we do not allow ourselves to be transformed.

IV. THE VIRTUES OF HUMILITY, SIMPLICITY AND CHARITY

The Guide for Initial Formation says that to accept the mission of formation means:

- *Recognizing that the Holy Spirit is the principal Formator; and allowing herself to be formed by and receptive to the Spirit's actions;*
- *Entering into a process of humility, conversion, and personal formation;*
- *Accepting the Paschal Mystery in her own life* (p. 54).

Some stories about Pope John XXIII illustrate this fact.

A Vatican official told the Pope it would be "absolutely impossible" to open the Second Vatican Council by 1963. "*Fine, we'll open it in 1962,*" he answered. And he did.

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In the midst of the turmoil of the Second Vatican Council, the Pope prayed late into the night for direction and peace. Finally, looking at the Blessed Sacrament, he said, “*Lord, it’s Your Church, and I am going to bed!*”

Doesn’t that sound like Constitution 51a: “*Formation is above all else the work of God living and acting in the heart of the person who is called. Next it is the work of the Sister herself, prompted by the desire for increasing fidelity to her vocation.*”

So, we formators are at best, third! And like Saint Peter we can say, “*We have neither silver nor gold, but what we have we give you... in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, rise and walk*” (cf. Acts 3:6).

V. ACCOMPANIMENT

To accompany someone means to “companion them, as on a journey”. One of the documents from the 2011 Seminarium says that “*to accompany means essentially to ‘share the bread of the journey’. This does not mean that the formator must reveal her intimate life, as if the relationship of accompaniment was a friendship. A formator is never more convincing than when she knows how to share her faith. The one accompanying and the other person are both being accompanied by the Spirit of God, the only formator. In this sense we can truly say that in accompanying someone on the path of the Spirit, the formator experiences her own ongoing formation*” (Cencini, *The truth frees you*, p. 8).

In order to be able to give, one has to be in relationships that provide accompaniment and nurturing. Thus, let us engage in the *Board of Directors Activity*.

Perhaps you sit on a Board of Directors for a hospital, school, university, or social service agency. Boards are comprised of many different types of professionals who bring various backgrounds and skill sets to share perspectives on the issues that are on the agenda. Boards are effective when their members aren’t afraid to ask questions of those who administer the work.

So, imagine that you have your own personal “Board of Directors” to assist you. In your notepad draw a large table and put 10 chairs at the table.

- Who sits on your Board? Indicate the name or initials of the members.
- Are there members who are both older than you and younger than you?
- Are there both men and women?
- Are there both lay and religious?
- Are there members who are deceased but continue to influence your life?
- Are your own initial formation directors on your Board?
- Is there someone whose term you wish was over?
- Did you find you had too many seats? Too few?
- Are there people on the Board whom you wouldn’t have chosen five years ago?
- Do the people on your Board know that they are on your Board? You might consider telling them.
- Would you be on their Board?
- Who chairs your Board of Directors?
- Is God on your Board? Saint Vincent? Saint Louise?
- What’s on the agenda for the next Board Meeting?

IMPORTANT FORMATION TOPICS FOR FORMATORS

1. Relating well in appropriate ways.

Those in initial formation are not your friends. I recently met with a Seminary Sister who was offended because she had trouble accepting that the directress was not going to be her friend but accompany her.

2. Listening well and accurately reflecting back what you hear.

Separate what you thought someone meant from what she really meant.

3. “Trust Your Training.”

Let me explain this with a story. I was preparing to run in a marathon (26.2 miles) and was working my way up to that mileage by running long runs on the weekends at the park nearby. One Saturday, I set out to run 18 miles, three loops of six miles around the park. On my third loop, another runner came along side of me and asked if he could join me. “Of course,” I said, eager to have a distraction. As we ran along he told me how he had run several marathons already, and I told him that I was training for my very first one. He said, “My advice is that you trust your training. I can tell by the way you are breathing that you have trained well and that you will be successful in completing the

Importance of formation for formators

race. So trust your training when, at about mile 13 you will see many runners quit the race. You'll feel like quitting too, but trust your training and keep on running." He was right, not just about the race, but about everything that I have prepared to do and have been able to accomplish. He was also right about wanting to quit sometimes.

In formation work, there are many reasons why we might get frustrated; we might feel like what we see in a candidate or young Sister is just our imagination, especially when our gut is telling us something that others either don't see or want to see, but we have to trust our training. We should trust our intuition and name the behaviors that concern us.

4. Know the difference between getting away and running away.

5. "Bear one another's burdens."

In addition to your big ears, develop big shoulders. In other words, "It's not about you!"

6. "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together" (African proverb).

A formation directress should also have

- spiritual direction
- supervision
- mentoring and peer support groups.

7. Resources that may be available in your area

* Religious Formation Conference (workshops and publications). This national Roman Catholic organization serves religious institutes of women and men with programs and services for those in the ministry of initial and lifelong formation, and general congregational membership. The ForMission Program is a two-year program designed to assist men and women responsible for formation to be agents of personal and communal transformation.

* Theology courses at Catholic universities

* Group process classes

* Training in spiritual direction to understand more deeply the difference between it and formation direction.

8. Examination of conscience

Listen to this intriguing story. One day a Native American grandfather had been caught in a struggle with a friend. His grandson had observed the incident and asked, "Grandfather, how are you feeling?" The grandfather thought for a few minutes and responded, "I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is the vengeful, angry, violent one. The other wolf is the loving compassionate one." The grandson asked him, "Which wolf will win the fight in your heart?" The grandfather answered, "The one I feed."

At the end of the day, as we do our examination of conscience, we can ask ourselves which wolf we fed throughout the day.

9. Use a self-evaluation tool and share it with others.

It provides us an opportunity to be accountable.

10. PRAY, PRAY, PRAY.

Saint Paul spells out our paradox: "We prove we are God's servants by our purity, knowledge, patience and kindness; by a spirit of holiness, by a love free from affectation; by the word of truth and by the power of God: we are called impostors yet we are truthful; nobodies who are in fact well-known; said to be dying and here we are alive; punished but not put to death; thought most miserable and yet we are always rejoicing; poor yet we enrich many. We seem to have nothing yet everything is ours" (2 Corinthians 6:4, 6-7a, 8-10). "And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

CONCLUSION

We need Daughters of Charity who are humble, simple and charitable to show new Daughters of Charity the way. In the words of Mother Guillemin: "A Daughter of Charity can be recognized by the following marks:

-a certain simplicity of bearing and language which allows her to be at ease everywhere without seeking either to attract attention or to remain unnoticed;

Importance of formation for formators

-a spontaneous awareness of the needs of others and a devoted service sought but never imposing itself;

-a willingness to collaborate, to work in common, to renounce one's own opinion or one's personal interest;

-a prompt obedience in relinquishing duties as well as accepting them;
-a universal love able to focus itself upon each individual entrusted to her" (Circular Letter of February 2, 1966).

Sister Nora GATTO
Daughter of Charity

SISTER G. ANIEBONAM, DAUGHTER OF CHARITY

**Accompaniment
as an effective way to grow
in following the example of Christ in the
Company**

May 15, 2017

A

Accompaniment

Accompaniment is a person-centered journey; it offers pure friendship to move forward in life. It is a spiritual journey designed to deepen awareness, to explore and reflect on spirituality, especially Vincentian spirituality, and thus enable faithful living in response to the Christ of Saint Vincent, albeit at the pace of the individual.

This relationship can be enormously helpful for the faith and life of a person (pre-postulant, postulant, Seminary Sister, young Sister or others) because the journey of life brings many challenges and choices, hence the need for effective support. This implies that what happens in accompaniment influences life and produces change and progress.

Accompaniment is a privileged way to experience attentive listening and a deeper look at God's invitations and calls. It generally assists with discernment in order to decide well and make bold and charitable choices. The process is unique to each individual and must take into account where she is in her vocational growth. The concrete ways of accompanying pre-postulants, postulants, Seminary Sisters and Sisters in initial formation underscore the fact that accompaniment is engaged between a Christian who is ready to go "where she would rather not go" (cf. Jn 21:18) with another with who is probably still feeding on milk like a child (cf. 1 Cor 3:2) but has a disposition to follow Christ and go "where she would rather not go".

Accompaniment, a way to grow in the following of Christ

Accompaniment should help a person make sense of her journey, develop a close relationship with God, others, persons who are poor, creation... and make life-giving and creative choices. The purpose is to allow the Spirit of God to reveal the direction, which engenders a response to become a person more in the likeness of God by availing of the resources of the Company for living out her vocation and mission.

Accompaniment facilitates the daily response to the presence and action of God and becoming deeply rooted in the spirit of the Company. It encourages living in a more authentic way in spite of the challenges of society today where social media, advertisement and the like can take us in other directions. Accompaniment allows the authentic seeker to have the courage of her convictions, so necessary to survive the wave of contradictions.

The call of God is discerned with time, and today it requires evidence not only of a feeling that God calls – “I feel called by God” – but a concrete daily living of the tenets of Christian life. A Daughter of Charity is first and foremost a Christian. It is wise to find out if the Charter makes sense to a candidate or Seminary Sister. Does she frown at the invitations presented in the Charter or even have repugnance for it?

Accompaniment fosters serenity that facilitates a balanced life style. The problem of activism challenges Daughters of Charity; if we are not doing something, we feel we are in the wrong place. Pope Francis has called us to reflect on the message of Luke 10:38-42 (Martha and Mary) because activism can leave us in a state of breathlessness even in the midst of great and exciting new initiatives. Therefore, accompaniment must lead to daring to take the path towards interiority that breaks the pattern of non-stop activity and forges a new path of stillness, which can produce a rich and lasting fruit in a person “*given to God in community for the service of persons who are poor*”.

Accompaniment also produces increased self-awareness. It is very difficult to know oneself if one is constantly running from one activity to another. If we are to know God, to know ourselves and to grow in understanding our relationships with those who are poor, collaborators and creation, etc., we need to stop and listen.

Accompaniment intends to encourage the person accompanied to rely on God, become more aware of His presence, both in her personal life and in the world, especially with the challenging realities across the globe, and look at these situations with the boldness of charity. This awareness

opens the door to increased responsiveness to God for new missionary momentum and makes room for growth in becoming more like Christ.

Those of us who have experienced this privileged companionship know that it is freeing, empowering, affirming, a support on the journey of faith, etc. Accompaniment plays a significant role of animation in the capacity for transformation, going beyond initial feelings. As she advances, the pre-postulant, postulant or Sister in initial formation makes choices that confirm her membership as a Daughter of Charity, “*adorer of the Father, servant of His loving plan and evangelizer of those who are poor*” (cf. C. 8a). Growing to adulthood is a process of “becoming”.

Some questions to evaluate the situation of a young woman in formation:

- Is she becoming more available?
- Does the statement, “In God’s will is my peace” make sense to her?
- Do the values of the Company reinforce her personal and cultural values?
- Are the values she proclaims consonant with her needs?
- Can she defer gratification?
- Does she have an appropriate sense of autonomy?
- What is her capacity to persevere?
- Does she always want to acquire what is in vogue or trending?

“Often beg Our Lord... to fill the persons who enter the Company with the spirit He wants all of you to have, so that, by this means, you may continue the good that has been started” (CCD X, 95).

It is important to note that the accompaniment provided through the end of Seminary is essentially formative direction, which encompasses teaching, instruction, mentoring, etc. and calls for regular encounters. Accompaniment drives the process and progress of value internalization, evidenced by change in attitudes and behaviors, which points to choices of an authentic life. It includes re-reading life experiences and a growing disposition to share with the directress, companions, etc. in order to be clear about the place of the **community** vis-à-vis **apostolate** for her future mission.

Thomas Merton considers accompaniment simply as “*a way of leading us to see and obey the real Director — the Holy Spirit hidden in the depths of our soul.*”

Accompaniment, a way to grow in the following of Christ

According to Jesuit priests Barry and Connolly, accompaniment concerns “*help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship.*”

I have found that experiencing God’s grace makes possible the healing of deep hurts and brokenness. Accompaniment enables the other person to open herself to God’s gaze of mercy and grace and to perceive the circumstances she must face. Gradually, she begins to see through the eyes of faith. She learns to bring her woundedness to God who heals and transforms it. She can then extend His grace to others with awesome audacity.

Special attention is given to illusions in order to verify motivations and gradually but steadily purify them. Does the young woman’s experience meet her expectations? *Community is for mission, not for oneself... The boldness of fraternal charity makes us leave our comfort zone for a new missionary momentum... “I was a stranger and you welcomed me”,* but who is the stranger? Granted, each woman will grow into her vocation and the mission of the Company, but there need to be some indicators of a sense of joy and a deepening openness of spirit to receive God’s calls.

There must be a disposition to **serve**. I do not want to use the word **do**, to avoid confusion with activism, for we are essentially called to **be** Daughters of Charity. Therefore, doing and being are inseparable since our doing depends on the quality of our being. This is what we are celebrating in the 400th anniversary of the Vincentian Charism.

Both the young woman in formation and whoever is accompanying her are convinced that God is at work directly in and through them as long as they are open. The young woman should interiorize her new identity. One of the most priceless gifts of accompaniment is empowering her to own the gratuitous gift bestowed on her as a Daughter of Charity and as a beloved Daughter of God.

It takes grace to silence voices critical of aspects of her history and to break patterns such as social media use. With grace, a young woman is emboldened to recognize her false self in order to step into freedom and living from her true self, loved into life by God. There is nothing like being the person we are created to be, knowing we are dearly loved and being formed to be more like Christ. The faltering steps on this road

of transformation do not matter; we must be open to the transforming Spirit (cf. Eph 3:13-16).

Tending well to the soul is integral to accompaniment. There are endless ways to tend to the soul. They vary with personality and the stage to which grace has brought us, but what stays constant is a deep relationship with the One who has given us life. Spiritual growth is unattainable unless we tend well to our relationship with God, a relationship seen in the way we act “in the manner [God] asks” of us, as Saint Louise expressed it in her Spiritual Testament. Accompaniment is an effective means that provides guidance into many enriching means of keeping the relationship with the God vibrant and dynamic.

Accompaniment is an effective means to open the door to this transforming friendship with God who offers us healing, fulfillment and joy. It helps us discover the importance of consistency and commitment on the journey.

Accompaniment is an effective way to grow in following the example of Christ in the Company of the Daughters of Charity and thus a veritable support so that the relationship with God becomes more clearly seen in daily living with Sisters, whomever they may be.

Accompaniment facilitates internalization of the values of the life and vocation of the Company, which results in unity of life and integration. “*The same love inspires and directs their contemplation and their service...*” (C. 7).

Conclusion

A Daughter of Charity develops a close relationship with God, and the place of God becomes clearer in her life.

A Daughter of Charity commits to a closer relationship with persons who are poor and seeks to become more involved in service to others. Truly, no form of misery is foreign to her (cf. C. 11).

The sense of belonging to the Company, in which she is given to God for the mission, is obvious.

Sister Gloria ANIEBONAM
Daughter of Charity

Some concrete ways of accompaniment

Formation is an apostolate of presence; hence, accompaniment is a special way of being present that is central to the responsibility of the directress for whatever stage she is assigned. It is important to remind ourselves constantly that God always reaches out to the person and calls her; the initiative is always His. What the formator does is to support what goes on in spiritual direction, for those privileged to have it.

The formator opens the Constitution to the person in formation (cf. C. 50). God is central, and the formator simply helps the other in responding joyfully to God. Our God is never outdone in generosity; hence, our response needs to be robust. What is the consequence of such a response? Does the young woman in formation enter into the intimacy that God wants to have with her so that she can recognize Him in those who are poor? The formator is there to help in the process of growth in intimacy with God and commitment to mission. From that intimate relationship with God, the young woman grows in the spirit of availability for the community and mission to which she is sent – whatever and wherever. This is the fruit of a relationship with God.

The example of Jesus with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (cf. Luke 24:13-35) serves as a model accompaniment. Keeping this in mind, I suggest the following aspects that should characterize a relationship of accompaniment in formation.

1. LISTENING

On the road with the two disciples, Jesus primarily listened. We can consider accompaniment as being a companion to someone on a journey. The formator should listen and seek to understand what is shared. For beginners in accompaniment, the directress often initiates the conversation and, having listened, asks more questions to help the person in formation to explore further or to delve deeper into her life. Her role is “calling the person on”. A willing disposition, openness and trust in the Sister accompanied in this listening process will determine her

growth. Listening implies giving the person space and time to tell her story. The formator offers her full attention and empathy to the young Sister: the value of this gift cannot be calculated in economic terms.

2. ACCEPTANCE AND AFFIRMATION

Acceptance and affirmation in accompaniment are of vital significance. The pre-postulant, postulant, Seminary Sister or Sister younger in vocation who is being accompanied should experience total acceptance and affirmation of the person she is in the process of becoming. The person whom we accompany should have a sense that we who journey with her believe in her. It is necessary that the formator consider her eminently trustworthy and earn her confidence so that she can share her story completely and freely. She should leave the time of sharing feeling very affirmed in who she is and in her relationship with God. The formator helps her to recognize her worth and own it. This is necessary to enable her to grow in the capacity to stand alongside persons who are poor and vulnerable, in Jesus’ spirit of humility. The conversation with the formator leads her to discover her “true self” and her values in a new and deeper way.

3. OPENNESS

Accompaniment reflects authentic relationships between persons with the disposition to interact. Openness, required of both formator and candidate or Sister, facilitates listening. A person accompanied should be able to say, “*I can, in perfect trust and love, express some of my negative feelings, which I might have been afraid to entrust to someone else.*” It is about giving up certain inhibitions and having the freedom and willingness to share a personal journey from the heart. In the spirit of openness, we share a real commitment to the faith that does justice in the boldness of charity, thanks to our shared vision of the common good.

4. PERSONAL SALVATION HISTORY

Accompaniment helps her to get in touch with her personal salvation history, the story of God at work in her life. It is about helping a person to understand who God is for her and to discover her operative image of God with its consequences for her relationship with the world and persons who are hurting.

Answering questions like “How do you understand God in your life?” or “Who is God for you?” helps a person to love God with all her mind

Some concrete ways of accompaniment

and heart. We have to unite our intellect to our feelings. We must make sure in formation to cultivate a balanced lifestyle and recognize God in all people, things and events.

5. CLARIFICATION

Another role of accompaniment is helping to clarify situations. The formator acts as an instrument of clarification, breaking open life experiences and attitudes in the light of the Word of God. Because we are a Society of Apostolic Life, the formator should help establish parallels between daily activities and spiritual experiences and unite them, leading the person accompanied to respond to questions such as:

- How does this affect you as a Daughter of Charity?
- What is your affective and effective response?
- Are you more fully appreciating the virtues of your vocation, the evangelical spirit, cordiality, compassion, etc.?

6. BOLD CHALLENGE

“How foolish you are!” (Lk 24:25). Jesus challenged the two travelers on the road to Emmaus. The formator, while gentle and concerned, should dare to issue bold challenges for the Sister because she has the responsibility to help her to stay honest in her relationship with God, herself and others (Sisters, persons who are poor, collaborators). God gives the grace to gently and firmly point out inappropriate reactions and behaviors or signs of immaturity. Facing up to reality is a necessary part of the process of accompaniment. The formator owes this boldness of charity to those she accompanies to help them grow.

7. ACCOUNTABILITY

Accompaniment is related to Jesus’ act of breaking the bread for His followers and thus to the sacramental life of the person in formation. The formator should ask her about her sacramental life to ascertain the value she places on it. Is the Eucharist a highlight of her day? How does it affect her life? This demands accountability and an awareness that she is answerable to God and the Company. Through her objectivity, the formator helps the young woman to appreciate that she is authentic to the extent she is responsible and accountable for all she has received from God: her life, vocation, gifts and talents. She must willingly make the best use of what God has entrusted to her, in a spirit of adoration and service. The sacraments and good liturgy are also concrete ways

of accompaniment and require explanation, participation and attention. The Sister in formation becomes more responsible in her service and recognizes persons who are poor as her “lords and masters” whom she must serve “with compassion, gentleness...” (C. 10b).

8. TEACHING

Part of accompanying Sisters in formation is teaching; what goes on in initial formation is mostly formative direction where a lot of teaching takes place during personal encounters. Sometimes others are invited to assist with this, but the formator needs to process with each person/group what is going on within to ascertain good understanding and internalization of the content. Besides the regular instructions, the formator needs to choose to teach some subjects or at least have some input in some areas. The formator is there to help those in formation understand needs, values and emotions and their manifestation in attitudes and behaviors in daily living (community/apostolate). Mentoring in words and action can never be overemphasized.

9. REFERRAL TO COUNSELING

In some instances, professional help may be necessary to respond to the particular need of the Sister in formation. In this case, the formator refers to a professional because her own background and skills are specific and generally insufficient to respond to such needs. Of course, there can be a counseling dimension to a direction relationship, in the sense of helping her to become her “true self”, but when barriers erected by the Sister in formation hinder the action of the Spirit, we need professional therapeutic help as well as the Sister’s openness and honest response to it.

10. DISCERNMENT

The formator explains to the Sister in formation the nature of true discernment. It is not just human decision making but a constant search for the will of God in her life. In other words, accompaniment helps to learn how to listen, pray, identify signs and discover God’s will in her daily self-giving to serve persons who are poor with the boldness of charity. The Sister in formation learns to cultivate an attitude based on the conviction that “in God’s will is my peace”. The life and example of the formator help her to understand the necessity of always making decisions at the foot of the Cross or at the foot of the altar after seeking the help of the Spirit in discerning the choices to make. Much time

Some concrete ways of accompaniment

goes into encouraging the person to learn to choose the “real” good as opposed to the “apparent” good.

11. CONFIDENTIALITY

A relationship of accompaniment is strictly confidential. The only exception to that would be sure knowledge that the person is contemplating murder, suicide or an abusive relationship, especially with a child. Then the law requires bringing forth such information to authorities in order to help her. If a Sister indicates that she is having suicidal thoughts, the formator needs to get that person help right away; it is a moral obligation, but also a civil obligation by law. But that rarely happens. In all other circumstances, it is a confidential relationship. The service of listening to a postulant or any other person demands that the formator does not tell anyone else what has been shared. If the formator herself has someone who accompanies her, she may say, “I am working with a person, and I am not sure how to guide her through this point.” Notice that the formator has preserved the other person’s anonymity.

12. INTEGRATION/INTERNALIZATION

Accompaniment is a tool for integration. It helps the Sister in formation to integrate the various aspects of her life - body, soul and spirit - and to put all of her life experience and knowledge at the service of her relationship with God. In other words, accompaniment is geared towards helping her discover the “self” God calls her to be. Honest prayer and reflectiveness, in solitude and with others, facilitate this integration. When there is integration/internalization, there is growth in spiritual discipleship, maturity and an attitude of servant.

13. PRAYER

Obviously, we frequently take the experience of accompaniment to prayer, lifting up the mind and heart to God. The formator must teach everything about prayer and its importance; she should also request information about the prayer life of the Sister in formation. Prayer, in conjunction with attentive listening to her story, can help her understand what is going on in her life. The formator is there to help her to understand the important role of silence and collectedness in her life. Sometimes there can be profound periods of silence during the dialogue. I have found that those moments of silence create strong bonds with the Sister in formation and are opportunities for the Spirit to “speak” very loudly. It is important to bring out the significance of silence and

recollection in our lives, even while serving persons who are poor.

The formator does not replace the Holy Spirit but “walks with” the Sister in formation. She joins with her but does not always push her: she should respect her personal freedom. She accompanies her in order to make way for the Spirit and encourages the Sister or the candidate to be attentive and vigilant to stay on God’s path.

The *Guide for Initial Formation* is very clear about the content and expectations for each stage. More than ever, we need lots of patience in accompanying the young women who come to the Company today. In effect, the process calls for more time. The *Guidelines for Initial Formation* from the last Seminarium also present accompaniment very clearly.

Sister Gloria ANIEBONAM
Daughter of Charity

Sense of belonging and participation in the life of the Company

Convictions and commitments

B

*Belonging
and
Participation*

Introduction

In this presentation, I will try to consider the sense of belonging and participation in the life of the Company, indicating some essential convictions related to this theme and offering some guidelines for encouraging commitment.

As those responsible for formation, you are aware that everything in formation is directed toward helping the person in formation to take on more deeply her identity as a Daughter of Charity: vocation/mission, essentially connected to belonging to the Company.

The *Guide for Initial Formation* indicates that one of the objectives of the Seminary stage is to help the Sister to *grow in her awareness of belonging to the Company, discover her responsibility as a member and commit herself faithfully to its service*. At the same time, she should learn to participate actively in *building Community, seeing it as a reality of faith and understanding that community life is truly a mystery of communion lived for the mission*.¹

Sensitive to the action of grace, the mission of formators is to show the Sisters in formation the beauty of following Christ, help them discover the spirituality of the Founders and the joy of belonging to the Company, as well as to point out obstacles that appear along the journey.²

1. Cf. *Guide for Initial Formation*, p. 89

2. Cf. Apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata*, 65-66

All of this work of formation takes place in the context of today's increasingly complex world. This challenges us to live within the complexity with an attitude of wisdom that attentively looks at and listens to reality with eyes enlightened by faith, welcomes the signs of the times as calls and challenges, discerns and *tests everything* in order to *retain what is good*³ and learns to live out what is essential. Therefore, forming oneself and forming others means considering life as formation in and of itself, such that every situation becomes formative, a mediation through which the Lord makes Himself present.

Today's reflection consists of these three points:

- I. Belonging to the Company: spiritual and juridical connections
- II. Belonging to the Company: a commitment of fidelity
- III. Belonging and participation: a Company enriched by the participation of all Sisters.

I. BELONGING TO THE COMPANY: SPIRITUAL AND JURIDICAL CONNECTIONS

The joy of belonging

To begin, it seems appropriate to consider belonging to the Company from the broader perspective of belonging to God and to the Church. The human person is called into life, and in entering into it, bears and discovers within the image of God who called him or her. *"Every creature expresses and is called to express a particular aspect of the thought of God. There he finds his name and his identity; he affirms and ensures his freedom and originality."*⁴

Belonging to the Company represents a privileged experience of faith and ecclesial communion. Baptism introduces us into the Church from which we receive the treasures of grace. *"It is my great hope,"* Pope Francis said, *"that all the baptized may experience the joy of belonging to the Church and rediscover that the Christian vocation, just like every particular vocation, is born from within the People of God, and is a gift of divine mercy."*⁵

3. Cf. 1 Thes 5:21

4. Cf. *New vocations for a new Europe*, 13

5. Pope Francis, Message for the 53rd World Day of Prayer for Vocations

Sense of belonging and participation in the life of the Company

In a catechesis on the Church, Pope Francis emphasized the close connection that should exist between “being Christian” and “belonging to the Church”: *“We are not isolated, and we are not Christians on an individual basis, each one on his or her own, no, our Christian identity is to belong! We are Christians because we belong to the Church. It is like a last name: if the first name is “I am Christian”, the last name is “I belong to the Church.”*”⁶

Signs of belonging to the Company

The sense of belonging is authentic when it reflects our identity, and it is credible when it is shown in love for vocation and for the Company, in genuine care for each member of the community and in an ability to accept difficult situations. Saint Louise went so far as to say, *“We make known that we love it [our vocation] when, to remain in it, we willingly suffer all the difficulties found there.”*⁷

In this complex world where lines are often blurred, it is important to emphasize that belonging extends beyond a juridical fact resulting from admission to the Company when the candidate decides to become a Daughter of Charity. Belonging to the Company includes some concrete, visible expressions, such as living an attitude of servant in an evangelical spirit of humble and simple love⁸ and constant availability so that the Company can fulfill its mission. Other very significant expressions include interest in formation⁹, participation and co-responsibility for everything that affects the Company as a whole.¹⁰

A real sense of belonging prevents considering and experiencing relationships with the community in terms of profit or expense. Mutual relationships in community life are governed by unconditional gift, limitless generosity and gratuitous gift of the heart without calculation or limits. The person comes to understand herself when she sees herself as belonging since where her treasure is, there is her heart.¹¹ The sense of belonging brings security, interest in the common good, enthusiasm and fulfillment.

6. Pope Francis, General Audience of June 25, 2014

7. Gobillon, French Ed. 1886 –Volume 2 - Chapter IV p. 72-73 - Love of Vocation

8. Cf. Constitution 24d

9. Cf. Constitution 49 and following

10. Cf. Constitutions 34; 35; 63

11. Cf. Mt 6:21

Consequences of belonging: rights and obligations

The fact of belonging to the Company entails a set of consequences:

- accepting the local community as the primary place of belonging,
- being sent by the Company,
- living and acting in a way consistent with the fundamental commitment of the Daughters of Charity,
- assuming chastity, poverty and obedience according to the Constitutions and Statutes as a ratification of the total gift of self to God to better accomplish the purpose of the Company,
- making vows and renewing them at the appropriate time in order to continue belonging to the Company.¹²

We know that from the time of admission to the Seminary, a woman is a Daughter of Charity. This important act has been prepared for during Postulancy, a stage during which the candidate discerned her vocation since she is only admitted *when both she and the Company are morally certain that she is called by God and is ready to take upon herself the life of a Daughter of Charity.*¹³

To make official her belonging to the Company, the Seminary Sister receives a document signed by the Visitatrix and the Directress. Likewise, each year when renewing their vows, the Sisters sign a document that indicates and confirms their belonging to the Company and their free acceptance of that membership.¹⁴

The Company considers that the Sisters who enter have assimilated its project, are members who take responsibility for the vitality of the entire body and are available for its mission in the Church. All of the Sisters have the same obligations and rights although they are acquired progressively, according to universal and proper law.¹⁵

The criteria set forth in the Constitutions to exercise the right to active and passive voice and to hold particular positions are based on age and years of vocation. However, having made vows for the first time or having confirmed her commitment in the Company in the course of the year by the renewal of her vows are added as additional criteria.

12. Cf. Constitution 8b. Cf. Constitution 40c

13. Cf. Constitutions 55a; 54c

14. Cf. Constitutions 55b; 28e

15. Cf. Constitution 40a

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The fact of making and renewing vows over the course of the year shows development in vocation consistent with the spirit of the vocation and the firm intention to continue going forward faithfully in responding to the Lord. A Sister who is having serious difficulties in her vocation and who has requested a delay in the renewal of vows would hardly be in the position to take on a leadership position or to participate in a Provincial or General Assembly.

Formative methods to strengthen the sense of belonging

Belonging to the Company demands an *exodus*, breaking with other possible ways of life, certainly good in and of themselves, yet not consistent with the way of life of the Daughters of Charity. Faced with the many possibilities for formation, be they materials, courses or sessions, etc., based on particular psycho-pedagogical schools of thought, it is necessary to discern if they are appropriate to guide the Sisters in what concerns identity and belonging.

It is useful to recall the guidelines indicated in several Church documents that encourage cultivating identity and remaining alert to particular situations that could undermine a vocation or create a certain dependence on family or friendships...¹⁶ Initial formation works to channel the way of relating to the family in a new way that is consistent with the vocational choice as well as helping to appropriately contextualize friendships. It also provides guidance on the use of means of communication, which have a major influence on the process of maturation and on personal balance.

The *Guide for Initial Formation* and the *Guidelines after the 2011 Seminarium* recall some means to strengthen and develop the sense of belonging. They include knowledge of the Constitutions in order to integrate them into one's own life as a response to God's plan, exploration of the thinking of the Founders, study of the history of the Company, prayer life, community life and personal and communal discernment.

We should add other means that also contribute to fostering the sense of belonging, such as interest in ongoing formation in order to acquire a deeper understanding of our vocation and its meaning in the world,¹⁷ reflection on documents of the Company, guidelines and writings of

16. Cf. *Fraternal life in community*, 46

17. Cf. Constitution 58a

Superiors, Provincial and international gatherings, formation days, paying attention to events through direct testimonies as well as the news media, the *Echoes of the Company*, the web site, publications, etc.

II. BELONGING TO THE COMPANY: A COMMITMENT OF FIDELITY

Radicality in discipleship of Christ

The vocation of the Daughter of Charity has its roots in the baptismal vocation at which a process begins of configuration to Jesus Christ, source and model of all charity. Thus, "*the Daughters of Charity, in fidelity to their Baptism and in response to a divine call, give themselves entirely and in community to the service of Christ in their brothers and sisters who are poor.*"¹⁸ "*To follow Him and carry on His mission, the Daughters of Charity choose to live totally and radically the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience, making them available for the purpose of their Company.*"¹⁹

The practice of the evangelical counsels brings us closer to the life of Jesus, who lived virginity, poverty and obedience as the expression of total love and full gift of self to the Father and to His brothers and sisters. The evangelical *counsels are a divine gift, which the Church received from its Lord and which it always safeguards with the help of His grace.*²⁰

The Church recognizes the special value of the vows for practicing the evangelical counsels.²¹ The vows, *deeply rooted in the mystery of the Church*, are a *source of strength and a covenant* between the person and God.²²

Initial formation is the appropriate time to discover the meaning and value of vows in Christian theology and spirituality, as an act of virtue of religion. Through this virtue, the person feels inclined to give to God the honor owed Him as Creator and Lord of the universe. Vows are the highest form of commitment one can make to God and must

18. Constitution 7a.

19. Constitution 8b.

20. Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 43

21. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2103

22. Cf. Constitution 28a

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be faithfully respected. This is why it is important and necessary to understand their meaning well, prepare conscientiously to pronounce them for the first time, tend to their annual renewal and joyfully assume the commitments that result from them.

Vows have juridical implications, but they are essentially the expression of a love that intends to reach the highest demands of radicality.

The vows in light of the purpose of the Company

From the beginning, the Company has held vows in great esteem and, faithful to the Founders, understands them as an expression and confirmation of the total gift of self to God.

The Constitutions present the vows very clearly and beautifully. They number four and are mentioned beginning with the one that gives meaning to the other three: the vow of service of those who are poor. *These vows are “non-religious”, annual, and always renewable, according to the Constitutions and Statutes.* The fact of making annual renewable vows does not limit their importance; their temporal nature is not a sign of a provisional nature but rather a call to go more deeply into the spirit of one’s vocation.²³

*“The annual renewal of vows permits the Sisters to strengthen their determination to be faithful to their vocation, while it assures the stability of their service of Christ in the Company; it implies a free act of the will, inspired always by love.”*²⁴ The annual renewal is a constant YES to an uninterrupted call. Saint Vincent affirmed, *“It would be better not to make them at all than to have the intention of obtaining a dispensation whenever you wished.”*²⁵

The specific vow of service of those who are poor is directly related to the identity and purpose of the Company.²⁶ The Daughters of Charity live their total gift of self to God in and through service of those who are poor, according to the spirit of the Company and the life style defined by the Constitutions and Statutes, faithful to the intentions of the Founders. The specific way of living the evangelical counsels, taken

23. Cf. Constitution 28

24. Cf. Constitution 28d

25. Cf. Saint Vincent, Conference on the Vocation of Daughters of Charity, July 19, 1640, CCD IX, 22

26. Cf. Constitution 24a

on by vow, has the characteristic imprint of the vocation of servants of the poor with the traits that make up their specific spirit of humility, simplicity and charity.

Article 12 of the Constitutions explicitly reproduces the thoughts of Saint Vincent (the Charter) on the availability and mobility required of the Daughters of Charity in order to go out to meet those who are poor and serve them everywhere. This secular nature of the Company helps it to protect its purpose, seeking the ideal of evangelical life in fidelity to the original intention of the Founders.

Saint Vincent often mentioned to the first Sisters that no one went about like they did among the people and encountered so many dangers. Therefore, it was very important that they “be more virtuous than nuns. *And if there’s one degree of perfection for members of religious orders, Daughters of Charity need two.*”²⁷

Without the support of the Eucharist, the Word of God and prayer, a Daughter of Charity could not maintain the strength of her vocation nor accomplish her mission because *“it’s in prayer that God lets us know what He wants us to do and to avoid... When the holy Fathers speak of prayer, they are exultant; they say that it’s a Fountain of Youth in which the soul is rejuvenated... the heart receives renewed strength, feeling energized by a courage it hadn’t experienced before...”*²⁸

Convictions and commitments related to the vows

a. Specific vow of service of those who are poor

Throughout all the stages of formation, both initial and ongoing, *“the Sisters commit themselves to deepen more and more their understanding of the richness of the service of Christ in the poor, the end of the Company.”*²⁹ In their formation for the service of those who are poor, it is essential that the Sisters discover the spirit that should animate them. Article 10b of the Constitutions summarizes the Vincentian spirituality with its profound Biblical roots, presenting service as a vision of faith and implementation of love.

“Seeing Christ in those who are poor” is a special way of serving that goes further than mere professional practice. It involves an irreplaceable

27. Conference of August 24, 1659, CCD X, 527

28. Cf. Saint Vincent, Conference of, May 31, 1648, CCD IX, 328

29. *Instructions on the Vows*, p. 115

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personal encounter; we can thus say that charity cannot be delegated.³⁰ “*Seeing those who are poor in Christ*” implies a specific way of praying that consists in presenting to God the Father the needs of those who are poor, of speaking to Him about them, of praying with and for them and in their name.

As mission is an essential aspect of identity, formation must help Sisters to understand the whole of life as mission. The encounter with persons who are poor should be a constant in the life of the Daughter of Charity; therefore, this contact with them cannot be missing from initial formation. Mission is not comparable to social volunteerism, nor to an altruistic commitment on behalf of a humanitarian cause.

Initial formation prepares Sisters in formation to serve those who are poor corporally and spiritually, to proclaim Jesus Christ with their lives, actions and words and to have a constant concern for *the development of every person in all the aspects of their being*.³¹

Saint Vincent never tired of adamantly repeating to the Sisters that they should do their “*utmost in the service of souls to make them friends of God... doing so even before concerning yourselves with their physical care*.”³² Making persons who are poor friends of God is a major challenge. When gathered with the Founders for a conference, one Sister made a moving comment: “*we can see whether we love God... if we like to speak of Him*.”³³

Pope Francis is very clear on this: “*The mission is important, but it is equally important to educate for the mission, to educate in the enthusiasm for proclaiming, to educate in that passion of going to whatever place, to every periphery, to tell everyone of the love of Jesus Christ, especially to those who are distant, to communicate it to the little ones and to the poor, and to let oneself also be evangelized by them. All of this requires a firm foundation, a strong Christian framework and character which today even families are rarely able to provide. This increases your responsibility*.”³⁴

30. Cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, 25a

31. Cf. Constitution 24b and 24e

32. Cf. Saint Vincent de Paul, Conference of July 19, 1640, The Vocation of Daughters of Charity, CCD IX, 19

33. Cf. Saint Vincent de Paul, Conference of September 19, 1649, Love of God, CCD IX, 371

34. Cf. Pope Francis, Address to participants in the congress for formators of consecrated men and women, April 11, 2015

Formation for the service of those who are poor must take place in concrete services in addition to the inner work of developing the evangelical attitudes of humility, simplicity and charity. This formation should take place in dialogue with reality in an attitude of attentive listening and evangelical discernment. It should also take into account the need to learn to work as a team and collaborate with others.

Given the tide of relativism and the trivialization of fundamental ethical values characterizing the civilization of our times, another demand of formation for the mission is a passion for the truth. In addition, formation requires knowledge of the social teachings of the Church, a significant part of the Gospel message.

b. Vow of chastity

Chastity, “*source of spiritual fecundity*,” is a “*gift that frees their heart and gives it the dimensions of the heart of Jesus Christ for an unconditional gift and total availability in the service of those who are poor*.” “*In following Jesus Christ, the Daughters of Charity commit themselves by vow to a life of chastity in celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom*.”³⁵

The matter of this vow coincides with the evangelical counsel of chastity. It requires intimate union with the Lord, constantly renewed by prayer and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation, spiritual accompaniment as well as love and devotion for the Virgin Mary. Community life is a great support for living chastity; therefore, we are all co-responsible for creating a community atmosphere that promotes it by means of simple and cordial relationships of welcome, acceptance and understanding.³⁶

The teaching of chastity requires sufficient preparatory time that makes it possible to see if the candidate has the needed human and spiritual maturity to embrace and assume celibacy. In addition, chastity implies a series of learnings: prudence, responsibility in the use of time and discernment in the use of the means of communication.

35. Constitution 29a and 29b

36. Cf. Constitution 29d

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“Chastity includes an apprenticeship in self-mastery which is a training in human freedom... it is through chastity that we are gathered together and led back to the unity from which we were fragmented into multiplicity.”³⁷

“Temptations against chastity are more frequent in moments of physical or mental fatigue.” It is thus necessary to be “careful to take enough time for sleep and rest, for community relaxation, for silence” and prayer.³⁸ “Chastity has laws of growth which progress through stages marked by imperfection and too often by sin.”³⁹

Chastity demands transcending a certain loneliness of heart and the ability to deal with past experiences: positive ones in order to give thanks for them and negative ones in order to humble oneself before the Lord. We must remain vigilant, pray without growing weary and assure a balanced life.

Chastity is frequently associated with simplicity. Gobillon, the first biographer of Saint Louise, placed this very telling prayer on her lips: “Chastity is a virtue, O my God, that honors the unity and simplicity of your being and that, detaching the soul from all affections that could divide it, places it on the path of close union with your divinity.”⁴⁰

The *Instructions on the Vows* states: “A heart totally given to God is simple, since it is neither shared nor divided. In a world which scarcely believes in chastity, the behavior of the Daughter of Charity should be clear, pure, without ambiguity and steadfast.”⁴¹

c. Vow of poverty

Poverty opens the heart to the love of all persons and inspires placing at the service of those who are poor their person, their talents, their time, their material goods, etc. In following Christ, “the Daughters of Charity acknowledge that all that they have comes from God. Happy to have no other treasure than God, they give thanks for this and, by their vow of poverty, commit themselves to total dependence in the use

37. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2339-40

38. *Instructions on the Vows*, 55

39. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2343

40. Gobillon, French edition of 1886. Volume 2, chapter V, p. 83

41. *Instructions on the Vows*, p. 51

and disposal of the goods of the Company, as well as in the use of their personal goods.”⁴²

“This is the matter of this vow... that confirms and ratifies the commitment to live poverty fully, according to our state of Servants of Christ in the poor.” “The vow is observed... each time a Daughter of Charity asks honestly, without constraint or fraud, a reasonable permission for the use and disposition of the goods of the Company or of her personal goods.”⁴³ However, observance of the vow is insufficient; the evangelical counsel aims much higher.

In a world where materialism reigns, those responsible for formation need a special art to encourage poverty and to foster a formative community environment where we learn to live simplicity and sobriety and to share everything, what we are and what we have. Initial formation is also the time to acquire the conviction that poverty and trust in Divine Providence are *pillars of the Company*.⁴⁴

The method of teaching poverty requires concrete and practical learning from an attitude of freedom that gives things their just value. It involves learning to admire and respect creation, to care for objects and natural resources, to live with what is strictly necessary, to place in common what belongs to all, to use things with a sense of responsibility and to love a simple life of hard work.

The formator guides and accompanies the Sisters such that they dare to make breaks, detaching themselves affectively and effectively even from necessary things, confront difficulties and contradictions with peace, trust in Providence and let themselves be guided by it. The formator encourages them to *ask of God in prayer* the gift of poverty and *strive to make it effective in their lives*.⁴⁵

Formation for poverty occurs through working on specific spiritual attitudes: the sense of always having more than needed, the conviction that all is a gratuitous gift and nothing is owed them, choosing for themselves what others do not like, spontaneously thinking of those who are in need in the use of things, developing awareness to see the needs of others. It is good to recall what Saint Vincent advised the first Sisters:

43. Cf. *Instructions on the Vows*, p. 71

44. Cf. Saint Louise, *Spiritual Writings*, L. 489, p. 518

45. Cf. *Instructions on the Vows*, p. 79

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“All good Daughters of Charity should be attached to the practice of this virtue. I say the practice, Sisters, because it wouldn't be sufficient to love the virtue in the abstract; you have to love the needs that may arise and not complain about what you don't have.”⁴⁶

Starting with the first steps in community, it is advisable to practice personal and community reviews to learn to discern *in the light of their vocation about their use of material goods and their way of life.*⁴⁷

d. Vow of obedience

Obedience imitates the attitude of Jesus Christ, obedient unto death, and leads to the humble acceptance of God's will. “*In following Him and under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Daughters of Charity make to God the offering of their freedom and, by their vow of obedience, commit themselves to obey their Superiors, in accordance with the Constitutions and Statutes.*” This is the content of the vow that also confirms the gift of one's freedom to God upon entrance into the Company.⁴⁸

Obedience in faith, *far from diminishing the dignity of the person... enhances it by increasing the freedom of the children of God.*⁴⁹ “*Obedience to God is the path of growth and, therefore, of freedom for the person because this obedience allows for the acceptance of a plan or a will different from one's own that not only does not deaden or lessen human dignity but is its basis. At the same time, freedom is also in itself a path of obedience, because it is in obeying the plan of the Father, in a childlike way, that the believer fulfills his or her freedom.*”⁵⁰

Formation for obedience must take into account the fact that God's will is made known through mediations. Obedience encompasses a whole program of evangelical life that welcomes the mediation of the Word of God, Church teaching, the Constitutions and Superiors. “*Mediations that exteriorly communicate the will of God must be recognized in the events of life and in the specific requirements of a particular vocation, but they are expressed as well in the laws that give order to the life of groups of people and in the dispositions of those who are called to lead such groupings. In the ecclesial context, laws and dispositions,*

46. Cf. Saint Vincent, Conference of January 25, 1643, CCD IX, 72

47. Cf. Constitution 30; *Instructions on the Vows*, p. 79-81

48. Cf. Constitution 31; *Instructions on the Vows*, p. 95-96

49. Cf. Vatican II, Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14

50. CIVCSVA, Instruction *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 5

legitimately given, provide an insight into the will of God, becoming the concrete and ordered realization of the demands of the Gospel from which they are formulated and perceived.”⁵¹

The person who lives out active and responsible obedience conscientiously commits herself to sincerely seeking the will of God through *communication with Superiors and her Sisters, information, consultation, the asking of permissions, the rendering of accounts*, etc.⁵² Beginning in initial formation, it is essential to experience obedience as a value, finding support in the means that help to live it out. It is important to leave room for personal initiatives yet be able to move from pursuing one's own plans, projects and desires to doing the will of the Father.

In addition, obedient availability is essential as it helps the *Sisters to transcend their own opinions and interests and enables the Company to fulfill the services entrusted to it.*⁵³ By reading and reflecting on the Constitutions, the Sisters discover that they “*are not the fruit of the human mind but of the Spirit of God.*”⁵⁴

Saint Vincent's words, spoken during the conference on obedience given May 23, 1655, are surprisingly strong: “*as long as the Company has this holy virtue it will subsist, but, when it doesn't, it will crumble... You can't persevere in your vocation without it,*” not even in service of those who are poor. “*A person who loves obedience... shows that she has the Spirit of Our Lord.*”⁵⁵

As a means of summarizing formation on the vows, it seems important to bring out a series of formative steps for each one of them from these four perspectives:

- Formation through creating a climate of joy, sisterly love, mutual assistance, trust, modesty, simplicity, seeking the will of God and discernment...

- Formation in values: responsibility, generosity, self-control, simplicity, service, collaboration...

51. CIVCSVA, Instruction *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 9

52. Cf. *Instructions on the Vows*, p. 99

53. Cf. Constitution 31

54. Cf. *Instructions on the Vows*, p. 99

55. Cf. Saint Vincent, Conference of May 23, 1655, CCD X, 63, 66

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- Formation in self-formation: personal balance, detachments, indifference, assuming personal history...

- Formation through sacraments and accompaniment. The basis and foundation of formation is the faith life, which is fed, strengthened and deepened in the liturgy and the sacraments. The general framework for education in the faith is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, an instrument that contains the fundamental concepts of the faith and an educational method for their transmission.

Beginning in initial formation, it is important to discover the need for accompaniment that *can take diverse forms. Two among them are particularly important: first, accompaniment as spiritual direction; secondly, accompaniment related to a specific responsibility* (service of authority, formation). *This accompaniment, according to the tradition of the Company, is a support in the vocational development of daily life. The time of Communication is a privileged time; therefore, it continues throughout one's life.*⁵⁶

III. BELONGING AND PARTICIPATION: A COMPANY ENRICHED BY THE PARTICIPATION OF ALL SISTERS

From belonging to participation

Belonging to the Company produces relationships binding us to the other members. It implies the right and duty to contribute to its life and mission as well as to the vitality and development of the Company.

The connections that unite us in the Company are based in the Lord's call, which has called and assembled us to continue His mission. Communion with our Sisters springs from communion with Jesus Christ. The love of God impels us to seek the common good, to encourage and strengthen what unites us, to participate as active members of the community and to overcome what weakens our interpersonal relationships.

The decree *Perfectae Caritatis* from the Second Vatican Council calls for the participation of all the members of communities in seeking the common good.⁵⁷ Along those same lines, article 63 of our Constitutions

56. Cf. *Guidelines for Initial Formation after the 2011 Seminarium*, p. 9-10

57. Cf. Vatican II, Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14

indicates, "Every Sister has the right and the duty to participate in the government of the Company, according to the provisions indicated in the Constitutions and Statutes."⁵⁸

The 2015-2021 Inter-Assemblies Document invites us to dare to renew our hearts and our responses in order to actively participate in the vitality of the Company and enrich it through the contribution of all Sisters.⁵⁹

Participation implies the involvement of each Sister in the commitment to build community by contributing to the process of reflection and decision-making, exchanging knowledge and skills and taking part in common tasks and the apostolic mission.

Conditions and attitudes that promote participation

Participation is not an end in and of itself; it is a means to achieve the communion of community life modeled on the Trinity⁶⁰ for the good of the vitality of the charism of the Company and its missionary vocation.

Communion is not a vague feeling without effect. It must be expressed in concrete actions of active participation and unconditional availability for any need, call or service because no member of the community individually has every gift. Thus, different gifts and functions *converge and mutually complement one another, for the unique communion and mission.*⁶¹

It is not a question of participating for the sake of participating. Participation requires certain conditions:

- a climate: simple and trusting relationships, the attitudes of attention, openness and interest toward each Sister and all that concerns the local community and its ministries,
- well-defined goals,
- sufficient coordination; otherwise, an accumulation of parallel tasks without any concrete purpose could result.

58. Constitution 63a

59. Cf. *The Boldness of Charity*, p. 8 and 19

60. Cf. Constitution 32

61. Cf. CIVCSVA, *Mutuae Relationes*, 9b

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Participation must be learned in a practical way in specific aspects of everyday life because it is not enough to know principles outlined in the Constitutions. What is important is that the Sister in formation integrates them and tries to practice them. It is therefore essential, beginning in initial formation, to entrust her with responsibilities that help her practice responsibility and promote personal initiative as well as self-discipline in fulfilling the commitments made.

In addition, this learning requires an attitude of seeking and accepting the truth. It is important to learn to seek out different sources of information, to reflect on facts and opinions and to give depth to one's thought and life. Given different ways of seeing things or approaching issues, it is appropriate to learn to resolve differences and discern among presented reasons and arguments.

Communion is weakened and participation made difficult in the absence of acceptance, with insufficient communication or the adoption of individualistic stances that lead to acting in isolation from others. Gatherings for prayer and the celebration of the faith strengthen communion and favor the quality of the participation of each of the Sisters.

Means to make progress in the participation of all Sisters⁶²

Article 34 of the Constitutions indicates that “*community living fosters a sharing that extends not only to material conditions but also to spiritual and apostolic commitments.*”

We are convinced that it is not enough to put material goods in common; it is more significant to share spiritual goods, intuitions, calls, faith experiences, etc. “*...the more we share those things which are central and vital, the more the fraternal bond grows in strength.*”⁶³

I would like to present some suggestions implied in the Inter-Assemblies Document for making progress in the many means offered by the Constitutions and Statutes that promote participation, co-responsibility and subsidiarity.⁶⁴

62. Cf. *The Boldness of Charity*, p.21 and following

63. *Fraternal Life in Community*, 32

64. Cf. *The Boldness of Charity*, p. 20-22

Building community day after day.

We contribute to the vitality of the community by little gestures of assistance and understanding, taking on specific tasks according to the abilities of each one, breathing life into gatherings, discussions, celebrations of faith, festivities and the various apostolic commitments. All the Sisters have much to give. Whatever our age, we are an active part of the mission, and we should *rely on the wisdom, prayer and the offering of the sufferings of our elderly and sick Sisters.*⁶⁵

Mutual support is essential for vocational encouragement of the Sisters of the local community. Recall Sister Barbe Angiboust who, according to the testimony given by Sisters who lived with her, encouraged her companions to participate in the life of the community, not to spare their efforts in the service of persons who are poor and not to fear illness...⁶⁶

Improve dialogue in an atmosphere of freedom and trust.⁶⁷

Communication requires an attitude of listening, respect of different opinions, welcome and acceptance of each person and her proposals and opinions. Without adequate sharing of information, good participation is impossible. An uninformed person runs the risk of being easily manipulated. Similarly, without truth and trust, participation is very difficult.

Saint Louise encouraged and urged the Sisters to create a climate of affection, cordiality and communication, appreciating positive gestures that she praised: “*I have the impression that the two of you are living together in great peace and with the desire of animating one another to strive for union and cordiality. This creates a climate in which you communicate with one another, telling one another what you did while you were apart...*”⁶⁸

Participate actively in formation.

We are responsible for our own growth. Motivated, we seek and take advantage of the appropriate means in order to enter more deeply in our vocation and be faithful to our call from God.

65. Cf. *The Boldness of Charity*, p. 20

66. Cf. Saint Vincent de Paul, Conference of November 11, 1659

67. Cf. *The Boldness of Charity*, p. 21

68. Cf. Saint Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, L. 425, p. 463

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Tiredness, caused by various circumstances, can produce listlessness that puts a damper on our desire for growth and renewal. This can lead to frustration that comes out in negative reactions, justification of behaviors and rejection of assistance. Saint Louise called the Sisters to “*encourage one another, [that their] mutual good example speak louder than any words could.*”⁶⁹

Participate actively in the pastoral plan of the Church, according to the charism of the Company, through involvement in the life of the parish and the diocese and collaboration with all of those actively engaged in the pastoral plan.

Sent by the Company, we carry out apostolic works that are part of the mission of the Church, a participation in its *universal mission of salvation*.⁷⁰ This broadens the horizon of the Company, called to imbue the universal and local Church with its particular charism. In addition to recognizing its works as works of the Church, the Company should be attentive to the calls of the Church, the cries of the poor and the signs of the times.⁷¹

Be available to go where God sends us.

Active availability makes us attentive and responsive to calls, ready to answer them. Without availability, tasks would be left undone, promises would be empty and participation just so many words. Availability makes possible adaptation to new ways of living and of organization. We must learn to live as itinerants and with what is temporary.

The Inter-Assemblies Document invites us to “*dare to come out of ourselves, our comfort zones and our middle-class mentality in order to go out to the peripheries, to difficult areas.*”⁷²

Open ourselves further to the international dimension.

As members of a missionary Company, we are called to collaborate according to our possibilities in missionary projects, coming out of the limited circle of our local or Provincial situation.⁷³

69. Cf. Saint Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, L. 402, p. 450

70. Cf. Constitution 1

71. Cf. Constitution 11a

72. *The Boldness of Charity*, p. 17

73. Cf. *The Boldness of Charity*, p. 20

Share means and resources; place in common what we are and what we have.

In the Company, goods are common goods, which translates into sharing of *initiatives, experience, and formation*. All of this implies broadening horizons beyond a local and Provincial vision.⁷⁴

Feel co-responsible for management and governance.

There are many occasions to participate in management and governance, mainly in the local community and on a Provincial level. The development, review and implementation of Local Community and Provincial Plans are means of participation, based on a Sister's awareness “*of her responsibility to contribute with all the wealth of her personality and culture to the common mission.*” Participation in drafting and reviewing budgets, in Domestic Councils, assemblies, commissions and work groups, consultations, etc., contributes to having a broader vision of issues, more precise knowledge of matters and better understanding and acceptance of decisions.⁷⁵

Belonging and participation: convictions and commitments

Formation helps a Sister to *acquire convictions that strengthen and unify her total gift of self to God*.⁷⁶ *Commitment* is always born from clear and solid *convictions*. According to our convictions, we will be able to live out our vocational commitment faithfully, always offering new responses to the constant calls and challenges presented to the Company.

“*With one heart,*” the Inter-Assemblies Document says, “*the members of the General Assembly professed some primary convictions that are essential for the future of the Company.*”⁷⁷ These convictions lead us to move forward in a commitment to conversion so that the Company might *keep alive the flame of our charism, respond to the challenges of our time and enthusiastically and generously take new paths*, pressed by missionary momentum and inspired by charity:

74. Cf. *The Boldness of Charity*, p. 20

75. Cf. Constitution 35a; Statute 47. Constitutions 35a and 83. Statutes 3c; 4, 6a

76. Cf. Constitution 50

77. *The Boldness of Charity*, p. 6

Sense of belonging and participation in the life of the Company

a. Return constantly to the Gospel, maintain and strengthen our close relationship with Christ⁷⁸

We are convinced of the need to turn constantly to the Gospel, as Saint Vincent and Saint Louise did. We need to intensify our close relationship with Christ, in the face to face of prayer that transforms and shapes us.

“Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervor dies out.”⁷⁹

Where can we find this inner energy, this fire that makes us burn with Christ’s charity and run to those who are poor? In the daily encounter with the Lord in the Eucharist, in attentive listening to His Word, in joyful sharing with our Sisters in community, in humble service of persons who are poor who have been entrusted to us.

b. Be more simple and joyful in community living

The Spirit creates communion and awakens our capacity to come out of ourselves; it drives us to build welcoming, joyful communities that are open to the newness of the Spirit. The missionary vitality of the community is closely related to the quality of its community life. The community is a place that radiates joy and expresses compassion and mercy. What a beautiful point of attraction for vocations!

Therefore, we need to *“take a more active part in ministry to young people and families”*; we need to dare *“to strengthen a vocation culture through our attractive and evangelizing witness, to open up our local communities to young people in order to offer opportunities for sharing, for prayer and for concrete service of persons who are poor, to accompany them and to reflect with them on their experiences of faith and service.”⁸⁰*

c. Have a life style that bears witness to a more radical evangelical poverty, simplify our life style and live authentically and consistently⁸¹

78. Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 3. *The Boldness of Charity*, p. 6 and 9

79. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 262

80. *The Boldness of Charity*, p. 24

81. *The Boldness of Charity*, p. 6; cf. p. 9-11

Behind its seductive and insistent mask, the uncontrollable desire for possessions, power and comfort at all costs is constantly present in our environment. We are called to simplify our lifestyle and eliminate the contradictions that weaken and obscure the sense of belonging or curb participation: the desire to have center stage, success and glory. We will only be meaningful in the Church and in the world if we are fully and authentically Daughters of Charity. We can be influenced by certain ideas and worldly ways of thinking and living that can distort identity and weaken the sense of belonging and active participation.

d. Live in close relationship with those who are excluded and victimized by all forms of violence

Living in close relationship with persons who are poor supposes remaining at their sides, offering them necessary support, defending their rights and collaborating with those who champion their cause in line with the guidelines of the Church. It means being the “milestone” along the road where those who pass by can lay down their burden and letting them pour out their indignation, their suffering and what torments them, as Blessed Rosalie Rendu liked to repeat and especially put into practice. Remaining close to those who are excluded implies sharing, suffering with them, serving them as our “lords” because they have a right to this, and learning from their crucified lives because they are truly our “masters”. Without realizing it, through their suffering and humiliation, they evangelize us.

e. Be a Company of “coming and going” to the peripheries, with a missionary momentum inspired by charity⁸²

Charity is bold and leads to innovating and renewing our way of serving persons who are poor, resulting in a social presence that expresses identity in a clear and visible way.

Missionary boldness leads us to *“enthusiastically and generously take new paths”⁸³*, overcoming a desire for efficiency or prestige in our works. Free from calculations and statistics, we root ourselves in and abandon ourselves to Divine Providence.

82. Cf. *The Boldness of Charity*, p. 6 and 14

83. *The Boldness of Charity*, p. 15

Sense of belonging and participation in the life of the Company

Missionary boldness implies living in a permanent state of mission. When we focus on ourselves, lose sensitivity and attentiveness to signs and lessen our availability, we waste energy. In our times, perhaps in some contexts more than in others, missionary boldness favors the evangelizing aspect of charity. We need to discern: Where are we? Why and how are we there? It is not enough to be in a periphery, we must know how to be there.⁸⁴

“If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life.”⁸⁵

Saint Louise – foundress, guide and companion in our vocation – has much to say to those who have the mission of formation in the Company. Thanks to her deep experience of a close relationship with the Lord, Louise was able to animate, encourage and accompany the Sisters in their vocation journey. A gentle teacher, she could indicate the objectives and demands of the call, welcoming each Sister and respecting her rhythm and possibilities. She was for them an example and teacher of the spiritual life, a witness of hope and an apostle of charity.

“Only Saints, men and women who let themselves be guided by the divine Spirit, ready to make radical and courageous decisions in the light of the Gospel, renew the Church and make a crucial contribution to building a better world.”⁸⁶

Sister Rosa Maria MIRO
Daughter of Charity

84. Cf. Msgr. Carballo. Day for Consecrated Life, February 2, 2015

85. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49

86. Benedict XVI, Audience of October 7, 2009

Hail Mary

**Even an un-regulated stream
may flow slowly,
but the words of the prayer flow quickly, too quickly.
We thus must calmly hold them back.**

**This is why, when we pray alone,
let us take a little pause after “Hail Mary”,
an attentive and open pause.**

**We should think that for each “Hail Mary”,
two of us must understand each word:
her and us.**

**Perhaps the Angel Gabriel himself,
after saying, “Hail Mary”,
had a moment of shock and silence.
At the very least, we can assume he was intelligent:
he respected the commas.
Let’s not act less well than he did!**

Father Jérôme
excerpt from “Hail Mary”
Published by Ad Solem

