

*E*choes of the Company



Seminarium

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1617-2017 400th Anniversary of the Charism

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Advent Letter

“Love is inventive to infinity”
and, as a consequence,
in the Eucharist you find it all

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To all the members of the Vincentian Family

My dear sisters and brothers,

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

In my letter for the feast of our Founder on 27 September 2016, I encouraged us to reflect on Saint Vincent de Paul as a “Mystic of Charity.” From that letter on, we started reflecting about what made Saint Vincent de Paul a Mystic of Charity.

In the Advent letter for the year 2016, we reflected on the “Incarnation” as one of the pillars of Saint Vincent de Paul’s spirituality. In the 2017 Lenten letter, we reflected on the second pillar of our Founder’s spirituality, the “Holy Trinity.” In this year’s Advent letter, we will reflect on the third pillar of Saint Vincent’s spirituality, the “Eucharist.”

In writing about the pillars of our spirituality and talking about the Incarnation and the Holy Trinity, Saint Vincent suggests that in the Eucharist, you find it all. He writes,

There can be no better way of paying the best honor possible to these mysteries [the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation] than proper devotion to, and use of, the Blessed Eucharist, sacrament and sacrifice. It includes, as it were, all the other mysteries of faith and, by itself, leads those who receive Communion respectfully or celebrate Mass properly, to holiness and ultimately to everlasting glory. In this way God, Unity and Trinity, and the Incarnate Word, are paid the greatest honor. For these reasons, nothing should be more important to us than showing due honor to this sacrament and sacrifice.

We are also to make a great effort to get everyone else to pay it similar honor and reverence. We should try, to the best of our ability, to achieve this by preventing, as far as we can, any lack of reverence in word or act, and by carefully teaching others what to believe about so great a mystery, and how they should honor it.¹

In the Eucharist, you find and can reflect, meditate, contemplate, adore, and have a personal encounter with all the stages of Jesus’s life from the Incarnation on:

- Jesus in Mary’s womb
- Jesus in the manger
- Jesus as a child in Nazareth living with his parents, Mary and Joseph
- Jesus in His three-year mission proclaiming the Good News
- Jesus in His suffering and death on the Cross
- Jesus’s Resurrection
- Jesus’s Ascension
- The Holy Trinity

This understanding that in the Eucharist you find it all is accompanied by other prophetic and inspirational words, coming from his deepest life experience, “Love is inventive to infinity.” One of the best known of Vincent’s phrases, he used these specific words while talking about the Eucharist, trying to explain what the Eucharist is, what the Eucharist does, what we find in the Eucharist. Jesus’s imagination found this concrete means to be with us always, to accompany us always, and to remain with us always until the end of the world. His Love, inventive to infinity, keeps surprising us today, here and now!

Since love is inventive to infinity, after being affixed to the infamous stake of the cross to win the hearts and souls of those by whom He wishes to be loved – not to mention all the other innumerable schemes He used for this purpose during His time spent among us – foreseeing that His absence could cause some forgetfulness or cooling off in our hearts, He wanted to avoid this danger by instituting the Most August Sacrament, in which He is as truly and substantially present as He is in heaven above. Furthermore, however, seeing that, if He wanted to humble and empty himself even more than He had done in His Incarnation and could make himself in some way more like us – or at least make us more like Him – He caused this venerable Sacrament to serve us as food and drink, intending by this means that the same

1. CCD XIIIa, 455; Document 117a, Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission (17 May 1658). CCD refers to the series, *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; future references to this work will use, as above, the initials, CCD, followed by the volume number, then the page number.

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union and resemblance that exist between nature and substance should occur spiritually in each human person. Because love can do and will everything, He willed it thus; and for fear that, if people didn't understand this incredible mystery and scheme of love, they might neglect to approach this Sacrament, He has obliged them to do so under pain of incurring His eternal displeasure. Nisi manducaveritis carnem Filii hominis, non habebitis vitam (Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man, you will not have life [cf. John 6:53]).²

If we find it all in the Eucharist, then it is there that Jesus speaks to us here and now from His Mother's womb. He speaks to us here and now from the manger as a newborn child. He speaks to us here and now as a child in Nazareth. He speaks to us here and now as the person sent by the Father who went about doing good. He speaks to us here and now from His suffering and death on the Cross. He speaks to us here and now from His Resurrection. He speaks to us here and now from His Ascension. He speaks to us here and now as one of the three Persons of the Trinity. The here-and-now reality of every human being from the time of conception until death is ever present in the here and now of the Eucharist, as the here and now of the Eucharist is present in the here and now of every human being.

When He instituted the Blessed Sacrament, He said to His Apostles, Desiderio desideravi hoc pascha manducare vobiscum (cf. Luke 22:15), which means "I have ardently desired to eat this pasch with you." Now, since the Son of God, who gives himself to us in the Holy Eucharist, desired this with such an ardent desire – desiderio desideravi – isn't it right that the soul who desires to receive Him, and of whom He is the sovereign good, should desire Him with all her heart? Rest assured, Sisters, that what He said to His Apostles He still says to each one of you. That's why you must try to stir up your desire by some good thought such as "You desire to come to me, my Lord, and who am I? But I, my God, desire with all my heart to go to you, for you are my sovereign good and my last end." The late Bishop of Geneva used to say that He always celebrated Mass as if it were for the last time, and received Communion as if it were Viaticum. That's an excellent practice and I advise you, as strongly as possible, dear Sisters, to adopt it.³

Dear sisters and brothers, the time of Advent gives us a wonderful opportunity to deepen and fortify this third pillar of our Vincentian spirituality, the Eucharist, this "Love inventive to infinity," this place where we find it all! To this end, I suggest taking the following steps to bring to life, renew, or deepen the place of the Eucharist in our lives:

2. CCD XI, 131-132; Conference 102, Exhortation to a Dying Brother, 1645.

3. CCD IX, 265; Conference 31, Holy Communion, 18 August 1647.

1) Before the celebration of the Holy Mass, take time in silence to prepare to accompany Jesus on His way to Calvary, the Cross, His death, and the Resurrection.

2) After the celebration of the Holy Mass, take time in silence to thank Jesus for being able to witness and take part over and over again in His Sacrifice, Death, and Resurrection.

3) Once a week, have at least half an hour of Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament for the whole community, or participate at the Adoration in the parish or where Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is available.

4) Every time we leave the house to go somewhere, stop at the house chapel or passing by a church enter for a moment to ask Jesus in the Tabernacle to accompany us where we plan to go, in the service we are called to deliver, in the task we would like to accomplish.

After adoring the Blessed Sacrament there and offering God the work they are about to do, they will ask Him for the grace of telling the sick poor what He wants said to them on His behalf for their salvation.⁴

5) Every time we come back from somewhere, stop at the house chapel or church to thank Jesus for all His blessings.

We should also keep up other worthwhile practices customary in the Congregation, such as to visit the chapel immediately before going out and after coming in, greeting Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.⁵

6) During the day, make some short visit to Jesus in the Tabernacle to help renew our inner peace, to recollect our thoughts, to receive a sign or response to questions and doubts that are present in our minds at a particular moment.

Now, when someone says something rude to you that you find hard to bear, don't answer back, but raise your heart to God to ask Him for the grace to put up with that for love of Him, and go before the Blessed Sacrament to tell your troubles to Our Lord.⁶

4. CCD XIIIb, 382; Document 186, Preparing the Sick of the Hôtel-Dieu for General Confession (1636).

5. CCD XIIIa, 460; Document 117a, Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission, (17 May 1658).

6. CCD X, 150; Conference 74, Love of Physical and Moral Sufferings (Common Rules, Article 6), 23 July 1656.

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I asked our confrere, Emeric Amyot d'Inville, a missionary in Madagascar, to share a personal reflection on the Eucharist. May his thoughts inspire your own contemplation.

Saint Vincent accorded a very special importance to the Eucharist, both in the spiritual life of his spiritual sons and daughters and in missionary preaching. It must continue to hold this central place for us today. Allow me to share with you some points that seem to me to be of particular importance for our spiritual life and our apostolate today.

This first reflection is directed specifically to priests. I would like to highlight an important and sometimes neglected fact: when we, ministers of the Eucharist, celebrate Mass, we become *one* with Christ, because of our *ministerial priesthood*: Acting in the name and in the person of Christ the head, we enter into the “I” of the only high priest, Jesus. We lend Him our voice, our hands, and our heart so that, saying Jesus’s very words in the first person, “This is *my* body... This is *my* blood,” He changes the bread into His Body and the wine into His Blood. A greater intimacy with Christ then occurs for us, priests, which we must savor every day and which gives a very profound meaning to our priestly identity.

By virtue of our Baptism, all of us, Vincentian priests, brothers, sisters, and laity, are the “faithful of Christ,” to use the Council’s expression. Therefore, because of the *common priesthood of the faithful* that we share, it is up to us all, without distinction, to offer to the Father our life and that of all those around us in union with the Eucharistic offering of Christ. During Mass, at the offertory or even during the elevation, let us take time to unite our life and that of the world and the Church to the offering of Jesus to his Father in order to give Him glory and to receive graces and blessings from Him. This is how our Mass takes on a special human density that is offered to God the Father through Christ.

Without distinction, we who are the faithful all receive Communion, the culmination of the Mass. The words of Jesus in Saint John’s Gospel, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” (6:56), must nourish and guide our thanksgiving after communion to make of it a silent and contemplative moment of loving intimacy with the Christ of whom John said, in his introduction to the account of the Passover meal, “He loved his own in the world and *he loved them to the end*” (13:1b). Christ, *who loved [us] to the end* in His passion as in His Eucharist, which is the memorial of that passion, awaits our love in response to His. This is the time, after communion, to express it to Him in a silent and fervent prayer. Our communion will be as good as our thanksgiving.

Finally, after Mass, far from saying goodbye to Jesus whom we would leave in the silence of the tabernacle, we set off with Him, “remaining in Him and He in us,” to live with Him and in Him our day with its encounters, joys, sorrows, and responsibilities. We go forth with Him to those with whom we live and who are entrusted to our care. We, Vincentians, go out to evangelize the poor, to serve them corporally and spiritually, to proclaim to them the word of life, and to be at the service of their human promotion “following Christ, the evangelizer of the poor” and in union with Him.

“Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit” (John 15:5). This is the objective of the Eucharist and the secret of the spiritual fruitfulness of our life and our apostolate.

May the reflection, meditation, contemplation, adoration, and personal encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist and Blessed Sacrament, Jesus’s inventive love to infinity, where we find it all, help us to prepare for the coming Christmas celebrations as well as for the lifelong mission we are called to fulfill!

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Father Tomaž MAVRIC, CM
Superior General

Letter of November 25, 2017

Dear Sisters,

“My child, I particularly love to pour out graces on the Community. I love it very much...”

(The Virgin Mary to Catherine Labouré, July 18, 1830)

From the bottom of my heart, I wish you happy and holy family feast days for November 27, 28, and 29. We will be united during this triduum that begins with the celebration of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. Let us give thanks for the gift of the Medal and its message that reminds us of God’s love offered to all and of the Virgin Mary’s powerful intercession. Since she herself told Catherine, we are sure that Mary accompanies the Company in a special way and supports it with her maternal love. Let us take the time to reflect on the life of Catherine, the saint of silence, who spoke more through her attitudes and actions than with words, and ask her to help us to deepen our own response to our vocational call. Finally, let us be grateful to Saint Vincent and Saint Louise for their responsiveness to the action of the Holy Spirit that made possible the foundation of the Company, surely subconsciously born in Saint Vincent’s heart 400 years ago. So many years of fidelity to the charism lead us to examine our identity as Daughters of Charity: how can we *be authentic servants in the 21st century?* (IAD, p. 7).

The jubilee year of the 400th anniversary of the Vincentian charism is drawing to a close. Your efforts and great creativity in celebrating it quite naturally lead me to thanksgiving. I want to extend my gratitude to you for the gatherings and events, small or large, organized for this occasion that allowed our charism to be better known throughout the world. This was evident with the pilgrimage of the heart of Saint Vincent throughout his native country of France. All these celebrations also contributed to renewing our appreciation of our history and our sense of belonging to the Company and strengthened collaboration within the Vincentian Family.

The Symposium in Rome, at which we all could be present thanks to the media or by uniting our thoughts and prayers to it, reminded us of the treasure and potential of this large Vincentian Family. The Homeless Alliance launched during it is a powerful sign of this. We are in

communication with the commission charged with the implementation of this project on the international level. I have indicated that you are already significantly involved in many initiatives on behalf of homeless persons; some of you will be asked for specific details. I continue to count on you to inform me of new actions that you will implement in the coming months. I also think of the concrete commitments you have made in response to our Inter-Assemblies Document concerning modern forms of slavery, as well as programs serving migrants and refugees, often carried out within networks.

The internationality of charity is also lived out in the mission *Ad Gentes*. On November 29, we will have the joy of sending Sister Halina Kowalska, from the Province of Krakow, to the Province del Caribe. We thank her for her generous ‘yes’ to this missionary call.

Without a doubt, the celebration of this jubilee year will leave traces in our personal and community life and will bear fruit in the future. The beatification in Spain of 60 martyrs, including 40 members of the Congregation of the Mission and two of our Sisters, prompts us to strengthen our faith and fidelity and to dare, day after day, to bear witness to our hope and charity.

We remain united in prayer for and with those who suffer from the consequences of natural disasters, victims of oppression, injustice, and violence, and those living in dire poverty.

I also entrust to your prayer the preparation for the General Assembly of MISEVI in February and for the Visitatrixes’ Inter-Assemblies Meeting in May 2018.

I thank you for your prayer and assure you of mine for each one of you, particularly during this time of asking to renew vows. As we prepare to enter the Advent Season, let us tend the fire of our love for Christ whom we wish to follow. May Mary Immaculate, star of Advent, obtain for us the abundant graces that we need in order to give ourselves totally to God and to persons who are poor.

Affectionately yours,

Sister Kathleen APPLER
Daughter of Charity

The Holy Spirit guides us

Introduction

S*In the year 1623, on the Feast of Saint Monica, God gave me the grace to make a vow of widowhood should He call my husband to Himself. On the following Feast of the Ascension, I was very disturbed because of the doubt I had as to whether I should leave my husband, as I greatly wanted to do, in order to make good my first vow, and to have greater liberty to serve God and my neighbor. I also doubted my capacity to break the attachment I had for my director, which might prevent me from accepting another, during his long absence, as I feared I might be obliged to do. I also suffered greatly because of the doubt I experienced concerning the immortality of the soul. All these things caused me incredible anguish which lasted from Ascension until Pentecost. On the Feast of Pentecost, during holy Mass or while I was praying in the church, my mind was instantly freed of all doubt. I was advised that I should remain with my husband and that a time would come when I would be in a position to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and that I would be in a small community where others would do the same. I then understood that I would be in a place where I could help my neighbor but I did not understand how this would be possible since there was to be much coming and going. I was also assured that I should remain at peace concerning my director; that God would give me one, whom He seemed to show me. It was repugnant to me to accept him; nevertheless, I acquiesced. It seemed to me that I did not yet have to make this change. My third doubt was removed by the inner assurance I felt that it was God who was teaching me these things and that, believing there is a God, I should not doubt the rest. I have always believed that I received this grace from the Blessed Bishop of Geneva because, before his death, I had greatly desired to communicate these trials to him and because since that time, I have had great devotion to him and have received many graces through him. On that*

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occasion, I had a reason for believing this to be so, although I cannot now remember it (Lumière of Pentecost).

Louise de Marillac always had a special love for the feast of Pentecost. She wanted the Spirit of God, that burning fire, to come to destroy all that was bad in her and restore, strengthen and develop the graces she had received at her Baptism. Louise had a very keen and profound perception of God's love, a vital source of energy for her. When the feast of Pentecost would come around, Louise would invite the Sisters to welcome this gift of the Holy Spirit!

I. THE SPIRIT TEACHES US.

Jesus said to His disciples, *"I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But 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. Everything that the Father has is mine; for this reason I told you that he will take from what is mine and declare it to you"* (Jn 16:12-15).

We often say that the Spirit guides us. In what sense? First, because the Spirit educates us. He hones our spiritual senses. He makes us more aware of what undermines our relationship with God: what we neglect, our carelessness, all the times we fail to be generous in love.

Next, the Spirit teaches us praise. He gives us a liking for praising God in community or in our personal prayer. Why? Because He places us in the presence of God who is faithful to His own generosity in an overabundant way. Our response is praise: what a joy for us that God is God!

Then, of course, we can ask the Spirit to shed light on our choices and our decisions. I think, for example, of the Wedding Feast of Cana in the Gospel. Mary presents her request because she believes in Jesus. Jesus initially refuses; then, we can imagine that He consults His Father in the Spirit. He then gives a superabundance of wine, and it is a time of celebration, joy for all!

It is by sending His Spirit that Jesus continues His mission and enables His presence with all of humanity. It is through the gift of His Spirit that He is present in human history and in the history of each individual life, as He is present in each one of us if we desire and welcome Him. Without the Holy Spirit, Jesus remains just a major historical figure for us, perhaps an admirable one, but fixed in a single place and time. Through the Holy Spirit, He becomes present in each of our lives.

II. THE HOLY SPIRIT HELPS US TO KNOW CHRIST AS THE ONLY SON OF GOD.

We can and should have the best knowledge possible about Jesus of Nazareth, the events of His life, the wonders He worked, His speeches and teachings. We should strive, better still, to know well the history of Israel and its covenant with God, without which we will never be able to understand the coming of the Messiah, announced by the prophets. We also should know as well as possible the historical context of Jesus' lifetime, the Roman occupation of Palestine and Mediterranean civilization. However, none of this will give us faith in Christ, Son of the Living God.

These studies are certainly serious and sometimes difficult, but our faith does not rest on this necessary intellectual work. It comes from the inner knowledge of the person of Jesus that the Holy Spirit gives us. It is difficult for us to understand how the Holy Spirit's presence and action operate. There is a good reason: the Holy Spirit is spirit and not material.

We see all that is material, we feel it, we experience it, we can locate and measure it. What is spiritual is by definition invisible, imperceptible and impalpable. Jesus tells us in Saint John's Gospel, "*The wind blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit*" (Jn 3:8).

We cannot see the wind, grasp it or enclose it, and yet it works with great strength. It makes the world move. Not only does it push clouds across the sky, it sets off storms and hurricanes. It is an active force, not visible in itself but visible by its effects. Similarly, no one sees the Spirit of God, who is not enclosed in any place on the earth, nor in any house; He is not representable and is represented by nothing. He is in us in an imperceptible way, located in no specific place in our being, not in the heart, the head, the lobes of the brain, nor the nervous system.

He helps us to know Christ in truth. Jesus tells us in the Gospel according to Saint John: "*I have told you this while I am with you. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name — he will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you*" (Jn 14:25-26). And again: "*But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth*" (Jn 16: 13).

III. THE HOLY SPIRIT MAKES US WITNESSES OF THE LIVING CHRIST TODAY.

We do not receive the Holy Spirit simply to assure the smooth functioning of our Christian life, either on a personal or ecclesial level. Jesus tells us in the Gospel, "*You are witnesses of these things. And behold I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high*" (Lk 24:48-49). This power announced to them is the Spirit of God Himself whom they will receive the day of Pentecost in order to become witnesses of Christ, not only in Jerusalem, but in the whole world: "*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit...*" (Mt 28:19).

Being Christian thus involves receiving a mission from Christ to be His witnesses to the entire earth. We should reflect seriously on this mission. We are accustomed to living in a society that considers faith a private matter that should not be externally visible. We are so accustomed to this that we have interiorized this way of understanding life, and we end up believing that there is a sort of humanity in the neutral state, without any reference to beliefs. In that case, faith, whether Christian, Muslim or Buddhist, appears as a sort of optional supplement that does not add anything to neutral human life. At most, it might add some private activities, like prayer, provided they do not disrupt the apparent social unanimity.

This widespread perspective makes any public expression of faith suspect as proselytism or sectarianism. How do we feel about this sort of camouflage of faith under the veil of 'tolerance' that is in fact intolerance of any specific expression? We must admit that we find it rather difficult and feel torn between two symmetric extremes. Either we accept to become clandestine Christians and hide our belonging to Christ and to the Church, or we turn into ostentatious preachy Christians. Neither of these extremes corresponds to the path that Christ invites us to follow.

The message and the hope that we have received are not intended to be buried in secrecy but to be shared. What are our esteem and sincere love for others if we decide to keep what is most valuable for ourselves? If our faith is a treasure that gives us life, how can we want to keep it for ourselves?

The question, however, is how we should share it. Does it mean we should walk around with placards announcing Jesus Christ? If announcing the Gospel were enough to make the witness heard, all we would have to do is fund the World Bible Alliance or buy an advertising page in the daily papers and wait for results. We often say that we do not know how to communicate, as if the proclamation of the faith were a simple problem of communication or commercial advertising.

The Holy Spirit guides us

Genuine witnesses are those who commit their life to the message they announce. In other words, witnesses proclaim the Good News first by showing its effects in their own life. Others will listen to and accept our words of love if we first allow the Good News to convert our lives to love. Others will take our call for conversion seriously if we have already adopted the life of persons who have undergone conversion.

IV. THE STRENGTH OF THE SPIRIT.

This convergence of the proclamation of the Good News and the conversion of our lives might discourage us. How can we aspire to lead a life that really corresponds to Christ's calls? If we are not able to align our lives with what we believe, how will we be able to become witnesses of the faith? How can we face the indifference or hostility that assails us when we declare ourselves among the friends and disciples of Christ? If our reputation or our image are so dear to us, will we risk them in clashes of ideas or beliefs?

If we take these objectives as our personal objectives, dependent on our personal means, it is highly likely that we will wallow in discouragement or despair, unless we simply chose to give up. Because I am a sinner and weak, do not ask me to be a witness of the mercy and power of God. This is precisely where the help of the Holy Spirit comes in. We are not the primary witnesses of the resurrection of Christ; the Holy Spirit Himself bears witness, as Jesus told His disciples.

Only by the strength of the Spirit can we hope to accomplish the mission Jesus entrusted to His disciples and to His Church, and thus to us. The gift of fortitude that we receive through the sacrament of Confirmation makes us true witnesses of the Lord. This mission is entrusted to every Christian, to each one of us, to each one of you.

You participate in this work, in the action of the Holy Spirit, through your mission as formators in the lives of those in your care. The action of the Holy Spirit is accomplished through you. The Holy Spirit takes you as you are. He forms and transforms the people who receive Him! He acts at various levels.

Constitution 51 clearly points to this work of the Spirit:

a. Formation is, before 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 her desire for increasing fidelity to her vocation.

b. In this discovery of God's plan for her, the Daughter of Charity is not alone; the Company is there to help her to become a servant of Christ in those who are poor.

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c. The privileged place in which this experience is lived is the local community, where all the Sisters are aware of their responsibility for formation.

d. The work of formation is entrusted particularly to Sisters imbued with the Vincentian spirit and experienced in community living and apostolic service among poor persons. These Sisters receive appropriate preparation for this ministry. They are open to dialogue and are capable of offering accompaniment and of aiding in the discernment process, with honesty and with respect for the person.

V. SENDING FORTH: LIVE IN CHRIST ACCORDING TO THE FORM OF LIFE OF THE GOSPEL.¹

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him, and He began to teach them. He said:

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

Blessed are you who, feeling inadequate before the imposing responsibility of forming Christ in hearts, trust in the work of the Holy Spirit, who reveals Jesus as "the most handsome of the sons of men".

It is the Holy Spirit who inspires the desire to become conformed to Christ in the depths of one's heart, who places the sentiments of the Son in our hearts and gives birth to His feelings, affections and sympathies in us. He ignites our passion for proclamation so that the Son's way of life is made visible in today's world. When this happens, the Gospel is revealed in a new way and the Kingdom of God in our midst.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN, FOR THEY WILL BE COMFORTED.

Blessed are you when you share with those in formation the difficulty of conversion, of leaving everything to follow Christ, of responding generously.

Blessed are those formators who can hold in their hearts the sufferings of young people, if you can look at them with total empathy, allowing them to pour into your hearts some of their pain and welcoming their pain with the Father's tenderness and mercy.

1. This section is taken from the conclusion of the International Congress for Formators, "Live in Christ according to the form of life of the Gospel" held in Rome April 7-11, 2015

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Blessed are those formators who cry because of the disappointments and failures they will inevitably face. Rest assured that you will be consoled by the Lord who wipes away every tear and will make your service fruitful.

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK, FOR THEY WILL INHERIT THE EARTH.

Blessed are you when you know how to wait patiently for the seed sown confidently and constantly, without trying to force or control the outcome.

Blessed are the formator-sowers, who will sow on every occasion, at every moment, in every heart, knowing that the seed has a strength and efficacy of its own.

Blessed are you when you act without any subtle or hidden violence, not even as a means to an end, because God will give your hearts the Promised Land.

Blessed are the formators who by their meekness remind those in formation that the one thing necessary is to become like an earthenware jar, from which others can take sips of heaven.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR JUSTICE, FOR THEY WILL BE SATISFIED.

Blessed are you if you hold an intense desire in your heart to bring about God's justice and share His passion for life and fraternal communion.

Blessed are you if you seek God's plan for each person, even at the cost of being misunderstood, without imposing your own point of view or the interests of the institute, so that each person can become herself according to God's dream for her.

Blessed are you if you do this, because the truth will give you the freedom to ask total commitment of young people entrusted to you and to be persuasive and credible, without manipulating or coercing them. The Father will hear the holy desires of your heart.

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL, FOR THEY WILL BE SHOWN MERCY.

Blessed are you formators if you have met the God rich in compassion and allowed His mercy to give you a heart of flesh, a compassionate heart capable of discovering the embers beneath the ashes in those who

appear to have lost all hope. If you know how to rekindle the fire that seems to be going out, you will teach them to descend into the many places of suffering and be the consolation of God. You will be witnesses of God who hears the cry of the poor, sees human suffering and bends down toward it with mercy. Your young people will follow you.

Blessed is the formation community, the small "Church that goes forth", "with open doors". A fraternal community in which the young person, "gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives, bridges distances, is willing to abase herself if necessary, and embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others."

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART, FOR THEY WILL SEE GOD.

Blessed are you if you have a sincere and upright heart, a pure gaze, and lead a life free of hypocrisy. Formation for consecrated life involves a purification of the heart so that one can enter into the mystery of the eternal Beloved. Constantly guide young people to live in communion with Him, without duplicity, and to taste intimacy with him and with His Father's "business" (cf. Lk 2:49).

Blessed is the formator who is able to pass on to young people the beauty of God and the certainty that only the Eternal One can quench the heart's thirst for love.

Blessed is the formator in love with God and passionate for humanity who knows how to communicate both the beauty of loving God with a completely human heart and of loving the other with a heart learning to love as God loves.

Blessed are you formators if you can look at the young people with the eyes of God, and if you can see God in their hearts!

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS, FOR THEY WILL BE CALLED CHILDREN OF GOD.

Blessed are you formators, men and women at peace with yourselves, if you are attentive to the great need for peace in our divided world and are able to bring peace to others and to all relationships.

Blessed are those who teach peace and interior unity as the foundation of every community.

Blessed are you if you know how to form for a well-ordered community and to live unity in diversity, in a variety of cultures: the Lord is there.

The Holy Spirit guides us

Together with the young people, you will be children of God and disarm hearts from every form of aggression with the therapy of goodness and of blessings for all.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED BECAUSE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

Blessed are you when you are persecuted because of the witness you are giving to the Lord Jesus, who is the apple of your eye and the delight of your heart.

Blessed are you formators coming from countries where Christians are persecuted: you live the Paschal Mystery in your flesh. Blessed are you who, like the grain of wheat, bear much fruit. In you and with you, the whole Church suffers, gives hope, invokes peace and proclaims the Kingdom of Heaven.

VI. ENCOURAGEMENT!

“Especially don’t be afraid of accompanying young people through the Paschal Mystery. This has to be the aim of every formation journey throughout life, in the company of Mary, the disciple and mother at the foot of the Cross.

Dear formators, the Church loves you, appreciates you and prays for you. Without your service, consecrated life could not exist or would have an uncertain future. Without your patience and your discernment, the people of God would risk never again seeing that luminous way of life that makes the definitive world, transfigured by the Beatitudes, shine in a passing world.”²

*Holy Spirit, Love of the Father and the Son, always inspire in me
what I should think, what I should say how I should say it,
what I should keep silent, what I should write,
how I should act, what I should do
to bring about your glory, the good of souls and my own sanctification.*
Cardinal Jean Verdier (1864-1940)

Father Bernard SCHOEPFER, CM
Director General

2. International Congress for Formators – Rome, April 7-11, 2015, *From the congress to life: some priorities*, paragraph no. 12

The vitality of the charism in the Company

This Vincentian year of the 400th anniversary of the beginning of our charism is a special opportunity to reflect on the charism and the institution. The charism and the institution are connected. Each of them complements and enriches the other.

I. THE INSTITUTION AT THE SERVICE OF THE CHARISM

I would like to begin with a story attributed to the philosopher Kierkegaard: “A European traveler, visiting China, met a beautiful Chinese young woman, with whom he fell deeply in love. Since he didn’t know Chinese, he returned to his country and began to study Chinese with the goal of developing his relationship with his beloved. After a great deal of study, he learned the Chinese language well; he wrote to his girlfriend, and she happily answered him. Delighted, the man continued his studies and became a great expert in Chinese language and culture. He gave classes, sessions and conferences in different countries. He was so busy with his studies, travels and commitments that he no longer had time to write to his beloved and gradually forgot her. After many years, this man, while famous and rich, did not feel happy. With so many activities and commitments, the main motivation for his studies and efforts to learn the Chinese language had become secondary in his life.”

This story warns us that it is wise to make sure that institutions always remain at the service of the charism and never lose the purpose for which they were founded. Institutions with a long history, like the Company of the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission, have seen fidelity and traditions but also deviations, which we must detect and correct, as the decree *Perfectae caritatis* asked more than 50 years ago with its recommendation to “return to the source”. The celebration of the 400th anniversary of the charism could help us attend to our institutions and, on a personal level, to “return to the love we had at first,” as we read in the Book of Revelation.

In his study of the history of institutions, the sociologist Max Weber concluded that they are like living beings: they are born with great strength, they remain strong and faithful for some years, but then a time comes when they begin to lose strength and decline. If they are not

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renewed, they end up dying. A Brazilian theologian and sociologist, Raimundo Barros, continuing the reflection of Max Weber, described the symptoms of a religious institution in need of renewal. Here are some of them:

- Looking backward more than looking forward. Don't misunderstand me: it is necessary to look backward because the past is the birthplace of the charism, which should always guide the present and the future. However, it is one thing to look back in order to discern the appropriate path forward, and a very different thing to nostalgically lock ourselves in the past and in that way avoid confronting the often difficult present moment.
- Seeing difficulties as problems and not as opportunities for growth. Situations of "crisis" can become a real "*kairos*". This is equally true for people and for institutions. The critical question is how to face new situations, crises, realities and problems. We can face them like an old person, with little energy, or with a youthful and hopeful attitude, always seeking a path of hope.
- Being excessively preoccupied with everything concerning financial and legal issues to the detriment of charismatic aspects. This is a way of seeking security while neglecting the prophetic dimension of the charism.
- No longer trying to change or improve structures that have become too rigid because doing so is too hard.
- Spending too much time in meetings that result in few decisions.
- Prioritizing individualism over the common good.
- Serving with little joy.

Our two Companies may have fallen into a certain routine and may need shaking up in order to return to the "*love they had at first*". The year 2017 is a golden opportunity for this. These words of Vincent are remarkable: "*Two or three times every day I ask God to destroy us if we're not useful for His glory*" (CCD XI, 2).

II. VINCENT DE PAUL SHOWS US A PATH OF VITALITY AND FULLNESS

We know that Vincent de Paul did not easily discover the charism that the Spirit inspired in him in 1617. Let's recall at the most important phases of his journey.

1. From darkness to light.

Like the prophet Jonah, Vincent de Paul spent a number of years running away from God. In reality, God was not the center of his life. Vincent eagerly sought an "honest retirement" or an easy, prestigious and well-paid position. Vincent spent the initial years of his priesthood, from 1600 to 1617, in this idle pursuit. He was not a bad priest, but God was not the ultimate point of reference in his life. He did many things, but he didn't have a guiding principle that would give deep meaning to all that he did. He was divided and restless.

At the beginning of 1617, Vincent allowed God to challenge him. Today we would say that several events produced a powerful experience of God for him. This experience transformed him once and for all, leading him to prioritize God in his life in a clear and unquestionable way. Based on this primacy, he would unify his entire person according to a clear set of values, in which each thing had its proper place and God was at the center.

2. Jesus Christ shows him his vocational path.

The compelling discovery of Jesus of Nazareth as He appears in the Gospels was the major inspirational principle of Vincent's vocation and of the institutions that he founded. His first biographer, Abelly, says it in this way:

"He thought of taking a firm and unbreakable resolve to honor Jesus Christ and to imitate him more perfectly than ever before by committing his entire life to the service of the poor." Abelly concludes: "*His heart, which had been so troubled for such a long time, was suddenly freed*" (L. Abelly, *The Life of the venerable servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, Book 3, Chapter Eleven, p. 115-116).

Some events that touched him personally, for example, the accusation by the judge of Sore and temptations against the faith, would deeply shake him and lead him to immerse himself in Jesus Christ and to take a real interest in poor persons, just as Jesus did during His public life. It is interesting to see the psychological effect on Saint Vincent of this drawing closer to Jesus Christ and to persons who are poor: "*His heart, which had been so troubled for such a long time, was suddenly freed,*" asserts Abelly. In other words, Vincent found the reason for his vocation in Jesus Christ and in those who are poor, and his troubled and divided heart began to enjoy peace and unity.

3. The Holy Spirit makes him creative and bold.

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The final stage on Vincent's path toward the fullness of the charism shows his boldness and creativity, which are not just the result of a person endowed with intelligence and will, but essentially a gift of the Spirit. The powerful experience of God that forever marked his life was the discovery of God's will, made evident in the discovery of the poor of his time, and the inspiration of Jesus Christ to follow Him more closely in His mission among persons who are poor. The urgency contained in the phrase, "*The poor people are dying of hunger and are in danger of damnation,*" gave birth to the man who would break the mold in the Church and in society of his time.

As Father O'Donnell has said, Vincent was more than creative and bold. He was a genuine alchemist. He had the art of facing situations of the moment and transforming them into something lasting and highly valuable. For example, he was not the first to preach a popular mission. They already existed in his time. However, he was the one who developed them, turning them into an appropriate response for helping people to begin a new life by means of a general confession, encouraging reconciliation within families and towns and establishing effective assistance for those in need through the Confraternities of Charity. His creativity led him to transform ministries so that they would respond to the needs of the most neglected people.

On another level, he had the insight and sufficient skill to found the Company of the Daughters of Charity, dedicated to persons who are poor, in a time when uniting consecrated life to active life was not permitted. He took advantage of all the elements of consecrated life to open up a new way, one which was totally original, in the Church, and with its approval. We could say something similar about the Congregation of the Mission. What happened to the man looking for "*an honest retirement*"?

When we put our skills at the service of the Spirit, He multiplies them and without fail brings them to their fullness.

III. SOME PATHS THAT LEAD TO REVIVING THE FLAME OF THE CHARISM IN THE COMPANY

1. Make Vincent's spiritual experience our own.

As we have seen, Vincent found the meaning of his life when he decided to love Jesus Christ more and to imitate and follow Him more closely as evangelizer of persons who are poor. We can summarize Vincent's spiritual experience as passionate love for Christ and persons who are poor, given concrete expression in following Christ as evangelizer and servant of those who are poor. It is only if we reproduce such

an experience that we can speak of making Vincentian spirituality relevant for today. If this is the case, then it will be meaningful during assemblies to speak about reconfigurations, new ways of incarnating the mission today and living in community. Otherwise, without this spiritual experience, the Vincentian vocation loses its evangelizing and missionary "bellows". Without rekindling the charism and the spiritual elements that make up our identity, the process of renewal will become mere administrative re-structuring, assemblies pure bureaucratic procedures and the jubilee year mere Vincentian folklore.

In other words, the vitality of the charism will not come through assemblies, documents, formation plans, pastoral plans nor even the celebration of this jubilee year. I don't mean to say that they are not important; they are, but only if everything above is present in the heart of each member of the Vincentian Family and if each member is open to being touched by it.

2. Persons who are poor in the vitality of the charism.

Service and evangelization were the great discoveries that led Vincent to understand what God was asking of him. Today, these same two challenges can still nurture and reinvigorate Daughters of Charity, local communities, Provinces and the Company as a whole. History shows us we will never manage to renew the Company without those who are poor, just as you cannot water a garden without using water. Now, poor persons are not an intellectual or virtual concept nor a resource for making beautiful speeches but rather real people with dignity, needs and suffering. They are the suffering face of Jesus Christ. It is essential to go out to them, to know them, to make friends with them, to be part of their world and to share in their life. The Vincentian sense of the Incarnation impels us to this. Gustavo Gutiérrez said, "*You say that you love the poor? What are their names?*" Services should lead to this humanization in regard to poor persons. If this is not the case, we should revisit and adapt them. Sometimes rushing, which we justify by the pressing demands of the ministry, ends up making the service of a person who is poor a little less human. Without its charism, the Company would be totally insignificant in the Church and in society, neither attractive nor visible.

Many Vincentians and Daughters of Charity find in Pope Francis an inspiration and a spokesman for giving new life to the charism. When the Pope speaks about a "*Church that goes forth*" and says, "*do not abandon the poor*", "*go out to the peripheries*" "*have the courage to evangelize*" "*leave our comfort zones*", or "*care for the vulnerable of the earth*" (EG 97, 33...), it seems as if Vincent de Paul has come back to life. With his Gospel-based and prophetic teaching, Pope Francis

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reminds us that our charism is unquestionably relevant, as Pope John Paul II said explicitly to the entire Vincentian family in 1985.

3. The practice of discernment as a guarantee for the vitality of the charism.

Our world and our Church are impacted by a diversity of trends, pastoral guidelines and theological emphases that call for a capacity for discernment as regards our charism.

We speak about new poverties, with a very broad understanding of who is poor. Here, as an example, is a text from *Nuovo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 50: “*The scenario of poverty can extend indefinitely, if in addition to its traditional forms we think of its newer patterns. These latter often affect financially affluent sectors and groups which are nevertheless threatened by despair at the lack of meaning in their lives, by drug addiction, by fear of abandonment in old age or sickness, by marginalization or social discrimination...*” The Aparacida Document states in article 405: “*we cannot forget that the greatest poverty is that of not recognizing the presence of the mystery of God and his love in the life of the human being...*”

We, members of the Vincentian Family, should be vigilant with regards to this broadening of the definition of the word “poor” because, in the end, the meaning of “poor” becomes blurry. The new forms of poverty are so numerous and so diverse that almost all people fall into one category or another. Given such a vast panorama in which the various categories of poor persons are described with such tact, the Company must maintain its conviction that the inheritance of its charism is the poor persons who are most abandoned, who are deprived of the basic necessities of life (cf. CCD XI, 349; C. 11b; C. 25). The loss of this fundamental reference point waters down and obscures the vitality of the charism. Following the same reasoning, the Company is strengthened, in terms of its charism, when its concern and activity focus directly on the world of the destitute.

The Sisters and, through them, institutions, know that God’s will is accomplished when the Company allows the Spirit to guide it in order to discern astutely who are most poor. This gives them special energy and joy. We discern in order to grow in “creative fidelity”; this in turn makes discernment easier. In this way, we enter into a process of life and fullness.

4. The Company is strengthened when it “goes forth”.

Vincent envisioned the “going forth” of the Company as “coming and

going” toward those who are poor. Pope Francis invites the entire Church to “*go forth*” and abandon the pastoral attitude that says, “*We have always done it this way*” in order to evangelize creatively (cf. EG 20-33). The Biblical process of placing oneself in a state of exodus, very present in Saint Vincent’s thinking, enables welcoming the Spirit, makes availability a reality and facilitates creativity in new forms of service and evangelization of those who are poor.

“Going forth” from a theological and Vincentian point of view means moving in a real and intentional way to where persons who are poor are found. It also means freeing ourselves from customs, models and ideas that are not easily reconciled with the Incarnation. However, this is only possible if we leave our central position and are unsettled. This change is not easy because we are people of the center, economically and socially speaking, whether we are conscious of it or not. The current socio-cultural context of consumerism and individualism does not help us in this either. Nonetheless, individually and collectively, we must come out of our “comfort zones”, that is, all of those actions, thoughts and behaviors that give us security and convenience but that get in the way of our growth. The Vincentian charism has a deep-rooted ability to generate new enthusiasm by allowing us to become closer to Jesus Christ, Himself other-centered and a friend of the excluded.

5. Joy and the vitality of a vocation

In order to live our charism with vitality, we need joy. We need it as much as the sun warms us or the air that we breathe. How can a Daughter of Charity live her vocation in an elegant and elevated way without joy? Saint Vincent told the first Daughters of Charity, “*The service of poor persons [should be] undertaken with joy, courage, fidelity, and love*” (CCD IX, 466). We also know he urged Louise’s joyfulness despite her personality, her work and the problems that she had to face.

If persons who are poor do not see in Daughters of Charity the joy and happiness that comes from giving their lives to the Lord, persons who are poor will be served but not evangelized. Daughters of Charity “*bear joyful witness to Jesus Christ,*” says Constitution 9. The same is true on a community level. We need joyful local communities that can serve as parables of the Kingdom in this world afflicted by all sorts of violence and fear. We can find a number of instructions in the Constitutions on joy in community (cf. C. 29, C. 33, C. 59 and S. 19).

Where do we find the treasure of joy? Prayer, the spiritual life, faith in a God who has gifted us with such a beautiful vocation and service of those who are poor necessarily lead to a meaningful life. The deeper the relationship with God and the awareness of a life consecrated to

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serve those who are most poor, the more happiness we will experience because we see the greatness of that life with greater clarity.

In addition to this fundamental means for finding joy, we can add some other secondary means, such as the art of enjoying the simple things of life like beautiful scenery, a walk, the warmth of the sun, the perfume of a rose, a simple meal, a pleasant conversation, the sound of a song, etc. These are all opportunities to marvel at being able to see, hear, taste, smell... We risk doing them unconsciously. Focusing attention on the simple things of life can help us to recognize the beauty and harmony of their nuances. It is a question of taking advantage of every opportunity within our grasp to fill ourselves with light, strength and inner peace. Our vocation and the service of those who are poor will be the first to benefit.

IV. FORMATION IN THE COMPANY BASED ON A REVITALIZED CHARISM: SOME CONCLUSIONS

1. Form based on the beauty of the Vincentian vocation.

I would like to evoke the myth of Ulysses. It was said that the Sirens irresistibly seduced sailors who had to pass through the straights along the coast of a tiny Greek island, and their boats crashed against the reefs near the islands. Ulysses, aware of the danger, blocked the ears of his companions with wax so that they would not hear the Sirens and not be seduced by their songs. He had them bind him to the mast so that he could listen to the seductive voices without suffering from their disastrous effects. Orpheus, also aware of the danger of the Sirens, acted very differently from Ulysses: he sang a song so melodious that he charmed the Sirens, silencing them forever.

Today, formation based on iron-clad discipline of “binding oneself to the mast” and “blocking one’s ears” so as not to be seduced by the song of the world does not help to capture what is attractive in our vocation nor assure growth in identity nor the necessary enculturation. Formation, rather, should try to help find, after the example of Orpheus, one’s own melody from within, to find the strongest motivations for fully committing oneself to totally live one’s vocation. In this way, the candidate or young Sister will gain important ‘baggage’ in order to situate herself correctly in our world and oppose the anti-values of our globalized culture. Obviously, none of this is possible without an organized and disciplined life, but that cannot have the central place as it may have sometimes had in the past.

2. Another aspect in initial formation: integration into the institution of the Company.

Through my experience acquired over time, I believe that one of the situations that produces discomfort among young Sisters (we could say the same about our young missionaries) is the awareness that they have to bear the weight of the works to carry forward, leaving little room for more direct contact with those who are poor and thus insufficient resolve to respond to the challenges of today. Our young members do not want to see themselves as bureaucrats or guardians of buildings. The real patrimony that the Company passes down and younger generations inherit cannot be reduced to capital to defend but rather is a charism to welcome, a spirituality to live out, a spirit to express and a mission to accomplish.

Younger generations experience the management of works as something oppressive that depletes their energy. In the midst of their ambiguities and contradictions, they send us the message that we need another form of management of the works (perhaps by lay people) in order to leave space for something new and to work more specifically and directly with persons who are poor rather than uniquely through administration of major projects and works.

Formation must deal with this two-fold situation: on the one hand, sparse new vocations have to bear the weight of institutions, which overwhelms them, and, on the other hand, the Sisters in formation often must deal with their own weakness, evidenced in, for example, the need for psychological therapy. Given this fragility, young people in formation need closeness, understanding, affection and patience but also clarity, accompaniment, explicit suggestions, specific goals to reach, and requirements connected to the need to assimilate the charism. The formators and the formation community should put this forward clearly.

3. Formation in renunciation to obtain the pearl of the charism.

It’s no secret that the society in which we are immersed influences all of us, perhaps much more than we think. This is what the exhortation *Starting Afresh from Christ* says in article 12: “*In addition to the life giving thrust, capable of witness and self-sacrifice to the point of martyrdom, consecrated life also experiences the insidiousness of mediocrity in the spiritual life, of the progressive taking on of middle class values and of a consumer mentality.*”

Young men and women who enter our communities today come with the desire for happiness, emotional satisfaction and fulfillment of personal dreams and plans. On the other hand, they have trouble identifying with the specific values of our charism, Jesus Christ, persons who are poor, prayer, community life, etc. It is not hard for them in theory, but it is less consistent in practice. As a result, they seek the more

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pleasant aspects of vocation and service, rejecting the more difficult and demanding ones.

This is why I must affirm that it is more necessary than ever today to form in renunciation, knowing that this is not exactly a value gaining in popularity. Forming in renunciation does not mean acting exactly as in the past, demanding to “moderate one’s will”, but rediscovering the human and Christian value of asceticism and assuming it in a positive way and without frustration for an enriching experience.

The parable of the fine pearl merchant (cf. Mt 13:45-46) gives us the real meaning of asceticism: we give up some precious pearls, not because they are fake (they were authentic and made up the merchant’s entire treasure) but because we have found the “definitive pearl” that seduces our eyes and heart. If our vocation, centered on the following and imitation of Jesus who places Himself at the service of those who are poor, does not entice us, mortification will end up dehumanizing and frustrating. However, it has great meaning in connection with the pearl of the charism.

Father Javier ÁLVAREZ, CM
Vicar General

The missionary vocation of the Company

This topic is central to the spirituality of the Company. We can even say that the missionary vocation directs the various dimensions of the Company: gift of self to God, prayer life, formation, community... We must consider everything based on the purpose of the Company, which is nothing other than the missionary vocation, defined in a broad sense. In addition, the missionary vocation is a pressing need enabling the Company to open up passionately to the current situation and, at the same time, to look to the future with hope. In short, *creative fidelity* takes on a special meaning when applied to the missionary vocation.

THE MISSIONARY VOCATION OF THE COMPANY IN THE CONSTITUTIONS AND IN THE IAD¹ (2015-2021)

Article 25 of the Constitutions states, “*The Company is missionary by nature.*” In other words, the Company is missionary by vocation; it is called to evangelize, following Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the Poor. “*To be true Daughters of Charity you must do what the Son of God did when He was on earth. And what did He do mainly? [...] He worked constantly for His neighbor, visiting and healing the sick and instructing the ignorant for their salvation. How fortunate you are, Sisters, to be called to a state of life so pleasing to God!*” (CCD IX, 34). Several conclusions flow from this fundamental assertion:

1. “*The missionary spirit must animate all the Sisters. They are ready to serve wherever they are sent*” (C. 25b).
2. “*...flexibility and mobility [are qualities] needed to respond to the calls of the Church in the face of every form of poverty*” (C. 25a).
3. “*Whatever the place of their mission and the form of their service, they give special attention ‘to the seeds of the Word’ present in all cultures, in order to help them grow in the light of the Gospel. In this way, they respond to the Church’s concern for inculturation*” (C. 25c).

1. Inter-Assemblies Document 2015-2021

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4. “Those who feel called to carry the message of salvation to peoples who have not yet received it, make themselves available for the mission *Ad Gentes* which is at the heart of the vocation of the Daughters of Charity” (C. 25d). The mission *Ad Gentes* is a specific way of fulfilling the missionary vocation of the Company, but it is not the only way.

Regarding the missionary vocation explained in the Constitutions, the Inter-Assemblies Document (2015-2021) adds several points.

1. The title of the document, “*The Boldness of Charity for a New Missionary Momentum*”, intensifies the missionary vocation of the Company, going beyond old dichotomies of body and spirit, foreign to the Vincentian way of thinking. The title is very balanced and suggestive because these two words, mission and charity, summarize the Vincentian charism well. In addition, the descriptions of charity and mission are very appropriate: “boldness” and “momentum”. They reflect the apostolic attitude of Vincent without mentioning his name. The relationship established between the two elements clearly indicates that charity is missionary and that mission cannot do without charity. There is such a symbiosis between charity and mission that strengthening one supposes emphasizing the other. To the extent that the Company becomes bolder in charity, its missionary vocation strengthens.

2. The Inter-Assemblies Document benefits from the missionary momentum of which Pope Francis reminds the entire Church, following the teachings of previous popes who spoke so much about the New Evangelization. Pope Francis frequently uses the verb “go forth”, which is in keeping with a missionary vocation and a missionary Church: “*to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel*” (*Evangelii gaudium* 20). In the Bible, we constantly see God driving believers such as Abraham, Moses and Jeremiah to this process of going forth. The Inter-Assemblies Document derives practical and concrete conclusions: “*be a Company that goes forth!*”, “*return constantly to the Gospel*”, “*be a Company of ‘coming and going’*” and “*live in close relationship with those who are excluded*” (IAD, p. 6), etc.

3. Giving a new missionary momentum to the Company could lead us to “*be [more] attentive to the signs of the times*”, “*take new paths*”, “*implement a process of discernment for a real revision of works that would make it possible for us to go out to the peripheries*” and “*review our choices, our decisions and our commitments in the light of the Word of God, the social doctrine of the Church and the guidelines of the Company*” (IAD, p. 15-16).

4. The Company asserts its missionary vocation as an institution and applies this to each Sister, whether she works in a mission *Ad Gentes* or in a traditionally Catholic country. This is how the Assembly put it: “*Wherever we are, whatever our ministry, each one of us is missionary*” (IAD, p. 22). Given that this is an essential characteristic of the Company and of the vocation of a Daughter of Charity, initial formation cannot fail to take this aspect into account (IAD, p. 23).

In summary, the Inter-Assemblies Document affirms the missionary vocation of the Company and connects it with mission and charity (in fidelity to Saint Vincent and the Church today). It opens up new possibilities and takes advantage of the missionary momentum that Pope Francis is breathing into the Church.

Following this overview of the missionary vocation of the Company, let us now explore more deeply the various aspects found in Constitution 25 and the Inter-Assemblies Document.

THE “MISSIONARY SPIRIT” OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY (C. 25b)

What is this missionary spirit about which the Constitutions speak? It is not a title given to a few Daughters of Charity who serve in a mission *Ad Gentes* but entails the whole set of attitudes that make the Daughters of Charity open and ready to offer their service wherever necessary (cf. C. 25b). Location alone is not enough to guarantee that someone will have the “missionary spirit” because someone could live without it in the most isolated mission, and someone can have an extraordinary missionary spirit while living in a big city like Paris. “*Wherever we are, whatever our ministry, each one of us is missionary*” (IAD, p. 22). This said, some ministries and places nonetheless foster openness and dedication to one’s vocation more than others do.

To determine precisely how a Daughter of Charity is living the “missionary spirit”, we must ask to what extent she lives out her vocational convictions, for example, her call to follow Jesus Christ, Evangelizer and Servant of those who are poor, the universality of her vocation, her readiness to go wherever needed and to do the will of God. “*...you have to be filled with the spirit of Our Lord so people will see that you love Him and are concerned with helping others to love Him. A Sister filled in this way with the spirit of Our Lord can only produce good results. But if there are any of you who are Daughters of Charity in name and dress only, they won’t say anything at all to them; or, if they do, it will be said so coldly that it won’t touch them at all. And why? Because this Sister, who has no charity in her heart, speaks only from her lips; what she says has no force because it comes only from*

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the tongue and not from the heart. But those who are filled with God speak lovingly because they carry God in their hearts, and what goes out of that heart is a little flame that enters the heart of the sick person; it's a balm that fills everything with its sweet perfume" (CCD X, 270).

This quote shows that the missionary spirit is something dynamic that motivates a person to go further. All Daughters of Charity are impelled to have this missionary spirit or the "spirit of Our Lord", in Saint Vincent's words. This is similar to apostolic zeal or the "new ardor" so often evoked in the New Evangelization. Ardor and missionary spirit or the "interior flame" come from a deep experience of Jesus Christ as Saviour of all. Based on this identification with Jesus Christ and the fact of assuming mission as something desired by God, it is easy to be creative and to see new means and expressions to serve and evangelize persons living in poverty, be it through words or charitable work and human promotion. Prophets are always creative, but their creativity does not come from acquired knowledge but rather from the fire that burns within.

AVAILABILITY, FLEXIBILITY AND MOBILITY (C. 25a)

Constitutions 25a and 25d indicate some requirements for strengthening the missionary vocation. Vincent de Paul frequently spoke to the Sisters about availability, such that some people think he considered it the fourth virtue that we should add to the virtues of humility, simplicity and charity. If the Sisters of a Province lack availability, it will be impossible for the Company to fulfill its mission in the Church. The Sisters would instead try to realize personal projects but not the project of the Province nor, therefore, of the Company. This risk affects all institutions today, according to the document, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, article 3. Individualism places personal projects before those of the Company, the Province or the local community. Individualism quashes availability. Similarly, limited community participation fosters individualism in the community, which is fertile ground for the growth of personal projects in place of the common mission.

The words that Vincent used the most frequently in speaking about this virtue of availability are "wherever" and "go". Note the similarity between the verb "go" and the verb used by Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium*, "go forth", in reference to the missionary vocation. Vincent defined Daughters of Charity as "*Sisters who come and go*" (CCD VIII, 277). We know that, thanks to availability and mobility in the Company's early years, the small number of Sisters could respond quickly to many forms of poverty.

Commenting on the Gospel passage, "*Where your treasure is, there your heart shall be,*" Vincent considered a Daughter of Charity whose heart grew attached to places, persons or things like an idolatress and adulteress. Sisters have given themselves to God to serve 'all poor persons' 'everywhere' 'wherever they are needed.' Vincentian indifference is a virtue that favors availability and mobility because it helps keep them open to God's desire by avoiding attachment to any personal project. "*You must be indifferent...*" Saint Vincent said. "*That's how you must act in order to be good Daughters of Charity, and to go wherever God wants: if to Africa, then to Africa; to the army, to the Indies, wherever people may ask for you, it doesn't matter; you're Daughters of Charity, you must go*" (CCD X, 104-105). Vincent insists on availability because the purpose of the Company or the very vocation of the Daughters of Charity is at stake. Without availability and mobility, mission will be very limited. "*Don't be afraid to go wherever you're sent*" (CCD X, 409).

Concerning these Vincentian virtues, Pope Francis presents us with two vices that hinder living the missionary vocation fully:

a) Comfort that is like a "*slow suicide*" (EG 272).

"'Why should I deny myself my comforts and pleasures if I won't see any significant result?' This attitude makes it impossible to be a missionary. It is only a malicious excuse for remaining caught up in comfort, laziness, vague dissatisfaction... It is a self-destructive attitude" (EG 275). Pope Francis points to a real situation in consecrated life: excessive concern for oneself produces a sort of community that is apathetic and somewhat insensitive to plans for service and evangelization. The community, in these cases, becomes a residence where each person clings to his or her work (without asking if it is prophetic or not), personal time is zealously protected and personal survival receives more attention than boldness and creativity.

Compare that text from Pope Francis with Saint Vincent's words. "*But what sort of men will turn us away from those good works already begun? They'll be undisciplined, undisciplined, undisciplined men who seek only to enjoy themselves and, provided they have enough to eat, don't bother about anything else. And who else? They'll be ___ I'd rather not say. They'll be men who coddle themselves (as he said this, he folded his arms, mimicking lazy men), people who have only a narrow outlook, confining their perspective and plans to a certain circumference within which they shut themselves away, so to speak, in one spot; they don't want to leave it, and if they're shown something outside it and go near to have a look, they immediately go back to their center, like snails into their shells."* Note: In saying this, he made

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certain gestures with his hands, moving his head around and speaking in a certain contemptuous tone of voice, which conveyed even better what he was trying to express than what he was actually saying. Then, recollecting himself, he reflected, "O you wretch! You're an old man like those people; small things seem big to you, and difficulties frighten you. Yes, Messieurs, just getting up in the morning seems a great affair to me, and the slightest inconveniences appear insurmountable. So then, there'll be small-minded men, people like myself, who'll try to cut back the practices and ministries of the Company. Let's give ourselves to God, Messieurs, so that He'll grant us the grace to stand fast" (Conference of December 6, 1658, CCD XII, 81-82).

b) Acedia (sloth) that is like a "*chronic discontent and a listlessness that parches the soul*" (EG 277). This form of "*selfishness*" is a "*paralysis*" for any attempt at creative fidelity (cf. EG 81). Acedia turns evangelizers into "*querulous and disillusioned pessimists*" (EG 85). It produces weariness, loss of motivation, a sense of emptiness and a lack of hope in consecrated persons. It is the "*devil's potion*", Pope Francis concludes (EG 83).

How does this sloth appear in Vincentians and Daughters of Charity? When they lose passion for evangelization and give up on encountering God in their service, they come to 'professionalize' their service and, with it, their vocation. Daughters of Charity, like Vincentians, may work a great deal and have many activities, calendars full of commitments, cell phones always on and many contacts in their network... but their heart no longer beats for Jesus Christ although they do not explicitly reject Him. Their spiritual life has dried out, and even if they do all the practices of their vocation, they are no longer aware of doing the will of God. They no longer seek to be prophets in their work, to make people ask questions, to suggest to them that God alone gives meaning to life. They work well on a professional level, but it is reduced to a "*gray pragmatism*" (EG 83), as Pope Francis puts it.

INCULTURATION (C. 25c) AND "ADAPTATION TO THE CHANGED CONDITIONS OF OUR TIME" (*Perfectae caritatis* 2)

The Company cannot accomplish its missionary vocation if it does not position itself correctly in its world. What are the implications of an "*adaptation to the changed conditions of our time*", called for in article 2 of the decree *Perfectae caritatis*?

First, it means adapting to our world in which we live and work despite all its problems of inequality and violence. This world also has values that it is good to bring out as John Paul II did in article 86 of *Redemptoris missio*: pacifism, feminism, ecology, interest in the

third and fourth worlds... Our world has almost limitless capacity for creativity and technological innovation. If we feel comfortable in this world, we will understand that we are a part of it and not strangers to it. Secularity makes it easier for Daughters of Charity to feel well adapted and active participants in the world, not to become like everyone else but to transform the world as "*yeast in the dough*." Only in this way will we walk alongside the poor persons of today, sharing with them their joys and hopes, their sadness and anguish (cf. *Gaudium et spes* 1). Our objective of holiness should not distance us from people but make us grow in humanity, striving to become holy without ceasing to be human.

Adaptation to the changed conditions of our times can also mean coming to terms with the growing pluralism of society and the Church and feeling at ease in it. The document from the Congress of Rome in 2004 on consecrated life, "*Passion for Christ, Passion for humanity*", declared, "*We are witnesses to a growing pluralism, which is an irreversible process*". Pluralism poses no threat to our identity. On the contrary, it is a richness and an opportunity to promote "*a spirituality of communion*" (*Vita consecrata* 51). The 2015 General Assembly invited the entire Company "*to value our differences as enriching*" (IAD, p. 20). We can no longer regard with distrust the impressive diversity that exists today in all of society, above all in European and American societies. Migration and modern diversity invite us to learn to live together and listen to each other, to share and to accept each other in our differences. Perhaps we need a new attitude of humility, respect and openness to the shared truth, which no one can amass. Truth belongs to all, and all possess it in some way. No one possesses the truth absolutely but just a part of the truth. In our days, dialogue is increasingly important as an instrument to communicate our truth and receive the truth of others.

On an institutional level, adaptation to the changed conditions of our times involves not falling into the temptation to maintain everything at all costs, as if that were an absolute value. We should preserve the buildings and structures that are necessary but not those that are no longer necessary. This is one of the criteria that guides the revision of works that is occurring in almost all Provinces, as encouraged in the documents following the General Assemblies in 2009 and 2015 (cf. IAD, p. 12-13). We should only maintain the traditions and customs that promote our vocation and identity.

Every decision of this type implies serious discernment; then, decisions must come. The document *Passion for Christ, Passion for humanity* invites consecrated life to *create more flexible and simpler structures* (cf. 83, 112) in order to preserve its meaningful prophetic character.

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THE MISSION *AD GENTES*, A SPECIFIC WAY OF CARRYING OUT THE MISSIONARY VOCATION OF THE COMPANY (C. 25d)

The so-called *Ad Gentes* missions usually coincide with the poorest countries. *Ad Gentes* missions are not only places that the Company has to live out its missionary vocation, but are also excellent, extraordinary communities and services for fully living out the Vincentian charism. Indeed, there is no need to ask if the recipients are poor or not, as can happen in first world countries where the Daughters of Charity perform many services. Nor does it seem difficult to provide 'spiritual service' alongside material service. In general, people in these underprivileged countries are more open to the Word of God than in materialistic societies that reject God.

Other values of the Company, for example, internationality or multiculturalism (cf. IAD, p. 20), are more developed in the mission *Ad Gentes* because local communities frequently are made up of Daughters of Charity coming from different countries and cultures and must work in an environment that is very different from their own. The diversity of reactions can make community life more complicated but also enrich it. In any case, cultural diversity is a powerful call to solidify the foundation of community life, the person of Jesus Christ. All Daughters of Charity should gather around Christ. The mission *Ad Gentes* resembles a springboard for assimilating Vincentian attitudes such as sensitivity to the world of the poor and of non-believers, the need to organize for maximal efficiency as possible, availability and mobility. The mission *Ad Gentes* encompasses all of these values.

We know that the Company has different ways of organizing the mission *Ad Gentes*. What is beyond all doubt is the huge benefit of the mission *Ad Gentes* for the entire Company, given that these missions make it possible, in themselves, to live out Vincentian values. The mission *Ad Gentes*, so dear to Vincent and so deeply rooted in the Company, unambiguously indicates the direction toward which our Vincentian vocation should tend. Nonetheless, I repeat that every service that a Daughter of Charity carries out is missionary, regardless of the country, and that "*Wherever we are, whatever our ministry, each one of us is missionary*" (IAD, p. 22).

THE MISSIONARY VOCATION OF THE COMPANY: CONSEQUENCES FOR FORMATION

What aspects of formation require reexamination in light of all that I have said? I would pick out three points.

1. The missionary vocation of the Company leads us to think about the active life of the Daughters of Charity. Saint Vincent envisioned it as '*coming and going*'. Everything in the Company is directed toward service, work, evangelization and persons who are poor. However, this focus on the active life should in no way diminish the importance of the spiritual aspect. Without the firm foundation of the faith life, the "building" of the vocation will surely collapse. Nietzsche said, "*He who has a 'why' to live can bear almost any 'how'.*" Experience has shown that when a Daughter of Charity does not cultivate her spiritual life, she soon comes to ask if what she is doing has meaning. In initial formation, it is essential to develop a culture of the faith life through teaching to pray deeply as well as offering times of spiritual sharing that enrich and strengthen the local community's faith life.

However, a Daughter of Charity's experience of God cannot take place only in the silence of a chapel. She also needs to be able to "*leave God for God*", that is, find God in persons who are poor. While formation in this concrete experience of God may be difficult, it is necessary given that it is at the heart of Vincentian spirituality. Other means help assimilate incarnational spirituality: bringing experiences of service of those who are poor to prayer, reflecting on situations of poverty from a Biblical perspective, etc.

2. The missionary vocation places a Daughter of Charity in constant contact with the world. She lives out her life and work in the "*streets of the city*". The city reveals life in all its varied expressions.

Our world and our globalized culture, like all human realities, are ambiguous, which means that we can find both values and anti-values in them. Our culture favors the values of freedom, dialogue, respect and acceptance of diversity and the uniqueness of each person, and they can enrich our vocation. On the other hand, anti-values such as superficiality, short-term life plans, pervasive materialism and an individualistic tendency destroy all sense of community.

It is important to form young women joining the Company in their ability to discern, benefit from and adopt all of these values that are in line with the Gospel and our charism and, at the same time, stay on guard against anti-values that muddle and weaken our identity in the Church.

How can we form new Daughters of Charity who come from today's culture? Nature offers us two suggestive examples showing different formation methods. The first concerns mollusks (snails, turtles, etc.). Since they do not develop inner skeletons with which to face life, they need a shield, a shell, to protect their fragile body. Vertebrates, on the other hand, can live with much greater agility and freedom, thanks to

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their bone structure that supports and gives shape to each part of their body.

In the first case, formation would mean excessive mistrust of the current culture, to the point of not seeing anything in it that could enrich our Vincentian vocation. Rather than discerning, we would seek to reject everything offered by our culture. Defensive formation or, even worse, formation antagonistic toward the world today, would have negative consequences for the service of those who are poor and would hinder fruitful dialogue with the current culture. Defensive, antagonistic formation would make the Daughters of Charity foreign to the world and result in many difficulties for carrying out their missionary vocation.

The second case involves formation that endows the person with a 'skeleton' of deep convictions that will allow her to enter into contact with reality in an adult way and to distinguish what could help and enrich her vocation from that which would harm it. This type of formation, open to our culture yet critical of it, cannot happen unless the person is the focus and called to take responsibility for herself. *"The person is the agent of her formation"* (Guide for initial formation, p. 23).

3. The missionary vocation of the Company demands Sisters' availability and mobility. Saint Vincent constantly insisted on these virtues for achieving the purpose of the Company: to go where poor persons are found. Without availability, personal projects will end up imposing themselves, over the plans of the local community, Province or General level, with the resulting destruction of the Company. Saint Vincent was very much aware of all this.

This is why one of the objectives of initial formation should be availability as a fundamental permanent attitude for the missionary vocation. It will always be difficult to harmonize an obedience of "being totally available" with current culture that is highly attuned to human rights, liberty, the respect of a person and her personal life project. Conflicts may arise in young Sisters in integrating all this, situations that can be resolved in a context of dialogue by both parties.

Availability has no limits, and formation of new vocations should not remain too closed in specific places or Provincial boundaries. The Inter-Assemblies Document invites us *"to break down external and internal barriers that create obstacles to our availability and generosity"* (IAD, p. 13) in order to be able *"in order to go out to the peripheries, to difficult areas"* (IAD, p. 17). Good formation must stress that the vocation of the Daughters of Charity binds to the entire Company although that bond finds concrete expression in belonging to a local community and to a Province. It is the same with Baptism, which binds to the universal

Church although each baptized Christian then becomes part of a diocese, parish or Christian community. The fact of belonging to a Province should never be an obstacle to availability on an international level.

"That's how you must act in order to be good Daughters of Charity, and to go wherever God wants: if to Africa, then to Africa; to the army, to the Indies, wherever people may ask for you, it doesn't matter; you're Daughters of Charity, you must go" (CCD X, 105).

Father Javier ÁLVAREZ, CM
Vicar General

The Constitutions free us to love

Our topic, “The Constitutions free us to love”, is very interesting and practical, not just for Sisters in formation but for all Sisters, beginning with myself; at the same time, the scope is immense. My reflection is neither historical nor juridical but rather aims to educate on a human and spiritual level. I will try to bring out several points that shed light on the path toward ‘freedom to love’, along with several methods that correspond to that goal.

I would like to start by watching a short film, “The lunch date”, which you can find on the internet: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epuTZigxUY8>

In summary, *a white woman arrives at the train station with two large bags on her arm. After identifying the track for her train, she sets off, looking right and not seeing a black man coming on her left. Bumping into him, she drops her two bags, and all her belongings scatter. After gathering them up, she arrives at her track, but too late! She watches the train leave. Distraught, she checks when the next train is leaving. Because she has a long wait, she goes to the train station cafeteria to eat something. She sits down with her salad, but, having forgotten her fork, she gets up for one. When she returns to her table, she sees a black man eating her meal. At first dismayed and then angry, she picks up her fork and eats from the plate at the same time that he does. The man watches her without speaking, and the woman continues to share her lunch with this unknown man. The salad finished, the stranger gets up and comes back with two cups of coffee, one for himself and one for the woman. After having drunk his coffee, the black man leaves, and when the woman gets up, she sees her own meal, untouched, on a nearby table. Realizing her mistake, she leaves laughing.*

In this story, the woman does not seem to have managed to open herself up to the other person and welcome him in a positive way. The fact of missing her train totally disturbed her and produced her “deficiencies in love”. Perhaps we can identify with this experience in some way.

In what way are the Constitutions tools to help us love?

The Constitutions are a **gift the Holy Spirit has given** to the Company!

They are:

- The sign of **God’s fidelity**, who has consecrated us for an important and relevant mission, and our commitment to live them out is an expression of our fidelity to God.
- A mediation of the **Gospel**, which is the “ultimate norm” of consecrated life.¹
- A summary of **our charism**. Entire generations of Daughters of Charity all over the world have walked the path of the Constitutions and lived out a specific way of holiness. The Constitutions “serve us as wings”² with which to fly fearlessly and to live generously the charismatic passion of our Founders. The charism is the privileged Gospel path to give life and color to the extraordinary intuitions of Vincent and Louise as well as to continue to make them possible today.

The Constitutions strengthen our **sense of belonging to God and to the Company**; they are for us, and for the Sisters who will come after us, a rule for life that maintains the original inspiration of the Founders while faithfully adapting it to history – the path God gives us – to live out our service of our brothers and sisters.

The Constitutions are the “**fruit of experience**” that help us to savor the charism, live our vocation with a renewed heart and by rediscovering its beauty and relevance, once again find our first love.³ They “*are the fruit of experience. They are not abstract documents, spinning out a theory about how to live well together. Rather, they map out a path of holiness that many have already trod.*”⁴

This blue pocket-sized book is thus a treasure chest of precious contents that, of course, cannot be learned by heart nor studied once and for all; it does not hold magic formula to resolve complicated situations. Rather, it is a gift to receive each day with fresh love because it is a practical translation for us today of our Gospel foundations read in the light of the Founders’ charismatic, spiritual and apostolic experience.

How can we overcome our resistances to love?

Let’s return to the short film and consider the various resistances to love that characterized this woman’s experience. We will then look in the Constitutions for tools to overcome these resistances.

1. Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2

2. *CCD X*, 79, Constitutions p. 10

3. Cf. *CIVCSVA, Starting Afresh from Christ*, 22

4. Sister Evelyne Franc, Introductory letter

THE AWARENESS OF HER CORPOREAL EXISTENCE

In the film, the woman misses her train, drops her bags, forgets a fork, etc. She is not present to herself. She has her head in the clouds and seems not to be aware of herself nor her corporeal existence.

The Daughters of Charity contemplate Christ in the self-emptying of His Redemptive Incarnation (C. 17b).

The Daughters of Charity contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation particularly in the mystery of Christ's self-emptying. The Second Vatican Council helps us understand that for our growth, we should recognize our body as an asset and not as an obstacle due to its passions, emotions, desires and sexuality. "*A body you prepared for me,*" says the Psalmist (Ps 40). Our body is the indispensable tool for entering into relationship with the world. We should not mistreat it but rather honor its autonomy even from our reasoning because if we do not listen to it, it may react.

We are called to be fully "woman" in order to belong fully to God, to enter into dialogue with our corporeal existence, to know it, train it, accompany it, allow it to express itself in appropriate ways – its anger, its fears, its worries and especially enthusiasm, joy, all of its capacity to love, to make plans and to desire.

The woman in the film isn't aware of who she is. Too closed in on herself, she isn't connected with her own humanity.

We live for joy, but following a crucified Christ who gave His life for us. "*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,*" says Saint Paul (Gal 6:14), and the Daughters of Charity contemplate the *self-emptying* of His Incarnation, as Father Griffin explained in his conference. We shouldn't be surprised, therefore, by suffering in our lives nor by that of our brothers and sisters, but we do not want to give this suffering the power to take away our joy, and we offer it to Christ crucified so that it might become fruitful in His love.

The Daughters of Charity endeavor to respond to the inspirations of the Spirit (C. 17c).

When something troubling happens, the question to ask is not, "*Lord, why is this happening?*" but rather, "*What can we do with this experience? How can we relate everything that happens to us to the Lord? How can we transform the suffering that we experience into an event that reveals His love for us, into an experience that engenders faith, hope and communion with our brothers and sisters and not into*

a hardness of heart or separation from others?" This allows us to respond to the inspirations of the Spirit...

THE MIRACULOUS "LENSES" OF THE WORD AND BREAD OF LIFE

The woman in the film only sees the food on her plate. She is blinded by prejudice. The other person is in front of her, but she does not see him. She does not see the other person! The Constitutions offer miraculous "lenses" to learn to look at the other whom I encounter, the person who is near me.

In the Constitutions, we read:

- The Daughters of Charity gather at the **Eucharist**... center of their life (C. 19b).
- In praising God, listening to God's **Word**... they act not only in their own name but in the name of all humanity, whose joys, hopes, sadness, and anguish they bear... (C. 19c).
- The **Liturgy of the Hours**... also brings the Sisters of the local community together for the prayer of the people of God.
- Prayer in common is an integral part of life and Gospel witness, signifying faith in the living Christ (C. 19d).
- The sacrament of **Reconciliation** [is] *an encounter of love* with the Lord who forgives (C. 20).
- A highlight of their day is the time of **personal prayer**: listening to the Lord, praise and thanksgiving, contemplation, seeking to know His will, and presenting to Him the life and needs of those who are poor (C. 21b).

Saint Vincent said to the Daughters of Charity, "*Let's never leave it and spend no time without being in prayer* (CCD IX, 332, Conference of May 31, 1648).

The Inter-Assemblies Document invites us to "*return constantly to the Gospel*" (p. 6) and to "*contemplate Christ in the Gospel together*" (p. 10).

Local communities should resolutely take on the task of **educating in spiritual knowledge of the Scriptures** in order to enter more deeply into a personal relationship with Jesus and God the Father. The personal relationship with the Lord finds expression in personal prayer and the liturgy, as the Constitutions indicate. God Himself teaches this relationship of love; He educates us and tells us how to remain faithful.

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The highlight of our days is praying together. Praying the Psalms, with which we begin our day, is extraordinary! Luciano Manicardi says, *“Each Psalm demands attention, interiorization, and the capacity for interpretation, in other words, connecting the Word of God and life. The Psalms are life placed before God, and praying them regularly leads the Christian to live before God, to make every life situation a daily opportunity for obedience to the will of God, for discernment and for conversion.”*⁵

In the Gospel we meet the person of Jesus. Christ opens wide the universe of “meaning” for our lives! However, let us not deceive ourselves: while the relationship with the Lord in the liturgy is wonderful, it demands effort, practice and surrender. Relationships with those whom we see are tiring enough, so our relationship with Him whom we do not see, if we wish it to be authentic, can only be demanding and costly for us. Here, educational work is key and should help us to avoid certain traps, such as the false reasoning of saying, *“I wish the liturgy were less repetitive, beautiful, original, fresh and new.”* For our songs in community, almost everywhere we have Sisters who sing off-key or are absent-minded, tired or hard of hearing, with their own rhythm that is hard to attune to the rest. I might try unsuccessfully to change them. Perhaps rather than spending days, months and years being angry because others do not pray well, it would be better that I work on myself to find an inner space from which I can welcome this unmanageable diversity and thus remain at peace before the Lord. The relationship with the Lord demands the formation of a solid and tested interior life with a honed ability for listening. It requires patience, perseverance, endurance and struggle against temptations. Luciano Manicardi further says, *“The human quality of persons, their ability for human relationships, is in great need of being formed because otherwise speaking about a relationship with God and with Christ is sheer illusion or, worse, hypocrisis and a lie. Praying is tiring, but before praying, we must learn to think, to create an inner space to activate the capacity for inner dialogue, to unify events of life and inner resonances to educate and correct our inner self.”*

What makes it possible to enter into this freedom and grow in it? Freedom is not a path without a goal or reference point: Gospel freedom demands following Someone who knows the path, and it requires that we chose to belong. We learn to be free only if we obey the living Word of God.

What happens if we do not attend to this treasure? We know what happened to Adam and Eve after their disobedience: separation! If we

start gradually and slowly and even without noticing to neglect prayer, meditation and regularity in communication with God, if spiritual growth starts to lack, then the “substance” of our vocation becomes precarious; our vocation gradually becomes empty, insignificant, even unbearable. Then, if we want to restore meaning and return to that first fervor, the path becomes long, hard and painful... The relationship with God or the spiritual life is sustained by and depends on what we think, feel and experience day after day. This relationship waters the land of my freedom that becomes able to shift the focus from myself to see and look at the other more, which the woman in the film was unable to do. There is nothing more “concrete” in spiritual life. Our love story with the Lord is a mutual covenant: we do not always manage to fulfill it, but God faithfully keeps this covenant.

A DELICIOUS EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY

In the film, the woman and the man seated across the table from each other do not speak to each other. They do not know each other and do not express any interest in getting to know each other. Everything focuses on the interest they have to defend: “my salad”.

The local community is modeled on the Trinity. Such a community **is built** day after day **by** each Sister’s gift of self and commitment (C. 32). The local community is the **primary place of belonging** for the Daughters of Charity. Community living fosters among them a sharing that extends not only to material conditions but also to spiritual and apostolic commitments (C. 34).

The privileged path with all the potential to free us is **community life**.

Every day we have the opportunity to share at table. **Eating together**, which defies any reasoning based on self-service or the animal instinct for food, is a liturgical act. Enzo Bianchi, founder of the monastic community of Bose (Italy), describes meals as a liturgical act! Feast days are usually celebrated with a good meal! The kingdom of heaven is like a feast with rich food and juicy rich food... (Is 25:6). At table, Jesus communicates some very important things. It is good *“to be attentive to the prayer at the beginning and end of the meal; together, we receive the food, together, we can taste the flavors, together, we use our senses in an act that is essential to life, but which is much more than the simple fact of nourishing oneself. It involves sharing life in an act that involves all the senses and entering into relationship with others.”*⁶ We can thus speak of a “delicious experience of community”, in other words, a community that has a flavor, a taste, a character!

5. Luciano Manicardi, “Servizio della Parola” Magazine, no. 440 - September 2012, p. 8-19

6. Enzo Bianchi, *Nella libertà e per amore [In freedom and out of love]*, Ed. Qiqajon

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Times of relaxation in common, in an atmosphere of joy and simple, friendly relationships, are part of community living and are necessary for balance in the life of each Sister and the local community (S. 19).

Another priceless moment of sharing is relaxation in common. At an evening recreation of young Sisters, the Sister leading it presented us a letter from our Superioress General, a passage of which I will read for you: *“Dear Sisters of Italy, I send you my greetings. Your gathering is very important. You are reflecting on topics that are essential to your lives as Daughters of Charity. I had the opportunity to see the program for your gathering. You will speak of passion, grace and responsibility. But the most important part of the meeting is surely recreation. We cannot fully live our gift of self to God, authentic service of those who are poor or good community life without humor, without a taste for joking and jokes, without humor that relieves our tiredness and brings a smile to our faces. So, as it is written in the Inter-Assemblies Document, number 418: ‘Laugh together, joke together, dance and sing with joy!’ Excuse me, perhaps these words do not appear in the Inter-Assemblies Document, nor even number 418, but since I have to quote the Inter-Assemblies Document in each letter that I write, I improved on it and invented this article 418.”*

In **dialogue**, experiences are shared, differences are minimized, and decisions are sought together (C. 34). *“Let us dare in reality... to make time to listen to each other and speak with each other”* (IAD, p. 11).

If the most recent General Assembly found it important to include this line in the final document, perhaps sometimes our words express more fatigue than joy, more information than sharing. The community is a human reality and thus precarious, fragile and inconsistent. There can be crises, difficult and sometime incompatible personalities, likes and dislikes, significant or vapid relationships. It is also a community of faith where we can live out theological relationships! This is why, before trying to pass on the values of healthy communication to young Sisters, we should ask ourselves if we know how to listen to each other, to listen to people who are obsessed with specific topic, to be attentive to what is said and welcome it with a unprejudiced and non-judgmental heart, and to express ourselves simply, with words that come from a heart rooted in Christ and are life-giving for those who listen to them.

Poor communication, a closed attitude, non-confrontation, interruption, all this does not heal but rather sows irreparable divisions! Of course, we are not yet in the heavenly Jerusalem, so heated conversations, harsh words or even aggressive or rigid reactions should not surprise us. However, we should be surprised if barren silence rather than mercy or forgiveness endures. Only dialogue has the power to restore life to

dead relationships!

I would like to highlight an aspect that may only affect certain countries but that seems important to me. In community, we share the same house, a physical environment. In most of our houses, each Sister has her bedroom. I consider this something positive that contributes to her intimacy and the possibility for rest. However, each Sister is responsible for how she uses her time in her bedroom (a little or a lot if the bedroom is also the place for study or work for her ministry).

The balance between community life, service and relaxation is a difficult balance and the fruit of great personal maturity. Even when we spend time in our room, communion with others and service continue, not physically but in communion of heart. In the bedroom or in the office, thanks to a system of global connections, we have contact with the world without moving, without even standing up, but simply by remaining in front of a screen. Computers, iPads, Facebook, cell phones, etc. are all very useful tools if they help us to build our foundations as Daughters of Charity, servants of those who are poor. At recreation, we may be tempted to send a quick text message, a sign that we are closer (virtually) to those who are far off and more distant from those who are close to us.

“HERE AND NOW”

The woman in the film isn't very present to herself, to her corporal experience. Incapable of looking at the other person in front of her, she does not enter into dialogue, and it even seems that she isn't able to be present to the situation that she is experiencing, to the crowd around her, to the rhythm of the trains... She isn't aware of herself as a part of a whole.

Each day..., they review their life in a desire for conversion, to discover the action of the Spirit, to thank God, and to verify their fidelity (S. 4).

Remaining attentive to the present moment, the “here and now”, accepting reality and being in the world physically and consciously imply welcoming in a concrete way the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ and being daughters of this world so loved by God. That is why reviewing our life and naming what happens to us are ways of **becoming aware** of what we feel and what is changing around us. This is essential for us to navigate our relationships and the world. It is a sort of compass that guides us in a way that is consistent with our charism, obedience, our specific vocation, the emotions we feel and the requests that we receive. It is also a compass that guides us toward what we can do, knowing that we can produce change; on the other hand, it indicates what we should stop because, realistically, it cannot lead to something better. Our

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conscience helps us not to be abstract and idealistic... not to be all talk. **Taking responsibility**, based on a well-developed conscience, for what we consider the best for ourselves, for our Sisters and for those who are poor gives us the freedom to choose where to go or to change direction if necessary.

Our conscience and sense of responsibility grow when we adopt the habit of reviewing life in the present moment:

- The place where we live and serve
- The local community
- The persons who are poor in the neighborhood: they are before me and represent a person, a face, a story, a human life...
- Relationships with organizations and various collaborators...
- An ensemble of events, changes - desired or not - expectations, requests, plans, meetings, unexpected events...

An educational or methodological conclusion

As servants of Christ in the person of the poor, we wish to follow the method and the educational method of love. It involves discovering in ourselves the deep current of love that drives our entire psychological and spiritual life in order to unify our lives. The law of this method is to love freely, consciously, willingly and joyfully what we inevitably love. This is the thinking of Saint Augustine, but Saint Vincent says the same thing: *“To be true Daughters of Charity you must do what the Son of God did when He was on earth. And what did He do mainly? [...] He worked constantly for His neighbor, visiting and healing the sick and instructing the ignorant for their salvation (that which we inevitably love). How fortunate you are, Sisters, to be called to a state of life so pleasing to God!”*⁷ (This causes us to love joyfully.)

A DYNAMIC GIFT

The woman in the film wants “her” salad. She lacks freedom. She lacks the inner **mobility** that would involve questioning her initial ideas so that she might be challenged. She doesn’t consider giving up or getting up to buy another salad. She does not adapt since that requires flexibility and also develops our flexibility.

The Company makes every effort to be available and ready to respond... to the calls of the Church and the urgent needs of the poor... (C. 12b).

This movement, this “coming and going”, is simply a consequence of

7. CCD IX, 14

the identity of the Daughters of Charity. In the thinking of the Founders, God chose the first Sisters to be *“apostles of charity”*⁸, servants of the sick poor; a real Daughter of Charity belongs to God for the service of those who are poor. This demands her constant ability to come and go in order to serve those who are poor, all poor persons, in every situation, in every place: a Daughter of Charity is always in the midst of the world!

As a result, the Daughters of Charity exist outside the structures of religious life but have the model of consecrated life from the early centuries of the Church. Thanks be to God, we no longer speak of strictures specific to a monastic life style (horarium, parlors, various customs, etc.); we have opened our houses and are much simpler in so many things. However, the revision of our way of life (cf. IAD, p. 12) must continue even if it is sometimes very difficult. We still must overcome some mental structures that keep us from an unconditional gift of self.

The letter to consecrated persons, *Proclaim*, stresses that consecrated life should not lower the missionary anchor in ports that are safe and private because our security lies in Christ. To take the path of liberty, effort and the grace of discernment are always necessary.⁹

*“We need a total freedom from everything that could hinder or impede movement, getting in the way of or slowing down the service of those who are poor. It involves sharing designed as freedom from... This then becomes freedom for... a real immersion in the reality of the world of those who are poor; according to the logic of the Incarnation through concrete acts of welcome in our place and time. We cannot serve those who are poor simply by drawing up beautiful plans or remaining at the window to look out from above. We must step down from the pedestal, lean downward, roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty. Service requires participation, solidarity and sharing.”*¹⁰

Father Alberto Vernaschi always likes to say that in the reality of service – any service – you have to be there: with your head (awareness), with your heart (empathy) and with your hands (work). *“We let ourselves become caught up in the newness of projects and initiatives and we forget that **the most important change depends on us and our desire and ability to make it happen.**”*¹¹

8. CCD X, 85

9. *Proclaim, to consecrated men and women witnesses of the Gospel among peoples.* Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 53

10. Vernaschi Alberto, CM. “Per chiostro le vie della città. L’identità di ieri e di sempre delle Figlie della Carità” [For cloister, the streets of the city. The identity of the Daughters of Charity yesterday and always]. Ed. CLV. p. 90

11. *Proclaim, to consecrated men and women witnesses of the Gospel among peoples.* Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 51

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We renew our capacity to be available and mobile... by living simply and not multiplying our “individual demands”. Only then will we have the freedom to go where the Lord calls us. The more attached we are to things, places and people, the more difficult it is to be mobile.

In the short film, the woman is not able to give herself, but the man seated across from her is. Disturbed during his meal, he accepts sharing what was on his plate and even goes so far as to buy her a coffee. He does not give because his life is perfect but because he is himself.

The Sisters find Christ and contemplate Him in the heart and life of those who are poor (C. 10a). They see Christ in those who are poor, and they see those who are poor in Christ (C. 10b).

Our life is authentic if we encounter Jesus, day after day, and offer Him our availability in order to enter into His loving plan, often different from our personal plans and purely human expectations.

To follow Christ, the goal of the path traced out by the Constitutions is making us free and new women for the future. Following Jesus, the new man, who gave His life out of love, we build the future by living the Gospel Beatitudes in the joy of offering all and holding nothing back from our gift.

Based on the charism of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, we build the future together by living in communion with our Sisters and persons who are poor. It is important to train our eyes and our heart to see what is beautiful in the other person and what he or she offers us, to recognize that the other is a gift (cf. Pope Francis’ Lenten Message for 2017).

The Company aptly expresses the key for this formation that influences life, with the title of the Inter-Assemblies Document, “The Boldness of Charity”. Jesus accompanies us on the transformative path and gives us the boldness to live according to the charism; this boldness of charity allows us to make Christ present in our life and in the life of our brothers and sisters. Through this charism, we discover and marvel that those who are poor themselves are means for our conversion, and it is only with them that we can be missionaries of hope and joy. Those who are poor are our future, but also our present, if only we are able to listen to them and, in humility and trust, allow them to challenge us. By their suffering, persons who are poor show us “the signs of the times”; by our life, we show them a future of love, possible because it is anchored on the solid rock of God’s fidelity.

Here are some pearls of wisdom received from persons who are poor:

- Alessio is eight years old and lives in a home; his mother is mentally ill, and his father is absent. At Christmas, the staff raising the children asks them to do an exercise classifying gifts: real gifts, good gifts, bad gifts. His answer: real gifts: meeting my dad; good gifts: a drone, a red Spiderman car; bad gifts: there aren’t any bad gifts.

- A homeless man peacefully sleeps on the main street of Catania. I was in a hurry, but I stopped to read his sign: *“The city sleeps. The day has gone by at break-neck speed with all its noises. There, in a corner, an old bum with everything that he owns and that he calls his ‘home’ is seated and watches the ‘normal’ people who pass by. He is calm; he has nothing while the people talk about the recession, high prices or their plans for New Year’s Eve. He is happy in his heart, he doesn’t have to run about, he doesn’t have to give gifts, he would just like a smile from the people who pass by. But finally evening falls, and the lights of the city come on. People go home. He, too, is at home. He prepares his bed made of cardboard and contemplates the city that slowly starts to fall silent, ready to go to sleep with the homeless man who, with the city, waits for the beginning of a new day.”*

- In a neighborhood of Catania, transsexual persons live and practice prostitution. A journalist spent several days with them producing an exceptional documentary to show their everyday life and their faith. The title of the documentary is “Christ died for the sins of others”. Here is a conversation between two of them.

- *God came for sinners, and not for the just! I cannot say, ‘I love Him whom I do not see’ and then not love my friend whom I see. The most important thing is to find our friendship with God.*

- *But you, do you believe? Do you, by chance, believe in God when you need Him?*

- *No, no! Even when you don’t need God, you should seek Him!*

- *People criticize us, saying, ‘How can that be? They are prostitutes and pray to the Lord? Isn’t that a contradiction?’ But Saint Mary Madeleine was a prostitute, too.*

- *You have to understand the message of the Lord well. In the sense that we do what we do, we’re prostitutes, but at the same time we believe in the Lord who said, ‘I did not come to heal all the contradictions of the world; I came to heal the human heart.’*

Saint Vincent and Saint Louise spent themselves not in order to establish works and institutions, but to proclaim Christ creatively and boldly to the most vulnerable and weak persons. We ask God for the ability to recognize Him in persons who are poor, to serve Him and to welcome the grace of the possibility of our own conversion.

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A CALL, A LOVE, A WAITING, A GIFT

At the end of the film, the woman breaks out laughing when she discovers that she was seen and accepted. It is a moment of insight. Someone freely shared something with her to which she had no right, and, by this gesture, he freed her. Or perhaps she laughs at herself. In one way or another, the other person helped her to become a little more aware of herself... and she can laugh!

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, in an evangelical spirit of humility, simplicity, and charity. The same love inspires and directs their contemplation and their service; in faith, they know that *God awaits them in those who suffer* (C. 7). *“You are poor Daughters of Charity who have given yourselves to God for the service of persons who are poor.”*¹²

This article from the Constitutions contains our identity, our belonging to God and to the Company, our mission and four magnificent words: a call, a love, a waiting and a gift. In this difficult time experienced by all religious congregations, we need to feel more keenly the joy of witnessing an unprecedented time of vocations for the Church, for the Company and for the Vincentian Family.

The very title of the second letter from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Keep Watch*, underscores the importance of discerning the signs of the times, trusting that God accompanies us, and of recognizing the signs, authentic no matter how small they may be, like the “little cloud” that Elijah could see from afar and that prefigured an imminent refreshing rainfall.¹³

At the end of this short film, the woman does not go to look for the man to thank him. Nor does she notice the other poor beggar... We would expect that after this unconditional act from which she benefited, she would in turn be able to do the same.

A WORD ON FORMATION

To depend on the Holy Spirit is to allow oneself to be molded into a resemblance to Christ, gentle and humble of heart (C. 18). Formation allows the woman to live her vocation as a progressive

12. Saint Vincent, October 22, 1650, To Some Sisters being sent to the country, *CCD IX*, 432.

13. Cf. *Keep Watch*, 6.

modeling of herself on Christ (C. 49) ...has as its goal, above all, the growth of each Sister in faith (C. 50) ...is, before 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 (C. 51a).

With all the formation that we receive, we would expect that our life change. How can we help young Sisters, based on the Constitutions, to have motivations and to forge solid convictions? The Inter-Assemblies Document invites us to ensure that formation is not just the passing on of knowledge but an opportunity for each Sister to forge solid convictions and root herself ever more deeply in her vocation as a Daughter of Charity (p. 23).

Passing on of knowledge is very important. Reading, writing, studying, going more deeply and facing oneself honestly are genuine formation tools. Love and knowledge go together like the tree and the roots, the house and the foundations. Without foundations, there is no house; without knowledge and intellectual work, love has weak foundations. We should not disdain studies and knowledge, but love and formation's real impact on life are what are important. However, the tools are not automatic. The Constitutions are not a magic formula, but paths toward freedom.

The woman in the film, even after her experience of sharing, wasn't able to live in a close relationship. We who watch her are also invited to accept her as she is. This film challenges us to try to accept people as they are.

We probably have some expectations for Sisters who are young in vocation. The Lord may have *other* expectations. We should allow the Word of Jesus to challenge us and reveal what comes from us and what comes from Him. Like Moses, the formator accompanies the Sister in formation without entering into the Promised Land. She does everything in her power and then lets the Holy Spirit work, waiting for the young Sister to respond to the invitations of formation in varying degrees, in different ways and at a different moment than what we might have wished. Our relationship with God develops by placing our humanity at the school of Jesus of Nazareth: it involves entering into Jesus of Nazareth's way of perceiving, speaking, living and loving so that our humanity becomes like His, or rather as little different from His as possible. The emphasis placed on formation is a constant element of our spiritual life as its goal is an ever-greater love. Formation is meaningful when it impels us to develop a real loving relationship with God and our brothers and sisters in order to serve them well because we should “*do well the good we do*” (cf. *CCD IX*, 177) in order “... *to respond anew to the constant calls of God. It is not only a need; it*

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is a question of justice toward persons who are poor and toward each Sister” (C. 52a).

WITH JOY

The short film concludes with the woman leaving on the train. She finally continues on her way.

With the Constitutions as a sure guide, we cannot get lost and are able to face the challenges of our times. Even in the most difficult and dark times, this “little cloud” on the horizon shows us a more fruitful future. What a comforting certainty that comes to us from the Word of God!

Rather than making predictions concerning future young vocations, we should focus on the quality of our life. Lived with dignity, every life bears fruits for the Kingdom of God. Wherever there is just one authentic Daughter of Charity, the future of the Company is built. “Give me a man of prayer, and he’ll be able to do anything,” said Saint Vincent. By living the Constitutions as faithfully as possible, we renew our identity of charity and the style of our mission. Communion – at all levels – is not something we find ready-made. We live our lives as Daughters of Charity in the service of younger Sisters with patience, conscientiousness and determination as well as gratitude and wonder. We know that nothing succeeds without communion and the effort to build it up, not *despite* difficulties but *through* them.

Young Sisters also see that sometimes there is a certain solitude and failure to share and collaborate. While the world becomes more and more global and multicultural, we can have trouble accepting differences within the same culture. However, we know that the community is a privileged place for learning to love and be loved. Sister Evelyne Franc spoke of the miracle of a continuous Pentecost that takes place in our local communities. Fidelity to the Constitutions requires cultivating a universal dimension that pushes us out toward ever-broader horizons and makes us more attentive to the people around us. Let us look at them with the eyes of Mary: maternal, compassionate eyes that are able to respond to their needs. We are called to be, like Mary, fully women and fully fruitful.

Sister Rosanna PITARRESI
Daughter of Charity

Points for emphasis in the formation of formators and in initial formation

My very dear Sisters,

It is a great joy for me to be with you today. I hope that what I have to share will be useful in your most important and delicate work of forming new members of the Daughters of Charity. I know that this Seminarium is drawing to a close and that you have received much information already. I trust that you have had some time to reflect on all that input and that you will continue to do so over the weeks and months ahead.

Because you have had considerable input in the past couple of weeks, some of what I say may repeat what you have heard already. However, as teachers – which, formators, of course, are – you know that repetition is an integral part of the formation process. We need to hear some things over and over again in order to assimilate them. In addition, we have only to look at Saint Vincent, a consummate formator, as an example. He did not hesitate to say,

*“everywhere I went I had only one sermon, which I adapted in a thousand different ways.”*¹

I have been asked to respond to two questions for your consideration this morning. These are:

- What should be emphasized in the formation of the formators?
- What formation aspects should we reinforce in the processes of vocational accompaniment of young people and Sisters in initial formation?

As I prepared my response to the first question, I found it also responded to the second. In a certain sense, the 11 points I will mention below can be directed both to the formators as well as to the persons in formation. It is one’s own personal pilgrimage as a formator that then will help others (persons in formation) to make their pilgrimage. You will be journeying together with those you are seeking to form.

1. CCD XII, p. 8; Conference 180, on the “Observance of the Rules,” 17 May 1658.

Points for emphasis in the formation of formators and in initial formation

1. Use theology from “below” and not theology from “above.” Approach the other with the inner recognition of your own wounds and brokenness. Seek to understand the other person, to react to him or her accordingly and not from the point of view of personal hurt or a position of authority, so as to hurt or humiliate the person in formation. It was Vincent’s acceptance and recognition of his own poverty that led him to purify his own heart, the heart that then beat so strongly for persons on the margins of society, as well as for his confreres and the Daughters of Charity.

Vincent’s approach to the person was not the approach of a theology from “above,” but rather an approach to the person from Vincent’s own poverty, the approach of a theology from “below.” To welcome the stranger within us, to recognize that she exists in every one of us, to embrace this stranger, accept her, and then give it all to Jesus to heal our wounds, to surrender completely to Him and trust totally in His Providence: this was Vincent’s way. Let it be the way for each one of us!

Formation and the accompaniment of young people are difficult in these modern times, especially in certain cultures. Nevertheless, we have the words of Saint Louise to console us:

*“Great courage and steadfastness are essential in order to persevere here because we are bound only by obedience and are often exposed to the danger of discouragement in various circumstances. It is more than a little disheartening for us to spend so much time and so many years in testing and forming our sisters only to have them taken from us by weakness. So long as God is glorified by it, nothing else matters.”*²

2. Build clearly on your own call and discernment, on a personal encounter with Jesus, and not limiting formation simply to following rules. You will do well to take the best from your own formation and use it in your role as formator. Those who helped to shape you as Daughters of Charity could serve as your inspirations and models as you seek to pass on the charism to the next generation. Saint Louise was well aware of the need for good discernment, as she told Sister Barbe Angiboust: *“Our sister from Bernay [Marie Papillon] is very well. She is still at the Motherhouse. We must be careful to ascertain that those we accept have truly been called. We have reason to expect much from her, but she still needs more time for her formation.”*³

3. Help the person in formation deal with the character that shaped her, assisting her to face her personal obstacles, hurts, and wounds, to recognize them and make them a place of growth, a positive place

2. *SW*, Letter 481, To Monsieur l’Abbe de Vaux, at Angers, 29 June (1649), pp. 293-294.

3. *SW*, Letter 471, To Sister Barbe Angiboust, at Bernay, 29 March (1656), p. 501.

for a brighter future and not a dark place of struggles that do not lead anywhere. Saint Vincent reminds us, *“It’s a question of forming young women who can serve God in the Company, helping them to put down deep roots of virtue, teaching them submission, mortification, humility, and the practice of their Rules and of every virtue.”*⁴

4. Provide regular, personal encounters with Jesus that will bring the person to feel loved by Jesus and to be able to love in return. These encounters with Jesus in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, during Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and the Sacrament of Reconciliation are vital means for developing our relationship with Jesus. We cannot expect to grow in the spiritual life if we are not nourished regularly with the very body and blood of Jesus, which he left us in the Eucharist. Blessed Giuseppina Nicoli, a Seminary Directress herself, recognized the importance of a solid sacramental life. She instructed the young Sisters: *“Holy Communion transforms us, makes us divine in a certain way ... because God unites himself so closely with us that we become one with Him ... If we realized the ardor with which our Lord wishes to give himself to us, we would be embarrassed, humbled, crushed at the thought of our coldness in going to Him.”*⁵

5. Have personal contact with the poor also during the formation process. As future servants of the poor, the young women in your charge need to have this interaction from the very beginning of their life in community. However, you need it too, not only to teach by example, but also to remain in hands on contact with the poor you are called to serve. Blessed Frédéric Ozanam put it so well when he said, *“Knowledge of the poor and needy is not gained by pouring over books or in discussions with politicians, but by visiting the slums where they live, sitting by the bedside of the dying, feeling the cold they feel, and learning from their lips the causes of their woes.”*⁶ His mentor, Blessed Rosalie Rendu, also taught her Sisters what attitudes to have toward the poor: *“Let us love the Good God very much. Let us not be sparing with our duty; let us serve the poor well, always speaking to them with great kindness. If you do not act in this way, you will be punished: the poor will insult you. The ruder they are; the more dignified you must be. Remember, Our Lord hides behind those rags.”*⁷

4. *CCD XIIIb*, 294-295; Document 161, Council of 30 October 1647.

5. Writings of Giuseppina Nicoli, Q XVII, Instructions to the Seminary Sisters 1912, pp. 141, 143, catalogued in the Archives of the Daughters of Charity in Cagliari, Italy; cited in Antonello, Erminio, *Una Mistica della Carità: Beata Giuseppina Nicoli [A Mystic of Charity, Blessed Giuseppina Nicoli]*, Roma: CLV Edizioni Vincenziane, 2007, p. 159.

6. Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, Speech to the General Assembly of the SSVF on December 14, 1848.

7. *Positio*, « Sommaire du Procès Ordinaire de Paris » [“Summary of the Ordinary Process of Paris”], p. 56-57.

Points for emphasis in the formation of formators and in initial formation

6. Help the person read, reflect, and meditate Holy Scripture as a vivid encounter with Jesus. Saint Jerome insists that “*ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.*”⁸ Our growth in the spiritual life depends on a daily meeting with Jesus in his word and in the Eucharist. To know the Lord we must drink deeply from the living water that is the Word of God.

Saint Vincent knew the need for growth in the spiritual life. What he said to Father Bernard Codoing certainly holds true for you today: “*It would be well, as you mention, to form them interiorly. Without that, a person soon sees the disappearance and end of his fervor.*”⁹ Saint Vincent also gave this critical advice to a seminary director: “*We must be full reservoirs in order to let our water spill out without becoming empty, and we must possess the spirit with which we want them to be animated, for no one can give what he does not have.*”¹⁰

7. Look for different forms that can help in our daily time dedicated to meditation. Again, Saint Vincent provides some suggestions: “*Help them to understand clearly how to make their prayer on the subject of a conference, and the reasons for doing a certain thing. For this, you have to make them realize the advantage of preparation for prayer and the disadvantage that comes from omitting it; afterward, they should consider the means that can lead them to make this preparation as perfectly as possible.*”¹¹ I know that some of the young women that come to you have a rather solid spiritual life already. They may have been working with a spiritual director for years and perhaps belong to a prayer group or scripture-study group. Others, however, come with lots of good will, but little background in the spiritual life. For those, Saint Louise encourages simplicity in prayer, especially during the first weeks of formation. She advises the Seminary Directress to “*instruct the new sisters to say their rosary at the time when the community begins meditation. Through prayers to the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph, they shall ask God to give them the grace to make meditation whenever obedience to the Rule permits them to do so.*”¹²

8. Build community life on the model of the Trinity. As I mentioned in my Lenten letter, Jesus helps us understand the Holy Trinity: the relationship among the three Persons, the inner connectivity among them, and the influence of the Trinity on each individual person as well as on society as a whole. As we discover and develop, with God’s grace, an unbreakable bond between the Trinity and the individual person, between the Trinity and the community, we will get ever closer

8. Saint Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah*, Book XVIII, ProL.: PL 24, 17.

9. CCD II, 396; Letter 639, To Bernard Codoing, in Rome, Paris, 30 January 1643.

10. CCD IV, 570; Letter 1623, To a Seminary Director.

11. CCD XIIIb, 302; Document 162, Council of 22 March [1648].

12. SW, A.91b, Rule for the Motherhouse, pp. 758-759.

to the ideal model of “relationships,” which Jesus presented to us in the persons of the Trinity. The Holy Trinity shows us the mutual relationship between the Father and the Son; the mutual relationship between the Father and the Spirit; the mutual relationship between the Son and the Spirit; and the relationship among the Father, Son, and Spirit. What can we see in these “relationships”? We can see that attention is always directed to the other person and not to oneself; that priority is always given to the other person and not to oneself; that praise, thankfulness, admiration are always given to the other person and not to oneself; that each one of the three Persons of the Trinity always expresses the need for collaboration with the other Person to fulfill the mission; and that each of the three Persons of the Trinity always clearly expresses that it would be insufficient and ineffective for each of them to act alone. The ideal model of the Trinity, that Jesus left us, is the model to follow.

Saint Louise recognized the problems that could arise in community, especially those involving different generations. She wrote to Sister Jeanne Lepintre, “*I am sure, my dear Sister, that you remind the most recent arrivals of the cordial respect they owe the older sisters. This is something so necessary that there would be great disorders in the Community if we did not pay attention to it. Young minds must be formed in submission and interior mortification. Otherwise, there would be only confusion, and the older sisters would have reason for discontent if they were misunderstood.*”¹³

9. Keep discovering the Incarnated Jesus in everyday life. As I encouraged you in my Advent letter, we need to see and recognize the Incarnation “here and now.” Incarnation means: God becoming man. God becoming a human being like us. God lowering himself to our level. God identifying himself with each single person individually, from the beginning of humanity until the end of time. Jesus is incarnated every single day, over and over again, in all the corners of the world. At every conception, at the beginning of every human life, Jesus is incarnated again. Therefore, Jesus’s real presence in the human person, his Incarnation, needs to be felt in every period of human history, in every area of human development. The Jesus, who was conceived, born, suffered, died, and raised from the dead, lives “here and now,” thirsts and longs to be rediscovered by us, so as to renew and deepen our closeness with Him, our friendship, the love between Him and me.

10. Take time for contemplation, recognizing that Vincent de Paul was a “Mystic of Charity.” The theologian Karl Rahner, at the end of the 20th century, had pronounced these prophetic words: “*The Christians of the 21st century are going to be mystics, or they will not be.*” In

13. SW, Letter 351, To Sister Jeanne Lepintre, at Nantes, 24 August (1652), p. 404.

Points for emphasis in the formation of formators and in initial formation

my very first letter to you, I reflected on why we can call Saint Vincent de Paul a “Mystic of Charity.” I trust that your own reflection on this aspect of our Holy Founder had led you to discover other ways to see him in that light.

11. Read and meditate daily on the present Constitutions and the Rules given to the Daughters of Charity by Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. Perhaps you could make a yearly plan to read-meditate each day a paragraph of the Constitutions and when you have finished them, begin the same read-meditate process with the Rules. You would continue alternating them during the entire year and all throughout the remaining years of your life. I realize that those of you who are Directresses read the Constitutions and Rule when you are preparing the classes to teach them to the Seminary Sisters. However, you also need to read and meditate them regularly for your own spiritual growth and formation. If you do not know the Constitutions, how can you live them?

The points above may sound rather daunting and perhaps they are. Just remember, however, Saint Vincent’s words to Sister Julienne Loret, the first Seminary Directress, *“On your own, you could never do it; you have neither the ability nor the insight, but Our Lord Jesus Christ will act in you; He Himself will be your ability and your insight. Make yourself a good, prayerful Sister, and Our Lord will teach you everything you’ll have to know.”*¹⁴

Father Tomaz MAVRIC, CM
Superior General

14. CCD XIIIb, 302; Document 162, Council of 22 March [1648].

**Designation of Visitatrixes and
Nomination of Provincial Directors**

PROVINCE OF ERITREA: Sister Lettekidan LUCAS was designated Visitatrix on November 2, 2016.

PROVINCE OF ESPANA-NORTE: Sister Maria Concepcion GONZALEZ IZQUIERDO was designated Visitatrix on November 2, 2016.

PROVINCE OF ETHIOPIA: Sister Hiwot ZEWDE was designated Visitatrix on December 14, 2016.

PROVINCE OF SAINT LOUISE-USA: Sister Catherine Mary NORRIS was designated Visitatrix on December 14, 2016.

PROVINCE OF LOS ALTOS HILLS: Sister Julie KUBASAK was designated Visitatrix on April 5, 2017.

PROVINCE OF COLOGNE-NETHERLANDS: Sister Christine EGER was designated Visitatrix on April 5, 2017.

PROVINCE OF ESPANA-ESTE: Sister Juana Maria BELZUNEGUI LIZARRAGA was designated Visitatrix on April 5, 2017.

PROVINCE OF THE NEAR EAST: Sister Laurice OBEID was designated Visitatrix on May 17, 2017.

PROVINCE OF SLOVENIA/REGION OF ALBANIA: Sister Francka SAJE was designated Visitatrix on July 12, 2017.

PROVINCE OF GRAZ-CENTRAL EUROPE: Sister Magdalena POMWENGER was re-designated Visitatrix for a three-year term on July 26, 2017.



*News
from the
Provinces*

APPOINTMENT OF PROVINCIAL DIRECTORS

PROVINCE OF CENTRAL AFRICA: Father Nestor GOMEZ was appointed Provincial Director on March 10, 2017.

PROVINCE OF CAMEROON: Father Frédéric Armand OLANGUINA was appointed Provincial Director on April 4, 2017.

PROVINCE OF MADRID-SANTA LUISA: Father Joaquin Gonzalez HERNANDO was appointed Provincial Director on April 4, 2017.

PROVINCE OF ESPANA-SUR: Father José Maria LOPEZ MASIDE was re-appointed Provincial Director for a three-year term on May 12, 2017.

PROVINCE OF FORTALEZA: Father Jânio José PEREIRA DA was appointed Provincial Director on May 12, 2017.

PROVINCE OF ESPANA-NORTE: Father Teodoro Martin ESTEBAN was appointed Provincial Director for a three-year term on May 19, 2017.

PROVINCE OF COLOGNE-NETHERLANDS: Father Georg WITZEL was re-appointed Provincial Director for a three-year term on June 14, 2017.

PROVINCE OF THAILAND: Father Victor PACHECO was re-appointed Provincial Director for a three-year term on June 14, 2017.

PROVINCE OF IRELAND: Father Mark NOONAN was re-appointed Provincial Director for a three-year term on June 14, 2017.

PROVINCE OF SAINT LOUISE-USA: Father John KETTELBERGER was appointed Provincial Director on June 14, 2017.

PROVINCE OF AUSTRALIA: Father Philip ROBSON was appointed Provincial Director on June 22, 2017.

PROVINCE OF CURITIBA: Father Marcos GUMIEIRO was appointed Provincial Director on June 22, 2017.

PROVINCE OF BELO HORIZONTE: Father Francisco Ermelindo GOMES was re-appointed Provincial Director for a three-year term on June 22, 2017.

PROVINCE OF ESPANA-ESTE: Father Julian Arana JIMENEZ was appointed Provincial Director on June 22, 2017.

PROVINCE OF GRAZ-CENTRAL EUROPE: Father Alexander JERNEJ was re-appointed Provincial Director for a six-year term on October 19, 2017. Father Szabolcs BARTA was appointed Sub-Director for a six-year term on October 19, 2017.

PROVINCE DEL CARIBE: Father Pedro DUARTE was appointed Provincial Director on September 13, 2017.

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**CONSECRATED BECAUSE “MORE EXPOSED”,
CONSECRATED TO REACH ALL PEOPLE**

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**Urgings of Pope Francis
during the ceremony closing the centenary
of the Marian apparitions
in Fatima (Portugal), October 13, 2017.**

*“Never distance yourselves from Blessed Mother
and never give up the rosary,
pray the rosary as she asked...
Never be afraid,
God is infinitely greater than all our problems
and loves us very much.
Continue to forge ahead,
never distance yourselves from Blessed Mother:
like a child who feels safe
when close to his mother,
we, too, are safe
when we remain close to the Virgin Mary.
She is our protection.”*

Video message broadcast to pilgrims
gathered at the “Cova da Iria”
and reported in the Osservatore Romano the following day.

