

# *E*choes of the Company

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Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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# 50th anniversary of the death of Mother Guillemin

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## Letter of May 8, 2018

Dear Sisters,

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

On this eve of the celebration our Foundress, I want to wish each of you a Happy Feast of St. Louise de Marillac and in order to be joined with you in thought and prayer, I offer details of what we are planning to do here at the Mother House with the Visitatrixes from around the world.

As you know, the Visitatrixes have been on retreat since May 4th. They are entering fully into this time of silence, spiritual renewal and encounter with our Lord. On May 9th we will celebrate the Feast of St. Louise in a special way. During the day we will have the privilege of praying before the original text of the “*Lumière de Pentecôte*”, handwritten by St. Louise herself and preserved in the Archives of the Congregation of the Mission. In the evening we will have a prayer service in our Chapel to honor our Foundress in front of this precious document which contains some of the essential elements of the Little Company. We will ask St. Louise to obtain for us the graces we need to respond faithfully to the calls of the Spirit today.

In communion with us, I invite you to reread the “*Lumière de Pentecôte*”, and to meditate on it personally and as a local community.

*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 occasion, I had a reason for believing this to be so, although I cannot now remember it.*

Let us deepen our trust in the Holy Spirit so that, after the example of St. Louise, we allow God to completely fill our heart and our life. The Spirit alone will be able to give us the *Boldness of Charity for a New Missionary Momentum*. This is a wonderful opportunity which is offered to us during this Easter Season, when in just a few days we will pray the Novena to the Holy Spirit.

### Letter of May 8, 2018

The work of the Inter-Assemblies Meeting will begin on May 14th. Marking the midpoint between two General Assemblies, this meeting gives us the opportunity to share experiences, review the past three years, and to begin to prepare for the upcoming Domestic, Provincial and General Assemblies. We count on the support of your prayer that the Holy Spirit will guide our reflection, in anticipation of a better service of Christ in those who are poor.

Through the intercession of Saint Louise, let us ask *“Mary, the first Christian and the consecrated Virgin par excellence, present in the life of the Company from the beginning”* (Cf. C. 15) to obtain for us the grace to be docile to the action of the Holy Spirit and to carry out God’s plan for the Company.

Affectionately united with you in prayer,

Sister Kathleen APPLER  
*Daughter of Charity*

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### FATHER CORPUS DELGADO, CM

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### ***“Coming and going” today***

The charism is a dynamic reality and not an archeological reference to the time of the Founders. Through its own force, the charism recreates itself in every age, continually developing and growing richer thanks to the vitality of the responses of each person and local community in fidelity to the Holy Spirit.

*“At their origins we see the hand of God who, in his Spirit, calls certain individuals to follow Christ more closely, to translate the Gospel into a particular way of life, to read the signs of the times with the eyes of faith and to respond creatively to the needs of the Church. This initial experience then matured and developed, engaging new members in new geographic and cultural contexts, and giving rise to new ways of exercising the charism, new initiatives and expressions of apostolic charity.”<sup>1</sup>*

In light of this invitation, I would like to look anew at the intuitions of the Founders and more specifically the lifestyle of the Daughters of Charity “coming and going”, in order to give it concrete form today, personally, as a local community and as a Province.

### **1. THE DAUGHTER OF CHARITY “COMING AND GOING” TODAY IS THE DISCIPLE WHO “GOES FORTH”.**

Pope Francis invented the expression, *“a Church that goes forth”*. This movement of “going forth” that God wants to produce in believers constantly appears in the Word of God. *“Now, go! I am sending you...”* (Ex 3:10). *“To whomever I send you, you shall go...”* (Jer 1:7).

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1. Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, I, 1

## “Coming and Going” today

*“In our day..., all of us are called to take part in this new missionary “going forth”. Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call 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).*

*“Going out to others in order to reach the fringes of humanity does not mean rushing out aimlessly into the world. Often it is better simply to slow down, to put aside our eagerness in order to see and listen to others, to stop rushing from one thing to another and to remain with someone who has faltered along the way (Evangelii Gaudium, 46).*

**“Wherever we are, whatever our ministry, each one of us is missionary” (IAD, p. 22).**

Living “going forth” allows us to see more closely those who experiencing poverty and marginalization and open ourselves to their needs. Before the horrors and injustices from which persons who were poor were suffering, Vincent wrote to Pope Innocent X to ask him to intervene. *“It is a small thing to hear or read these things; they must be seen and ascertained with one’s own eyes” (CCD IV, 446).*

Living “going forth” leads to drawing near to those who suffer, discovering their struggles, their hopes and their thirst for justice.

Living “going forth” makes us closer to those who suffer by respecting them, accepting them, listening to them and deciding to be their traveling companions.

When a pilgrim undertakes a long voyage, he appreciates the company of a group. Our going forth toward Christ, present in the person of the poor, cannot be lived in isolation but with the commitment of the local community, united forces, shared support and collective celebration of life. A pilgrim must be attentive to keep up the pace, to change direction and adapt to all sorts of roads. Going forth toward Christ present in the person of the poor makes us more attentive to engage our creativity, imagination and ever-renewed fidelity.

## **2. THE DAUGHTER OF CHARITY “COMING AND GOING” TAKES ON THE ATTITUDES OF JESUS IN HIS INCARNATION.**

***“They contemplate Christ in the self-emptying of His Redemptive Incarnation and they marvel ‘that a God should somehow be unable***

***or unwilling to be separated from man.’ They learn from Him how to reveal to their brothers and sisters God’s love for the world, especially for persons who are poor” (C. 17 b).***

In Jesus Christ, God goes forth to seek out the “lost sheep”, suffering humanity that has gone astray...

In the radical self-emptying of Christ’s Incarnation, *“though He was in the form of God... He emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness and found human in appearance, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6-8).*

The attitudes of the Son of God in His Incarnation inspire how we should live “coming and going” today.

*- In the Incarnation, God goes out to meet people and seeks them out.*

We cannot reduce the service of those who are poor to helping those who come to us to ask for assistance. Following the Incarnate Son of God, we should seek out, know and identify the needs and problems of our brothers and sisters.

*- The Incarnation is a self-emptying.*

In our service of those who are poor, we should be Christ’s disciples, ready to come out of ourselves, empty ourselves, strip ourselves of our securities and conformist behaviors, place ourselves in the shoes of those who are poor and give them a place in our hearts and lives. For us personally and our communities, this process implies a real exodus, a path of conversion.

*- Through the Incarnation, the Son of God, found human in appearance, humbled Himself.*

Our service of those who are poor necessarily implies sharing, participating in some way in the living conditions of those who are poor. Our local communities should find forms of participation in the living conditions of those who are poor, following the Incarnate Christ.

*- The words and signs of the Incarnate Son of God reveal God’s plan and the Good News for persons who are poor.*

### “Coming and Going” today

These words and signs highlight the lies of certain people and the structures of sin that marginalize those who are poor. Following Christ, our local communities should come to promote those who are poor and explicitly proclaim Jesus Christ, fight effectively against poverty, analyze its causes, live in solidarity with marginalized groups and denounce the personal, communal and structural sin that generates exclusion and dependency.

- *God’s self-emptying goes even to death, and death on a cross.*

Descending to the margins of society, to the peripheries of the world and working for the dignity of persons who are poor can sometimes lead others to misunderstand, reject and disdain us. As disciples of the Master, this should not surprise us.

### **3 – THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY “COMING AND GOING” PITCH THE “TENT OF MEETING” ON THE “COURT OF THE GENTILES”.**

Pope Francis suggests that Christian communities should be of “one heart” like a tent.

Our Church and our local communities should not resemble an unmovable stone but a “tent” that we roll up at sunrise to set out for a new journey.

The experience of Daughters of Charity “coming and going” helps us imagine the Church like a tent and desire to live joyfully in it. This suggests a provisional nature and adaptability, but also hospitality, relationships and acceptance of “bad weather”.

Encouraged by the Spirit and the Lord’s promise, although we do not know the road ahead of us, we can move forward, setting up and folding up our tent as many times as necessary.

Moses took the Tent and pitched it outside of the camp at a good distance. They called it the “Tent of Meeting”. The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a person speaks to a friend (cf. Ex 33:7-11).

The community of missionary disciples goes forth in haste to meet life and to build a culture of encounter around Jesus in the common home, for the joy of the Gospel fills the entire heart and life of those who are with Him.

In the Tent of Meeting that the Daughters of Charity pitch, a culture of mercy develops based on the rediscovery of others: a culture in which no one looks at the other with indifference nor turns away from the sight of his or her suffering brothers and sisters.

Pope Benedict XVI used the expression, “court of the Gentiles”.

*“I think that today too the Church should open a sort of ‘Court of the Gentiles’ in which people might in some way latch on to God, without knowing him and before gaining access to his mystery, at whose service the inner life of the Church stands.”<sup>2</sup>*

The image of the Court of the Gentiles indicates to us the boldness of the Daughters of Charity to look for all possible ways to establish forms of dialogue that might meet the deepest expectations of people and their thirst for God. This boldness makes it possible to enter these contexts by sharing their experience of searching and speaking of the encounter with the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a gift.

**“Seeking to make the Lord known to those who are poor, they proclaim the Gospel to them, explicitly wherever possible, but always through the witness of their lives. They are open to receiving from poor persons and to allowing themselves to be evangelized by them” (C. 24b).**

For his part, Pope Francis uses another image, equally compelling. *“So I trust that, rather than living in some utopia, you will find ways to create ‘alternate spaces’, where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive.”<sup>3</sup>*

It does not seem that this is the era of large structures; it is time to favor the “utopia”<sup>4</sup>, but even more the time to recreate “places”, spaces, where persons who are poor can experience the joy of the Gospel, where their wounds can be healed and the Good News may continue to reach all of us.

2. Address to the members of the Roman Curia, December 21, 2009

3. Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, II, 2

4. The etymology of the word “utopia” means “non-place”.

“Coming and Going” today

**4– THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY “COMING AND GOING” AT THE FEET OF THOSE WHO ARE POOR.**

A speech Pope Francis addressed to a group of Bishops<sup>5</sup> presents us with the invitation to kneel down and wash the feet of persons who are poor.

Saint Vincent de Paul did not hesitate to call Daughters of Charity “pastors”.

*“Pastors have the care of souls; Princes and Magistrates, of bodies; but you have to serve the sick poor as Pastors, fathers, and mothers, procuring for them for soul and body all the good you can because often they have no one but you to care for them” (CCD X, 94).*

This statement from Vincent helps us hear Pope Francis’ reflection to recently appointed Bishops as if it were addressed to the Daughters of Charity.

*“As I underlined in the Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, today there is an imperious need for missionary conversion (cf. 19-49); a conversion which concerns every baptized person and every parish, but which the Pastors are naturally called to live and witness to first, as leaders of the particular Churches. I therefore encourage you to order your life and your episcopal ministry to this missionary transformation which challenges the People of God today.*

*At the center of this missionary conversion of the Church is service to humanity, following the example of her Lord who washed the feet of his disciples. The Church, as an evangelizing community, is called to grow in proximity, to bridge distances, to abase herself to the point of humiliation, if necessary, and to embrace human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. In this perspective, the Second Vatican Council, discussing the duty of the Bishop, as the guide of God’s family, underlined that Bishops, in exercising their ministry as fathers and shepherds in the midst of their faithful, must act as “those who serve” always keeping before their eyes the example of the Good Shepherd who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life for all...*

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5. Address of Pope Francis to the Bishops taking part in the seminar organized by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, September 20, 2014

*The Church needs Pastors, and therefore servants, Bishops who know how to kneel before others to wash their feet. Pastors close to their people, meek, patient and merciful fathers and brothers...”*

“Let us dare,” the Inter-Assemblies Document says.

***“Whatever their particular type of work and level of professional competence, the Sisters maintain toward persons who are poor an attitude of servant, which implies the practice of the virtues of their state: humility, simplicity, and charity. They preserve detachment of heart and the sense of giving without seeking any return. This is manifested in the spirit of their service and the quality of their presence” (C. 24d).***

**5– THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY “COMING AND GOING”, A MISSIONARY AND MERCIFUL COMMUNITY.**

The People of God, in the diversity of its members and charisms – laity, religious, priests, bishops –, we are all called to give this *collective witness* that we are children of God and brothers and sisters to each other.

As a missionary community, let us unite forces, seek to coordinate efforts and try to complement each other. Putting aside feelings of competition, let us favor collaboration. Let us prefer being collaborators to being those in charge. Let us live availability for the shared mission, the common mission entrusted us by the Lord.

Saint Louise said,

*“...let us love Him in each other since we are His” (Spiritual Writings, p. 159).*

Today more than ever, the witness of **missionary communion** (more than the altruistic heroism of intrepid solitary figures) will reveal the signs of the Kingdom of God in the world and give credibility to the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Gospels emphasize that when Jesus saw poor persons, He was moved in his guts by **mercy**, the reflection of the mercy of God the Father.

### “Coming and Going” today

*“We incarnate the duty of hearing the cry of the poor when we are deeply moved by the suffering of others.”<sup>6</sup>*

- Thanks to mercy, Christians allow themselves to be hurt, touched; they are moved deep within.
- Mercy allows us to hear the groans of those who suffer, accompany people in their need, defend them against injustice and give them a larger place in our lives.<sup>7</sup>
- Mercy leads us to express our commitment to the cause of those who are poor and become indignant at the violation of their rights.
- Mercy opens the eyes of our hearts to show us the face of those who suffer (not just the statistics).
- Mercy breaks through the anonymity of marginalized persons and gives each person who suffers a name and a face.
- Mercy causes us to show interest in all men and women of every race, culture, religion and social status.
- Mercy touches the whole person and his or her overall good: corporal and spiritual, material and cultural, individual and social, temporal and transcendent, earthly and heavenly. This global unity encompasses individual assistance in response to an urgent need as well as social promotion and the struggle to change unjust structures. *“Saint Vincent reminds the Sisters that love embraces justice. The Daughters of Charity are constantly solicitous for the development of every person in all the aspects of their being. That is why they are alert to ways of helping their brothers and sisters to become conscious of their own dignity and agents of their own promotion. They plead the cause of the underprivileged, who do not have the possibility of making their legitimate demands and aspirations heard”* (C. 24e).

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6. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 193

7. *“Our commitment does not consist exclusively in activities or programs of promotion and assistance; what the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an unruly activism, but above all an attentiveness which considers the other ‘in a certain sense as one with ourselves’. This loving attentiveness is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek their good”* (EG, 199).

- Mercy makes us instruments of hope. *“In the desert people of faith are needed who, by the example of their own lives, point out the way to the Promised Land and keep hope alive ... we are called to be living sources of water from which others can drink”* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 86).

- Mercy becomes prayer, intercession. *“One form of prayer moves us particularly to take up the task of evangelization and to seek the good of others: it is the prayer of intercession”* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 281). The Daughters of Charity *“consider it their responsibility to pray with and for those who are poor and in their name”* (C. 24f).

***“In her own life, [the Virgin Mary] gives the example of that maternal love by which all should be animated who cooperate in the apostolic mission of the Church on behalf of the rebirth of mankind”*** (C. 26).

Father Corpus DELGADO, CM

*“All together before God, we assume the responsibility of keeping the Company on the path of holiness, of making it a receptive instrument in His hands, ready to respond to His plans, in fidelity to its vocation in the Church.”*

Mother Guillemin

*“The renewal of each member of the Community will produce the renewal of the Community as a whole... The renewal will be affected less by a change in the exterior form of the laws, than thanks to the attitude taken in the interior of souls, a veritable conversion.”*

Mother Guillemin



## **Christ is the Rule of the Daughters of Charity and Mary is the Mother of the Company**

In light of Catherine Labouré's spiritual journey beginning during  
her childhood in Fain

(Bicentenary of her First Communion, 1818-2018)

### **Introduction**

When we go to Fain-lès-Moutiers for the first time, the small size of the village strikes us. It may make us think of the little village of Nazareth that did not figure on any of the Roman road maps of the time. Did people not ask, "*What good can come from Nazareth?*" We, too, could wonder, "*What good could come from Fain-lès-Moutiers?*"

Nonetheless, it is in Fain-lès-Moutiers that the Holy Spirit raised up a spiritual guide to dispense His light at a particular moment in the history of the Church and the Company. In fact, Catherine Labouré was born just after the end of the French Revolution. Now, during that period, the Company was very weak and seemed incapable of getting itself back up on its feet. This is when God sent Catherine as a new sort of "Marguerite Naseau" for the modern era.

When we think of Saint Catherine, depending on our leaning, we may be more or less impressed by the direct interventions of heaven, by her ordinary holiness, by the quality of her life as a Daughter of Charity, by her humility, by her way of seeing everything in God or by her hidden life and her remaining silent about herself as the witness of the apparitions, etc.

Catherine neither spoke nor wrote much, yet her whole life is a sort of long love letter. The eloquence of her life of humility and charity led the Church to proclaim her a saint on July 27, 1947.

## **IN WHAT GROUND DID CATHERINE LABOURÉ'S HOLINESS TAKE ROOT?**

Born on May 2, 1806, Catherine was a simple country girl; nothing external distinguished her from the other children of the village. She was the eighth child of the family. She was joyful and liked to play with the others. The Labouré family was practicing Catholics, but not in an overdone way. Faith was part of family life. The parents, Pierre and Madeleine, planted the seeds of love for God and the Blessed Virgin in the hearts of their children. When he was about 20 years old, Pierre, her father, had begun his studies to become a priest, but the French Revolution closed seminaries. He returned to work the land, following family tradition. At age 25, he met Madeleine and married. They had ten children who lived and seven who died at birth. The parents courageously endured these successive deaths of their children, offering them to God. Madeleine, the mother, more particularly passed on her deep faith to Catherine; unfortunately, she died suddenly at the age of 46.

These circumstances prevented Catherine from attending school. You could almost say she did not know how to read or write (she received no university education and did not write any spiritual treatises). However, she was the one whom God chose to receive the exceptional revelation of the mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception, a revelation that would have a major influence on the Church because twenty-four years later on December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX would proclaim this mystery a truth of the faith.

### **THREE KEY EVENTS DEEPLY INFLUENCED CATHERINE'S CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH**

#### **Her mother's death**

The consequence of this first event was her deliberate choice of Mary as her mother. An unshakeable trust in the Virgin Mary would follow and undergird her entire life. Herein lies the beginning of Catherine's holiness.

Through this sorrowful situation when she was 9 years old, Catherine connects with all young people wounded by life or who experience

### Christ is the Rule, Mary is the Mother

trauma following the death of one of their parents. She also connects with each one of us in our different childhood wounds. Catherine's Marian experience can open up a path for inner healing and human and spiritual maturation for many people.

#### **Her First Communion**

This second event would bring about her deep love for Jesus in the Eucharist, which would translate into a life of work. Herein lies the beginning of her vocation.

Catherine helps us to reach out to all those children who do not know God and all those who must work hard to provide for their families.

#### **The dream of Saint Vincent**

This third event took place one night. In a dream, Catherine heard the first call that God addressed to her to indicate her future as a Daughter of Charity and the special mission she would receive. It is important to remember that Saint Vincent met Catherine three times in a special way.

Catherine turns out thoughts toward the Vincentian Family. By her witness of a humble, simple and charitable life, she brings out the sense of the three characteristic virtues of the Daughters of Charity.

If we do not look too closely, we could imagine Catherine very happy on many levels: a simple life without troubles and a relatively well-off family in the Burgundy countryside, but let us look more closely.

**THE FIRST EVENT, HER MOTHER'S DEATH, COULD HAVE TRAUMATIZED CATHERINE. HOWEVER, THIS TRAGEDY WOULD LEAD HER TO DEVELOP A TOTALLY CONFIDENT FILIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE VIRGIN MARY.**

Catherine was 9 years old. The mother's death was sudden for the entire family, the household was in mourning, and Catherine suffered in her heart. Catherine cried; what distress in her eyes, and at the same time, what determination! In her affliction, she took hold of the little statue of Mary on the armoire in her parent's bedroom and said, "*From now*

*on, you will be my mother.*" We might think that Catherine's decision was the effect of emotion, but the events that would follow prove that her childish words were in fact very profound and irrevocable.

Catherine seems to have received a sort of intuition, like an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to make this act of faith and confidence. It was as if Jesus said directly to her what He said from the Cross, "*Behold your mother.*" A mother's purpose is to protect her child, raise him or her and offer tender love, and Catherine would "make use of" Mary to take her life in her own hands.

Catherine, from her experience of nine years, seemed to say to Mary, "*I love you; I open the house of my heart to you; come and live in my home.*" We should not think too readily that this is infantile or silly. Isn't this what Jesus said during the last moments of His life? "Behold your mother." By offering us the best gift of His heart, He asks us to love His Mother as He loved her. In other words, in order to "stand up" in the love of Jesus, we are invited to hold ourselves against Mary's heart. Because God is Father, Jesus wanted us to experience in Mary the mystery of the Mother as well. A child has a father and a mother; this is both natural and supernatural.

The Gospel continues, showing that at the foot of the Cross, John perfectly grasped Jesus's message because he decided to record what happened to him. "*From that hour on, the disciple took her into his home*" (Jn 19:27). Nine-year-old Catherine, with the freshness and freedom of childhood, herself as well began a real life of companionship with Mary. Sure of the presence of the Virgin Mary at her side since a mother is always there, Catherine very simply turned herself over to her maternal education. Now, "*when Mary has taken root in a soul... God will let her plant the roots of every virtue, but especially deep humility and burning charity.*"<sup>1</sup> Of course, this is not detectable by the senses and takes place gradually. We do not know how it happened in Catherine's heart; we just know that she used to pray the rosary with her family as was common at the time. How many times had Catherine observed the tenderness of her mother holding her little brother Auguste, crippled following an accident, on her lap? Wasn't that a beautiful representation of the Virgin Mary holding the child Jesus in her arms?

1. Louis-Grignion de Montfort, *Treatise on True Devotion to Mary*, no. 35 and *The Secret of Mary*, no. 15

### Christ is the Rule, Mary is the Mother

Allow me to put forth the hypothesis that Catherine very simply “cut-and-pasted”, assimilating Mary with the Child Jesus on the one hand with Mary and the young Catherine on the other. It then becomes easy to imagine Catherine praying each Hail Mary with her childish simplicity, sure that each of her invocations brought great joy to the heart of her heavenly mother. With each “*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,*” we can make out Mary, seated beside her, interceding for her and all of humanity. We know that such a Marian atmosphere helps grace to develop and grow.

In the depths of this emotional poverty, Catherine developed an intense filial relationship with Mary, her new mother. “*Consolation of the afflicted*” who is very close to us as soon as we call upon her, Mary would become her “nurse” with tender hands and the cure for her wounds. From then on, Catherine would direct her affection toward the Blessed Virgin. This was a pivotal moment in Catherine’s life!

HERE, WE CAN ESTABLISH A PARALLEL BETWEEN THE MARIAN LIFE OF CATHERINE LABOURÉ AND THAT OF THÉRÈSE DE LISIEUX.

Beginning at nine years old, Catherine’s discovery of Mary’s maternal love was not conceptual but real. She already lived an extraordinary Marian life, very simple but very profound, and this deep intimacy seems comparable to that of Thérèse as a child. Saint Thérèse did not know Saint Catherine because she was born just four years before Catherine’s death, but we can clearly establish a significant connection between them in terms of their spirituality. Even in their respective childhoods, we can find similarities, and God can speak to us through their simplicity and trust.

When *Thérèse* lost her mother at the age of 4 ½, she threw herself in the arms of her older sister, Pauline, and said, “*Now you are my mother.*” Five years later, though, when Pauline entered the Carmel, Thérèse was so sad about her departure that she fell very ill, a sort of physical reaction to her emotional state. Her father and sisters prayed fervently to Our Lady of Victories. One day, Thérèse saw the statue of Mary at her bedside smile, and she immediately felt healed. Later, when Thérèse would be at the foot of Our Lady of Victories on her way to Rome to ask

the Pope permission to enter the Carmel at age 15, she would say, “*The Blessed Virgin told me plainly that it was really she who had smiled on me and cured me. I understood that she watched over me, that I was her child, so from then on I could only call her ‘mom’ because this name seemed even more tender than ‘mother’.*”

*Catherine*, for her part, at her mother’s death, surely had a similar experience. Did she receive the grace of seeing Mary’s smile? We do not know because she did not write *The Story of a Soul*. It is too bad because it would have been very interesting to discover how Mary’s gentleness healed her wounded heart. Thanks to the Virgin Mary, Catherine was no longer abandoned; she had a mom who, from heaven, would always remain close to her little girl. It would be better to say that the little girl would never leave her. The mother and child would never leave each other. Catherine would dwell in her maternal heart; it was not enough to live with Mary but actually in her, within the house of God that Mary herself is.

By saying to Mary, “*From now on, you will be my mother,*” Catherine made a real act of faith and in that way grew in trust. This is because one of the behaviors that helps us grow in trust is to make acts of faith. Faith grows by actually saying to the Lord, “*I trust you, I entrust this situation to you, I know that you will take care of it.*” These acts of faith and confidence do not eliminate the difficulties of life; they do not necessarily bear fruit five minutes later, but they always bear fruit eventually, perhaps only in ten years, but, no matter, they do bear fruit.

The events that followed justify the affirmation that Catherine received a special grace of consolation and an inner strength to overcome her two years of “exile”.

INDEED, SOON AFTER HER MOTHER’S FUNERAL, WE KNOW WHAT HAPPENED AT THE LABOURÉ FARM, BUT WE WILL CALL IT TO MIND AGAIN.

After twenty-three years of marriage, her father was highly distraught; he felt broken. His relatives decided to relieve him as much as possible. The oldest girl, Marie Louise, was called back to the farm temporarily from Langres where she had been staying with one of her mother’s

### Christ is the Rule, Mary is the Mother

sisters. Someone had to take care of the youngest children, especially little disabled Auguste. The father came up with a temporary solution by sending Catherine and Tonine to Aunt Marguerite's house in Saint-Rémy. The departure was rushed. Her mother's death distanced Catherine from her father, who was so important to her.

FOR CATHERINE, THIS WAS A NEW WOUND, A SECOND UPHEAVAL.

We should acknowledge the tragedy experienced by these two little girls, just nine and seven, who felt orphans twice over as their mother was gone and their father far away. Catherine felt terribly the wound of separation; she could have fallen ill over it.

In Saint-Rémy, Aunt Marguerite spent her days at the counter of her shop; she did not have time to care for the two children and generally entrusted them to the servant of the house. The two little girls were not without what they needed materially, but they were neglected and put to work at various household tasks. The lack of information on their stay in Saint-Rémy prevents us from saying more. Nonetheless, we know that two years later when the two children returned to Fain, Catherine was able to run the family farm, and Tonine, the youngest sister, just 10 years old, was in no way a melancholy or morose child; on the contrary, she was able to collaborate with Catherine.

This allows us to affirm that the two years spent away from Fain without the reassuring presence of her father were very important for Catherine's human and spiritual growth. Who freed Catherine from her distress? Mary, whom Catherine would call her Good Mother. For Catherine, Mary is good; she is a good mother who healed all her wounds. By the working of the Holy Spirit through Mary, Catherine's heart grew peaceful, and the venom of doubt in feeling abandoned disappeared. Moreover, Catherine began to receive the same good dispositions found in Mary's heart. Having taken focus off herself, she could care for her little sister Tonine and be a sort of mother for her. Tonine would be grateful to her for this to the end of her life.

Without a doubt, Catherine would not have become what she was without this special relationship with Mary, real intimacy with her, the

trust of a child toward her mother and the confidence of a child who expects to receive everything from her mother. With Mary at her side, her trials turned into graces, and Catherine would come out of them strengthened, having grown and matured. The two years spent in Saint-Rémy were for her a school of love, the love whose source lies in the heart of Mary who so loved Jesus and identified with Him even to His Passion. With her Good Mother, Catherine mysteriously had a greater knowledge of Jesus.

In fact, as soon as she returned to Fain at the beginning of January 1818, Catherine was ready to make her First Communion although she had attended neither school nor catechism. What, then, prepared her heart? Only God and Catherine know. Her faith was simple but already quite personal. Catherine knew Jesus and Mary as living people, those close to her and about whom she thought regularly, to whom she spoke and who spoke to her. In the depths of this exile, God, through Mary, shaped Catherine's heart to prepare it to receive great graces.

THE SECOND EVENT: THE DAY OF HER **FIRST COMMUNION**. THIS EVENT WOULD INSPIRE HER **DEEP UNION WITH JESUS** AND A **SPIRITUALITY OF WORK**.

On January 25, 1818, at the age of 11 ½, Catherine made her First Communion with such deep faith and fervor that Tonine was surprised and would say, "*She was no longer of this earth, she was entirely mystic.*" It is true! In the same way that Catherine had taken Mary into her heart unconditionally, Catherine received Jesus with her whole person, her whole heart and her whole mind. This defies explanation; children sometimes receive these graces of a profound union precisely because they have a child's heart. With Mary at her side, Catherine wanted to love Jesus unrestrictedly, and she asked Him to establish His reign of love in her and to take possession of her thoughts, feelings and desires.

*Saint Thérèse's* First Communion was a great happiness for her as well. She called it "*the first embrace of Jesus.*" What a beautiful expression from the lips of a child!

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Saint Catherine's First Communion marked a real turning point in her life and would be the starting point for her vocation and a continuation of her journey of holiness. Catherine wanted to belong totally to God; she wanted the Spirit of Jesus to fill her entire person, her strength, her intelligence, her memory, her will and even her desires. She wanted to belong to Christ, to think *like Jesus* and no longer like the world; she wanted to look at people *like Jesus*, to speak and act *like Jesus*. She no longer wished how others looked on her or the prevailing culture to influence her but rather to live according to the spirit of Jesus, as Mary did.

Catherine's friendship with Jesus and Mary would characterize her entire life up to her death. Catherine held Christ's hand in one of her hands and that of Mary in the other. This does not mean that she spent her entire day looking up toward heaven. Not at all! Catherine was an **active contemplative**. Once she had returned to Fain, we see her working with great enthusiasm. She was twelve years old but already a real little woman. She valiantly took matters into her own hands with great energy and was not afraid to "roll up her sleeves". She was heroically perseverant and constant in all that concerned the farm.

#### JUST 12 YEARS OLD AND ALREADY A MOTHER!

Catherine became not only the servant of the family but also the "mother" for her little disabled brother, acting with a gentle and creative charity in the least details. Catherine did not do extraordinary things but was excellent in all things. We are very far removed from an image of Catherine in ecstasy, as she is sometimes represented. Catherine was a hard worker who courageously put herself at the service of all and contributed a significant amount of work. Her life speaks to us of the beauty of work.

#### THIS YOUNG COUNTRY WOMAN, HOWEVER, HAD A SECRET.

\* *Each day, she would go to meet the One she loved at the church of Fain where she would pray at length, kneeling on the cold flagstones. For Catherine, prayer was essential for working; it gave her strength and meaning.*

\* *Once she turned 14, she fasted Fridays and Saturdays, and this did not keep her from working hard.*

\* *At 5:30 in the morning, summer and winter alike, rain or shine, we still see Catherine making the trip whenever she could to Moutiers-Saint-Jean, about 6 kilometers round trip, to attend Mass and adore the Blessed Sacrament at the church. She wanted to live in communion with God.*

\* *Catherine took Mary as model at the beginning of all her activities. She would later write in her retreat notes<sup>2</sup> how much she always wanted to do all things like Mary would have done them. Her Good Mother was constantly at her side; Catherine consulted her and asked her advice in order to know the will of God. Mary did nothing in Catherine's place, but she was there with her, and that changes everything! Catherine considered herself a simple "instrument" in the hands of Mary, and her work was always imbued with an intention of love. Her motto was "pray and work" and not "work and pray". This spirituality of work would guide her entire life. Catherine was busy all day long, by the sweat of her brow, with her hands in buckets and pots, but she gave great attention to prayer. It was her firm resolution. Fidelity to prayer required significant effort, but it was worthwhile. Of course, there were ups and downs, but Catherine kept the rhythm of fidelity in prayer, and this intimacy with God would lead her to respect concrete reality and the human person because God has chosen humankind as His own.*

For Catherine, her spirituality of work involved striving to act for God and with Him, to be faithful in accomplishing the duties of her state and all the requirements of everyday life as best as possible. Catherine seems already well rooted in the Vincentian tradition.

#### ABOUT 5 YEARS LATER, SOMETHING INCREDIBLE WOULD HAPPEN!

The source of an unexpected event could in part be these significant moments of Catherine's life, namely, her love for Mary and the Eucharist and her love for work. Catherine surely fascinated Saint Vincent as

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2. Retreat notes dated 1838

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Marguerite Naseau once had. “A farmer’s son, who tended swine and cows,”<sup>3</sup> he must have felt attracted by the greatness of the soul of this young country woman, by her intense faith life, her purity of intention, her perseverance in adversity and her fervor in work with no other interest than the glory of God. Catherine represented a good village girl such as Saint Vincent liked them, and this certainly delighted his heart.

#### THE THIRD EVENT THAT WOULD MARK CATHERINE’S LIFE WAS THE **DREAM OF SAINT VINCENT** DURING WHICH CATHERINE GAINED INSIGHT INTO HER VOCATION.

Catherine was 17 or 18 years old. One night, Saint Vincent visited her in a dream, which she would never forget. It was a divine intervention that could remind us of the Light of Pentecost. It is clear that heaven favored Saint Louise and Saint Catherine, who both received exceptional graces for the Church, the Company and the world.

In this dream, Catherine saw herself at prayer in the church when an elderly priest arrived. He put on his priestly vestments and celebrated Mass at the altar. She was struck by his eyes when he turned to say, “*Dominus vobiscum.*” At “*Ite missa est,*” he motioned for her to approach him. She was seized with fear and backed away, nonetheless fascinated. Leaving the church, she went to visit a sick person. The elderly priest found her there and said, “*My daughter, it is good to care for the sick... My daughter, you may be running away from me now, but one day you will be happy to come to me. God has designs on you. Don’t forget it.*” Catherine again fled. Coming through the entrance of her family home, she awoke. It was only a dream, but the events that followed would prove that the person who spoke to her was not a mere dream; it was in fact a divine intervention because everything happened as predicted.

*Let us bring out three important elements in this dream:*

The first is the sign offered to Catherine, the Eucharist. God came to meet her in her deep desire to participate in Mass.

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3. Saint Vincent de Paul, *CCD IV*, 219

The second is Saint Vincent’s eyes. “*I was struck by his eyes.*” The fire of divine love burning in Saint Vincent’s heart attracted Catherine.

The third is that Vincent motioned to her to approach; he called her to follow him. “*One day you will be happy to come to me.*” At the same time, he revealed to her that God needed her and her availability because “*God has designs on you.*”

This dream of Saint Vincent, so important for Catherine, can in a way make us think of Saint Paul’s experience with the Galatians when he said, “*My children, for whom I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you!*”<sup>4</sup> Saint Vincent, for his part, came to meet Catherine as if to “give birth” to her vocation as a Daughter of Charity and the mission that God wanted to entrust to her.

#### THIS MYSTERIOUS DREAM REMAINED IN CATHERINE’S HEART.

Catherine continued her work on the farm. It was as hard as ever, but an inner light filled her. She had a new enthusiasm and did her work even better than before but seemingly without effort. Catherine wanted to give her life to God; when she spoke to her father about this, he refused vehemently. No way would he lose his daughter who ran the farm so well!

#### AFTER THIS DREAM, CATHERINE WOULD HAVE TWO OTHER SPECIAL MEETINGS WITH SAINT VINCENT

- *First in Châtillon-sur-Seine.* At age 18, Catherine arrived in the town’s well-respected boarding school to learn to read and write. Catherine was totally out of her element. Young women of high society attended this esteemed establishment, and academically she was with the youngest children. In the depths of this experience of poverty and humiliation, Saint Vincent revealed his name and indicated the way to her. There was a community of Sisters in the town. She visited them and was shown into the parlor. What a surprise! She saw a portrait hanging on the wall of an elderly priest. She had already seen that face. It was the face from her dream. She asked the Sister, “*Who is that old man dressed as a priest?*” The Sister answered, “*Why, he is our Founder!*”

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4. Letter of Saint Paul to the Galatians 4:19

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- *Then in Paris*, a few days after Catherine's arrival on April 21, 1830, at the Seminary of the Mother House. Everything happened as if Saint Vincent, who had brought her there, was again beckoning to her to draw closer. Four days later, the relics of Vincent's body, hidden since the Revolution, were transferred from Notre Dame Cathedral to 95 rue de Sèvres, the Vincentians' Mother House. Three days in a row during the octave, Catherine saw the heart of Saint Vincent as an icon. Catherine understood that the Company should renew itself and extend to the ends of the earth.

It is further clear that on July 18 (vigil of the feast of Saint Vincent, celebrated at that time on July 19; the Seminary Directress gave an instruction on Saint Vincent's Marian devotion), it was again Saint Vincent who guided Catherine toward the mission that God wished to entrust to her. Before going to bed, Catherine was taken by a new impulse, cut in two the little piece of cloth - a relic of Saint Vincent given to each Sister by the Directress - and swallowed half. She then went to sleep thinking that Saint Vincent would obtain for her the grace of seeing the Blessed Virgin. Through the intermediary of Saint Vincent, God placed this desire in Catherine.

#### *By way of conclusion*

We have just taken a moment to consider three significant events that marked the childhood and youth of Catherine and shaped her spiritual make-up, especially her three loves that are in fact one, love for Our Lord, the Virgin Mary and Saint Vincent, expressed in a life of continuous arduous work. It is clear that Catherine's holiness draws from her twenty-one years spent in Fain-lès-Moutiers. Let us try to note some **traits characterizing her rich spiritual personality**. We will focus on three among many others:

- her filial relationship with the Good Lord, the Father
- her loving and trusting closeness to Mary, her "Good Mother"
- her sense of obedience to authority.

## SOME CHARACTERISTIC TRAITS OF CATHERINE'S SPIRITUAL MAKE-UP

### 1 – HER FILIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GOOD LORD, THE FATHER

Saint Catherine did not write anything about God, but her life implicitly reveals her desire for God and things of above from her childhood.

#### IN FAIN-LÈS-MOUTIERS

Catherine loved her parents; her father was especially important for her. Her mother's death, however, would separate her from her father. Two years later, her father, missing Catherine, his favorite of the three girls, went to Saint-Rémy to bring her back. The father quite naturally needed to see his daughter. Catherine knew her father's love; she felt the pleasure of being close to him, of knowing that he needed her and counted on her. Catherine would do everything to please him.

This experience of paternal love helped her discover God as a good Father who needed His child close to Him in order to be happy. This love of God led her to spend long hours in the church to listen to Him and receive from Him because He comes into our hearts only if we desire Him. Like a child who enjoys being with her father, Catherine developed a real desire to be close to the Good Lord because that made Him happy as He finds joy in seeing her.

Since her First Communion, God alone reigned in her life. The Eucharist was the sacrament that most powerfully represented Jesus' presence for her. Two years later, she began fasting to leave more space for God in her life because, even if she had a sense of responsibility for the work to accomplish on the farm, she focused on God.

Whenever she could, Catherine arose early in the morning to participate in the Mass at the church of Moutiers-Saint-Jean. *"My soul thirsts for God, the living God. As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God"* (Ps 42). *"God, you are my God, it is you I seek! For you my soul thirsts"* (cf. Ps 63). Catherine wanted to penetrate ever deeper into the heart of God who seeks out thirsty souls to fill them

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abundantly with Himself. We should not imagine that Catherine's life was easy. No, she had the same difficulties as we do to pray, but she kept her faith in the active presence of Christ and allowed nothing to keep her from living in communion with Him.

#### IN PARIS AND REUILLY

Catherine's heart always lived in a "heavenly dimension". The great wellspring of her life was prayer, into which she put all her effort. She drew strength, patience and light from it. Her companions in community learned much by watching her pray. *"Whenever possible, she would make for the chapel... go in and make a deep bow of extreme respect for the tabernacle... kneel down, and, a moment later, leave the chapel with her face lit up... and return to her work. It was extremely striking."*<sup>5</sup>

One day Catherine very simply confided her way of praying to a Sister who complained that she did not know how to make meditation. This prayer reveals the depths of her relationship with God, consisting of an attitude of simplicity, a filial turning toward the Good Lord, this Father who captivated her attention. Once again, trust triumphed and made Catherine an authentic contemplative who penetrated the most elevated divine mysteries.

**"Here I am, Lord."** The first essential element of all contemplation is to fix our eyes on God. Catherine first placed herself in the presence of God in an attitude free from any self-interest, an attitude of love. She did not begin by setting forth her problems but placed herself before God like a child in the arms of her Father. She seemed as at ease with Him as with her "Good Mother"; all she had to do was entrust herself to Him.

**"Give me what you will."** Catherine opened herself to the work of grace; she handed herself over to God's good pleasure. She did not place her trust in herself but in God, whose only desire is to communicate Himself, to give Himself and to be one with His beloved creatures! *"Remain in me as I remain in you"* (Jn 15:4). Catherine thus became receptive to allow the Holy Spirit to flood her in such a way that she

5. Sister Cosnard, quoted in René Laurentin, *The Life of Catherine Labouré*, p. 295

became fully united to Him, and the Lord would lead her down the paths and in the way that would please Him. Prioritizing trust in God results in effusions of His love.

**"If He gives me something, I am content and thank Him. If he gives me nothing, I still thank Him because I deserve nothing more than that."** God was her guide. On the one hand, Catherine had audacious trust in her heavenly Father and demanded nothing because love does not demand anything; on the other hand, she explained that deprivation of positive experiences of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is a frequent experience. God can work the most profound supernatural transformations without external signs indicating His action. Whatever our feelings, thanksgiving should always spring from our hearts as Saint Paul recommends, *"giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father"* (Eph 5:20).

Catherine continued like a friend quite naturally speaks with a friend, **"I tell Him everything that is in my heart. I tell Him about my pains and my joys, and then I listen."** God enjoys when we share about our lives because without Him we can do nothing; in Him and through Him, however, we can bear much fruit.

**"If you listen, God will also speak to you, for with the Good Lord, you have to both speak and listen. He always speaks to you when you approach Him plainly and simply."** Does not this simplicity of Catherine's contemplation encourage us on our own path?

#### **2 - HER LOVING AND TRUSTING CLOSENESS TO MARY, HER "GOOD MOTHER"**

All throughout her life, Catherine placed herself entirely in Mary's hands; she lived everything with her and through her. She demonstrated her determination to turn herself over to Mary to lead a genuine spiritual combat. For Catherine, the Mother of God was there to help her fight against selfish tendencies. Along the same lines as the "little way of the childlike" of Thérèse of Lisieux, *"If you do not become like little children, you will not enter into the Kingdom of God."* We could qualify Catherine's deeply intimate relationship with Mary as her "little Marian way".



This **little Marian way** is a *filial attitude consisting of audacious trust in Mary's maternal goodness, her loving and attentive presence to our everyday lives*. It is easy to recognize a great similarity and beautiful complementarity between the little way of the childlike and the little Marian way. Simply surrender yourself like a child in the arms of Mary and the Good Lord, letting yourself be loved and expecting everything from them, like a little child expects everything from his or her mother and father.

If this little Marian way of Catherine surprises us or seems overdone, we should listen again to what the Angel Gabriel said to Joseph. *“Do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her”* (Mt 1:20). How could we be afraid to take into our home someone in whom the Holy Spirit works, in whom the Holy Spirit engenders? By welcoming Mary, by consciously and deliberately choosing her as our mother, we open ourselves at the same time to the Holy Spirit who gives us birth in the Father.

By her little Marian way, Catherine very simply reminds us that a disciple is not just a disciple of Jesus or a companion of Jesus, but a child of the Father and a child of Mary. We can never have too much trust in the Mother of God. This is a very important point because often we want to draw closer to God but by our own effort. We then place our trust in ourselves and our intelligence, and this exaggerated trust in ourselves contaminates in great part our activity and surely diminishes its effectiveness. In theory, we know that God does everything, but we still want to do everything ourselves, and we run the risk of taking God's place. Trusting does not come naturally; sometimes it takes years to place ourselves in Mary's hands and surrender ourselves entirely to her. Impossible through our effort alone, this is rather a gift from God. We must ask for it and welcome it.

#### IN PARIS IN 1830

The night of July 18, Mary came to meet Catherine with a very maternal attitude. She sat in a chair as a mother sits down with her daughter to

spend time with her, discuss matters and confide her secrets with her. Conversing with Catherine on her life, she announced that God needed her for a mission.

On November 27, to reveal the mystery of her Immaculate Conception, Mary presented herself to Catherine again with a very maternal attitude, holding the world in her hands and offering it to God. Her presence was both royal and familial, maternal and familiar. The Mother of God looks on the world and each one of us as if we were unique in her eyes. Contemplating Mary Immaculate's hands, beaming with light, Catherine entered into a process of *trust and surrender* that allowed her to learn from Mary to develop an attitude of total receptivity to divine love and receive torrents of grace.

*“YOU WILL NOT SEE ME ANYMORE, BUT YOU WILL HEAR MY VOICE DURING YOUR PRAYERS.”*<sup>6</sup>

The end of the third apparition of the Blessed Virgin in December 1830 was a sort of farewell, and Catherine received this surprising message, *“You will not see me anymore, but you will hear my voice.”* The simplicity of the statement could mask its importance and quality. We know that faith is the foundation for contact with the supernatural world. Divine love presupposes a soul's openness to God's action. Now, the fundamental disposition of Catherine's heart, vital for accomplishing the mission entrusted her by God, is trust in and surrender to her Good Mother.

Once in Reuilly, Catherine no longer saw the Virgin Mary, but she continued to hear her in her prayers in an invisible way, more in keeping with the nature of faith. In the spring, the inner voice urged her to transmit her message, and she gave in to this inspiration. It was a wasted effort as her confessor asked her to resist these illusions. The inner voice, however, continued to insist. What should she do with this contradictory advice, that of Our Lady and that of God's representative? In the autumn, Catherine dared to reply to Mary, *“He [Father Aladel] does not want to listen to me.”*

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6. René Laurentin, *The Life of Catherine Labouré*, p. 81

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“He is my servant,” answered the voice inside her, “and he should be frightened of displeasing me.”

In the autumn, Catherine tried a third time to touch the person Our Lady wanted to reach: “*The Virgin is angry!*” she brought herself to say. Her confessor, who saw a danger of illusion in these visions, was troubled but sent Catherine away without saying anything to give her hope. After obtaining the authorization of the Archbishop of Paris, the project to strike the medal took shape, and the engraver asked for clarification about the back. Father Aladel, consulted Catherine in the confessional in Reuilly, who answered that she needed to pray and ask the Virgin Mary. At her next confession, she gave the reply that she had received in prayer. “*The M and the two hearts will be sufficient.*”

Catherine would keep all of these interior “visitations” from the Virgin Mary in the secret of her heart, but she would find support in them to persevere in accomplishing the mission God had entrusted her.

When Catherine spoke to the Blessed Virgin, her words were simple, heartfelt and warm. Her recitation of the rosary was understated, without affectation but joyful. She recommended praying the rosary because it involves repeating God’s own words. It is prayer in the Spirit when we no longer know how to pray; it is the prayer of persons who are poor and the poor of heart. Catherine never dissociated contemplation from action. She also sought to imitate Mary, especially her concern for those who are poor.

With this unshakeable confidence in Mary, Catherine faced all the difficulties of the 1871 regime called the Commune. In this revolutionary period, the Sisters were menaced, but Catherine reassured them, saying, “*Do not be afraid. The Blessed Virgin will protect us; she is watching over us, over the entire community. The Virgin Mary is looking after us; nothing will happen to us.*” Threatened by the revolutionaries, Sister Dufès, the Sister Servant, had to flee. Catherine went to the headquarters of the insurgents in Reuilly to defend her. She confronted about sixty raving mad anticlerical Communards before whom she

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7. René Laurentin, *The Life of Catherine Labouré*, p. 87-89

calmly explained herself. Mary helped her find the words she needed. Despite intimidation by these angry armed men surrounding her, one of the soldiers for whom she had provided care saved her from their hands, and Catherine walked free from the headquarters. Soon afterward, new accusations were made against the Sisters. The Communards called Catherine in for questioning. In spite of death threats, she remained composed and got through it because of her calm. A few hours after her departure, however, the Communards regretted having allowed her to leave. In anger, they took over the Sisters’ house, remained there all night and threatened to kill the Sisters. Fortunately, the next day their leader, Siron, a former convict to whom Catherine had given a Medal, came to free the Sisters.

### **3 – HER SENSE OF OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY**

Catherine lived her entire life in a spirit of obedience to authority, in other words, she fully accepted the authority of all those whom the Father placed with her in this role. Catherine understood that God’s will was expressed by all those vested with authority over her. God had total authority over her, and Catherine could surrender herself completely to Him because He was merciful, watched over her as the apple of His eye and loved her with a special and indescribable love. Catherine had this absolute trust in God. She did not try to lead herself but to cooperate with God by leaning totally on Mary.

Jesus always lived under the authority of the Father. He only did what the Father asked of Him, what was in obedience to the Father. “*My food is to do the Father’s will.*” At the Cross, He turned Himself entirely over to the Father’s good pleasure and rose up to the Father’s will. There is no greater act of filial obedience in which love comes before all. However, we should not think that this was easy for Catherine!

### **IN FAITH, OBEDIENCE TO PATERNAL AUTHORITY**

Obedience to her father was a true challenge. When Catherine spoke to him about her vocation, his categorical refusals pierced her heart. Of course, she could have bypassed paternal authority, but she did not want to leave her father without permission because Catherine saw this paternal authority as that of Christ who is in charge and acts.

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She needed a miracle. Catherine waited patiently and prayed, but the Lord would not intervene right away. However, Catherine was sure that by obeying her father, she was working in cooperation with God. She offered God her vocational plan. She knew that God was calling her and would give her a sign at the appropriate time. This was far from the end. To try to change his daughter's mind, her father sent her to help her widowed brother run his restaurant for working men in Paris. Catherine obeyed, ready to accept God's will, even if she did not understand it.

Mister Labouré's refusal would last five years. That meant five years of waiting for Catherine to love and follow Jesus in the way He had chosen for her: like Jesus, she had one sole desire, to do the Father's will. Catherine gave of herself with love in this obedience after the example of Christ, an obedience that did not argue, an obedience that went beyond human reasoning, an obedience that more than once called for heroic actions.

#### IN THE SEMINARY AND AT REUILLY, OBEDIENCE TO SUPERIORS AND TO HER CONFESSOR

Catherine lived out this perfect obedience toward her Superiors and Father Aladel because she considered them the representatives of Christ on earth. She would not disobey them for anything in the world. Catherine looked at them with eyes of faith because they were appointed by God to help her to follow His will. By obeying, she was cooperating with her Superiors in accomplishing God's work. Through obedience, Catherine developed a new ability to love in going beyond her own will to accept that of God. It could happen that Superiors make a mistake, but Catherine was sure that she would never be wrong in obeying them.

When her confessor told her to forget her "illusions", Catherine obeyed with profound humility and remained calm, without grumbling or complaining. The stronger Catherine's relationship with heaven, the more painful dissuasion by heaven's representative was to her. Catherine accepted living obedience even if it was a "martyrdom". In her distress, her resource was trusting prayer "at the foot of the altar," following the advice of the Virgin Mary herself.

When the Sisters of the local community reacted negatively to the Sister Servant, Catherine tirelessly repeated, "*Do not complain; our Superiors represent God for us.*" What prevailed in her was life in Christ, which made her see all things in Him. She joined to her spirit of faith a great control of her tongue in order to build evangelical communion.

For us as well, obedience is a challenge because sometimes it makes us think of submission or servile dependency. Catherine helps us understand the deep meaning of obedience to God that creates a new freedom, whatever the act of obedience, no matter how small, provided we obey truly for the purpose of cooperating in His divine work.

#### Conclusion

Through this brief look at the journey of holiness of Catherine that began during her childhood in Fain-lès-Moutiers, we discover her profound faith, her filial surrender to the Father, her deep trust in Mary, her real sense of evangelical obedience and her burning charity for all.

Saint Catherine gives us a means for understanding these words from the Gospel: "*no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above... no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit*" (Jn 3:3-5). Catherine's faith draws us into this mystery of birth to the life of grace, that which makes us children of God, children in the image and likeness of God. This profound interior reality leads us to enter into a process of radical conversion, to be "*born of water and the Christ*"; in other words, "*empty yourself of self in order to clothe yourself with Jesus Christ.*"<sup>8</sup> We cannot fully be disciples of Jesus without this new birth, without being reborn from above.

Mary, "full of grace" because empty of herself, was forever marked by the Holy Spirit. Filled with the Holy Spirit since the moment of her conception, she found favor with God not only for herself but for us as well. At the Cross, Jesus gives us His mother. "*Son, behold your mother.*" Then, bowing His head, He "handed over" the Spirit, pouring it on Mary and depositing in her maternal breast all His brothers and sisters

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8. CCD XI, 311

Christ is the Rule, Mary is the Mother

to come. Mary received the fullness of the Spirit handed over by Jesus, and disciples are called to participate in Mary's faith. The connection between Mary and the disciple is part of the work of salvation according to Jesus' explicit desire. Here, we find a characteristic trait of the "identity card" of a disciple of Jesus: becoming a "child" thanks to the Mother. It is by resembling Jesus to the point of being born of Mary, this immaculate woman, that disciples are faithful in their mission of making the Father known. Jesus' disciples are "children", "children of the Father" as well as "children of Mary".

Catherine's little Marian way can be an invitation to meditate at greater length on this great mystery and progressively grow in our desire to be reborn of Mary, she who is charged with giving birth to us. Mary is given to us so that we receive the grace that she bears and so that we learn from her to let the grace that is Jesus Christ flood us.

The Constitutions, which trace out a path of holiness for us, invite us to take Mary as the *model and teacher of the spiritual life* in order to serve Christ in persons who are poor following the way of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. May the only Mother of the Company and our Mother help us to see all things in Christ, discover His hand at work in all things and see Him in everyday events, especially in those who are poor, so that Christ may truly be our Rule of life.

Sister Anne PRÉVOST  
*Daughter of Charity*

APPOINTMENTS

**Designation of Visitatrixes  
and appointment of Provincial Directors**

**DESIGNATION OF VISITATRIXES**

PROVINCE OF FORTALEZA: Sister Vilanneide FERREIRA DE SOUZA was designated Visitatrix on December 13, 2017.

PROVINCE OF RECIFE: Sister Maria Ilza FERREIRA was re-designated Visitatrix for three years on December 13, 2017.

PROVINCE OF WARSAW: Sister Jadwiga SZOK was designated Visitatrix on December 13, 2017.

PROVINCE OF NORTH INDIA: Sister Martha PRADHAN was designated Visitatrix on January 10, 2018.

PROVINCE OF VIETNAM: Sister Têrêxa Mai Lan DO THI MAI LAN was designated Visitatrix on January 10, 2018.

PROVINCE OF SARDINIA: Sister Caterina BUA was re-designated Visitatrix for three years on February 20, 2018.

PROVINCE OF RIO DE JANEIRO: Sister Maria Cristina D'ABRUZZO was re-designated Visitatrix for three years on March 3, 2018.

PROVINCE OF CALI: Sister Gloria Maria AGUIRRE FRANCO was re-designated Visitatrix for three years on March 3, 2018.



*News from the  
Provinces*

## Appointments

PROVINCE OF CENTRAL AMERICA: Sister Delia Marina CABRERA GODOY was designated Visitatrix on March 21, 2018.

### **APPOINTMENT OF PROVINCIAL DIRECTORS**

PROVINCE OF KRAKOW: Father Bogdan ZAPOTOCZNY was appointed Provincial Director on March 14, 2018.

PROVINCE OF CONGO: Father Justinus ILUKU was re-appointed Provincial Director for three years on March 27, 2018.

PROVINCE OF COLOGNE-NETHERLANDS: Father Mathieu Van KNIPPENBERG was re-appointed Provincial Sub-Director for three years on March 27, 2018.

PROVINCE OF SAN VINCENZO-ITALIA: Father Giancarlo PASSERINI was appointed Provincial Director on March 27, 2018.

PROVINCE OF SOUTH INDIA: Father Baiju CHITTOOPARAMBAN was appointed Provincial Director on May 2, 2018.

PROVINCE OF SARDINIA: Father Italo ZEDDE was re-appointed Provincial Director for three years on May 16, 2018.

PROVINCE OF SLOVAKIA: Father Jozef GARAJ was re-appointed Provincial Director for three years on May 16, 2018.

PROVINCE OF MADRID-SAN VICENTE: Father Enrique SANZ PORRAS was appointed Provincial Director on June 13, 2018.

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## **SISTERS' TESTIMONIES**

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### **Province of Belgium-France-Switzerland**

#### **Together with Mary**

Near the Belgian city of Wavre, the Louvranges Residences, an initiative of Caritas International, are a place of temporary housing for isolated refugee women and mothers. This housing center is a former community house, remodeled into 24 apartments. The Sisters continue to live there and serve in a mission of presence and close relationship with the mothers (about twenty) and children (around forty).

All the residents of the Louvranges Residences are in very difficult situations and awaiting a residency permit. They come from countries in Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, etc. where there are terrible conflicts, with all the violence with which we are so familiar. Different races, nationalities and religions rub shoulders. The main objectives of this housing center, a pilot project in our country, are to help these women become independent, promote their integration in society and help them to establish social connections. Each family housed in an apartment must thus take responsibility for its life.

Along with some twenty residents, we experienced a large gathering in Louvain-la-Neuve for the feast of the Annunciation. The day's theme was "Together with Mary on the path of peace." This beautiful initiative, supported by the group Efesia Belgium, brought more than 500 Catholics and Muslims from the area together in order to establish relational bonds and pray together.

#### **WHAT IS TOGETHER WITH MARY?**

In Lebanon, Christians and Muslims across the spectrum have celebrated the Annunciation together since March 25, 2007. Inspired by this Lebanese initiative, Efesia, a new lay Christian association created in 2014, which develops in the Church both in connection with Church

## Sisters' Testimonies

hierarchy and as part of a fabric of relationships among Christian communities and movements, began the Together with Mary movement. Efesia started the group Together with Mary, provides animation for it and unites members. It assembles associations of Christians and Muslims of all backgrounds, desiring to promote a better coexistence and contribute to peace. It unites them around the person of the Virgin Mary, who helps bring together Muslim and Christian traditions. In troubled times, the association has the mission of fostering encounter in three ways: with other movements within the Church, with those who are poor, and with other cultures and religions, especially Muslims. Together with Mary attracts increasing numbers of people. Gatherings continue expanding across Europe and Africa, always with the intention of engaging the heart and the mind. The goal of these encounters is neither syncretism nor proselytism. Together with Mary gatherings aim for pluralism marked by joy and fellowship. Together with Mary is now well under way in its threefold spiritual, popular and civic aspects and two components of Christians and Muslims. Together with Mary also intends to help Christians and Muslims establish friendly relationships through joint action and to have closer relationships with those in precarious situations, be they close or far away. The members of Efesia, as witnesses of Christ, work in the areas of education, economic matters, health care, basic infrastructure, assistance to the elderly and human rights.

The figure of the Virgin Mary is present in both faith traditions. Christians like Muslims believe that Mary received the Angel Gabriel's announcement of the virginal birth of her son. For Muslims, Mary is the most perfect woman in creation. She is the only woman mentioned by name in the Koran – 34 times. It dedicates an entire sutra to her. For Christians, Mary is the mother of Jesus, Son of God, and the mother of all humanity.

For believers in both religions, Mary is a model of faith and fidelity. Devotion to her makes personal encounters possible, particularly for the feast of the Annunciation, March 25.

The accounts of the Annunciation in the Koran and the Gospel are similar.

*“O Mary, God gives you good news of a Word from Him. His name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary” (Koran 3:45).*

*“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus” (Luke 1:30-31).*

## **TOGETHER WITH MARY ENCOUNTERS IN BELGIUM**

In Belgium, the first Together with Mary encounter organized by the Efesia group took place March 25, 2016, in Saint Michel Church in Brussels, the second on March 25, 2017, in Louvain-la-Neuve, and in 2018 there were two gatherings, one in Louvain on March 25 and the other in Banneux, June 19-21, 2018.

The March 25, 2017, encounter was very spiritually meaningful for both religions, accessible all very civic-minded. After prayers in Arabic and French, we heard the text of the Annunciation read from the Gospel and then from the Koran, followed by a reflection offered by a representative of each community. The participants then listened to two testimonies, one from a Catholic on the rosary and the other from a Muslim woman. Next, the Imam of Louvain-la-Neuve, who is very close to Christians and a friend of the parish priest of the city, and Monsignor Hudsyn, Vicar General of the Diocese of Brabant Wallon, each took a turn to speak. Their testimonies were projected on a large screen. The children's choir from the Mosque of Molenbeek and the University Chorus of Louvain alternated singing between the various speeches. The participation of the children from Molenbeek was especially meaningful because this district of Brussels has unfortunately become infamous because of the involvement of a few of its residents in international terrorist acts.

Monsignor Hudsyn stressed, *“Mary is, for our faith traditions, a real believer: attentive to God, listening to Him and totally available to do His will... we have reacted in another way to a current difficult situation where violence is never far off... We have allowed others' song and prayer resonate in us...”* We then prayed the Our Father and sang the “Fatiha” *(In the name of God, the infinitely Compassionate and Merciful. Praise be to God, Lord of all the worlds. The Compassionate,*

## Sisters' Testimonies

*the Merciful. Ruler on the Day of Reckoning. You alone do we worship, and You alone do we ask for help. Guide us on the straight path, the path of those who have received your grace; not the path of those who have brought down wrath, nor of those who wander astray.*) We recited the final prayer together: “*You who sent Gabriel to announce the Good News to the Madonna of women, on earth as in heaven, grant that we may love the Blessed Virgin, Our Lady... Watch over our country, all those who live here and our leaders. May peace and conviviality reign in Belgium, Europe and the world...*” The final song led all the participants to gather around a well-laden table, prepared by women from the two faith communities.

As Monsignor Hudsyn mentioned, “*This shared moment is surely not enough, but it keeps alive the fire of hope and courage to pursue and open dialogue as well as to continue to forge bonds together, creating spaces for friendship and solidarity. It also encourages us to undertake everything that could bring us together: human concerns, care for creation and finally an interest in God Himself. It is still a long road for us to travel together, but the longest voyages always begin with a first step.*” A splendid release of seven doves concluded the encounter, on the Grand Square of Louvain-la-Neuve, an expression of our hope to advance toward a peaceful society.

### **Conclusion**

Let us continue, with Mary, to promote a society of greater solidarity, enriched by the diversity of cultures and religions, in the context of an open and dynamic secular state, respecting freedom of worship and the right to be different.

The Daughters of Charity of Louvranges

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## SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

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### **Province of Central Africa**

#### **An extraordinary year of reconciliation in Rwanda**

Preceding the 25th anniversary of the genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994, the Catholic Bishops of Rwanda opened an Extraordinary Year of Reconciliation.

Constitution 32b invites us to engage actively in this process of forgiveness and reconciliation. “*Reconciliation and mutual forgiveness, so strongly recommended by the Founders, help them to overlook what may have been an obstacle to unity and evangelical witness.*” The very moving testimony of Maiti Girtanner helped us realize that the inner process of forgiveness does not depend on the repentance of the person who committed the offense.

Here are some passages from our bishops' pastoral letter. “*Reconciliation is a long journey that requires time, patience and divine grace. It is our desire to pursue the good step that has been made in this process, and then keep going forward: reconciling ourselves with God, reconciling with ourselves, reconciling with our brothers and sisters, and even with our environment as Pope Francis asked us to do... The history of our country was marked by the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994... This year of reconciliation is a special grace that God has bestowed on us out of His great love... In order to reach this goal of reconciliation, the perpetrators must be helped to confess and ask for forgiveness, the victims must be helped in their journey of forgiving... The Word of God explicitly shows us the right thing to do... God is always calling us back for reconciliation whenever we go astray. It was God who made the prodigal son regret the kind of life he was leading, and then make the decision of going back home to his father (cf. Luke 15:11-32). It was Jesus who looked for Zacchaeus, called him and gave him a heart of repentance and then reconciled with the people he had treated unjustly. It was Christ who appeared to Paul and stopped him from being a*

## Sisters' Testimonies

*persecutor and murderer, and be reconciled with him (cf. Galatians 2:20). Today Christ is equally inviting us to repent and become the true witnesses of unity and reconciliation... God was with us in all that we went through although there was a time we thought that he abandoned us. To reconcile with yourself is to accept who you are, your origin, your family of origin, region, your ethnic group, without threatening your relationships with others ... To reconcile with yourself is to accept your own sufferings and wounds to unite them to those of Christ on the cross... To reconcile yourself with your sorrowful history is to understand that your suffering was not a loss by uniting it to the suffering of Jesus Christ so that it contributes to bringing salvation to the world. This is included in the message that the Blessed Virgin Mary came to reveal to us at Kibeho...*

*In the Our Father... we acknowledge that we are all sinners and need to be forgiven by God... God asks us to forgive our brothers as He forgives us... We are asking Christians and other people of good will to support this journey of reconciliation and to reject all forms of division and violence... Brothers and sisters in Christ, we entrust this extraordinary year of reconciliation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Word, Our Lady of Kibeho, who calls us to repentance, prayer and brotherly love. We invoke upon you all God's blessings.*

The bishops of Rwanda

### **On this path of forgiveness to give and receive, allow ourselves to be evangelized by the testimony of Maïti Girtanner, who died in 2014 at age 92**

At age 75, Maïti Girtanner gave the moving account of the forgiveness that her torturer came to seek from her. A member of the Resistance during World War II, she was arrested by the Gestapo and tortured. The abuse from which she suffered would always mark her body and shape her entire life, forcing her to give up all her plans, especially her career as a pianist. She lived from her love for justice and especially her Catholic faith, an unshakable faith from which she drew all her strength at the most tragic moments of her life. A journalist met her in her home because she still suffered terribly although her arrest and imprisonment dated back more than 60 years. The torture inflicted by

the Gestapo had partially destroyed her nerve centers in an irreversible way. At the end of the war, moreover, she had been left for dead. Maïti is very reluctant to speak on this subject since she thinks that it is not the most important element of her witness. What counts for her is her desire to forgive.

To understand Maïti a little, we have to put ourselves in the context of June 1940 when the Germans invaded France in a flash. Maïti's family had taken refuge near Poitiers on the family's property between the occupied zone and the free zone. In fact, it was almost natural for Maïti to begin helping French people pass to the free zone in her little boat. She gradually became responsible for a small network directly connected to General de Gaulle. She organized parachute drops and stole German documents. She had several things going for her: in addition to the charm of an eighteen-year-old, she spoke German very well because her father had a Swiss background; she also had a bicycle on which she could crisscross France from Amiens to Biarritz to organize the little Resistance network. Maïti intended to become a professional pianist. She played the piano skillfully and worked hard. This dream crumbled after the torture inflicted by the Germans; she could no longer play the piano at all. Here is her testimony.

Maïti: All those who acted against German wishes were considered mortal enemies of Germany, so they had to pay dearly for what they had done. In my case, they had accumulated knowledge of a certain number of actions directly against them, and rather than just condemning me to death, the general condemned me to a "punishment", in other words, a form of torture before death.

Journalist: For you, is it important to speak the truth about the facts and your suffering?

Maïti: It is not at all important for me to speak about the suffering I endured. What is important is that I did everything I possibly could to fight against the German invasion and all it imposed upon us. Despite my young age, I very quickly realized that if we were arrested, we would pay a very high price and maybe even with our lives. Most of my collaborators paid with their lives.



## Sisters' Testimonies

Journalist: What happened exactly? In what did this “punishment” consist?

Maïti: I say “punishment” because I hate to say the word “torture”. You see, it’s the word that hurts me, that wounds me, and I do not like it. They, the Germans, used the word punishment to indicate the fact that they had to make those who fought against Germany suffer. They had to suffer until death ensued.

Journalist: You were there with some companions?

Maïti: I was arrested by chance, really. I was then sent to Avenue Foch in Paris, where interrogations took place. There, I found myself with some twenty people who had been arrested. Each of us was held in a locked room of a private house and interrogated separately.

Journalist: During this punishment, you met a particular person named Leo.

Maïti: Yes. After my interrogation in Paris, the general who made the decision to arrest all of us sent us somewhere, I had no idea where. They put us in a car with the windows covered. We rode for hours; only later did I learn where I was. In the cellar where I was thrown (they didn’t even give me the time to climb down the steps), there were already eighteen people waiting to be abused, tortured and killed. In fact, it was the last step before death. In this cellar there was an officer, a young officer who guarded the door and always stood in front of it. Since I spoke German, I approached him and asked him, “Tell me, how did you end up here? How old are you?” He answered, “My name is Leo, I’m 26.” I said, “I’m 21. How did you end up here?” He then puffed up his chest with a proud and triumphant attitude and said, “I have the good fortune to have been chosen among the young Germans sufficiently intelligent to pursue advanced studies, medical studies.” He had specialized in neurosurgery in order to serve Germany. “In the end,” he added, “I have been serving Germany for several years by making Germany’s enemies pay for all they have done against us.”

Journalist: What was his role with you? Did he participate in torturing you?

Maïti: Oh, absolutely. There were five of them, and in any case, he dealt directly with me. I remembered his name and personality because he was the closest to me given that he was almost always in front of the door guarding us – that’s the first thing. Secondly, I had spoken with him for several weeks; thirdly, forty years later, I saw him come back here, to my home, when he knew a deadly illness had condemned him to death. Otherwise, perhaps he would have blended in my mind with the other Germans. However, forty years later, when I heard my phone ring here and picked it up, I immediately recognized the voice of Leo who said, “I am in Paris, and I absolutely want to see you.” Everything in me cried out, “No, no, I do not want to see him!” I was revolted; I felt like a piece of furniture had fallen on my head, and yet I heard myself saying, “Well then, come tomorrow at three o’clock.”

Journalist: But what happened then? It is quite extraordinary, first that you would find each other, that he would ask this of you and then that you would accept.

Maïti: Yes, something happened that was not of our making, that was far beyond us. He had never forgotten the little young woman. I was by far the youngest in that famous cellar that served as a prison, but I was the one in a way who led the others, who got them to open up, who tried to comfort them because we knew that when they disappeared behind the door, often they returned to us dying or dead. I tried to offer them something warm from within my heart and also something spiritual. Being deeply Christian and Catholic, after a few days I had suggested that we pray, even if we were of all sorts of religions or none at all. Every day, we prayed a little. He had heard all this, Leo, he had seen, he had observed. Now, when he himself fell ill and the doctor told him, “Look, your illness is very serious,” he asked, “How much time to do you give me to live?” The doctor answered, “I give you six or seven months.” He returned home overwhelmed. He was married. He had married and told his wife that he had been a doctor, but he did not tell her in the first years of their marriage that he was a doctor-torturer; it was only after ten years of marriage that he admitted it. Since his wife knew this and he knew that he was going to die, he looked for help. He was afraid. Something awoke in him. He had never forgotten that little young woman who spoke about God, who spoke about comfort, and he said to himself, “I need her for me.” So there you are. He did

## Sisters' Testimonies

not reflect a single second that when they came to liberate me, he was finishing us off – we were only three out of eighteen left, and six days later we would all be dead – he did not reflect that I should have been dead for many, many years. No, not at all. I had to be alive, and he had to find me and speak to me. He came to France without even knowing if he would find me. He found me quickly through the Conservatory. He went to its secretariat where he found the former secretary who spent his days there because he so loved it. The new secretary did not know who I was. But when Leo asked, “Where is Maïti Girtanner?” the former secretary answered from his armchair, “Oh, I know very well where she lives; I will give you her address and telephone number.” It only took him ten minutes to find me. All this has meaning, then. It is very clear that it happened through a will much stronger than ours.

Journalist: You suffered so much during that period, and Leo is very closely tied to all your suffering. Why did you agree to open your door to him?

Maïti: I agreed to open my door to him because of the little he told me on the phone: “I have a very serious illness, I only have a few more months to live and I absolutely have to talk to you because I am afraid of death.” The fact that he told me he was afraid of death after all the crimes that he had committed, the deaths he himself had caused, this moved me deeply, and I felt called, impelled to tell him, “Come, we will talk about it.”

Journalist: Did you feel hatred against your torturer?

Maïti: I did not at all feel hatred toward him; I felt abhorrence, which is completely different. I felt repulsion for all the horrific acts he had perpetrated, but hatred, absolutely not, hatred or anger, if you will, absolutely not.

Journalist: So then, Leo came here to Saint Germain-en-Laye?

Maïti: Leo arrived the following day. I had told him to come at three o'clock. I was in bed because it happens to me from time to time that I cannot put my feet on the ground. This happened during a week when I had to stay in bed – I was stretched out on my bed and had left the door

open. He came upstairs. I recognized him immediately. He recognized me although forty years had passed. He had not changed much: a tall handsome man, who had wonderful blond hair, the prototype of handsome German men. I recognized him immediately. He recognized me as well. I still spoke German pretty well although I had not used it since the war, so we spoke in German. He took the chair where you are sitting and sat near me. I said to him, “What is happening to you, Leo?” He described his illness to me, told me that he only had a few months to live and that he had a horrible fear of death.

Journalist: When you met, were you afraid of him, did you fear him? How was it?

Maïti: No, I was not afraid of him, but I did have a physical reaction, namely, I trembled from head to toe seeing him again because, since I was suffering a great deal that day, I again felt in a way all that he had made me endure. I sometimes dreaded him. I felt a sort of very thick wall between him and me. In my head and in my heart, I said to myself, “I must not let this wall form because I will not be able to talk to him as I want to do. This wall must become transparent.” I therefore made an enormous mental and spiritual effort in the space of a few seconds to be really responsive and open before him.

Journalist: Because you wanted to speak to him?

Maïti: I did want to speak to him, and since he had told me on the telephone, “I am afraid to face death,” I felt committed to explaining to him what death really is. I asked him how he was raised and thus discovered that he came from a Catholic family. As a little boy, then, he had already learned things that lied dormant in him and had completely disappeared behind all the atrocities that had been inculcated in him by the formation that prepared those doctor-torturers.

Journalist: Where did you find the strength to be able to indicate the path of salvation to your torturer, he who had made you suffer?

Maïti: I will tell you straight off that I did not find this myself. I was weak in any case; I have remained so since then. I am absolutely certain that this is something that was given me, a grace given me. I understood

## Sisters' Testimonies

as soon as he called that I had a sort of mission on his behalf. If I had very little time, at least the little time that I had with him, it was to help him, to pick him up by the scrape of his neck and pull him out of the horror where he was in order to bring him closer to the light.

Journalist: God was present at that moment, just as He was present all throughout those long years of suffering.

Maïti: Absolutely, absolutely. In my mind, I am sure I am not mistaken, it was the presence of God, it was His strength that entered me and gave me the right words, which came to me at the right moment. I speak easily, but I still had to find the right words with a man slumped into the armchair. He was trembling before death, and death was stalking him in the coming weeks; he was terrified. He absolutely wanted to keep living and did not understand that death could be a new beginning. In just an hour or two, I had to make him understand that death is an opening, that the path continues and that instead of closing, it opens, it enlarges and we go toward the light, on the condition that we recognize our faults and regret them. There it is: we must recognize all the bad that we have done.

Journalist: So, at the end of an hour and a half or two hours, Leo went back to Austria where he lived.

Maïti: Yes. He was seated in this chair, his hands crossed, as men often do, you know, between his knees, and as I spoke to him, he gradually leaned back against the chair back. As I spoke, he straightened up, straightened more, and when I stopped talking, he was leaning back against the back of the chair. After an hour, or a little more, he appeared much less tense, and his arms relaxed, too. At that point, I thought, "It's almost a success." I had achieved something, I had won relaxation, so I could go even further; I could aim higher. I told him my concept of death. "It is an encounter, an encounter of light, it is the pinnacle of a whole life, even if this life included serious sins and crimes, as you said." I did not want to mask in any way what he was. I said, "Even if the life included crimes like yours."

He cut me off and said, "But God could never forgive me..."

"Well, then" I said, "It's that you do not know God. He has a response to all the horrors that you perpetrated."

"It isn't possible," he said.

"Yes, it is possible, and I will tell you how. The response lies in love. God is love, and He loves you despite your atrocities and those of your fellow officers. He loves you and only asks one thing, for you to turn toward this love that is a purifying love and believe that this love can heal you of all the evil that you did."

His face changed completely at that moment. His face had been tense and very pale, but it relaxed and took on color. He looked me very deeply in the eyes and said, "Do you really believe this, or are you just saying this to console me?"

I answered him, "I have staked my life on this, on the love of God that floods us if we give it room. Now you, since you still have a few weeks, a few months to live, no longer be anything but love, no longer act except out of love for others. By acting out of love, you will enter into God's way of perceiving, you will enter into God's way of living and being, and you will receive His love." He believed it.

Journalist: His life was turned around, the end of his life?

Maïti: I learned that he believed it because I had asked his wife, whom I set up in the room next door, to leave the door open so that she could hear our conversation and talk it over later with him. She came to say goodbye to me when he got up to leave, and I whispered to her, "Keep me informed." Two and a half months later (he didn't even last three months), she called me to say, "Leo has died. He died asking for you, calling out for you. I have to tell you something. When we left your building, Leo was no longer the same; he was not the same man. He stood up straight, seemed casual, walked confidently and said, 'I believe the message Maïti wanted to give me.'" She told me that, during his remaining two and a half months, he gathered his whole family, who was totally in the dark about his past as a doctor-torturer. (This is because he was not arrested. Out of the five, three were arrested, but he and one other escaped, so he returned to Germany and washed his hands of it,

## Sisters' Testimonies

and no one ever knew what he had done as a torturer. He never spoke about it.) So, he gathered his whole family and confessed that he had been a doctor-torturer. Admitting this was extremely courageous. He said that he had a very serious illness from which he would probably die in the coming months and that he wanted everyone to know what he had been. For him, this was a way to begin penance and advance toward the Lord in whom he had believed as a little boy. All the brainwashing he had endured was to make his faith disappear, yet he found it again with me. With the passing days, he discovered the presence of God more and more alive. He assembled all his household employees (a large mansion and fortune with twenty-four employees, you get the idea...). He said the same thing to his household employees. He said, "Well, I was one of those doctor-torturers that you hear about. I terribly regret it now that I am going to die, and I ask your forgiveness as if I had done the wrong to you." He had a stack of envelopes in his hand, and his wife wondered what they were. He gave each family of those who served him an envelope so the children could pursue their studies. He became all things to all people. He tried to live according to love with everyone from the moment he left my home to the moment he died. His wife told me that he was a completely changed man.

Journalist: Maïti, you contributed to Leo being able to reconcile with himself and surely with God, but we are thinking about you. What changed for you? What did this meeting change for you?

Maïti: Well, this meeting changed many things. First, because I did not attribute this conversion to myself. We could call this a conversion because, really, he was black before and he became white, if we can put it that way. I didn't let myself claim it for myself. I really felt in the depths of my being that it was the love of God that had chosen me as an instrument, nothing more, but this instrument worked through words. I followed his facial expressions, so I could direct what I was saying, choose one word rather than another. I was only an instrument; it was not I who worked, but the Lord.

Journalist: Did you forgive Leo, and did he ask you forgiveness for what he had done to you?

Maïti: When he came, he did not say those words, nor did he say 'forgive me' during our conversation. However, just as he was leaving, I was lying in bed and he was standing very tall above me, he leaned down over me, and, totally unplanned, I lifted myself off my pillows, held out my hands, held his head and gave him a kiss. It was a kiss of peace. When I gave him this kiss of peace, he asked forgiveness of me. My heart leapt in my chest, but I was so caught up in those two hours we had spent together, I was still in shock, that at the time I did not analyze all this could represent. It was in the days that followed and until the phone call from his wife announcing his death that everything gradually fell into place. I must say that when I was liberated, even before opening my eyes in the hospital, I thought and reflected. People thought I was unconscious, but I was very conscious. Among the thoughts I had was, "I have to try to understand what forgiveness is because I want to forgive these men." Honestly, it was one of the first thoughts that came to me when I was freed.

Journalist: When you only weighed 37 kilos?

Maïti: I was dying, and they told me that I would never make it, etc. I thought to myself, "My days are numbered, so if my days are numbered and I am not even 21 years old, I know so little. I must find the means to understand what forgiveness is because I want it to be more than just a word." As I recovered, I continually thought about this forgiveness to offer Leo and wondered, "Have I really forgiven him? Is it just my imagination?"

Journalist: Maïti, how can we build peace today? Does it take place through processes like yours of forgiveness and what Leo did with you?

Maïti: Yes, building peace is a very long process; it does not happen overnight because we are poor little human creatures with a lot of imagination and many images in our minds. I had many awful, atrocious images in my mind, starting with all those who were with me in the cellar, 15 of whom out of the 18 were dead at my liberation. Recovering peace after what we have experienced is very difficult. There, too, I turned to the Lord, saying, "You are the Lord of Peace, and you can teach me what peace is. I need to know peace, to discover peace." I had a sort of intuition that my mission in the little time left for me to

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live would be to help others understand what peace might be in relation to all those atrocities. I really had a very powerful intuition of this.

Journalist: Do you think that peace can be built without faith, without God?

Maïti: I do not think you can build real profound peace that fills you to the depths of your heart, the depths of your soul, the depths of your being, without the presence of God. He is the one who can give us the strength to go against the evil that has affected us so deeply, broken us, physically and mentally destroyed us. Imagine the mental state of a 21-year-old young woman with all that. Peace, therefore, cannot come immediately. It is really a conquest. I had the impression that, on my own, I would never manage to find it alone. I needed strong support; I needed a model. I found my model in the person of Jesus Christ. We shouldn't imagine we have the strength to find peace in ourselves. We should see ourselves as needing to receive a very special gift that will lead us toward peace. Do you want it? God will not force us. I heard this, "Do you want it?" and I understood. I said to the Lord, "I do want it, but now, teach me."

Sister Désirée NIBOGORA and a team  
*Daughters of Charity*

## SISTER M. A. INFANTE, DAUGHTER OF CHARITY

### The habit of the Daughters of Charity

#### 1 - INTRODUCTION

For the first twelve years of the Company (1633-1645), the Daughters of Charity did not wear a habit in the sense of uniform clothing and of a sign of belonging, as the Founders came to understand it. The concept of the habit **as a sign of consecration** was introduced in the Company in the mid-19th century during the term of Father Etienne and appeared as a point that defined their identity, almost a century later, in chapter III of the 1954 Constitutions. This point on the habit as a sign of consecration was ratified in article 42 of the post-conciliar provisional 1970 Constitutions following the extraordinary General Assembly of 1968-1969.

The provisional 1975 Constitutions placed the habit in the chapter on community life and fraternal charity. "*The Daughters of Charity wear a habit as a sign of their consecration to God and of their belonging to the Company*" (C. 28). The 1983 Constitutions confirmed the same content concerning the habit: according to our proper law, it is **a sign of consecration** (cf. C. 3.14). The 2003 General Assembly revised the Constitutions. As the Founders never used the expression "sign of consecration", it is not appropriate for the Company and was therefore eliminated from the Constitutions.

Our current Constitutions return to the Founders' understanding of the meaning of the habit as a sign of belonging and identification of who we are (C. 41):



*History of  
the Company*

*“The Daughters of Charity wear: a form of dress in accord with the specifications given in the Statutes, a distinctive sign which identifies them as Daughters of Charity. On all occasions, their outward behavior and their attire, modest and simple in color and style, should reflect an interior disposition of union with God and with persons who are poor.”*

We must recall that the members of the Company wore no habit during the first twelve years (1633-1645). The Sisters wore secular dress according to the style of the region from which they came. However, as difficulties gradually arose from the fact that the Sisters were dressed differently, the Founders understood that this could become a problem and that it was important to choose a simple, uniform habit that would be a sign of belonging to the Company and identify the members on an exterior level.

Let us examine what occurred by looking at texts from the Founders.

## 2 – ORIGIN OF THE HABIT IN THE COMPANY

In 1642, the Sisters were thus wearing secular dress. The conference held January 6, 1642, indicates that the diversity of secular dresses was a cause of division and lack of sisterly communion in the Company. The Sisters made comparisons and made fun of each other. Saint Vincent tried to correct them. *“The senior Sisters have to encourage the newcomers, show them respect, praise their little efforts, accept what they say and do and, above all, take care not to talk to them and treat them like strangers or **make fun of the way they speak and the cut of their clothes**”* (CCD IX, 45 - Conference of January 6, 1642).

From that date forward, the Founders stressed the importance of wearing the same clothes or a habit. The letter Saint Vincent wrote to Saint Louise on November 1, 1642, indicates that the Founders encouraged, suggested and ordered a uniform way of dressing. *“I do not know what to tell you about that fine young woman from Angers, except that it is not your concern, seeing that she cannot put up with **so important a matter as that of uniformity of habit**. Still I think we should wait a while”* (CCD II, 151 - L. 494).

Here are the three reasons for this decision for a uniform habit:

- greater sisterly union within the community (uniform clothing eliminates mocking judgements on ways of dressing),
- austerity and poverty (buying fabric in large quantities and the same for all is less expensive),
- sign of belonging and *esprit de corps*: the Sisters are recognized as Daughters of Charity.

The process of adopting a uniform way of dressing was slow and gradual. On January 22, 1645, in a conference on the observance of the Rule, Saint Vincent stated that they wear ordinary dress. *“It may be said in truth that it’s God who established your Company. I was thinking about this again today and I said to myself, ‘Did you ever dream of founding a Company of Sisters? Oh no, not I! Was it Mile Le Gras? Just as little.’ I can tell you in all truth that I never thought of it. Who then had the idea of establishing in the Church of God a **Company of women and Daughters of Charity wearing ordinary attire?** ... I can tell you once again that it was God, and not I”* (CCD IX, 165).

In September 1645, Saint Louise read the draft document that Saint Vincent had written to the Archbishop of Paris to request approval of the Company. Saint Louise made several remarks, one of which refers to the choice of habit and its purpose. *“Would it not be necessary to mention that the money placed in the common purse serves to buy the necessary provisions of the house and **clothes for the sisters, even those living in the parishes, where their habits are made, in order, by this means, to be always uniform?**”* (SW, p. 133 - L. 124b)

In 1645 the Founders drafted the official Rule that would be presented to the Archbishop of Paris for approval of the Company by the diocesan Church. This Rule already mentioned the requirement of uniform clothing, called a habit by both the Founders and the Sisters. *“**They all dress in the same way, in the style of countrywomen...** As far as possible, they will also take care to observe uniformity with regard to food, clothing, their manner of walking and speaking, the service of those who are poor, and **especially in the way they arrange their headdress and are dressed, as has been stated. If they save any money, they will put it in the common purse, which will be used to provide them***

*with their clothing and other necessities, when the time comes for this”* (Regulations - CCD XIIIb, 125-126).

As part of the process for diocesan approval of the Company, Saint Louise was asked to make a report of the expenses for 1645. She prepared detailed accounts and, before presenting them to the Archbishop of Paris, she sent them to Saint Vincent on May 4, 1646, saying, *“I have figured out all that the Sisters brought to the house in 1645. The total comes to 1,129livres and 12 sous. **Out of that, there were 43 Sisters to be supplied with habits and linen.** I think there are almost 400 livres left over for the house, minus expenses, **without including in that the linen and habits made by the Sisters of the house.** I think, Monsieur, if you say something about this, it would be well for our Sisters to hear that what they bring in is just about equal to what is spent and that those bringing in more than what is needed for them, make up for others who do not bring in enough, for I do not know if the whole Company would be capable of understanding that their frugality is a great help to the house, because of the lack of restraint of some, and of the majority who tell too freely everything they know”* (CCD II, 640 - L. 801).

From these details, we can see that the Company began to use the habit in a widespread way starting in September 1645. When the Company received ecclesial approval on November 20, 1646, the Sisters were already wearing a uniform habit.

### 3 – THE IMPORTANCE THE FOUNDERS PLACED ON UNIFORMITY

In the 17th century, uniformity was seen as a privileged source of sisterly communion, an expression of obedience and a sign of regularity and evangelical perfection. This was the common mentality in the Church, and the Founders shared it. In the conference held August 25, 1648, on the *spirit of the world*, Saint Vincent affirmed,

*“A Sister who is displeased because she has cheap clothing or because her collar isn’t nicely laundered or good enough, will be upset by this. She won’t go willingly where she has work to do, will want shoes that are well made, and will be annoyed if they are low-heeled or mended*

*badly. All that is the spirit of the world, Sisters! Please be careful”* (CCD IX, 349).

In 1650 the Sisters were wearing a standard headdress and a grey habit, which is why they were called *grey Sisters* in some areas of France. On April 19, 1650, as Saint Vincent could not remain for the conference on *how to act amid difficulties when far from the Motherhouse*, Father Antoine Portail, as the first Director of the Daughters of Charity, presided over it. He said, *“You must conform yourselves to the spirit of the Motherhouse so that you will not only be recognized by your attire and headdress but also by the way you act. You see how necessary that is, dear Sisters, so please pay close attention to it”* (CCD IX, 400).

The conference on *the virtues of Sisters Anne de Gennes, Marie Lullen, Marguerite Bossu and Cécile Delaitre* took place on December 9, 1650, at the Mother House. One of their companions said that these Sisters willingly accepted the habit of the Company.

*“I knew Sister Marie Lullen while she was still in Le Mans, before she came here [...]and I remember that she and another young woman set aside their secular clothing and wore grey dresses; this led to their being ridiculed and mocked by those who disapproved of that change. They began to serve poor persons in the Le Mans hospital. They established great order in that house, where, until then, not much order had existed. Many people found fault with this, and they were really persecuted because of it, but they endured it courageously”* (CCD IX, 436).

On November 15, 1657, Saint Vincent asked that the Sisters maintain uniformity in their clothing as a means of living in communion. He gave as an example the Sisters who had gone to establish the community in Arras, where they were considered strange.

*“Our dear Sisters who went to Arras discovered that it’s the custom in that area to wear a sort of hooded cape. They’ve written to ask me if they should adopt the local custom because they seemed so strange that people were staring at them as if they came from another planet; anyway, they were pointing at them. We’ve replied to them that they have to be very wary of that because it would be a cause of division between*

*them and the Sisters here, and that, once people get used to seeing them, anything they may think or say about the way they dress will stop. They weren't wrong in proposing that to us as they did because they made it clear that they were prepared to follow the advice that would be given them; that's the way you should act, and **never make any change in your clothing, no matter where you go.** We see foreigners coming here dressed in the style of their native land; eh bien! they're not concerned about changing to other types of clothing, even though people stare at them and are surprised to see them... Therefore, dear Sisters, **don't be surprised that we strongly recommend uniformity in the way you dress and that you never make any change under the pretext of adopting the customs of the places where you may be sent.** If one of your Sisters should try to persuade you to the contrary, know that, regardless of the pretext, this is a temptation motivating her to that in order to destroy your Company, which can subsist only by means of union and charity (CCD X, 283-284 - Conference of November 15, 1657).*

During the conference held on August 26, 1657, Saint Vincent insisted on uniformity in clothing as a source of sisterly communion and a sign of belonging to the Company.

*"Today I received a letter in which I was told that one of your Sisters bought herself a cape without permission and wears it when she goes out. Imagine what a nice sight it is to see this Sister with her Sister; one wearing her usual headdress and the other with that cape! If we weren't firm about this, you'd soon see Sisters, now in a dress made in one style, now in another; with finer linen, and a little nicer headdress, and then they'd let their hair show. In a word, if we weren't careful, there would be no more uniformity, and this would be the ruin of the Community. But as long as you hold fast to this holy custom, God will preserve you. How fortunate you are, Sisters! I don't know - and I say this in the presence of God - I see no Community more pleasing to God than yours. But remember this well: never buy your own clothes, for as soon as one Sister has a dress made in one way and another in another, that causes great disorder" (CCD X, 253).*

#### **4 – THE HABIT, A CALL TO CONSISTENCY OF LIFE**

When Saint Vincent presented the Sisters with the virtues of our particular spirit in three conferences dedicated to this theme in February 1653, he made a clear call to consistency of life. On February 24, he said,

*"The first reason is that your spirit is for you what the soul is for the body. Now, as soon as a body no longer has a soul, it's dead. In the same way, a Daughter of Charity is dead as soon as she no longer has her spirit, that is, as soon as she no longer has humility, charity, and simplicity. God have mercy on her! She's no longer a Daughter of Charity except in her attire. It would be better if she were no longer one" (CCD IX, 471-472).*

On April 17, 1653, when explaining the conditions to gain the jubilee, Saint Vincent specified, *"If a Sister wears the attire of a Daughter of Charity in the sight of God and the world, but doesn't have charity, that amounts to nothing" (CCD IX, 489).*

Saint Vincent warned the Sisters on June 24, 1654, against envy and said, *"It's not the dress that makes you a Daughter of Charity; it's the interior habit of the soul" (CCD IX, 552).*

Speaking of temptations that can arise, Saint Vincent warned Sisters against the vice of criticism and complaining that had crept into some Sisters. He zealously made a powerful appeal to consistency of life and responsibility in living out charity.

*"One will complain of the food; another of the clothes; another that she's being treated harshly; another that the government of the house isn't good; another that it's very hard to live such a life. And then everyone will find something to criticize. What are you doing, Sisters, when you start criticizing, or when you say, 'We should have better food; we should be dressed differently; this and that is necessary'? That's just the way to ruin your Company, of which a certain virtuous lady - it was the Duchess of Ventadour - said to me yesterday (I wish I could say this to you, Sisters, without your hearing it, but that's impossible, I have to say it); she said to me, 'Monsieur, I see no state in life, no Company more useful to the Church of God than this one'" (CCD X, 16).*



In June 1656, Saint Vincent spoke to the Sisters about availability to go to one place or another. Noting what can impede availability, he referred to attachment to a particular way of dressing. *“You’ll see persons so attached to having a dress made in a particular way and of a certain fabric that they’ll disrupt the whole Company to satisfy their passion. Some are so subject to a disordered affection that they attach themselves to anything that gives them some satisfaction... When these persons are told to go to a place, you see them sad and melancholy, and they obey reluctantly. Why do you think they don’t do what they’re told joyfully and promptly? Because some attachment has them bound hand and foot”* (CCD X, 135-136).

When Mademoiselle de Villers died in 1658, the Queen of Poland wanted to make one of the Sisters live with her in her castle to be her “almsgiver” and distribute money to those who were poor. She offered this position to Marguerite Moreau who, at the beginning, did not dare refuse the queen’s request. She then wrote to Louise de Marillac, describing her concern.

*“...this really worried me for fear that, if I were to change my way of dressing and reside at the court, that might cause me to lose my vocation. How do I know that God, who once gave me the grace to overcome all the difficulties I had in leaving the world, will do the same now? If it were up to me, I’d much prefer that God might permit that I become seriously ill rather than to put me in such danger”* (CCD XIIIb, 368-369).

Saint Vincent and Saint Louise took time to discern and decided to send their refusal to the queen. For the Founders and the first Sisters, it was clear that the Daughters of Charity were called and chosen to live at the service of Christ in persons who are poor in a life consecrated to God in community for the mission with a simple habit.

## 5 – SAINT LOUISE’S FEARS TOWARD THE END OF HER LIFE

At the end of 1657 and the beginning of 1658, Louise de Marillac described some tensions that were mounting day after day in the heart of the community in Paris. Louise analyzed these tensions without fear. She noted that the majority of Sisters were young village girls

who, before entering the Company, were not *“in the habit of conserving with persons of rank”* (A. 61). Because of their work, the Sisters were regularly in contact with the Ladies of Charity and shared their thoughts with them on the service to be done.

Some were pleased to be considered on an equal level as the ladies. These country women, most of whom had been illiterate, had learned to read and write, and some had taken a liking to studying and were so passionate about reading that they ended up neglecting the humbler services that they considered less important. By learning, as well, to handle money for the service of sick poor persons, some of these country women discovered the conveniences it can procure and were sometimes tempted to help their own families.

However, a temptation and a question arose in a small group of Sisters: why should we always be servants? Would it be possible to live consecration to God in a way that was closer to the life of nuns? Others, who were more contemplative, would like to establish a group of Sisters that would spend more time in prayer, meditation and reading...

Louise de Marillac was aware of the great danger of a schism in the Company of the Daughters of Charity, with one group of Sisters oriented toward monastic life and another group who would continue to be totally given to the service of persons who are poor. Louise reflected, prayed and discerned the will of God regarding a concrete fact: *those who were more contemplative looked with contempt on the real servants of those who are poor*. This situation greatly concerned Louise between 1658 and 1660. In January 1660, two months before her death, she wrote Saint Vincent, presenting her fears to him.

*“As I reflect upon the present condition of the Company, I also worry about no longer being able to discuss matters with you... it seems to me... that I must speak to you about the Company and tell you that I think that there is reason to fear that it may fail in several ways. Firstly, I have noticed that in several parishes the Ladies are beginning to distrust them, although I believe that I can assure you that I know of no sister who gives them any real reason to do so...”*

*All this... leads me to realize how necessary it is for the Rules to continue*

*to oblige the sisters to live poorly, simply and humbly because I fear that if they settle into a way of life that requires great expenditures, is ostentatious and partially enclosed, they would thereby be obliged to find ways to maintain it, and so they would become a very withdrawn and inactive group, living apart from passers-by and poorly-clothed people, leading some to say that this wearer-of-a-rough headdress, this sister in name only, has no authority, rather she elicits contempt.*

*I know that not only the sisters but others, who are obliged to honor the designs of God for the spiritual and corporal service of the sick poor, will have a strong inclination toward this way of life which is so dangerous for the continuation of the work of God which, my Most Honored Father, your Charity has so firmly sustained against all opposition. I am truly distressed to cause you this trouble. If your Charity sees that God wills something other than what has been done until now, then in the name of Our Lord, be the one to declare and order it” (SW, p. 677-678 - L. 655).*

Despite her fears, Saint Louise was persuaded that what is essential in the charism must be strengthened and shine through in our way of life. This is what she wrote on January 10, 1660, to Sister Marguerite Chétif, who was in Arras.

*“So you have not found any girls who want to give themselves to the service of Our Lord in the poor as members of the Company? You surely know that some of our sisters have come from farther away than Arras. However, this requires strong characters who desire to reach the holiness of true Christians and who want to die to themselves by mortification and a veritable act of renunciation, which they already made at the time of their holy Baptism, so that the Spirit of Jesus Christ may abide in them and grant them the strength to persevere in this way of life which is totally spiritual, although they will be employed in exterior works which appear lowly and despicable in the eyes of the world but which are glorious in the sight of God and His angels” (SW, p. 674 - L. 651).*

## **6 - EVOLUTION OF THE HABIT OVER THE COURSE OF HISTORY**

From 1645 down to our day, the habit of the Daughters of Charity has changed significantly. From the first standard clothing that was simple and like that of women from the villages of Ile de France to the majestic cornette of 1964, there were many changes... This evolution is quite visible in the paintings and engravings made after the canonization of Saint Vincent. The most spectacular change took place September 20, 1964. It was an exemplary act of obedience to the Church, a sign of sisterly communion desired by all the Sisters, an exercise of personal and institutional simplicity to draw closer to those who are poor in the service carried out by each Sister. All throughout history, one of the most well-known changes of habit is that of the Sisters of Spain, by order of King Fernando VII in 1827. At the end of the French Revolution, he was imprisoned by Napoleon in France from 1808-1814; when he returned to Spain, he was on the throne again until 1833. His government was characterized by absolutism, a certain aversion to anything French and royalism (a set of rights granted the king to intervene in the affairs of the Church, allowing him to give orders, establish norms and make decisions annulling those of the ecclesial authority).

In this context, in December 1826, King Fernando VII decided to impose a different headdress on the Spanish Daughters of Charity from that worn in France. By royal order, he required that they remove the cornette and adopt a headdress that would allow them to wear a large veil over it for going to church or otherwise leaving the house. This was the custom in Spain for noble women, and the Sisters were considered to belong to this category... The royal norm governing them arrived in the local communities by a letter of obedience from Father Fortunato Feu, Provincial Director, dated January 1, 1827, which communicated the king's order. The change introduced by Fernando VII was approved and ratified by Popes Pius VII and Pius IX. The ratification by Pius IX had the value of a particular and stable statute. This was the origin of the difference in habit worn by the Sisters of the Spanish Province compared to the others. Black muslin was used in the Company before the French Revolution until March 25, 1835. The Sisters of the Spanish Province kept it until 1964, backed by the statute of Pope Pius IX.

Sister María Ángeles INFANTE  
*Daughter of Charity*

**“My overriding feeling  
is the certainty  
that I am only  
an instrument  
of God’s action  
and of the leadership  
of the Virgin Mary,  
our only Mother  
and true Superioress General.”**

**Mother Suzanne Guillemin  
Superioress General from 1962 to 1968**

