

# *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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## FATHER T. MAVRIČ, SUPERIOR GENERAL

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### Letter of September 3, 2018 for the Feast of Saint Vincent de Paul

*To all the members of the Vincentian Family*

My dear brothers and sisters in Saint Vincent,

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

In this year 2018, we celebrate the Feast of Saint Vincent for the first time at the beginning of the fifth century of the Vincentian Charism. Once again, I would like to suggest as first steps on this path the following two initiatives:

- a) To renew and deepen our relationship with the Saints, Blessed, and Servants of God of the Vincentian Family around the world as models of the Vincentian charism.
- b) To renew and deepen the “Culture of Vocations.”

The Vincentian Family is presently active in 156 countries throughout the world. To celebrate the Feast of Saint Vincent de Paul in the communities, parishes, schools, universities, and other services and projects in which the different branches of the Vincentian Family are involved, at the beginning of the fifth century of the Vincentian Charism, I encourage you to focus this year on the first point:

S  
*Spiritual  
Life*

**Deepening our relationship with the Saints, Blessed,  
and Servants of God of the Vincentian Family.**

To do so, I suggest that each of the above-mentioned entities of the various branches choose one of the Saints, Blessed, or Servants of God within the Vincentian Family and make a presentation on him or her within the given group. In addition, develop a specific plan to present the Saint, Blessed, or Servant of God you have chosen to those in your surroundings, village, neighborhood, or any other place you choose outside your community or group. Presenting a member of the Vincentian Family, whose life is a model of the incarnation of the charism in the place and time of history God put him or her to fulfill the mission, will be a wonderful way to share the legacy, spirituality, and charism of Saint Vincent de Paul.

HERE ARE SOME FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING THIS PROJECT:

- 1) Reflect on the list of all the Saints, Blessed, and Servants of God of the Vincentian Family.
- 2) Choose, according to your judgment, the one who, in your environment or place of service, best speaks to the persons to whom you will present him or her.
- 3) Form a small committee to be responsible for preparing the project by
  - a) considering the best way to communicate to the people the life, spirituality, and charism of the one chosen;
  - b) developing means to present the information with PowerPoint, brochures, internet, social media, YouTube, Instagram, etc.
- 4) Encourage, in a particular way, young people to follow in his/her footsteps, such as considering a vocation to the Consecrated Life as a Sister, Brother, or Priest (thus deepening the Culture of Vocations).

- 5) If you are not able to prepare or launch the initiative for the Feast of Saint Vincent de Paul, form the committee responsible for coordinating it and announce it on the Feast, with the plan as to how, where, and when you will develop the project and make the different presentations.
- 6) Encourage others to pray through the intercession of that Saint, Blessed, or Servant of God for various needs and to trust in his/her intervention before God, being open to graces, miracles, healing of soul and body, and conversions. To this end, compose a prayer through the intercession of the chosen Saint, Blessed, or Servant of God, indicating an address or e-mail where persons can communicate the graces received. This also will help to bring the processes of our Blessed and Servants of God to a conclusion. Many still need a miracle to be presented to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in order to be recognized officially by the Church as Saints.
- 7) Send us information, short articles with pictures, to famvin.org or cmglobal.org, in order to share your initiative with the entire Vincentian Family.

Saint Vincent himself expressed his thoughts on praying to the Saints when speaking to the confreres:

*He told the Company that it should raise its mind and heart to God on this holy day of All Saints to ask for His grace and to pray for the needs of each one in particular and of the Company in general. "You see," he said, "on this day Our Lord is accustomed to pour His graces in greater abundance on the faithful who ask Him for them in the way they should. He does so through the intercession of all the saints; for, since we have more intercessors before God, we must have no doubt that the graces He pours forth on the faithful on this day are more abundant than on the other special feast days of the saints.*

Letter of September 3, 2018

*“So that, my dear confreres, is what we have to do, that is, to thank His Divine Majesty for all the gifts and graces He’s been pleased to grant all the saints in general who are now in heaven, and to each of them in particular, for the good use they’ve made of those same graces and for their perseverance in the practice of good works until the end. We should thank God for all that because they practiced so well the first lesson Our Lord taught them and us: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven’ (Matthew 5:3).”<sup>1</sup>*

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Father Tomaž MAVRIČ, CM  
*Superior General*

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1. CCD XI, 382; Conference 175, Repetition of Prayer, 1 November 1657. CCD refers to the series, *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014.

*Let us go forward, living by the Holy Spirit* (cf. Gal 5:16).

***The fruit of the Spirit is generosity!***

I raise my eyes toward the mountains.

From whence shall come my help?

*My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.*

He will not allow your foot to slip; or your guardian to sleep.

Behold, the guardian of Israel never slumbers nor sleeps.

*The Lord is your guardian;*

*the Lord is your shade at your right hand.*

By day the sun will not strike you, nor the moon by night.

*The Lord will guard you from all evil; he will guard your soul.*

*The Lord will guard your coming and going*

*both now and forever.*

(Psalm 121:1-8)

Psalm 121<sup>1</sup> “is one of the “songs of ascents” that accompanied the pilgrimage to the encounter with the Lord in the Temple of Zion. It is a Psalm of trust, for the Hebrew verb *shamar*, “to safeguard, to protect”, is repeated in it six times. God, whose name is frequently invoked, emerges as the ever vigilant, attentive and concerned “guardian”, the “sentinel” who keeps watch over his people to protect them from every hazard and danger. The song begins with the Psalmist raising his eyes “to the mountains”, that is, to the hills crowned by Jerusalem: from up there comes help, for there, in his temple, the Lord dwells (cf. vv. 1-2). However, the word “mountains” can also conjure up images of idolatrous shrines in the so-called “high places”, which are frequently condemned in the Old Testament (cf. 1 Kgs 3:2; 2 Kgs 18:4).

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1. Benedict XVI, General Audience May 4, 2005



“Let us go forward, living by the Holy Spirit”

*In this case, there would have been a contrast: while the pilgrim was advancing towards Zion, his eyes would have lit on pagan temples that were a great temptation to him. But his faith was steadfast, and he was certain of one thing alone: “My help shall come from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Ps 121:2). There are also similar things in our pilgrimage through life. We see the high places that spread out before us as a promise of life: wealth, power, prestige, the easy life. These high places are temptations, for they truly seem like the promise of life. But with our faith we realize that this is not true and that these high places are not life. True life, true help, comes from the Lord. And we turn our gaze, therefore, to the true high places, to the true mountain: Christ.*

*This trust is illustrated in the Psalm through the image of the guardian and sentinel, who watch and protect. There is also an allusion to the foot that does not stumble (cf. v. 3) on the way through life, and perhaps to the shepherd who, stopping for the night, watches over his flock without falling asleep or dozing (cf. v. 4). The divine Pastor knows no rest in the task of caring for his people, for all of us.”*

God is generous toward us. Based on various readings and especially the book by Lytta Basset, *Dare generosity*,<sup>2</sup> let us delve more deeply into this mystery.

## I. MEDITATION ON GENEROSITY

1. When Jean-Paul Sartre said, “Hell is other people,” he meant that everything is ruined when my own conscience encounters that of others. When I go from myself to others, I go from my dreams and plans to other people who have other desires. Differences and the risk of disagreement are at the foundation of my relationship with others. My life is limited, in a way, by others.

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2. Lytta Basset, *Oser la Bienveillance [Dare generosity]*, February 2014

2. We may remember or might currently enjoy the presence of a generous person. When we think of him or her, we feel peace and joy. This presence transforms our perception of situations. We have received so much from the generosity of loved ones who have helped us to live and be transformed. Generosity can also appear in public figures, which leads to openness of hearts beyond social and religious barriers. Generosity is contagious. It spreads. Contrary to what those who have a dark vision of human nature for religious or philosophical reasons might think, generosity is recognized by a large number of people because it corresponds to a desire of their hearts. In the Gospel, after all, Jesus says, “Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father” (Mt 5:16).

3. Generosity includes the idea of looking out for what is good. This means that I take the stance, not of a monitor, but of a watchperson, relating to the world or other people in a special way. It is as if good cannot exist by its light alone; it requires polishing to make it brighter. In this sense, being generous means deciding both that the other person is capable of greatness and wonderful actions and that we have a responsibility to care for him. Generosity is exactly the opposite of a natural and unconditional adherence to good. It develops from a concern that the world is not as it should be. Recognizing the value of generosity or good will means accepting the fact that ill will exists. Ill will and malice exist, which is why there is a desire to improve the world. Generosity establishes hospitality rather than fear, openness rather than closure.

4. From a theological point of view, this desire rests on two foundations: belief in a shared humanity and faith that we all come from God. These two points do not depend on people’s actions. Paradoxically, this attitude that consists of watching over someone with a good intention, without imposing anything on him, in a disinterested way, also results from God’s grace. By looking at others in this way, we are living in His image, He who has a loving plan for each person (cf. Ephesians 1:9). This is the opposite of *eros*, which considers the other person as an object for our personal satisfaction.

*“Let us go forward, living by the Holy Spirit”*

5. However, generosity is not naivety. The enemy is very concrete, after all. We remain lucid, but Christian realism lies in the concern for the good of the other. Considering someone with kindness while being able to evaluate his acts morally, that is what is at issue in Christian generosity. Being generous helps us recognize that we do not have access to the mystery of the other person, to what causes him to act in one way or another. Generosity is *“looking at the other person in a way sustained by great understanding for human nature in and of itself. It is a movement of expansiveness and reconciliation.”*

6. In *Dare generosity*, the Swiss Protestant philosopher and theologian Lytta Basset describes an attitude that we should also apply to ourselves. According to her, the words and actions of Jesus invite us to consider our own sin with a perspective based on the certainty of unconditional blessing. This frees us from a confining sense of guilt.

7. Being generous is watching over someone with a good intention, wanting good for him without imposing anything on him. Generosity is never abstract but experienced among us well before we are aware of it. We do not have to profess ourselves believers for this to happen. It is content to impel us each day to be attentive to the generosity that we receive from others and practice towards others.

8. Generosity is a sign of God when I want to let the regard of the Totally Other dwell in me and pass through me. Without imagining that I am its origin, it is obvious to me that it comes at the times I least expect it as I recognize that I am being generous toward a person who upset me, angered me or treated me as an enemy.

9. When life is difficult, we have a good, easily accessible training exercise: being attentive to the generosity that flows among people, even among strangers, which we witness daily in the streets or on the train. We can then rejoice in that generosity, which slips incognito into our relationships, tirelessly compensating for our individual shortcomings.

10. Generosity renews our reading of Scripture, for example, the “chance” meeting of Jesus with Zacchaeus. Jesus’ generosity will cause Zacchaeus to restore relationships and take responsibility for his acts. The account is part of a section that has been called the “Gospel of the excluded”, of all those persons with whom society considered it unacceptable to associate. This happens in Jericho. Jesus has just cured a blind man who had called out to Him for help. Immediately afterwards, another man, Zacchaeus, seeks to see Jesus. The similarity is striking: both are excluded because they are “sinners”, but both are, more or less consciously, looking for a relationship. Generosity walks through the city of Jericho.

11. Let’s note several aspects of generosity:

- A generosity on the look-out for what the other desires.
- A generosity that treats others as equals.
- A generosity that wants lasting relationships.
- A generosity that inspires responsible actions.
- A generosity that accepts others with their current limitations.
- A generosity that makes us perceptive.
- A generosity that awakes people’s relational ability.
- A generosity that causes us to let go of guilt and perfectionism.
- A generosity that restores the social fabric.

12. In his encounter with Zacchaeus, Jesus acts with perfect humility as if to better encourage us to identify with Him. Any human being, marked in the depths of his human nature with the seal of generosity, can offer his fellow creature, however entrenched he may be, his own desire for connection and set out in search of him who is lost in order to enter into relationship with him and save him from fatal self-centeredness.

13. When we do this, we simply allow generosity to work through us. The more human we are and the more we reach out others, the more we incarnate God, who is constantly working to build relationships. Generosity, a way of being, feeling and acting, has always existed but today responds to a new longing, as we can detect today in warm expressions or in collaborative actions.

“Let us go forward, living by the Holy Spirit”

14. Today, there is also an increasingly widespread spiritual quest. The response is found in a relational approach. It involves being connected to the Living God, listening to Him and hearing Him to find guidance for our lives. A relationship with God goes hand in hand with human relationships. The problem arises where the relationship is in danger or broken off, in situations of closure, aimlessness, blindness, illness, division, exclusion, idolatry and debt. We are called to not cut ourselves off from others.

15. If we look back, we find many traces of generosity received that caused and continues to cause peace and joy. In our heart of hearts, we know in truth that accepting generosity and manifesting it to those around us through a look, a smile or an action means feeling in harmony with God, other people and ourselves and feeling the happiness found in that harmony.

16. Throughout the Bible, God is eternally seeking a partnership with us, even in the depths of our darkness. Christ confirms this attitude of generosity; concerning the man born blind, neither he nor his parents sinned to cause his blindness. Let us then refuse to lock individuals in an unchanging “nature”, let ourselves be seized deep within by compassion for them, as Jesus was toward the Samaritan woman. Let us accept their suffering and stop dealing them the blow, “I know you, your true colors will come out again.” Of course, sin is present; it is refusal of relationship with others and with God. Christ saves us from sin by healing us, which allows us to reestablish relationships. We should remember that Christ never locked anyone into his sin and that each person is capable of God. The generosity of someone else saved us.

## II. LET US LIVE GENEROSITY EVER MORE FULLY<sup>3</sup>

Generosity, this loving regard with which we look at other people regardless of their behavior, is both a disposition of the heart and a demanding practice for ‘missionary disciples’. While not a ‘theological’ virtue, it is no less a virtue and a gift of the Holy Spirit.

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3. Reflections by Father Jean-Pierre Renouard for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vincentian charism

With Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, we believe that generosity is putting the love of God and our fellow man into practice with special attention for the least fortunate.

Saint Vincent’s accepting to be sent to persons who are poor was a turning point in his encounter with Christ. *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... He has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor...”*

In the logic of his baptism and priesthood, Vincent saw himself as a disciple walking the roads of the Gospel with Jesus. He felt called to be with Him, to learn to know God, and at the same time, to participate in His mission. *“...the Lord appointed seventy-two others whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit”* (Lk 10:1). Throughout the Gospel, Jesus chooses to show an interest primarily in those who are poor, those who suffer in their body and soul. Vincent de Paul, along with his first companions, understood this. *“In this vocation, we’re very much in conformity with Our Lord Jesus Christ, who seems to have made His principle aim, in coming into the world, to assist poor people and to take care of them... And if we ask Our Lord, ‘What did you come to do on earth?’ ‘To assist the poor.’ ‘Anything else?’ ‘To assist the poor’”* (CCD XI, 98).

Starting with his foundational experiences of 1617 in Gannes and Folleville and then in Châtillon, this assistance of those who are poor would consist in caring for persons who are poor in their entire being. Our celebrations last year reminded us that 1617 represents the springboard for all the action that Vincent would develop, with all his collaborators and descendants, on many varied fronts, such as war, illness, hunger, religious ignorance or lack of formation.

Committed to this path of service of those wounded by life, Vincent de Paul came to adopt a spirituality of Christ present in the person of the poor. This is where we look with him. *“... in serving persons who are poor, we serve Jesus Christ. How true, Sisters! You are serving Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as that we are here. A Sister will go ten times*



*“Let us go forward, living by the Holy Spirit”*

*a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day she’ll find God there”* (CCD IX, 199).

Contemplation of Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, leads to recognizing His presence in humankind, in each person, and especially in His brothers and sisters who are poor. This is how Jesus Himself announced His presence in the world before all. Remember the words of Matthew 25 that inspired Vincent and appear in his writings as early as the Rule of Châtillon in December 1617.

Like Vincent de Paul, we realize in our service that Christ’s identification with persons who are poor can take place, which leads to experiencing God’s real presence: *“She’ll find God there.”*

Thanks to his encounter with Christ in the person of the poor, Vincent de Paul drew a spiritual and existential consequence of this identification: a prompt availability for service. With Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, the divine is in the human.

The human therefore deserves all the attention and honor given the divine. Service becomes like a sacred liturgical act, like a prayer, because it is an act of entering into contact with and establishing a connection with God. Responding to a service of our brothers and sisters is the same as responding to a service of God; there is no possible contradiction between the two.

*“Remember that when you leave meditation and Holy Mass to serve poor persons, you lose nothing, Sisters, because to serve those who are poor is to go to God, and you should see God in them. So then, be very careful to attend to all their needs...”* (CCD IX, 5).

According to Saint Vincent de Paul, in service we learn to contemplate Christ in those who are poor. *“See God in them”* is the step to take in order to live service as an encounter with God, as a prayer.

*“I must not judge a poor peasant man or woman by their appearance or their apparent intelligence, especially since very often they scarcely have the expression or the mind of rational persons, so crude and vulgar they are. But turn the medal, and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, who willed to be poor, is represented to us by these poor people... O Dieu! How beautiful it is to see poor people if we consider them in God and with the esteem in which Jesus Christ held them! If, however, we look on them according to the sentiments of the flesh and a worldly spirit, they will seem contemptible”* (CCD XI, 26).

Along with Saint Vincent de Paul, we are called to transform our vision and go beyond appearances... Christ is present at our doorsteps, in persons who are poor, and expects due worship, as He is God. With Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, this worship consists primarily in charity, which we live out in a real way in the service of our brothers and sisters. Saint Vincent de Paul experienced how Christ and persons living in poverty intersect.

Christ and persons who are poor identify with each other and call out for service in order to have a real encounter. They each become for us a way of life, a vocation, because they allow us to contemplate what we are called to become: children of God and brothers or sisters of every person in Christ. Along with Saint Vincent de Paul, we can discover and live out service of our brothers and sisters as a vocation.

Isn’t generosity - the fact of looking on another with kindness that can turn into action for the happiness of the other person, no matter his behavior - a very Christian principle and even a highly humanitarian one?

Let us remember this advice from Pope Francis in his exhortation *Rejoice and be glad* (117): *“It is not good when we look down on others like heartless judges, lording it over them and always trying to teach them lessons. That is itself a subtle form of violence. Saint John of the Cross proposed a different path: ‘Always prefer to be taught by all, rather than to desire teaching even the least of all.’ And he added advice on how to keep the*

“Let us go forward, living by the Holy Spirit”

devil at bay: ‘Rejoice in the good of others as if it were your own, and desire that they be given precedence over you in all things; this you should do wholeheartedly. You will thereby overcome evil with good, banish the devil, and possess a happy heart. Try to practice this all the more with those who least attract you. Realize that if you do not train yourself in this way, you will not attain real charity or make any progress in it.’”

**In conclusion**

Jesus is profoundly generous. He takes care of us. Let us conclude with this passage from Saint Mark’s Gospel:

“People were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this he became indignant and said to them, ‘Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it.’ Then he embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them” (Mark 10:13-16).

Father Bernard SCHOEPFER, CM  
Director General

“All these devoted themselves  
with one accord to prayer.”

(Acts 1:14)

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they entered the city, they went to the upper room where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers (Acts 1:12-14).

**I. MEDITATION<sup>1</sup>**

1. Jesus has just left His disciples, and the first sentence of this passage from the Acts of the Apostles summarizes in a few words what was surely a critical step in the life of the first Christians. We call it the Ascension and have made a holy day out of it, but at the beginning it must have been more like a day of mourning, a day of a great departure.

2. After the horror of the Passion and death of Jesus, after the awe of the Resurrection, now they find themselves orphans, once and for all. As a result, they become closer to us, and their behavior can guide ours. We will examine, therefore, their circumstances and actions. Jesus left them instructions not to leave Jerusalem and to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

3. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that after Jesus’ Ascension, the Apostles, Mary and some women gathered to pray. Why? Because they sharply felt Jesus’ absence. This is natural after spending so many years together.

1. See <https://www.mariedenazarth.com>

*“All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer”*

4. Jesus had told them, *“I am with you always, until the end of the age”* (Mt 28:20). From the Cross, He gave a mother to the disciple and a son to His mother. One could hardly ask for more. He gave them as a husband says to his wife or a mother to her son, *“I am with you always.”* These words have helped so many men and women separated by war or abduction to hold fast in time of trials.

5. The Apostles painfully felt Jesus’ absence, and this absence leads to prayer. This account in Acts emphasizes that faith and prayer become stronger when people gather for prayer. We know from experience that our prayer is not as powerful if we remain alone. The Church that is born of this sharing gives much to each of us. Faith is built by the atmosphere of churches that radiate the mysterious presence of Jesus among us. I am always struck by all the people who come through the chapel here at 140 rue du Bac and stop, struck in a way by the presence of God emanating from this place.

6. The Apostles and Mary prayed. And Jesus? He, too, prays, Saint John tells us. He prays because He loves His Father. What does that mean? Loving means trusting with complete confidence in the other person. Would you confide something personal or entrust a very important task to someone whom you did not love or whom you did not trust? No, of course not! Thanks to the Holy Spirit, there is a bond of unshakable love between Jesus and His Father.

7. Jesus also prays because He loves all those whom the Father has entrusted to Him. What is extraordinary in Jesus’ prayer is that Jesus is not alone in it. He keeps attachments in the world that He is leaving, His disciples, and brings them with Him in prayer. Jesus prays for all those who seek Him and wish to listen to Him. He asks His Father to sanctify us, to bring us into God’s world and free us from the isolation that closes us in on ourselves and that keeps us distant from God and thus distant from others. How can we love God and our neighbor if we focus on ourselves?

8. So then, let us pray, let us pay honor to the author of the letter to Diognetus. *“Such is the Christian’s lofty and divinely appointed*

*function, from which he is not permitted to excuse himself, for Christians are the soul of the world and dwell in the heart of it.”*

Like the Apostles, we should be aware that without Him, we can do nothing. We cannot preach in public squares without passing through the Upper Room, without first being clothed with the power from on high. The main actor in the birth and development of the Church is the Holy Spirit.

9. Scripture does not frequently mention Mary explicitly. She is, however, mentioned at decisive moments: at the birth of Jesus, at the beginning of His apostolic life in Cana, at the end of His apostolic life with His death on the Cross and in the Upper Room waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

10. Mary is there; she is no longer alone as during the first intervention of the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation. She is in the midst of these men and women who hesitate between doubt and faith. She remains the woman who gives birth. A body, the Church, still must be brought into the world by the power of the Spirit. She is the woman in the state of giving birth. It is not by chance that many works of art represent Mary pregnant in the Upper Room. She continues to bring into the world the body of her Son, by the power of the Spirit, this body that is the Church. Mary is there. She waits for her hour. She waits in hope. Women know what it is to ‘wait’ in pain and in hope.

11. Let us ask ourselves this question. How can I personally, in collaboration or in community, also be on the lookout for what is in embryo, the newness that wants to be born in me, in others, in my neighborhood, in the Church, in the world? How can I be on the lookout for life, announce the dawning day and give birth to what longs to be born?

12. In the Upper Room, Mary teaches this community, already formed and yet to be born, to *“encourage each other daily while it is still ‘today’”* and the Apostles to *“hold unwaveringly to our confession that gives us hope, for he who made the promise is trustworthy”* (Heb 10:13, 23), according to the Letter to the

“All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer”

Hebrews. Mary cannot doubt God’s faithfulness. This passage through doubt, fear and perhaps despair, lived together with Mary in waiting, prayer, sharing and mutual encouragement to hope against hope, comes to an end.

13. In the Upper Room, there are different people: men and women, Apostles, the Mother of Jesus, as well as His relatives. This unanimity means that all are committed to serving the work of Christ. They are not self-centered but centered on Christ. In this context, jealousy, rivalry and judgement of others have no place. From time to time, the Church should return to the Upper Room and work again on this unity.

14. God wanted to realize the Incarnation through Mary, but He also wanted her to be present at the birth of the Church. Her presence in the Upper Room is not trivial. Mary is there discretely – she is not at the center – but she draws the Holy Spirit down on the nascent Church.

15. The life of Mary is mostly hidden after Christ’s resurrection. The New Testament only speaks of her once (Acts 1:14). Saint Paul best explains the secret of this hidden life: a life “in God”. *“If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory”* (Col 3:1-4).

16. At a young age, Mary offers herself to the service of the Lord; she receives His Son in a virginal heart that relies on God for everything. Attentive, she receives the Word of God like manna for each day. Vulnerable, she gives her maternal love. Poor, she receives even the burial place for her Son. Grieving, she receives the joy of the Resurrection. Faithful, she receives the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room and gives witness. We all can, with Mary, give ourselves humbly and open ourselves to the transcendent.

## II. REFLECTION ON PRAYER<sup>2</sup>

1. Relationships between human beings are complex and built through words and other attitudes. The same holds true for a relationship with God. Sometimes prayer is something that we say to God. It is also and perhaps primarily a way of placing ourselves before God in silence, trusting expectancy, questions or even rebellion... Praying is mostly taking time to love God, a time for loving ourselves and allowing God to love us.

2. In human beings, words and silence are two interconnected realities. Words are impossible without silence; if everyone speaks at the same time, the result is hubbub and no longer speech. There is no human silence that does not relate to words: when we notice the silence of a place or time, it is because we know that it could have been noisy. Even alone out in nature, we can avoid silence by talking or singing to mask the anxiety of solitude.

3. There is no reason to make either words or silence sacred. We believe in a God who created the world with His words and who speaks to people; silence helps respect God’s transcendence. We should be aware of the limits of speech and never believe we have explained the mystery of God because we have spoken about Him; however, because He chose to make Himself known by the transmission of human words, we should not give up on speaking about Him.

4. If we risk a deeper practice of silence, our relationship to words will be different, less talkative, more modest. For example, the prayer of intercession or request, when it combines with silent contemplative prayer, becomes less wordy. We no longer feel obliged to describe the situation to God down to the least details or call Him to witness to what happens to us by telling him, nor to explain to Him exactly what He should do. We can be content to name those for whom we want to pray, entrust them to God’s grace or enter into prayer with them and in their name.

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2. Sources: *Fiches vincentienne (Vincentian Study Sheets)*: no. 17 - *Prayer*; no. 63 - *Vincent, a man of prayer*



“All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer”

5. Prayer in community, in the liturgy or in a more spontaneous way, in shared silence or in song, can strengthen prayer and provide a striking experience of mutual support. However, if we expect so much of the community that we never pray alone, the community will not contribute anything. It is not an aircraft carrier: it is the communion of those who pray.

6. Even in the solitude of our room, we are never separated from the Body of Christ, and we are never absorbed in the mass of believers, in a collective movement that would dissolve our personal relationship with God. Members of the Body of Christ, of the same nature as Him and as our brothers and sisters, God nonetheless has a special name for us that He alone knows.

7. Christian tradition is the sum of experiences. We do not have to invent the paths that we travel since other believers have traveled them before us. They teach us a way of living and of praying. There is not just one way, a “single room in the Father’s house”. The life of the Church has developed various forms of prayer that have their originality and their own coherence.

8. Here as well, we should be aware that no one way of praying is the best or the most Christian. Placing ourselves at the school of a tradition by listening to great spiritual teachers not only involves entering into a tradition or a secular movement, but also admitting that we all have something to learn.

9. People turn toward God in response to a love and an invitation that always come first. The movement towards God is thus intimately connected to welcoming God. We turn, we advance toward God who dwells within us and whose presence we must first welcome.

10. Favoring welcoming the gift of God means taking the risk of passivity and abdication of our greatness as people to make ourselves simple receptacles.

11. Favoring the movement toward God means taking the risk of excessive will, with the spiritual life becoming a conquest by the

sweat of our brow.

12. Welcoming the love of God does not paralyze us but on the contrary sets us in action. The effect of the encounter with God is to increase our desire for God rather than extinguish it. Welcoming God’s love means discovering a little more His immensity. As Gregory of Nyssia said, “*It’s seeing the invisible.*” Invisible like a landscape that continually unfolds before the eyes of someone walking forward, which can never be taken in with just one glance.

### III. SAINT VINCENT’S PRAYER

1. The spirituality of the first half of the ‘great century of souls’ in France has two particular characteristics.

2. The spiritual life, intimate union with God and extraordinary graces are no longer limited to cloistered religious who have left the world. Saint Francis de Sales, in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, places them within reach of all, the greatest along with the most humble who live in the world.

3. Among those who reached extraordinary mystical heights, many were also men or women of action, as were Teresa of Avila, religious founders in Canada and many others.

4. Saint Vincent was very private about his own spiritual life. He did not like to put himself forward, even when he mentioned his own experience. He did give advice concerning prayer and prayer life, significantly colored by his experience. Two spiritual events seem to have had a significant influence on him: his encounter with persons who are poor that would cause him to read the Gospel from a new perspective and his encounter with Saint Francis de Sales, whose examples were a point of reference: “our blessed father, the Bishop of Geneva.”

5. Like Saint Matthew, Saint Vincent firmly believed that God conceals His secrets from the learned and reserves them for the poor and humble (cf. Mt 11:25). “*He reveals to those hearts what all the schools haven’t discovered*” (CCD IX, 331). This truth is



*“All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer”*

the foundation of his prayer life. *“True religion is found among the poor,”* and if we want to enter into an intimate relationship with God through prayer, there is no other way than becoming before him like *“beggars... poor and weak”* (CCD XII, 122).

6. Prayer, as Saint Vincent understood it, is not pure contemplation. It should not remain disincarnated but lead to action and be subjected to verification in action. He was wary of lofty sentiments and spiritual heights. From *“sweet conversations they have with God”* to *“working, suffering, mortifying themselves”* for the service of persons who are poor and each other, they can *“come up short”* and *“their courage fails them”*. Illusion is easy and pleasant, but, *“No, no, let’s not fool ourselves”* (cf. CCD XI, 33).

7. Saint Vincent did not limit prayer to a personal relationship with God. More than many others, he had a concern for the prayer of the Church and contributed to its renewal after observing a liturgical anarchy *“worthy of tears”* (CCD XII, 212). He tried to remedy it beginning with the first retreats for the ordinands during which future priests were taught to say the Mass in a worthy and uniform fashion.

8. He did not fear innovation and organized a sort of para-liturgy for children at the end of missions that concluded the catechism and included a solemn procession and first Communion. We think it may be at the origin of our modern celebration of solemn communion.

9. Finally, Saint Vincent recommended sharing prayer on occasion. Of course, each person is alone before God, and prayer is a heart-to-heart conversation with Him. However, rather than walling themselves in an individualism of juxtaposed spiritual lives, Saint Vincent invited his followers to spiritual sharing. He invented *“repetitions of prayer”* where each person shares with others, in the greatest simplicity, the thoughts that came to him in meditation (cf. CCD XII, 234).

10. It is striking how many times in his conferences and letters Saint Vincent reveals himself as a man of prayer. It is uncontest-

able: every event was for him a reason for praise, thanksgiving or intercession... Quite naturally, he spoke to God and called out to Him, thus showing that he lived in His presence despite his busy schedule.

**CONCLUSION: IN CONSTANT PRAYER**

*“...we should remember that holiness consists in a habitual openness to the transcendent, expressed by prayer and adoration.*

*The saints are distinguished by a spirit of prayer and a need for communion with God. They find an exclusive concern with this world to be narrow and stifling, and, amid their own concerns and commitments, they long for God, losing themselves in praise and contemplation of the Lord. I do not believe in holiness without prayer, even though that prayer need not be lengthy or involve intense emotions”* (Gaudete et Exsultate, 147).

Enlightened and led by the Spirit, Mary had a powerful influence on the community of the Lord’s disciples.

Ever since Mary received John as her son at the foot of the Cross by the expressed desire of her crucified Son, she has become mother of the Apostles, mother of human kind, “mother of the entire nascent Church”.

From then on, she would accompany with her prayer and comfort not only the primitive Church in Jerusalem, but the Church of all times, of which she became forever the model as well as the refuge.

*Virgin Mary, you are our only Mother!  
O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us.*

Father Bernard SCHOEPPER, CM  
*Director General*

Province of Vietnam

Mission with HIV/AIDS patients

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News  
from the  
Provinces

Many Daughters of Charity in Vietnam have served patients in public hospitals, catering to the poorest in our society. I have been a nurse for more than thirty years, accompanying people with leprosy, cancer and other serious illnesses. I walk with them and their families on this perilous journey where hope and faith are on trial. Death and resurrection appear and disappear like sunrise and sunset. This is a critical period, filled with tears and prayers. For many patients, illness is also a turning point where people can find motivation and inspiration for a drastic conversion. Upon receiving a new mission to look after HIV/AIDS patients in their last stage at Mai Hoa Center administered by the Daughters of Charity, I felt the fear of hopelessness because I knew these patients had a very slim chance to recover and thus have a brief time to prepare for their landing on the other shore.

The patients admitted to Mai Hoa Center suffer from hopelessness because there is no cure and have suffered from societal discrimination, rejection by families and friends and from lack of timely treatment. As they reach their last stage of sickness, they look like the agonizing Christ on the cross, and their skeletal bodies are covered with wounds that give off a nasty smell. Once, two policemen brought a male patient whose legs were paralyzed to the center. They delivered him hastily and ran away as if they feared we would not accept the sick man.

They appeared shocked to see us welcome the patient with open arms.

We make great efforts to lessen their pain, yet we cannot avoid hurting them when dressing their wounds. The stench combined with groaning and occasional violence makes the staff's work difficult. I often recall Saint Vincent's words: "turn the medal" to see God in them, and I hear Jesus ask me: "Do you love me? If yes, take care of your siblings".

I continue to pray that God might grant me greater faith to deal with them with compassion and respect. Progressively, even if the pain remains agonizing, the patients become open to interact and respond more positively. Resentment and hatred decrease with time and are replaced by appreciation for any expression of kindness. Their prayers are intense. Their search for a God of compassion who loves and forgives the prodigal son leads them eventually to request baptism and die in peace. Our joy comes from the fact that most of our patients left this world in peace and reconciled with themselves, with their loved ones and with God. They make me think of the workers of the eleventh hour in the Gospel (Mt 20:1-16). They began later in the "work-day" but humbly recognized their sins, "worked" with love, accepting the Father's will, and were grateful for the forgiveness offered (Lk 15:11-32).

I often thought that God does want me to open my arms to care for these brothers and sisters. If I fail to love them sincerely, I know that they would not only die biologically but spiritually from hatred and resentment. In that case, God could ask me, "Where is your brother?" (Gen 4:9-10)

Sister Thiên An NGUYEN THI KIM CHAU  
*Daughter of Charity*

## Province of St. Louise de Marillac-Asia

### Serving in a public university in Manila

I would like to share with you very simply an experience into which the then-Province of the Philippines ventured as fruit of its discernment in the revision of works. This is one of our responses.

In the Philippines, the Daughters of Charity serve in varied ministries including education. We have 20 schools, big colleges and a Catholic university. Challenging ourselves on how best we can serve youth in the peripheries, the Province decided on insertion in public/government colleges and universities. The Province thus sent me to serve in a government-run college with a population of 20,000 students in the heart of Manila, forcing me to leave my comfort zone and “launch into the deep”. I received from those who are poor the best experience of personal transformation in this assignment, and I consider it one of the greatest blessings of my life as a Daughter of Charity.

The students in that government-run school, coming from poor families from different regions of the Philippines, are government scholars. In this public institution, everything was unfamiliar to me, and it was obvious that I was in the peripheries. Like a missionary in a foreign land, I was challenged to be strong in pursuing my mission to bring the Good News. Resourcefulness and creativity helped me in assembling a team of students from different departments to form a faith-community on a crusade to witness to Jesus Christ. They began to organize different programs and activities attended by Catholics and non-Catholics.

Each day was full of surprises. The youth, wanting to belong and to be acknowledged as persons, found in my presence security, purpose and meaning. We became a circle of friends with a common mission of building relationships and spreading God's mercy and compassion. This made me realize that the poor are capable of real solidarity and collaboration.

What a realization for me that the poor are a rich and powerful agent of change. We cannot do anything without them. It is their simplicity, humility and sense of service that transformed me: now, I live for others. Their generosity is helping me in my Vincentian vocation. This reminds me that the first Daughters of Charity came from the village folks and went to persons who are poor as if running to a fire.

Today, our “crusade” involves offering different programs and spiritual activities around the Word of God, the Eucharist, liturgical seasons and the place of the Virgin Mary. We can hold celebrations, formation sessions, retreats and recollections and offer counseling and spiritual direction. All of this aims for team-building, establishing a basic ecclesial community, visiting the poor in institutions and in their homes, deepening understanding of the sacraments, especially the sacrament of reconciliation, reflecting on vocation promotion, etc.

I thank the Little Company for the opportunity of being sent to these peripheries, which confirms my missionary vocation. I met Jesus Himself in the person of these disadvantaged youth who converted me to be ready and bold to go to where the neediest are found.

Sister Adelia Acuña BAUTISTA  
*Daughter of Charity*

## Province of Saint Louise-USA

### At the service of elderly homeless women

I belong to the Province of Saint Louise-USA and was missioned two years ago to El Paso, a city in the American Southwest in the state of Texas. El Paso is part of the borderland between Mexico and the United States. This region has its own culture. The border covers about 2,000 miles, and part of it is in El Paso, on one bank of the Rio Grande, with the vast Mexican city of Ciudad Juarez on the other bank.

When you fly on an airplane over Juarez and El Paso, it seems like one place. This brings to my mind that when you look with eyes of faith from above, there is no division, we are one with God, we are a church that builds bridges and not walls - and I mean especially the internal walls that I can build in my heart when I exclude my brother or sister because of race, nationality, religion, creed, etc. This is what precisely is happening now in our country.

I like to listen to the words of a song: "Open the eyes of heart, Lord, I want to see you..." Every day I see how people take many risks when they try to cross the border seeking freedom. Some make it over, others die on their way and others get caught and put in detention centers separated from their families. They are seeking freedom from war, violence and discrimination and hope to obtain asylum in a foreign country as well as a better life. Some come from Mexico or Southern and Central American countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras... Their fundamental rights to migrate or seek refuge are constantly violated, which goes against

the value of life and is a form of murder. We all have a right to live with dignity.

I am a volunteer at a homeless shelter for elderly and/or frail woman called "La Casa de las Abuelitas" which means "The House of Grandmothers". These women who have suffered all sorts of abuse and violence are fleeing their countries seeking a better life. Can you imagine how hard it must be for an elderly person to make this journey alone? Most of them are undocumented and have nowhere to go. Some carry many wounds from the past and have physical and/or mental limitations. Some have family, but it is as if they have no one. Others have family that from time to time pick them up but end up bringing them back after a day or two because they feel the women are a burden. We try to help them obtain legal status, but the bureaucracy of immigration law makes it very difficult, especially if they have some little thing on their criminal record.

I am 35 years vocation. Before, I was always worried and caught up in doing things. Now at the shelter, I just focus on being present for the poor I serve. I spend time with them, listen to them and advocate for their needs. I do coordinate with the volunteers. Two days of the week I take a turn for the staff preparing their breakfast, giving them their medication, helping them with chores and cooking lunch for them. These women have not only taught me some good Mexican recipes, but also and most importantly to better practice humility, simplicity and charity. I learn from them resilience, boldness, happiness with little and how they look out for each other even if they struggle with differences. We share our vulnerabilities and transform them together, but I must confess it is really they who have rescued me.

Pope Francis, in his message for the 51<sup>st</sup> World Day of Peace, gave us four ways to act with migrants and refugees: "welcome, protect, promote and integrate". For each word, here are four women who have transformed my life.

### Sisters' Testimonies

**Welcome:** Alicia is a 78-year-old with one son whom she has not seen for years; her family doesn't want to see her. At times Alicia becomes angry and aggressive, but when she gets over it, she expresses her need to be loved, saying, "Do you still love me?" I always respond, "More than yesterday." Despite her frailty, every morning she receives me with a smile and a hug.

**Protect:** Sylvia, 58, lost two of her children in a house fire set by her husband under the influence of alcohol. Sylvia got burned trying to save her children trapped in the flames; her feet have been deformed ever since by the burns. However, Sylvia is always willing to help. She teaches me every day that life goes on and hope never dies. When I say, "See you tomorrow," before returning home, she always responds in Spanish, "Primero Dios" which means "First God".

**Promote:** Olga is 63 and has required a wheelchair to get around for some years now. After a horrible car accident, she lost a leg and has major gaps in her memory. Clearly traumatized, she usually has a cheerful spirit and the courage to get around herself as much as possible. When she sees me, she always asks me if I have eaten something and offers me the little she has.

**Integrate:** We try to make "La Casa de las Abuelitas" a secure and a peaceful home for the women. For some it is extremely difficult to feel secure because they were molested and abused since childhood. Others, even if they have worked hard all their lives, have no income at all because they were always exploited. I always admire them when they say, "Thank you, Sister, for all that you do for us."

The shelter also tries to integrate them into society, but if we can't, they can stay with us as long as they want and need. Last year one of them died at 98 years old. No one reclaimed her, so her ashes are in the backyard of one of our shelters with other unclaimed homeless people. In a way, they thus continue to be part of "La Casa de las Abuelitas".

### Conclusion

In 1531, Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to a Mexican native in the Mountain of Tepeyac in a time of oppression and rejection for the Indians. Juan Diego, who saw her, was chosen by the Virgin Mary to pass on her message. Our Lady always comes to heal her children. Her apparition was and continues to be prophetic and missionary.

To her we commend so many that are suffering discrimination because of their race. The poor today teach us that, in the Church, miracles happen every day of their lives. Our Lady of Guadalupe, pray for them and pray for us.

Sister Migdalia FLORES  
*Daughter of Charity*



## Listening to Mother Guillemin Seeking the essential

**H**  
History  
of the  
Company

In a spirit of admiration and gratitude, we are remembering Sister Suzanne Guillemin during the fiftieth anniversary of her passage to the mission of heaven. A woman with a deep faith life, solidly rooted in Jesus Christ, she was a bright point of light showing the way for the Company and significantly influenced religious life and the life of the Church during the Second Vatican Council. Her perceptiveness led her to relate all things to God, with a calm and bold attitude, from a universal point of view and with an open and hopeful heart. Through her writings as well as some testimonies about her experiences, we can enter into her rich personality and benefit from the beauty of her life, which summarizes the wisdom of the Spirit. She continues to speak to us gently and tenderly, out of respect for the truth and fidelity to the charism, without compromising on its demands.

Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, brings out the importance of maintaining a hierarchy of values and seeking what is essential.<sup>1</sup> We know that the essential gives meaning to our lives and remains relevant over the course of time. The busy pace of life can make the many treasures of the grace that God grants us pass unnoticed: “Remember your Creator... before the pitcher is shattered at the spring” (Eccl 12:1, 6). Sister Suzanne Guillemin

1. Cf. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, 60

was able to seek out and live what is essential. She motivated and encouraged the Sisters and others with whom she had a relationship to discern real values in contrast to what was ephemeral and superficial.

Among the testimonies gathered after her death, Father Greco, SJ, an expert on the Council, said, “*I could appreciate the broadness of her perspective, her serenity, her wonderful balance. She was “solid”. Her great openness, her culture, and especially her sense of the supernatural accompanied by her undeniable charism gave her perfect control in confronting the most difficult problems of our times. With her, discussions always went deeper and to the essential.*”<sup>2</sup>

In her letter of January 1, 1965, Mother Guillemin emphasized the necessity to “*rediscover... our vocation... identify it in Christ and in the Church and distinguish the essential from the accidental.*”<sup>3</sup>

-First, I will point out some solid foundations on which she built her life of total gift of self and her mission.

-Secondly, I will bring out some essential aspects of her teaching.

-In the third section, I will suggest, based on her writings, some guidelines for seeking and living out what is essential. When offering her reflections to the Sisters, Mother Guillemin often used expressions that included herself: let us do, let us seek, let us savor, etc. This is a good way to help us understand her own life as a never-ending path of growth, renewal and constant openness to the Holy Spirit.

### I. LET OUR WILL BE FIRMLY ROOTED IN GOD<sup>4</sup>

We could wonder what is behind this simple Daughter of Charity who lived totally given to God, who was joyfully available, who promoted the renewal of the Company asked of it by the Council

2. Cf. *Echo of the Mother House*, May-June 1968

3. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1965

4. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of February 2, 1966

## Listening to Mother Guillemín

and who could humbly discern the signs of the times. It is very simple: a deep experience of God, a deep faith that she considered a spiritual treasure to tend carefully. She was able to maintain a real balance of her action and apostolic life.

Throughout her life, Sister Suzanne strove to remain attentive to God, firmly rooted in His will. Living in obedience is the sign of our belonging to God. She could do this thanks to a life of total gift of self, supported by some essential pillars.

### 1. The gift of being a daughter of God

During a repetition of prayer, Sister Suzanne said, “*We belonged to God even before we ourselves desired it!*”<sup>5</sup> What happiness to let Jesus take hold of us. Fully aware of belonging to God, she joyfully and thankfully lived her condition as a baptized Christian.

The secret of her bold and hopeful attitude was her trust in God, shown simply in everyday life and surfacing clearly at special moments, like June 11, 1962, when she was informed of her election as Superioress General. With humble calm, she expressed her feelings imbued with a spirit of faith and trusting surrender, recognizing herself as a simple instrument of God’s action and convinced that the Virgin Mary is the only Mother and true Superioress General of the Company.<sup>6</sup>

Father Slattery, Superior General at the time and a close collaborator with Mother Guillemín, appreciated her lively and deep faith, her trust in Divine Providence, her profound love for God, her devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and her veneration of the Holy Founders. He admired her charity, kindness and goodness that extended to all, especially to the members of the Company and to the poor.<sup>7</sup>

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5. Sister Suzanne Guillemín, Repetition of Prayer, 1967 (Volume II, p. 231)

6. Cf. *Echoes of the Company*, May-June, 2007, p. 220

7. Cf. *Echoes of the Company*, May-June, 2008, p. 254 (Letter of April 4, 1968)

Based on numerous testimonies, we see that Mother Guillemín had the gift of finding God spontaneously and simply in every person, especially in the least fortunate. The nurses of the International Catholic Committee of Nurses and Socio-medical Assistants (CICIAMS), with whom she worked extensively, said admiringly that she was one of those people who make God present wherever they go.<sup>8</sup>

### Fidelity to the Founders

Throughout her life, she was able to face the challenges of her time with a deep love of her vocation and joyful fidelity to the spirit of the Founders. Sister Lucie Rogé, who collaborated with her for fourteen years, stated, “*Above all and in all her entire being, she was a Daughter of Charity after the Founders’ own heart.*” Sister Lucie witnessed the depth and rigor with which Sister Suzanne lived out her vocation, down to the smallest details. Mother Guillemín had interest in everything that concerned evangelization, always opening herself to new possibilities. She was all in one a servant of Christ in the person of the poor, a woman of reflection and action, an organizer capable of accomplishing what she planned even with limited resources, the soul of the house attentive to the least details of domestic life and a great mystic.<sup>9</sup>

To respond to the Council’s call for reviving congregations’ specific spirit by returning to the source, Mother Guillemín spurred the Company’s renewal and adaptation to the demands of new times. She resolutely made great efforts to motivate the Sisters to assume the changes, emphasizing inner renewal. “*So must the Community [Company] refresh, renew, and purify itself in order to appear in the form that those who founded it three centuries ago [the Founders] would have given it today... Any attempt at renewal or of adaptation which would not have for starting point, the desire to emphasize the spirit of our origin, would be doomed to failure.*”<sup>10</sup>

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8. Cf. *Echo of the Mother House*, May 1968

9. Cf. *Sor Suzanne Guillemín, escritos y palabras*. Introduction, p. 7 and following.

10. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemín, Letter of January 1, 1965

### Listening to Mother Guillemin

Her apostolic zeal kept her at the ready, attentive to tragic events. In 1940, she opened the doors of her local community in the Saint Bernard de la Chapelle neighborhood to refugees from Belgium and northern France after the declaration of the Second World War. During the bombings that hit the neighborhood in 1944, she mobilized, with composure and boldness, the necessary resources to assist the wounded and evacuate children and the elderly. Nothing and no one could get in the way of her impulse for charity. The tears of her suffering brothers and sisters in the devastated neighborhood also streamed from her eyes.<sup>11</sup>

Two weeks after the conclusion of the 1962 General Assembly, Mother Guillemin hurried to visit the Sisters spread out over the five continents. In that year, the Company had about four thousand local communities in 65 countries. Her first visit was to Algeria. The country was immersed in political upheaval after years of war. Mother Guillemin comforted the Sisters, encouraged them and indicated appropriate steps for going forward.<sup>12</sup>

### **3. Love of and obedience to the Church: “sensus ecclesiae”**

Like Saint Louise, who considered herself doubly a daughter of the Church, Sister Suzanne deeply lived her belonging to the Church. She must have enjoyed recalling that the love of the Church led Louise de Marillac to ask the Holy Father for a plenary indulgence for all Daughters of Charity.<sup>13</sup>

The Church and the Company remain closely united, Mother Guillemin would say. We cannot separate our love for them or our belonging to them; we cannot go to one without the other. The Church gives us Christ and leads us to Christ. “*To enter actively into the [life] of the Church.... [is a] question of life or death*” (January 1, 1965). In her letters to the Sisters as well as in her conferences, she made constant reference to the documents and

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11. Cf. *Echoes of the Company*, January-February 2007, p. 77

12. Cf. *Echo of the Mother House*, July 1962

13. Cf. Saint Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, L. 179, June 21, 1647, p. 202-203. Saint Louise wished that this indulgence, applicable at death, would be for all Daughters of Charity

calls of the Church. It was very clear for her that we are sent and act in the name of Christ and of the Church.

Pope John XXIII convoked the Council in 1962, to study, among other questions, the most dramatic problems affecting humanity: hunger in the world, the scant respect for human rights in many countries, the unfair distribution of wealth, the arms race that endangered peace and stability of the whole world...

On September 22, 1964, Mother Guillemin was appointed an auditor, participating in the third and fourth conciliar sessions along with 23 other women, both Sisters and laity. It was an important event in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Church.

Mother Guillemin enthusiastically transmitted the message of the Council to the entire Company and spoke to the Sisters about her meeting with Pope John XXIII at various meetings and gatherings. One day the Holy Father, reading the chapter of the *Imitation of Christ* that describes the four means for finding peace, stressed two: preferring having less to having more and doing others' will before your own.<sup>14</sup> She continually called for religious life's conversion through study and assimilation of conciliar documents as a process that lasts a lifetime and can never be considered finished.

With her acute social awareness and her apostolic experience, she likewise contributed to the work of the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace, to which she was named an advisor. Concerning problems in active religious life, Mother Guillemin worked closely with the Bishops of France and Africa (on October 26, 1964, and in October 1965). She participated in the General Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG). Firmly convinced that it was necessary to emphasize the specific vocation of each institute in communion with the universal Church, she received an appointment as advisor for the Congregation for Religious on February 22, 1968. (Unfortunately, she would die soon afterward.)

### **4. Attention to the signs of the times**

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14. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of March 1965

### Listening to Mother Guillemin

The Church's relationship with the world was at the heart of the concerns of Pope John XXIII and of Vatican II. It is important to read the signs of the times in order to discern the action of the Holy Spirit in the evolution of history. Aware of socio-cultural changes, Mother Guillemin was open to major issues concerning human rights, the lay apostolate, work for justice, peace and the development of peoples, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue; she saw the need for a careful discernment in order to offer the most appropriate responses.

Father Jamet, Director General, shared her dreams and plans for implementation of the Council's demands. He discovered how she could combine her broad vision of the needs of her times and her love of Vincentian spirituality. Together, Father Jamet and Mother Guillemin were sure guides to help the Sisters through the new and sometimes tumultuous process of renewal.<sup>15</sup>

In 1964, responding to the Church's desire for *aggiornamento*, Mother Guillemin prepared the change in habit, encouraging the Sisters to live it in a spirit of faith, turning it into an offering to the Lord. On September 20, 1964, some 45,000 Daughters of Charity thus changed their traditional habit for a simpler one, better adapted to the times.<sup>16</sup>

Sister Suzanne often said, "God is in events"; this was how she understood what happened. In 1963, she had the joy of welcoming into the Company the Congregation of the Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Madagascar and the following year, the Marienschwester of Austria.<sup>17</sup>

In response to the Council's call to promote the lay apostolate in the Church, Mother Guillemin encouraged the Sisters to collaborate with lay people, study situations with them, welcome their suggestions and deal with problems together in a desire for truth and justice.<sup>18</sup>

15. Cf. *Echo of the Mother House*, May 1968

16. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of September 1964

17. Cf. *Echoes of the Company*, May-June 2007, p. 223-225

18. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1964

## II. LET US HAVE THE COURAGE TO SHINE THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL ON OUR LIVES<sup>19</sup>

### SOME ESSENTIAL POINTS OF SISTER SUZANNE GUILLEMIN'S TEACHING

"The sources of our thinking," Sister Suzanne asserted, "are in the Gospel, Sacred Scripture, the writings of the Founders and the documents of the Church. Saint Vincent and Saint Louise are teachers of the Gospel. They lived the Gospel and taught us it."<sup>20</sup>

#### **1. Rekindling the fire of our faith. Having a strong and vigorous faith<sup>21</sup>**

Faith had a central place in the life and mission of Sister Suzanne Guillemin. Seeped in the spirit of the Gospel, she was convinced that whoever believes goes forward with this light of the Gospel. Faith imbues our way of seeing, thinking and acting. She experienced the love of God the Father, placed her full trust in Him and surrendered herself completely to His plans. Throughout her life, she allowed the Lord to guide her even in situations where the paths were difficult. Relying on her solid faith, she drew strength from it to work tirelessly.

In 1963, when she was visiting the Sisters in Vietnam, she experienced the Providential hand of God in a serious incident that could have been deadly. With the horrors of war, travelling within the country was not without risk. The Visitatrix was accompanying Mother Guillemin through a dangerous area. Machine gun fire hit the vehicle, causing damage. A bag of bread intended for persons who were poor deflected the bullet that would have hit Mother Guillemin. The travelers continued on their way, giving thanks to God. It was a miracle!<sup>22</sup>

19. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1965

20. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Conference of August 14, 1967; Retreat of January 1965

21. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1968

22. Cf. *Echoes of the Company*, May-June 2007, p. 222-223



## Listening to Mother Guillemin

To celebrate the 19<sup>th</sup> centenary of the martyrdom of the Apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Rome, Pope Paul VI convoked a Year of Faith, from June 1967-June 1968. On this occasion, Mother Guillemin offered the Sisters a profound reflection on this theological virtue in her letter of January 1, 1968. *“Faith is the very base of all spiritual life, essentially of all religious life; it is the root of our contacts with God, and the source of that charity to which we aspire. On the strength and enlightenment of our faith depend the sincerity and the vitality of our personal conversion, and of that renewal of the Company... A humble, strong and tranquil faith should progressively invade our entire life, establishing between God and ourselves a permanent contact, making clear to us His plans concerning people, events and ourselves, and causing us to cling to His Divine Will, even though His ways seem sometimes disconcerting to us.”* *“On the strength and enlightenment of our faith,”* Sister Suzanne asserted, *“depend the sincerity and the vitality of our personal conversion, and of that renewal of the Company... Faith should be our guide along the road of charity, and that is why it is so important to examine ourselves on this essential point.”*<sup>23</sup>

Mother Guillemin often recalled that the gift of faith makes demands, especially that of its constant development. Progress in faith takes place primarily through the encounter with the Word of God, personal and community prayer and the celebration of the Sacraments. *“Prayer and the Sacraments are the permanent sources from which we must nourish our theological life... Life lived according to the faith is a continual combat which demands great courage”* to feed it regularly from the Gospel and to deepen it by following the Magisterium of the Church.<sup>24</sup>

We must not fail in the duty of *“witnessing to our faith. Faith has been given to [us]... and we are responsible to our brothers for the faith which must be extended to them by us.”* To remind us of our responsibility, Mother Guillemin would bring out the promise made by the Virgin Mary to Saint Catherine Labouré, *“God will make use of the two families to revive the faith.”* *“Let*

23. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1968

24. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1968

*us draw from this an important lesson for the present time: every Daughter of Charity must be, there where the Lord has placed her, a catechist of the faith... We can see clearly all the influences being brought to bear today on those around us, and we see how the face of the true God is veiled from them by the multitude of false gods adored by the modern world: the god of money, the god of well-being, the god of science... They all need to see and hear Jesus Christ by means of our words and our life... What more urgent service are [the poor] asking of us than that of handing on to them the gift of faith?”*<sup>25</sup>

## **2. Being what we are called to be; authenticity and consistency**<sup>26</sup>

In the Gospel, Jesus teaches with authority to seek and live in truth and reject any form of hypocrisy or keeping up appearances, any attitude of vanity and presumption. Mother Guillemin was always concerned with the question of vocational authenticity and consistency. *“Of what use would it be to us to know the Gospel... if the Gospel did not dominate our whole interior and exterior life? Do we not deceive ourselves a little upon the reality of our evangelical life?”*<sup>27</sup>

In her letter of January 1, 1966, she shared her deep vocational convictions and her great love for the Company. *“If God needed only mechanical beings who could provide a spectacle of activity without a soul and show actions devoid of religious value, He has but to make imitation Daughters of Charity who, under pretext of making necessary contacts with the world, become so identified with it that they are no different from worldlings, having adopted their ideas and their behavior... We are useful to the world and to the Church only if we are completely and authentically Daughters of Charity, Daughters of God.”*<sup>28</sup>

She stressed the responsibility to live the values of the Company, recalling what it should be in the Church, what should be

25. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1968

26. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of May 1963

27. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1964

28. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1966



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maintained or developed to recover the spirit of the Founders, especially our three specific virtues and the evangelical counsels. Each vow is an essential support for authentically living the vocation. *“No fidelity is possible without a permanent mastery of mind, of heart and of body. Asceticism of mind comprises the positive aspect of humility, prayer and the pursuit of truth in the light of faith as well as the negative aspect of renunciation of all that might sully or falsify our thinking.”*<sup>29</sup>

Supported by the teachings of the Founders, Mother Guillemin saw that humility is at the origin of all the good works that we do. Without humility, we cannot authentically live out our identity nor persevere in our vocation. Humility leads us to remain before God without growing discouraged due to our weaknesses, expecting everything from Him. *“To be humble is to be dissatisfied with one’s self, to recognize one’s failings, to be conscious of one’s weakness; it is to mistrust our own understanding and compare our ideas with those of wiser people; it is to believe in the grace which guides Superiors; it is knowing that we know nothing, that we can make mistakes, and that we have need of God.”*<sup>30</sup> Humility in service is the indispensable condition for being able to move away *“from a position of possession to a position of insertion, from a position of authority to a position of collaboration, from a complex of religious superiority to a sense of fraternity.”*<sup>31</sup>

Her spirit of faith led her to discover the need to do everything to be and not merely appear. *“An essential objective is achieving a harmony between vocation and life, seeking the glory of God above all else, attributing nothing to oneself and living service of Christ in the person of the poor with great purity of intention. Simplicity, which brings out the truth, relates to the lived experience of our identity. If we intend to please God in all that we do, if this intention is at the foundation of our lives, then God will be visible through our attitudes and behaviors.”*<sup>32</sup> *“The ability*

29. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of February 2, 1966

30. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1965

31. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Conference to the Bishops of France, October 26, 1964

32. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of August 1964

*to admit an error, a fault or a deficiency and not letting these opportunities to be sincere pass by are signs of humility and simplicity.”*<sup>33</sup> It is probable that, in her reflections about the spirit of our vocation, she had in mind a Sister who had written as her only will and testament, *“The good Lord has loved me, and I have done my best to love Him, too.”*<sup>34</sup>

### **3. Serving those who are poor, being charity and practicing it. Making God present to those who are poor**

The letter of February 2, 1968, written shortly before her death, was dedicated to the service of persons who are poor. This meditation offers responses to the many questions posed during the preparatory work for the General Assembly.

The thread running through her reflection is the Gospel verse *“You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself”* (Lk 10:27). She stated that we find the inspiration for serving those who are poor in Jesus since it is His own charity that impels us to care for our suffering brothers and sisters. The service of those who are poor is the concrete practice of love. *“I do not know whether or not there exists anywhere in the world a Daughter of Charity who unfortunately is able to dissociate her charitable action from the love that ought to animate it. One does not serve the poor by some mere gift of one’s care, by some aid or by teaching; that is self-evident. To any of these must be joined the gift of one’s whole self, in the fullness of one’s heart... It is our being, whole and entire, not merely our time and activity, that is committed to the service of Christ living in the poor.”*<sup>35</sup>

Mother Guillemin also reminded us of our need to ask for the grace of keeping a pure regard, able to discover the presence of Christ in the poor, an inexhaustible mystery. She stated that our mission

33. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of May 1963

34. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of March 1965, cf. Repetition of Prayer (Volume II, p. 236)

35. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of February 2, 1968

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is not managing charity but *being charity and practicing it*: in what we do and are, we are Christ and the Gospel in the depths of our being and in our acts. In this way, we transform ourselves into the Lord and allow Him to pass through us.<sup>36</sup>

The Lord expects of us that we not only carry out an activity or offer assistance, but that we make Him present wherever we are. *“It remains for us to humanize technology and make of it the instrument of the tenderness of Christ.”*<sup>37</sup> In the presence of a Daughter of Charity, all people should feel understood and respected and experience God’s love for them. Regarding our condition as servant, she said, *“We should be obsessed with this desire to bring God to the world, not in an exalted way that certainly would not be the good one nor that of Saint Vincent, but in a conscientious way. In other words, we should be aware of our duty, our obligation to be, in all our personal and interior life, so much and deeply real Daughters of Charity, daughters of the love of God, that people perceive God in us. Because He dwells there, those who come into contact with us and those whom we will see pass by could not help but have a sort of revelation of God.”* Perhaps without our realizing it, the thought of God may grow in the hearts of those who do not believe because we ourselves are filled with His presence.<sup>38</sup> *“There are people who have been attracted to God simply by seeing a Daughter of Charity pass by. There was a poor man who each day saw a Sister going out to serve the poor. She was a real Daughter of Charity, very simple, very modest, belonging deeply to God. When the Sister died, this man said, ‘What a misfortune! God will no longer pass by us!’”*<sup>39</sup>

After habit-taking, Sister Suzanne was welcomed into Saint Bernard de la Chapelle local community in the 18<sup>th</sup> district of Paris. In helping to raise the children there, she saw to the human and Christian formation of these young people with her typical enthusiasm. With the Children of Mary, she produced the Passion of the Savior and later a Nativity play, to the delight of children

36. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of September 1965

37. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of February 2, 1968

38. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Echo of the Mother House 1964

39. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Echo of the Mother House 1964

and adults.<sup>40</sup> Twenty years later, she became Sister Servant of Tourcoing in northern France where she built an authentic sisterly atmosphere and mobilized the Sisters in their response to the local community’s mission. She was later missioned to the Centrale in Paris where she organized, coordinated and favored the apostolic life of the Provinces, adapting to the new demands of the times. She was aware that *“not only the bodily strength and time that have been granted us belong to God, but also the resources of our mind, our will and our judgement.”*<sup>41</sup>

We will be recognized as real Daughters of Charity by the way we carry out our service. We run the risk of acting as mere professionals. *“Open your eyes to spiritual realities. Above all, do not to turn into mere professionals or technicians albeit in works of charity.”*<sup>42</sup> *“In these times, we are dismayed to see, that in addition to those who suffer from material poverty, the victims of injustice or those deprived of their freedom, those who are deprived of God are also poor. We are called to work in defense of life, in favor of peace, justice and solidarity. At the roots of our identity is the missionary spirit. This is why the Daughter of Charity should be concerned about the spiritual poverty of many of our contemporaries who do not know God and do not believe in Him.”*<sup>43</sup> *“We run the risk in these times of placing our trust in work, knowledge, technology and organization and not sufficiently taking into account spiritual values.”*<sup>44</sup> *“From the beginnings of the Company, we were sent to those who for one reason or another did not know God. The act of charity makes drawing closer to God possible.”*<sup>45</sup> *“In rendering God present to the world of the poor,” Pope Paul VI said, “you bear outstanding witness to Him, and you must spare nothing to make this witness visible to all. This is an essential mark of your fidelity, for this is what Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac wished.”*<sup>46</sup>

40. Cf. *Echoes of the Company*, January-February 2007, p. 76

41. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of February 2, 1968

42. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Conference of August 16, 1966

43. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of September 1964

44. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of September 1965

45. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of August 1964

46. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1966

**4. Living charity; incarnating in the world the charity of Christ in our community, apostolic and social relationships.**

Mother Guillemin frequently emphasized charity, the soul of the Company. She referred to the first community, as described in the Acts of the Apostles: a community of witnesses who pray and serve those in need, sharing everything and living in fraternal communion with one heart and soul. For her, charity is the soul of the Company. *“To live with love of God is primarily to have complacency in Him. Let us try to free ourselves a little from that instinctive egoism which too often brings us to God solely because we feel that we have need of Him... Let us know how to tell God of our love for Him... Let us love Him above all because He is God... The Psalms inspire us with words of praise, adoration and thanksgiving... Let us enter fully into these sentiments and may our days be filled with them... With what lightness do we pronounce these words and how many of or acts contradict the words we have said... The act of charity which we say mentally each morning at the beginning of our mediation, should not remain a dead letter, but it should transform and animate our entire life. ‘My God, I love you with all my heart and above all things.’... However, this love would be only illusive if it did not lead us to a perfect adherence to the Will of God... We wish to inspire God and our Superiors as to the manner of conducting us.”*<sup>47</sup>

Her meditations on the mystical Body of Christ indicate the sense of community life, its foundation and its demands. Everything should rest on authentic charity. The Lord calls us to unite ourselves to Him, and we should consider community life in this light. We can live together, alongside each other, each one expecting the other to contribute something, without establishing a community.<sup>48</sup>

The community is not a human and social team. What makes community is the communion of minds and hearts at the most spiritual level of their relationship with God. Each one of us is responsible for sharing the Lord’s spiritual and intellectual gifts to us. There is a sort of human respect that is an affliction of

47. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1967

48. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Conference of August 11, 1967

communities: we speak of everything except the Lord and our own spiritual life. The community, seat of charity, should be in communion with all the organizations of the Church around it. An open community, yes, but maintaining its own identity, preserving its specificity without blurring lines with the laity. Although we have difficulties in community life, each one of us should contribute with all her strength so that we do not fail in our witness of unity and charity. Above all, we need faith convictions. Her instructions to the Sister Servants (1963-1966) show her interest in community life. *“Charity is above all an inner reality. Sometimes there are friendly expressions without real charity, good manners that could be vanity and even deep-rooted pride. When someone approaches us, we may think that she is unbearable. Think of how God looks at us when we approach Him with our brokenness; He always looks at us as the Savior. We should ask ourselves what our attitudes are toward those who come to us.”*<sup>49</sup>

Concerning some practical aspects of community life, she explained article 15 of the decree *Perfectae Caritatis* in detail, inviting the Sisters to active and responsible participation in community, adding very practical advice: *“Do not wait for other to begin; do it! Have this sense of the body of community!”*<sup>50</sup>

She encouraged the Sisters to make their communities an oasis of peace thanks to mutual love, understanding, respect, acceptance of differences, dialogue, listening, etc. *“If our local communities are not at all havens of peace, it is because... [we] retain for our benefit alone the spiritual, intellectual or material good...; because pride makes us blind when we look at ourselves; [because] our heart, too much occupied with self, is not free enough for Charity to take possession of it... The practice of fraternal charity, rich in understanding, respect and support, will lead a Community little by little... to the life of union... which will make us witnesses to the Gospel and real workers for peace.”*<sup>51</sup>

49. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Conference of April 1966; Retreat of July 1966

50. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Conference of August 14, 1967

51. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1964

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These same attitudes should also imbue relationships outside the community. Dialogue matures in the habit of asking ourselves what Christ thinks about our brother or sister. Admiring the qualities and efforts of others and assuming their right intention rather than focusing on their weaknesses improve communication.<sup>52</sup>

### **5. Being poor with those who are poor, close in life and spirit**

Poverty is at the heart of the Gospel message. The Kingdom is first of all for those who are poor. Mother Guillemin also insisted on the role of poverty in the Company. However, “*Do we know what it means to be poor?*” she asked. “*The entire future of the Little Company depends upon the way in which we shall understand and live holy poverty... The love of poverty, the understanding of poverty... can only come from the contemplation of Christ’s poverty... We should endeavor to resemble the poor... Because of his poverty, a poor person has his independence curtailed; he must ask and wait, and often put up with inconveniences.*”<sup>53</sup>

She encouraged the Sisters to witness to poverty, recalling the need for mortification in our daily life, of being satisfied with what is necessary to live and serve, of placing everything in common, of accepting indifferently what we like and dislike, etc. “*Only a soul that is poor, whose entire confidence is in God, can peacefully and cheerfully welcome an idea contrary to her own, or see a carefully planned project set aside,*” and step aside when circumstances put her in the shadows without losing her peace and joy as a result.<sup>54</sup> “*The religious who is poor in spirit is someone who accepts sharing responsibilities with her professional colleagues, who can step aside to allow another religious or a lay collaborator to have influence... she who can accept ministry conditions where she finds herself - locations, people and situations - is poor in spirit.*”<sup>55</sup> “*Poverty is a long and hard struggle.*” Depending on God for everything is an attitude of a

52. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1965

53. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of February 2, 1965

54. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of February 2, 1965

55. Cf. Suzanne Guillemin, Problems for the Future of Religious Life (*Echoes of the Company*, July-August 2007, p. 319)

person who is truly poor. Growing in real poverty of spirit involves giving up all that is not Christ. “*[When] our soul is so full of earthly goods... there is no room for God. Let us strip ourselves of these things, and we shall possess God,*” Sister Suzanne concluded. Wealth ties us down and keeps us from being free.<sup>56</sup>

### **III. LET US WORK WITH ARDOR AND PERSEVERANCE AT OUR SPIRITUAL RENEWAL**<sup>57</sup>

#### SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR SEEKING THE ESSENTIAL AND LIVING FROM IT

Our spiritual life, like every human life, follows a rhythm of growth and development, and we are responsible for tending to it.<sup>58</sup> Along our path toward the Lord, we need to examine how we live and how we use our time as well as what goals we wish to reach. We must regularly take quality time for prayer, reflection and formation.<sup>59</sup>

#### **1. Renewing ourselves constantly in the spirit of our vocation**

Motivated by the Council, Mother Guillemin led the Company to a real process of renewal and revitalization.

Renewal is “*the recovery of that eager impetus which is the grace of beginnings; that freshness of feeling, that keen attraction for spiritual things, that ceaseless energy in seeking God which is the characteristic of spiritual youth and which we sometimes find so vividly alive in some of our old Sisters who have kept the enthusiasm of the years of their youth... To renew ourselves is also to strengthen our faith in the great principles of the Gospel on which we have based our life. To renew ourselves is, in fine, to make sure of the good and healthy state of our spiritual life; to examine its manifestations, its steadiness, its value, its connection*”

56. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of February 2, 1965

57. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1967

58. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, oral remarks, 1966

59. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of August 1964



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with our professional and apostolic activities, and to make provision for a discipline of life which will favor its development.”<sup>60</sup>

“Renewal will occur less by a change in the exterior form of the laws than thanks to the attitude taken in the interior of souls” in an attitude of obedience to Christ. This is the heart of our spiritual renewal. “If our lives are so tepid and apathetic, if sometimes we feel that joy has left us, it is because we have not placed our treasure where it ought to be; we have not grasped the true meaning of our life. We have not entered fully into the mystery of Christ.”<sup>61</sup>

In response to those who limited adaptation to its superficial aspects, Mother Guillemin asserted, “Conversion consists in readjusting what we are to what we should be. If we act exactly like the world, we will no longer have anything to offer it. Some speak of liberation, which turns the person into an object of worship and deprives the person of the light of moral principles. The idea of sin is changed, obedience attacked, and relaxation of standards assimilated to adaptation. It is better to compare adaptation with conversion, which does not happen once and for all. Adapting means recovering our specific spirit. Having an attitude of caprice and doing just anything is not adaptation but rather error. The Church does not need mediocre Daughters of Charity; the Church and the world need saints.”<sup>62</sup>

The renewal for which the Council called requires “an increase of fidelity to her own calling.”<sup>63</sup> Mother Guillemin considered this fidelity the most beautiful action of grace. “If we are faithful, if constantly and joyfully we renew our offering to God, we acknowledge... that it is good to serve the Lord, that we have not been mistaken in our expectations since we have given ourselves to Him; that it is truly only He Who is worthy of being loved and preferred above all else; that He has not deceived us, and that

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60. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1965; Letter of January 1, 1967

61. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1967

62. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of August 1964

63. Cf. Vatican II, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6

His love has followed and sustained us in all the circumstances of our life.”<sup>64</sup>

It is good for us to look back over our path of fidelity, giving thanks to God, asking His forgiveness and looking to the future calmly. Although we went through difficult times, we can say, “My Lord has not abandoned me.” It is a gift of God to accept ahead of time what He has in store for us. In this lies the perfection of the vow of obedience and the virtue of hope.

## 2. Taking great care for the means of formation

Mother Guillemin explained how necessary formation is for good service of those who are poor and maintaining unity in the Company while respecting diversity.

In our times, formation should maintain a specific style to energize us in our identity as servants and make us every more capable of humanizing technology. Every vocation journey is a process of growth and a path of conversion; our personal transformation affects community life and, as a result, the entire Company. Aware of the rapidity of societal changes, Mother Guillemin considered it necessary to safeguard the essential in our vocation, and the Sisters needed good formation in order to face the challenges of new realities. In 1966, she announced the establishment of the Juniorate in accordance with the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*. She then contributed to the preparation and organization of a Seminary for the Directresses of the 48 Seminaries in the Company as well as formation days for Sister Servants and Sisters of various ages in vocation.

In order to respond to problems and needs, we must discern what we should do, what we can do and how to do it. Mother Guillemin took advantage of every opportunity to invite the Sisters to develop their desire to accept the guidance of the Holy Spirit. “Nothing is more wonderful than those Sisters who have reached 80 or 90 years of age and maintain their attitude of seeking God

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64. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Repetition of prayer (Volume II, p. 234)



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*with the desire to improve themselves, to go further and not remain stuck where they are.*"<sup>65</sup>

### 3. Living from prayer, wanting to pray

Fifty years after her departure for heaven, Mother Guillemin continues to enlighten us about many aspects of our lives, including the role of prayer. *"We must want to pray!"* In a culture of speed, the excess of suffocating activities, our life should witness that we have time for what is spiritual and that we assign importance to personal and communal communication with God as the foundation of our life of gift of self. Where prayer life is lacking, we will find evasion, superficiality and existential weariness. We should be *"faithful to the practice of meditation in order to be able ultimately to live in a state of prayer"* as Saint Vincent asks of us. *"Without [prayer] there is no personal perfection possible, nor any valid apostolate."*<sup>66</sup>

Meditation is not an intellectual exercise but a relationship with the Lord, helping us to look at events with the eyes of faith. *"The time of meditation is the time in which we should consider with Our Lord in the Tabernacle if we have known how to recognize Him in our life."*<sup>67</sup> *"Our spiritual life... ought to be a permanent bond between those who are poor and God. Like Saint Vincent, we should bear as a burden of sorrow the spiritual miseries of our human brothers, who are so often hopelessly fettered by the material injustice that oppresses them... It means to pray in their stead... [praise Him], ask pardon, to expiate, to offer and to implore the mercy of God... The supreme prayer, the one that contains all other prayers, is... Holy Mass... the essential act of our spiritual service to the poor... It is communion with Christ and in Christ... We bring to our Mass of each day all those with whom God has associated us for the purpose of loving and serving Him... We gather up in our hands all... suffering humanity."*<sup>68</sup>

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65. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of August 1964

66. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1963

67. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1963

68. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of February 2, 1968

Mother Guillemin continually offered simple advice for living in a state of prayer: avoid missing prayer without a serious reason, overcoming routine to savor the beauty of the Our Father, Hail Mary and Creed. She also recommended meditating on the "name" of our vocation. *"Daughters of Charity, we originate in charity, not our poor little charity, but that of God. We are called to be witnesses, instruments of His love and charity for those who are poor. Those who suffer from any need have the certainty of finding in us the response not of a mere creature, which is always quite limited, but the response of God's charity. We should always be the manifestation of God's charity."*<sup>69</sup>

The Virgin Mary held a privileged place in her heart; she fervently loved the Mother of God, enthusiastically preparing feasts in her honor and emphasizing the value of praying the Holy Rosary, *"active contemplation perfectly in harmony with our [vocation]."* Through the rosary, *"our heart converses with Our Lady, offering her continually our acts of praise and love, telling her of all our troubles and those of our Brethren."*<sup>70</sup> She also enjoyed accompanying the Sisters in their pilgrimages to Chartres, such an emblematic place in the history of the Company.

Sister Rosa Maria MIRO  
Daughter of Charity

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69. Cf. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Retreat of September 1964

70. Sister Suzanne Guillemin, Letter of January 1, 1963

## Michel Antoine Le Gras The ups and downs of an only son

As a teenager, Louise de Marillac hoped to become a Capuchin nun, but her delicate health and perhaps other reasons<sup>1</sup> did not permit that. Thus, following her family's advice, she changed her vocational direction. On February 5, 1613, at the age of 21, she entered into an arranged marriage with Antoine Le Gras, who was Secretary to Queen Marie de Medici.<sup>2</sup>

Louise and Antoine had just one child, Michel Antoine, who was born on October 18, 1613. He was baptized the next day in the parish church of Saint Merry, near where his parents lived. René de Marillac, councilor of the king, was the godfather; Valence d'Attichy was the godmother. The early years of Louise and Antoine's marriage seem to have been reasonably happy, but with

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1. Louise discussed this matter with her spiritual director at that time, Fr. Champigny. Other reasons may have played a role in closing off her entry into the Capuchins; e.g., her illegitimacy, the small size of the dowry that she had. Cf. Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, *Histoire des Filles de la Charité* (Fayard, Paris, 2011), p. 75-76. Cf. also, Nicolas Gobillon, *The Life of Mademoiselle le Gras: Foundress and First Superior of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor* (London, 1984), p. 4. Gobillon states that Fr. Champigny told Louise that he thought that "God had some other design on her."

2. The marriage contract, signed a day earlier, was embarrassing to Louise, since it acknowledged her being the "fille naturelle" (illegitimate child) of her father, conceived and born of an unknown woman in the interval between his two marriages. The Marillacs described themselves as her "friends" rather than her family.

the onset of illness around 1621 or 1622, Antoine became difficult and had dark, angry moods.<sup>3</sup> Louise tended to blame herself for his sickness and her family troubles; she agonized over what she perceived as infidelity to promises made in the past. It is clear that by 1623 she was in deep distress and thought of leaving her 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."<sup>4</sup> She was advised to stay with Antoine and her son. She did. Antoine died after a long, painful illness on December 21, 1625.

For decades, their son Michel was a continual source of concern to his mother, as is evident in letters that she wrote about him to Vincent de Paul and to others like the Abbé de Vaux. In some ways, Michel's difficulties are understandable. During his early formative years, his father was in bad humor much of the time, suffering from insomnia and hemorrhages. His mother was distressed, sometimes depressed and continually over-protective.<sup>5</sup> Michel was slow to develop emotionally. His adolescence was prolonged and his maturation to responsible adulthood was much delayed.

When Michel was ten or eleven, he seemed listless, indecisive and not particularly bright.<sup>6</sup> Louise sought, without much success, to find people in Paris who might be able to guide him. She often turned to Vincent de Paul.

3. Cf. Gobillon, p. 29. Cf. also Benito Martínez, C.M., *La Señorita Le Gras y Santa Luisa de Marillac* (Editorial CEME, 1991), p. 12.

4. *Spiritual Writings*, p. 1, A. 2

5. Cf. Elizabeth Charpy, *Contre vents et marées. Louise de Marillac* (Paris, 1988), p. 70.

6. There are various opinions about Michel's intellectual capacity. According to most of Louise's biographers, he was not very intelligent. But others express a contrary opinion, seeing him as a young man who admired the intellectual abilities of the members of the Congregation of the Mission and who himself at the age of twenty-two obtained a licentiate in Philosophy. After leaving the Seminary of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, he went to the prestigious Jesuits' College of Clermont, where he took theology courses for several years

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When he was 13, Michel entered the Seminary of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, directed by Adrien Bourdoise, a friend of Vincent. There he came across as unstable. At times, he appeared inclined toward priesthood; at times, not. His difficulties while at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet caused Louise great anxiety. Her letters to Vincent de Paul at that time allude to the problem continually. Vincent's responses repeat the same theme: her anxiety as a mother should give way to confidence in God's love.<sup>7</sup> He wrote to her in February 1630:

*“Bon Dieu, Mademoiselle, how good it is to be God's child, since He loves those who have the happiness of possessing this quality in His sight even more tenderly than you love your child – although you have more affection for him than almost any mother I know! Oh well, we shall talk about it on your return. Meanwhile, be fully confident that she to whom Our Lord has given so much love for other people's children will merit Our Lord's special affection for her own child. Please live peacefully in this assurance, even, I say, in the joy of a heart that desires to conform itself completely to that of Our Lord.”*<sup>8</sup>

By 1633, when she and Vincent founded the Daughters of Charity, Louise had worked through a number of spiritual crises courageously. She was forty-two years of age and a mature woman who was very capable of wisely guiding others, like the newly arriving Sisters.<sup>9</sup> However, Michel continued to preoccupy her. He seemed unable to find his path in life.

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7. In the course of my research on this article, Cyrille de Nanteuil, C.M., sent me a very interesting, unpublished manuscript, entitled “Mademoiselle Le Gras, Mère Inquiète (1626-1658)”. It reviews all the correspondence and other documents touching on Louise and Michel.

8. CCD I, 69, L. 41

9. For some remarkable samples of Louise's sage advice to the sisters, cf. Louise Sullivan, D.C., “The Spirituality of Louise de Marillac: Moved by the Spirit to Charity,” *Vincentian Heritage* 12 (1991), p. 155-171; especially, p. 168.

At times, Vincent chided her with humor. “*Oh! Our Lord most certainly did well not to choose you for his mother.*”<sup>10</sup> At times, he took a more serious approach. “*But what shall we say about this excessive affection? I certainly think, Mademoiselle, that you have to try before God to rid yourself of it. All it does is weigh upon your spirit and deprive you of the peace Our Lord wishes in your heart and the detachment from love of everything that is not Himself. Do so, therefore, I beg you, and you will give honor to God Who is responsible for the sovereign and absolute care of your son, and Who wishes you to be concerned only in a dependent and tranquil way.*”<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes Michel seemed happy and moved forward toward becoming a priest.<sup>12</sup> At other times, he did not like the idea at all and said that he would receive the Sacrament of Orders only to please his mother. Actually, her attachment to the idea of his becoming a priest seemed much greater than his.

At one stage, Vincent encouraged Michel's vocation. At the same time, as he frequently did over the years, he urged Louise to be at peace about the matter. He even alluded to his own past with some irony:

*I received two of your letters or rather one in two parts, and saw and spoke to your son afterwards, without letting him be aware that I knew anything about what happened yesterday. Now, he told me very calmly and soberly that he had seen you and that you had been feeling somewhat ill. After that, I spoke to him about his vocation and whether he was persevering in it. He told me quite emphatically yes, that he was going to the Sorbonne for that purpose, and that he was determined to do well. That is why I thought there was no need to talk to him, nor even suspect what you fear. Therefore, please be at peace about it. And what is more, even if the things you fear come about, you should still adore*

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10. CCD I, 109, L. 69

11. CCD I, 67, L. 40

12. CCD I, 509, L. 359

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God's Providence in his regard and believe that the journey or the change of state would contribute to his salvation and perhaps to his greater perfection. Alas! Mademoiselle, if all those who have left their parents were in danger of being lost, where would I be? O well, remember that everything helps the predestined to reach their goal and that I am, in the love of Our Lord, Mademoiselle, your most humble servant.<sup>13</sup>

Around 1638, Michel reached the point of saying that he wished that both he and Louise were dead. She was stunned by his words. When he heard about what Michel had said, Vincent was very firm with Louise. He wrote to her on a Saturday morning:

*I received your note this morning after writing the above letter. In response, I shall tell you that your son told Monsieur de la Salle that he was entering into that state of life only because you wished it, that he wished he were dead<sup>14</sup> because of it, and that, in order to please you, he would take the Minor Orders. Now, is that a vocation? I think he would rather die than wish your death. Be that as it may, whether it springs from nature or from the devil, his will is not free to make a decision in a matter of such importance and you must not wish him to do so. Some time ago, a good young man in this city took the [sub-diaconate] in a similar state of mind and was not able to go on to the other Orders. Do you want to expose your son to the same danger? Allow God to lead him; He is more his Father than you are his mother and loves him more than you do. Allow Him to guide him. He will be quite capable of calling him some other time if He wants him, or of giving him the occupation which is proper for his salvation. I remember a priest, formerly in this house, who took Holy Orders in a troubled state of mind such as that. God knows where he is now!*

V.D.

13. CCD I, 509-510, L. 659

14. Vincent first wrote and then erased, "that he willed you were dead and himself as well."

*Please make your meditation on Zebedee[’s wife] and her sons. As she was ardently seeking the establishment of her children, Our Lord said to them: "You do not know what you are asking" (cf. Mt 20:20).<sup>15</sup>*

Michel's life over the next few years involved escapades that were quite excruciating for Louise.<sup>16</sup> In 1644, he ran off with the daughter of a wine merchant.<sup>17</sup> Deeply distressed, Louise sought them out and found them. She had the young woman placed with the "Daughters of the Madeleine",<sup>18</sup> a monastery founded for repentant women, and arranged for Michel to stay at Saint Lazare. The superior at the Daughters of the Madeleine soon advocated for the wine merchant's daughter's release, but Louise expressed considerable doubt, fearing that the young woman and Michel would quickly get back together.

The next year Michel got involved in a more mysterious scandalous matter and disappeared again. Louise's biographer, Elisabeth Charpy, writes, "What did her son do with the Count de Mauny, whom he received in his room at Saint-Lazare? What offense did he commit there?"<sup>19</sup> We do not know. Was there partying in his room? Drinking? Something sexual? In March 1646, Louise expressed her profound embarrassment to Vincent "that this son of mine perpetrated the offense at one of your houses."<sup>20</sup> In reparation for Michel's faults, Louise sent Vincent a painting of the Blessed Virgin to adorn an altar dedicated to Mary.<sup>21</sup>

During this period, Louise wrote to Vincent, "I am extremely anxious about my son... You are aware of how great my sorrow is and that my misgivings are considerable."<sup>22</sup> In another letter

15. CCD I, 506, L. 355

16. CCD II, 593, 630; III, 36

17. SW, p. 134; also, p. 130

18. SW, p. 132, L. 124

19. Charpy, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

20. SW, p. 140, L. 303B

21. SW, p. 140, L. 303B

22. SW, p. 122, L. 113



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about Michel, she pleaded, “*Help me to keep myself strongly attached to Jesus Crucified.*”<sup>23</sup> Louise was so distraught that, when she concluded this letter, she knelt in prayer before a crucifix and grieved. One of the sisters saw her and asked her what was wrong, to which Louise responded, “*I do not know where my son is!*”<sup>24</sup>

As Calvet notes rather drolly, “*We follow the history of Michel’s health, his studies, his whims, his dislikes, his good resolutions, his purges and bleedings, his temper and repentances.*” He was frequently thoughtless and seemingly carefree, “*not knowing what he wanted to do and as often as not content to do nothing. His mother supposed that all he needed was a spur and so she gave him incentives in plenty, especially when the time came for him to decide whether to take minor orders. At this point we share in a drama of passion, of conflicting desires. Monsieur Vincent endeavored to soothe both mother and son.*”<sup>25</sup> From his letters we get an idea of the strong feelings on all sides. The many letters Louise and Vincent exchanged during this period capture her pain and his support.

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23. *SW*, p. 135, L. 109

24. Sister María Teresa Barbero Echavarría, DC, “St. Louise de Marillac and Education”. This article was first published as “Santa Luisa de Marillac, ayer y hoy,” XXXIV Semana de Estudios Vicencianos (Editorial CEME, 2010). It can be found online, in English, at: [http://famvin.org/wiki/Saint\\_Louise\\_de\\_Marillac\\_and\\_Education](http://famvin.org/wiki/Saint_Louise_de_Marillac_and_Education)

25. Jean Calvet, *Saint Louise de Marillac, a portrait* (London, 1959), po. 93.

When Michel disappeared in 1644, she wrote to Vincent: *I am extremely anxious about my son, who arrived Saturday with the Comtesse de Maure.*<sup>26</sup> *She sent me word that she had given him on note on Sunday and that he was supposed to come here to see me. She does not know where he could be. What should I do? I do not know if he went to the Bons-Enfants. Should I send someone there or would you, Monsieur, be willing to go to the trouble of doing so? I mean simply to send someone to inquire if he has been there and what he has done. I most humbly beg you to do this for me for me for the love of God. You are aware of how great my sorrow is and that my misgivings are considerable. I remain, Monsieur, your most obedient and most grateful daughter and servant.*

*I have no one in the world to help me in this matter and I scarcely ever have except your Charity.*<sup>27</sup>

A son who desires his mother’s death as well as his own, who argues and exchanges harsh words with her, who runs off, recklessly in love, and then runs off again – one can imagine Louise’s emotions as she poured out her heart to Vincent. She found it impossible to detach herself from Michel and his future.

Louise continued to pray for Michel and made a pilgrimage to Chartres in order to place him in the hands of the Blessed Virgin. Two years later, she made an act of renunciation during which she tried to surrender her son completely, placing him in God’s

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26. The reference here is to Anne Doni d’Attichy, one of the daughters of Valence de Marillac and a cousin of Louise. She had married Louis de Rochechouart, Comte de Maure, who is known principally for his role in the Fronde. Her contemporaries considered the Comtesse de Maure “*infinitely witty, capable, learned, knowledgeable and extraordinary in all things. To be in her court, one had to be very polite, for well-bred people of both sexes came there from everywhere.*” In her old age she became extremely eccentric; concern for her health robbed her of all peace of mind. Cf. *CCD* I, notes p. 86 and p. 336.

27. *SW*, p. 122-123, L. 113



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hands: “I had a strong desire to ... abandon him entirely to God.”<sup>28</sup>

Vincent often attempted to help Michel. He spoke with him frequently and gave him lodging at Saint-Lazare. He had him named bailiff for the court proceedings there.<sup>29</sup> In August 1646, when Michel was seriously ill, Vincent sent two Daughters of Charity to care for him.<sup>30</sup>

Michel’s disappearances occurred shortly before Louise completed her will. At that time, she confided to Vincent, “My thought that I am very near death remains with me.”<sup>31</sup> But she lived for a decade and a half more and with creative energy. Toward the end of 1647, Vincent marveled at how energetic she continued to be, even though she had looked “dead” to him for the past ten years. “To see her, one would say she has just stepped out of the tomb because her body is so frail and her face so pale. However, God knows the strength of spirit she possesses.”<sup>32</sup>

In her Last Will and Testament, drawn up in 1645, Louise specified various legacies. Michel was to inherit whatever was not included in the particular bequests that she made. She also stated that after Michel’s death, if he should have no “legitimate offspring”, Vincent de Paul should give the remainder of her son’s legacy to those living in poverty.<sup>33</sup>

In the will, she wrote rather touchingly:

*The obligation of mother, together with the strong natural affection I have always had for my son, urges me to recommend him to remember the care which, for his salvation, the goodness of*

28. *SW*, p. 166, L. 151

29. *CCD* III, note p. 432

30. *SW*, p. 167, L. 151

31. *SW* p. 132, L. 124

32. *CCD* III, 257, L. 1002

33. Cf. Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., “Last Will and Testament of Saint Louise de Marillac,” *Vincentian Heritage* 15 (1994), p. 97-112.

*God had of his education, and to be grateful all his life, striving never to do anything contrary to God’s most holy will. To aid you in this, my son, take counsel in all your affairs of persons who are competent and who lead good lives. And that the advice you receive may be more useful to you, always ask it before forming your decision; otherwise you will not freely give your reasons for and against your proposals, and in that case you will deceive yourself.*

*I rely so much on the kindness of Monsieur Vincent that I am certain he will never refuse you his assistance in your wants, whether temporal or spiritual. You know how much we owe him, so I entreat you, should you ever be so happy as to have an opportunity to serve him or his company, you will do it with all your heart, remembering that you are particularly obliged to do so, not only in gratitude for all the benefits we have received from him but also for the service he renders to the holy Church, our mother. Do the same, and for the same reason, I beg you, for the gentlemen of the community of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet.*

*I beseech my son often to remember to pray for the soul of his father; to remember his good life, how he greatly feared God and was scrupulous in keeping himself irreproachable, especially recalling his patience in the great sufferings which were sent to him in his last years and in which he practiced very great virtue. O my son, remember to honor always the Marillacs, and to serve them willingly, should God ever send the opportunity to do so. Also, Monsieur the Count and Madame the Countess of Maure, and all those to whom I have the honor to be related. I know they will always retain their affection for me, and while you comport yourself as a man of honor they will never refuse you assistance in your wants, as I humbly supplicate them, remembering that their predecessors have always obliged us in that way, doing us the honor to acknowledge our relationship. What I say, my God, you know to be on account of the need my son, whom you have given me, may have, and not for vain glory.*

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(She further stipulated that Masses be celebrated for Michel after his death.)

*After my debts and legacies are paid, my son, as sole heir, shall enjoy my property. After his death, all I leave will pass to the poor; whom I constitute my heirs after him. In case he marries and has children, he and his children will enjoy it according to the law regulating substituted successions, but I intend and will that, should he have no legitimate offspring, the poor shall enjoy the little that God has given me, and for this purpose I humbly supplicate Monsieur Vincent de Paul, Founder and General of the Priests of the Mission, and after him his successors, to look after this disposition, so that should the substitution take place, they may collect the revenues and make the annual distribution, since I know that their principal duty is to labor for the salvation of the poor, for which I would willingly sacrifice my life.<sup>34</sup>*

In 1649, Madame de Romilly, a friend of Louise, suggested Made-moiselle Portier as a future wife for Michel.<sup>35</sup> A meeting was set up to discuss what the two families might bring to the marriage. Since Louise was away, Vincent de Paul represented her. Three days later, he sent her an account of the conversation.<sup>36</sup> Eventually, the marriage negotiations fell through.<sup>37</sup>

Things brightened up considerably in 1650. On January 13, Louise wrote to Sr. Jeanne Lepintre, Sister Servant at Nantes, “*I beg you and all our sisters to receive Holy Communion for the intention of my son, who, I believe, will receive the sacrament of matrimony soon. God has chosen for him someone who seems to be a most virtuous young woman who is not from Paris.*”<sup>38</sup>

34. *Documents*, p. 993-994, 996

35. *SW*, p. 297-298, L. 255

36. *CCD* III, 472-47, L. 1132

37. Cf. Charpy, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

38. *SW*, p. 314, L. 275

The marriage contract was a difficult matter. Michel had little income, whereas his intended bride was well off. Finally, her uncle, René-Michel de la Rochemaillet, agreed to cede to Michel his post as solicitor at the Mint and the revenue attached to it. The day before the wedding, the marriage contract was signed in the presence of Monsieur Vincent. Then, on January 18, 1650, the marriage of Michel Le Gras and Gabrielle Le Clerc, the daughter of Lord de Chennevières and the late Lady Musset de la Roche-maillet, was celebrated in Saint-Sauveur Church.<sup>39</sup>

But even after the marriage, Michel’s troubles were not over. There were subsequent wrangles within his wife’s family. Louise tried to serve as peacemaker.<sup>40</sup> In addition, Michel became deaf and had to give up his post as bailiff at Saint-Lazare.<sup>41</sup> It is clear from Louise’s correspondence that he was quite deaf for a good period of time.<sup>42</sup>

In October 1651, a daughter, Louise-Renée,<sup>43</sup> was born to Michel and Gabrielle. She became the apple of her grandmother’s eye. Sometimes Louise and the Daughters of Charity referred to her as “*la petite Sœur*”.<sup>44</sup> Apparently, Louise-Renée was quite ill in 1656 but recovered.<sup>45</sup> She was Michel and Gabrielle’s only child. After Michel’s marriage to Gabrielle and the birth of Louise-Renée, Louise added codicils to her will.

### Codicil of 1653

The first codicil, dated December 28, 1653, confirms Louise’s will of 1645 and makes a few changes because Michel, since his marriage, had begun to receive an annual income from Louise’s

39. *CCD* III, note p. 537

40. *SW*, p. 609, L. 591

41. *CCD* V, note p. 441

42. *SW*, p. 487, L. 456

43. Writers sometimes call her Renée-Louise.

44. *SW*, p. 388, L. 339

45. *SW*, p. 518, L. 489

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property. She says nothing about her daughter-in-law or granddaughter. She concludes by renewing her total gift of self to God, acknowledging that Providence has guided her in “every state of life,” and asking pardon for her faults.

*This day, feast of Holy Innocents, in the year 1653, I have reviewed my will, which I believe to be made in the best form in my power to bring about the best results. Accordingly, I confirm it and approve of all its articles and in as much as there has been a change in my son whom divine providence has destined for marriage and that by his contract I have given him 500 livres annual income, arranged in diverse deeds which have placed in his hands, and being assured by his own word, shortly before his marriage, that he will have no need of my little income – that it will be doing no wrong to him or his children if he does not receive it – I think I am bound in conscience to declare what follows as my desire in the execution of my will, desiring with all my heart that if God gives it any merit, his goodness may apply it for the salvation of all the family and to draw mercy on my poor soul.*

*First, as the gentlemen of the Mission shall not be obliged to have the masses mentioned in my will said until after the death of my son, he shall enjoy the thirty livres set apart for this purpose, which shall be collected from the rent for the city house which I reserve to myself. From this revenue also shall be taken all the other legacies which I have made, excepting the ten crowns of the money due to me in Auvergne.<sup>46</sup>*

### Codicil of 1656

Because Louise was very sick at the time, the codicil of May 11, 1656, is written in the third person by notaries. It reveals her satisfaction with her son’s family situation. She alters her will further so that Michel and his family can derive maximum benefit. Louise adds an interesting new bequest: that her only grandchild, Louise-Renée, should invite the poor of her parish to an annual

dinner and serve them herself as guests.

*Having reason to be satisfied with the conduct of Michel Antoine Le Gras, equerry, her only son, bailiff in Saint-Lazare and counselor in the Court of Exchange, and with the young lady Le Clerc, his wife, on account of the respect and tokens of affection which she had received from her since their marriage; being assured that, should said son die without children, his goods and those he might have from said lady, his mother, would be used for the benefit of the poor, she therefore has revoked and does revoke the substitution which she made of her property by aforesaid will for the benefit of the poor; wishing that her son above named enjoy the same and freely dispose of it as he pleases. She wills and ordains, according to said will and codicil, that the revenue which belonged to her on the city house be for the benefit of the gentlemen of the Mission, to whom she has made abundant legacies and gifts on the conditions named by said will and codicils, and that they commence to receive them and accomplish the conditions prescribed on the day of the decease of her son. Moreover, to give on the first dividend received, thirty livres for the poor of Saint-Laurent, her parish, and eighteen livres for the legacies which she had made by her will to her confessor, and still another eighteen livres to her granddaughter, the daughter of the above named son, during her life, to be employed in giving dinner to the poor of the parish in which she may live: at which dinner she will serve the poor guests. Wishing, moreover, the said will and codicils to be executed and begging Monsieur Vincent to be, with said son, executor of the present codicil.<sup>47</sup>*

In the years that followed, Louise-Renée, whom her grandmother loved so much, witnessed two significant events, which surely imprinted themselves indelibly on her memory.

She was present with her father and mother on February 4, 1660, when her grandmother received the last sacraments. On that occasion, Louise said to Michel, Gabrielle and Louise-Renée:

46. Documents, p. 998

47. Documents, p. 1000

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*“I pray the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, by the power he has given to fathers and mothers to bless their children, that he give you his blessing, detaching you from earthly things, and attaching you to him. Live as good Christians.”<sup>48</sup>*

Louise-Renée and her father<sup>49</sup> were also present on April 10, 1680, when her grandmother’s body was exhumed<sup>50</sup> and her remains were placed in a lead casket for preservation. That day Louise-Renée would have met Marguerite Chétif, Louise de Marillac’s immediate successor as Superioress General, and Mathurine Guérin who then held the office and did so on numerous occasions over a thirty-year period between 1667 and 1697. The witnesses testified, *“We found only bones, and they were of a color bordering on russet, and smooth, without any unpleasant odor at all.”<sup>51</sup>*

By marriage, Louise-Renée became Mademoiselle D’Ormilly. Seemingly, she died childless. We know that she was still alive in February 1696, when her father, Michel, died at the age of 83.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, we know nothing further about her.

Father Robert MALONEY, CM

48. Nicolas Gobillon, *op.cit.*, p. 61

49. Apparently, Gabrielle died sometime between 1660 and 1680.

50. Cf. Betty Ann McNeill, *“Spes Unica - Path to Glory. The Canonization Process of Louise de Marillac,” Vincentian Heritage*, 13 (1992), p. 114.

51. Elisabeth Charpy, “The Reliquary of Saint Louise de Marillac,” *Echoes of the Company* (December 1988), p. 457.

52. CCD V, note p. 441. In his diary, on February 20, 1696, the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, M. Edme Jolly, refers to the “sudden death” of Monsieur le Gras and states that he will pray for him and will send condolences to Mademoiselle, his daughter.

**“When, after a resistance more or less prolonged,  
we gave ourselves to God,  
we understood that  
the step we were taking,  
the commitment we were making,  
was nothing other than  
a commitment to pursue sanctity...  
Mary is the purest, the simplest,  
the most beautiful model for the life  
of every Daughter of Charity.  
Looking to her is enough to find the light,  
but we must look to her!”**

**Mother Suzanne Guillemin (1967)  
Cf. Instructions to the Sister Servants, Volume II, p. 81**

