

*E*choes of the Company



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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**The boldness
of holiness
for a new
missionary
momentum**

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2019 Lenten letter

Pilgrimage to the Heart: Spiritual Direction Sacrament of Reconciliation Faith Sharing

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Dear members of the worldwide Vincentian Family,

*Spiritual
Life*

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

As we enter the season of Lent, it is with overwhelming inner joy that we offer thanks to Jesus for this holy time of the year that helps us understand and see with the eyes of the heart His never-ending gestures of mercy toward us, toward others, toward the whole of humanity.

We continue our reflection from previous letters on the elements that shaped Vincentian spirituality and led Saint Vincent de Paul to become a Mystic of Charity. In the most recent Advent letter, we reflected on one of the principal founts from which Vincent drank as a Mystic of Charity: daily meditative prayer, daily meditation. **In this Lenten letter, I would like to reflect on other founts that made Saint Vincent into a Mystic of Charity: spiritual direction, the sacrament of Reconciliation, and faith sharing.**

Lent 2019

I invite all of us to make of this Lent a pilgrimage, a pilgrimage to the heart, to Jesus' heart and our own. If the two hearts meet, if the two hearts are filled with the same thoughts and desires, all the acts that follow, at any given moment of our lives, will be holy acts. Jesus will fill our hearts with His presence even in the smallest areas, and our hearts will become hearts according to His heart.

The archives in the Motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission in Paris contain two lists of conferences that Saint Vincent gave at Saint-Lazare. One, in the handwriting of René Alméras, Assistant at the Motherhouse and eventually Vincent's successor as Superior General, covers 1656 to 1660. The other, written down by Jean Gicquel, sub-Assistant, runs from 1650 to 1660. Neither list is complete, but the dates and topics indicated for the conferences in February 1652, 1653, 1654, and early March 1655 hint that Vincent spoke with his confreres each year at the beginning of Lent. A typical listing reads this way:

February 1652 – *Spending this Lent well.*

- *Our responsibility to spend this Lent more devoutly and more strictly than the others.*
- *What each man thinks it good to do in order to spend it well (CCD XII, 410).¹*

Vincent himself told us that every year the members of the Tuesday Conferences spoke of using Lent well (CCD XI, 80), and, though we can find only a few allusions to Lent in his conferences to the Daughters of Charity, it is hard to imagine that he did not discuss this topic with the sisters too.

1. *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume XII, p. 410. Future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials *CCD*, followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, *CCD XII, 410*.

Unfortunately, not even one of Vincent's Lenten conferences has come down to us. Scattered references appear in his letters and other writings, but most of what he said about Lent has disappeared. Mindful of Vincent's focus on "Spending this Lent well," we embark on a pilgrimage, a pilgrimage to the heart by reflecting on three important founts present in the Vincentian tradition and spirituality: spiritual direction, the sacrament of Reconciliation, and faith sharing.

- **Spiritual Direction**

Spiritual direction, as an aid on our life's journey, means speaking simply and confidentially with a spiritual director about our joys and sorrows, our daily struggles, and our successes and failures. Few things are more helpful in dealing with intense feelings, concerns, and problems than a "soul friend," who understands us and knows the pitfalls along the road on which we are walking. The struggles we experience regarding delicate matters, like sexuality, are often embarrassing, but "honest talk" with a mature director is usually the wisest first step in handling them.

Saint Vincent often spoke of the need for spiritual direction. He wrote to Sister Jeanne Lepeintre on 23 February 1650, "Spiritual direction is very useful. It is an occasion for advice in difficulties, encouragement in weariness, refuge in temptation, and strength in dejection; in a word, it is a source of well-being and consolation, if the director is truly charitable, prudent, and experienced" (*CCD* III, 603). Conversely, when problems remain bottled up too long, or when we attempt to deal with them in isolation, they can cause enormous personal confusion and eventually an explosion. Vincent was aware that, unfortunately, the practice of spiritual direction sometimes falls into disuse after ordination to the priesthood or the profession of vows, so he recommended it explicitly to those who came to Saint-Lazare for ordination retreats (*CCD* XIIIa, 159).

Lent 2019

The goal of speaking with a spiritual guide, expressed clearly since the time of the desert fathers and mothers, is simple: purity of heart. Knowing that, Vincent recommended spiritual direction at least several times a year (cf., *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission* X, 11), especially during times of retreat or a liturgical season like Lent.

As Saint Vincent de Paul so clearly urged all the confreres, as well as the sisters and, in general, all consecrated persons to have a spiritual director, a soul friend who is charitable, prudent, and experienced, I would like to encourage each member of the Vincentian Family, consecrated and lay, to have a spiritual director who will accompany him or her on his or her pilgrimage. Saint Vincent urged consecrated persons not to limit spiritual direction just to the initial formation period – postulancy, Internal Seminary, seminary – and then not continue it, but to make spiritual direction part of their spiritual journey through their entire life.

Each person and his or her spiritual director decide how often to meet for spiritual direction. Our Founder suggested at a least a few times a year. It could be every two or three months. In this regard, each of the different Congregations that belong to the Vincentian Family has its own Constitutions and Statues that speak concretely about spiritual direction and how to implement it in one's life.

- **The Sacrament of Reconciliation**

Pope Francis has placed tremendous emphasis on God's mercy. It is the first word in his motto: *Miserando atque Eligendo* (which we might loosely translate as "By God's merciful choice"). At a Sunday Angelus early in his papacy, he recommended to his listeners Cardinal Walter Kasper's book *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*.

Four centuries earlier, Saint Vincent too saw mercy as the core of the Good News. He described it as "... that beautiful virtue

of which it is said, ‘Mercy is the distinctive feature of God’” (CCD XI, 328).

The sacrament of Reconciliation is the celebration of God’s mercy toward each of us. It is a ritual dialogue that embodies: 1) God’s continual outreach to us in merciful forgiveness and 2) our recognition of how much we need God’s mercy. It promises peace to those who admit their sins humbly.

Speaking the truth in simplicity is essential in the sacrament of Reconciliation, just as it is in spiritual direction. We go to confession so that we might lay our sins simply before God, confident that God’s healing love comes to us through sacramental signs. The quality of our relationship with a confessor will depend largely upon the transparency with which we reveal ourselves. It is imperative, therefore, that such a relationship be characterized by free self-disclosure and by the avoidance of maintaining “hidden corners” in our lives.

Saint Vincent de Paul calls us to take part in the sacrament of Reconciliation frequently “so that we might achieve continual conversion and authenticity of vocation” (*Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission* 45, 2). In light of this encouragement, inspired by Jesus’ Spirit, I would like to invite each member of the Vincentian Family to meet Jesus personally in the sacrament of Reconciliation on a regular basis.

Many of you, or maybe most of you, do meet Jesus in the sacrament of Reconciliation at least every month or even more often. I would like to take this opportunity to urge those members of the Vincentian Family, who may not have this practice of meeting Jesus in the sacrament of Reconciliation on a regular basis, once a month, to respond to Jesus’ invitation, making it a regular part of their spiritual journey.

- **Faith Sharing**

Lent 2019

In Vincent's time, practices like repetition of prayer and chapter provided members of his Family with the opportunity to share their faith frequently and to admit their faults openly. Over time, unfortunately, those practices became stylized and routine, so that, gradually, they lost the spontaneity that made them come alive.

However, faith sharing has perennial value. Through the centuries, various models of faith sharing emerged. Different spiritual fathers imparted a method or steps to help us listen to God's Word, be open to receiving it into our hearts, and receive inspiration from the Spirit to understand what Jesus is telling us personally through a certain passage. Then, in all simplicity and humility, we share it with the group, the community. It is "holy ground" where we feel safe, not judged, not criticized, but heard, accepted as equals, as we are at that moment in our spiritual journey. In that kind of environment, in that kind of community, in those kinds of faith-sharing gatherings, we deepen our relationship with Jesus, ourselves, and others.

Vincent liked sharing to be frank and concrete. He stated:

It is a good practice to get down to particulars in humbling matters, when prudence allows us to admit them openly, because of the benefit we draw from this, overcoming our repugnance to reveal what pride might want to keep hidden. Saint Augustine himself made public the secret sins of his youth, writing a book about them so that the whole world might know all the foolishness of his errors and the excesses of his unruly conduct. And didn't that vessel of election, Saint Paul the great Apostle, who was ravished to heaven, admit that he had persecuted the Church? He even put it in writing, so that, even until the end of time, people might know that he had been a persecutor (CCD XI, 44).

Among other forms of faith sharing that you know or may practice in your own local communities or groups, let me suggest one model, called the "seven steps," an outline that our local communities or any other group can use:

Seven steps:

- We recall the Lord's presence.
Someone begins with a prayer or a song.
- We read a text.
Someone reads a biblical text, or a passage from Saint Vincent, or some other selection.
- We let God speak to us in silence.
We keep silence for a determined time and allow God to speak to us.
- We pick out words or phrases that strike us.
Each person picks out a word or a short phrase and says it aloud prayerfully, while the others keep silence.
- We share what we have heard in our hearts.
What touched us personally in the reading or in prayer?
- We discuss anything that individuals or the group as a whole may be called to do.
Is there something we may be called to do?
- We pray together.
We end with a prayer or a song.

Faith sharing is “holy ground,” where we take off our shoes to place ourselves before Jesus in simplicity and humility. Faith sharing is not a moment when, after listening to God’s Word and meditating on it, we give a short homily or a short exegesis of the text we have just read, taking the position of a teacher. Rather, faith sharing is about listening and meditating on what Jesus is saying to each of us personally, and then sharing it with the group, with our community.

Jesus is the Healer, and we are invited to become healers with our wounds according to His heart. It is possible to share our weaknesses, challenges, worries, and inner battles with a group, with the local community, when we do not feel threatened, judged, or rejected, but rather when we feel deep respect, acceptance, love, where we feel like true brothers and sisters, dear friends, helping each other on the path of life.

Lent 2019

In our communities of consecrated life, probably our usual way of being together is at the Eucharist, daily meditation, common prayers, meals, recreation, house meetings, etc. To those different moments, I would like to invite the different Congregations of consecrated life, as well as all the lay branches of the Vincentian Family, to reflect on the possibility of introducing a faith-sharing gathering according to the method most acceptable for each Congregation or group, choosing from among the many that you yourselves know or to which you will be introduced. The method that I have included in this Lenten letter is one model.

Each individual community will be able to reflect and decide how often to organize a faith-sharing meeting: once a week, once a month, a few times a year according to the liturgical calendar, or any other schedule the community or group might choose. Many communities and groups may already practice faith sharing. I extend this invitation and encouragement to those communities and groups where this practice is not yet present.

Together we embark on a “pilgrimage to the heart.” Deeper reflection on spiritual direction, the sacrament of Reconciliation, and faith sharing and their adoption as our regular “companions” assure us that our pilgrimage will attain its objective: to unite Jesus’ heart and our own heart in order to reach the heart of all people as more effective evangelizers of the Poor.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Father Tomaž MAVRIČ, CM
Superior General

Retreat day in preparation for Renovation

*You who love life;
you who desire happiness,
respond as a faithful servant of His loving will.
Respond as a faithful servant of the Gospel
and His peace.²*

Introduction

French-speakers have sung this refrain for years. Its few words can introduce us to a meditation on vocation. On this retreat day in preparation for the renewal of vows, let us call to mind our life, faith and vocation journeys!

The preparation and implementation of the Synod on young people in 2018 enriched our reflection on the theme of vocation. The final document, released in bookstores in January 2019, is titled “Young people, faith and vocational discernment”.³

The response to God’s call is eminently personal. Not only can no one hear the call for us, but no one can respond for us. Indeed, God does not expect our passive response in which we would be content to let Him use us. Samuel’s response, “*Speak, Lord, your*

2. Song: A 548, D. Rimaud – J. Berthier

3. Synod of Bishops, Final Document: Young people, faith and vocational discernment

Retreat day in preparation for Renovation

servant is listening,"⁴ reflects his total readiness to collaborate with God's grace.

"You who love life; you who desire happiness, listen to the voice of the Lord, attune the ear of your heart." Yes, we need to be attentive to different voices that we have in our hearts. Responding to our vocation and our mission involves entering into a spiritual combat, sorting out within us what might come from God and separating it from what does not come from Him.

Let us listen to these words from your Constitutions: *"In Scripture, when choosing someone for a special vocation, God promises to point out the way. Gradually, by the light of the Spirit, the path becomes clear."*⁵

Choosing to live our vocation faithfully is not always so easy. We know that discouragement can overcome us, and we can throw up our hands because we no longer see the meaning nor the purpose of life.

However, the true joy of those called consists in believing and experiencing that the Lord, for His part, is faithful and that with Him we can go forward, be disciples and witnesses of the love of God, open our hearts to great things and live everyday life as a grace God has given us. *"Sufficient for a day is its own evil"* (Mt 6:34).

Biblical passages on vocation are many and varied. Here are a few references.

1. Vocation of Abraham: Genesis 12:1-5
2. Vocation of Moses: Exodus 3:1-6, 9-12
3. Vocation of Samuel: 1 Samuel 3:1-10
4. Vocation of Elisha: 1 Kings 19:16-19, 21
5. Vocation of Isaiah: Isaiah 6:1-8

4. 1 S 3:10

5. C. 49

6. Vocation of Jeremiah: Jeremiah 1:4-9
7. Vocation: a consuming fire: Jeremiah 20:7-9
8. The ministry of reconciliation: 2 Corinthians 5:14-20
9. The loss of all things to gain Christ: Philippians 3:8-14
10. This honor is received when called by God: Hebrews 5:1-10
11. The harvest is abundant: Matthew 9:35-38
12. You are lacking in one thing: Mark 10:17-27
13. What those who have given up everything will receive: Mark 10:28-30
14. Fishers of men: Luke 5:1-11
15. Follow Jesus without reserve: Luke 9:57-62
16. Renouncing everyone and everything to follow Jesus: Luke 14:25-33
17. Call of the first disciples: John 1:35-51

WHAT IS VOCATION?⁶

- Conceiving of and living life in terms of vocation means living life as something received in order to give it again, as a gift to offer. It involves responding personally and freely to God's call with the gift of self. In His company, listening to His voice, the needs and cries of the world and the Word of God, we discern our vocation.

- Beyond the different layers of meaning in the word, "vocation," we must recognize that we do not build our life all alone but receive it from Someone Else who calls us into life and first gives it to us through our parents. From a Biblical perspective, we receive life from God who calls each one of us in a unique and particular way, but always within a people, with others.

The first call comes from our parents who give us a name.

- The first word that goes with "vocation" is the word, "call." Speaking about vocation means understanding that we are called

6. The rest of this conference (except the conclusion) is by N. Becquart - <https://questions.aleteia.org/articles/172/quest-ce-que-la-vocation/>

Retreat day in preparation for Renovation

subjects, anticipated subjects, or, to borrow the beautiful expression of the philosopher Paul Ricœur, “convoked subjects”.

- The first thing that is absolutely fundamental when a little baby is born is what he will be “called” by his parents, who give him a first name. He does not chose his own first name. This tells us that the first call that we receive really is a call to life: we receive life from our parents. We cannot live without others who, by calling us, make us grow in life.

Life is received from God who also calls us in a unique and particular way.

- As Christians, we discover and name the Triune God as the source of this life that exists before us and that we receive. We do not produce it by ourselves. The more aware we become that all that we are and all that we have is a gift received and the more we are grateful for the immensity of this gift received, the more we realize that we are made for giving what we have received.

- Fundamentally, our life comes from God and returns to God. God creates each one of us in a unique way and calls each one of us in a singular way. Each person has a particular call that fits him in with others. This is why our vocation always has a communal dimension, and we could say that the Church is the mother of vocations. Thus, discerning our vocation involves discovering, by and through others, God’s unique call for us and responding freely by giving ourselves.

- Vocation is a path of happiness that makes me happy by making others happy. Fundamentally, our vocation is a vocation to love – to love and be loved – that leads to happiness. For Christians, this call is a vocation to holiness and the elevated ideal of a life of service directed towards others. Baptized people have the vocation of following Christ as missionary disciples in different ways and states of life.

Our fundamental vocation is a vocation to love and happiness.

- Saint John Paul II reminded us that love is the profound fundamental vocation of every human being. We could describe vocation as a way of seeing life, of receiving it and of giving it because our lives are made for life, love and bearing fruit.

- As Christians, we ultimately realize that our vocation is a vocation to holiness. With the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis has given us a “handbook” for growing on the path of holiness. At the end, he writes, *“It is my hope that these pages will prove helpful by enabling the whole Church to devote herself anew to promoting the desire for holiness. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us a fervent longing to be saints for God’s greater glory, and let us encourage one another in this effort. In this way, we will share a happiness that the world will not be able to take from us.”*⁷

- As baptized Christians, we all are called to holiness, to live like Christ. Vocation is not a concept but first and foremost a path of life for ourselves and others. Our life is a vocation, that is, we are called to be, we are called to live, we are called to grow, we are called to love and serve, and we are called to live in love with others. This is our fundamental vocation.

- Our vocation to life in order to grow in humanity is primary. However, as Christians, we know that the path to the fullness of life following Christ’s example is a path of offering in the form of a Pascal movement, a passage through the passion to enter into the light of the resurrection.

Baptized Christians have a vocation to follow Christ in different ways and states of life.

7. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 177

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- By the Baptism that immerses us in the death and resurrection of Christ, we are configured to Christ, in other words, called to live like Christ and to follow Him more closely. Starting from this baptismal vocation, shared by all Christians, we can then speak about “vocation” as a life choice, a way of living in a state of life.

- This allows us to present the different paths of ‘vocation to marriage,’ ‘vocation to consecrated life,’ ‘vocation to the priesthood.’ Against the background of a single vocation from the fact of our Baptism, there are different ways, different vocations that find expression in different states of life.

- Vocation is certainly a great adventure that unfolds over the course of a lifetime. We could say many things about vocations, but, in the end, they remain a mystery of a life journey, tracing out our own path, listening to God and others. Vocation is a little like artwork: a path to invent with God starting from the concrete reality of our lives. Every vocation is an incarnation.

Vocation is a great adventure.

- Receiving life as a vocation to discern makes us go out farther and deeper beyond our initial ideas. It is a way of living in response to a call that precedes us, received from God, which we try to discern and translate in practical ways in our choices and way of life as a human and spiritual adventure. It is the adventure of life, freedom and love. Ultimately, it is the adventure of fuller life.

- It is a mystery because it is beyond us. We have never fully discovered, followed, translated into action or found the right words for our profound vocation. Our God is enigmatic. Our vocation is therefore a mystery, the very mystery of God. I am struck by this passage from *Gaudete et Exsultate*: “*At times, life presents great challenges. Through them, the Lord calls us anew to a conversion that can make his grace more evident in our lives, ‘in order that we may share his holiness’ (Heb 12:10). At other times, we need only*

*find a more perfect way of doing what we are already doing: 'There are inspirations that tend solely to perfect in an extraordinary way the ordinary things we do in life.' When Cardinal François-Xavier Nguyễn van Thuân was imprisoned, he refused to waste time waiting for the day he would be set free. Instead, he chose 'to live the present moment, filling it to the brim with love'. He decided: 'I will seize the occasions that present themselves every day; I will accomplish ordinary actions in an extraordinary way.'*⁸

- Therefore, day after day, Renovation after Renovation, Christ Himself shows us our profound vocation. He Himself had a vocation as a Son who received everything from His Father and in turn gave everything that He received. Christ, the Son of God, is the first to show us what vocation is since He responded perfectly to His vocation. All vocations are rooted in the vocation of Christ.

Vocation is also like artwork to invent with God.

- We sometimes hear young people discerning their vocation ask, "Why was I made? What is the purpose of my life?" Sometimes one will ask me, "How can I be sure about my vocation?" They expect a clear sign from heaven, as if it were something prepackaged, already precisely written into God's plan and that has to be deciphered.

- The path is not traced out in advance. God creates us as creatures in His image and likeness. He has not written our life out in advance, which would make us mere marionettes. We live our vocation by living our lives with God and inventing them with Him.

- It really is like artwork, realizing that we do not start from zero. I was born in a certain place and am made in a certain way, but I wish to build my life with God by opening up to conversion. I thus make choices by letting the Spirit guide me rather than my superficial desires that stifle my deep desire. Our vocation makes

8. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 17

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us free, always more free, and humanizes us.

- Our vocation should lead us to freedom, unity of life, love, mission and to finding our place and joy in responding to the needs of the world. Every vocation is a mission in a very incarnate reality to live our pilgrimage on earth with others and for others. Vocation leads to freedom, unity of life, love, life and mission; most especially, it leads us toward others.

- One of the signs that we are well on the way to our profound vocation is advancing toward inner unity, greater freedom and greater love. Vocation places us on a path that gives more life and bears fruit for others.

- This is why every vocation is a mission. It is something very important. In other words, we never receive this vocation primarily or solely for ourselves. We receive a vocation for others, for the service of the Church and the world.

- The sign that we are on the path of our vocation is precisely fruitfulness. We bear fruit for others. This path not only will make me happy but will make others happy.

The joy of vocation is responding to the needs of the world.

“A vocation is the place God calls you where your deepest gladness meets the world’s deepest hunger.”⁹

- Vocation is the place where our deepest joy responds to the world’s most urgent needs. My encounter with the cry or the suffering of the world will touch me and cause me a deep joy. We could think of Moses’ vocation. When God calls him, He says, *“I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry. [...] Now, go! I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt”* (Ex 3:1, 10).

9. Frederick Buechner, American theologian

- This is why, in order to discover and discern our vocation, it is very important to be attentive to God and His Word in prayer and the sacraments. This reminds us of Samuel's vocation in the Old Testament as well. He did not immediately recognize God's voice. It always takes place through listening, but listening does not just take place within ourselves, all alone, interiorly (sometimes we see this through the Word of God); it can also be listening to the movements and cries of the world.

Every vocation is thus a mission in a very incarnate reality.

- We could also look to the call of Peter or the other apostles. *"Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men"* (Mt 4:19). Christ calls the apostles to give them a share in His mission. Claire Monestès, foundress of the Xavarians, said, *"Every vocation is an incarnation."*

- We see this very well in Mary's response to the angel at the Annunciation (Lk 1:38). Mary is a model for us: she responded to the call of Christ and set off down God's path. At the Annunciation, Mary, shaped by the Word of God, said "yes" to welcoming the Word and made the Incarnation possible. A sign that we are following our vocation is that we are on a path of incarnation. This anchors us ever more deeply in the concrete reality of life.

- If the response to a call disconnects us from reality and makes us flee the world, something is not right because our vocation as Christians is to live here below in the complexity of the world even if our ultimate vocation is beyond. We come from God and Trinitarian love and are made to return to God. The Church tells us that life on this earth is a pilgrimage; the Church is on pilgrimage on the earth.

- It is a whole process. We must see this call as something that sets us in movement. We see this, for that matter, after the Annunciation. What did Mary do when she said yes? She set off right away

Retreat day in preparation for Renovation

to reach out to her pregnant cousin Elizabeth (Lk 1:39). Vocation puts us on the road; it always sets us in motion towards others and simultaneously deepens our relationship with God and with others.

- The first criterion of vocational discernment is a greater love of God that leads to loving our neighbor more. Loving God means loving others. Loving and serving God means loving and serving others.

- The vocation of a disciple of Christ is fundamentally and structurally ecclesial and communal. This is why we also need the mediation of the Church to continue to discern our vocation path.

- Finally, living life as a vocation is a way of seeing life, understanding ourselves in God and acting in response to a call in an attitude of gift inspired by gratitude and thanksgiving. It is also a way of understanding ourselves as subjects, people convoked, called to respond to Another, whatever the response.

Conclusion

“Among all the biblical figures who illustrate the mystery of vocation, we should contemplate in a particular way the figure of Mary. This young woman, with her “yes”, made the Incarnation possible, thereby creating the conditions for every other ecclesial vocation. She remains the first disciple of Jesus and the model of all discipleship. In her pilgrimage of faith, Mary followed her Son to the foot of the Cross and after the Resurrection she accompanied the nascent Church to Pentecost. As mother and merciful teacher she continues to accompany the Church and to implore the Spirit who gives life to every vocation. Clearly, then, the “Marian principle” has an eminent role and illuminates the whole life of the Church in its various manifestations. Alongside the Virgin, the figure of Joseph her spouse constitutes another exemplary model of vocational response.”¹⁰

10. Synod of Bishops, Final Document: Young people, faith and vocational discernment, 83

- On this retreat day, let us ask the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph to help us to “*care for our vocation.*”

- Vocation, in the context of Christian faith, is a unique and personal call of God inscribed in each person created by God. Each human person receives it in order to give a response in freedom and love for his or her own happiness. Each person is thus mysteriously called by God to respond to God by giving his or her life. In that way, we participate in the Paschal mystery of Jesus, a passage toward fullness of life. Yes, “*God promises to point out the way. Gradually, by the light of the Spirit, the path becomes clear.*”¹¹

- Let us conclude with these encouraging words from Pope Francis. “*Do not be afraid to set your sights higher, to allow yourself to be loved and liberated by God. Do not be afraid to let yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit. Holiness does not make you less human, since it is an encounter between your weakness and the power of God’s grace. For in the words of León Bloy, when all is said and done, ‘the only great tragedy in life, is not to become a saint’.*”¹²

Listen to the voice of the Lord, attune the ear of your heart.

*Whoever you are, your God calls you; whoever you are,
He is your Father.*

You, the fire of truth; You, the wind of freedom;

You, the joy of the gift of life, come Spirit of God.

Listen to the voice of the Lord, attune the ear of your heart!

Father Bernard SCHOEPFER, CM
Director General

11. C. 49

12. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 34

Letter of March 25, 2019

Dear Sisters,

*Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have
no relations with a man?”*

*And the angel said to her in reply, “The Holy Spirit will come
upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow
you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy,
the Son of God...”*

(Luke 1:34-35)

On this day when we have the grace once again of renewing our vows of service of those who are poor, poverty, chastity, and obedience, I take delight in reaching out to you to wish you a very happy feast of the Annunciation of the Lord and to give thanks with you for this gift from God. This year, the two verses above from Saint Luke’s Gospel held my attention.

The question that the Virgin Mary asks the angel shows her humanity. Mary is very much present to the reality of her situation and, in all simplicity, seeks to understand how the extraordinary announcement that God’s messenger has just made – that of giving birth to the Savior of the world – will come to pass. We, too, before pronouncing our “yes”, may have said, “Lord, how will this happen this year?”

In response, the angel invites the Virgin Mary to look further, “higher”, and to trust in the action of the Holy Spirit. We are called to this same humility and trust: to turn ourselves over completely to the action of the Holy Spirit who alone can help

us fulfill God's will and correspond each day more fully to His desire for us. Let us ask the Virgin Mary to obtain for us the grace of this total surrender to the Lord's will: "*May it be done to me according to your word*" (Luke 1:38).

As we begin writing with the Lord a new page of our life as Daughters of Charity, I give thanks to Him for all that has developed in the Company over the last year and for your generosity and availability. I am thinking especially of new implantations and services that have come to be. With the boldness of charity, a good number of Provinces have opened local communities or implemented new projects in response to the challenges of the Inter-Assemblies Document. Thanks to Interprovincial collaboration among the five Provinces of Spain, a new service began in Melilla, a Spanish enclave on the coast of Morocco, a "critical place of immigration", and collaboration between the Provinces of South India and North India made it possible for us to resume our presence in Fiji in June 2018. In January 2019, the Province of St. Louise de Marillac-Asia opened a local community in Papua-New Guinea. Other new missions were established in regions within the boundaries of Provinces or in dioceses where we had not yet been present. I encourage you to pursue the revision of works and congratulate you for your discernment, your accompaniment of local communities that are closing with a concern for continuing the works, as well as for your boldness in simultaneously opening new local communities in other places in order to be ever more consistent with our charism. Let us ask the Lord to make all these little seeds of hope grow!

At the Mother House, about thirty English-speaking Sisters ministering to youth reflected and worked for two weeks this January on the theme of the Synod of Bishops, "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment". In February, twenty Sisters from the Province of St. Louise de Marillac-Asia were blessed to have their annual retreat here, followed by pilgrimages in the footsteps of the Founders.

Letter of March 25, 2019

The international retreat, in which 69 Sisters participated, just concluded, and we are preparing to welcome the 75 Sisters from 11-24 years vocation for the session for spiritual and Vincentian revitalization, which will take place April 29 - May 13. Let us hold this gathering in prayer such that it might be for all the participants a privileged time of renewal in their vocation that gives them new enthusiasm for the service of persons who are poor!

With the help of the Holy Spirit, the General Council is continuing preparations for the Assemblies, which are fast approaching. In a few weeks, after the Superior General's official convocation of the 2021 General Assembly, the Visitatrixes will receive all the necessary documents for beginning the process of the Domestic and Provincial Assemblies. Starting now, let us prepare our hearts to experience this graced time in a spirit of faith and communion.

In these painful moments for the Church, I invite you to intensify your prayer for Pope Francis and *“that the Church may return to being absolutely credible and trustworthy in her mission of service and education for the little ones, according to Jesus’ teaching”* (Pope Francis, Angelus of February 24, 2019).

Finally, I would like to repeat how touched and encouraged I am by all your messages and your prayers for my health. I continue my prescribed medical treatment. Please keep praying for me and for the entire Company.

Once again, Happy Feast of the Annunciation, and let us fervently continue our journey toward Easter. Be assured that I bring each one of you and all your intentions “to the foot of the altar” through the powerful intercession of the Virgin Mary.

Most affectionately,

Sister Kathleen APPLER
Daughter of Charity

Conference on the Solemnity of the Annunciation and the Renovation of vows

Motherhouse, March 25, 2019

Good morning, Sister Kathleen, Sisters, and Father Bernard. It is good to be with you again this year for the Solemnity of the Annunciation of Our Lord and the feast of the Renovation of your vows.

Today, I would like to reflect on our existential and material peripheries. In doing so, let me first look back at the two points we contemplated at last year's meeting on this occasion. These were:

- 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 and spirituality, and
- to renew and deepen the “Culture of Vocations.”

In order to accomplish the former, I suggested that we

- Revive the veneration and invocation of the Saints, Blessed, and Servants of God by starting from their place of origin.
- Organize meetings, pilgrimages, prayer services, and media presentations to make them known.
- Pray incessantly to ask Jesus for the grace that all the Blessed and Servants of God or possible new candidates for sainthood be canonized by the Church.

As I mentioned at that time, Saint Vincent reminded us 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*

*The Solemnity of the Annunciation and the Renovation of vows
of good works until the end. We should thank God for all that.*¹

Likewise, as I said in my talk last year, Saint Louise encouraged the Sisters to greet the patron saints of the churches they passed when traveling. In addition, she had the practice of giving them holy cards at the beginning of each year with different saints to serve as their guardians: *“I am sending you your Holy Protectors of the year, begging Our Lord to give you the blessings that Monsieur Vincent, our Most Honored Father, wished the entire Company to receive with the distribution of these pictures. He also bestowed upon them a most devout blessing in order to implore the help of these good saints for you, and to sanctify all of you.”*²

In order to undertake the second point, I recommended that we

- Unite all our efforts at showing the children, youth, and adults of today, who are caught in the “Anti-Culture of Vocations,” the beauty, attractiveness, and life-giving meaning of responding with a resounding “Yes” to Jesus’ call.
- Promote an environment in which all people can discover and rediscover their reason for being on this earth, the meaning of life, the mission they are called to fulfill, the call they are invited to answer.

Neither Saint Vincent nor Saint Louise spoke directly about vocational promotion, although each recognized the need to witness fidelity in living out one’s own vocation, as well as the need to discern carefully the motives prompting a young person to offer himself or herself to God. Saint Vincent wrote the superior in Warsaw, as follows: *“Ask Him for this grace for all of us so that we may constantly sigh for, and aspire after, the things that are above, and that we may proceed in that direction through the works of our vocation so as to draw others with us to heaven.”*³

1. CCD XI, 382; Conference 175, Repetition of Prayer, November 1, 1657

2. SW, 412; L. 360B, (To Sister Cécile Angiboust) at Angers, February 8, 1653

3. CCD VIII, 325; Letter 3111 to Guillaume Desdames, Superior in Warsaw, April 2, 1660

In writing to the Abbé de Vaux, Saint Louise said, “*Sister Madeleine [Mongert] told me that some girls have presented themselves for the service of the poor. I very humbly beg you, Monsieur, to look carefully into their vocation and their emotional stability. Then, if you find them suitable, they will be most welcome. They must be strong and healthy.*”⁴

So now, we ask ourselves, how did we do in this past year in these two areas, taking into consideration our existential and material peripheries? How did we manage to go out from within ourselves toward others in these two areas? Did we work at promoting devotion to the Saints and Blessed of the Vincentian Family? Did we try to promote a culture of vocations wherever we live and serve?

I was pleased to note two initiatives that took place concerning these points.

Firstly, I was tremendously happy to see the exposition prepared here at the Motherhouse on the Saints, Blessed, and Servants of God. By sharing the icons, examples of our charism and spirituality, with those on the peripheries, we are extending ourselves toward them. This, of course, is not limited to one or two efforts, but must be an ongoing outreach in both areas, our Blessed, Saints, and Servants of God, as well as promoting the culture of vocations by way of vocation ministry.

Secondly, regarding the latter, it was wonderful to hear about the workshop held in January for Sisters from some of the English-speaking Provinces who work with young people or serve in vocation ministry. I understand it was very helpful to the participants. I trust that Provinces of other languages will join forces in a similar way to form Sisters in these most important ministries. In light of reflecting on existential and material peripheries, I would like to mention the Vincentian Family Homeless Alliance. One of its initiatives is the “13 Houses” project to be carried out in all 156 countries where the Vincentian Family currently is present in the world. As I am sure you are aware or can guess,

4. *SW*, 80; L. 65 To Monsieur L’Abbé de Vaux (August 1642)

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the project's name "13 Houses" comes from the 13 houses (Treize Maisons) that Saint Vincent had built for the foundlings in 1645 on rue du Faubourg-Saint-Denis.

The 13 Houses Project is in process, and we all are learning from it, but it offers a wonderful opportunity to go out to the existential and material peripheries together as Family. As a movement, we are able to build more and more houses for the homeless, refugees, and persons who live in shacks, places that cannot rightly be called homes. I hope to touch on this theme in my letter to the entire Vincentian Family for the Feast of Saint Vincent.

As you may recall, the development of the Vincentian Family as we know it today began under one of my predecessors, Father Robert Maloney. On a visit to Mexico, he was struck by the effects on service to the poor of the collaboration among the various branches present in that country and foresaw what this could mean if extended to other countries in which Saint Vincent's followers labor.

Although the intuition of Father Maloney is of relatively recent origin, during his lifetime, Saint Vincent established such collaboration among his various foundations. You probably know better than I do that some of the first Daughters of Charity worked under the direction of the Ladies of the Confraternities. The Ladies themselves supported several of the works of the Sisters, particularly that of the Foundlings. The members of the Congregation of the Mission established Confraternities of Charity in all the areas where they preached missions. Brother Jean Parre served to carry the donations, both in money and materials, from the Ladies to the regions of Picardy and Champagne devastated by the revolt known as the Fronde. Those are just a few examples of such collaboration.

In the spirit of continuing that collaboration today, I want to share with you news of the upcoming first meeting of all the international leaders of the 150 branches of the Vincentian Family. It will be held in Rome January 7-12, 2020. The staff of

the Vincentian Family Office in Philadelphia has spent the past year visiting and establishing personal contact with these leaders throughout the world.

At that meeting next January, we hope to look back at the beginning of the tree that is our Vincentian Family, at its history, and then reflect on and share about its future. Today, that tree has 150 branches. The Family into which it has grown is being shaped gradually into a Movement. In view of going out into the existential and material peripheries, how can we keep forming the Family ever more as a Family reaching out into the realities of today's world?

Vincent always sought to consider the whole person, spiritually, physically, psychologically, etc. Therefore, we, as the Vincentian Family, are present in the fields of evangelization, formation, pastoral ministry, education, health, and social services... Given our background in these vital areas, can we organize ourselves more efficiently in the near and long-range future to provide immediate response to natural disasters, war, disease, etc.? Can we collaborate with other groups that also provide such assistance in time of catastrophes? Some are better prepared than we are and could share their knowledge and skills with us.

I ask you to keep these two initiatives in your prayer that they may stimulate us to leave our comfort and go out to the existential and material peripheries, so as to be of even greater service to the poor and destitute of our day. May Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, Saint Vincent, Saint Louise, and all the Saints, Blessed, and Servants of God of the Vincentian Family intercede for us, obtaining for us an abundance of grace during this Lenten season.

Happy Feast to all of you!

Father Tomaž MAVRIČ, CM
Superior General

Province of Vietnam

Summer Mission of Joy

N

News
from the
Provinces

“Be a Company that goes forth” (IAD, p. 6)

As the Constitutions say, “*Each Daughter of Charity is missionary by nature*” (cf. C. 25). Her service, whatever it may be, is the means for her to carry out the mission. For the mission to be dynamic, each Sister must renew her passion for Christ and for those who are poor and boldly live out affective and effective love. According to the teaching of the Church, the Company should “go forth” (cf. IAD, p. 5-6) and “*go forth from [its] own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel*” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 20).

Since 1995, Sisters have dedicated two summer months to the “Summer Mission of Joy”, which consists in going to the most remote locations where there are not enough priests and consecrated men and women to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel. When the Sisters set off in the summer for this itinerant mission, those who remain in their local communities accept the extra work that must be done there.

In honor of the 90th anniversary of the presence of Daughters of Charity in Vietnam, the 30th anniversary of the canonization of the Vietnamese martyrs and the beginning of the fifth century of the Vincentian charism, the Sisters strive to respond to the recom-

mendations of the Superior General, Father Tomaž Mavrič. *“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 and spirituality”* (letter of January 25, 2018) and renew and develop the culture of vocations, as indicated in our Provincial Plan (p. 13).

The Summer Mission of Joy

After three intense days to re-energize themselves physically and spiritually, the sixty-nine Sisters set off at three o'clock in the morning for eight dioceses and thirty-two different locations. Forty-five of them go in the same bus. In their happiness, they forget about carsickness. It really is a big itinerant community that shares times of prayer, meals, relaxation and rest.

After two days of travel, they separate to go to the destination that God had in mind for them, and each one of them accepts, with the availability of a true servant, the place assigned them. Once they arrive in the local parish, they begin cleaning the house and making the place more welcoming, knowing that youth and adults are waiting for them. Some Sisters are housed in the homes of renters who have gone far away, even abroad, for work. In this case, they have good housing, and the owners know that their houses will be kept up well. Other Sisters live in nearby parishes two to eight kilometers away with less amenities. However, the priest and the parish council always welcome them well, and they receive what they need for cooking. God provides them with manna and quails through the intermediary of the parishioners. When they return from their pastoral service, they find vegetables, meat, fish, rice, fruit, etc. at their doorstep.

This simple life style among the people facilitates encounters between the Sisters and the people. Children as well as adults can come to the Sisters' house when they want, especially in the evening. The Sisters' house is a place for children and adults to meet. There are discussions, study of the catechism and planning

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for the next day's visits.

During the two months of the summer mission, the Sisters serve in the following ways.

- Catechesis for beginners, human formation, First Communion, Confirmation, Catechumenate, marriage preparation and training of catechists.
- Home visits: family ministry, new evangelization and bringing Communion to people in their homes or at the hospital.
- Marian ministry, especially on July 18, the anniversary of the first apparition of Mary to Saint Catherine Labouré.
- Vocation ministry and ministry with the Marian Youth, especially during two large gatherings called the "Young People Special". Two hundred fifty to four hundred fifty youth participate in each of these gatherings. Their theme is "*Following Jesus the Teacher, in faith, love and trusting surrender, imitate the Vietnamese martyrs and the Saints and Blessed of the Vincentian Family.*"

This theme, developed by the Pastoral Commission, was sent to the Sisters who would participate in the summer mission. There is a short questionnaire to study with the young people. The day of the gathering, young people have a sort of competition that promotes friendship, joy and vitality. The priests and the members of the parish council do everything possible so the gatherings go well despite rain and possible electrical outages. A few days before the gathering, when the heat was oppressive, some light rain arrived to lower the temperature. Everyone considered this a sign from Heaven.

After becoming acquainted with the lives of the Vietnamese martyrs and the Saints and Blessed of the Vincentian Family, the young people better understand how close they are to them and the possibility to imitate them in some ways. This is a way to help the young people develop the culture of vocations. Even if they do not understand the meaning of birthday celebrations,

young people enjoy organizing them, for the real sense is to thank God and our parents for giving us life. Through our birthdays, we can discover both the plan of God who created us: “*In love, He destined us for adoption to Himself through Jesus Christ*” (Eph 1:4-5) and the meaning of our lives, the mission to which we are called: “*I will make you a light to the nations*” (Is 49:6). The example of Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul is a reference point in the process of prayer as they read events and life experiences in order to discern the path to take to respond to Jesus’ “*Follow me.*”

Young people appreciate times of silence to contemplate God’s creation and listen to His loving plan. Here and now, God is sowing the seeds of religious or lay vocations, and He invites collaboration with Him so the seeds bud and blossom.

As Vincent wrote to Father Blatiron: “*For more than twenty years I have not dared to ask this of God, thinking that, since the Congregation is His work, its preservation and growth should be left to His Providence alone. Reflecting, however, on the recommendation given us in the Gospel to ask Him to send laborers into His harvest (cf. Luke 10:2) I have become convinced of the importance and usefulness of this devotion*” (CCD V, 468-469, letter to Father Etienne Blatiron).

This is why it is important each day to ask God to send vocations to serve Christ in those who are poor but also to recognize our responsibility to accompany young people.

At the closing of the twenty-third summer mission, the Sisters returned to their local communities, their hearts filled with joy, enthusiasm and gratitude to God. They recognize that those who are poor teach and form them as they serve them. All are convinced that the Vincentian charism is fully relevant. This type of mission is a favorable context for developing the charism by living with and among those who are poor, having a similar life style to theirs even if it is not identical, with flexibility in the

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schedule according to the urgent needs of the mission.

Young people learn with the Sisters to visit people who are poor and to participate in their activities. The parish priests eagerly await the next year to resume this pastoral experience.

O Mary, only Mother of the Company, we thank you for being with us at every moment. We place in your hands all the missions already completed, all the people met and served. We ask you to continue to guide them on the path of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

Pastoral Commission of the Province

Province of Ireland

Working with refugees

I work with Crosscare Refugee Service, a project of Crosscare, the Catholic Social Care of the Archdiocese Dublin. Crosscare is a non-profit organization that offers emergency shelter to those in need, works with young people in the community to help them meet their full potential, develops innovative approaches to fight against food poverty and deprivation in the community and provides parish-based support services in communities throughout the Archdiocese of Dublin. Crosscare Refugee Service (CRS) works with refugees, asylum seekers, victims of human trafficking and migrants. CRS provides advice and advocacy on housing, homelessness, social welfare, health and wellbeing, the asylum process, family reunification and citizenship. We provide support with integration through a women's group and a men's group. We also have an information clinic for members of the Somali community. I am happy to collaborate in CRS, which is a concrete way for me to be in keeping with our Inter-Assemblies Document 2015 – 2021, which challenges us to *“dare courageously to increase networking at all levels... for the defense and integration of migrants, refugees and victims of modern forms of slavery”* (IAD, p. 17-18).

This Catholic social service of the Archdiocese of Dublin turns resolutely to Mary for the help it needs to experience God's mercy. In Hebrew, the word for mercy has the same root as the word for a mother's womb. At a time when the people of Israel felt abandoned by God, when they were in exile far away from homeland, the prophet Isaiah assured them of God's love: *“Can a woman forget her child, that she should have no compassion*

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on the child of her womb? Even if these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palm of my hand” (Is 49:15-16). It is the same for us, Daughters of Charity. As Mother of the Little Company and our Mother, the Virgin Mary continues to nurture the birth of Christ in our hearts, drawing us continually into the fountain of God’s mercy.

The migrant crisis in Europe will be the defining issue of the 21st century. The Syrian conflict has triggered one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises since World War II. Today, there are over one billion migrants globally, challenging us to respond with mercy and compassion. Pope Francis reminds us that the only appropriate response for a Christian to the plight of migrants, especially refugees and asylum seekers, is a response dictated by the Gospel of Mercy.¹ People are on the move more than ever before, driven by socio-political, economic and environmental “push” factors. During 2015, over one million migrants and asylum seekers risked crossing the Mediterranean Sea in unsafe boats in an attempt to enter the European Union. Among them, 3,700 men, women and children died. The picture of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach has left an indelible image on all our minds. Jesus continues to invite us, His disciples, to see the marks of His suffering on the body of little Aylan.

Mercy is a language of the heart, the language that God speaks and asks us to speak fluently. It is a language of gestures and actions that shows how we care deeply, want things to change and wish the pain would go away. This is what I try to do in my humble service with asylum seekers, refugees, victims of human trafficking and migrants. The case of Ali is one among many.

When Ali arrived in Ireland, he did not know English. He was a professional in Syria who found himself in a country where he was not allowed to work and was dependent on the mercy of others. I assisted him with his asylum application and requested refugee status. He was told that he would have to wait nine months for

1. Letter for the World Day for Migrants and Refugees 2016

his interview with the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner, with no guarantee that his application for refugee status would be successful. He was quite distraught. I telephoned the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner (ORAC) and advocated on his behalf to have the date of his interview brought forward.

The interview was scheduled for three months later. Ali found this still too long and difficult as he worried for the safety of his wife, three children and mother in Damascus. Three months later, after a four-hour interview, he was granted refugee status.

We then needed to make an application to bring his wife, children and mother to Ireland under Family Reunification. As we completed the long questionnaire together, I felt his pain of being far from his family. He had to wait another six months for a decision. In the meantime, I helped him to get his social welfare payments and to find accommodation so he could move out of the hostel.

One day, Ali told me all that it took for him to make it to Ireland. After travelling two days to get to Lebanon, he sailed to Turkey where he spent over two weeks. He was trying to get to Greece, but the boat capsized, and he and his travelling companions were picked up by the Turkish navy and put in prison for four days. Issued a 'paper', they had to leave Turkey within seventy-two hours.

They took another boat, which brought them to an island where they were without food for two days; it was very hard for the children in the group. They finally took another boat to Greece and spent seven days there. They travelled from Greece to Macedonia by road, from Macedonia to Serbia by train.

After walking for over twelve hours, they took a bus to Hungary. They left Hungary for Calais (in France) where they paid smugglers €4,000. They left Calais and travelled by train to Belgium where he lived for almost two months.

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Ali then travelled to Germany and got a flight to Ireland. His intention had been to continue to the United Kingdom where he heard that asylum seekers would obtain refugee status quickly.

However, once he arrived in Ireland without a valid visa to enter the United Kingdom, he had to apply for asylum in Dublin.

Ali's long journey from Syria to Ireland reminds me that we are all on a journey, not necessarily a physical one, but on a journey back to God. Like the people of Israel in biblical times, the refugee or the migrant who comes to Crosscare Refugee Service is an exile, far from home and family. The *Servant Song* has the words: "*We are pilgrims on a journey. We are brothers on the road. We are here to help each other, walk the mile and bear the load.*"² The image of life as a journey is a clear call to our interconnectedness and mutual responsibility; we are responsible to and for each other on this road.

There are many more people in situations like Ali. Working with Crosscare Refugee Service is a privilege. I am convinced that divine mercy consists in always offering people a second chance and sometimes a third chance if necessary because divine mercy has no bounds.

"They practice mercy, that beautiful virtue of which it's said, 'Mercy is the distinctive feature of God'" (CCD XI, 328).

Sister Breege KEENAN
Daughter of Charity

2. Richard Gillard, *The Servant Song*

Province of Nuestra Señora de la Mision – America
Sur
Tacuarembó (Uruguay)

Care for poor and dependent
elderly people

Saint Vincent de Paul Home

Tacuarembó is a city of 50,000 residents and the capital of the Tacuarembó Department. At the Saint Vincent de Paul Home, two Sisters in the local community have the joy of serving forty elderly people who are often alone, poor and dependent.

Most of the elderly people who arrive at the Home had a little house that they had built thanks to the efforts of a lifetime. However, when they could no longer remain alone, they gave it to their family, who in return sometimes abused or exploited them. Their small pensions, sometimes reduced due to loans to pay back, did not allow them to go to smaller facilities with more of a family atmosphere. They had to turn to homes for the poor.

When Luis Alberto came here, he inspired pity. He had lived in the streets after using up his entire pension to pay for medications for his children. He had out-of-control diabetes, his heart was very weak and he often fainted. Once, this happened when he was in the shower, and the scalding hot water burnt his foot. He had to be taken to the hospital. After a five-hour journey, he had emergency surgery to implant a pacemaker. Once he was back on his feet, Luis became haughty and very demanding with the lay staff. We had to combine tireless patience with firm author-

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ity. We know how difficult life is in a home for the elderly. In addition to old age, the experience of being placed in a collective setting plunges elderly people into a sense of exile. They quickly lose their pride, going through periods of discouragement that sometimes make them wallow in depression. Solitude and dependence add to their handicaps and pains. This is why it is extremely important for elderly people to be able to experience the love of God, who does not abandon them.

We have limited lay staff to help us; some afternoons, we are just the two Sisters, and we have to work without any breaks. Despite the fatigue of some days, we are happy to serve Jesus present in each of these persons who are poor. Caring for them as well as possible, repeating each morning the same gestures and offering love, this is our everyday experience by which we serve Our Lord Jesus as revealed to us in the Gospel of the Final Judgment (Mt 25); these are the works of mercy. Caring for them involves feeding them, helping them to drink, washing them, changing them, doing everything to help them remain clean despite the infirmities of their age. It also means restoring their sense of importance, humanity and dignity... all these things could seem very insignificant sometimes, but they have great value. We know that what counts is the love that we put into each action. We do what we do thanks to the love of Jesus because divine charity is a gift of God that we receive each day. We console those who are sad and pray for each one of them, the living and the dead.

Many elderly and sick people do not know God, and we strive to help them to be reconciled with themselves, with others and with God before dying.

The Sisters of the Saint Vincent de Paul Home
Daughters of Charity

Province of Cali

Experience of an Interprovincial Seminary

“God is the one who willed this Company of Sisters from different regions and wanted all of them to be of one heart” (Saint Vincent, February 13, 1646, CCD IX, 195).

Embracing the initiative of the Spirit of God, made manifest in the reconfiguration processes of Provinces in the Company, we began the experience of an Interprovincial Seminary in Cali on February 11, 2014.

The Inter-Assemblies Document 2015-2021 invites us to dare *“a Company enriched by the participation of all Sisters”* and to *“be more open to our internationality: to value our differences as enriching, to intensify intercultural dialogue characterized by listening and respect”* (p. 19-20). To promote internationality in formation, six Provinces of Latin America and the Caribbean (la Milagrosa Bogota-Venezuela, El Caribe, Ecuador, Mexico, Nuestra Señora de la Misión-América Sur and Cali) chose to have a single Seminary.

“See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the wilderness I make a way” (Is 43:19). This *reconfiguration* in formation is comparable to a pilgrimage. It includes the joy of encounters and sharing but also the desire to seek the will of God together, make necessary adjustments and face the challenges that arise. A pilgrimage requires preparation, effort, prayer, discernment, learning and organization in order to give birth to something new.

Advantages of an Interprovincial Seminary

Establishing an Interprovincial Seminary has helped to:

- bear out the specific spirit of the Company and the desire for unity in the diversity of cultures. Differences do not distance us from each other but are an opportunity for enrichment and seeking the essential: the Kingdom of God and the charism.
- recognize that the Provinces go at God's pace and, in accordance with the times, update formation programs for the best possible formation of servants of Christ in the poor.
- give up "one's own culture", "one's own way of thinking" and "one's own Province" to experience the power of the Gospel and the charism.
- pass from affective love to effective love, form for the "culture of encounter" and go forward together following Jesus Christ, Teacher and Artisan, in sisterly charity and mutual assistance free of any competitive spirit.
- overcome together the most difficult moments that are nonetheless sometimes necessary in order to build authentic communion in respect for diversity.

In this progress, the formation community is enriched by each Sister's reality, her faith journey, her history as well as her culture. This requires a certain openness of mind and heart to accompany each vocation in a spirit of listening, acceptance and respect.

Along this path, the pilgrim must also face challenges and overcome certain difficulties.

The challenges of this experience of an Interprovincial Seminary

- *Faced with excessive attachments to "one's own culture", the Interprovincial Seminary made it possible to quickly develop a Gospel culture and promote an attitude of openness for following Christ and being configured to Him.*

- *Faced with all the forms of deceit that exist in our societies and*

untruthfulness about oneself, the Interprovincial Seminary is a place where young Sisters learn to let God guide and accompany them, through the mediation of formators, whoever they are.

- *Faced with different lengths of the initial stages of formation in each Province*, the Interprovincial Seminary required standardization the periods of formation for each stage and observance of the established formation plan.

- The Interprovincial Seminary is a privileged space, which is a reminder that each Sister has a responsibility for the mission of formation. *We need everyone's availability, generosity and collaboration, even with our personal limitations, because we are forming young Sisters for the Church and for the Company.*

- *Faced with the need for formation of the formators themselves in order to provide this service of accompaniment in an Interprovincial Seminary*, we better understand the importance of preparing Daughters of Charity for this mission.

As a sort of conclusion, we could say that the experience of this Interprovincial Seminary with its challenges has touched our lives. It allowed us to rediscover that this “pilgrimage” for the mission of formation truly aims to live this truth in fullness: *“The principal end for which God has called and assembled the Daughters of Charity is to honor our Lord Jesus Christ as the source and model of all charity; serving Him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor”* (Common Rules, I, 1).

We are convinced that formation is above all the action of God present in the heart of the person whom He calls. The Company is there to help each individual progress in her vocation, and “we make the road by walking”. We have entrusted everything concerning the formation of servants of Christ in those who are poor to the Blessed Virgin, the first disciple, evangelizer and formator.

Sister Martha Dolly MARULANDA
Daughter of Charity

Conference given at the Motherhouse

Very simply, live together to combat exclusion

Building a society of communion
rather than a society of competition

Here is the experience of two founders of associations for solidarity, who daily offer tremendous service to homeless people: Martin Choutet and Andrew McKnight. Some socially excluded people will also share their experience in their association and what helps them to keep going and lift themselves up.

ASSOCIATION FOR FRIENDSHIP (APA)

APA was created in 2006 by two young professionals, Martin Choutet and Etienne Villemain. The idea is to contribute to the struggle against exclusion, complementing public services and other non-profit organizations. It is inspired by the Gospel and carried out in connection with the Catholic Church of Paris. The Association for Friendship involves charitable house sharing in Paris. People who are homeless, living either on the streets or in collective shelters, and a group of 25 to 35 year-old professionals live together. They choose to live together to experience the joy of encounter. The first year, six of us lived together in the first apartment. By the third year, APA was housing thirty residents. Today, more than 200 live in twenty-five apartments in Paris and its suburbs.

TESTIMONY OF MARTIN CHOUTET, CO-FOUNDER OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR FRIENDSHIP (APA)

I was working in a shelter run by a large non-profit, and I very much liked this work, but it had its drawbacks.

- First, I was working there as a professional. I was a social worker, so in a way I was paid to be in a helping relationship with them. Each time that I had an interview, I was paid, and the other person was not. Of course, it is quite legitimate for professionals to exist, but I personally aspired to something else, namely, a relationship more on the order of friendship, equal to equal, in which there were no financial stakes. It was a form of gratuity. Of course, this is rather personal; there are several possible forms of relationships, but I was drawn to this sort of relationship that really placed me on the same level.

- Another point challenged me, which was that in this center, as in many other centers funded by the government, many things were done for people. There were cleaning women who did the housekeeping; there were cooks who, off site, prepared the meals that arrived in prepared containers. All you had to do was take them out and reheat them. There was a director, social workers, reception workers. Seeing so many people mobilized without calling upon the skills of the people who were there raised questions for me. In a sense, it was as if we were stealing their place from them because there were excellent cooks among them, others who had skills for welcoming. I said to myself, "Watch out! Are we building institutions that function well and sometimes bear very good fruit?" I was also drawn by the idea of returning to a form of simplicity, self-management and self-organization. I thought, "In the end, we will do something, but by coming together. Perhaps we will succeed by relying on the skills of each person and not primarily on very costly structures that require many people." In short, I wanted to try a form of simplicity of life.

- A third thing was that this non-profit offered no spiritual dimension in everyday life. Now, I also experienced one person's death in the shelter when I was there on site. The person was in his room on an upper floor, probably with a mixture of alcohol and

Persons who are poor speak

medication. This deeply shocked me, and that day I assessed to what extent we face struggles of life and death and are in contact with sometimes very despondent people who go through very hard things. In general, life can stop at any time. In dealing with such a challenge, with such deep wounds, such as the fight against alcoholism, I had no desire to rely on human forces alone, not mine nor those of others. This was not enough. With such high stakes, to restore hope, I only wanted to hold the hand of God so the Lord would really be in charge of the project. He is the Good Shepherd. Then, we are happy to help, but it is good to hand over responsibility and leadership to Him, to let Him inspire us; in short, to better connect spiritual life, prayer life and action. That pretty much describes the basis for APA.

It happened almost naturally, with a big dose of Providence. Providence put us in contact with the people whom we needed. We were quite poor, without any apartment, without a team, necessarily, but with a few calls, we had appropriately prepared people who also had desires in their hearts. From the beginning, it was an encounter of people with different histories and completely different paths. By placing them in common, this became possible. The very fact of meeting each other was made possible by Providence.

In all simplicity, we will share with you what we experience in the Association for Friendship (APA), the mission of which is to favor encounters and the creation of bonds of friendship and mutual assistance, with a special place for people suffering from exclusion. First, we will listen to a passage from the Bible, chapter 25 of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew: the parable of the Final Judgment. This Gospel is very clear. If we want to honor Our Lord, the Gospel shows us a very direct way, that of honoring the person who is suffering, being close and a friend to those who suffer. It also tells us to what extent each person is a beloved brother or sister of Jesus. Knowing this is very inspiring when we go out to meet those who are afflicted. We remind ourselves that each person with whom we cross paths - people

who are in the streets, who sleep in parking garages, in the woods, in the subway - each one of them is one of the beloved brothers or sisters of Jesus and each one is also a child of God, a child of the King, that is to say, a prince or princess. Therefore, each severely marginalized person is a prince or princess. This should lead to concrete action for a just, fraternal and spiritual society where each person receives recognition for what he or she is, as he or she is, namely, as a beloved child of the Lord, as a human brother or sister.

APA'S MISSION TAKES FORM IN THREE MAJOR TYPES OF ACTIVITIES

1 – SHARED APARTMENTS TO REBUILD ONE'S LIFE AND LEARN TO LIVE TOGETHER DAY AFTER DAY

The first aspect of mission and action is the housing shared in solidarity, places where homeless people and others who have not experienced homelessness live together. The latter are often young professionals who had housing, but all decided to live together to have this experience of encounter and friendship, setting aside all our labels, our pasts, our happy and sorrowful experiences to “reshuffle the cards” and learn to live together, recognizing the value of each individual and creating with what they bring. This has meaning. Sharing, mutual assistance and human warmth are at the heart of the project.

In the shared apartments, each resident contributes to paying the rent, renders a service to the community (errands, housework, etc.) and participates in the weekly “household meal”. A sort of “family life” forms. The duration is not limited. The amount of time that residents can remain in the apartments is flexible, adapted to the individual. Of course, the objective is to progress towards greater insertion, which takes different forms depending on their personal journey and objectives. There is an apartment leader, and once a week the residents are required to eat together. They take turns preparing this shared meal.

Persons who are poor speak

Today, APA runs 25 apartments in Paris and the surrounding area where about 200 people live, with six to ten residents per apartment, either all men or all women. *“Through these shared apartments, we want to share more than apartment, learn to live times of friendship on a daily basis and help each other to grow.”*

2 – SUNDAY DINNERS

The second type of activity APA has are Sunday dinners. We believe that Sunday is a sacred day, a day of liberation and friendship. Therefore, every Sunday, we are present in three locations in Paris. A team of volunteers and homeless people comes to prepare a hot meal each Sunday. We host these open tables after liturgical celebrations so that they are times of conviviality where, little by little, people can create relationships. Open to all, these Sunday dinners are often an entrance into the Association for Friendship. Everyone can participate, with a little qualification because at times there are too many people, so we give invitations to those who come and have the habit of coming, explaining to others that they can go to one of the other two locations. In general, we redirect them.

The tables are open for people who are homeless or at high risk, who have a little apartment but very limited resources, who are isolated, but also all those who want to share the meal with us. The idea is encounter. You can come very regularly and commit or come occasionally. This is the mystery of the open table. The first location is in the parish where it started, in the center of Paris in the 4th district, Notre-Dame-des-Blancs-Manteaux, another is in the 15th district, where we also have shared apartments, and the other is in the 6th district, in a former Visitation convent.

3 – VACATIONS AND SPIRITUAL RETREATS

Our third line of action is vacations and spiritual retreats. Here as well, these times are shared among some people in situations of exclusion or who have lived on the streets and others who do

not have those experiences. Since all the apartments are located in Paris or its suburbs, everyone appreciates going out “to the country”.

Through these three types of activities, APA hopes to respond simultaneously to:

- a material need, such as having a roof over your head or eating a meal, or enjoying rest and relaxation;

- a relational need, the fact of living together, connected, of entering into relationships of friendship;

- and a spiritual need. In all our activities, we want to open doors to facilitate each person’s encounter with the Lord.

With the help of the Bettencourt Schueller Foundation, APA hired a social worker to accompany the residents with the most difficulties in their process of receiving health care, rejoining the workforce and finding housing. In addition, it has invested in the renovation of additional housing and now has the help of an administrative assistant for rental management.

TESTIMONIES FROM MARTINE AND STEPHANE, TWO PEOPLE IN SITUATIONS OF EXCLUSION

MARTINE

I am 52 years old. I had a normal life. I worked but was pretty isolated because I am solitary by nature. Three years ago, I began to lose my housing, but I still had my job, so I managed between the streets, hotels and friends, but this life cannot last long. After three years, I was very tired and had enough. I quit my job and found myself really on the streets for six months. For four months, I remained isolated. I did not want to see anyone; I was not even sure if I wanted to live or not. At a given time, I thought of my nephews, who are still young, and that kept me

Persons who are poor speak

going a little. Then, I met a first association called “Liberation to captives”. These people opened a little door to me because, when I knocked on the door in city offices or elsewhere, it did not work. They did not judge me, they just listened and helped me as much as they could. They also took me away for vacation. There, I met a man who was part of APA. He explained to me what it was. Then, it is always up to us to reflect and see if we want to go or not. When you come off the streets even if it is only after six months and are detached from everyone, are you able to live with six other people, knowing that there are young people and others who have been through hell? I thought that with the latter, I would be able to share things, but I was not sure about the young people. I reflected for three months, and I finally made the decision, realizing that all alone, I would never make it. I do not regret my choice because I am doing well now. I met people who are young and less young, people of different nationalities and different religions. In fact, we learn from each other. There are times that are not easy. Personally, I had hard moments because, until you’ve lifted yourself up, it can all seem good at the beginning, and then the time comes when you say, it isn’t really that great. We also have to ask others to help us. In the Association, there is a group of social workers, and depending on what happens to us, we can always go to see them and ask them things. They have helped me a lot. I also have made spiritual outings, to the Arche in Trosly (Oise) or Viale in Lozère. Today, I do not know if I have forgotten what happened to me yet, I do not think so, but in any case, this forged the person who I am today. I can speak more easily and tell others that what happened to me can happen to anyone. It happens so fast!

Today, I have begun a training program to become a nurse’s aide. I think that without associations like APA and without my apartment-mates to encourage me, I doubt that I would have gone through with it. In any case, I am proud to do it today, and I say thank you APA. Thanks to all those who are behind us to help us because it is not easy to be outside. The system makes people think that when you are outside, it is because you chose that life,

but that is not necessarily the case. The thoughts and ideas that gave me the strength to hang in during the very difficult moments in the streets were that I had succeeded in life for fifty years and made it, living normally, so there was no reason that I not make it a second time. I told myself, “You can do it”. Moreover, I didn’t have the courage to go through with killing myself. I told myself that if you fall once, you can get up. The first thing I did when I found myself on the streets was to set foot again in a church, which I hadn’t done for thirty years. I didn’t go anymore because I had the impression that “up there”, when I asked Him questions, He didn’t listen to me. The only question that I asked Him that day when I went into the church was, “Why me? Why is this happening to me today? What could I have done for this to happen to me?” Each time that I would go in a church, I would ask the same question, without having the answer when I left. When I was at Paray-le-Monial, at one point the priest said that I just had to open my barriers and speak honestly to Him. I just said what I wanted: housing for at least a week so I could sleep peacefully for a week. Then, I returned to Paris, and two days later, I learned that I had been taken on by SIAO (a public service for shelter and access to housing for people who are homeless or poorly housed). I had a permanent emergency housing, which meant I could remain there a long time, and I was no longer outside. I told Him, “Thank you,” because He answered me that day. Today, that is my strength. My nephews are also important to me. So are those who still struggle today because on Sundays I go to the shared meals. Because I made it, I think that I can help others to make it since I speak from experience.

STÉPHANE

I am 50 years old and went through difficult times since the age of 22. I wanted to get into the performance world, and that led me to the depths. I know what it means to suffer in my heart. I regained confidence in myself two years ago when I went to the Vatican and participated as an altar server in a Mass with the Pope. We were more than six thousand people in situations of

Persons who are poor speak

insecurity from all over Europe. There was a large group from Paris. Pope Francis prayed with all of us who live in unstable situations; it was unforgettable. The “Fratello” pilgrimage opened me to hope. I had ignored the Church for years, which I regret. This closed doors to me and meant that I lived outside for years. Since I have been a friend of APA for several years, APA took me on, and I began living in a shared apartment a month ago. This has allowed me to get out of the pits where I was, to not remain closed in on myself and to trust others. On the streets, you turn in on yourself, you do not look at others and you fall into alcoholism. When you are in a group, you don’t drink anymore whereas on the streets, you drink easily. With men, alcohol gets the upper hand. You don’t believe in anything anymore, you forget about religion, you become an anarchist, each one goes off track on his own, you don’t want to listen anymore. Something has to trigger a change for you to listen. Other people don’t set it off, you do. For me, it was when I was at the Vatican that I opened my eyes and set off that trigger. For years, I didn’t believe in religion any more. I don’t know, but I’d say a miracle took place.

What keeps people who live in the streets going is work. Even if you are outside, in the streets, you always have to work. If you don’t work anymore, it’s over. I was in the streets for more than twenty years, but I always worked, and that always supported me and allowed me to stay in a hotel from time to time. If you do not work, you are dead. When people are in the streets, they need motivation; motivate them to go to work. They need encouragement to go forward, and that will get them out of their problems. Otherwise, it’s alcohol or drugs. Many of my friends tell me, “That’s worthless; we don’t believe anymore.” I answer them, “If I managed to get myself out of this mess, why wouldn’t you be able to get yourselves out?”

CONCLUSION BY MARTIN CHOUTET

We live together in the same apartment; we get to know each other and make sure that each person is recognized appropriately, no one

is set aside and each person can express the talents within him. We work to make sure each person has a decent life, a place to rest, people to meet, connections to develop. For about a month now, we have been living with Stéphane, and we enjoy marveling at what we see. Stéphane had hardly arrived in the apartment when he sort of took charge of things. He felt that we did not do housecleaning well enough, so he set to it. He considered that we did not cook well enough, so he prepares tasty dishes for us. Just this morning, I came home and saw another apartment-mate who came off the streets not long ago and is going through some difficulties. At the moment I came in, I saw Stéphane putting a jacket on him to clothe him because he didn't have much. I saw a connection with Matthew 25 and how all of us are invited to enter into this relation of reciprocity that does not divide us into guests and hosts, helpers and those helped. There are only people who have their full dignity, who are all beloved children of the Good Lord and invited to love each other, to help each other. What gives us joy is when we receive and we can marvel at talents, simply giving opportunities and a context that favor the expression of talents. This is what we try to do. When we are taken up in everyday worries of daily survival, sometimes people do not have full latitude for expressing talents and assuring safety. The basis of a place to live is also being able to establish a certain security for yourself in order to rebound. As Martine and Stéphane said, it also means stopping a moment to better love others and live in solidarity.

THE DEPAUL FRANCE DAY CENTER,

A “BUBBLE OF GENTLENESS” FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE IN PARIS

TESTIMONY OF ANDREW MCKNIGHT

Andrew left London three years ago to build this Parisian project, which is supported by the British charitable association Depaul International and dedicated to helping homeless people and those

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in high-risk situations. The smiling director shares with us a few scenes of life at the day center. (You can read his initial testimony in the *Echoes of the Company*, March-April 2018).

The services of Depaul France are located in the 15th district of Paris.

It is a day center offering hygiene and health services for people living on the street. **It is not housing; you might call this the step before that, where we can begin to help our guests make a start on projects.**

The center just celebrated its third anniversary. We have regular services with showers, clothes-washing, nurses, doctors, breakfast and, like APA, we also try to spend fraternal moments without labels of “hosts” and “guests”. For example, we have a picnic at the Sisters’ place in L’Hay-les-Roses for the feast of Saint Vincent, Christmas. Little by little, as a guest said, a family is established, and the bonds among us become increasingly warm.

On the first World Day of the Poor, I focused on the stories of three guests. Therefore, I would like to return to these three people because for us, as for APA, lasting connections are very important. We exist for long-term relationships, and we are fortunate to still be in contact with these three people. Here is some news about them.

GILBERT, ONE OF OUR THREE GUESTS, IS NOW HOUSED WITH APA.

One of the neighbors of the Depaul Center found him lying on the ground, and he was taken to the hospital. One and a half years later, he was able to benefit from the program “Winter Solidarity” offered in some Parisian parishes during the winter. After “Winter Solidarity”, he now is in housing that accepts people who are alone or in difficulty. Gilbert is doing well; he even put some weight back on since you eat so well there.

FRANCK

Still volatile, irascible and terribly sensitive, Franck is a little hard to manage. He has serious health problems affecting his legs. At one point, Franck had decided to plant an avocado pit. When he left to take his spot in a housing program, this avocado, against all expectations, began to grow. A beautiful symbol of his new life that was beginning. We continue to get news from Franck, who calls us from time to time. He recently paid us a visit. Questions always arise for me when former guests return. Indeed, for Franck, it was a story that shows how difficult rehabilitation is, even with housing. There are always issues, highs and lows to deal with. Life in a shared apartment, where he lives – not with APA, but another association – life is not always so easy. Franck was banned for three nights because he had been violent. He had to spend one night outside, and he needed a shower, so he came to see us. Most of all, he needed to spill out everything he had on his chest. Thanks to the relationship I have with his social worker, I could telephone and explain that he had returned to us, that he understood that it was very important not to lose his place there and that he wanted to return. He again has housing. All is going well for the time being.

THOMAS

A young Polish man, Thomas also has many health problems, both physical and mental. He is in conflict with himself, with life. He has problems with addiction, legal issues and family conflict, but he also has a real desire to try to live as well as possible, to do good, to do things properly and to reconcile. Thomas is still with us and still sleeps in the parking garage in La Défense (outskirts of Paris), but he is doing a little better; he is a little more stable. This is thanks to all the collaborative work, to all the connections we have been able to make with associations, hospitals and other government services. With Thomas, we really see the importance of working together with other associations and partners in the Vincentian Family. Our guests' needs impel us to look for part-

Persons who are poor speak

nerships since we cannot do it all alone. Depaul's mission is not to respond to all the needs in Paris; we cannot do this. The Pope says in his message that the more we recognize our limitations, the more we will work together.

I am also very impressed by the guests who not only ask to be connected with others, but who take a more active role. Thomas was the one to speak about Depaul to another association and told them, "It's great, you have to go see them." Thomas invited another partner to our center, and he was the one to give the guided tour. Thus, if we are close to our guests, if we listen to them, if we value them, if they feel comfortable at our place, they will help us to develop all the necessary partnerships.

I am also always deeply moved by the example of guests who are on the streets and manage to establish around themselves a whole network of assistance and a sort of family circle.

Yesterday, I met **Hervé** for the first time. He told us how he lived in the street and didn't much like to go to associations where it's noisy and there are fights. He keeps apart a bit, but he appreciates social contact, so he really likes his neighborhood and his little corner of the street in the 15th district of Paris. Hervé has family in Belgium, and he told us how, in fact, the neighborhood shopkeepers chip in to buy him a train ticket to go to Belgium from time to time so he can see his family and his wife. I think that poverty can push us to create connections that are very enriching and positive. Poor, we need others and are perhaps more open and ready to welcome others.

It's like us at Depaul. Since we are a small association and do not have many means, it is very important to have partnerships, volunteers and donors. Weak and poor ourselves, we must remain humble and open to all the connections that we can build with guests and all the services of the city.

CONCLUSION

I will conclude by saying that it is a great joy to hear Pope Francis say, “I want a poor Church for the poor.” This statement surprises us! At the beginning, I rather thought that we needed a strong, powerful and efficient Church for the poor. This is not what he tells us, and it did me good to hear this because when I look at me or look at our Association for Friendship, I could grow discouraged, saying, “We do not have all that is necessary to do this; let others take care of it. There are other people who are more gifted than we are and have more talents to do things.” We could even be tempted to give up and say we aren’t capable of doing things. It very encouraging to think that it is also with our great poverities and limitations that we can just try to do our best. The result is not up to us. Something works well, something else doesn’t work well, we produce a little or a lot of fruit: all this does not depend on us. What is up to us is not to grow discouraged over our poverty and our personal inner poverty, the qualities we lack. What touches me is to see how much the Lord Himself comes to our assistance, how much we can taste His mercy when we try to take a little step, even when we feel incapable of doing much.

Martin CHOUTET, *co-founder of APA*,
Martine and Stéphane
Andrew MCKNIGHT, *director of Depaul France*

Province of Fortaleza

Sister Clemencia Oliveira
(1896 – 1966)

H

History
of the
Company

A gift of God for those who are poor

“Who is Sister Clemencia, whose earthly pilgrimage inspired so much admiration in her Superiors, the Sisters of her local community, doctors and merchants as well as in persons who are poor who benefited from her burning charity?”¹

The reason comes out very clearly in a testimony from Dr. Francisco de Assis Arruda Furtado. *“This Sister always sought to live her vows faithfully, practicing the evangelical counsels and **constantly seeking perfection**. In community life and her relationship with the Sisters, she never let the spirit of discord, which sometimes even invades cloisters, contaminate her... Sister Clemencia received this good spirit of a true **consecrated woman** from a life of constant prayer. Without her life of union with God, source of her inner life, she never could have exercised her activities as an apostle and servant of the poor.”²*

1. Bessa, Murilo Alves, *Irmã Clemência, a que serviu até o fim*. 1996 [*Sister Clemencia, someone who served to the very end*]. Fortaleza- Secretaria da Cultura e Desporto.

2. Dr. Francisco de Assis Arruda Furtado, lawyer, specialist in administration and professor at the University of the State of Ceará. Cf. Bessa, Murilo Alves. p. 89.

WHO IS SISTER CLEMENCIA OLIVEIRA?

A little history about Redenção, the birthplace of Sister Clemencia

Although slavery began to decline in 1850 with the end of the slave trade, it still took some years for the abolitionist movement (for the suppression of slavery) to gain momentum. In 1882, in the city of Acarape (State of Ceará), an abolitionist movement was created and became very influential. On January 1, 1883, abolitionist political leaders came to Acarape to support the process of freeing slaves in the region.

On March 25, 1883, the 116 slaves of the city of Acarape and the surrounding areas were freed, and the squalid sheds where they lived were destroyed. On that day, the city changed its name from Acarape to Redenção, which means “redemption”. In 1884, the State of Ceara completely abolished slavery on its territory. The entire country progressively took up the abolitionist cause, and, after a long period of raising awareness, the Golden Law of May 13, 1888, put a definitive end to slavery in Brazil.

Following a major public debate, the University for International Integration of the Afro-Brazilian Lusophony³ (UNILAB) was created in Redenção in 2009. UNILAB’s mission is promoting the integration of black populations in northeastern Brazil and in Portuguese-speaking African countries. This university invites students to meet, no longer as owners or slaves, but as free and equal citizens, sharing the treasures of their cultural patrimony in order to strengthen the bonds of friendship.⁴

The Oliveira family

In the city of Redenção, José Joaquim and Francisca Saraiva de

3. Lusophony is the totality of cultural identities, regions, countries and communities connected to the Portuguese language.

4. Cf. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Sister Clemencia Oliveira

Oliveira lived through the entire movement of the abolition of slavery. On August 23, 1896, their first child, Benícia de Oliveira, was born. She was baptized a week after her birth, and received the name Francisca Benícia. She was the future “mother of the poor” and, at the school of Saint Vincent de Paul, would give her life for them in order to free them from extreme poverty, illness and sorrow.

The Oliveira family grew each year. At a very early age, little Benícia had to help with household chores, take care of her twelve younger brothers and sisters and help them to do their homework. Expenses increased, and Benícia would need to contribute to the household budget. A gifted seamstress, she dutifully applied herself, and orders increased, bringing in income.

The Oliveira family was deeply Christian and practiced its faith. Benícia grew in love of God and neighbor. She actively participated in the choir and catechism in her parish. With the help of her spiritual director, Father Luís Rocha, she forged a servant personality.

On August 2, 1914, her mother came to the term of her fourteenth pregnancy, but the delivery went poorly, and the baby, Maria dos Anjos, died soon after her baptism. Three weeks later, on August 25, 1914, her mother, struck by a serious infection, died, leaving thirteen motherless children.⁵

According to Sister Elisabeth Silveira, *“We find the adolescent Benícia, with her richness of spirit and soul (evidenced by the smile always present on her face), plunged into a painful family situation but sustained by a simplicity of life not yet threatened by progress and its not always ethically acceptable consequences. In general, external circumstances do not determine but influence to a greater or lesser extent people’s way of thinking, acting and being and even that of institutions and society. In this context, Benícia, the eldest of her siblings, took on responsibility for*

5. Cf. Bessa, Murilo Alves. p. 17

leading the house at the age of 18, an additional task which she carried out courageously.”⁶

Thanks to an intense prayer life and her regular practice of remaining before the Blessed Sacrament, Benícia discovered that God was calling her to become a nun. Because she wanted to serve God, Father Luís Rocha directed her to the Company of the Daughters of Charity. She was 23 years old. However, there was a problem! Who would take care of the house?

She spoke about this vocation with her father, who rejected it. He had a strategy. Convinced that he would manage to persuade her not to leave the house, he gathered all his children to ask them if they accepted Benícia’s departure to become a nun. Contrary to his expectations, all the other children unanimously accepted their oldest sister’s vocation. The father found himself obliged to accept Benícia’s decision. It was her sister Antônia, called Toinha, age 18, who would run the house. The father did not yet know that two of his other daughters would later become Daughters of Charity: Rosilda (Sister Rosa de Lima) and Nativa (Sister Maria da Natividade).

In January 1919, Father Luís Rocha⁷ brought Benícia to Immaculate Conception School to present her to Sister Henriot. There, she began her Postulancy, which lasted just three months. She participated in the spiritual exercises and household tasks of the community and learned about the Vincentian charism. At the end of March 1919, she entered the Seminary in Rio de Janeiro. After eight months of formation, Sister Benícia received the habit of the Daughters of Charity and the name Sister Clemencia

6. Silveira, Elisabeth, DC. *Irmã Clemência- exemplo de santidade vivida na simplicidade e no anonimato. (Sister Clemencia – example of holiness lived in simplicity and anonymity)* Conference given at the Brazilian Academy of Hagiography. Fortaleza. 31.07.2007, p. 10-11

7. Note: Mgsr. Luís de Carvalho Rocha, confessor and spiritual director of Sister Clemencia, would later found a religious congregation in Ceará with Mrs. Rosita Paiva, the Josephine Institute.

Sister Clemencia Oliveira

on December 5, 1919. She was sent on mission to Immaculate Conception School where she had made her Postulancy. The Seminary Directress wrote in her file, “*Sister Oliveira is in good health, serious, thoughtful, has sound judgment, is intelligent although with little schooling; she has a remarkable capacity for sewing; she works hard, is pious and very dedicated.*”⁸

In the habit-taking book, Sister Clemencia wrote, “***Jesus, I wish to die rather than be unfaithful to you; grant me the grace of always loving you more.***”⁹

AN ALWAYS JOYFUL AND AVAILABLE DAUGHTER OF CHARITY

In this simple phrase, “*Jesus, I wish to die rather than be unfaithful to you; grant me the grace of always loving you more,*” her path of holiness already emerges.

At Immaculate Conception School, Sister Clemencia received the assignment of preparing more than 300 meals a day for the Sisters, boarding students, orphans and employees. She collaborated with several assistant cooks and maintained the huge wood stoves. She would later receive the additional assignment as seamstress. In addition to these two duties, Sister Clemencia served the sick Sisters and took care of the boarding students and orphans who came to the infirmary.

Sister Clemencia exercised her responsibilities for twenty-two years in the school and helped those who were poor in the clinic. “*If holiness consists in learning to love and living love,*”¹⁰ Sister Clemencia wonderfully incarnated the Vincentian charism. She did ordinary things in an extraordinary way and practiced the virtues of humility, simplicity and charity. One of her companions,

8. Cf. Bessa, p. 25

9. Cf. Bessa, p. 25

10. Ubillús, Fr. José Antônio. CM, Text of his conference presented at the Symposium for the Fourth Centenary of the Ordination of Saint Vincent de Paul, October 21 -22 2000, in Paris. Published in *Animation Vincentienne*, no. 78. Toulouse, with the title, *Vincent de Paul: a call to holiness.*

Sister Margarida Cola, testified, *“I consider her a Sister like the holy Sisters in the time of Saint Vincent: simple, humble, kind and with a spirit of total self-sacrifice. She worked long years in the kitchen, enduring its oppressive heat and the fatigue of the responsibility without complaining, totally available.”*¹¹

One of the alumna of Immaculate Conception School said, *“In the school kitchen, she humbly cared for the health of the Sisters and students for twenty-two or twenty-five years. With the rising smoke of the wood stoves, she lifted her spirit up to heaven, and with the heat of the smoking pots, her love burned for Christ.”*¹² Even if Sister Clemencia accepted everything in faith, the work tired her, and the heat of the ovens gradually damaged her health. After thirteen consecutive years in this service, she contracted several pulmonary and renal infections that caused her to suffer until the end of her life. If Saint Vincent had asked Sister Clemencia, *“What reduced you to this state?”* her response would have been, *“Charity! Mercy makes us sensitive to the suffering of our brothers and sisters, unites us to their joys and sorrows and commits us to advancing together to build a fairer and more fraternal world.”*¹³ Sister Clemencia served in this school, contemplating Christ in the person of all those whom she met and bearing witness to a life totally given to God and to her brothers and sisters.

*“This is how Sister Clemencia realized, in her way, the dream of Saint Louise de Marillac, who saw herself part of a group of people, coming and going, caring for all forms of human suffering encountered. Indeed, in the long hallways of the school, she compassionately dedicated herself to the service of her brothers and sisters in their diverse needs. Always smiling and with the left end of her apron attached to the right side at the waist, she was one of the **apron Sisters**, symbolizing their readiness to render*

11. Cf. Bessa, p.27

12. Soares, Maria Norma Maia. *Memória Imaculada – Histórico da Associação de Ex-alunos do Colégio da Imaculada Conceição. (Immaculate memory – history of the alumni association of Immaculate Conception School)* Expressão Gráfica e Editora. Fortaleza. 2011, p. 56-57.

13. Cf. Silveira, p. 21

Sister Clemencia Oliveira

any service."¹⁴

**SISTER CLEMENCIA SEES THOSE WHO ARE POOR,
AND HER CHARITY IMPELS HER TO GO FURTHER**

For medical reasons, Sister Clemencia had to go for rest in the mountains (Maciço de Baturité) in Pacoti in 1932. God was waiting for her there to show her what she had not yet seen: the extreme poverty of a marginalized part of the population. These people lacked any form of assistance and suffered from hunger and many epidemic infectious diseases: yaws, bubonic plague, tuberculosis, trachoma, etc. In Pacoti, there was no hospital nor clinic at the service of this poor social class.

Seeing all this suffering around her, Sister Clemencia was seized with pity for all these poor people and interrupted her convalescence. With no thought for herself, she began to serve them. Each morning, under a little garden shelter, Sister Clemencia washed their dirty feet covered with wounds. At the same time, she taught them the truths of the faith. She had no instruction in nursing care, but “love is inventive to infinity,” and “nothing is impossible for God.” People began to think highly of her. Once, the police station called her in the middle of the night to go care for a man seriously injured by a knife wound; his intestine was exposed. “This man will die because there is no doctor and no means to take him to Fortaleza. Come dress his wound so that he does not die completely abandoned.” Her biographer, Murilo Bessa, says that Sister Clemencia started to pray, “What would Jesus do?” Sister Clemencia took her material (a sewing needle and sturdy thread), which she sterilized in boiling water. When she arrived at the police station, the man was lying on the ground. She knelt down beside him, washed the part of his intestines that had come out, put them back in his peritoneum and sewed up the wound. The man survived his wound without any infection. Witnesses considered it something of a miracle.

After two years of this sort of “rest”, Sister Clemencia returned to

14. Cf. Silveira, p. 22

Immaculate Conception School and resumed her duties, giving her all for more than nine years with the same availability, the same smile and total acceptance of the Lord's will. Sister Clemencia was then missioned to the city of Baturité, in the State of Ceara.

IN THE CITY OF BATURITÉ, A CHARITY THAT WENT TO EXTREMES

Sister Clemencia arrived in Baturité on January 20, 1943, with Sister Perissé, the new Sister Servant, and three other Sisters to found Our Lady of Liberation Youth Center for the education of poor young girls. Sister Clemencia was made responsible for administrating the Youth Center, receiving poor people in the municipal Saint Anthony Health Care Center and teaching handicrafts to the young women to prepare them for a profitable profession to help their families.

More and more poor people flocked to the health care center. They came from the outskirts of the city but also from neighboring villages. Some days the crowd that pressed to enter was so big that you would have thought it was a political rally. Because of the ever-growing number of patients, the mayor, Ananias Arruda,¹⁵ decided to have a new health care center built at his own expense, this time dedicated to Saint Joseph.

Sister Clemencia continued to follow Christ in a radical way. She wanted to fulfill the duties of her vocation ever more faithfully through actions characterized by gentleness, compassion, cordiality, respect and devotion. Sister Amélia Amorim Sá, one of her Sister Servants, said,

“Sister Clemencia was truly a virtuous Daughter of Saint Vincent

15. In the city of Baturité, there is another saint: Ananias Arruda. He gave all his goods for the religious communities of the city. He was a Commander of the Holy See, giving him the right to have the Blessed Sacrament in his home. He and his wife Donaninha Arruda agreed to live perfect chastity together.

Sister Clemencia Oliveira

de Paul... She was sad when she had to say 'no' to someone, but in all humility, she tried to avoid any misunderstandings with those who were poor. One day, she ran after a poor man who had gone away angry because he was not served. After catching up with him, she approached him and knelt down before him in the middle of the street, asking him to forgive her and return so that she could give him what he needed."¹⁶

Before infected and fetid wounds, before the dirtiness of poor children, Sister Clemencia always knelt down to care for people, listen to their complaints and needs, speak to them and encourage them as a mother does.

When someone asked her if so much work tired her, she responded simply, *"This is one of the tasks of a Daughter of Charity. If I need to do it ten times, I will do it. We are servants of the poor."*¹⁷ While caring for the body, Sister Clemencia also cared for souls, evangelizing them and being evangelized by them.

*"All those who accept to be loved and accompanied by God are saints."*¹⁸ Sister Clemencia is one of those joyful witnesses of consecrated life at the service of all without any exception. In selfless, humble and loving service of her "Lords and Masters," she did everything to please God, and it is certain that Saint Vincent would have been happy to meet her with *"her basket on her back,"* going through the streets of the city.

Sister Clemencia knew that she did not have the knowledge or skills to take care of all the poor people who came to the health care center. However, her love for them was so strong that she inspired some doctors to work free of charge. They did not receive any salary except a cold drink, a big smile and a bus ticket to get

16. cf. Bessa, p. 74

17. cf. Bessa, p. 63

18. Teixeira, Vinícius Augusto R.CM."A vocação universal à santidade como horizonte da vida cristã. [The universal vocation to holiness as the horizon of the Christian life] Published by REB. Petrópolis. vol. 69, fasc. 275, p. 618-641, July 2009.

them back home. Doctor Álcimo Cavalcante Aguiar, who came to the center once a week, relied on Sister Clemencia and other volunteers to follow-up on the patients.

Sister Clemencia, however, did not stop there. She convinced Doctor Álcimo to make home visits to the sick who were too ill to come to the health care center. ***“Yes, doctor, there are patients who cannot come here. Don’t you think we should go to them at least once a week?”***¹⁹

The doctor could not resist her suggestions that were so compassionate. *“Sister Clemencia made me aware of the necessity of helping in their homes sick people who could not go out.”*²⁰ The following days, the doctor and Sister Clemencia went on foot or by cart to visit the sick in their homes as Saint Vincent encouraged. *“... but you’re obliged to go to seek them out in their own homes. In that way you surpass those nuns because you’re not content with nursing the sick who are brought to you, as they do, but you also go to nurse them in their own homes. You take food to them there and do many other services for them.”*²¹

Sister Clemencia’s love for her “Lords and Masters” went even further. Sister Clemencia knew that it is important for the sick to eat well and have medications in order to heal. With the permission of her Sister Servant, she decided to go out in the afternoons to see merchants of the city and those at the Saturday market to ask them for food, fruit and vegetables. Once a month, she went to Fortaleza to ask labs and doctor’s offices for free samples. She also asked for money as possible. Of course, sometimes she was humiliated and insulted, but she accepted this in silence, never complaining and always keeping her wonderful smile. Their generosity allowed the health care center to survive.

19. cf. Bessa, p. 52

20. cf. Bessa, p. 52. Doctor Álcimo was one of the lay people who testified to the holiness Sister Clemencia.

21. CCD X, 117. Conference of November 2, 1655, The maxims of Jesus Christ and those of the world

THE CHARITY OF SISTER CLEMENCIA REMAINS (cf.

1 Cor 12:31 – 13:13)

In 1952, after serving nine years without any break, Sister Clemencia's health declined. She had diabetes, poor hearing and pain in her foot and leg. Following medical exams, she was advised to stop working. Sister Clemencia peacefully accepted her Sister Servant's decision. In the chapel, she cried for poor people who would remain unassisted. After a certain time, however, and with strength that could only come from within and her union with God, she resumed her service of those who were poor for about ten years. Her biographer does not specify the moment when she could no longer leave the community house up to her death. Sister Clemencia is truly a martyr of charity. She sacrificed herself for the service of those who are poor. *"God is your founder; He himself has called you; and your vocation is the greatest in the Church of God, for you are martyrs; whoever gives his or her life for God is regarded as a martyr, and it's certain that your lives are shortened by your labors; consequently, you are martyrs."*²² Sister Clemencia's state of health weakened, she fell into a pre-coma, her foot became so seriously gangrened that doctors amputated it in her bed, without her showing any sign of pain. After the operation, she fell into a coma and died on July 2, 1966, the feast, at that time, of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary, whom she had so honored during her life, always adorned with her rosary in her hand. Sister Clemencia died at the age of 70 and 47 years vocation, completing twenty-three years of service of the poorest of the poor in the city of Baturité.

The cedar of Baturité has fallen! The odor of her holiness remains, a real witness of a servant of the poor.

A tearful crowd accompanied her to Saint Michael the Archangel Cemetery where she was buried in a shallow grave like that of her "Lords and Masters". Her remains were later transferred to a vault donated to the community by the Severiano Ribeiro family.

22. CCD IX, 361-362. Conference of December 25, 1648, Love of vocation

Now, since the exhumation at the end of the diocesan phase of the beatification process, her remains rest on the right-hand side altar in Our Lady of Palma Church in the city where she lived her love and total gift of self to God with all her might.

Sister Rita de Cássia RAMOS DE VASCONCELOS
Daughter of Charity

A tragedy that invites us to
“immerse ourselves more deeply in what
makes up our faith.”

The fire that partially destroyed
Notre Dame Cathedral this Monday of Holy Week
causes great pain in the hearts of the French
and a large part of the global population.

Beyond the unanimously shared
emotion and feelings,
Catholics are called to continue
to show their faith by prayer
and deeper reflection on the Pascal mystery
celebrated in these coming days.

Stones from the earth,
as beautiful and precious as they are,
are fated to pass away.
But not love nor faith,
which this trial of material destruction
may in fact strengthen.

Behind the Cross, which remains standing,
the horizon of the Resurrection is already visible.

Inspired by hope,
the Christians of Paris, France and the entire world,
are invited to reach that horizon,
lifting up toward the cornerstone who is the living Christ
their own stone
in the form of trusting prayer.

Vincent Neymon,
Deputy Spokesman for the
Conference of Bishops of France

