

# *E*choes of the Company

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Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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

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*Spiritual  
Life*

Letter of September 11, 2020

FHA and post-COVID-19  
opportunities and challenges  
for the worldwide Vincentian Family

“Together in prayer, thought, and action”

Dear brothers and sisters,

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

The year 2020 had hardly begun when it brought us so many unexpected challenges, so much uncertainty, suffering, and death. Their common denominator: COVID-19.

As the virus spread from country to country to reach the whole world, the different branches of the Vincentian Family began work at alleviating the many harmful consequences that this virus inflicted on humanity.

**On the international level, the Vincentian Family:**

**1. Sent a message of encouragement** with the promise of continuous prayer to all the members of each Congregation and Association, as well as to those who do not officially belong to a

specific branch of the Family but are inspired by Saint Vincent de Paul's spirituality and charism and live them in their daily lives. In these difficult times, we ask the Lord's continued blessing on the many wonderful services and works of mercy for the poor of each branch. These works are shaped by the same spirit and charism and are truly signs that the "Kingdom of God is near" and is for the poor, a message that is more important than ever.

**2. Invited members of the Vincentian Family to pray through the intercession of Saint John Gabriel Perboyre, CM, China's first canonized saint, for healing for those suffering from COVID-19** and strength for all the medical, social, and religious workers, persons in public office, and all those who in every way possible are striving to relieve the suffering caused by the pandemic. This was in response to numerous suggestions because Saint John Gabriel was martyred by suffocation on a cross in 1840 in Wuhan, China, the city where the COVID-19 virus originated.

Recently, a prayer for the intercession of Saint John Gabriel Perboyre was composed by Father Andrzej Jarosiewicz, the pastor of the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Bolesławiec, Poland. After the discovery of Saint John Gabriel Perboyre's relics there just a few months ago, the reliquary was placed on the main altar where the relics can be seen and venerated daily. With the pastor, I would like to encourage the Vincentian Family to say this prayer and to diffuse it widely.

**Prayer to Saint John Gabriel Perboyre, CM**

Saint Jean Gabriel Perboyre, priest and martyr,  
kindly answer the prayers of the Church,  
which you served all your life.

We ask you for the grace to be preserved  
from the coronavirus pandemic  
that is ravaging humanity  
and that has its origin in the place  
sanctified by your mission and your death as a martyr.

For the love of the Church, your family,  
we ask for healing for all the sick,  
strength and patience for healthcare workers  
and all other persons who are helping,  
the light of the Holy Spirit for those who govern  
and are attempting to bring a halt to the pandemic,  
and peace of heart to those who despair.

Obtain for those who have left this world  
because of the pandemic  
the grace of endless happiness and comfort to their families.

May the offering of your martyrdom by strangulation  
obtain from God the grace to free us from the pandemic  
that has sown death, fear, and uncertainty in today's world.

In communion with you and with the Church,  
which you loved to the end,  
and following the example of the Savior,  
we invoke the intercession of the Mother of the Church  
assumed into heaven,  
and we say:

We fly to your patronage,  
holy Mother of God;  
despise not our petitions  
in our necessities,  
but deliver us from all evil,  
O glorious and blessed Virgin!

**3. Organized a prayer meeting with the title: “The prayer of the Vincentian Family for a world in need”** for those suffering the terrible consequences of COVID-19, racism, and other pandemics that are damaging human dignity. We plan to repeat this prayer experience made possible through modern technology in the future.

**In the midst of COVID-19, another tragedy occurred in Lebanon.** The explosion in Beirut brought much human and material devastation: many people died or were injured, and over 300,000 families were left homeless.

Again, the Vincentian Family responded energetically to alleviate physical, psychological, and material suffering. Individual branches contacted their members in Lebanon to assist them in helping the many people who lost everything in a matter of minutes. The Vincentian Family Executive Committee (VFEC) also launched a campaign with the International Committee of the Famvin Homeless Alliance (FHA) to help the hundreds of thousands of homeless in the Lebanese capital through the Vincentian Family National Council in Lebanon, coordinated by its national president, Father Ziad Haddad, CM.

This tragic event and so many others around the world – wars, earthquakes, floods, and other calamities – speak clearly of the importance of a model for **responding to such urgent needs quickly and in the most organized and effective way possible.** We wish to become more and more affective and effective tools in the hands of Jesus to demonstrate His mercy, compassion, and love wherever He wants us to go.

To strengthen current practices, **the model for the Vincentian Family worldwide is to keep growing in the concrete practice of acting and responding to the call of the poor together as a Family, as a Movement.** Every single branch, whether it is big or small, is an invaluable part of the wonderful mosaic that makes

up the Vincentian Family. To this we add the members of the Vincentian Family in the larger sense of the word, and **together we become a force on which the world's poor can count.**

**For the first time, all the international representatives of the 160 branches of the Vincentian Family, Superiors General and International Presidents, were invited** to Rome this past January to meet, share, listen to each other, make plans, and take concrete steps to move forward into the future. The theme was: “The Vincentian Family moving forward” at the beginning of the fifth century of our common spirituality and charism.

One of the topics was the **Famvin Homeless Alliance (FHA), of which the 13 Houses campaign is a part.** Discussing this and other subjects, the participants emphasized **the need to continue developing collaboration and mutual support in a common response to the needs of the poor.** The Vincentian Family Executive Committee confirmed the reflection at that meeting that the **FHA with the 13 Houses campaign** is an initiative in the area of charity that brings the Vincentian Family together and, thus, **needs to be promoted wholeheartedly within the Vincentian Family to reach each member's heart so that everyone becomes an active part of our common initiative.**

Because the needs of the poor are never-ending, different ones receive priority in each country as the individual branches respond so wonderfully to these needs. However, **the Famvin Homeless Alliance is our unique common project.** Therefore, it needs to be promoted, extended, and introduced in all 156 countries where the Vincentian Family is present so that no Congregation or Association will remain outside it, but all will take an active part in the initiative in every corner of the world where we live and serve.

The FHA is presently three years old and already has shown wonderful results. Efforts need to be further developed,

intensified, and expanded for the 1.2 billion homeless: people who live on the streets, refugees who are displaced from their homes, and people living in substandard housing. Their numbers are increasing drastically all around the world as a consequence of COVID-19.

I would like to return to certain points from last year's letter for the Feast of Saint Vincent de Paul that I am convinced are the key for us to move forward so that the 160 branches pray, think, and act together. This year, we are especially invited as the Vincentian Family, as the Vincentian Movement, to further commit to the FHA because the message of Pope Francis for the 106<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees, which providentially will be celebrated 27 September 2020, speaks of one of the groups of persons whom we are helping through the FHA. **Therefore, this year's Feast of Saint Vincent de Paul becomes an extraordinary opportunity to reaffirm or make a commitment to active participation in the FHA as well as in the "13 Houses" project.**

**The FHA provides unity within the Family in responding to the overwhelming needs of the homeless.** The FHA international coordinators and board members, who bring together many years of expertise in the field of homelessness, are available to the whole Vincentian Family for information and support. **We need to quickly come to the point when homelessness will not be tackled alone as an individual person or an individual branch, but together as a Family on the local, national, and international levels.** Each branch needs to bring its long history of service to the homeless, expertise, professionalism, and resources to face this challenge together. Indeed, Pope Francis stresses in his message, *"It is necessary to cooperate in order to build... We must commit ourselves to ensuring international cooperation, global solidarity and local commitment, leaving no one excluded."*

To this end, I would like to invite all 160 branches of the Vincentian Family to become active collaborators in the Famvin Homeless Alliance initiative (FHA) by:

- a) Contacting, if you have not done so already, the FHA coordinating committee member Mrs. Yasmine Cajuste (fha.info@famvin.org) to receive information and materials. You also can visit the FHA website: vfhomelessalliance.org.
- b) Sharing and sending to Mrs. Cajuste the wealth of knowledge, expertise, and resources that each branch has acquired in the field of homelessness.
- c) Introducing this objective in the yearly plan of activities of the specific branch that has not yet become actively part of the FHA on the international, national, and local levels.
- d) Sharing information from the FHA with all its members so that everyone is aware of this initiative and impelled to become an active participant with the other branches in their areas of service.
- e) Encouraging the members to be active participants in the Vincentian Family National Councils in countries where these are formed. In countries where one does not yet exist, encouraging the leaders of the specific branches to come together with the distinct goal of engaging together in the FHA initiative.

The fight against homelessness is also a response to COVID-19. If a person does not have a place to live, all other efforts to bring an end to COVID-19 will not have the desired effect because preventative measures and medical treatments presuppose an adequate place for the person to live for them to be effective.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought us as individuals and as members of the worldwide Vincentian Family many opportunities as well as challenges. The same will be true in the

post-COVID-19 period. Pope Francis repeatedly reminds us that the world, and we as individuals, cannot remain the same after COVID-19. We will become better, or we will take a step back and become worse. The same is true for our Vincentian Family, for our Vincentian Movement. So many wonderful steps, be they new forms of prayer gatherings, collaborative food distribution, or other initiatives, have already been taken in the pandemic period and will be taken in the so-called post-COVID-19 period, bringing the Family together more and more.

May the Feast of Saint Vincent de Paul be an opportunity to make a common commitment, helping each other in the process, so that by next year's celebration we can announce with overwhelming joy that the objective of having all 160 branches of the Vincentian Family actively participating in the FHA has become a reality, for the glory of Jesus and for the good of the poor!

I wish everyone a deep experience of Providence walking in front of us when we enter the post-COVID-19 time of opportunities and challenges.

May Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, Saint Vincent de Paul, all the Saints, Blessed, and Servants of God of the Vincentian Family keep interceding for us and inspiring us on this path!

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Father Tomaž MAVRIČ, CM  
*Superior General*

## Letter of September 27, 2020

Dear Sisters,

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

The feast of Saint Vincent is and always will be an opportunity to look to the figure of our Founder, especially in 2020, such an unusual year. The world is experiencing an unprecedented crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and amplified poverty and inequalities. Saint Vincent also lived through wars, epidemics, destitution, famine... he challenged, he was inventive and he put in place an extensive network of charity with the Confraternities of Charity and then with us!

The force of his messages galvanized and still galvanizes the Daughters of Charity: *“I am persecuted with the persecuted, accursed with those who are accursed; I am a slave with the slaves; I am afflicted with the afflicted, and sick with the sick. That’s how you must act in order to be good Daughters of Charity, and to go wherever God wants: if to Africa, then to Africa; to the army, to the Indies, wherever people may ask for you, it doesn’t matter; you’re Daughters of Charity, you must go”* (Saint Vincent, October 18, 1655, CCD X, 105).

Saint Vincent knew the world, human nature and political workings. He did not hesitate to send Sisters to the front lines of every form of poverty. He did so with an unflagging yet focused passion in order to maintain a constant balance that allowed him to avoid fatalism, which discourages or paralyzes, and the illusion

of omnipotence, which causes us to believe that circumstances will bend to our wishes and above all that it is possible to rely on no one. These two pitfalls have the same underpinning: thinking that we can live “without God.”

Saint Vincent’s missionary action was thus permeated by both **realism** and a **sense of commitment that goes “above and beyond.”** Let us consider what this might mean for us today.

## **Realism**

Dreaming is necessary because dreams quite often foster creativity. They are the starting point for constructive discussions, the establishment of new services or their adaptation, participation in projects along with others...

Pope Francis, in his exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, expresses four great dreams: a social dream, a cultural dream, an ecological dream and an ecclesial dream. Although this document is a follow-up to the Synod for the Amazon and especially concerns that vast region of the world, it is good to read or re-read it since it is possible to draw parallels between these four dreams and the four challenges put forward for the Assemblies’ reflection. In a way, Pope Francis encourages us to do so: “*The Church’s concern for the problems of this area obliges us to discuss, however briefly, a number of other important issues that can assist other areas of our world in confronting their own challenges*” (*Querida Amazonia*, 5).

Our challenges can lead us to dream. Let us dream, then, but let us be lucid. Saint Vincent was down to earth. He observed as long as needed and then took note of the situation as it was. Like him, let us make it our concern to know and love the world, the world as a whole, in order to better understand our everyday world. Striving to understand helps put difficulties into perspective, judge in a more nuanced fashion, accept differences better and share

one's treasures more spontaneously. *"No one is so poor as to have nothing to share"* (Jean Rodhain, founder of Caritas-France). Realism is a prerequisite for responding to urgent needs effectively but also on a longer-term basis. We had this experience with COVID-19. In an emergency, your knowledge of local conditions and your closeness to those who are most poor very quickly enabled you to support, help and receive people efficiently and prudently. Many Provinces organized food distribution and health care. Examples continue to come in to us (Lebanon, Indonesia, Paraguay, etc.). Currently, in different difficult circumstances in Belarus, where we have three local communities (9 Sisters: 5 Belarusian and 4 Polish), the Sisters courageously pursue their service of the people.

Saint Vincent's realism was never an impediment for him, and fear did not paralyze him. He knew that *"the beginnings of important works are always difficult"* (Saint Vincent, June 13, 1659, CCD VII, 608). We have so many fears sometimes!

While continuing emergency assistance, you are now reflecting with others about how you can contribute to efforts for the rebuilding that will be essential for a large segment of the population. It will take time: *"God's works are not done all at once, but little by little"* (Saint Vincent, January 17, 1659, CCD VII, 454).

Saint Vincent's realistic spirit has been passed on from generation to generation of Daughters of Charity down to us today. It is a way of being that unites all the Provinces of the world: a realism that I would describe as open, namely, one that makes it possible to humbly take a step and then other steps in order to respond to current sufferings.

**A sense of commitment that goes "above and beyond"**

Almost all of us are familiar with the scene in the film *Monsieur Vincent* where these words are attributed to him: “do more.” All his life, Saint Vincent gave practical expression to his dreams, which were based on his understanding of reality. When he considered that justice was flouted and poverty was too severe, he came out of himself and made fitting decisions to commit himself fully and all the way. “Above and beyond,” truly, in the sense of not hesitating to open up to new forms of poverty and bring his initiatives to a successful conclusion.

*Ephata*... Saint Vincent lived it. He sent the Sisters “above and beyond the walls,” “above and beyond borders,” to missions that were “above and beyond” for the times. He did not heed the logic of “we’ve always done it this way.” When it was a matter of responding to vital needs, his inventiveness knew no limits. He knew that God was guiding his action and giving it its full intensity. “*Wisdom consists in following Providence step by step*” (Saint Vincent, August 6, 1644, *CCD II*, 521).

Today, how can we avoid dreaming beyond our means but instead commit ourselves to realistic responses within our reach? Examples could include having a greater concern for quality relationships in existing missions, becoming more aware of the community witness, regaining courage in difficult moments, daring a modest yet innovative missionary experience, etc.

In fact, “above and beyond” does not mean extraordinary, huge or even original but going wherever there is suffering, where the Sisters must first listen before being creative, in other words, responding to the call: *Ephata!* Let us be opened and go forth! Here are some initiatives that already exist:

In the Province of Central Africa, an Annex at the service of Burundian refugees in Rusumo, Rwanda, will become a local community with three Sisters.

In Vietnam, reconstruction of the Anê Thành – Tà Ghênh house, which burnt in April, is nearly completed. The Sisters have already resumed their mission from temporary accommodations.

Sisters from the Province of Chelmnno-Poznan have gone to Marioupol, Ukraine. This city is located in the east of the country, which is an area experiencing a tragic humanitarian situation with great poverty due to the armed conflicts that have not yet really ended.

Today, Saint Vincent impels the Daughters of Charity to boldness, whatever the place or situation. Perhaps if he were among us, he might sometimes find us a bit tepid in our devotion to Christ, a little weak in our practice of our vows and too comfortable in our life style... Let us then review all these points! However, he would rejoice to see the courage and determination of local communities to be close to their poorest brothers and sisters and their desire to live in a more joyful and sisterly way. The passion for service is a reality in the Company. The context of Covid, the events in Lebanon and the struggle of the Sisters with the people to survive in Venezuela or other countries have brought this out. Let us give thanks for what is already happening and dare to face what we could do better.

Finally, we could intensify our prayer for the Provinces that have not yet been able to hold their Assemblies because of the worsening of the epidemic and many other unexpected events. In South India, the arrival of some Sisters was made complicated by flooding; in the Province of Central America, an earthquake interrupted the program for 24 hours; in Ireland, a new period of lockdown was imposed the very morning of the beginning of the Assembly. In short, obstacles are not lacking, and Provincial Councils are demonstrating great creativity! To date, 30 Provinces have concluded their Assemblies, so 20 still remain.

Let us be realistic and let us sustain our desire for boldness in the everyday circumstances of missionary, prayerful, sisterly local communities! Let us listen to Saint Vincent as he sent Sisters to Metz: *“Fervor is like a fire that warms all who come near it. Fervor comes from the noun fire, and when we use Latin words to say that water boils, we say aqua fervet. Fervor is a fire that makes things boil and grow hot, as fire causes water to boil. Strictly speaking, it’s charity on fire”* (Saint Vincent, August 26, 1658, CCD X, 449).

Happy feast of Saint Vincent! Affectionately united with you in prayer,

Sister Françoise PETIT  
*Daughter of Charity*

Session for Sisters 25-40 years vocation

With the peripheries in our hearts...  
The service of those who are poor

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**I. WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF THE INVITATION TO “GO TO THE PERIPHERIES”?**

Session  
for Sisters  
25-40 years  
vocation

It would be hard to find the word “periphery” in the official discourse of the Church before 2013. That year, during the conclave convened to elect a new Pope, Cardinal Bergoglio (not yet Pope Francis), used it:

*“Evangelizing implies apostolic zeal. Evangelizing presupposes the Church has the parrhêsia (boldness) to come out of itself. The Church is called to come out of itself and go towards the peripheries, not just geographical ones, but also existential ones: those of the mystery of sin, suffering, injustice, those of ignorance and absence of faith, those of thought, those of all forms of poverty”* (reported by Cardinal Jaime Luca Ortega, Cardinal of Havana).

*“The Church is called to come out of itself and go towards the peripheries.”* The peripheries towards which the Church should go, according to Pope Francis, are not just “geographical peripheries,” geographical spaces, but also existential peripheries, human realities marked by sin, poverty, suffering, injustice, ignorance, the absence of God, lack of education, etc.

In his apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, EG, 20-24), the Pope shakes up the whole world and the Church itself when he clearly expresses his longing for a Church that goes forth and when he calls all Christians and all communities to **discern the path that the Lord asks them to follow** and to choose to be genuine missionary disciples of Christ: *“Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the “peripheries” in need of the light of the Gospel”* (EG, 20).

To reach *“all the peripheries in need of the light of the Gospel,”* the entire Church and consecrated men and women in particular need to undergo a conversion and change their mentality; otherwise, we run the risk of becoming a Church centered on itself and religious communities centered on themselves. The Pope’s call is urgent:

*“Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the center and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: ‘Give them something to eat’ (Mk 6:37)”* (EG, 49).

### *With the peripheries in our hearts*

It couldn't be clearer! Pope Francis has set the Church in motion toward the peripheries. His long experience as a pastor of his flock, a theologian and a spiritual man gives him the right to denounce a certain distancing on the part of the Church from the existential peripheries even as, geographically speaking, it has spread all over the planet. This Church that is everywhere has in a way settled into a middle-class mentality, closed itself off and distanced itself from human realities that in fact need the Gospel message and charity's force. How many bishops, priests, consecrated persons and Christians have isolated themselves in a comfortable risk-free life cut off from reality.

The Pope is direct and clear. We know his style well. He speaks frankly, and his images are incisive and powerful. He denounces *a tomb psychology [that] develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum* (EG, 83). He denounces "armchair Christians"; he asserts that when the Church isolates itself, it falls ill; he also denounces "*spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church, consists in seeking not the Lord's glory but human glory and personal well-being. It is what the Lord reprimanded the Pharisees for: 'How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?' (Jn 5:44). It is a subtle way of seeking one's 'own interests, not those of Jesus Christ' (Phil 2:21). [Spiritual worldliness] takes on many forms, depending on the kinds of persons and groups into which it seeps. Since it is based on carefully cultivated appearances, it is not always linked to outward sin; from without, everything appears as it should be. But if it were to seep into the Church, 'it would be infinitely more disastrous than any other worldliness which is simply moral'*" (EG, 93).

It is also clear for Pope Francis that poverty and misery are the clear indications of geographical and spiritual peripheries. The peripheries are inhabited by poor persons, and these poor persons are excluded. They were not able *to be fully part of society.*

Abandonment, indifference and unjust systems that destroy the social fabric produce peripheries. How, though, could we see this, how could we understand this if we are far from these realities?

Article 187 of *The Joy of the Gospel* issues this call: “*Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid. A mere glance at the Scriptures is enough to make us see how our gracious Father wants to hear the cry of the poor: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them... so I will send you...” (Ex 3:7-8, 10). We also see how he is concerned for their needs: “When the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up for them a deliverer” (Jg 3:15). If we, who are God’s means of hearing the poor, turn deaf ears to this plea, we oppose the Father’s will and his plan; that poor person “might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt” (Dt 15:9).*

*A lack of solidarity towards his or her needs will directly affect our relationship with God: “For if in bitterness of soul he calls down a curse upon you, his Creator will hear his prayer” (Sir 4:6). The old question always returns: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods, and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 Jn 3:17).*

*Let us recall also how bluntly the apostle James speaks of the cry of the oppressed: “The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts” (Jas 5:4)” (EG, 187).*

## With the peripheries in our hearts

Two ideas are especially important for the continuation of our reflection:

- Lack of solidarity toward people on the peripheries directly affects our relationship with God. Closing our eyes, ears, hands and hearts to our brothers and sisters is also closing ourselves to God. *“I was hungry and you gave me to eat... Amen, Amen, I say to you, whatever you did not do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did not do to me”* (Mt 25:45).
- We are instruments of God, *“God’s means,”* for listening to those who are poor. In other words, we God’s instruments for going to the human, existential, sociological and other peripheries, and if we refuse to be these instruments of God, Pope Francis warns us, *“we oppose the Father’s will and his plan.”*

Having established these two points, we can move on to another stage of our reflection.

## **II. IS THERE A THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THIS ECCLESIAL AND SPIRITUAL MOVEMENT?**

From the first pages of the Bible, God appears in movement. We could say that the creation of the universe and the world results from a movement from the center toward the peripheries, God toward the empty void... From this nothingness, the initial *“tohu bohu,”*<sup>1</sup> God created a hospitable and welcoming world for all creatures. This is the Creator’s initial desire.

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1. Le **Tohu-bohu** is a Biblical Hebrew phrase found in the Genesis creation narrative (Genesis 1:2) that describes the condition of the earth immediately before the creation of light. Biblical and post-Biblical literature coincide in considering this condition as inhospitable, even incompatible with life. The concept was taken up in French with the expression **tohu-bohu**, which describes confused agitation. Wikipedia, consulted on March 9, 2020.

<https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tohu-va-Bohu>

Biblical revelation continues by presenting God in a constant process of going forth, setting into motion men and women who go in the name of God toward His most wayward creatures. *“The word of God constantly shows us how God challenges those who believe in him ‘to go forth.’ Abraham received the call to set out for a new land (cf. Gen 12:1-3). Moses heard God’s call: ‘Go, I send you’ (Ex 3:10) and led the people towards the promised land (cf. Ex 3:17). To Jeremiah, God says: ‘To all whom I send you, you shall go’ (Jer 1:7)” (EG, 20).*

We can thus unequivocally say that revelation itself is the theological basis for a Church that goes forth, in motion toward the peripheries. This is God’s nature! God is not a solitary being, nor an isolated one, nor a selfish and self-sufficient being. In fact, God is not absolute and does not want to be. “What do you mean?” you will ask. The word “absolute” means “without connection,” “without attachments,” “without relationships,” “cut and dried,” etc. This is the thinking behind an absolute monarch, who governs without concern for anyone and without listening to the least advice. God does not behave like an absolute monarch. His almighty nature is only understandable and beneficial in that it is exercised in love and out of love. It is God’s love that is almighty. Otherwise, God would crush us by his almightiness. *“God acts not out of the necessity of His power, but out of the choice of His goodness guided by His wisdom,”*<sup>2</sup> a philosopher would say. Divine revelation appears as divine movement toward humanity. *“Revelation is not primarily the presence of God, but the going forth of God out from Himself into the world. However, in exiling Himself in creation, God did not remain foreign to humankind: He wanted to make Himself heard, to make Himself seen, to make Himself ‘known’ or rather encountered by a people who welcome Him. This encounter between humanity and God*

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2. Guy SAMAMA, “Peut-on se passer de l’idée de création ?” [“Could we do without the concept of creation?”] In *Pardès*, 2001/2 N° 31, p. 139-164. This quote is found on p. 146; cf. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-pardes-2001-2-page-139.htm>

*With the peripheries in our hearts*

*remains unique and inexpressible even if given to an entire people and over time: it appears 'in many ways' (Lk 1:1) without any event ever being able to exhaust it in its totality.*"<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, Biblical revelation pushes to the extreme the idea of a "God who goes forth," a God in motion out to the peripheries, a God of encounter. The incarnation of Christ most fully expresses God's going forth towards His creatures and, among them, the poorest and most vulnerable ones. He chose to become flesh in the condition of the humble and the lowly. Why? Perhaps because the humble and lowly are the easiest to approach, the easiest to encounter.

Christ incarnate, the Son of God become man, is also the Christological foundation for the idea of a Church that goes forth, of a movement towards the peripheries. One of the most beautiful images in the Bible is surely that of Jesus the Good Shepherd. He knows each of His sheep by name, cares for them, leads them toward green pastures and above all seeks out the lost sheep (Lk 15:3-7). The lost sheep of Luke's Gospel represents the peripheries in Jesus' eyes. The shepherd is so convinced of the importance of this lost sheep that he does not hesitate to leave the ninety-nine others to set off to find it. A single sheep is worth ninety-nine... how crazy!

Finally, Christ in the Gospel of Matthew 25 identifies with the least of his brothers and sisters. "*Amen, amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me*" (Mt 25:40). A poet says it better than we can:

*"I was hungry... I was thirsty... I was a stranger... whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me (Mt 25:35-40). What is described, what is revealed in this monumental page of the Gospel is transubstantiation. Jesus passes fully*

3. Cf. *Encyclopédie Universalis*, article on the word "révélation": <https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/revelation/1-la-revelation-dans-la-bible/>  
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*into the substance of those who are poor. All of Jesus is in the 'species' of those who are poor. All types of poor people are transubstantiated in Jesus because 'you did it to me' is another way of saying 'this is my body' (Mt 25:26). Of all the needy of the world, Jesus makes His body, of all those who go without, He makes His fullness... This is the mystery of transubstantiation. Not many people think of this transubstantiation because it is not theoretical and because it disgusts us to think that Jesus is another person."*<sup>4</sup>

In short, the Biblical revelation of the incarnation is also basis for the spirituality of going forth to the peripheries.

### **III. VINCENT DE PAUL LIVED OUT THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE PERIPHERIES IN THE 17TH CENTURY.**

Let us turn to Vincent de Paul and ask him how he would have spoken about this call to the peripheries. While the word 'periphery' did not figure in Vincent's vocabulary, he moved physically and conceptually from the center toward the geographical and spiritual peripheries of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He caused the Church to move and set men and women into motion toward many different human and social peripheries of that century.

Vincent's century was one of divisions. There were the rich and the poor, the bourgeoisie and lords and a vast multitude of destitute people who could not survive in a dignified way. Migration caused by wars, the suffering of hungry people, the spiritual and human abandonment of country dwellers, the disdain for abandoned children, the dehumanization of sick people and galley convicts... Vincent saw all this. He was not satisfied, however, with seeing it from afar; he drew near like the Good Samaritan in the Gospel, let other people's suffering enter into his heart and acted with all his might. He set many people into motion. It was his own way

4. François CASSINGENA-TREVEDY, *Étincelles* II, Ad Solem, Floch: Mayenne, 2007, p. 421-422

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of de-compartmentalizing this world that was closed in on itself as if there were eternally separated social castes.

Vincent was so bold that during his lifetime, he sent Priests of the Mission and Daughters of Charity throughout Europe and beyond: Italy, the British Isles, Poland, Madagascar and North Africa. This began as early as 1645.

*“The idea of making Christ known in distant lands overjoyed Vincent’s heart.”*<sup>5</sup> He wrote the following to Charles Nacquart on March 22, 1648, to announce that he would go with other companions of the Congregation of the Mission to Madagascar: *“The Company has cast its eyes on you, as the best offering it has, to do homage to our Sovereign Creator... together with another good priest of the Company. O my more than dearest Father, what does your heart say to this news? Does it have the shame and confusion suitable for receiving such a grace from heaven?”*<sup>6</sup> Note that Vincent considered going far away and leaving everything a grace, a gift from God and an homage paid to our sovereign Creator. We should recall that the sea voyage then lasted six months, the climate sometimes caused death and some died on the boat before arriving at the mission. Vincent, for his part, never grew discouraged. He kept sending missionaries to these distant lands despite several deaths.

Another example of Vincent’s zeal for the mission that goes forth is his careful preparation of the missionaries before they left for Algiers, a Muslim land. *“They shall subject themselves to the laws of the country except in what concerns religion, which they will never dispute and will say nothing to belittle it.”*<sup>7</sup>

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5. Marie-Joëlle GUILLAUME, *Vincent de Paul. Un saint du Grand siècle* [*Vincent de Paul: a Saint of the Great Century*]. Perrin: Paris, 2015, p. 416

6. CCD III, p. 278-279, L. 1020, To Charles Nacquart, Priest of the Mission in Richelieu

7. Quoted in Marie-Joëlle GUILLAUME, op. cit., p. 423

Vincent de Paul himself turned to the peripheries of his times, but he also helped the contemporary clergy to do the same. He saw that men came to the priesthood without a true vocation for service after the example of the Good Shepherd of the Gospel, but with a simple desire to assure a good position and reputation for themselves. Vincent admitted his own worldly quest for an “honest retirement,” an expression showing that priesthood for him represented a social and economic ladder that would promise him a bright future. He therefore organized the retreats for the ordinands. Hundreds of seminarians would be ordained in Paris between 1631 and 1641 after an eleven-day retreat either at St. Lazare or the Collège des Bons Enfants. Thanks to Vincent and his team, these men, who could have become priests without sufficient preparation, discovered the spiritual life, mental prayer, contemplation, examination of conscience, theology, morality, etc. As a result, these future priests would celebrate Mass with dignity and devotion and visit the sick in hospitals and prisoners. They would teach catechism and hear confessions. The Tuesday Conferences would be an extension of these retreats. Having tasted theological and pastoral reflection, prayer in common and priestly friendship, these priests wished to keep the flame lit during the ordination retreats burning. A very important point for the members of the Tuesday Conferences was ongoing involvement in charitable work.

*“At Vincent’s death, the Tuesday Conferences numbered about 250 members. From its numbers were chosen twenty-two bishops, and it included founders of religious congregations such as Jean-Jacques Olier (Sulpicians) and François Pallu (co-founder of the Foreign Missionaries of Paris)”*<sup>8</sup> and many others. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, we would see not just Vincent going to the peripheries, but a large number of missionaries and diocesan priests who would do the same.

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8. Idem., p. 261

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Now, where did Vincent de Paul draw such strength, inspiration and pastoral and spiritual creativity? Quite simply, everything came to him from the contemplation of the “Christ who goes forth,” about whom he spoke in these terms:

*“Let’s look at the Son of God; what a heart of charity He had; what a fire of love! Please tell us, Jesus, who pulled You away from heaven to come to endure the curse of earth and the many persecutions and torments You suffered?”*

*O Savior! Source of love humbled even to our level and to a vile agony, who showed, in that, greater love for the neighbor than You yourself did? You came to lay yourself open to all our misfortunes, to take the form of a sinner, to lead a life of suffering and to undergo a shameful death for us; is there any love like that? But who else could love in such an outstanding way? Only Our Lord, who was so enamored with the love of creatures as to leave the throne of His Father to come to take a body subject to weaknesses. And why? To establish among us, by His word and example, love of the neighbor. This is the love that crucified Him and brought about that admirable work of our redemption. O Messieurs, if we had only a little of that love, would we stand around with our arms folded?”<sup>9</sup>*

Vincent looked at the incarnation of the Son of God: “Tell us,” Vincent asked Jesus, “Please tell us, Jesus, who pulled You away from heaven to come to endure the curse of earth?” What captured Vincent’s attention? It is the fact that only our Lord would be so in love with creatures to be able to leave the throne of His Father to come and take on a human body.

His eyes fixed on the incarnate Christ, Vincent contemplated the Son of God’s going forth from heaven to come save humanity. It would seem that the Son of God’s voyage toward the human and earthly peripheries filled Saint Vincent with admiration.

9. CCD XII, p. 216. The date is May 30, 1659, so it is a 78-year-old man who speaks to his missionaries.

Obedying the loving will of His Father, Christ became un-centered on Himself. He left His paradise, His center, and exiled Himself to the human and earthly adventures that would ultimately lead Him to the cross. He lived His *kenosis*, in other words, He emptied Himself of Himself, of His divine condition that he did not keep for Himself; rather, He humbled Himself, He emptied Himself of Himself, He stripped Himself and took on the condition of a servant... This is precisely the hymn to the Philippians that we regularly sing during Vespers (Phil 2:6-11). Christ is the foundation for Vincent de Paul's energetic action. It is also the Christological basis for the Church that goes forth and for the spirituality of going forth.

#### **IV. WHY IS THE “SPIRITUALITY OF THE PERIPHERIES” IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT DOING INNER WORK?**

The service of those who are poor on the peripheries is not always easy. By nature, we are “conservative,” like predictable lives and avoid what disturbs us and breaks our routine.

Wholeheartedly going out to the human and geographical peripheries is a Gospel, ecclesial and communal undertaking. We cannot go all alone; otherwise, we will not last long. It is also necessary to do some inner work.

#### **CONSIDER THESE QUESTIONS:**

- Do we dream of a Church that goes forth as Pope Francis and Saint Vincent desire?
  
- What keeps us from going forth to existential and geographical peripheries? The institution? Our conservatism? Old and outdated structures? Fear? Our fears? Our middle-class mentality? Our hardness of heart? Our indifference? Our lack of faith? Our lack of enthusiasm and zeal? Our

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lack of love for God and neighbor? A mistaken idea of consecrated life? Spiritual and pastoral sloth (acedia)?

Recall what Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “*The problem is not always an excess of activity, but rather activity undertaken badly, without adequate motivation, without a spirituality which would permeate it and make it pleasurable. As a result, work becomes more tiring than necessary, even leading at times to illness. Far from a content and happy tiredness, this is a tense, burdensome, dissatisfying and, in the end, unbearable fatigue. This pastoral acedia can be caused by a number of things. Some fall into it because they throw themselves into unrealistic projects and are not satisfied simply to do what they reasonably can. Others, because they lack the patience to allow processes to mature; they want everything to fall from heaven. Others, because they are attached to a few projects or vain dreams of success. Others, because they have lost real contact with people and so depersonalize their work that they are more concerned with the road map than with the journey itself. Others fall into acedia because they are unable to wait; they want to dominate the rhythm of life. Today’s obsession with immediate results makes it hard for pastoral workers to tolerate anything that smacks of disagreement, possible failure, criticism, the cross.*

*And so, the biggest threat of all gradually takes shape: ‘the gray pragmatism of the daily life of the Church, in which all appears to proceed normally, while in reality faith is wearing down and degenerating into small-mindedness’. A tomb psychology thus develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum. Disillusioned with reality, with the Church and with themselves, they experience a constant temptation to cling to a faint melancholy, lacking in hope, which seizes the heart like ‘the most precious of the devil’s potions’. Called to radiate light and communicate life, in the end they are caught up in things that generate only darkness and inner weariness, and slowly*

*consume all zeal for the apostolate. For all this, I repeat: Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization!”* (EG, 82-83).

To be part of the Church that goes forth, we must come out of ourselves and of our endless inner conflicts. It is true that some will last our whole lives. However, let us give ourselves the means to help overcome them. An even more serious problem is that sometimes consecrated men and women enter monasteries or religious communities to be taken care of. In that case, going out to others and to the peripheries becomes impossible because we weigh ourselves down. Our very self is burdensome; the self is a dictator that ends up extinguishing our joy of the Gospel and of sharing it with those who need it.

Of course, God can save and does save regardless of our proclamation and action, but if we do not proclaim the Gospel, if we do not love affectively and effectively, can we be saved? The problem is not that we would have failed in our duty but that we would not have passed on the joy that we received, the treasure of love that saved us... this would mean that our joy of faith and of God's love was insignificant for us. If our encounter with the Lord Jesus has transformed our lives, we cannot keep it for ourselves. If we keep it for ourselves, it means that it has not really transformed us, and then it is legitimate to question our salvation. Therefore, evangelization that goes forth, a Church that goes forth is required to be true to our fundamental identity.

Father Roberto GOMEZ, CM

## **SOME QUESTIONS**

- Share a dream about serving those who are poor on the peripheries that fills us with joy.
  
- In which peripheries is the Company present in our Province and our country? What human and geographical peripheries still need to be served?
  
- What theological and spiritual foundations do we find in the Constitutions and the thinking of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise to back up the Pope's invitation addressed to the entire Church to go to the peripheries?

Session for Sisters 25-40 years vocation

## Religious life in the digital age “Deciphering the sphinx”

### I. WHAT IS CHANGING?

People say that the world has changed and that things no longer are as they were in the past. In fact, the world has not changed; the world is changing! The speed of processes in communication technology is unprecedented in human history.

This is evident to anyone who, for example, goes to a store to buy a cell phone. A model bought a month or even a week ago has become obsolete. Moreover, this is the case for all types of equipment. Every morning when we wake up, we are overwhelmed by new gadgets, applications, digital innovations and surprises of all sorts. The Brazilian poet Belchior was right to say, *“Everything that was new ‘a little while ago’ is old ‘today,’ and we all need to grow younger.”* “A little while ago” can be just five minutes earlier. According to Klaus Schwab, the founder of the World Economic Forum, the digital age centers around standards that are very different from those of other eras. We have been used to advancing linearly whereas now the speed is exponential (Schwab, 2004).

Technological evolution in all areas of human knowledge had come slowly and progressively, incomparable with the amazing advances of our times. It’s like replacing a Volkswagen Beetle with a Formula 1 race car. By the time you look at the race track, the car has already disappeared!

## II. “DECIPHER ME OR I WILL DEVOUR YOU.”

In antiquity, the playwright Sophocles used a myth in his tragedy *Oedipus Rex* to reflect on the questions of human guilt and responsibility regarding norms and taboos. Unaware that he had killed his own father, Oedipus went to Thebes. Along the way, he came upon the Sphinx, a monster who was half lion, half woman and who challenged travelers with riddles, devouring those who could not solve them. The Sphinx tormented the inhabitants of Thebes. The Sphinx asked the following riddle: “*What animal walks on four feet in the morning, two at noon and three in the evening?*” Oedipus answered, “*It is man since in the morning of his life (childhood), he crawls with his feet and hands, at noon (adulthood), he walks on two feet, and in the evening (old age), he needs two legs and the help of a cane.*”

The digital age is like a sphinx that puts forward new riddles every minute for us to solve. There is no pre-established road map, ready response or perfect recipe. We are living a “new version of the world,” something totally different from anything that has been seen in human history.

*“The problem is that there is no user manual for this new version since its operation evolves depending on its use. It is an open system that changes based on interactions with its environment”* (Magaldi and Salibi, 2018).

The challenge is thus ongoing, and the mission never ends. Furthermore, the task of confronting the “digital sphinx” and of doing one’s best to decipher its riddles falls not only to researchers or advanced technology experts. The positive and negative impacts of this “new version” of the world (the power of the sphinx) are unquestionably felt in all areas of human activity and touch all of humanity. This ongoing and incomplete deciphering must take place not only in labs, universities or technology centers; it is also vital for it to happen in families and schools, so why not in religious life as well?

Oedipus was very intelligent and got what he wanted. May we have the same good fortune today!

### III. SOME PATHS FORWARD

Since all people on the face of the earth share in the need to try to decipher the riddles of the digital age, we need some paths forward to help us to better understand this sphinx. In other words, in which “version of the world” are we living? What are its main or most relevant characteristics? I will bring out a few points:

#### **a) It is a multi-facetted and interconnected world.**

In the past, information dissemination took place in a linear way and was almost always controlled by large media groups, even by governments. The old formula of “transmitter-receiver” in social communication media indicated a hierarchy or a power relationship between someone who could transmit and someone who could receive. That relationship has been turned on its head. The world in its “new version” is one of individual freedoms in which dissemination is completely decentralized, and everyone can be not only a receiver but can also transmit whatever he wants whenever he wants. Messages posted on social networks by individuals or social groups may interest just a small number of people, but certain contents can make them “go viral,” that is, spread instantaneously and uncontrollably to reach thousands of internet users. People publish everything (photos, images, opinions, accusations, insults, lies) on social networks, and no one has to answer to anyone. While Facebook, for example, recently imposed certain limits, they are minimal.

Moreover, it is a world where no one is really far from anyone despite huge geographical distances. We are definitively linked to each other, whatever our religion, political leanings or sexual orientation. We live networked, all together and all mixed up! We may be for or against it, support or reject it, but the truth

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is that we can no longer escape this network except in the rare moments when we turn off our cell phone or have no Internet service, which for many people is a near social death. Certainly, there is no other way to be a human being today.

#### **b) A world of selective social interaction**

New forms of technology have democratized the processes of mass communication, enabling individuals to be providers or disseminators of information. All people, as long as they have Internet access, can gather and disseminate information as they wish. Internet use empowers people, strengthening their sense of security, personal freedom and influence, which has a positive effect on happiness and personal well-being (Castells, 2013). Indeed, many people have grown accustomed to publishing photos, comments, jokes and even personal insults on social networks. Individual feelings or desires count above all else. It seems like the world revolves around me and the people in my social group.

Along these lines, it is helpful to understand how social groups form today. The so-called “selective social interaction” (Castells, 2013) is one of the primary traits of the digital age. Relationships based on kinship, physical proximity or collegiality no longer prevail when someone decides to become part of a particular social group. Social groups are formed freely based on very diverse interests, depending on political leanings, religion and sexual preferences as well as tastes, feelings, experiences and personal expectations. These groups often extend beyond the geographical boundaries and specific cultures within which socialization has traditionally taken place. Now, we live (virtually) in the “global village.” However, this globalization made possible and favored by the Internet is an individual decision made by each member of the network and is not determined externally by anyone. We are all connected, but as a result of our personal freedom.

### c) A vast and profound world

It is not just a change in the “what” and “how” but also in “who” we are. The “new version” produces a radical paradigm shift in all areas. It is wrong to think that what happened is just swapping telegrams for WhatsApp, landlines for cell phones or video cassettes rented from a video store for Netflix that we watch comfortably at home. It is much more than that, infinitely more! Magaldi and Salibi Neto state in their work entitled *Managing tomorrow*:

*“There is a new global perspective. This system is not a simple incremental change to the previous one. It is a version that functions according to a very specific logic, different from previous ones”* (Magaldi and Salibi, 2018).

All the technological revolutions known to humanity (from the steam engine to the discovery of electricity) have impacted, in a way, our manner of BEING and LIVING in the world. Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press, to give but one example, had a major influence on the course of human history. Access to books democratized reading, and knowledge developed considerably. However, technology resulting from the digital age has a much more systematic impact because it involves the transformation of entire systems. This is what Magaldi and Salibi Neto, in the aforementioned work, call a “disruptive moment,” in other words, a shock so radical that it causes not just one particular floor to collapse, but the entire building. The authors write:

*“At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world has entered into a real eruption. Traditional organizations are paralyzed by the idea that all the knowledge acquired through experience over the course of centuries is worth very little when faced with an unknown reality”* (Magaldi and Salibi, 2018).

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We are experiencing an unprecedented cultural change. There has been nothing like what we are living through today. Given that effective communication is a fundamental characteristic of the human race, the transformation of communication affects our lives at all levels and maybe (just “maybe”) causes changes in our cerebral connections over time (Castells, 2013). Henceforth, we see with different eyes, with a different perspective on the world. Reapplying existing models could mean not just going backward, but a death sentence. This is true for businesses, religious life, institutions in general and all people.

## IV. NOSTALGIA

Nostalgia almost always comes up in conversations among men and women over 50, and this is true among religious men and women as well. We hear expressions like, “*In my day, it wasn’t like that,*” or “*Everything has changed for the worse,*” in any café, among retired people waiting in lines and sitting on park benches or during community time in our religious houses. We speak a lot about a past that is often idealized and about a present that does not please and no longer meets the expectations of those who lived in other eras. “Yesterday” will always be better than “today.” “Yesterday” I was mostly sure, but “today” I feel lost. “Yesterday” I believed, but “today” I can no longer trust.

In itself, nostalgia is good. After all, it does the heart and soul good to remember the past, especially when we had a positive experience of this recent or distant past despite certain difficulties. There are no regrets, and if there are, there are not too many. As an old Carnival song goes, “*Remembering is living!*” because in a way, remembering is reliving what we have lived. This nostalgia is sweet, pleasant and optimistic. However, there is also bitter nostalgia, a sadness that makes us suffer and that gradually eats away at our remaining hope and motivation to keep living. Such nostalgia can also be an indication of prejudices and discrimination. Often, when we extol the past, we forget that the

Spirit of God really renews the face of the earth (Rev 21:5) and as a result is capable of making the present as good as or better than the past. Opening ourselves to the action of the Holy Spirit thus means opening ourselves to the newness that arises at every instant. To come to this point, we must fight the prejudices rooted in the past and courageously open ourselves to a dialogue with the reality of the present that is free from discrimination against anyone or anything. Bitterly nostalgic people can embitter others' lives! Nostalgic people open to the movement of the Spirit rejoice in their past and thrill at the possibilities of the present!

## V. WHY MUST WE CHANGE?

This is one of the most common questions among bitterly nostalgic people. Their reasoning is the following: if the past was so good, why not repeat the old formulas? A well-known proverb goes, "*You don't change a winning team.*" Given the instability and uncertainty of the present, wouldn't it be more prudent to leave things as they are or rather as they always have been? We can always turn to popular wisdom that says, "*No harm ever came from caution and chicken soup,*" or "*A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.*" The values that we have established in the past mean the stability of the institution whereas new values, those that lie before us, do not offer us any guarantee. In the best-case scenario, bitterly nostalgic people tend to put off facing the present with the following attitude: "*Leave it as it is, and we'll see what comes of it.*" Obviously, this attitude takes us nowhere.

It seems that this was precisely the apostles' feeling toward Jesus at the time of His Transfiguration. They wanted to remain there forever, contemplating this magnificent scene. Why come down from the mountain and take the risks of the plain? Why exchange peace for war? Why go from the glory that we have already touched with our hands to the uncertainties of everyday life? The idea was to set up three tents and remain forever in this wonderful place in the company of Moses, Elijah and Jesus.

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Resentful, they may have said to Jesus, “*Lord, what a stupid idea!*” However, to their great disappointment, Jesus rejected their suggestion and invited them to come down from the mountain to take up the challenges of the plain. Jesus was not naïve or unaware of the risks of the mission. He knew that things would be very complicated down there, but he also knew that He was not sent to the mountain but to the plain, where life throbs with its human sorrows and joys. The decision to come down and take the risks involved in the proclamation of the Good News definitely did not please the disciples. Only later would they be able to understand.

There are consecrated men and women today who, like the apostles, try to take refuge on the peaceful mountain of their religious institutions. They are men and women who are afraid to come down to the plain where we find the great challenges of our times, this digital age. They are consecrated men and women who believe that “yesterday” was better and that the best option is conserving the past as it was. Traditional forms therefore must inevitably be defended. At most, some “reforms” are possible as long as there is not too much risk.

*“In general, the human person worries more about the risk of trying something new than about the danger of maintaining the status quo in a changing environment”* (Magaldi and Salibi, 2018).

Although these authors’ book specifically concerns the administration of businesses, we could apply this reflection to the reality of religious life. It would seem that religious families tend to retreat or settle into their comfort zone. Among other reasons, this results from an accelerating decrease in numbers, the lack of vocations, financial difficulties and sometimes the lack of new leaders or of leaders open to this new world in which we live. Often, coming down to the plain is a very difficult task! It seems better to remain safe under the tents than to take the risks of an unknown plain. The problem is that this “security” is not actually as safe as consecrated men and women think. The “disruptive

moment” in which we live is so powerful that it can destabilize big, solid institutions and reduce our “castles in the sky” to dust.

## **VI. RISKS, YES, BUT OPPORTUNITIES AS WELL!**

Pessimistic nostalgic people (the bitter ones) see only risks and the dangers in the digital age, which threaten our institutions. On the contrary, the optimists (the sweet ones) have a broader perspective and thus understand that risks are often new opportunities to evaluate the path traveled and to grow. Even if these people are older, they become like young people when they look carefully at reality and take up its challenges. Chronological age matters little if we remain open to newness. Indeed, visionaries are those who are not satisfied with complaining about the novelties of our times but throw themselves into the daily adventure of trying to “decipher the sphinx.”

It is true that the risks, some well-known, others less so, are numerous. One of the greatest risks at this time might be the possibility to spread all sorts of racial hatred, homophobia and other prejudices. Anyone on social networks can make all of this go “viral” at any time. In addition, social networks have begun to be invaded by what we have come to call “post-truth” or “fake news.” It is not by chance that Oxford Dictionaries chose as its 2016 word of the year “post-truth,” defining the term as shorthand for the “*circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotion appeals and personal belief*” (D’Ancona, 2018). Spreading lies on social networks can seriously damage an individual’s image or the reputation of an institution. This invasion of lies is becoming a real concern because it compromises the social, political and economic stability that we need to live. Unfortunately, the antidote to contain the spread of this illness has not yet been discovered. The worst thing is that sometimes with the best intentions but without even minimal discernment, we reproduce this “fake news” and help to spread the virus of lies in cyberspace.

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The opportunities are as abundant as the risks. The digital age is the age of individual freedoms. Obviously, these freedoms can be used for evil or for good. Living in a multifaceted and interconnected world, we can search for and share information, clarify it, motivate others and raise their awareness and thus mobilize people for something positive. Today, countless global social movements are organized around social networks. The fight to defend human rights, especially those of minorities, has found its best ally in the Internet.

In addition, social networks also represent opportunities for creating spaces for discussion on a wide range of subjects. People are wrong to think that Facebook, for example, was created to spread insults, hatred and prejudices. The people who use networks to disseminate their repressive messages or anger are not the majority. The fact that some users express a certain intolerance and proffer insults does not mean that Facebook or any other network was created for that purpose. We can and should go on these networks to share good things, things that can really contribute to the growth of humanity or human values that exist in the digital age.

Networks are a privileged space for sharing in this multifaceted and diverse world that also demands respect of differences. Here is another great opportunity! To the extent that we can respect differences rather than trying to use political or religious authoritarianism or dogmatism to convince other internet users, social networks will help us to build truly transparent and democratic relationships. Then, it will no longer be absurd to claim that the digital age can be perfectly compatible with Jesus' Gospel values. The greatest commandment, the commandment to love one's neighbor, translates today into respect, tolerance and sharing of what we have and who we are. The same social networks that spread hatred, prejudice and intolerance can also serve all people as networks of solidarity, bringing together people of different religious beliefs, political leanings or sexual preferences.

## VII. THREE IMPORTANT WORDS

In fact, we should have three attitudes if we hope to confront the “riddles of the sphinx.”

The first is **OPENNESS**, in other words, the readiness to give up certain attitudes that were considered unshakable in the recent past.

Anyone who thinks that he knows it all and closes himself to novelty that is entering into our lives or, rather, that has already entered them, probably is not capable of surviving today. Anyone who has no more questions to ask or thinks that he can find answers to everything in his “archives” has been left behind and has already missed the “train” of history. The digital age is also the age of new learning, an invitation to deconstruct old certainties and face new, rich possibilities. It is thus important to restore humility’s relevance as a factor of personal development, like the leader learning to unlearn and give up his certainties, many of which are deeply rooted in his conscience. Adopting the habit of frequently asking questions gives rise to reflection, curiosity and restlessness flowing from the conviction that everything is in a state of construction (Magaldi and Salibi, 2018).

The next word is **DISCERNMENT**.

The parable of the weeds and the wheat is highly pertinent. Today more than ever, we should have a critical regard on the reality around us. It is not a matter of looking at the digital age simply to condemn it. Such an attitude will resolve nothing. The weeds and the wheat are mixed, and separating them according to the criteria of the Gospel is our task. Discernment is necessary! When we look at the technological society in which we live, we realize that everything is all mixed up! Millions of lies “clothed” in truth (called fake news) appear each second on social networks, and people generally allow them to influence them without stopping a single second to reflect on this, to realize the situation and much less to discern.

## Religious life in the digital age

Given this very murky picture, our biggest contribution in our day and for our time may be to offer people, regardless of their social class, political position or religious stance, the elements and criteria that will enable them to make a real discernment. Religious men and women should become “animators of discernment.” Our mission now is provoking, encouraging and accompanying individual and communal discernment processes. Along the same lines, we should emphasize the importance of the practice of discernment in the formation of new generations of consecrated men and women. This practice should happen regularly, not just in our congregations or institutes but also in all the institutions where we work. Formation in discernment is surely the greatest challenge religious life faces today.

However, we should emphasize that certain fundamental conditions are necessary for engaging in a discernment process. The first of these conditions is a complete as possible *knowledge* of reality. No one can really discern without the necessary elements. For example, if someone wants to discern, he should first know the **object**, that is, know exactly what will be discerned. After obtaining a basic clarity on the object, this person needs to have as much information as possible on it, presented as pros and cons. Thus, it is not enough to have the latest cell phone for a person to say he is “up to date on everything.” Classes, seminars, conferences, times of individual and community study on the most significant themes of the digital age are highly important for those who wish to begin to “decipher the sphinx’s riddles.”

Secondly, all discernment processes require a basic *psycho-emotional balance* of the people involved. People who are sick, depressed or stressed will have difficulty entering into this process. In addition, it is necessary to enter into it with unarmed minds, in other words, without preconceived ideas or prejudices. A minimal *distance* is highly necessary, even indispensable. How can I discern something if I have already decided? It is also important to have the wisdom to give the process time. Often people, especially leaders, in their rush to find a way out of their

personal or institutional problems, end up rolling over the process. Typically, the results are catastrophic!

Finally, in addition to all this, it is always good to stress that communal discernment will never be authentic unless it includes a process of *dialogue* with broad participation by the people concerned. If the process excludes someone directly or indirectly involved, it no longer is discernment. Similarly, processes in which diversity and plurality are not respected end up becoming a big farce. No one imposes anything on anyone. Opinions should be well founded and firmly defended but at the same time open to different viewpoints. In the “circle of discernment,” no one is superior to anyone, and each person should maintain profound respect for opinions opposed to his own. In the end, discernment will result in concrete decisions that will affect the life of people and/or the institution. These decisions should, of course, be followed and freely assumed in a spirit of honesty and integrity. When all these points are respected, discernment leads to personal, communal and/or institutional growth that benefits all.

The third attitude that helps us in our attempt to resolve the riddles of our times is **BOLDNESS**.

The opposite of paralyzing fear, boldness leads us daringly towards the new paths that open before us. The weight of institutions of religious life is sometimes so heavy that it does not allow us to take risks. However, today this saying is truer than ever: “*Nothing hazarded, nothing gained.*” People who have called into question their way of *being* and *doing* are appropriating all this technology brought about by the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution (widespread accessibility to Internet, intelligent machines, artificial intelligence and other inventions). They have dared to invest in what is “new.”

Nowadays, the most profitable businesses in the world are those that were born precisely from the boldness of a handful of young people like Mark Zuckerberg, one of the creators of Facebook.

### Religious life in the digital age

The number of startups increases every day, transforming ideas into reality and helping humanity to live better. These small businesses (some of them not so small) are revolutionizing the world every minute. The number of cell phone applications available to us today in the palm of our hand is already impressive. Someone needs transportation? Contact Uber. You want to listen to music? Simply download it on your phone. Are you lost in the city? Open any navigation App. Banking? Just download your bank's App. It is all very convenient and rapid.

### **VIII. WILL WE COME DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN?**

Leaving our convenience and comfort zone, coming down to the plain, demands a lot of effort and always entails risks. The “sphinx’s riddle” is not so easy to solve, but it is not beyond our human capacities. After all, they are the same capacities that created the “sphinx.” The digital age is the era of questions, so, let’s ask questions! Let us not be satisfied with responses that have already been given over the course of time. Let us dare to invent a different religious life because our time, after all, is different. Anachronous rules, norms and concepts should be “reconfigured.” To do so, we are invited to open our eyes, minds and hearts wider and wider, seeking among the “mountains of weeds” the precious wheat that is God’s will in our lives.

So then, let us place new technology at the service of justice and peace. Let us use social networks to sow fraternity, respect and acceptance among people. May technology be our ally, an ally of the Gospel, and not our enemy. With openness, discernment, the light of the Word of God and much boldness, we will gradually decipher the riddle, and religious life will become relevant, effective and coherent in its mission of being “*the salt and the light of the earth.*”

Father Plutarco ALMEIDA, SJ

Province of Rosalie Rendu  
(Great Britain and Australia)

Persons who are poor evangelize us

I live in a large housing estate in Hull, East Yorkshire. Each encounter is a grace-filled moment in which the people who live here evangelize me. I would like to share just two such encounters. (Actual names are not used.)

The first person who taught me so much is **Sally**, a young woman with a history of drug addiction, abuse and mental illness. I met her almost the first day I came here. She would come looking for money to pay her electricity or gas bills. Sometimes I felt impelled to try and find the money somewhere as she seemed so desperate.

She was often the victim of the unfair system of government benefits sanctions, which meant that if for some reason she did not turn up for an appointment with Social Services or arrived late to collect her benefits, they would be stopped for weeks or months.

Her situation got gradually worse as her mental health deteriorated to the point that she had to be hospitalized. After some time, she was diagnosed as having schizophrenia and received treatment. Following a marked improvement in her mental



*News from  
the Provinces*

*Persons who are poor evangelize us*

health, she started to receive help from an agency providing counselling and work training. We were able to offer her a couple of hours work with pay and helped her out with food rather than money.

At Christmas we were looking at the crib in our small chapel when Sally said, “Sister, can we pray?”

“Of course,” I said. “What would you like to pray about?”

Sally answered, “I would like to thank God for all He has done for me.” This was the answer of someone who had experienced abuse, drug addiction and severe schizophrenia. The depth of her faith astonished me, and with Jesus I felt drawn to exclaim, “*I have not found anyone with such great faith*” (cf. Mt 8:10).

**Dolly and Mick** also touched me deeply; their faith stories never fail to inspire and move me. Dolly was a widow whose marriage had been very unhappy mainly because of her conversion to Catholicism. Mick had lost his wife to a particularly aggressive and painful cancer and turned away from God in his grief. Dolly and Mick met and eventually married.

Dolly was a faithful practicing Catholic. To her surprise, one day Mick asked if he could go to church with her. He continued to accompany her the following weeks, and when he heard about the “Journey in Faith” program for those interested in the Catholic faith, he wanted to attend. After a year in the program, he was received into the Catholic Church and has been a faithful Catholic ever since. What strikes me is how Dolly and Mick speak about their conversion. For them, coming into the Church was “coming home.”

As neither of them is well enough now to make it to Church, it is my privilege to bring them Holy Communion each week. It is beautiful to see their profound devotion and joy when they receive the Lord in the Eucharist. They often retell their faith stories, and

one day they helped me better understand these words of Jesus: *“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone opens the door, I will come in and have supper with them”* (Rev 3:20). When I shared these words with them, they were both very taken with them because when Jesus knocked at their door, they opened it wide and invited Him into their hearts and lives.

Sister Teresa MATHEWS  
*Daughter of Charity*

100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beatification of  
Louise de Marillac

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“We have found a valiant woman”

*History of  
the Company*

On May 9, 1920, in Saint Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, the solemn ceremony for the beatification of Louise de Marillac took place. Three paintings hung inside the basilica, each depicting one of the three miracles recognized for the beatification; outside, a large canvas showed Louise in the glory of heaven. The Daughters of Charity’s wish came true as the Church recognized the holiness of their “Mother”; from then on, they could publicly honor Louise as they had long revered her in their hearts.

The cause followed the ordinary procedures lasting many long years: 38 years of worry, uncertainty, hope and joy. On June 10, 1895, an official decree of Pope Leo XIII ratified the favorable opinion given by the Sacred Congregation of Rites to introduce Louise de Marillac’s cause. On July 19, 1911, Pope Pius X promulgated a decree on Louise de Marillac’s heroic virtues. On March 9, 1919, Pope Benedict XV ordered the reading of the decree approving the three miracles obtained from God through the intercession of Louise de Marillac, thus making it possible to celebrate the beatification in the Vatican basilica as soon as it would be possible.

## VENERABLE LOUISE DE MARILLAC

The decree of June 10, 1895, was a first sign of hope. After the initial official request by the Company made in 1882, the Church passed its first judgement, and the “*pious Servant of God received the right to the title ‘Venerable’.*” The Company welcomed these pieces of good news: first, the feast of the manifestation of the Immaculate Virgin Mary of the Miraculous Medal, instituted by Pope Leo XIII on November 27, 1894, in memorial of the apparition of the Virgin Mary to Catherine Labouré in the Mother House Chapel, rue du Bac in Paris, and then the Foundress’ declaration as Venerable.

The promulgation of this decree in 1895 overjoyed the hearts of the Daughters of Charity. The Superioress General, Mother Lamartinié, went to Rome to express the profound gratitude of “*Saint Vincent’s double family*” to the Sovereign Pontiff. Back in Paris, a solemn thanksgiving Benediction was held at the Mother House Chapel. In his allocution, the Superior General, Father Fiat, stated, “*We should thank God for having made this Venerable Servant an instrument of His mercy, she who, through constant suffering, accomplished such admirable works. We should thank God for having, in His mercy to you, rendered her a faithful model of the virtues that should be conspicuous in a Daughter of Charity.*”<sup>1</sup>

In 1895, the Archbishop of Paris authorized all the local communities of Daughters of Charity in his diocese to celebrate a solemn Benediction in thanksgiving to God and for the rapid beatification of their Venerable Foundress. That year on November 25-26-27, the pastor of Saint Laurent Church – where Louise de Marillac had been buried in 1660 – held a solemn thanksgiving Triduum including the feast of the Manifestation of the Miraculous Medal to show both his devotion to the Immaculate Virgin and his deep respect for the Daughters of Charity. Notices posted at the entrances to all the churches of Paris specified the schedule

1. Allocution by Father Fiat, June 29, 1895. *Annals* 1895, page 450

100th anniversary of the beautification of Louise de Marillac

for this Triduum and the names of the preachers for the evening ceremonies: Msgr. Jourdan de la Passardière, Auxiliary Bishop of Paris and former titular Bishop of Roséa (Asia Minor), and Msgr. d'Hulst, Rector of the Catholic Institute of Paris. These two great orators drew huge crowds to Saint Laurent Parish. Each local community in Paris in turn sent a group of Sisters to participate; it was a great consolation to visit this church that is like a shrine for them because it is there that “*their Venerable Mother prayed, cried, and that for many years preserved her precious remains.*”<sup>2</sup> For the first time in a church, the Sisters heard the life of Louise de Marillac publicly presented by Church authorities and not simply a “member of the Family.” “*How shall we glorify her, save by imbibing, according to our status, the spirit that animated her. By acting thus, we shall honor her whom we love,*” said the Rector of the Catholic Institute of Paris. On November 27, the third day of the Triduum, Msgr. Jourdan de la Passardière affirmed, “*This evening, the Church of Paris celebrates the apparition of Mary Immaculate to a Daughter of Saint Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. The glory of the Daughter is reflected on the Mother. The Mother’s sanctity was the cause of this remarkable favor and thereby we shall study the consummation of sanctity in the Venerable Servant of God. I would like to show you this admirable woman, imbued with such devotion to Mary Immaculate, that this devotion finds, in the miracle whose anniversary we celebrate the today, its recompense and crowning glory, and sums up in a word today’s feast and the life of the Venerable: holiness in charity.*”<sup>3</sup>

On the occasion of the promulgation of this decree, solemn thanksgiving ceremonies took place in several French cities. In Montpellier, the Bishop published a pastoral letter in which he called the clergy and faithful to participate in a thanksgiving celebration. “*You know the gratitude that animates France and, in fact, the whole Catholic world, with regard to the pious family of the Daughters of Charity... After a silence of two hundred thirty-*

2. Thanksgiving Triduum at Saint Laurent Church in Paris. *Annales* 1896, page 147

3. *Idem.*, page 149 and pages 151-152

*five years, the tomb of Louise de Marillac... is again greeted with words of praise and admiring acclamations... Today, it is the infallible voice of the Vicar of Jesus Christ that resounds around her sepulcher to celebrate her greatness.”<sup>4</sup>*

**“WE HAVE FOUND A VALIANT WOMAN, THE GLORY AND HONOR OF CATHOLIC FRANCE, LOUISE DE MARILLAC”**

Such are the first words of the decree on the heroic virtues of Louise de Marillac, read on July 19, 1911, in the presence of Pope Pius X; this decree solemnly proclaims that *“the Venerable Servant of God Louise de Marillac has practiced in an heroic degree the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity in God and for neighbor, as well as the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude and their cognate virtues, and we may now proceed to the discussion of the four miracles.”* Mother Marie Mauche, Superioress General, was at the Vatican that July 19, 1911, with three hundred Daughters of Charity and the Director General to participate in the impressive ceremony.

Father Fiat announced the good news to the Company on August 15, 1911, in a circular letter: *“This Decree it is, my dear Daughters, which today I have the happiness to send you. It should be preserved as a sacred deposit in each of your houses; as a monument of the exalted idea entertained by the Church of the merits for your Venerable Mother.”*

The Superior General continued, *“Never did your Venerable Mother receive such a eulogy; not only is it most glorious, but it is also most complete in its conciseness... We need seek no further; we have found, says the Vicar of Jesus Christ, a valiant woman, Louise de Marillac. She is, therefore, classed among the Monicas, the Elizabeths, the Frances de Chantals.... A valiant woman, Louise de Marillac is unhesitatingly declared the glory and honor of Catholic France... Would you have ever dreamed of*

4. Pastoral letter of Msgr. de Cabrière, Montpellier, June 29, 1895. *Annals* 1895, page 453

100th anniversary of the beautification of Louise de Marillac  
*such an honor for your pious and beloved Mother?"*

For this occasion, Father Fiat prescribed three successive novenas for the entire Company: one in thanksgiving, with the recitation of a *Magnificat*, an *Our Father* and a *Hail Mary*; another to ask God for the primitive spirit and for vocations; and a third to request the glorification of Louise de Marillac and the miracles needed for her beatification.

When the decree was published, three miracles were introduced: one that had taken place in the Diocese of Brixen (Austria) in 1902 and two in Spain, in 1908 and 1909.

The inquiry was lengthy; several miracles were rejected. The Sisters prayed and encouraged people who were sick to ask for their healing through the intercession of Louise de Marillac. In 1914, Father Villette, Superior General, expressed his concern to several Cardinals, who answered, "*Have no fear, Mademoiselle Le Gras will be beatified; such or such a miracle may not be accepted, but others will be presented. After all, why do we need miracles? Is not the wonderful Company of the Daughters of Charity, with its prodigious expansion and admirable works, the greatest, the most convincing miracle? Does it not prove that the Foundress of the Daughters of Charity is in heaven whence she animates her daughters and fills them with her own zeal? Have confidence; she will be beatified after the war. This will be God's recompense for the Sisters' dedication.*"<sup>5</sup> Father Verdier told the Sisters in 1921, "*Miracles? The Church has approved three of these miracles, but these are not the only ones attributed to Louise. I have read at least fifty in the depositions of witnesses in the process of beatification. How many others have never been published, either because circumstances prevented or because physicians were reluctant to make the required statements.*"<sup>6</sup>

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5. Mother House, Panegyric of Blessed Louise de Marillac, March 15, 1921. *Annals* 1921, page 325

6. *Idem.*, page 324

## THE POWERFUL INTERCESSION OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC

God responded to the Sisters' dedication. In March 1919, the inquiry commission delivered its final opinion and solemnly declared, "*It is proven that three miracles have taken place*" through the intercession of the Servant of God, Venerable Louise de Marillac.

*"First, the perfect and instantaneous cure of Joseph Marie Héleut, of a purulent inner ear infection with perforation of the eardrum accompanied by symptoms of osteitis and periostitis in the mastoid region; second, the perfect and instantaneous cure of Sister Maria Ferrer y Nin of a post-traumatic compressive myelitis; third, the perfect and instantaneous cure of Rose Curlo of a fistulous ulcer."*<sup>7</sup>

The decree was read in the presence of the Pope. Several Daughters of Charity were at the ceremony along with Father Verdier, Vicar General, who expressed his gratitude to Pope Benedict XV, taking up the words of the previous decree that called Louise de Marillac a "valiant woman." "*We have found a valiant woman in the person of the humble and remarkable Louise de Marillac... She was strong in mind, heart, will and her entire being... With the help of God who strengthened her and of Saint Vincent who directed her, she succeeded and performed miracles of charity, the prelude of those miracles that have just been solemnly proclaimed and recognized. Yes, truly, the details of her life and works clearly prove that Louise de Marillac is a valiant woman, and I thank you, Most Holy Father, for having proclaimed her such to the entire world; I thank you in the name of the Family of Saint Vincent... In the glorification of her who is truly this strong woman because she is so thoroughly Christian, may not the women of the present day draw a timely lesson?*"<sup>8</sup>

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7. Decree on the authenticity of miracles, March 9, 1919. *Annals* 1919, page 393

8. Speech by Father Verdier, Vicar General, March 9, 1919. *Annals* 1919, page 394 and 396

### 100th anniversary of the beatification of Louise de Marillac

The Pope responded to the expressions of thanks with a speech in which he again praised Louise de Marillac. *“It is enough to point out the true characteristic of Louise de Marillac. You know it full well; it is none other than charity. Louise de Marillac was associated with Saint Vincent de Paul in those foundations which were inspired solely by the love of God and of neighbor. Charity is the name given to her daughters. Why not then say that the ‘Mother of the Daughters of Charity’ had no other motto than charity? Her noble brow was ever adorned with the diamond of charity, for it is enough to study her life or simply to recall her memory to be most powerfully impelled to a practical love of God and of neighbor... The miracles that the Holy See just approved took place in France, Spain and Italy, respectively; here are three Sisters who represent, as it were, the whole human race and proclaim to the world that to share in the benefits of charity, one must address the Venerable Louise de Marillac.”*<sup>9</sup>

All that then remained was to set the date for the beatification. At the same time, the Company had the joy of learning that four Daughters of Charity from Arras guillotined during the French Revolution would be beatified with the other martyrs of the Revolution. (The Diocese of Arras had requested and pursued the beatification process.) May 9 (1920) was chosen for Louise de Marillac and June 13 for the martyrs of Arras.

### **The beatification of Louise de Marillac: “*Blessed Louise de Marillac, pray for us*”**

The beatification of the Foundress of the Daughters of Charity was so important that it had to be solemnized in a very special way by a broad representation of the Company at the ceremonies that would take place in Rome.

The Superioress General convoked the Visitatrixes from abroad, about ninety of them, as well as the Sister Servants of local communities in France and several Sisters of Office of the Mother

9. Response by the Sovereign Pontiff, March 9, 1919. *Annals* 1919, page 399

House to participate in the festivities. On May 5, 1920, “*an entire train car of cornettes left Paris for the Eternal City.*” Each of the three Italian Provinces received permission to send twenty-five Sisters, apart from the local communities of Rome and the surrounding area, which were given wide latitude. In addition, the traditional bouquet of flowers offered on May 9 to the Sovereign Pontiff was prepared by the Provincial Houses of Torino, Sienna and Naples, which had requested this honor.

On May 9, the Daughters of Charity present in Rome listened emotionally and gratefully to the words of the Brief of Beatification that stated among other things, “*It is not without a wise design of God’s Providence that, in our time when all of Europe has suffered from a war whose fury devastated the French provinces particularly, this daughter of Catholic France, the honor and glory of her noble country, apostle of charity and of brotherly love, would be elevated to the supreme honors of the altar.*”<sup>10</sup>

After the afternoon solemn Benediction, an official delegation, which included Father Verdier, Superior General, Mother Emilie Maurice and the Postulator of the cause, offered the Sovereign Pontiff a reliquary containing a bone fragment of the new Blessed, the traditional bouquet of artificial flowers and the “Life of the Blessed.” Holy cards of Louise de Marillac and the account of her life were distributed to the Cardinals and many Archbishops, Bishops, priests and other guests present.

During the customary audience after the beatification ceremonies, on June 15, 1920, Pope Benedict XV again addressed the Daughters of Charity. “*We wish to focus our attention more particularly on the two beatifications in the family of the Daughters of Charity, by which we have been happy to open and close this series of celebrations; namely, that of Blessed Louise de Marillac, your Foundress, and that of the four Sisters martyred in Cambrai; and we shall remark in them this charity that constantly animated and sustained them... You are charged to continue the work of your*

10. *Annals* 1921, page 141

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Mother. They call you ‘Daughters of Charity’ not on account of the multiplicity or variety of your works, for then they could name you ‘Mothers of Charitable Works’ or ‘Sisters of Mercy.’ But you are ‘Daughters of Charity,’ that is, Daughters of the love of God in its purest form, and tending above all and before all to the salvation and benefit of souls.”<sup>11</sup>

Pope Benedict XV continued to show his favor toward the Sisters. He allowed twenty of them to participate in Mass in his private chapel. He had the chalice offered for the beatification of our Sisters of Arras consecrated for the Mass, and he personally distributed communion to the Sisters. After the Mass, he took the time to talk with them and even joke. As a matter of fact, on May 9, the Superioress General had sent him a small present with these words, “*The very happy daughters of their Blessed Mother.*” When Benedict XV saw her, he indicated his pleasure and added, “*So! The daughters are happier than the Mother; they are ‘very happy’ while the Mother is only ‘quite happy’* [a play on words with the French word for Blessed].”<sup>12</sup>

An altar was erected at the Mother House Chapel under which the remains of Louise de Marillac were placed in a reliquary. Above the altar, a bas-relief depicted the Blessed Virgin seated, holding Baby Jesus on her lap, Saint Vincent graciously welcoming Louise de Marillac and two Daughters of Charity contemplating her in admiration. At her canonization in 1934, this altar would be completely changed.

***“A soul who humbled herself and whom the Church has exalted!”***

The beatification of Louise de Marillac caused a wave of joy, gratitude and pride, not just among her Daughters all over the world but also among people in her country of France. For example, a

11. Audience granted by Benedict XV to the Double Vincentian Family. *Annals* 1921, page 102-104

12. *Annales* 1920, page 636-7 (not reproduced in the English *Annals*)

city council member from the Saint-Victor neighborhood in Paris and several of his colleagues proposed that a street in Paris near Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet Church receive the name of the new Blessed, but the proposal was not adopted.

The Catholic newspaper *La Croix* published a long article on her life entitled, “*A soul who humbled herself and whom the Church has exalted.*”<sup>13</sup> The introduction reads, “*She humbled herself, yes... but the Church after centuries is about to elevate her, the hidden violet, to proclaim her Blessed... We may call upon her intercession. Already we exclaim, ‘Blessed Louise de Marillac, pray for us.’*” The article concluded with this short prayer: “*O Blessed Louise de Marillac, you witnessed greater evils than ours, devastating plagues, and the horrors of civil and foreign wars, but your charity contributed to alleviate all strife; increase now among us that unalterable peace you then enjoyed.*”

Several French Bishops invited the faithful to join spiritually in these canonizations and beatifications taking place in 1920 and to give thanks to God for the new French saints and Blessed with the canonization of Joan of Arc and Marguerite-Marie Alacoque and the beatification of Louise de Marillac and the martyrs of Arras.

The Bishop of Quimper and Léon said, “*Louise de Marillac entered into history through the door of humility and charity, devoting herself to the care of the poor, the sick and children... It is Louise de Marillac’s merit to have been the first, in the midst of these ‘village girls’ whose life she shared, to give the example of a perfection as exalted as that of cloister and to have impressed that perfection upon her heart and upon the heart of her Community in a heroic degree... Her beatification will be a source of satisfaction... and encourage all those women who, though in the world, lead lives of piety and charity and devote themselves to apostolic and educational works or to other spiritual and corporal works of mercy.*”

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13. Article in *La Croix*, reprinted in *Annals* 1920, page 325 and 330

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The Bishop of Sens wrote, “*Perhaps many among you, our very dear brothers, still do not know even the name of the newly Beatified. Nothing could better satisfy her profoundly humble soul than such total effacement; but the hour is come wherein she who, under the direction of Saint Vincent de Paul, founded the Company of the Daughters of Charity is to be glorified. Anyone who is not familiar with her life may come to know the mother by her daughters. If you have seen the white cornettes... consecrate themselves to the service of the poor whom they call ‘our lords and masters,’ you may judge by that what must have been the initiator of all this devotion. It is only just to attribute the glory to her because it is after her example that the first Daughters of Charity were formed, and the Sisters of today have no other ideal than that of which Louise de Marillac was the living model.*”

The Archbishop of Paris, for his part, wrote in his pastoral letter, “*Louise de Marillac displays generous charity towards her fellow-beings, helpful compassion for the poor, the sick and orphans, for all forms of distress. Louise de Marillac belongs especially to our diocese by her birth, life, labors and death, even by her tomb... Since 1824, her bones have rested in the chapel hallowed by the apparition of the Virgin of the Miraculous Medal.*”<sup>14</sup> He invited Parisians to the celebrations planned in her honor. “*The solemn Triduum in honor of the newly Beatified will be celebrated in Saint Sulpice Church, and we are confident that all Catholic Paris will there invoke this admirable model of sanctity and great benefactress of humanity. We will unite ourselves to her in our tribute to her martyred daughters, the Sisters of Charity of Arras, put to death in hatred of religion during the Revolution.*”

### **The celebrations in honor of Blessed Louise de Marillac and the four Daughter of Charity, martyrs of Arras**

The Mother House prepared a Triduum: two days in honor of the Foundress and one day in honor of her martyred Daughters. As

14. Various pastoral letters from Bishops about the Blessed, reprinted in *Annals* 1920, pages 320-324

the Chapel at the rue du Bac was too small, Saint Sulpice Church was chosen to allow everyone (Sisters, Seminary Sisters, elderly Sisters, the faithful, children and youth) to participate in these three days of celebration. Everything was planned down to the least details: liturgy, hymns specially composed for the occasion, songs, decoration, participation by different groups... Each day, a high-ranking guest gave the panegyric of the Blessed; Cardinal Amette presided over the pontifical offices.

At the Mother House Chapel, the double Vincentian family gathered to celebrate the beatification, first with a high Mass sung by the pastor of Saint François Xavier Church (the parish in which the Mother House lies) and then with the evening ceremony at which Cardinal Amette presided and Msgr. Chollet, Archbishop of Cambrai, presented the panegyric.

Festive thanksgiving celebrations then took place all over France and in the countries where the Daughters of Charity lived.

A Triduum was held in Arras, and the Bishop proudly emphasized that Founders sent the first Daughters of Charity to Arras. *“What a priceless treasure Saint Vincent de Paul bestowed upon us in assigning to Arras Sister Marguerite Chétif, who would soon succeed Mademoiselle Le Gras as Superioress.”*<sup>15</sup> So many Sisters participated in the ceremony that the local press noted, *“Surely, so many cornettes have never been seen in Arras.”*

In Angers, to show gratitude to Blessed Louise de Marillac, the faithful were reminded that she came three times to Angers and that *“our city has the honor of having the first asylum that she founded for the sick, crippled and abandoned children, to whom she consecrated her life, a wonderful work that her daughters continue.”*

Metz also honored the Foundress. The Superioress General’s presence at these celebrations gave them a statelier character. It

15. *Annals* 1921, page 442-443

100th anniversary of the beautification of Louise de Marillac

was said, “Metz was one of the first cities that had the honor of receiving her daughters within its walls.”

In Paris, the pastor of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet Church also held festive celebrations because it was there that “*Blessed Louise de Marillac founded the Company of the Daughters of Charity.*” The pastor of Clichy said, “*Everything allows us to imagine that the Blessed met Saint Vincent de Paul in his little parish of Clichy, so it is right that solemnities be held in this church in her honor.*”

“*Everywhere, in Paris, London, Brussels, Cologne, Torino, Naples, Madrid, in Asia, Africa and America, magnificent ceremonies mark the feasts celebrated in her honor, while cardinals and bishops rehearse her praises. Universal honor, respect and veneration, that will endure until the end of time and throughout eternity!*”<sup>16</sup> the Superior General declared on March 15, 1921.

The Sisters in China wrote, “*It was just that the first to celebrate Louise de Marillac and the Martyrs of Arras was France, their birthplace and homeland, but it would not have been right for it to be the only one. Everywhere, in fact, where her children work and die, a mother is ‘at home’ and has the right to receive honor and thanks.*”

Statues and paintings were ordered and sent throughout the world. When they arrived late, it caused great emotion among the Sisters. Nothing kept the Sisters and the faithful from gathering to give thanks to God and sing His praises.

During the preparations for the celebration in Sienna, two children died of typhus and many others had a high fever; it seemed inevitable that an epidemic would break out. A Daughter of Charity placed a picture of Louise de Marillac on the infirmary door, saying, “*Now, my Blessed Mother, no one else must enter here with that disease.*” And so it was. The illness stopped, and

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16. *Annals* 1921, page 312-313

the fevers abated.<sup>17</sup> Rich and poor, all together, were invited to the celebrations. A Sister wrote to the Superioress General about all the events. “*Our Blessed Mother was certainly among us; it was evident.*” “*These celebrations were truly grace making itself present,*” wrote another Sister.

Louise de Marillac was presented everywhere as the “*valiant woman*” of Scripture, the “*model for all states of life: young women, wives, mothers, housewives, widows, people consecrated to God and the elderly who prepare for death.*”

## Conclusion

The beatification of Louise de Marillac inspired each Daughter of Charity’s gratitude for belonging to such a great family and for being an heir to such a rich spirituality. Throughout the celebrations, the Sisters heard exhortations to be worthy of this gift through a life imbued with prayer, charity, service and fidelity.

On March 15, 1921, during the first liturgical celebration of the feast of Blessed Louise de Marillac, Father Verdier said, “*Honor, then, your Mother by venerating her relics... Honor your Mother by reading the inspiring Mass prayers that the Holy Church has composed in her honor and by having this Mass said in your chapels whenever the rubrics permit. Honor your Mother by reciting her office... Place in your houses her statues and paintings... She deserves it because she is your Mother, an honored and honorable Mother, a Blessed Mother... Let us praise God in the confession of Blessed Louise.*”<sup>18</sup>

Sister Magdalena HARBU  
Daughter of Charity

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17. *Annals* 1921, page 474

18. *Annals* 1921, page 313

## Quasi-Province Saint Genevieve

In honor of the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Saint Genevieve's birth

Conference given by Father Denis Metzinger at the Motherhouse; the oral style has been preserved

To present the life of Saint Genevieve and her relevance today, we must speak about French history for context.

This year we are celebrating the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth, so we are far removed from her time. You should know that all our information about the life of Saint Genevieve comes from a manuscript called the *Vita*. The *Vita* was written about eighteen years after Genevieve's death at the request of Saint Clotilde who was, we might say, a spiritual companion of Saint Genevieve. The author of the *Vita* is unknown, but the closeness in time, eighteen years after her death, easily allows us to think that the author was her contemporary, which gives credibility to the account. The *Vita* was written in Latin, translated in many ways and inspired different works, novels, etc.

Sixteen hundred years ago, we did not yet talk about France but about Gaul, which was a major province in a huge empire, the Roman Empire. Sixteen hundred years ago, the Roman Empire was in total upheaval; it was the fall of the Empire. The Gauls were divided: some waited for Rome to save them; others remained faithful to Rome. The Franks came from the banks of the Rhine and were allied with the Romans; in short, European

borders were in the process of changing rapidly.

This was also the period during which the Christian faith entered Gaul with Pothin, the Bishop of Lyon, and Denis, the Bishop of Lutetia (modern Paris). This is the period when the Catholic faith structured itself, if I might say so, with the Council of Nicaea-Constantinople, which formulated the Creed that we pray at Mass. This was thus a very intense period in the Church and in society of the time, which was limited to what we know today as Western Europe. All of that world was changing. It is important to have all this as background because it allows us to understand how, by putting her talents to work, Genevieve benefited from these times. We could add that these were the times of the great Saint Martin, evangelizer of Hungary, Saint Martin who obviously was in Tours and whom Saint Genevieve went to see there. The number of people she was able to meet is impressive. She met Saint Remi, who baptized Clovis, in Reims. She met Saint Aignan in Orléans. In short, it was a very rich as well as extremely unstable period from a political standpoint because everyone was tearing the others apart, basically in order to shape what would take the place of the Roman Empire. It is essential to have this in mind when we speak about the life of Genevieve.

### **Who was Saint Genevieve?**

Saint Genevieve was born in Nanterre. Nanterre is a small town – it was, for it is a city today – northwest of Paris, on the banks of the Seine, which is very important. The Seine flows through Paris; leaving Paris, the Seine flows to Saint-Cloud, to Sèvres, and comes to Nanterre. It continues to Rouen and all the way to the sea. She was born in this little village on the Seine around 420. We are celebrating the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth, but we are not really sure if it might have been 418 or 422; it does not really matter.

She was born into a noble family, to a couple of Gaulish nobles who after many years of marriage were not able to have a child.

### 1600th anniversary of the birth of Saint Genevieve

Obviously, the announcement of the birth of a baby, Genevieve, brought great joy. This, then, is significant: on the banks of the Seine and in a noble family. The depiction of Genevieve watching over sheep is totally erroneous. Quite simply, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a legend developed around Genevieve that basically assimilated her with Joan of Arc. It has nothing to do with reality. Even if we see it on the façade of the most beautiful church in Paris, it is an error.

Genevieve grew up in the home of this family, in her parents' home, in this village. Her father was a city councillor of Paris. This is significant. He had a noble role. As a councillor, he had a certain power in the organization of the city of Paris. He was a soldier and a councillor and was considered a religious man. Genevieve's mother, Geronica, was counted as a Roman citizen and had significant authority. The family earned its livelihood thanks to the land that it owned and worked.

Worry reigned at that time because of wars and the invasion of the Franks, etc.: what would become of the region? We can easily picture Genevieve in Nanterre, looking out into the distance. What did she see when she looked out into the distance? She saw the walls and the rooftops of Lutetia. She was drawn to Lutetia quite simply because her godmother lived there. Her godmother lived very close to what is the square in front of Notre Dame Cathedral today, so really in the heart of the city. At the time, Lutetia was only what we call the Ile de la Cité, the island in the Seine, because it is thanks to the Seine that the city was built. All the building materials came by boat, which is the case for all cities through which a river crosses. The city that would come to be called Paris developed around the Seine in concentric circles.

We can easily imagine little Genevieve at that point. When she was seven years old, a rather unusual event took place in the village. One evening, a boat stopped in the village of Nanterre, and the crowd was informed that the boat held an envoy of the Pope. It was the Bishop of Auxerre, Saint Germain l'Auxerrois,

who was sent by the Pope to England, Great Britain, to help the Catholic Church, the Christian population of Great Britain, fight against the heresy of Pelagius. At the time, what was called Pelagianism was the doctrine that consisted in saying that it was relatively easy to be holy: you should make it by your own force and free will. Obviously, this is a heresy because the Church teaches that holiness is a gift; it is God's grace working in our hearts that makes us become holy. As Pelagianism was gaining ground, the Pope of Rome, Celestin, was concerned and sent a theologian, Saint Germain d'Auxerre. You can imagine the trip: Auxerre is southeast of Paris on a tributary of the Seine, so he traveled by boat and stopped for the night. Because he was sent by the Pope, the Christian community of Nanterre was overjoyed and gathered that evening in the church. What happened in the church? There was a huge crowd. Genevieve was there with her parents, and just then, Saint Germain d'Auxerre stopped in front of this girl and gave her a small medal, a cross. He said to her, "My daughter, you will consecrate your life to God." It was an important moment in her life that altered everything. Everything changed in her life and for her parents. Not surprisingly, her parents were not very keen on this. She was their only child, so the plan was to arrange an advantageous marriage. Her mother, who had a tough character, was angry. Her father, who was gentler and more religious, let things run their course. However, nothing had really happened. Simply, if we picture the scene, it is like papal audiences. The people are along the barriers, the Pope stops, he touches a child; that's basically what happened. Genevieve, however, experienced this as a sign, a call. This destabilized her and the whole family, to the point that the mother was very angry. Whenever her daughter went to church, she was furious. One day, the mother became blind. This is what the *Vita* recounts. The mother became blind. It is like the miracles in the Bible: it is a sign that refers to something else, in this case that she had lost sight of God. She was physically blind. She begged God to restore her sight. She went to the well of their house, and because she was blind, Genevieve helped her to draw water from the well. Genevieve applied some well water to her

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eyes. She recovered her sight. This was the first sign from heaven on behalf of Genevieve's mother. This fine woman understood that perhaps it was best to let the good Lord do what He wanted with her daughter. If you go one day to Nanterre, at the site of the Cathedral (Nanterre is a modern diocese just fifty years old; previously, it was part of the diocese of Paris), there is a memorial to this place reputed to be the house of Genevieve's family, and you can see the well.

Not long after that, Genevieve received consecration, so, since it is the oldest order in the history of the Church, we could say that she became a consecrated virgin. Relatively young – we do not know exactly when – relatively young, Genevieve consecrated herself to God. By the sign of the providential visit of Saint Germain d'Auxerre, by the sign of the water that restored her mother's sight, Genevieve pursued her path and consecrated herself totally to God.

When Genevieve was twenty years old, her parents died. What did Genevieve do? She was encouraged and supported by the other consecrated virgins, but her godmother told her, "Come to Paris, to Lutetia. Don't stay alone in Nanterre." At the age of twenty, Genevieve went to live with her godmother on the Ile de la Cité about where the Hôtel-Dieu is today, at the heart of Paris. She thus became a Parisian. What a change for her! What a change for her because she went from a village where her parents worked the land to a house that was like a palace because her godmother, like her father, was involved in the municipal government. She was in a totally different setting. It altered her life radically. Her godmother was a civic leader. In other words, she participated in the life of the city. Since Genevieve's father who was a city councillor had died, the position fell to the godmother and Genevieve. This was a position that was passed on. The *Vita* says that Genevieve participated, all smiles, very pleasant, in the grand receptions, but that this changed nothing about her austere lifestyle, consecrated to God. Her prayer life remained her priority.

The story goes that she fell ill at one point. In her illness and suffering, she was torn. She lost consciousness for three days and no longer knew where she was. When she awoke, she would say that it was as if she had been taken up to heaven. The interpretation is that she experienced a sort of temptation. Should she live her religious consecration or her mission for the city? She was of two minds. It is interesting to note that the *Vita* says three days, in reference to the three days between the death and resurrection of Jesus. The memory of this trial would mark her and give her the strength to face all challenges because she interpreted this event as one more sign from God, giving her the strength to go forward in the mission that she had received at the service of the city.

She was reputed to have the gift of seeing into people's hearts. Many people came to see her, speak with her and open their hearts. Of course, this was controversial, and people would take her for a lunatic. People would speak calumnies against her and say all sorts of nonsense. Bishop Germain was once again sent to Great Britain, and this time, he did not stop in Nanterre but in Lutetia. Recalling what had happened, he asked to see Genevieve. The place they met is where Saint Germain l'Auxerrois Church is today, so it is on the banks of the Seine, very close to the Louvre, to help situate you. He asked for news of Genevieve and where she was, and he heard all sorts of things. They said, "She's gone crazy," etc. He went to look for her, and he found her in prayer. After meeting her, he reassured the people who were against her, saying, "No, no, she's a woman of prayer; she is not crazy at all. Her life is totally given to God, and that is the basis of her life." So much so that after that, Genevieve paradoxically became the best-known woman in Paris. It was at that point that she would found, right next to Notre Dame Cathedral, a community of women to pray for the city. Not a religious community, not a community of consecrated virgins, but a community of women who committed to praying for the city.

An important event then occurred as the sounds of a war approached Paris. The Romans were not strong enough, the

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Roman Empire was collapsing, and the Romans were incapable of resisting all sorts of attacks. An army of more than a million men had set off. It was the army of the Huns with Attila at its head. You may know the proverb: “Where Attila passes, the grass never grows again.” This says something about Attila. The Huns were warriors, a nomadic people that constantly pillaged, killed and set everything on fire. At the same time, Attila, as awful as he was, was a true genius in warfare. He was a pagan who worshiped his sword alone. He would go all across Europe, across the Rhine, Germany (I’m speaking of the modern country), the Roman Empire, and destroy everything in his path, all the way to Metz and to Reims.

Naturally, the people of Paris were afraid, reasoning that if Attila was in Reims, 140 kilometers from Paris, he was going to arrive in Paris. They thus fled and abandoned the city. Genevieve said, “Abandoning the city of Paris is to condemn it.” Genevieve remained confident, in prayer. Everyone went to ask her advice. She said the same thing to everyone: “Pray, do penance, and Lutetia will be saved.” Opinions were divided. How could this woman have the solution? What should be done? “Do not flee, Lutetia will be saved, do not abandon it.” Her confidence, the certainty that she had in faith made people take her for a lunatic once again. However, Genevieve continued to restore the people’s confidence. Lutetia was spared. Attila would bypass Paris and go toward the Loire Valley, near Orléans, etc.: a miracle obtained through the holy resolve of Genevieve. The Barbarians did not come to Paris. Attila would never become the master of the West. All the residents of Lutetia congratulated themselves for having obeyed Genevieve and for having such a good guardian for the city. Finally, thanks to this event, all Parisians embraced her.

This was when her godmother died, and she could no longer remain in the palace where she had lived with her godmother, so she went to live on what was then called Mont Lucotitius, south of the Ile de la Cité; today, this is Saint Genevieve Hill, at the time, a neighborhood at the height of expansion. Her house overlooked

the whole city; she could see the entire city, so she continued to watch over it. She is considered the protectress, the providence of Paris. She protected Paris as a mother defends her child.

Her reputation went beyond the walls of Paris. It is even said that she was known in the East. There is a passage in the *Vita* that alludes to merchants who were going from the West to the East and who in Syria came upon Saint Cyriac who told the merchants, “Greet Genevieve on my behalf.” As a result, for example, the Orthodox today have a real devotion to Saint Genevieve. Orthodox pilgrimages come quite frequently to the parish.

Genevieve, who had great devotion to the evangelizer of Paris, Saint Denis, regularly went on pilgrimage to his grave. You know that Saint Denis was decapitated on the hill of Montmartre. The story goes that decapitating the bishop would not decapitate the Church, and the bishop leaned down, picked up his head and continued on his way from Montmartre – today there is a street that goes down the hill, called the rue des Martyrs (Montmartre means mountain of the martyrs) – to what is now Saint Denis, where the Bishop was then buried. Genevieve went there frequently on pilgrimage. One day, she was leading a pilgrimage with a lit candle, and the candle went out. Everyone panicked because it was night... Mysteriously, as Genevieve prayed, the candle relit. This was another sign of Genevieve’s faith.

Genevieve then reasoned that it was disgraceful that the evangelizer of Paris be buried in a cemetery where no one came to acknowledge his presence. Therefore, Genevieve pressured the Parisian clergy, and there was an appeal throughout Paris to have earth for bricks, etc. Genevieve was at the initiative of the first cathedral of Saint Denis. It was Genevieve who, wishing to honor Saint Denis, had built this place of prayer worthy of the evangelizer Saint Denis.

Toward the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, another very important event took place when Clovis was beginning to take power and put an

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end to the Roman Empire. How do you make a population obey authorities? It is pretty easy; all you have to do is deprive it of food. Famine gripped Paris, a tragedy, which was going to force the city to surrender and allow Clovis' enemies to take power. The Parisians turned to Genevieve, saying, "You got rid of the Huns for us, what should we do now?" Since all the roads were occupied by the armies of the Franks, Genevieve organized a flotilla and went by the Seine to the region of Aube, not far from the city of Troyes, to Arcis-sur-Aube, and because of her reputation in Paris, all the inhabitants of this region of Champagne gave to Genevieve and filled the hold of the boats with flour. She returned to Paris, had bread made, and gave orders to distribute it to those most in need. She thus saved Paris not only from invasion by the Franks but above all from famine. She distributed manna, bread, so you can well imagine that her fame, if I may put it that way, grew.

You know that the current motto of the city of Paris is "*Fluctuat nec mergitur*," "It floats but does not sink." It is said (there is no historical proof, but it's not completely false...) that this is the result of the boats that returned weighed down with food because when the enemy, the Franks, the Visigoths, saw them coming down the Seine, they threw trees in the water to impede the trip. You know that the seal of the city of Paris is a boat, and the boat refers to this event with Genevieve: a boat that floats but does not sink; this is what actually happened. I have mentioned the most important facts that are found in the *Vita* and that are attributed to Genevieve.

In 492, Clovis married Clotilde; Clovis would be baptized in 496, so we could say that France discovered Christianity. We cannot say Christian France, but his baptism supported the establishment of Christianity and the spread of the Gospel in France.

Genevieve went to meet Saint Martin in Tours and then Saint Remi in Reims; she established a spiritual friendship with Saint Clotilde, Clovis' wife. Genevieve was more than ninety years old when she died, quite rare at that time. The king asked that she be buried

in the church built for her, at the time Saint Genevieve Church. Since the French Revolution, nothing remains of Saint Genevieve Church except a bell tower. Today, Henri IV Secondary School sits where the revolutionaries destroyed everything. A religious order of canons, the Genovefains, came about to keep alive the memory of Saint Genevieve and prayer to her. Clovis then asked to be buried beside Genevieve. You can well imagine Genevieve's huge influence up to the French Revolution.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, there was a Norman invasion, Barbarians, and what did the monks do? They hid the relics. They reasoned, "If the Barbarians come, if the Normans come to Paris, they will steal what is most precious to us." They hid the relics, which is why there are relics in many different places. Whenever there was a situation of suffering in the city of Paris from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Genovefain monks led processions and asked for Saint Genevieve's intercession. The people of Paris considered Saint Genevieve their protectress.

At the time of the French Revolution, the revolutionaries stole the body of Saint Genevieve. They did not know that there were other relics that had been hidden, and the body of Saint Genevieve was thrown into the Seine. A large part of her body was lost. Once again, thanks to the monks, we still have several relics.

Previously, the king had asked to have a large church built in honor of Saint Genevieve, a church that would not be a parish church and that would allow all Parisians and all the French to pray Saint Genevieve because, although there was prayer in the monks' monastery, ordinary people could not enter it. This is why Saint Etienne du Mont Church had been built right beside it for the neighborhood residents. However, the king wanted to transfer the body of Saint Genevieve – this is before the Revolution – to a large church, the church of the Pantheon. When you go to the Pantheon, there is a large plaque outside that reads Saint Genevieve Church. What is rather humorous, the irony of history, is that during the French Revolution, the Pantheon was turned into a temple of

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secularity, and the pride and glory of the Republic were buried there. On the pediment of the Pantheon, it is written, “To great men, from the grateful nation.” The paradox of history is that the first great man to enter into the Pantheon was Saint Genevieve.

The lower level of the Pantheon, the crypt, holds the tombs of great men, the heroes of the Republic. On the upper level, there are 19<sup>th</sup> century frescos by Puvis de Chavannes that recount Saint Genevieve’s whole life. When we enter the Pantheon, we see clearly that it is a church dedicated to Saint Genevieve.

Because the monastery was destroyed during the Revolution, Saint Etienne du Mont Church, which was the parish church of Saint Genevieve Hill, has become the site associated with Saint Genevieve. All year long, the relics of Saint Genevieve are venerated at Saint Etienne du Mont. After the Revolution, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a road called rue Clovis was carved out between the two edifices and uncovered the exact location of the tombs of Clovis, Clotilde and Genevieve. At Saint Etienne du Mont, there is a sort of sarcophagus that contains not the body of Saint Genevieve but the tombstone in memory of her. Eighteenth-century stained-glass windows are like a comic strip that recounts everything I told you: the *Vita*, the different miracles and the processions that were very large until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Every year, on the liturgical feast day of Saint Genevieve, January 3, we process with the reliquary to Notre Dame Cathedral.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would simply like to highlight what I would call the relevance of Saint Genevieve. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, there was a mixture, as there always is in hagiography, a mixture of real historical facts and legend. As a priest, whenever I celebrate a funeral, I bury a “saint”!!! Everyone who speaks explains to me how wonderful the deceased was. This is why I think it is important to consider what is the modern relevance of this saintly figure.

You know the Pope's exhortation on holiness, *Gaudete et exsultate, Rejoice and be glad*, from March 2018; he insists on this with a short paragraph that seems important for all of us. "*To recognize the word that the Lord wishes to speak to us through one of his saints, we do not need to get caught up in details, for there we might also encounter mistakes and failures. Not everything a saint says is completely faithful to the Gospel; not everything he or she does is authentic or perfect.*" There is legend and other things. "*What we need to contemplate is the totality of their life, their entire journey of growth in holiness, the reflection of Jesus Christ that emerges when we grasp their overall meaning as a person*" (22). We should not limit ourselves, for example, to saying, "Oh! Saint Genevieve is wonderful because she provided food for Parisians!" Okay, it is true that she did that. But why did she do that? It is because she was filled with faith and wanted to live from charity. In every case, we should look behind, beyond the facts.

### **I would bring out several criteria that I find significant.**

Genevieve was a woman. It is often said that women do not have their place in the Church. Whenever I hear that, I say, why, go ask a Superioress General of a congregation if women don't have their place in the Church. The Mother General of a congregation has much more power than a Bishop. Yes, because the congregation is all over the world. So, Genevieve was a woman; this is an important point to note.

Genevieve was a baptized Christian. It was in the name of her Baptism that she acted; we must not forget this. Genevieve, baptized, consecrated her life to God.

Another characteristic: Genevieve took action and overcame fear. This is a virtue! When the crowd was frightened, she said, "No, come on: here is what we will do."

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Genevieve was an evangelizer of the city. When she built the beginnings of Saint Denis Basilica, when she took action, etc., she was proclaiming the Gospel; she was evangelizing. This is clearly very important.

Genevieve committed to working for the common good. She worked for the city, that is, for everyone. She did not say, “I am doing this because I am Christian, so I act just for Christians.” No, for the common good.

Genevieve was a woman of prayer.

Genevieve was attentive to those who were poor and the weakest in society.

I brought out those points because I found those criteria that the Pope gave in his exhortation. It seemed to me that these criteria help us to see the relevance today of this figure of Saint Genevieve.

Father Denis METZINGER  
*Pastor of Saint Etienne du Mont Church in Paris*

# **Prayer to Mary Immaculate**

**... O Virgin Mary,  
today I entrust to you all those who...  
throughout the world are burdened by disillusionment,  
by discouragement because of sin;  
those who think there is no longer hope for them,  
that their sins are too many and too great,  
and that God certainly does not have time to waste with them.  
I entrust them to you, because not only are you a Mother  
and as such, you never stop loving your children,  
but you are also Immaculate, full of grace,  
and you can reflect into the darkest gloom  
a ray of the Risen Christ's light.  
He, and He alone, breaks the chains of evil,  
frees from the most acute dependencies,  
unties from the most criminal bonds,  
softens the hardest of hearts...**

**Pope Francis, December 8, 2019**

