

*E*choes of the Company



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

MARCH

APRIL

2021

No. 2



**Fraternal love
for a new
missionary
momentum**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SPIRITUAL LIFE

Letter of March 25, 2021.....81
Sister Françoise Petit, Superioress General

Retreat day in preparation for Renovation
Fidelity.....86
Father Bernard Schoepfer, Director General

Fratelli tutti

An encyclical on fraternity and social friendship.....96
Monsignor Nicolas Brouwet, Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes

NEWS FROM THE PROVINCES

Sisters' Testimonies

Province of St. Louise de Marillac-Asia
The Boldness of Charity in God's own time.....106
Sister Maria Jesusa Encio, Daughter of Charity

Province of Saint Louise-USA
An ever-greater fraternity.....111
The Provincial Council

Province of Fortaleza
Living communion with God and with our brothers
and sisters at Saint Jean-Gabriel Perboyre House.....115
The Sisters of Saint Jean-Gabriel Perboyre House

Province of Central America
*Called and assembled by God
in the three local communities in Costa Rica:*
Our experience of fraternity.....117
Sister Elisabeth Chaves, Daughter of Charity

Province of Eritrea
Celebrating joyful events with “our Lords and Masters”125
Sister Lettekidan Lucas, Daughter of Charity

Testimony by a Vincentian collaborator

Province of Madrid-San Vicente
The poor, our masters, evangelize us.....127
Daniel Roca Laguna, Social worker in the schools of Madrid

HISTORY OF THE COMPANY

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Child of Hope.....134
Sister Betty Ann McNeil, Daughter of Charity

Letter of March 25, 2021

Dear Sisters,

*“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word”*
(Lk 1:38).

On this Annunciation day, we have once again said “yes.” Perhaps it is a joyful yes, full of trust, or, on the contrary, hesitant because pronounced in a moment of doubts and difficulties. That is how life goes, but each Sister has responded with the psalmist, *“Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will”* (cf. Ps 40), with what I am here and now and with the desire to start afresh, renewed in heart and mind.

At this time, the situation of the world affects us particularly – for we are in this world – and with all of humanity, we are being tried by uncertainty, insecurity and sometimes violence. Recently, our Sisters in Bangui, Central African Republic, again saw rebels arrive. In Chile, the violence is against migrants cast out in the Atacama Desert, with whom the Sisters helplessly witness such terrible injustices. These are just two examples among so many others.

The Renovation of vows represents an opportunity for us to review, in the light of the Gospel, the life of the world and that of our local communities, to strengthen our faith and to give renewed meaning to the charity that we wish to live.

S

*Spiritual
Life*

Letter of March 25, 2021

How can the Renovation process also revive our hope? How can it encourage us to keep getting back up and to help others to get back on their feet again? Certainly, it is thanks to the conviction that the gift of our life can be the sign of a simple, faithful and bold fraternity. This sign can restore hope to those who have lost everything and make visible the faith that keeps us standing in the inevitable storms of life. Fragmented expressions of fraternity can emerge to become an “*eruption of fraternity*,” in Pope Francis’ words (*Let us Dream*, p. 46).

A simple fraternity: The practice of the vows of chastity, poverty, obedience and service of those who are poor can support a climate of simple fraternity.

Indeed, the vows teach us to know ourselves increasingly well and to acknowledge our limitations, our desire for holiness that we do not always manage to translate sufficiently into action. At the same time, they help us to discover our gifts and to make us less self-centered, humbler, simpler and freer to live fraternity and the joy of the Gospel.

In an atmosphere of prayer and simple, natural and uncomplicated fraternity, our “living together” becomes a place of life, in other words, a place where little resurrections can occur.

Local communities then can turn into oases of peace and love where simple fraternity becomes a way of being and doing, a place of speech and trust, a place where it is pleasant to remain awhile, a “community milestone” on which to rest for those suffering from destitution, solitude and so many other forms of poverty.

A faithful fraternity: These days, the notion of duration in commitment is sorely questioned. Our vows, in contrast, impel us to dare fidelity and to believe that this fidelity is not only possible but that it contributes to our human growth, anchors us in our vocation and makes us deeply happy. The witness of

fidelity lived over the years in an increasingly peaceful way can only be a sign of God's presence. Without Him, would this be possible?

Another aspect of this fraternity that strives to be faithful is that which we can offer to those whom we meet. Sometimes, a sense of helplessness before so many situations of multiple poverties overcomes us, yet we always have fidelity to offer, an unconditional fidelity, even with "empty hands."

"There is always the factor of "gratuitousness": the ability to do some things simply because they are good in themselves, without concern for personal gain or recompense" (Fratelli tutti, 139).

A bold fraternity: Each vow is a personal commitment but is lived together. Boldness lies in believing that we can help each other to live the vows, that we can support each other to overcome obstacles and that fraternity lived in community is made to be shared with all.

Bold fraternity is expressed, each day, in fidelity and perseverance in longstanding services, in health care, education, presence and prayer.

Bold fraternity is also shown whenever missionary momentum pushes a local community to dare to invent other forms of service, to go beyond what was considered possible.

There are many examples. For several years, the Province of Chelmino-Poznan has tried to establish a community in Uzbekistan. The Sisters went there several times for periods of a month but were not able to open a local community for lack of a visa. This November 27, 2020, two Sisters went back there and this time, in principle, should be able to remain in this very poor region of Central Asia.

In my January 1 letter, I mentioned a mobile team of four Sisters in Mozambique. They are now on the ground with the displaced

Letter of March 25, 2021

persons who come from the war zone in the north. With others, they offer support, health care and a friendly presence.

In the Province of Amazonia in Brazil, the local community in Ananindeua, with some families, created a cooperative producing pizza and other dishes, which now allows the families to be self-sufficient.

The Company also expresses fraternity through responses to calls of the Church. The Dicastery for promoting Integral Human Development invited the Daughters of Charity to participate in a water-access program for health-care services administered by religious congregations. Of the 137 sites chosen, five of them are with the Daughters of Charity. A meeting with Cardinal Turkson is taking place today for practical implementation of this program.

Recently, this same Dicastery asked Sister Carol Keehan (Province of Saint Louise-USA) to take responsibility for a working group on Covid. The objective is to bring about an equitable distribution of the vaccine.

These few examples show that the total gift of self to God through our vows releases energy, generosity, fraternity and creativity. Our minds and hearts are free to look forward as we place ourselves totally at the service of our brothers and sisters.

Things are not always easy, and we must recognize that sometimes there are failures, conflicts and disappointments. It doesn't matter! God does not ask heroic feats of us; He asks us to act, to be present in places of precarity and suffering, to pray. Let us believe that He is with us.

"Oh, how good it is to hope in God and put our trust in Him!"
(Saint Vincent, November 25, 1657, CCD XI, 392)

Let us ask the Lord to help us to live our vows simply, faithfully and boldly; then, fraternity will have this coloring, that of hope, that of the Gospel, to share with our brothers and sisters.

Next week, we will observe Holy Week, this solemn week when Mary accompanied her Son on the path of His Passion. She felt the pain of a mother and understands that of those who suffer today. She wept at the foot of the cross as we weep before so much poverty and injustice.

With her, let us offer our lives on this path of service. We are not alone; God is with us.

Affectionately and with the assurance of my prayer,

Sister Françoise PETIT
Daughter of Charity

Retreat day in preparation for Renovation

Fidelity

“On our own, we are capable of neither great nor small things, but we should prefer small ones, leaving it to God to do great things for us as He judges appropriate. Small things come up every day, every moment; great things are only rarely offered. Small things are no less likely to sanctify us than great ones; perhaps they are even more suitable because they keep us humble and do not lay us open to pride.

Fidelity to small things and care in pleasing God even in the least trifles prove love’s thoughtfulness. We can do small things with such elevated dispositions that they are more pleasing to God than great things done with less perfect dispositions. We have only to look to the household of Nazareth to be convinced. After all, Sacred Scripture leaves no doubt: those who neglect and disdain small things will also be negligent in great things. Let us thus aspire to the practice of small things and of all that is likely to develop our child-like and simple spirit.”¹

*Grant me, O Lord, the grace of fidelity,
through your Son Jesus Christ crucified
and through the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin.²*

1. Jean-Nicolas Grou, SJ (1731-1803), *Manuel des âmes intérieures, Recueil d’opuscules inédits* [Manuel for interior souls; collection of unpublished pamphlets]

2. First vow formula, Constitutions, p. 66

Introduction

A good number of our contemporaries doubt that fidelity is possible. In a relativistic universe, can a person remain faithful over the years to a person, a vocation, a cause or ideas? Rather than a firm commitment, we now see a preference for the right to have subjective, successive and different choices. Some people go even further and suspect that fidelity is a fetter to freedom, like a chain around the ankle, binding people and locking them into their past. It is widely considered that real strength does not consist so much in persevering as in adapting to new situations. Will the oak (a solid tree if there ever was one, symbol of longevity) or the reed (symbol of flexibility) win out today? People speak less of the greatness of fidelity than of the necessity of a capacity to adapt.

1. Fidelity is possible because it is a gift from God³

Jesus knew His disciples with their weaknesses and limitations. During the Passion, they would abandon their Teacher and even, in Peter's case, deny Him. However, that is when Jesus prays to the Father and asks Him to keep His disciples in the name that He has given Him. He addresses His Father, saying, "*Holy Father, keep them in your name*" (Jn 17:11).

This name is precisely His holiness, His power of life and love. The Holy Spirit's role is to place in the heart of Jesus' disciples the strength of this love that comes from the Father. The first to be faithful is God: He is faithful to His promise, to His covenant, to the gift of His Spirit. The Father is faithful in His loving plan for humankind.

Saint Paul would say to the Corinthians, "*God is faithful, and by Him you were called to fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*" (1 Cor 1:9). The Son is faithful to His Father, pursuing His mission to the very end, and His death on the cross will be

3. Sections 1-3 are based on a homily by Monsignor Jean Pierre Ricard, May 29, 2013

Fidelity

the affirmation of His fidelity.

Moreover, in the book of Revelation, Saint John calls Jesus Christ “*the faithful witness... the faithful and true witness*” (Rev 1:5 and 3:14). The Holy Spirit gives people the strength, zeal and desire for this fidelity, which Saint John calls the truth, quite simply the enlightening and life-giving power of love. The Father will not allow the devil to divert people from this source of living water or to seize hold of the heart and mind of those who have kept the Word and placed their lives in the hands of the Father.

Jesus kept them; the Father will keep them. Moreover, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, said, “*I give [my sheep] eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father’s hand*” (Jn 10:28-29).

Human fidelity, in relationships with God and others, does not result primarily from a heroic tenacity of will or from a determination to succeed by the sweat of one’s brow. It is an effect of the grace of God in us, a fruit of His love. We can be faithful because God Himself is faithful and supports our faithfulness.

2. Faithfulness is a creative work

In the Bible, the notion of fidelity is tied to solidity. Being faithful means being solid and thus trustworthy. The word “amen” comes from this same root: it does not mean that the prayer is over but affirms that God is faithful, so I can count on Him for fulfillment of the prayer. In the New Testament, the word is also translated, depending on the context, as “faith.” The “believers” are “the faithful”; faith and fidelity are two connected qualities.

Far from being a paralyzing nostalgia that would make us prisoners of the past, fidelity is a creative work that is lived out in the present and turns us toward the future. It does not get locked

into conserving the past at all costs or identical repetition. It is lived out by updating, which creates something new. This grace that God gives us is ours to receive in the context of our everyday lives.

We should savor novelty by inventing, day after day, new responses to the various challenges that we encounter in the different stages of our lives. In the spiritual life, we call this everyday holiness. The same applies to love and friendship. Faithfulness calls for giving ever-new expressions of it, day after day. Yes, faithfulness is creative.

3. Faithfulness is a struggle

Faithfulness, however, is not a bed of roses. It is also a spiritual struggle. At times, the temptation can be strong to leave the source of living water to drink from other watering holes. God said of His own people, *“They have forsaken me, the source of living waters; they have dug themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water”* (Jr 2:13).

While some days the difficulties in this struggle come from ourselves, other days they come from outside, in a sometimes-violent opposition and persecution. Jesus, in fact, predicted this for His own: *“If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because you do not belong to the world, and I have chosen you out of the world, the world hates you. Remember the word I spoke to you, ‘No slave is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you”* (Jn 15:18-20).

Throughout the world today, many Christians are persecuted for their faith, for their faithfulness to Christ. Some days the price to pay for remaining faithful is very high. Jesus thus asks His Father to sanctify His disciples in the truth, to give them that inner strength that will make it possible for them to hold fast. Faith in God’s help caused Saint Paul to exclaim, *“Nothing will*

Fidelity

be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39).

Strengthened by this help from God, Christ’s disciples resist the temptation of sectarian withdrawal. They neither flee the world nor curse it. They remain in the midst of the world in order to bear witness to love that is stronger than evil, hatred or human sin. They remain faithful at their posts. They do not desert the world. The Spirit protects them in this mission.

4. God is always faithful

“God is faithful, and by Him you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor 1:9). These words from the apostle Paul imply looking back and looking forward. Recalling his past, he could say about himself, “He by whom I was called to fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ, my Lord, is faithful.” With total confidence, he could say in faith, “He will be faithful.”

When we look back, we can see with gratitude that God has been faithful for us since the day when we received salvation through grace up until this day. In faith, we look to the unknown future, and we can consider with absolute hope the years that lie before us until the day when we will appear before Him to give an account of our service to our Master.

According to the letter of Saint James, *“The Father of lights, with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change,”* is the foundation of our lives (Js 1:17). Let us be grateful for this faithful God. This gratitude is a source that causes hope that does not disappoint to spring from our hearts and souls.

God’s fidelity is like a rainbow that extends from one end of our lives to the other. Just as that glorious, brightly colored arc illuminates the landscape after the storm, God’s fidelity enlightens our entire life. We can say with Saint Paul, *“I am*

confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6).

Within ourselves, just as all around us, we find much infidelity, which makes our God’s fidelity stand out even more, He who called us to fellowship with His Son. This is why we should aspire to an ever-more authentic and intimate relationship with the faithful One. From the bottom of our hearts, we thus ask Him that our life might mirror His fidelity.

We believe that *faithfulness is a condition for real, deep fulfillment*. God speaks about it so often in the Bible because it is an essential dimension of the Christian life. Without it, there is chaos, both in terms of life with God and in terms of married life, family life, community life... in short, in all domains.

5. Reflections by Pope Francis on fidelity

a. Fidelity and illusions⁴

“There are always illusions that attract our attention, and often we pursue these illusions. Faithfulness: in good times and in bad. There is a passage in the Second Book of Chronicles that is very striking to me. It is from the twelfth chapter, at the beginning. ‘When the kingdom was consolidated,’ it reads, ‘King Rehoboam felt secure and abandoned the law of the Lord, and so did all Israel with him’ (cf. 2 Chron 12:1). This is what the Bible says. It is a historical event, but it is a universal event.

Many times, when we feel secure, we begin to make plans and slowly drift away from the Lord. We do not remain faithful. My security is no longer that which the Lord gives me. It is an idol. This is what happened to Rehoboam and the people of Israel. He felt secure – a consolidated kingdom – and abandoned the law and began to worship idols.

4. Pope Francis, Homily of April 14, 2020

Fidelity

Sure, we might say, 'Father, I don't kneel before idols.' No, perhaps you do not kneel, but it is true that you seek them and often adore idols in your heart. Self-assuredness opens the door to idols."

b. Faithfulness is our response to God's fidelity⁵

"Our fidelity is nothing more than a response to God's fidelity. God is faithful to His word, is faithful to His promise and walks with His people, close to His people, carrying out the promise. God continually reveals Himself as a Savior of His people because He is faithful to His promise."

God is capable of re-doing things, of re-creating, as He did with this man crippled from birth whose feet He recreated. He healed him (cf. Acts 3:6-8), the God who heals, the God who always brings consolation to His people, the God who recreates. A new recreation: this is His faithfulness to us. A recreation that is more wonderful than creation."

c. God's fidelity is patient⁶

"God's fidelity is a patient fidelity: He is patient with His people, He listens to them, He guides them, He explains slowly to them and He warms their hearts, as He did with these two disciples who were going far away from Jerusalem: He warms their heart so that they might return home (cf. Lk 24:32-33). We do not know what happened in that dialogue. God's faithfulness is the generous God who sought after Peter who had denied him. We only know that the Lord rose and appeared to Simon; we do not know what happened in that dialogue (see Lk 24:34), but we do know that it was God's faithfulness that sought Peter out. God's fidelity always precedes us, and our faithfulness is always a response to that faithfulness that precedes us. It is God who always precedes us. It is like the flower of the almond tree in spring: it blooms first."

5. Pope Francis, Homily of April 15, 2020

6. Pope Francis, Homily of April 15, 2020

6. The gift of fidelity and the joy of perseverance

Following Christ the Servant in the service of persons who are poor is our path for welcoming the gift of fidelity. I noted these words from the letter that Sister Françoise addressed to us on February 2:

“Service is for them the expression of their total gift of self to God in the Company and gives it its full significance’ (C. 16b). ‘Embrace chastity in order to enlarge our heart,’ ‘Choose poverty in order to share better;’ ‘Love obedience in order to serve together better.’ Everything is directed towards service, and the vows are imbued with service. Such is the charism passed down from generation to generation.

Contemplating Jesus in His relationships gives us the image of Christ whom we wish to follow: ‘At the school of the Son of God, the Daughters of Charity learn that no type of distress should be foreign to them’ (C. 11a). Christ Himself shows us the way of encounter; the foundation of all service of those who are poor. Do we always take time just to be with people before acting?⁷ Let us meditate on the Word of God daily, especially the passages in which Jesus experiences encounters: let us contemplate His gaze, His kindness, His tenderness, and let us accept to be shaped by this.”

Father Tomaž, in his letter for this Lenten Season, invites us to a conversion: to accept that our peace be disturbed! I would like to share this passage with you: *“The broken Christ becomes a clear sign before our eyes that keeps disturbing our peace and calling us to conversion. He invites us to a continuous dialogue with Him in the here and now of the world and of our everyday relationships. This broken Christ helps us to bring ourselves to Him with our human reality, as well as with the reality of every human being. Christ is always prepared to listen as well as*

7. Conference of May 25, 1654, CCD IX, 541

Fidelity

suggest. He keeps challenging us, but gently and with a never-ending mercy.”

Reading the Pope’s Lenten message, “A Time for Renewing Faith, Hope and Love,” I focused on the aspect of love. As Saint Paul says, “*The greatest of these is love*” (1 Cor 13:13). Fidelity allows for inventive love. Listen to these words from Pope Francis:

“Love, following in the footsteps of Christ, in concern and compassion for all, is the highest expression of our faith and hope. Love rejoices in seeing others grow. Hence it suffers when others are anguished, lonely, sick, homeless, despised or in need. Love is a leap of the heart; it brings us out of ourselves and creates bonds of sharing and communion. ‘Social love makes it possible to advance towards a civilization of love, to which all of us can feel called. With its impulse to universality, love is capable of building a new world. No mere sentiment, it is the best means of discovering effective paths of development for everyone’ (Fratelli tutti, 183).”

Grant us, Lord, the grace of fidelity and give us the joy of perseverance. Let us keep in mind this advice that Saint Vincent gave during a conference on the preservation of the Company:

“If we see that we’re determined to be faithful to God, disdaining all the honors and pleasures that may present themselves, we must thank God for this and give Him all the glory for it.”⁸

Let us conclude by praying through the intercession of Mary, faithful and perseverant woman.

Mary, faithful woman, you were docile in welcoming the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father; through your Son Jesus, teach us to preserve the gift of a vocation and to rediscover its vitality day by day.

8. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *The gift of fidelity, the joy of perseverance*, 106

We look to you, to contemplate God's work, which renews our ability to love and heals our wounded fidelity.

We look to you, persevering in following, watchful guardian and lover of the Word, to contemplate the blessedness of those who, through fidelity, bear much fruit.

We look to you, persevering at the foot of the cross, to stand beside the infinite crosses of the world, where Christ is still crucified in the poor and the abandoned, to bring comfort and support.

We look to you persevering with the Apostles in prayer, to burn with the Love that never goes out, to walk in joy and to face defeats and disappointments without anxiety.

Mary, faithful woman, pray for us. Obtain for us from your Son and our Redeemer a living and loving faith, a humble and industrious charity, to live the gift of fidelity in perseverance, humble and joyful seal of hope. Amen.

Father Bernard SCHOEPPER, CM
Director General

Fratelli tutti

An encyclical on fraternity and social friendship

“I offer this social Encyclical as a modest contribution to continued reflection, in the hope that in the face of present-day attempts to eliminate or ignore others, we may prove capable of responding with a new vision of fraternity and social friendship that will not remain at the level of words” (Fratelli tutti, 6).

This is how Pope Francis begins his encyclical, this letter that is addressed to us and that we receive in faith, as an encouragement for fraternity and all our efforts to create social connections, but also as a self-examination before the temptation to give in to the culture of individualism and self-centeredness.

With these few pages, I would like to encourage you to read this text, not by summarizing it, but by bringing out some of the themes it treats.

Let us allow Pope Francis’ reflection to challenge us even if some passages may trouble us. It is the nature of an encyclical addressed to the entire Church and even to all of humanity to help us step back and break the usual dividing lines of schools of thought and opinions.

Social friendship? Who speaks about this? Not economists, financiers, sociologists, politicians or journalists. Who is still interested in fraternity, a concept that, for many, lies in the realm of utopia, of dreams, of sentimentality with, moreover, an offensive whiff of Christianity? Can the world still believe in fraternity when it no longer believes in fathers? When it no longer believes in paternity because it has the bitter taste of patriarchy?

A world closing in on itself

Pope Francis speaks about it. First, he does so by denouncing a world that is closing in on itself while projecting an illusion of the contrary. Globalization is above all a market driven by individual interests that bring us together like consumers in a store but that do not make us brothers. *“We are more alone than ever in an increasingly massified world that promotes individual interests and weakens the communitarian dimension of life. Indeed, there are markets where individuals become mere consumers or bystanders”* (FT, 12).

In this consumer culture, everything seems to contribute to the isolation of individuals to make them vulnerable: history is deconstructed, words are deformed, those who think differently are derided and communication networks amplify aggressivity and retreat into restricted networks.

Pope Francis thus repeats what he wrote to young people in March 2019: *“If someone tells young people to ignore their history, to reject the experiences of their elders, to look down on the past and to look forward to a future that he himself holds out, doesn't it then become easy to draw them along so that they only do what he tells them? He needs the young to be shallow, uprooted and distrustful, so that they can trust only in his promises and act according to his plans. That is how various ideologies operate: they destroy (or deconstruct) all differences so that they can reign unopposed”* (FT, 13).

This is how the social tissue unravels. Our societies set off down the path of atomization, breakdown and widespread mistrust: we no longer can trust anyone but ourselves. This leads to the marginalization of the poorest people, especially unborn children, vulnerable and elderly people, often women as well. (We should recall that the Pope is writing for all cultures.) Migrants are excluded from participation in social life. The common good is no longer understood except as the sum of individual interests negotiated by public power.

The Covid-19 pandemic, however, made us aware of our belonging to the same global community. *“Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved*

Fratelli tutti, an encyclical on fraternity and social friendship together” (FT, 32). This is why the Pope concludes his first chapter, an uncompromising analysis of globalization, with this plea: “*Let us... advance along the paths of hope!*”

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

What is the source of this hope? It is the Word of God, which Pope Francis presents us through a meditation on the parable of the Good Samaritan. The response to the absence of fraternity can be summarized in few words: once I stop to bend down to someone near me, especially if he is wounded or weakened, I transform the world by embracing it with the love of Christ; I repair the unraveled social tissue; I fulfill my responsibility for the common good; I build fraternity.

It is based on this personal initiative that everything can change and that a culture of social friendship can spread. “*We can start from below and, case by case, act at the most concrete and local levels, and then expand to the farthest reaches of our countries and our world, with the same care and concern that the Samaritan showed for each of the wounded man’s injuries. Let us seek out others and embrace the world as it is, without fear of pain or a sense of inadequacy, because there we will discover all the goodness that God has planted in human hearts... Yet let us not do this alone, as individuals. The Samaritan discovered an innkeeper who would care for the man; we too are called to unite as a family that is stronger than the sum of small individual members*” (FT, 78).

Fraternity is hospitality

We must rebuild this “us,” tend to it and protect it at all costs. It is an “us” that draws us out of ourselves in a law of *ekstasis*, of coming out of ourselves, “*to find a fuller existence in another*” (FT, 88). This is the logic of genuine love: it does not close us in on the person loved; rather, it makes us look outward together; it opens us to all others. This is why hospitality is the hallmark of real love. Communion among those who love each other is never a closed circle; it is rather a home with its doors always open.

“Love also impels us towards universal communion. No one can mature or find fulfilment by withdrawing from others. By its very nature, love calls for growth in openness and the ability to accept others as part of a continuing adventure that makes every periphery converge in a greater sense of mutual belonging. As Jesus told us: ‘You are all brothers’ (Mt 23:8)” (FT, 95).

What about social love? Pope Francis suggests that it is possible to apply these principles of personal open and hospitable friendship to social relationships and in particular to the phenomenon of migration.

Care for migrants

Make no mistake. The Pope does not consider migrations of populations something to encourage at any cost. *“Ideally, unnecessary migration ought to be avoided,”* he writes (FT, 129). However, migrants are there. What do we do about this? The Church’s mission is to repeat tirelessly the duty of hospitality for those who knock at our doors. It does not implement a policy of welcome itself; this is only a minor role, in emergency situations. It constantly implores rich nations, however, not to forget those who are at their borders. *“Our response to the arrival of migrating persons can be summarized by four words: welcome, protect, promote and integrate”* (FT, 129).

The issue of migrants has concerned the Pope since the beginning of his pontificate because they are signs of a liberal world that no longer works and where inhabitants of one country feel useless in their own land and rejected by neighboring countries. Migration concerns us all because it challenges the comfortable system in which we live in the West and that creates a “throw-away culture,” people who have left their country and whom no one wants in theirs. This is why the Pope suggests a form of global governance for the issue of migrants. *“There is a need for mid-term and long-term planning which is not limited to emergency responses. Such planning should include effective assistance for integrating migrants in their receiving countries, while also promoting the development of their countries of origin through policies inspired by solidarity, yet not linking assistance to ideological strategies and practices alien or contrary to the*

Fratelli tutti, an encyclical on fraternity and social friendship cultures of the peoples being assisted” (FT, 132, extract from the address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See, January 11, 2016).

The Pope thus proposes reflection on a global scale on the phenomenon of migration in order to go beyond short-term solutions and think as a single human family.

It is in this spirit that he insists on the reciprocal gifts that migratory movements can represent. *“The stories of migrants are always stories of an encounter between individuals and between cultures. For the communities and societies to which they come, migrants bring an opportunity for enrichment and the integral human development of all”* (FT, 133).

He does not dream, though, of a sort of abstract multiculturalism imposed on all. The welcome of migrants requires of the hosts a love of their land, history and culture that they can pass on to those who arrive in order to favor their integration.

“The solution is not an openness that spurns its own richness. Just as there can be no dialogue with ‘others’ without a sense of our own identity, so there can be no openness between peoples except on the basis of love for one’s own land, one’s own people, one’s own cultural roots. I cannot truly encounter another unless I stand on firm foundations, for it is on the basis of these that I can accept the gift the other brings and in turn offer an authentic gift of my own. I can welcome others who are different, and value the unique contribution they have to make, only if I am firmly rooted in my own people and culture” (FT, 143). *“The common good likewise requires that we protect and love our native land”* (FT, 143).

The mission of the Church in social issues

Some people would criticize the Pope for being somewhat naïve regarding the welcome of migrants. Nonetheless, he is fulfilling his role when he helps to awaken our conscience while thousands of our brothers and sisters sleep in refugee camps or try to leave their continent in make-shift vessels. He cannot offer concrete solutions for each country; this is the role of local governments. However, he can draw the attention of political, economic and

social leaders to the need for fraternity to deal with movements of populations. *“For these reasons,”* the Pope writes near the end of his letter, *“the Church, while respecting the autonomy of political life, does not restrict her mission to the private sphere. On the contrary, ‘she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines’ in the building of a better world, or fail to ‘reawaken the spiritual energy’ that can contribute to the betterment of society.’ It is true that religious ministers must not engage in the party politics that are the proper domain of the laity, but neither can they renounce the political dimension of life itself, which involves a constant attention to the common good and a concern for integral human development. The Church ‘has a public role over and above her charitable and educational activities.’ She works for ‘the advancement of humanity and of universal fraternity.’ She does not claim to compete with earthly powers, but to offer herself as ‘a family among families, this is the Church, open to bearing witness in today’s world, open to faith hope and love for the Lord and for those whom he loves with a preferential love. A home with open doors. The Church is a home with open doors, because she is a mother’”* (FT, 276).

What contributes to this fraternity, this social friendship?

Fraternity, social friendship, is the charity of Christ that imbues social relationships, human solidarity and popular initiatives.

We find here a theme that is dear to Pope Francis, a “people.” *“To be part of a people,”* Francis writes, *“is to be part of a shared identity arising from social and cultural bonds”* (FT, 158). Two current trends deform the internal dynamic of a country’s population: liberalism that isolates individuals by turning them into consumers and populism that corrupts popular enthusiasm to serve the interests of those who govern.

The notion of a people describes the deep connection that exists among the citizens of a particular country, the members of a particular nation, of a particular society. A “people” evokes the connection among individual people. This connection is primarily that of a culture, a shared history that creates an internal dynamic for finding solutions to social and economic problems.

Fratelli tutti, an encyclical on fraternity and social friendship

“What is needed is a model of social, political and economic participation ‘that can include popular movements and invigorate local, national and international governing structures with that torrent of moral energy that springs from including the excluded in the building of a common destiny’ while also ensuring that ‘these experiences of solidarity which grow up from below, from the subsoil of the planet – can come together, be more coordinated, keep on meeting one another.’ This, however, must happen in a way that will not betray their distinctive way of acting as ‘sowers of change, promoters of a process involving millions of actions, great and small, creatively intertwined like words in a poem’” (FT, 169). It is from these processes, transformed on a deep level by the love that comes from God, that social friendship can come to life. Political activity should assure its promotion in the interest of the common good. “For whereas individuals can help others in need, when they join together in initiating social processes of fraternity and justice for all, they enter the ‘field of charity at its most vast, namely political charity.’ This entails working for a social and political order whose soul is social charity. Once more, I appeal for a renewed appreciation of politics as ‘a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good’” (FT, 180).

This social charity is born in dialogue

It requires a dialogue built first in trust, the certainty that each person can contribute his ‘stone’ to the edifice under construction. *“Authentic social dialogue involves the ability to respect the other’s point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns. Based on their identity and experience, others have a contribution to make” (FT, 203).* It is also a dialogue that aims to arrive together at a recognition of common principles, of universal laws (natural law?) which can be a foundation for moving forward.

“Such dialogue needs to be enriched and illumined by clear thinking, rational arguments, a variety of perspectives and the contribution of different fields of knowledge and points of view. Nor can it exclude the conviction that it is possible to arrive at certain fundamental truths always to be upheld. Acknowledging the existence of certain enduring values, however demanding

it may be to discern them, makes for a robust and solid social ethics” (FT, 211).

Truth and forgiveness build up fraternity

For the Pope, then, there are certain “*fundamental truths.*” This encyclical considers truth from two perspectives. First, it is the recognition of these eternal values discovered through a respectful dialogue. We sometimes think that the fruit of dialogue is a sort of negotiation between opposing parties to find a solution that would have nothing to do with any form of truth. We would be dialoging to find practical consensuses far from truths, a “dogmatic” approach, we might say. The Holy Father thinks, in contrast, that dialogue leads to the discovery of “*an enduring truth accessible to the intellect*” (FT, 212). There are, he writes, basic structures that support the human being and society. The recognition of these structures is the foundation of constructive social dialogue and work for the common good.

In the encyclical, the truth is also a fundamental value in beginning a process of reconciliation. “*Starting anew from the truth*” is necessary for working for peace, Pope Francis writes. “*Only by basing themselves on the historical truth of events will they be able to make a broad and persevering effort to understand one another and to strive for a new synthesis for the good of all*” (FT, 226).

This prepares for forgiveness, a forgiveness that does not neglect justice but rejects the desire for vengeance. “*Those who truly forgive do not forget. Instead, they choose not to yield to the same destructive force that caused them so much suffering. They break the vicious circle; they halt the advance of the forces of destruction. They choose not to spread in society the spirit of revenge that will sooner or later return to take its toll. Revenge never truly satisfies victims*” (FT, 251).

Fraternity is the foundation of transcendence

Finally, we cannot be brothers if we do not recognize a shared Father. The tendency in our secularized societies to put God aside deprives us of a solid foundation to ensure fraternity in humanity. Human reasoning can create conditions for equality,

Fratelli tutti, an encyclical on fraternity and social friendship

but it cannot provide a foundation for fraternity. When justice no longer has a transcendent foundation, it runs the risk of serving only as the law of the survival of the fittest.

“If there is no transcendent truth, in obedience to which man achieves his full identity, then there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people. Their self-interest as a class, group or nation would inevitably set them in opposition to one another. If one does not acknowledge transcendent truth, then the force of power takes over, and each person tends to make full use of the means at his disposal in order to impose his own interests or his own opinion, with no regard for the rights of others... The root of modern totalitarianism is to be found in the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person who, as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore by his very nature the subject of rights that no one may violate – no individual, group, class, nation or state. Not even the majority of the social body may violate these rights, by going against the minority” (John Paul II, Centesimus annus (May 1, 1991), n° 44 - FT, 273).

This is why Pope Francis makes several references to the *Document on human fraternity for world peace and living together* co-signed with Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of the Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo, on February 4, 2019. This does not prevent us from confessing that God is Father and that we are brothers and sisters in Jesus, His only beloved Son. Our fraternity’s ultimate foundation lies in our baptism that gives us the grace of filiation by adoption in a totally unmerited, unconditional way because God the Father wants us all to be brothers (*fratelli tutti!*) as Saint Paul teaches: *“He destined us for adoption to Himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of His will, for the praise of the glory of His grace that He granted us in the beloved”* (Eph 1:5-6).

This encyclical is rich in varied reflections, both in terms of personal relationships and of social relationships and relations among nations. It invites us to look at humanity as a family. We need this message of hope, not just to hear it but above all to put it into practice.

“It is my desire,” Francis writes, “in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity... Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all” (FT, 8).

Monsignor Nicolas BROUWET
Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes

Province of St. Louise de Marillac-Asia

The Boldness of Charity
in God's own time



News from
the Provinces

*“Centered on Christ, through the intercession of
our Blessed Mother and our Holy Founders,
let us ask the Lord to bless us with the graces
we need to make
the Boldness of Charity for a new Missionary
Momentum
a vibrant reality”*

(Sister Kathleen Appler, IAD 2015-2021).

The political situation in Laos limits evangelization and apostolic works of priests and religious, especially foreign missionaries. Since their establishment here in 1999, the Daughters of Charity have exclusively served those who belong to the Roman Catholic faith and only in Catholic communities/villages in order to avoid being accused of proselytization, which is grounds for imprisonment or deportation.

However, attentive to the calls and challenges of our Inter-Assemblies Document (IAD 2015-2021) and Pope Francis' appeal *“let us go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the peripheries in need of the light of the Gospel”* (*Evangelii Gaudium*,

20), the Daughters of Charity turned over the Catholic Youth Ministry to the Diocese of Vientiane in May 2017 in order to respond more fully to those who are suffering from multiple forms of poverty and to the most vulnerable young people living in the peripheries and at great risk of human trafficking, illegal migration, unjust labor, prostitution and other forms of human slavery.

God's mysterious ways: discovering Namhone village

Namhone is a small village in Mern district, Province of Vientiane, where the Khamu ethnic group co-exists with the majority of the Hmong ethnic group that were relocated from the north of Laos to ensure their safety from insurgencies. The Hmong people are animists in their belief and faithful to the practice of their culture and traditions. They are small, traditional farmers whose lives are attuned to nature; they habitually settle in elevated places. Their village is inaccessible because of distance and the rough, rugged roads. The people lack opportunities for education, health care and social services.

The only Catholics in this village are Chong Thaoyonglee and her younger sister. Chong joined the Hmong youth group when she was in the second year of her Bachelor of Science in Community Development at the National University of Laos. Found to need support to fund her education, the Catholic Youth Ministry assisted Chong until she completed her course of study. She became a youth leader and introduced other Hmong young persons from her village who, like her, were seeking financial assistance for their education. One of them is Meenu Thao, who is taking a Bachelor of Science in Arts (English), also at the National University of Laos. She became the contact leader for the Hmong students in the program when Chong was sent to a youth pastoral training in the Philippines for 19 months.

Sisters' Testimonies

Learning of the dream of the Hmong people to go to school and earn a degree in order to improve their life situation inspired the Sisters to visit Namhone. In February 2018, we were able to meet the inhabitants of this village thanks to the accompaniment of Meenu who acted as guide; her presence was also our assurance of safety.

We were on the road at 6:30 in the morning and followed the route along the Mekong River (a wide and long river that divides Laos from Thailand) and then took rough and rugged roads. Around noon, we reached a small, dusty village where houses are mostly made from light materials. We saw old people clothed in a dress typical of their culture and children in school uniforms playfully walking under the heat of the sun. We were warmly welcomed by the parents of Chong and Meenu. After the fatigue from the long ride, their smiles eased our apprehension that our visit may raise questions from village leaders and neighbors as the place is rarely visited by foreigners. We introduced ourselves as friends of Meenu and Chong and stated the purpose of our visit; a translation from Hmong into Lao language aided our exchange.

We were invited for a lunch of small fishes broiled in charcoal, boiled squash soup, sticky rice and dried fried pork. Meenu's mother, acting as guide, then accompanied us to visit a few families, which enabled us to get a larger view of the village and to gather information about the eight students we would be helping with their needs.

Our joy in visiting these isolated people surpassed our insecurity and tension as well as the 4-hour ordeal of travelling the same rough, rugged roads back to the capital city of Vientiane.

Saint Vincent's words, "*If you will not help, who will help these people?*" guided our reflection on our experience, discernment of God's will and decision to embrace and accompany these young students in fulfilling their dreams for a better future and a

sustainable life for their families. We continue to trust in God's Providence as we respond with audaciousness to the needs of these people in the peripheries.

Immediately, eight high school students were assisted. One student, Houg Thao, had a problem with her vision. Thanks to the involvement of a member of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, she was able to visit eye specialists in the Vientiane capital, who diagnosed her with a mild hydrocephalus, the cause of her constant headaches and impaired vision. A delicate surgery unfortunately gives no assurance of total recovery. A Hmong doctor explained the pros and cons of the surgery to the mother, who decided against submitting her child to the proposed operation.

Houg Thao, 16 years old, continues to go to school thanks to the educational assistance and is in her 3rd year in high school. She and her younger sister were abandoned by their father 10 years ago and are cared for by a loving mother, but she is in poor health. The younger sister is mentally challenged, and while she was referred to study in a center for persons with disabilities, the mother is hesitant to give her consent as she is worried about her daughter's capacities.

Meanwhile, Chong completed her Youth Pastoral Training in the Philippines and now works in the program with the responsibility of facilitating referrals and of monitoring the income generating projects of the students' families.

March 15, 2020, was only our fifth visit to Namhone given the rainy seasons and the government's restrictions on visiting and conducting activities. Scholarships are granted in collaboration with *Enfants du Mékong* and individual sponsors. To date, we are accompanying 52 high school and college students including 15 from Namhone. Some families are provided with initial capital for starting a small business or activity to augment family income.

Sisters' Testimonies

It is our joy to see young people pursue their studies and participate in formation and training to help them develop their God-given gifts, to equip them with skills to face life's challenges and to become channels of God's love and compassion.

May Divine Providence continue to act through all our stakeholders so that these underprivileged youth can accomplish everything God plans for them.

“Let us be submissive to Providence; He will see to our affairs in His own time and His own ways” (CCD III, 449; Letter 1109 to Rene Alméras).

Sister Maria Jesusa ENCIO
Daughter of Charity

Province of Saint Louise-USA

An ever-greater fraternity

This past year, the COVID pandemic has taught us many lessons about patience, flexibility and adaptability. We have learned to do more with less, to really appreciate the people with whom we live and minister, to be more creative and to venture into new experiences that we never could have imagined doing. This has been part of our experience here in the Province of St. Louise-USA.

The first significant adaptation we had to make was in preparation for our Provincial Assembly. With the ambiguity of how long the pandemic would last, we made the decision to change our Provincial Assembly from an in-person meeting to a virtual meeting. Our Preparatory Commission had to switch gears entirely to adapt what would have been one four-day gathering into two four-day virtual sessions that would include time for small and large group discussion on the Synthesis material, group discernment of Provincial direction for the next six years and voting on propositions and postulates.

In July 2020, the first part of the Provincial Assembly used Zoom technology to allow almost 200 Sisters to meet, pray and dialogue about the four challenges: human rights and holistic development, care for our “common home”, the mystique of “living together” and passing on the faith and Christian values to younger generations. While we were somewhat skeptical about how this could be accomplished, it was clear that, due

Sisters' Testimonies

to the prayerful preparation that happened during the Domestic Assemblies and leading up to the Provincial Assembly by each local community (and by the grace of the Holy Spirit), it worked. It was a blessed experience for all.

It was beautiful to see how our more tech-savvy Sisters in each local community generously, patiently and lovingly helped our Sisters who were not as confident with the technology. When we held the second part of our Assembly in March 2021, which focused on our Provincial matters, we again saw the Sisters reaching out to help each other with the technology so that the real work of the Assembly could happen. As they gathered at the end of each day for Mass, we could see the experience of this virtual Provincial Assembly helping to build community in ways we never could have imagined.

Over the past year, we have examined and lived into this mystique of living together in many ways, but the one that stands out is the care of our older Sisters.

Our Province has four large care facilities for our older Sisters that are spread across the Province and the country. Like so many of you, we have been concerned about the care and safety of our older Sisters during this pandemic. The coronavirus made its way into each of our four care facilities, affecting both our Sisters and our lay staff despite extreme care and caution by all. That concern reached a crucial stage in December 2020 at our residence in Albany, New York. A number of Sisters tested positive for COVID and were in strict isolation – several needing much medical and personal care. Several staff were unable to work as they were infected or exposed to COVID and needed to quarantine. Still others had to quit their duties to care for frail family members. The remaining staff (Sisters and lay) were stretched to the limits.

All of the elder Sisters were quarantined in their rooms to prevent further spread of the virus, meaning they could no longer do things that they were normally able to do for themselves, such as walking to meals, doing their personal laundry, etc. Meals now needed to be delivered three times a day with limited staff and fewer able-bodied Sisters to assist. There had been a surge in COVID cases throughout the Albany area, so there really weren't extra lay staff available to assist us with the care of our Sisters. The Sisters living in the adjoining local community were also in quarantine as they too had Sisters who tested positive. Our pool of available workers was getting dangerously low.

We put out the word to the Province asking for Sisters who could volunteer to assist in Albany for 4-6 weeks. Among the first to volunteer and set out to drive the one thousand miles to Albany from the Provincial House in St. Louis were two of our Provincial Councillors. They were joined by seven other Sisters from across the Province. A couple of the volunteer Sisters were actually nurses or health care providers, but most were not; each Sister helped out in numerous ways: passing out food trays, doing laundry for Sisters, mopping floors, conducting weekly COVID tests for Sisters and staff, providing personal care of the Sisters and generally lifting their spirits. The Sisters in Albany had new faces (or at least eyes) to see in their seemingly endless hours and days of isolation.

The work was long and demanding as the Sisters helped cover all three shifts (24 hours per day), but the spirit was wonderful! Our older Sisters couldn't believe that these Sisters would drop everything, especially during the Christmas holidays, to come and assist them. It wasn't just the Sisters who traveled to Albany who were impacted. Their companions at home delayed Christmas celebrations until they could return, or they celebrated early before they left. Thanks to the wonders of phones and Zoom, the Sister volunteers were able to stay in touch with their local communities in between their work shifts (and sleeping).

Sisters' Testimonies

This contact was deeply appreciated by each Sister, whether she was volunteering in Albany or still at home, praying for the ill and their caregivers from afar. Community happens even when we are apart, and we appreciate it even more when we come back together.

Our “traveling workers” managed to arrange a visit from the Three Kings on January 6, 2021. They came bearing gifts and wearing some rather unusual costumes befitting a pandemic: masks, gloves and face shields with beards attached! This lifted spirits and made for lots of good stories.

The willingness of the Sisters who traveled to Albany spoke volumes about availability and what it means to belong to the Company. This was the mystique of community in action. Many who came to offer their services didn't even know the older Sisters since they were from a different part of the Province, but they know one another now, and a bond was formed that will last a lifetime.

Across the Province, Sisters adapted to the needs of those to whom they minister. They made masks, learned to use technology to reach out to those who were isolated, taught wearing masks and shields and did their best to keep one another safe while continuing to reach out to those in need. We never want to live through another pandemic, but we did learn a lot from this experience about what it means to live this mystique of community.

The Provincial Council

Province of Fortaleza

Living communion
with God and with our brothers and sisters
at Saint Jean-Gabriel Perboyre House

Fraternity demands commitment, maturity and co-responsibility. By taking responsibility for our own growth in these areas, we also contribute to the growth of others, even indirectly. By acknowledging our limitations and accepting help, we awaken in others the desire to grow. Reciprocity strengthens fraternal communion. However, this should not prevent us from accepting others who think differently because we must remain open-minded and accepting before the great mystery of each individual person.

It is from this perspective that our local community strives to bear witness to Gospel fraternity, the source of which is the Eucharist (cf. C. 19b and IAD 2015-2021, p. 10: “*All our relationships, centered on Jesus Christ, allow us to be credible witnesses of God’s mercy and tenderness.*”) Each Sister commits to fostering the quality of our prayer life and the monthly retreat, reflecting on a particular theme each month. “*Prayer is the water needed to nurture hope and increase confidence*” (Pope Francis, homily of June 29, 2017). Together, we try to help each other by sharing our gifts.

Sisters' Testimonies

Many lay people from the parish attend daily Mass in our Chapel of Our Lady of Grace. This spiritual connection unites us. Together, we celebrate liturgical feasts, Vincentian holy days such as the feasts of the Founders, Saint Catherine, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, as well as Christmas and New Year. The lay people consider themselves part of the Vincentian Family and are always ready to join in activities on behalf of those who are poor or Saint Jean-Gabriel Perboyre House. At the beginning of Lent, we invited them to contribute to a collection of non-perishable food goods to distribute to poor families in the neighborhood.

At Saint Jean-Gabriel Perboyre House, which hosts patients and a relative before or after liver, kidney or bone marrow transplants as well as patients suffering from cancer or motor, visual or auditive handicaps, we regularly bring together employees and a family of migrants from Venezuela staying with us for special events such as birthdays or religious feast days. *“Becoming a missionary Church requires constantly fostering communion, since mission does not have to do with outreach alone...”* (Pope Francis, homily of July 7, 2015).

We try to sow kindness at the different works where we serve: Saint Jean-Gabriel Perboyre House as well as Jesus the Worker Vocational High School, adult vocational classes offered by the AIC to neighborhood residents, in ministry to migrants and the financial support and accompaniment of a Venezuelan family that lives in one of our houses in Tabapuazinho, Caucaia-Ceará, helping the family with various bureaucratic matters...

In these different ministries, each one of us strives to serve our suffering brothers and sisters with love and to recognize the face of Jesus in them.

The Sisters of Saint Jean-Gabriel Perboyre House

Province of Central America

*Called and assembled by God
in the three local communities in Costa Rica*

Our experience of fraternity

“Fraternity, a gift and a task that comes from God the Father.”¹
God is always calling. He gave us life, calls us through our Baptism to live in Christ as Church and makes us all brothers and sisters. The fundamental value of our lives is love: love for the Savior, mutual love and concern for the persons who are poor whom He allows us to serve and love as brothers and sisters. *“For us the wellspring of human dignity and fraternity is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”²*

We are eleven Daughters of Charity in Costa Rica in three local communities at some distance from each other: the first is located in Bambu, near Bratsi in the southeast region of Talamanca, where the Sisters work in a home for the elderly, the second local community is in the rural zone of Guapiles and the third is in Alajualita, a suburb of the capital of San Jose. Two of the eleven Sisters are from El Salvador, two from Panama and seven from Costa Rica. Through the service of those who are poor, we feel like “*one heart*,” beating with the love of the Lord: we constantly strive for the culture of encounter within the community and with the people of God whose simple life style evangelizes us and who force us to examine our identity as servants.

1. Pope Francis, press conference of July 31, 2013

2. *Fratelli tutti*, 277

Sisters' Testimonies

*“How important it is to dream together... each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all.”*³ The cultural diversity that defines our local communities and life together, far from being an obstacle to fraternity, is the source of experiences, learnings and challenges impelling us to build connections of communion, keeping our focus on Christ who has called us so that He might make His dwelling place among us.

The Provincial Formation Commission offers sisterly gatherings to reflect on various topics each year. *“Social love is a force capable of inspiring new ways of approaching the problems of today’s world.”*⁴

However the Covid-19 pandemic made it difficult to continue these regular gatherings due to the state of emergency decreed by the Public Health Department. Over the months, awareness of the impact of the virus obliged us to find new strategies and means to continue a more-or-less normal rhythm of life while respecting current health measures. We realize that *“we need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead.”*⁵

With the uncertainty about this new virus, the country took precautionary measures to avoid its spread, such as a ban on gatherings and the closure of places of worship. Priests celebrated the Eucharist without the faithful. This abrupt change made us more aware of the importance of our faith life. Fortunately, we were able to participate in televised or livestreamed celebrations. Although certain restrictions remain in place for the public good, measures have become less severe. *“The way to restore hope and bring about renewal, rather... is closeness; it is the culture of encounter.”*⁶

3. Ibid., 8

4. Ibid., 183

5. Ibid., 8

6. Ibid., 30

In our three local communities composed of Sisters of different ages and nationalities, sent on mission for various services, we strive to strengthen the sense of “living together” and our individual responsibility in the shared task of building up community, accepting each other with our differences. According to Pope Francis, “*A community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others.*”⁷

In early March 2020, we had decided to bring together the three local communities for a retreat day on the eve of the Feast of the Annunciation to review our commitment as Daughters of Charity in preparation for Renovation. Everything was planned, but it was just at that time that the pandemic grew worse. Given the uncertainty of the situation and fear of infecting the older Sisters, we gave up this plan, and each local community organized itself at home.

Fortunately, each local community found a priest available to celebrate Eucharist the day when we renew our gift of self to God in order to serve Him in the person of the poor. “*Yes, Lord, You can count on us just as we count on You.*” That day, we learned that Sisters in several European countries had been afflicted by the coronavirus.

We increasingly missed our sisterly gatherings. Thanks to modern technology, we could begin communicating among ourselves. When we were able to call each other by internet, we had the joy of hearing each other and sharing our joys and difficulties.

Even though interpersonal relationships changed, we could continue ordinary life and, to the extent possible, our service. “*The Church is always... in search of new ways to proclaim the Gospel.*” “*Right now, it is necessary to celebrate remotely, but this is ‘to get out of the tunnel’ and not to remain this way.*”⁸

7. Ibid., 67

8. Pope Francis, Address to participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, December 7, 2013; interview with the Spanish newspaper *La Vida Nueva*.

Sisters' Testimonies

In April 2020, the Province offered an online retreat for the elderly Sisters. This was a test for future virtual communications. The conditions for the retreat were ideal: the Provincial Director preached the retreat, and we could see and hear him on the computer screen; moreover, he sent us the written text of his talks to facilitate our reflection. Of course, the protagonist is the Lord: *“I will lead her into the wilderness and speak persuasively to her”* (Hosea 2:16). Thanks to the younger Sisters who placed their talent at the service of the oldest ones, each Sister could peacefully make her annual retreat. *“Let us dare to contemplate Christ in the Gospel together, in order to build a faith community day after day”* (IAD, p. 10). All the other annual retreats took place in this format, and each Sister enrolled based on her availability.

The Provincial Assembly also took place in a virtual format. Thanks to these new technologies, all the Sisters of the countries of Central America convoked to the Provincial Assembly gathered through their computer screen and were able to dialogue, reflect and study the chosen topics responsibly and in a joyful atmosphere. It was a wonderful occasion to reinforce the bonds of fraternal friendship!

“The Covid-19 pandemic unexpectedly erupted, exposing our false securities.”⁹

The first case of Covid-19 in Costa Rica was confirmed on March 6, 2020. All health facilities, including the Saint Louise Home for the elderly in Talamanca received strict recommendations concerning the health measures to take: constant surveillance and rigorously application of infectious disease prevention measures. The Sisters in Bambu work in the Saint Louise Home directly administered by the Health Department. With these health measures, the Sisters and staff had to change their way of entering in relationship with the elderly residents. Wearing masks, protective gowns and special clothing and respecting distances to prevent the propagation of the virus and to protect

9. *Fratelli tutti*, 7

others are triggers for psychological insecurity among the elderly.

On October 12, 2020, the first case of infection appeared at Saint Louise Home. The announcement of this news was very worrisome for everyone, and three elderly residents died soon afterwards. The nursing staff was overworked in a very stressful environment: *“the poor are our worry and our sorrow.”* In prayer, the Lord gave each Sister energy, love and strength. *“Be patient; sometimes we must go through the worst of times to get to the best, but always trusting in God.”*¹⁰ In addition, guidance by the Health Department and representatives of the Costa Rican Social Security Administration as well as the support of families (donations, assistance, prayer) made it possible for us to make it through these difficult moments.

The Sisters in the two other local communities in the country and members of the Vincentian Family helped the Sisters in Bambu to support the Home in Talamanca financially and in prayer.

*“Fraternity means living in peace together, helping each other and loving each other.”*¹¹

In this unusual time, while continuing to take every possible precaution, we strive to infuse the little things of everyday life and encounters with others in the streets, shops, etc. with more intensity and interiority, to encourage each other to observe preventative measures and especially to foster a way of life that is close to those who are poor: an excursion to the Basilica of Nuestra Senora de los Angeles, visits to Sisters’ parents, to elderly people, to the sick...

Birthdays and Vincentian Family feast days were an opportunity for fraternal gatherings and celebrations with collaborators, benefactors, the Priests of the Mission who accompany us, etc.

10. Pope Francis, Twitter

11. Pope Francis, reflections

Sisters' Testimonies

*“Mary, Virgin and Mother... Star of the new evangelization, help us to bear radiant witness to communion, service, ardent and generous faith...”*¹²

In this pandemic year, we wondered how we could have the preparatory novena for the November 27 apparitions and honor the mission that the Blessed Virgin entrusted to us of making known and distributing the Medal as a concrete means of recalling her love: *“For those who wear it with confidence, there will be abundant graces.”* Fortunately, churches had just recently been reopened with precise guidelines for the respect of necessary distances and for the number of congregants proportional to the size and capacity of a church. The situation changed for us because the dimensions of our house, where we usually celebrated Mass with the people of the parish, would not allow us to observe these health measures. Despite all these limitations, we can truly say that in our country, 2020 was the best year for the diffusion of the Medal and the fervor with which the novena was prayed in preparation for the feast of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. We received a wonderful and encouraging response to everything that we undertook for the printing of novena programs, the distribution of Medals... The in-person Eucharistic celebration on November 27 at the national shrine Santo Cristo de Esquipulas, which is part of our sector, was broadcast on two national Catholic radio stations and the Facebook live page of the Vincentians.

Throughout the country, the Daughters of Charity, the members of the Vincentian Marian Youth, the members of the Association of the Miraculous Medal, Vincentian groups as well as all those who love the Virgin Mary were able to unite in prayer to experience this beautiful feast with greater fervor... Really, nothing is as it usually is!

“If the music of the Gospel ceases to sound in our homes, our public squares..., then we will no longer hear the strains that

12. *Evangelii gaudium*, 288

challenge us to defend the dignity of every man and woman.”¹³

We were very happy to be able to meet virtually on Christmas Day so we could see and hear each other and communicate with the Provincial Council. The fraternal messages were encouraging, and, thanks to a new program, we could go and kneel down at the stable, still virtually. Each of us could choose a character (Mary, Joseph, a shepherd, a wise man...) or an object in the stable (the star...) or an animal (a lamb, a camel...) or a gift... and place it in the stable, promising to take on the characteristics of the choice she had made and thus more fully live out the fruits of Christmas: for example, be the light of the star, practice the gentleness of the lamb, have the strength of the camel, be full of love like Mary, give generously of self like Joseph... So then, yes, the Son of God becomes flesh still today. The program lasted about an hour; it was a wonderful opportunity to renew ourselves in our gift of self to God and to persons who are poor.

Christmas is also an invitation to share with all people our joy and gratitude to God who became a little Child to live our human condition. This pandemic has caused a considerable increase in the number of people in need: loss of work, children out of school, women confronted by thousands of problems... all this requires much listening and compassion on our part.

How could we celebrate Christmas this year? The usual festivities would be impossible because of all the restrictions. Fortunately, benefactors and Church groups were very, and their assistance enabled us to offer candies to the children and some gifts to the poorest families.

“Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love!”¹⁴

For the jubilee of Sister Cruz Elena, the Sisters from the three local communities were able to come together to celebrate this

13. *Fratelli tutti*, 277

14. *Evangelii gaudium*, 101

Sisters' Testimonies

event. After the long period of harsh health restrictions, it was the first time that the Sisters from the three local communities were all together for Mass at the parish church and then for a meal. How wonderful! We could share news – difficulties, but joys as well.

“Human beings [cannot]... fully know themselves apart from an encounter with other persons.”¹⁵

We are now more aware of the importance of strengthening our relationship with God and with others day after day. We better understand the importance of fraternal sharing. Naturally, we still have much progress to make in our life of fraternal communion, but it seems that this difficult period has made us grow in fraternity and in our sense of belonging to the Company. *“Will we bend down and help another to get up?”¹⁶*

Sister Elisabeth CHAVES
Daughter of Charity

15. *Fratelli tutti*, 87

16. *Ibid.*, 70

Province of Eritrea

Celebrating joyful events
with “our Lords and Masters”

The Daughters of Charity of Immaculate Mary’s House in Asmara invited me to participate in one of their activities planned for the mentally handicapped people at the Center for the Handicapped in the Maitemenay neighborhood of Asmara, run by the municipality, where the Sisters have worked since the 1980s in order to offer their humble service and give joy. While society usually segregates mentally handicapped people, the Sisters, for their part, are close to them, strive to understand them, console them and safeguard their dignity as children of God while also tending to their well-being: showers, haircuts, nail care, etc.

In their service, the Daughters of Charity collaborate with lay volunteers and the youth of the parish. Pastoral activities at the Parish of the Miraculous Medal are assured by the Vincentian priests; with the Sisters, they encourage the youth to participate regularly in this service. The pre-postulants in this local community also go twice a week, which helps them to discern, to understand the Vincentian charism better and to mature their desire to be a Daughter of Charity.

For all the special feasts of the year, a meal is held with gifts, primarily new clothes. On Holy Thursday, a special meal known as “TuTuqo” is prepared and served.

Sisters' Testimonies

The Province allocated some money to buy clothes, shoes and bed covers. During the gift distribution, one of the mentally-ill elderly women said to us, “*When we see you among us, our life is renewed.*” This expression said with enthusiasm and big smile touched us. It is true that only the Lord can renew people’s lives, but God sends people like us to revive the lives of those who feel discouraged and deprived of love, respect and attention.

We have the joy of serving and giving of ourselves to the residents, but thanks to them, we return home full of deep joy that no one can imagine, and we have learned from them the spirit of gratitude and simplicity. As Saint Vincent says, the poor evangelize us if we are open to read in their lives the message of life. We thank the Lord for allowing us to experience the profound joy of our gift of self.

Sister Lettekidan LUCAS
Daughter of Charity

Province of Madrid-San Vicente

The poor, our masters,
evangelize us

I was asked to share a reflection based on my experience of a work of mercy, specifically, instructing the ignorant. I must admit that I was tempted to play the “teacher” (Mt 23:8) and offer a theological discourse on mercy, setting down a precise definition of God, as if I had had coffee with Him and could now pass on to you an absolute truth. Thank God, I was not able to produce that text since, as I sought to develop it by reading *Misericordiae Vultus* by Pope Francis, *Mercy* by the theologian Walter Kasper, or *Blessed are you the poor!* by Joseph Wresinski, I tried to find the ideal space and time for reflection and work without any interruptions. However, life tapped at the glass of my false bubble: today it is a child who runs away, at another moment the company of an alcoholic woman or a visit to someone detained at police station, support at a funeral wake, my son’s admission to the hospital, then diapers, clothes to wash, more or less pleasant ordinary tasks... All this put me back in my place, giving a realistic and less theoretical and idealized sense to what I intended to write. Such are our lives! Ultimately, this is what I hope to communicate to you: life!

For a moment now on our path of conversion for the transformation of our hearts, we will change the active subject. This time, we will not be the ones to teach. We will shift our center of gravity away from ourselves and toward those who are poor and who suffer.

What do they teach us?

This requires two preliminary exercises. First, we will come down off the pedestal of our prestige and abundant knowledge and remove all hasty judgements from our minds in order to make the merciful eyes of God our own. We will do this thanks to a second exercise, which brings us closer to God's love: listening... An image comes to mind from the film *Monsieur Vincent*, in the garret room where he comes to know the poor. Up until then, he had not understood them. We will prepare ourselves in this process of deepening our relationship with those who are poor, to know them, understand them, and finally reach the state reserved for saints, that of sharing their lives and their daily struggles until we become one of them. Then we will be like Saint Vincent de Paul himself when he started to row, sharing the same punishment with the galley convicts.

Vincent de Paul's powerful and categorical affirmation that the *poor are our masters* puts the Daughters of Charity and all of us who live out the Vincentian charism in the position of apprentices in order to serve in humility and simplicity. We regularly learn when we teach; all masters learn while teaching, and those who are poor, the truly poor, teach us at all times and circumstances of life. Letting those who are poor teach us is a life-long task. Thus, "instructing the ignorant" is the best apprenticeship and the most fascinating mission.

This short meditation reflects what I witnessed and recorded in my journal: the beating of hearts that dream, suffer, desire, love... and the knowledge held by poor and excluded people. They intimately experience both the reality of their condition and the reality of the world imposed on them. I simply wish to share their lives with you.

Once again, all these women are standing in front of the school door. They have been waiting for a half-hour for the social worker, the principal, a Daughter of Charity... to ask for books, uniforms, food or a fee reduction at the

cafeteria. They are like the crowd, persistent in its faith, that gathered and jostled to touch Christ (cf. Luke 8:40-56).

She has three nephews. When her drug-addicted sister died, like many of her generation, the aunt took them in, raised them and tried to meet all their needs. When the oldest boy defied her and ran away, she repeatedly forgave him and allowed him to remain with her. This reminds me of the Father's mercy toward the prodigal son (cf. Luke 15:11-32).

A teenager was branded as marginal and delinquent. When social services came to take his friend's brothers and sisters from the home, this teenager put his hand over the blade of the knife his friend was holding in order to prevent him from doing something stupid and killing the social worker. Isn't this the meekness of the poor? (cf. Matthew 5:5)

A gypsy grandmother, a widow without any income, welcomes three children, two daughters-in-law and as many as six grandchildren into her home. She is like Jesus, sensitive to the suffering of his contemporaries, who takes five loaves and two fish to feed the crowd (cf. Mark 6:30-44).

Hundreds of men work dawn to dusk collecting scrap metal, recycling every possible material. They are unemployed, without any diploma, without professional recognition for their work, like the poor man Lazarus (cf. Luke 16:19-31).

An Ecuadorian grandmother and her grandson with Down syndrome go every morning to the parish church, just at the end of the Eucharist. Together, they pray to Christ crucified and we, the good parishioners, take offense at the tone of their voice. It is like in the well-

Sisters' Testimonies

known parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee. The tax collector prays very differently and finds favor with God (cf. Luke 18:9-14).

A mother teaches her children that they should forgive and watch over their sick father until his death even though he abandoned them because of infidelity. She is like Christ who calls His disciples to forgive seventy times seven times (cf. Matthew 18:21-22).

The prostitutes already know a lot but, out of humility, ask the Sisters who go out to them, "Tell us about God." "*Tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you*" (Matthew 21:31).

Many other events in the lives of those who are poor conceal little and great lessons on the mystery of mercy.

After a beating by her husband, a pregnant alcoholic mother prays to the Christ of the poor that she might see her daughter born.

A mother evicted from her home welcomes another undocumented mother and her son with cerebral palsy.

Malian migrants, unemployed and undocumented, contribute everything they have to repatriate the body of the wife of one of them.

Men who live in the streets drink before entering the soup kitchen because the humiliation of coming there to eat daily is too hard to face sober.

A child throws a potato from the third floor of his building because you do not involve him in the cultural activity that you are conducting in his neighborhood.

Children protect their parents by hiding letters for appointments with tutors so the parents will not be ashamed of their ignorance in front of the teachers.

Children hide their mother when she is drunk because they know that she would be subject to public mockery.

Thousands of children from all over the world serve as teachers for other children in their village or under bridges in big cities.

A Syrian child comes toward us and cries out, “My message is: please help Syrians. Just stop the war; we do not want to go to Europe.”

I make these words my own: *“For years, the flame of revenge kept me alive. In the prison of my hatred, people filled with Love visited me and brought me to my knees in my heart. I owe my life and a wonderful lesson of love to those whom society rejects: the sickly, the crippled, the disabled, the ‘abnormal.’ I dedicate this book to them. They made my rebirth possible. This unexpected encounter with Love turned my life upside down”* (Prologue to the book *Stronger than hatred* by Tim Guénard).

People who are poor are our masters. It is not easy to understand. Obviously, they are not our masters or teachers only in terms of knowledge and skills but particularly in terms of awareness... This adds to the depth of western culture that has always striven to develop its awareness. Those who are most poor teach us awareness of justice, injustice and contempt. This is what we learn through their words, actions and lives. They thus help those who approach them to deepen and develop their awareness. If we do not listen to those who are excluded, we run the risk of rushing headlong toward catastrophe.

“Observe, listen and question those who live in poverty: we do not easily accept taking this approach. It first requires great

Sisters' Testimonies

humility and openness. It requires the humility to convince ourselves that people who are poor have something to teach us. It requires the openness to accept the consequences of what we learn. Where might these people lead us, they who seem to defy our efforts to get them out of their poverty, who entrench themselves in this poverty and accuse us of social or religious failure? Don't we prefer to destroy it, pure and simple, imposing our will on those who are poor, breaking them and obliging them to become like us or disappear?

Objective analysis also demands great skill. Are we able simply to listen to those who are poor and interpret their words, which do not mean in their world what they mean in ours? Do we understand their gestures, which are those of a universe into which we have not really entered? Can we recognize how those who are poor perceive us, those who are around them? That is what will determine, in large part, how they will communicate with us.

How many surveys have been ill-conceived, how many studies conducted poorly, how many ineffective and even harmful approaches because we have not been able to get on the same wavelength as those whom we want to question. Even in our research, we have wanted those who are poor to adapt to us and our previous experience rather than adapting to them” (Joseph Wresinski).

Those who are poor are not the ones who should adapt to us. We should adapt to them. We should be, by God's call, their servants. Our call is to live aristocracy upside-down in order to help those who have no one. *“Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40). Saint Vincent said to the Daughters of Charity, “Poor people are our masters; they're our kings” (CCD X, 489).*

What is important is that we, human beings, meet, that love is expressed and that exclusion ends. Behind the excluded person,

there is a “you” hidden by the world of humiliation. Allow the birth of that “you” thanks to culture, education and all the rest... Help poor persons to recover their beauty and human dignity. Help people to stand up tall. This vision of a world that changes from the bottom of the social ladder is prophetic. Let us return to the Gospel, make a new reading through the encounter with those who are poor and do it joyfully. So, who is teaching whom? Yes, the poor are our masters.

Daniel Roca LAGUNA
Social worker in the schools of Madrid

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton

Child of Hope



*History of
the Company*

Early in her life, Elizabeth Ann Bayley (her maiden name) Seton overcame adversity, broke through gates and went forward. Divine Grace empowered her to become increasingly open and responsive to encounters with God.

This article presents an overview of how Elizabeth Ann Bayley responded in her youth to adverse life-changing events and their influence on her relationship with God before 1793.

The Bayley and Charlton families were among the earliest European settlers of colonial New York, many of whom were French Huguenots (Protestants from the Kingdom of France and Navarre) from the British Isles. In 1767, Dr. Richard Bayley married Catherine Charlton, daughter of Mary Bayeux and Reverend Richard Charlton, pastor of St. Andrew Anglican Church, Staten Island (New York).

After the American patriots defeated the British at the battle of Yorktown (1781), the colonists created a new Republic with its first capital in New York City, elected the first President (1789), George Washington, and began establishing a democracy.

Simultaneously, New Yorkers who were affiliated with the Church of England refused to recognize the British monarch as their religious leader. Like-minded compatriots established the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America in 1801. The Bayley and Charlton families were among its congregants.

Richard and Catherine Charlton Bayley, Elizabeth Ann's parents

Richard and Catherine Bayley lived near Newtown, Long Island (today, the Elmhurst neighborhood of Queens, New York). Although colonial life had few comforts, the Bayleys anticipated that they would prosper. After all, Catherine's father was an Episcopal priest, her brother a respected physician and her brother-in-law a successful merchant and then farmer. The Bayleys did not anticipate adversity.

They had a first child, Mary. Six years later, on August 28, 1774, a second daughter, Elizabeth Ann, was born. Two years later, they were expecting a third daughter, but Mrs. Bayley became seriously ill during childbirth and died unexpectedly despite the medical intervention of her husband.

The girls and their heartbroken father were inconsolable at the death of a loving wife and mother. Years later, Elizabeth Ann discovered a prayer by Saint Bernard, the *Memorare*, which touched her deeply.

*"I had a Mother,
which you know my foolish heart
so often lamented to have lost in early days.
— from the first remembrance of infancy,
I have looked in all the plays of childhood and wildness of youth
to the clouds for my Mother,
and at that moment it seemed as if I had found more than her,*

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Child of Hope
even in tenderness and pity of a Mother —
so I cried myself to sleep in her heart.”¹

There are no extant records to shed light on who managed the household and cared for the children after their mother’s death until Dr. Bayley’s remarriage.

Charlotte Barclay Bayley, Elizabeth Ann’s stepmother

Dr. Bayley felt that his three children needed a mother and married nineteen-year-old Charlotte Amelia Barclay barely a year after their mother’s death. However, the Bayley girls received their stepmother reluctantly. Charlotte wished for acceptance as the matron of the household.

Charlotte was the youngest of eleven children and had lost her parents as a young girl, her father when she was three and her mother at the tender age of six. Although we know little about Charlotte’s personality, we know that she had no experience with young children, which the Bayley girls sensed and probably resented. One could think that a young woman who had experienced early childhood loss herself might have been empathetic with the Bayley girls, but they were apparently unable to accept any overtures of her maternal affection, perhaps perceiving her as an intruder.

During the initial struggles of their first four months as a blended family, Kitty (Catherine), a toddler, became ill and died unexpectedly. The already tense emotional climate of the family burst. Elizabeth felt lingering hurt from this second loss and may have wondered if she could have played a role in the death of her mother or Kitty. The mystery of death is unfathomable for young children.

As grief wove itself through her life, sorrow molded her heart

l. 2.11, To Rebecca Seton, Regina Bechtle, S.C., and Judith Metz, S.C., eds.,
Ellin M. Kelly, mss. ed., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings*, 3 vols.
(New City Press: New York, 2000-2006), I:293. Hereinafter cited as *CW*.

for compassion, empathy and courage, similar to Louise de Marillac, who understood that it was God's will that she "go to Him by way of the Cross."²

Adversity cast a dark cloud on the Bayley family when least expected. Its shadows enveloped three-year-old Elizabeth, causing the first of many emotional wounds, which only time and God's grace would heal.

Late in life, Elizabeth recorded reminiscences that offer glimpses of her early years: "At 4 years of age, sitting alone on a step of the door looking at the clouds while my little sister Catherine 2 years old lay in her coffin. They asked me, did I not cry when little Kitty was dead? —No, because Kitty is gone up to heaven, I wish I could go, too, with Mamma."³

Within the next seventeen years, the Bayley family counted seven more children. Disagreements erupted and became more hot-tempered within the blended family. When Elizabeth was 16, due to a "family disagreement," she "could not guess why, when I spoke kindly to relations, they did not speak to me — could not even guess how anyone could be an enemy to another."⁴

Elizabeth's father is torn between his roles of father and doctor

Dr. Bayley decided to sail to England for advanced medical study. Was it to acquire new skills or to escape simmering unhappiness at home? Was he primarily a professional dedicated to the good of society as a physician or a loving father committed to the best interest of his children as their parent? Which did he consider his chief obligation before God? We do not know, but the father's absence altered eight-year old Elizabeth's family situation forever.

2. A. 29 (On Charity), Louise Sullivan, D.C., trans., ed., *Louise de Marillac Spiritual Writings*, (New City Press: New York, 1991), p. 711. Hereinafter cited as *SW*.

3. 10.4, Dear Remembrances, *CW*, IIIa:510

4. *Ibid.*, 512

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Child of Hope

Realizing that his older daughters felt rejected by their stepmother, their father arranged for Mary, 14, and Elizabeth, 8, to stay with their paternal uncle, William Bayley, and his wife, Sara Pell Bayley, on their farm in New Rochelle, New York State.

The older Bayley girls would not see their father for several years. Elizabeth pined for her father's attention and love. His absence caused her heartache. At times, she thought that her father no longer loved her. Fortunately, she enjoyed playing with any children who lived in the area, particularly her cousins, Joe and Nancy. She appreciated the care and affection of her aunt and uncle. She dreamed of the security and stability of living with her father, if he would only return... He did come back briefly, and the girls went back home, but not for long. He again arranged for further study in London, during which time his two daughters returned to their Bayley relatives for another prolonged stay until 1790.

Dr. Bayley studied medicine and anatomy for four years under Dr. William Hunter at the London School of Anatomy (1782-1786). Upon his return, he practiced medicine for about two years with his brother-in-law and former mentor, Dr. John Charlton, then sailed back to England for advanced surgical study under Dr. John Hunter of St. George's Hospital in London (1788-1790).

Elizabeth's solitude

Because of her father's extended absences, young Elizabeth felt rejected by him and perceived that he no longer loved her. She also missed her deceased mother. As the months stretched into years, the adolescent Elizabeth experienced the cumulative impact of loss and separation. She recalled this bitter period: "*Folly — sorrows — romance — miserable friendships but all turned to good and thoughts of how silly to love anything in this world.*"⁵

5. Ibid.

Despite her sorrow and anger over paternal rejection, Elizabeth learned that immersion in nature could stir feelings of consolation and even awe. Amid all the fluctuations of adolescence, Elizabeth escaped into her own world of fantasy. For example, she remembered “*many thoughts of running away to such a place over the seas, in disguise, working for a living... astonished at peoples’ care in dress, in the world, etc.*”⁶ At this time, wrapped in daydreams, Elizabeth focused on her future:

*“At 18 fine plans of a little country home, to gather all the little children round and teach them their prayers and keep them clean and teach them to be good — then passionate wishes that there were such places in America as I read of in novels where people could be shut up from the world, and pray, and be good always.”*⁷

Riveted by anxiety, melancholy permeated her psyche at times. She felt alone and had mood swings, but sadness seemed embedded in her young heart. Uncertain, Elizabeth had no control over her circumstances. Among her journal entries, we find a description of an incident possibly associated with adolescent depression.⁸

“I was very miserable... driven by misery... the wretched reasoning.” She expressed relief for not taking a drug overdose of laudanum, an opium derivative: “*the praise and thanks of excessive joy not to have done the horrid deed, the thousand promises of ETERNAL GRATITUDE.*”⁹

Life would challenge Elizabeth to wrestle with uncertainty and lack of control. In her youth, Elizabeth had not yet heard of Vincent de Paul, who acknowledged to Louise de Marillac, “*I am like you, Mademoiselle; there is nothing that bothers me*

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. 1.9, To Eliza Sadler, 11 August 1796, *CW*, I:10

9. 10.4, Dear Remembrances, *CW*, IIIa:512-3

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Child of Hope

more than uncertainty.”¹⁰ Yet, twenty years later, seasoned with wisdom born of maturity, Vincent expressed this faith-filled insight: “*God be blessed for having willed all earthly things to be uncertain and perishable so that we may seek in Him alone the stability of our plans and affairs because things then turn out well for us.*”¹¹

As a “*child of Hope,*” Elizabeth believed in a “*Providence which never slumbers no sleeps.*”¹² Her devotion to “*Merciful Providence*” and the protection of her Guardian Angel consoled her in the midst of life’s challenges. She learned to manage adversity with “*good grace.*”¹³ Only the “*protecting presence and consoling grace of...[her] Redeemer and God*” enabled her to overcome misfortune.¹⁴

Elizabeth, more introspective than extroverted, was naturally intuitive. Her gift of interiority was a grace, which not only sustained her but also nurtured others as she matured and engaged in benevolence. A precocious adolescent, Elizabeth enjoyed reading and conversing with adults despite her youthful age. Melancholia, however, forged inroads into her heart, scarred by her early childhood losses, and feelings of isolation encircled her. Having inherited the Bayley temper, her anger could flare. This concerned her father, who wrote his daughter a letter of paternal advice:

“Calm that glowing of your soul, that warm emanation of your chest, for a more temperate climate, impressions on that case will be less readily admitted but their effects will last longer...

10. L. 175, Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, [Between 1632 and 1636, probably July 22], Marie Poole, D.C., trans., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, 14 vols., (New City Press: New York, 1983-2014), I, 240-241. Hereinafter cited as *CCD*.

11. L. 2352, Vincent de Paul to Jacques Chiroye (26 August 1657), *CCD* VI, 439

12. 1.8, To Eliza Sadler, 8 February 1796, *CW*, I:9

13. 1.12, To Eliza Sadler, 1 August 1796, *CW*, I:17

14. 2.8, To Rebecca Seton, 3 January 1804, *CW*, I:280

Guard against the sudden the change of weather. Never dwell on a trifle, be mistress of yourself, then I am convinced you will always have the credit of acting well.”¹⁵

Looking Up

The Bayley family formed Elizabeth’s religious self and shaped her understanding of God as a Protestant Episcopalian in a diverse religious environment. Many of her relatives descended from French Huguenots. Methodists, Quakers and Anabaptists were among her friends and acquaintances. Exposure to varied religious traditions in her formative years created her adult awareness, acceptance and openness to different faiths and styles of worship.

Elizabeth’s spirituality and sanctity developed from her baptism. At the time of her mother’s death, a relative may have told Mary and Elizabeth that their mother had gone to heaven and pointed toward the sky. Whatever the explanation, Elizabeth understood that deceased loved ones were with God in heaven in the midst of the clouds. Thereafter, she observed clouds in remembrance of her loved ones. Elizabeth longed for reunion with her mother and developed a lifelong habit of “*looking up to God*” in silent prayer.¹⁶

Perhaps emulating her own instruction on heaven, Elizabeth noted this reminiscence in her journal: “*At 6 taking my little sister Emma up to the garret window, showing her the setting sun, [and] told her God lived up in heaven and good children would go up there...teaching her her prayers.*”¹⁷

Elizabeth noted in her journal that Mrs. Bayley had taken time to teach her Psalm 23, *The Lord is my Shepherd*, despite the

15. Daughters of Charity Archives Province of St. Louise-USA, Dr. Richard Bayley to EA Bayley, n.d. Hereinafter cited as APSL.

16. 10.4, Dear Remembrances, *CW*, IIIa: 512-3; 3.26, To Antonio Filicchi, 30 April 1805, *CW*, I:359

17. 10.4, Dear Remembrances, *CW*, IIIa:510

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Child of Hope

tension in their relationship. “*All through life...[this] has been the favorite Psalm, ‘though I walk in the midst of the shadow of Death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.’*”¹⁸ Reading, pondering and praying with “*the dear Scriptures as usual*” became a lifelong practice which nourished her relationship with God. Even when unable to sleep, she would take her Bible and read until sleepy.¹⁹ Prior to her marriage, Elizabeth nurtured her relationship with God in various ways:

- Worshiping liturgically and receiving communion on Communion Sundays.
- Reading the Bible, initially as literature. Gradually her reading became a time of reflection and prayer. Later in life, she regularly copied passages that inspired her and made brief notes in the margins of her Bible.
- Consulting Biblical commentaries to understand particular scriptural passages and copying those that helped her to understand her faith better.
- Playing the piano and singing religious hymns.
- Fostering harmony in interpersonal relationships and caring about creation.
- Valuing solitude and taking the time to contemplate nature’s beauty.

Her capacity for delight

Creation’s beauty riveted Elizabeth’s attention, and she liked to “*approach nature and the environment... [with] openness to awe and wonder.*”²⁰ She explored woodlands, flora and the

18. Ibid.

19. 2.7, To Rebecca Seton, 19 November 1803, *CW*, I:254; Cf. 1.7, To William Magee Seton, 23 July 1794, *CW*, I:6

20. *Laudato si’* (2015), 11

shoreline. Throughout her life, she observed nature's seasonal cycles of winter dormancy and spring rejuvenation. She noticed life around her: birds' nests laden with eggs, wildflowers, seashells... and always gazed on the ever-changing clouds in the sky, looking for her mother and little Kitty.

She marveled at the fragility of life. Seeing “*girls taking bird eggs*,” she cried at the distress of the mother bird “*because the girls would destroy*” the eggs.²¹ Offended by her playmates' insensitivity, Elizabeth “*always loved to play and walk alone*.”²² She recorded memories retrospectively as an adult and fondly alluded to the years spent with her uncle and aunt in New Rochelle with its multifaceted beauty that inspired encounters with God.

Had Elizabeth lived to read *Laudato si'*, she would have noted the wisdom of Pope Francis and probably copied in her journal, “*Nature is nothing other than a certain kind of art, namely God's art*.”²³

Elizabeth reveals what she enjoyed in the intimate presence of the Creator and Divine Artist:²⁴

“*...delight to sit alone by the water side [Long Island Sound] — wandering hours on the shore humming and gathering shells — every little leaf and flower or animal, insect, shades of clouds, or waving trees, objects of vacant unconnected thoughts of God and heaven*.”²⁵

Ecological awareness

As Elizabeth grew from girlhood into adolescence, she cherished her location by the coast where she observed and explored

21. 10.4, Dear Remembrances, *CW*, IIIa:510-511

22. *Ibid.*, 511

23. *Laudato si'*, 80

24. 10.4, Dear Remembrances, *CW*, IIIa:510-523

25. *Ibid.*, 511

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Child of Hope

nature, admiring its delicate balance although she could not know what today's society considers care of the earth and obligatory stewardship. Society faces "*the urgent challenge to protect our common home.*"²⁶ To be a good steward is everyone's responsibility.

By her own admission, as a young girl, Elizabeth sensed not only the value, but also the delicacy of natural life and, as if by instinct, wished to observe and to protect habitats of flora and fauna.²⁷ Her interest for what could be considered inconsequential echoes Pope Francis' conviction: "*The Holy Spirit...knows how to loosen the knots of human affairs*" and "*continues the work of creation*" despite inadequate human stewardship.²⁸

A Sister of Charity of Seton Hill, Sister Sung-Hae Kim, a noted scholar of the Vincentian Family, has studied Elizabeth's writings from an ecological perspective and published new insights about Elizabeth in light of a modern understanding of ecology in the 21st century. Elizabeth would hum and gather seashells along the shoreline. She grew in awareness of her God and Creator and expanded her sphere of love in interpersonal relationships. Elizabeth's recollections of her childhood, adolescence and young adulthood offer examples of rudimentary ecological awareness, which deepened as she became a wife and mother.²⁹ Sister Kim analyzed Elizabeth's writings from 1793 to 1808 and identified the following "*constitutive elements in her ecological spirituality.*"³⁰

1. The beauty of nature was the space wherein her encounter with God and friends always took place;

26. *Laudato si'*, 13

27. Cf. 10.4, Dear Remembrances, *CW*, IIIa:510

28. *Laudato si'*, 80

29. 10.4, Dear Remembrances, *CW*, IIIa:510-511

30. See Kim, Sung-Hae S.C. (2015) "The Ecological Spirituality of Elizabeth Ann Seton," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 32: Iss. 2, Article 2. Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol32/iss2/2> Sister Kim's constitutive elements are used with permission for this article.

2. When she felt abandoned, Elizabeth identified with the surrounding natural environment and therein experienced consolation and God's mercy;
3. Elizabeth saw God's equity in nature and learned ecological balance that accepts both life and death, joy and suffering;
4. Recognizing the rhythms of nature, Elizabeth realized the importance of living in the present and learned to be content in all situations, acquiring the virtues of moderation and harmony.

Trust in God

In 1786, Dr. Bayley returned from London and remained in New York for about two years, until after the Doctors Riot of mid-April 1788. Apparently, his two children from his first marriage, Mary, 20, and Elizabeth, 14, lived with him until his next departure for England. To support his interests in medical research, Dr. Bayley had developed a valuable collection of anatomy specimens. One night, an angry mob attacked his medical laboratory at New York Hospital and destroyed much of his collection because of rumors that he and his associates robbed graves to obtain corpses for dissection.³¹

In her memoir, Elizabeth referred to the attack as a “*night passed in sweat of terror.*” The noise and commotion of the rabble terrified Mary and Elizabeth, motivating them to pray their way through the night. The young women feared for the lives of their father and his associates. They also feared for their own safety. The violence terrified the young women. Would their father survive the attack? Could they protect themselves?

Mary and Elizabeth turned to God in trust, praying fervently. God answered their prayers: Dr. Bayley and his colleagues survived, but his laboratory was damaged and the specimens destroyed.

31. 13-14 April 1788

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Child of Hope

He salvaged a few samples in an attempt to reconstitute his treasured collection, but some items were irreplaceable. That day, Elizabeth understood that God was her Father and would never stop loving her.

That night would not be Elizabeth's last encounter with violence. Fifteen years later, again in New York, she would witness another frenzied mob.³²

Ultimately, her father became a model for her because of his way of caring for patients

In 1790, Elizabeth was 16 years old and Mary 22 years old. When Dr. Bayley returned from his last trip to London, he settled in lower Manhattan (New York City) and brought his oldest daughters to live with him. During this time, Elizabeth may have attended a small private school operated by a local schoolmistress, a Madame Pompelion.³³

Dr. Wright Post, a medical student of Dr. Bayley, courted the eldest daughter, Mary, and they married in 1790.³⁴ Within that same year, Dr. Bayley permanently separated from his wife, Charlotte. Depending exclusively on her to raise their seven children (ranging from a few months to eleven years old), he was carefree to pursue his medical and research interests.

In Manhattan, Elizabeth attended dances, concerts, plays and society events with other adolescents. She recorded that she had a “*thousand reflections after being at public places — why I could not say my prayers and have good thoughts as if I had been at home, wishing to philosophize and give everything its place — not able though to do both — preferred going to my*

32. The anti-Catholic Highbinders Riot occurred at St. Peter's Church, 24-25 December 1806.

33. APSL, Mary Bayley Post to Elizabeth Seton, 12 June 1815

34. 10 June 1790

*room to any amusement out of it.”*³⁵

Driven by intellectual curiosity and scientific investigation, Dr. Bayley sought to understand the mysteries of human anatomy and physiology. Elizabeth learned much about basic nursing, medicine, and pharmacology from her father. Her father’s care of indigent patients at the New York Dispensary became her model; she admired his dedicated service, competency, work ethic and compassion.

Dr. Bayley’s commitment to advancing the field of medicine and medical education earned the respect of his peers, especially in preventing the spread of disease by requiring quarantine at ports of entry. Elizabeth took pride not only in her father’s meticulous research to prevent the transmission of yellow fever, but also in his appointment as the first public health officer of the port of New York and in his concern for sick immigrants.

Peace

For Elizabeth, every sign of life made her turn her heart to God, cast her eyes heavenward and implore a blessing. She wrote, “*According to the old principle by constant looking up, and reinforcement of patience, the poor spirit was broken down to bear everything as it happened and prepared with silent resignation for the future.*”³⁶

The exquisite beauty of sunsets and sunrises left Elizabeth in awe. Such encounters with majestic beauty relieved her stress, nurtured her inner self and produced equilibrium and a broader outlook.

Elizabeth also enjoyed writing. She chronicled significant occasions and her reflections in a journal or in correspondence with close friends. Writing was the primary tool that Elizabeth

35. 10.4, Dear Remembrances, *CW*, IIIa:512

36. 4.11, To Julia Scott, 20 November 1805, *CW*, I:396

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Child of Hope

used to reflect on and process her feelings, record hopes and gain (or regain) perspective, particularly about life-changing events.

She further enjoyed reading. In her youth, she read Sacred Scripture, poetry, ancient history, Greek mythology, philosophy and travel literature. Her wide-ranging preferences most likely related to titles available wherever she was. Over time, her literary choices included passages from the Bible or schoolbooks and poetry collections, which she copied because they impressed her. One of her notebooks contains passages from thirty-two poets, predominantly eighteenth-century writers from England and Scotland, particularly William Cowper and Edward Young.³⁷ Throughout her life, Elizabeth copied extracts from religious writers and interwove her own reflections as commentary.³⁸ A stanza from “The Traveler’s Return Home,” a poem that Elizabeth copied, poignantly conveys her sentiments, possibly in anticipation of her father’s return to New York:³⁹

*“Now more and more my pleasures rise
As near my long forsaken home
I hear the voice of glad surprise
Proclaims aloud he’s come he’s come.”*

Elizabeth sometimes connected meaningful moments of her life to the beauty of spring, an icon or symbol of life, as a place where she encounters the Divine Presence. Fourteen years after a memorable experience from her last stay on the farm of her uncle and aunt, she shared the memory with a sister-in-law, Rebecca Seton, her “soul sister.”

37. Kelly, Ellin M. Ph.D. (2009) “Elizabeth Bayley Seton’s Commonplace Book of Poetry, APSL, Rare Book 31,” *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 29: Iss. 1, Article 4, p. 37. Hereinafter cited as Kelly, *Book of Poetry*.

38. 8.23, Extracts from George Horne’s *A commentary on the Book of Psalms*, *CW*, IIIa: 38- 81. Psalm 23 appears on p. 68-71.

39. Kelly, *Book of Poetry*, 25

Elizabeth copied another poem with the title, “Ode to Peace” although its poet, Thomas Parnell, had titled his work “A Battle to Contentment.”⁴⁰ There is no record to explain Elizabeth’s rationale for altering its name, but its last stanza echoes sentiments similar to those Elizabeth recorded about her 1789 drive to the woods. These lines are particularly prophetic:

“*Know God — and bring thy Heart to know
The joys that from Religion flow.*”⁴¹

Her “Dear Remembrances”

Adverse life-changing events affected Elizabeth Ann Bayley’s early development. They influenced her relationship with God and shaped her spirituality as a young woman. Much later in life, Elizabeth recorded her *Dear Remembrances* and did so with a deep sense of gratitude for her past, noting her youthful “*pleasure in learning anything pious.*”⁴² Her choice to copy Thomas Parnell’s poem illustrates her aspiration to “*know God*” and the heartfelt joy of a living faith.⁴³

As a child, Elizabeth sought to know the Divine, searching the heavens for deceased loved ones; she further longed for the embrace of her absent father. Her happiness was restored in contemplating nature: fields and wildflowers, seashores of scattered shells, woodlands... Gazing on the beauty of creation often transformed her solitude into an encounter with God in this “green cathedral.”

The nighttime attack on her father’s laboratory helped her to understand that God was her Father. With confident delight, she realized that God would be there for her and would never stop loving her even when she, a “*child of Hope,*” would have

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. 10.4, *Dear Remembrances*, *CW*, IIIa:510

43. Ibid.

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Child of Hope

her “*prospects darkened by... disappointments.*”⁴⁴ Solitude and seemingly aimless meanderings nurtured Elizabeth’s inner self and awareness of God: consoling grace washed over her.

Elizabeth’s trust in God enabled her to discover peace, reconcile with her father and bond with him after his return to New York, witnessing his compassionate medical care for poor persons.

During her childhood and youth, Elizabeth grasped the value of being content in the present moment despite the obscurity of life’s stresses and challenges, learning the important lesson of being “*careful to meet our grace.*”⁴⁵ At the threshold of adulthood, God was coaching Elizabeth to be open like Louise de Marillac: “*The grace of my God will accomplish in me whatever He wills.*”⁴⁶

Here is one of the poems that Elizabeth included in her notebook of poetry:

A BATTLE TO CONTENTMENT [“Ode to Peace”]

Lovely lasting Peace of mind
Sweet delight of Human Kind!
Heavenly born and bred on high,
To crown the favourites of the sky
With more of happiness below
Than Victors in a triumph know.
Lovely lasting Peace appear,
This world itself, if thou are here
Is once again with Eden bless’d
And Man contains it in his breast.

44. 1.8, To Eliza Sadler, 8 February 1796, *CW*, I:9

45. 7.195, To Sister Cecilia O’Conway, [20 November 1818], *CW*, II:595

46. M. 8B (On Holy Communion), *SW*, p. 834

'Twas thus as under shade I stood
And sung my wishes to the wood
And lost in thought no more perciev'd
The branches whisper as they would
It seemed, as all the quiet place
Confess'd the presence of the Grace
When thus she spake, Go rule thy Will,
Bid thy wild passion all be still,
Know God—and bring thy Heart to know
The joys that from Religion flow,
Then ev'ry grace shall prove its guest
And *I'll* be there to crown the rest—⁴⁷

Thomas Parnell

Sister Betty Ann McNEIL
Daughter of Charity

47. Kelly, *Book of Poetry*, 96

God looks into the heart

(cf. 1 Sm 16:7)

In Saint Joseph, [God] recognized

the heart of a father,

able to give and generate life

in the midst of daily routines.

Vocations have this same goal:

to beget and renew lives every day.

The Lord desires to shape

the hearts of fathers and mothers:

hearts that are open,

capable of great initiatives,

generous in self-giving,

compassionate in comforting anxieties

and steadfast in strengthening hopes.

The... consecrated life greatly needs

these qualities nowadays,

in times marked by fragility

but also by the sufferings due to the pandemic...

Pope Francis

March 19, 2021

