

# *E*choes of the Company

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Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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JULY  
AUGUST  
2021  
No. 4



**Fraternal love  
for a new  
missionary  
momentum**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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## SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Letter of August 15, 2021.....	233
Sister Françoise Petit, Superioress General	
Fraternity in community life.....	238
Perspectives	
Father Javier Álvarez, Vicar General	

## NEWS FROM THE PROVINCES

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### *Sisters' Testimonies*

Province of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton (United States).....	251
“See how they love one another.”	
Saint Vincent de Paul local community in Phoenix, Arizona	
Province of Fortaleza (Brazil).....	254
Casa da Criança Irma Marcillac for young children	
Sisters of Casa da Criança Irma Marcillac	
Province of Vietnam.....	255
The mystique of “living together”	
Sisters of Mai Phuc local community (Phuoc Minh)	
Province of Central America (El Salvador).....	260
How we experience fraternity in Ahuachapan	
Hogar de la Nina San José local community	
Sisters of Hogar de la Nina San José local community	

## HISTORY OF THE COMPANY

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Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton.....	263
<i>Plan of Life</i>	
Sister Betty Ann McNeil, Daughter of Charity	
Louise de Marillac and Saint Joseph.....	282
Sister Carmen Urrizburu, Daughter of Charity	

## Letter of August 15, 2021

Dear Sisters,

*“Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, ‘Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ... Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled’” (Lk 1:41b-43, 45).*

With this powerful and confident greeting, Elizabeth makes a real act of faith. Through the action of the Spirit, she recognizes Mary as the Mother of the Son of God, she who believed.

The event of the Assumption invites us to have this same faith in order to celebrate Mary’s entrance into God’s glory, she who was the first to enter it after her Son. It is an opportunity to revisit her life as we do whenever a loved one leaves us: Mary, the young woman of Nazareth, Mary at the foot of the cross, Mary, witness to the Resurrection, Mary ultimately raised up into heaven. Through a grace received from God, she was always responsive to the Spirit, and this is what gives her such a unique and special place in the Church and in our life. Let us acknowledge Mary as the model and teacher of the spiritual life, she *“who heeds and welcomes the Word of God”* (C. 23).

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Spiritual  
Life

### Letter of August 15, 2021

She accompanies us today on the path that we are traveling and that we will continue the day of our death, for we are on pilgrimage on earth toward heaven.

Listen to a 13-year-old boy, Tanguy, terminally ill at the time, who told his parents, “*There are not two lives, one on earth and one in heaven. There is only one. It is the same.*”

The simplicity of this testimony can enlighten us so we can receive better the message of hope offered on this day of the Assumption. Indeed, it is an invitation to raise our eyes to the horizon, to open ourselves constantly to the totally Other and to all others and to dare to envision all transitions as gates opening along the route. Let us think of all those gates through which we have had to pass, and let us be ready to break through those gates that will inevitably appear in the events, stages and encounters that we will have to experience. So many gates, so many calls, so many responses...

Today, the gate of paradise opens; “*Mary is taken up to heaven; a chorus of angels exults*” (Gospel acclamation for this day).

Mary draws us along with her, she who sees her Son face to face for eternity, she who joined Him in His glory. It is a message of hope for the world and for ourselves, a light in this time of trials and uncertainty because “*Eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place and have something to give those poor men and women who will have been liberated once and for all*” (*Laudato si*, 243).

For 18 months, the world has been living in the Covid-19 age and is at the mercy of this pandemic that is far from over. We have all noted its social, economic and psychological repercussions. We observe that poverty has increased, inequalities have grown and despair has overcome so many families. Human fragility has become visible and is like a rediscovered obvious fact. With all of humanity, we experience this in our flesh. Your messages

bear witness to this daily. You have heard the calls, and you got involved to respond to them, sometimes at the risk of your life. Today, I think especially of Sister Angèle, a Daughter of Charity in Lebanon, who was behind the construction of a ward intended specifically for Covid patients and who, a few weeks after its opening, herself died from this virus. Others could be named. The Boldness of Charity, Ephata! Break through the gate... go towards... encounter. Our vocation is to give ourselves to the very end. Let us present all these Sisters to the Lord. They are witnesses of charity.

Another obvious fact has emerged loud and clear: we depend on each other, even better, we are responsible for each other, and no one will be saved alone, nor any country.

Solidarity is based on the fact, among others, that “everything is connected,” an expression of Pope Francis that has become familiar. We are called to explore it more deeply, to draw conclusions personally, in community, through sharing among Provinces or by Sisters who make themselves available to respond to a call and accept to leave their Province. Sharing...

Here is a recent example: the two Provinces in the United States put in common their strengths and their enthusiasm in order to perform more effectively their service with migrants in El Paso, Texas, on the US-Mexican border. We can pray for the Sisters who will arrive in this Interprovincial local community during the month of August, “*concerned with sharing the lot of those who are poor*” (C. 30).

There is a strong awareness of belonging to one body in the Company, but the current situation calls us to live communion and sharing even more fully and confidently, knowing that Providence will never fail us. Our Founders said this so often. “... *Learn not to rely in any way on your own strength or ingenuity, but to put all your trust in Providence*” (Saint Vincent, June 9, 1658, CCD X, 406).

## Letter of August 15, 2021

On this day, as Church, let us celebrate the faith and hope that dwell in us and that we wish might always increase. Throughout the world, this feast is the occasion for large joyful, prayerful gatherings. Popular piety witnesses to trust in the intercession of the Mother of the Son of God. Let us allow ourselves to be supported by the People of God, look to the horizon and believe that hope takes form in all our acts in the present, our acts of generosity and fraternity. Let us have more faith. “*Oh, how good it is to hope in God and put our trust in Him!* (Saint Vincent, November 25, 1657, *CCD XI*, 392). Mary invites us to this.

Let us ask her to intercede for us with her Son. May He be our support in order to live our vocation of women given to God together in faith and hope. “*O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.*”

To conclude, here are several pieces of information:

It is now probable that our General Assembly will be able to take place on the planned dates, that is, October 29 – November 21. Everything is ready, and all that remains is to await joyfully the arrival of all the members. We invite you to pray to the Holy Spirit starting now and more intensely from the beginning of the retreat, which will open on October 19 at 8:15pm (Paris time). May the Spirit be the guide of this gathering. May each Sister prepare to open herself to what the Lord expects of the Company, and may ‘Ephata’ take concrete form in bold, practical and feasible guidelines!

Another piece of information concerns the *Instructions on the Vows*. After several years of work by multiple successive committees, whom I warmly thank, a new document has been written. It is a Guide called “Preparation for vows,” which you will be receiving soon. I will leave it to you to explore it, hoping that it will help the youngest Sisters to prepare themselves better for vows and help formators and local communities welcoming them to accompany them in the best possible way.



Finally, a last announcement about the UN. In 2013, Sister Catherine Prendergast (Province of Ireland) was appointed the representative of the Daughters of Charity at the UN in New York. She was joined in 2015 by Sister Margaret O'Dwyer (Province of Saint Louise-USA). In 2019, Sister Catherine went to the office of the UN in Geneva to take over for Sister Monique Javouhey. Recently, Sister Michelle Loisel (Province of Saint Louise-USA) was appointed to the office in New York and Sister Francesca Edet (Province of Rosalie Rendu, former Visitatrix of Nigeria) to the office in Geneva. They will gradually learn about UN operations and the role that they will exercise there in the name of the Company. Thank you to these Sisters for their mission at the service of justice and solidarity.

Over recent days, I have received many feast day greetings. I wish to thank you from the bottom of my heart for them and for the Masses celebrated for my intentions and those of the Company.

May Mary accompany us! May we, like her, keep our eyes set on Jesus Christ and put the Word into practice! Let us pray for each other. Happy feast!

Sister Françoise PETIT  
*Daughter of Charity*

*Erratum in the Echoes of the Company, 2021, issue 3, p. 175  
concerning the designation of Visitatrices:*

*PROVINCE OF INDONESIA*

*Sister Luisa Kristiana INDRAYANTI was **designated** Visitatrix  
on January 20, 2021.*

## Fraternity in community life

### Perspectives

Article 81 of your Constitutions affirms that each local community renders the Company present. We could think of the Company as a large polyhedron with as many faces as local communities. The entire Company lies in each one of them, just like in each face of a polyhedron. All this indicates to us that the Company is a whole, a “body,” a “family,” as Saint Vincent liked to say.<sup>1</sup> Each local community is a cell of this living being.

### **CHANGES IN THE COMMUNAL “ECOSYSTEM” CONCERNING FRATERNITY**

I would like to invite you to compare a local community today to one from the 1950s. We immediately recognize major changes in life style, interpersonal relationships, the flexibility of the schedule and many other details.

#### **1 – Some causes of changes in community**

- The first cause is a more evangelical understanding of authority based more on the Biblical images of the servant, the faithful steward (who has no authority of his own) and the shepherd who knows his sheep and gives everything for them. These Gospel passages inspire a new style of authority in which dialogue is fundamental, an indispensable means for discerning the will of God and creating a sisterly environment in local communities.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Cf. *CCD IX*, 80

2. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14; *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 20 d, e and f

- The second substantial contribution to changes in our local communities is the fact of living in an information world: televisions, computers, internet, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, etc. With all these modern means of communication, the climate of local communities today is very different from that seven or eight decades ago when silence, reading at table and retiring to one's room very early were important elements of community life.

Without a doubt, all these means of communication are a great help for our life and mission, but, at the same time, they can become a temptation to isolate ourselves and become more individualistic. It is necessary or at least desirable to form ourselves in these modern means in order to use them wisely; otherwise, they can create problems of addiction and isolation.

- A third cause, and not the least important, is our current way of understanding the concept of community. Constitution 32 says, "*Called and assembled by God, the Daughters of Charity live a community life the better to fulfill their specific mission of service.*" In other words, service is the structural axis that gives meaning to the local community and justifies it in the Company.

Today, since services in the Company are many and the situations of local communities are very different, the structures established for all communities are no longer sufficient if we want to take seriously the fact that "community is for mission/service." This is why, within the framework of the Constitutions and Statutes, each local community is called to create its own structures in accord with the circumstances in which it finds itself. This is the real meaning of the Local Community Plan, necessary in order to adapt the mission to the specific local community.<sup>3</sup> This is a major change that significantly affects the local communities of the Company (according to the Constitutions and Statutes). There are also other structures agreed upon by each local community. This results in great diversity, which should be reflected in the different Local Community Plans. Obviously,

3. Cf. C. 35a, C. 83, S. 3c, S. 4, S. 60b and S. 67

## *Fraternity in community life*

for each Local Community Plan to be a useful tool, a good dose of creativity and responsibility on the part of each Sister in the community is necessary.

### **2 - The danger of individualism**

In today's community ecosystem, we also note some difficulties that directly affect life together. One of the most important is called individualism, surely stronger in our day than in the time of Saint Vincent. In our world today, ideas such as freedom, plurality, personal fulfillment, respect of the individual, etc. are highly appreciated values. However, when these values are poorly understood in community, they end up becoming an individualistic culture that also contaminates community life.

Individualism gets in the way of harmoniously combining personal plans and that of the local community because personal plans always take priority over Local Community and Provincial Plans, as implied in article 3 of *The Service of Authority and Obedience*. This article further states that cultural influence is a factor favoring the emergence of this mentality. Seeking personal fulfillment and personal well-being at any cost are other manifestations of this same reality. In addition, individualism today may be called by attractive names such as individual charisms, cultural particularities or personal evolutions, resulting in even greater confusion. It is up to those in authority to discern where the boundary lies between legitimate diversity and individualism that negates community life and weakens the sense of belonging. Of course, those in authority have the responsibility of stressing and recalling the sense of shared mission just as Saint Vincent would undoubtedly do if he were alive today.

The challenge that this individualistic culture poses to our way of living in community requires a more theological and Gospel-based understanding of community. Jesus calls us, as He did the apostles, to "be with Him and to send us forth to mission."<sup>4</sup>

4. Cf. Mk 3:13-15

Community for mission means feeling united by a shared mission, practicing dialogue and discernment, opening ourselves to our surroundings and having flexible structures that favor availability for mission. Strengthening mission, emphasizing its importance and involving everyone in it are synonymous with more effectively countering or quashing individualism, so present in the world and in the Church.

### **3 – Challenges specific to the new community ecosystem**

To conclude this first section, I want to highlight some challenges that local communities must face today.<sup>5</sup> First, it seems important to grow in the practice of co-responsibility, a principle that is well-developed in the Constitutions. However, this principle does not work unless all the Sisters exercise it. Co-responsibility is an excellent sign of the Sisters' degree of community maturity or immaturity. It takes concrete form in "building community" rather than "consuming community."

Another important challenge that fraternal life in community must face is harmoniously integrating values of today's culture, values that Sisters appreciate such as freedom, respect of the individual, equality, etc., with values tied to the demands of community life like obedience, sacrifice, the Local Community Plan and participation in the mission of the community. It is always a difficult balance to achieve. The community can easily tilt towards one of these two extremes: either ignoring the current values of the overall culture or allowing them to take over. The solution is in the middle, because the local community must shape itself with "creative fidelity."

The apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata* lists other challenges that arise in the different stages of vocation and that, logically, are experienced within the local community. During the initial

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5. Wittgenstein, the famous philosopher of language, said that we should not speak about problems but about challenges and opportunities. Problems paralyze; challenges energize. For him, language has a very heavy psychological weight and is never neutral.

### Fraternity in community life

years of vocation, there is the challenge of passing from a guided and supervised life to a situation of full operational responsibility. In the time of vocational maturity, the dangers can be the risk of routine and discouragement in the face of tremendous effort but little results. The challenge consists in becoming aware of reality and seeking to understand the meaning of what is happening. In old age, the danger and challenge lie in pessimism around stopping professional activity as well as physical limitations that inevitably arise over time.<sup>6</sup> Ongoing formation programs should respond to the personal and community challenges of vocation that appear at each stage.

## **COMMUNITY PILLARS OF YESTERDAY AND TODAY**

### **1 – Faith is stronger than psychology.**

The community is, above all, a reality that can only be understood and lived in faith. In a community, there is the love of God the Father Himself who called and assembled us, unity around a single charism and Gospel fraternity that is expressed by the word “us.” We are thus “icons of the Trinity,” the mystery to which Saint Vincent referred us when he spoke of community,<sup>7</sup> following the example of Jesus with His apostles and of the first Christian communities.

Keep in mind that God is the foundation of the community; if He is not, the psychological point of view will take the upper hand (“*I accept this person whom I like, but not that person!*”), or a mercantile mentality (“*this person helped me, but not the other one*”). Vincent de Paul strongly insisted on the fact that it is God Himself who calls us and brings us together in community. If a community is not aware that God is its foundation, then “demons” enter it: division, envy, jealousy, resentment...

Of course, a faith perspective does not resolve all the difficulties that one can encounter in building community life. However, it

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6. *Vita consecrata*, 70

7. *CCD VI*, 77; *CCD XII*, 204-205, 221-222

allows the Daughters of Charity to face problems according to the Gospel, with charity, understanding, patience and courage, able to forgive and ask forgiveness.

## **2 – The first Christian communities shed light on communities today.**

Saint Vincent wanted community life in the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity to resemble that of the communities described in the Acts of the Apostles. An analysis of Acts 2:42-44 reveals three levels of fraternal sharing within these communities:

- material sharing: *“All who believed were together and had all things in common.”*
- mutual affection: *“The community of believers was of one heart and mind.”*
- spiritual sharing: *“They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.”*

Saint Vincent saw an example in this: fraternal union, sharing of goods with those in need, shared prayer and attention to the teaching of the apostles. *“What a happiness for the Mission to be able to imitate the first Christians and, like them, to live in common and in poverty!”*<sup>8</sup>

For Vincent, without these spiritual foundations, without these theological motivations, without this spirituality, community life collapses. The desire to serve and evangelize is not enough for living in community; profound reasons that justify living together are necessary.

How many times, due to differences in thinking, personality, pastoral differences, conflicts in interpersonal relationships, etc.,

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8. CCD XI, 212

### Fraternity in community life

would we have been more effective serving and evangelizing all alone or by forming a specialized and complementary work team? A Vincentian community, however, is much more than a work team or a cooperative where work and goods are shared; it is a theological space, an “icon” of the Trinity.

### **3 – The icon of the Trinity (cf. C. 32a)**

Saint Vincent and the Constitutions<sup>9</sup> present the mystery of the Holy Trinity as the foundation of community. With this icon, Saint Vincent highlights three points:

#### ***a) Equality of the members of the community***

The functions and tasks are different, but all the members are equal in dignity and rights. This must find concrete expression. For example, Vincent called insistently for equality within the community such that those outside it not be able to tell who was the person in authority in the community.<sup>10</sup> *“I’m not of the opinion of the person who said to me a few days ago that, to govern well and maintain your authority, you must make it clear that you’re the Superior. O mon Dieu! Our Lord Jesus Christ didn’t talk like that; He taught us just the opposite by word and example, telling us that He himself had come, not to be served, but to serve others, and that whoever wanted to be the master must be the servant of all.”*<sup>11</sup>

#### ***b) Communion among the members of the community<sup>12</sup> and the coordination of duties***

No member of the community can remain uninterested in the others’ work and life. *“If we want to have within us the image of the adorable Trinity and a holy relationship with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, let’s establish ourselves in this spirit. What*

9. C. 32

10. CCD VI, 77-78

11. CCD XI, 313 – Advice to Antoine Durand, named Superior of the Agde Seminary

12. CCD XII, 221-222



*creates unity and single-mindedness in God, if not equality and the distinction of the Three Persons? And what creates Their love if not Their resemblance?”*<sup>13</sup> In our day, we translate distinction and resemblance by unity in diversity. This reflection cautions us to make sure not to overly divide work since this is not necessarily a sign of good organization. It could mask a desire for independence and possession.

### ***c) Mission of the community***

The Holy Trinity is also the love that drives the mission of the community. All apostolic activity proceeds from the love of God that dwells in us; otherwise, activity becomes “activism.”

## **A PRINCIPLE THAT PRODUCES FRATERNITY**

Your Constitutions refer to dialogue and communication.<sup>14</sup> Psychology has shown the deep relationship that exists between the development of the person and dialogue. No one comes into the world to be a desert island; no one can be fulfilled alone nor live as if he didn’t need others and others didn’t need him. This conviction is the basis for the necessity of communication.

If we apply this idea to community life, we must conclude that there is no community if there is no dialogue or communication among those making it up. It would only be an illusion of community (cf. *Fraternal Life in Community*, 29-34). To renew community life, it is essential to expand and increase communication. To recognize each other as brothers, we must know each other, and to know each other, we must communicate among ourselves. Communication creates closer relationships and strengthens the sense of family and of belonging to the group. It fosters participation and co-responsibility in the shared mission. Lack of communication or sticking to superficial topics increases individualism, insensitivity toward others, anonymity, isolation and solitude. Because we need others, we run the risk

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13. *CCD* XII, 210

14. Cf. C. 36b

## Fraternity in community life

of looking outside the community for what we do not find there.

### **1 - Communication and dialogue are not trends or something foreign to the Company.**

Let us recall Saint Vincent's practice with the first Sisters and Priests of the Mission. How naturally, how simply and how deeply each of them shared during conferences or repetitions of prayer. These were further occasions for all to give thanks or to ask forgiveness for their faults.

No one questions the fact that a community is built on charity, and dialogue is the new name for charity, Pope Paul VI said. The document *Fraternal Life in Community* adds, "Without dialogue and attentive listening, community members run the risk of living juxtaposed or parallel lives, a far cry from the ideal of fraternity" (32). The apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata* says that consecrated people are called to place everything is common: "material goods and spiritual experiences, talents and inspirations, apostolic ideals and charitable service."<sup>15</sup>

It is not enough to be convinced of the necessity of dialoging, being in relationship and sharing; each person must give and receive so that dialogue and community relationships are humanizing, even healing.

For constructive dialogue, the **following attitudes** must be developed:

- **trust** because one cannot open up to another person unless one trusts him or her.
- **humility** to admit that no one has the whole truth. Humility is always an asset; in the end, it is what counts most in community life.

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15. *Vita consecrata*, 42  
246

- *benevolence* to avoid any hasty judgement, almost always faulty, and to see the particular situation of each person.
- *simplicity* to make relationships transparent and peaceful.

**There are also methods** that can help to foster dialogue and relationships. The method to use depends on the type of discussion: planning and development of a project, sharing of prayer or of a spiritual experience, review of life, apostolic reflection... Each meeting needs its own method. On occasion, a local community or Province could invite an expert in group dynamics to teach the art of fraternal communication.

## 2 – Different levels of sharing

Sharing in a local community of Daughters of Charity encompasses the three levels mentioned above: material goods, fraternal affection and spiritual goods. Living in communion means placing each person's gifts in common. Each person gives and receives. This type of sharing is fundamental in a community of consecrated life: the members are not brought together by psychological, ideological or professional affinities nor by language or race, but by Him who calls them to a life of faith, a Gospel project in common and growth in holiness through mutual support.

In communities of consecrated life, the sharing of material goods and friendship leads to the sharing of the gifts of the Spirit, spiritual goods. The spiritual goods to share are the Eucharist, meditation, the Word of God, mission, all of faith life. When these spiritual goods are lived in an authentic way and are shared, it then becomes possible for the community to have one heart and one mind. When the need is not felt to share these gifts of the Spirit, community becomes mere routine, without depth, and disintegrates, losing the real reasons that justify its existence.

## **SOME KEY AREAS FOR GROWING IN COMMUNITY FRATERNITY<sup>16</sup>**

### **1 – Service or apostolic work**

The Company is a Society of Apostolic Life. This means that service-apostolic work is part of community; as C. 32a says, community is for mission. As a result, apostolic service is one of the sources of sanctification for the Daughters of Charity. What does this imply?

1 – The Sisters have a right to have a service, adapted to their abilities, because it is a source of their sanctification, just as important as the spiritual life. Those in authority, the Visitatrix or the Sister Servant, thus have the responsibility to discern what each Sister can do.

2 – Paying attention to apostolic service also means allowing the Sisters to share regularly about what they are experiencing in their different services: joys, sorrows, hopes and fears, discoveries, questions and challenges to face. The community atmosphere should be favorable to the expression of solidarity in service. At the end of the day, are the Sisters able to share what they've experienced and the challenges they're facing but also to listen to what the other Sisters have to say? Common interest in the service carried out by each Sister in the local community is an extraordinary unifying force.

When the situation calls for it, it is not preposterous for a Sister Servant with her community to question the mission of the house or a specific service of the work of the house. Of course, this reflection should be shared with the Visitatrix so that she can discern with her Council if a work or a service of the work is in conformity or not with the purpose of the Company and the guidelines of the Provincial Plan. Then, the necessary decisions should be made.

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16. I drew inspiration for this section from chapter IV of the document of the Congregation of the Mission, *Practical Guide for the Local Superior*, Rome 2003, p. 221-226.

## 2 - Prayer

Because prayer is at the heart of Christian life, it is also at the heart of community life. Constitutions 19 to 23 speak about the main prayer practices: Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, meditation in common...

The Sister Servant, in agreement with the Sisters of the community, plans the times and ways of prayer in common. To the extent possible, it is advisable to be creative in order to help the Sisters to have a deeper prayer life. Routine can be as detrimental as termites in the wood of furniture.

*Saint Vincent said, "The interior life is essential; it has to be our aim; if we lack that, we lack everything" (CCD XII, 111). Whether the community is large or small, all the Sisters should be actively involved in prayer. While the way of praying in a small community may be different from that of a large community, it is important to pray together because prayer in common builds fraternity.*

## 3 - Meals

Some Daughters of Charity do not appreciate this community time very much. I have observed that some have one eye on the table and the other on the dishwasher. However, meals are a privileged time for listening to one another, talking with one another, sharing information, having real communication. We might think of the importance today of "working lunches" for many people in the workforce. Meals eaten at top speed and with little conversation lose their human dimension and become nothing more than a time for consuming food. On the contrary, meals are a space during the day for sharing among Sisters.

Attentive listening is fundamental in conversation during meals. Showing interest in our past, our history and our dreams is a way of living the new commandment of love. It can be frustrating sometimes not to be able to recount an interesting experience because no one wants to listen to you!

#### **4 – Gatherings, meetings**

One Vincentian scholar has said that the many daily, weekly or monthly meetings in which we must participate are a modern way of living the virtue of mortification.

In community life, gatherings and meetings have their place and build community. All the Sisters should feel responsible for sharing their values and respecting the decisions made. Each Sister should participate actively in line with her more or less talkative character; what is important is to be free to speak. This is a sign of the community's vitality.

For the decisions of a house-local community-work, it is important that all the Sisters participate actively as much as possible because the discernment will be enriched, and this will be a constructive experience for the community. The principle of co-responsibility aims for this. We know that the competent authority (local, Provincial or General) has the final word; however, everything before that falls to the Sisters.

#### **5 - Relaxation**

Times of relaxation also have their place in the local community. A good mood and humor favor harmony and keep us from taking ourselves too seriously. If it is important for the community to work in unity, it is just as important for it to relax in common and laugh from time to time. This allows us to discover other aspects of our Sisters' personality.

Saint Vincent frequently invited Saint Louise to be less serious with the first Sisters. Madame Goussault was an example of someone with a good temperament. He mentioned this several times to Saint Louise. Of course, it is up to all the Sisters of the community to create an atmosphere of trust and joy. Then everything will work much better!

Father Javier Álvarez, CM  
*Vicar General*

Province of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton  
(United States)

“See how they love one another.”

In July 2020, our local community house in Phoenix, Arizona, increased from three to five! Our ministry is an elementary school with one of us serving as director and the other a semi-retired Sister who volunteered in the library. One Sister was missioned, and two Sisters and a pre-postulant (for one year) were missioned to the house. One Sister came from a house that closed and is working in prison ministry. Because of the pandemic, she is not able to go directly to the prisons but continues her letter-writing part of the ministry in a small parlor, converted into an office. Another Sister was missioned from a very large city and is currently teaching math in our junior high program. The pre-postulant, of Mexican descent, is helping in the school with 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. Because she is bilingual, much of her time is spent translating in Spanish for the teachers since our family population is 95% Latino, mostly Mexican.

We would like to share with you the simple, yet wonderful grace we have received to live the “*mystique of living together*,” and how we have seemed to obtain it in these past nine months, for it is indeed a grace and an effort.

It didn't take very long before we all felt as if we had lived together for many months thanks to open, clear communication, motivated by love and



*News from  
the Provinces*

## Sisters' Testimonies

confidence. Fraternity is lived out in the thousands of details of everyday life: for example, we have, as all Daughters do, a house Horarium, but amid the frequent changes of schedule in our active ministries, we use a whiteboard to remind us of the events and any changes in our day. Although the Sister Servant puts the general announcements on the board, anyone can write other bits of news on it. It's encouraging to walk by and see, "Welcome home, Sister!" or "Have a nice trip, Sister!" It helps to be able to write, "Went to the store." If someone forgets to erase her name from "at the post office" and it's 8 p.m., there is laughter, and a comment might be, "The line in the post office couldn't have been that long!" We do household tasks together: washing and drying dishes, sweeping and mopping the floor, emptying the garbage and compost... rather than just a Sister who rotates the duty each week. We chat among ourselves, sometimes singing, sometimes joking, but always helping each other, in acceptance of each other's limitations and abilities. Oh yes, we tease if someone gets a phone call during the dishes. When one of us goes out to the store, she asks, "Does anyone need anything?"; it is a sign of love because it takes effort to buy for someone else. One Sister, who has been on this mission for 10 years, has had various duties both off campus and in the school but has not had consistent service since the coronavirus hit. Her frequent question for us is, "Do you need any help?" or if asked, her reply is always, "Sure, I'll be glad to." She is of tremendous assistance to the Sister in prison ministry with correspondence.

In our community, there is a great range among us in age, age in vocation and culture with our three different national backgrounds. This makes for the happy challenge of being open to difference and understanding each other.

At Christmas time, the pre-postulant was not able to travel to visit her family because of the pandemic. Overcoming her sadness and disappointment, she threw herself into holiday preparations by sharing her family traditions. We had already decided to celebrate our own in-house *Posadas* (a popular devotion that consists in going from house to house, seeking



shelter for Mary and Joseph) since the parish was not able to have any celebrations because of the virus. We planned to carry small statues of Mary and Joseph around the house and stop at different doors to sing and ask for lodging.

Having organized an evening of *tamale* making (ground meat encased in cornmeal, wrapped in corn husks and steamed), the pre-postulant also made *champurrado*, a thick Mexican cinnamon hot chocolate, and *pan dulce*, or sweet bread. The pre-postulant even made a *piñata* for the celebration of the Posadas. A piñata is a hollow object filled with candies that can be in any form. This one was a seven-pointed star that symbolized the seven deadly sins. Breaking the seven points of the piñata to release the candies symbolizes how sin needs to be broken and smashed to bring out sweetness and goodness.

Recently, one of the school parents brought pre-packaged food that she was permitted to give away from her job. The next morning, we distributed it to the homeless. That began a new Friday night ritual! We sort all the food and re-organize it into insulated bags. On Saturday morning, we pack the car with the food bags and drive to a neighborhood where there are pockets of people living on the street. We distribute about 25 bags along with a bottle of water, a Miraculous Medal and a smile to accompany words of blessing and encouragement. Thanks to this initiative, we are able to share this time with those living on the streets.

It is at the evening meal that we all share our encounters with God in the persons, events, joys, surprises, as well as the inconveniences and contradictions that may have occurred throughout the day.

We have learned that there is much more support of each other through attentive, non-judgmental mutual listening than through endless advice. Graciously receiving help is a beautiful form of fraternal love: “*See how they love one another.*”

St. Vincent de Paul local community  
Phoenix, Arizona

253

Province of Fortaleza (Brazil)  
Casa da Criança Irma Marcillac  
for young children

*“... live together as having but one heart and one soul so that by this union of spirit you may be a true image of the unity of God...”*  
(CCD IV, 238 - L. 1389 to Sister Anne Hardemont, July 30, 1651).  
Our early education center, Casa Da Criança Irma Marcillac, is located in the Sao João de Tauape neighborhood in Fortaleza. This facility for children offers early education programs: day care, preschool and primary school. The love of Christ assembled us to live together in fraternal communion, loving each other, respecting each other and helping each other *“with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our strength”* (cf. Deut 6:5).

In this extraordinary time of the pandemic, fraternal love impels us to make ourselves more available for the needs of our Sisters, to push ourselves beyond our personal comfort in order to live in joy and mutual love, assuming our weaknesses and limitations, and to prepare our times of prayer carefully ... The pandemic has a very negative impact on children, and it is necessary to assure basic care and hygiene for them. The “Grow up with Dignity” program supplies us with monthly baskets of food stuff, which allows us to provide for their needs. We see how important it is to offer corporal and spiritual service. The pandemic is also causing an increase in the number of people in need. Many live in the streets and look for food. As a local community, we decided to share whatever we can with them. We thank the Lord for calling us to carry out this mission, bearing witness to His merciful love for those who are poor, following the example of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, our holy Founders.

The Sisters of Casa da Criança Irmã Marcillac

Province of Vietnam

The mystique of “living together”

It has been said that community life is the story of three tables: the table of the Word of God and the Eucharist, the dining room table and the meeting table around which we gather. We will use this interesting idea to share about our fraternal life.

**The Eucharistic table**

*“At the Eucharist, Christians ‘are instructed by the Word of God, refreshed at the table of the Lord’s Body, and give God thanks’”* (C. 19b). According to Church teaching and our Constitutions, we know that our community is, above all, a community brought together by God that is nourished by prayer at the **table of the Eucharist and the Word of God**.

Each morning at 5:30, we pray Morning Prayer and participate in the Eucharist with the parishioners at the parish church; then, we continue our meditation in the local community oratory. We gather again at 11:30 for examen and at 5:30 for Evening Prayer and meditation, concluding with a decade of the rosary before the little shrine to the Blessed Virgin. Around 8 o’clock, we thank God for the day and listen to the next day’s Gospel.

Each Thursday, the evening is set aside for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament with the people. Saturday mornings, we have adoration in our oratory.

Aware that the Eucharist is the center of our life and mission, each of us strives to prepare herself well and participate actively. Of course, we can sometimes experience a certain indifference,

## Sisters' Testimonies

a distraction regarding the pressing needs of our service or other activities. God, however, is always there to lift us back up thanks to reminders from the Sister Servant and our elder Sister. They both play the role of sentinels: *“Upon your walls, Jerusalem, I have stationed sentinels; by day and by night, they shall never be silent...”* (Is 62:6).

### **The dining room table**

The Eucharistic table nourishes our spirit and strengthens our spiritual life, and the dining room table feeds the body. Like in a family, each of us is attentive to the needs of the other Sisters in the community and their preferred dishes: one likes guavas, the other pancakes or ice cream, etc. Knowing the tastes of our Sisters is only a small part of our mutual knowledge; we also know our personalities, vocation stories, our families... during meals, we share what makes up our lives, material things about the house or garden, those concerning the school, the parish, the life of those who are poor, their problems and needs. We thus come to know them even if we have not met them. That is what struck Mr. Lê Bình An when he came to our local community for the first time. Although just two Sisters visit him, he had the feeling that all of us knew him.

### **The meeting table**

Naturally, we need to examine periodically how we live our vocation, serve those who are poor and listen to new calls. This is the time to gather at the meeting table to review the Local Community Plan and share about our different activities in order to have a full picture of the situation and determine energizing lines of action. We currently have four sponsorship programs for 200 students, we help about twenty elderly people who are all alone, we visit about twenty families, especially migrants from Cambodia and we have fifty students in the kindergarten and two classes of academic support for some forty migrants. In the parish, we also teach catechesis to about one hundred children, form catechumens, prepare couples for marriage and

accompany youth discerning their vocation and AIC members. First Fridays, we bring communion to the sick and elderly. We visit families who have abandoned religious practice or who are going through difficult situations. To have more resources, we tend a garden and raise animals. Despite the diversity of activities, all the Sisters make themselves available according to their possibilities. At the meeting table, we also share on writings from our Superiors and other spiritual texts that strengthen our spiritual life.

Nonetheless, a local community is never exempt from conflicts. When there is a “whole,” there are also clashes that come from differences. We are five Sisters: the Sister Servant, an elder Sister and three young Sisters. In addition to the age difference, there are also diverse personalities and cultures; we come from the high plateau, from the south, from the north... Each of us has her history, her upbringing, her habits... Each of us brings what she “is” and what she “has” to the community. Differences are normal, and we know that their author is the Holy Spirit. He is the one who has brought us together in community. Our love of our vocation and our faith perspective help us accept differences as values that enrich the community. When frictions arise, we try to reconcile as quickly as possible: “...*live together as having but one heart and one soul so that by this union of spirit you may be a true image of the unity of God...*” (Saint Vincent, July 30, 1651, to Sister Anne Hardemont, *CCD IV*, 238).

“*Their charity extends beyond the local community...*” (C. 37) in relationships with the parish priest, parishioners, members of the Vincentian Family, local officials and in interfaith dialogue.

## *Sisters' Testimonies*

For a while, people pointed out to us that our local community was as empty as Ba Danh pagoda<sup>1</sup> because there were no outsiders. As our house was located behind the presbytery, few people came to our house although there were the kindergarten children. This made us reflect, and we decided to build the day care center on the community grounds. Since then, the children's parents meet us more easily. Because the gate is always open, those who are poor readily come to the community house to share their joys, suffering and difficulties. Since there are more requests for service, the parish priest and parishioners come to help us, along with the AIC members who are increasingly numerous and involved.

We maintain a respectful relationship with local officials and speak to them on behalf of those who are poor. We can collaborate with these officials. Our region has different religions, including Caodaism and Buddhism. Many of the poor people whom we serve adhere to these religions, and we share with them when opportunities arrive, for example, at Têt, the Lunar New Year.

It was especially after the events of 1975 that people began arriving in this region. There are many drug addicts, thieves, gamblers... The material and spiritual needs of those who are poor are huge, but we do not have enough time to respond to them all. The parish, for its part, had been a long time without a priest, and the parishioners have a weak faith life and little interest in the sacramental life. Some children in catechism are not interested in the activities and try to sow trouble, which leads to more difficult relationships with the parents.

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1. Various scholars advance many theories to explain the expression "as empty as Ba Danh pagoda." The best-known theory is that Ba Danh pagoda [Bao Son Tu] is very sacred. The name of the pagoda is based on the name of the location of the village of Danh Xa where the temple is found, and the incomprehensible emptiness of such a sacred and solemn place could be explained because of the temple's isolated position. Moreover, the local people often recount that Bao Son Tu is very sacred and that if passersby dare to laugh, they will be severely punished. Because of this, fewer and fewer people dare to come worship because they are afraid spoiling things for themselves.

Nonetheless, we wish to continue this path of fraternity as invited by Pope Francis: *“Stepping into this flood tide... while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage. Greater possibilities for communication thus turn into greater possibilities for encounter and solidarity for everyone...”* (Evangelii Gaudium, 87) *“giving [ourselves] to them with a love that is concrete, practical, and effective”* (Constitutions, p. 9).

The Sisters of Mai Phuc local community (Phuoc Minh)

Province of Central America  
(El Salvador)

How we experience fraternity in Ahuachapán

Hogar de la Niña San José  
local community

*“Union is so excellent... that Our Lord willed to give himself to us under the beautiful name of Communion. That’s why we must ardently desire that union always exist among us, since God loves it so much”* (a Sister, conference of April 26, 1643, CCD IX, 81).

With this thought from a conference with Saint Vincent, we present our experience of community life in Hogar de la Niña San José local community in Ahuachapán, El Salvador.

Our local community, part of the Province of Central America, consists of five Daughters of Charity of various nationalities: two Guatemalans, two Salvadorians and one Nicaraguan. While we are not a perfect local community, we are convinced that it is God who called and assembled us and that the diversity of our nationalities produces the richness of our community life.

All of us are at the service of the education of children and youth. With the assistance of 51 collaborators, we have responsibility for an early childhood holistic development center for 40 children, aged 6 months to 4 years, as well as for the school of 892 students, kindergarten to intermediary school (children aged 4 to 15).

Our happiness lies in knowing that we are loved by a God of love, and we believe that fraternity is possible. However, it is



not easy because we are tempted to seek our own security and comfort or to dominate and impose our ideas. Nonetheless, when we turn to Jesus and reflect on our vocation, we can see people and events from a faith perspective, become more tolerant and build quality community life since it is rooted in our encounter with Christ. Our failures in love make us more aware of our need for accepting divine mercy, and asking forgiveness restores our community bonds. *“Only the Lord can give us the strength needed to accept life as it is, with all its contradictions, frustrations and disappointments” (Patris corde, 4).*

Each one of us strives to place her gifts at the service of the local community; each one gives and receives. What helps us most in our community life is living the little details of everyday life well: prayer life, dialogue, mutual respect and trust. We know that our community life is our strength and support in service, and our fraternal witness is so important for those who are poor and those with whom we serve.

The Covid-19 pandemic was a real trial that brought out our human fragility. Nonetheless, as members of the educational community, we learned a new way of living together and strengthening the bonds of solidarity. We had to invent new ways of teaching and learning so that, despite it all, everyone could have the most successful and least disrupted academic year possible. *“When the good of others is at stake, good intentions are not enough” (Fratelli tutti, 185). “Love is a gift that gives meaning to our lives. It enables us to view those in need as members of our own family, as friends, brothers or sisters” (2021 Lenten Message of Pope Francis).*

To be closer to people in need, in person and virtually for those who have the means, we looked for ways to obtain necessary equipment and to provide teachers with access to a reliable internet connection.

However, while the digital world offers a range of applications for developing educational work, it does not replace the emotional bonds that can be expressed in academic, cultural and artistic activities, sports and spiritual experiences (Eucharist, prayer

services, retreats, etc.). No one is made to live alone; we all need others to progress. *“The storm has exposed our vulnerability and uncovered those false and superfluous certainties around which we constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities” (Fratelli tutti, 32).*

During this pandemic, we tried to bring to life all the lovely words in our School Plan. Health restrictions and safety measures did not stop us: we went to visit the families of students, teachers, other employees and volunteers in their homes; we accompanied as best we could those who were afflicted in their health or who had lost a member of their family or their job due to Covid-19. We encouraged them all to continue to pray faithfully to the Lord. *“We began to realize that our lives are interwoven with and sustained by ordinary people valiantly shaping the decisive events of our shared history” (Fratelli tutti, 54).*

The times continue to teach us lessons. The current situation urges us to strengthen even more the bonds of fraternity by developing our faith, hope and charity, a charity that is not limited to helping the poorest people materially.

With the teachers and staff, the students learn from a young age to give a little joy to lonely elderly people in the Llano Magaña Home, to share with the victims of natural disasters (tropical storms, etc.) and to celebrate special times like Christmas and the feasts of the Founders, etc.

We continue to entrust ourselves to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, she who was the first disciple and a fundamental support for the community life of the first Christians. May her example of attentive listening, her meditation on the Word of God and her keeping all those events and meditating on them in her heart help us to have a consistent way of life. May we remain united, supporting each other like a family after the example of the Blessed Trinity, being credible before God and our brothers and sisters.

The Sisters of Hogar de la Niña  
San José local community

## Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton

### *Plan of Life*<sup>1</sup>

*This article presents how Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton, after her conversion to Catholicism, followed Divine Providence from New York to Maryland where she became Mother Seton and launched a mission in 1809 that continues today.*



History of  
the Company

Elizabeth Seton, recently converted to Catholicism, walked courageously by faith despite adversity and disappointment. She kindled hope in her heart despite financial and housing insecurity. Mr. Patrick White's school, where she expected to teach, failed financially in August of 1805. Three years later, she had to resign from her job as housemother at the boarding house of St. Mark's Episcopal School. In the face of uncertainty, Elizabeth safeguarded her primary obligation: "*The only word I have to say to every question is, I am a Mother, whatever Providence awaits me consistent with that plea, I say Amen to it.*"<sup>2</sup>

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1. 5.4 Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 8 July 1808, 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), 2:18. Hereinafter cited as *CW*.
  2. 6.74, Elizabeth Seton to George Weis, [27 April 1811], *CW*, 2:181.

## Divine Providence

In her Christian formation as an Episcopalian, Elizabeth had learned about God’s loving care for each person. Trusting in this God of love, she believed that as “*we go, there is a Providence which never slumbers or sleeps*”<sup>3</sup> and that “*God will provide, that is all my Comfort — never did that Providence fail me.*”<sup>4</sup>

In the unexpected challenges and opportunities that Elizabeth faced throughout her life, she encountered the mystique of God leading her, allowing her to overcome adversity and begin anew.

In 1791, at the invitation of John Carroll (1789-1815), first bishop of the United States, French refugee Sulpicians established Saint Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore, Maryland. This seminary would train American men for the priesthood. His vision for Catholicism in the United States blended with the Sulpician mission.

Father Louis William Dubourg, P.S.S., an émigré priest born in the French colony of Saint-Dominque (now Haiti) to French parents, was visiting New York when he met Elizabeth quite providentially around 1806.<sup>5</sup> Upon hearing her story, he invited her to Baltimore to begin a small boarding school for the religious education of girls and further assured her that the Sulpicians would assist in forming a *plan of life* in the best interests of her children and her future responsibility for the students.<sup>6</sup>

3. 1.8, Elizabeth Seton to Eliza Sadler, 8 February 1796, *CW*, 1:9.

4. 6.142, Elizabeth Seton to Julia Scott, 15 December 1813, *CW*, 2:256.

5. William Dubourg (1766-1833) joined the Sulpicians in Baltimore (1795); established St. Mary’s College, Baltimore (1799), and first Superior General (1809-1809) of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s, Emmitsburg. Not only was Dubourg instrumental in Elizabeth Seton establishing the first native sisterhood in the United States (1809) and its adaptation of the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity* (1812), but also as first bishop of the diocese of Louisiana and the Floridas, Dubourg invited Rev. Felix de Andreis, C.M., (1778-1820), and Rev. Joseph Rosati, C.M., (1789-1843), (first bishop of Saint Louis, Missouri, 1827-1843) to initiate the first mission of the Congregation of the Mission in North America in 1816. As the new bishop of Montauban, Dubourg ordained Saint John Gabriel Perboyre, C.M., to the priesthood in the chapel of the Daughters of Charity on rue du Bac.

6. 5.4, Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 8 July 1808, *CW*, 2:18.

Elizabeth had been considering a move to Montreal, Quebec, but her advisors in Boston, Father John Cheverus (1768-1836) and Father Francis Matignon (1753-1818)<sup>7</sup>, recommended that she not move to Canada, convinced that she would do immense good in the United States. Only after Father Dubourg returned to Baltimore did he consult his Sulpician superior, Father François Charles Nagot (1734-1816), and confrères about his overture to Elizabeth. Bishop Carroll approved the plan, writing, “[*Although*] I am entirely ignorant of all particulars, yet, to approve the plan to which you allude, it is enough for me to know that it has the concurrence of Dr. Matignon and Mr. Cheverus.”<sup>8</sup>

After the death of her beloved father-in-law, Elizabeth and her husband cared for his orphaned younger siblings. They sent the older children to boarding schools, and she taught the younger ones at home. Through this experience, Elizabeth discovered her talent for teaching and wrote a friend, “*I have tried it one week, and as yet it has been only a pleasure.*”<sup>9</sup> This natural inclination would bloom into her future ministry in Catholic education in Maryland at the invitation of Father William Dubourg.

Father Dubourg outlined his vision for the school on Paca Street before Elizabeth and her children sailed to Maryland. He recommended that “*the number or pupils*” not increase rapidly because “*the fewer you have in the beginning, the lighter your task, and the easier it will be to establish the spirit of regularity and piety, which must be the mainspring of your machine.*” He reasoned that the United States had “*too many, mixed schools, in which ornamental accomplishments are the only objects of education.*” He maintained that there were none

7. Rev. John Cheverus (1768-1836), an émigré from France, became the first bishop of Boston in 1808, became the archbishop of Bordeaux (1826-1836) and a cardinal (1836). Rev. Francis A. Matignon (1753-1818), an émigré from France and doctor of the Sorbonne (1785), served in Boston. Cheverus and Matignon were trusted advisors to Elizabeth Seton.

8. Archives of the Province of Saint Louise-USA [APSL], John Carroll to Elizabeth Seton, New York, 23 May 1807. See 4.27, Elizabeth Seton to Bishop John Carroll, 26 November 1806, CW, 1:420-422.

9. 1.33, Elizabeth Seton to Julia Scott, 25 November 1798, CW, 1:54.

### *Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton*

which blended basic education “*with, and made subservient to pious instructions,*” concluding, “*such a one you certainly wish yours to be.*”<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth would realize that Father Dubourg’s enthusiasm was boundless for starting new initiatives and then another before the first was firmly established, creating uncertainty and insecurity among collaborators.

## **Mission in Maryland**

Elizabeth broke through societal and geographic limits as she left New York and sailed southward to begin anew in Maryland. On June 16, 1808, she and her daughters arrived in Baltimore. Elizabeth spent one year as schoolmistress of a small boarding school for Catholic girls conducted in her home, adjacent to the Sulpicians’ St. Mary’s Seminary, Paca Street. Her pupils received religious education and faith formation along with reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Immersed in Catholic culture, Elizabeth sensed that love embraces justice as her understanding of mission intensified.<sup>11</sup> She became aware of disparities, particularly the lack of educational opportunities for young girls from impoverished families. In this era of primitive schools, boys learned to read and write, but any girls enrolled were taught only to read!

Elizabeth shared with Father Dubourg her desire to teach poor children. Simultaneously, Samuel Sutherland Cooper (1769-1843), a seminarian, convert and retired sea captain, expressed interest in purchasing property for programs to educate and benefit impoverished people. Cooper’s plan included “*an institution for the advancement of Catholic female children in habits of religion, and giving them an education suited to that purpose.*”<sup>12</sup>

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10. William Dubourg to Elizabeth Seton, 27 May 1808, quoted in Annabelle M. Melville, ed. by Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton 1774-1821* (Hanover, Pennsylvania: The Sheridan Press, 2009), 185.

11. L. 452. Vincent de Paul to François du Coudray, 17 June 1640, *CCD* II, 68. Cf. L. 2546. Vincent de Paul to Firmin Get, 8 March 1658, *CCD* VII, 115-116.

12. Elizabeth Seton to Filippo Filicchi, 8 February 1809, *CW*, 2:54-55.

In 1798, Father Dubourg had endeavored unsuccessfully to bring Ursulines to Baltimore. He still entertained the idea of establishing a native sisterhood.<sup>13</sup> Was this the moment to bring his dream to fruition since Divine Providence had brought together Mrs. Seton's presence and Mr. Cooper's offer? The Sulpicians and Bishop Carroll did not anticipate Cooper's stipulation about the location. The donor required that "*this establishment will be made at Emmitsburg, a village eighteen leagues from Baltimore, and thence it will extend throughout the United States.*"<sup>14</sup>

Elizabeth did not impose herself, as she explained to Filippo Filicchi: "*I have invariably kept in the background and avoided even reflecting voluntarily on anything of the kind knowing that Almighty God alone could effect it if indeed it will be realized.*"<sup>15</sup> The Sulpicians of Baltimore laid the steppingstones for Elizabeth's future and committed to support Father Dubourg's initiative for female education because they saw benefits to replicating the Company of the Daughters of Charity in North America.<sup>16</sup> The Daughters of Charity's simplicity, flexibility and mission to serve people in need fit well with the needs of the American Church. The Sulpicians recorded the minutes of their assembly of March 14, 1809:

*"It is a matter of buying a plantation near Emmitsburg to found there a community of daughters, a peu près sur le même plan que les filles de la Charité, de Saint Vincent de Paul [sic]; who join to the care of the sick, the instruction of young girls in all branches of Christian education."*<sup>17</sup>

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13. McNeil, Betty Ann D.C. (1999) "The Sulpicians and the Sisters of Charity: Concentric Circles of Mission," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: 20:1, p. 21. Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol20/iss1/2>

14. William Dubourg to Abbé Élèves, 15 June 1828, APSL.

15. 5.18, Elizabeth Seton to Filippo Filicchi, 8 February 1809, *CW*, 2:55.

16. Rev. Charles-François Nagot, P.S.S. (1734-1816; Sulpician superior 1790-1810) and Rev. John Mary Tessier, P.S.S. (1758-1840); Sulpician superior (1810-1829).

17. Annabelle M. Melville, *Louis William Dubourg*, 2 vols. (Loyola University Press, 1976), 1:177.

## Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton

Father Dubourg assured Elizabeth that his confreres “were full of eagerness” about the prospective Community and “ready to promote it to the full extent of his power.”<sup>18</sup> The priests recruited candidates from Philadelphia, New York and Baltimore. Recommended by the Sulpician Father Pierre Babade (1763-1846), Cecilia Maria O’Conway (1788-1865) of Philadelphia was the first Sister of Charity in North America like Marguerite Naseau was in France.<sup>19</sup>

## Mother Seton

In her desired to begin anew, divine grace empowered Elizabeth to respond wholeheartedly to God whom she encountered more deeply in prayer and to whom she wished to consecrate herself by private vows. On March 25, 1809, in the Chapelle Basse of St. Mary’s Seminary, she vowed chastity and obedience for one year before John Carroll, archbishop of the Premier See (Baltimore). He believed that the freedom to exercise her parental obligations for her children precluded making a vow of poverty. On this occasion when she was about to launch a new mission and a new life in community, imitating Jesus Christ, “*the source and model of all Charity*,”<sup>20</sup> the Archbishop gave her the title *Mother Seton*.

Five other women arrived to join Mother Seton and the nascent community in Baltimore. They adopted simple but uniform attire: a black dress, cape and bonnet patterned after the widows’ weeds in Tuscany. By the end of July 1809, Mother Seton and companions had relocated to Frederick County, Maryland, initially staying six weeks on the mountainside at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary. Meanwhile, the Sulpicians arranged with their confrere, bishop-elect Benedict Joseph Flaget (1763-1850), who was about to sail to France, to obtain texts of the *Common Rules*, Vincentian writings and some Daughters of Charity willing to come to the United States. (Mother Seton was not aware of the last objective.)

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18. William Dubourg to Elizabeth Seton, 8 June 1808, APSL.

19. Cf. McNeil, Betty Ann D.C. (2009) “Memoir of Sister Cecilia O’Conway: Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s,” *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: 29:2. Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol29/iss2/2>

20. A-12.3, Rule of 1812, *CW*, 3b:500.



Mother Seton named their property St. Joseph's Valley. The community, tentatively called the "Sisters of St. Joseph" while still in Baltimore, was named by Mother Seton the "Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's." Founded on July 31, 1809, their name signifies that the Sisters of Charity live in St. Joseph's Valley. At first, the sisters were crowded, living in an old stone farmhouse, until a larger dwelling, St. Joseph's House (now the White House), was completed. The sisterhood was the first apostolic society native to the United States.

During Mother Seton's lifetime, 105 candidates joined the Sisters of Charity, 67 of whom persevered. Eighteen Sisters of Charity pronounced vows for the first time on July 19, 1813, using a modified version of the vow formula of the Daughters of Charity. Unfortunately, disease and early death were omnipresent: Mother Seton would bury eighteen young sisters in addition to her daughters Annina (Anna Maria) (1812) and Rebecca (1816) and her sisters-in-law Harriet (1809) and Cecilia Seton (1810).<sup>21</sup> Mother Seton nonetheless continually strove to "*do God's will*" and abandoned herself "*to his good Providence*," which she feared "*to anticipate*" by word or deed.<sup>22</sup>

William and Richard Seton attended George Town College for two years until their mother transferred them to St. Mary's College, Baltimore, and the next year to Mount St. Mary's, near Emmitsburg.<sup>23</sup> Her daughters attended classes at St. Joseph's School and helped as teacher aides.

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21. McNeil, Betty Ann D.C. (2012) "Demographics of Entrants: Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's, 1809–1849 And Daughters of Charity, Province of the United States, 1850–1909," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: 31,1, p.79. Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol31/iss1/4>

22. 7.323, Elizabeth Seton to a Priest, n.d., *CW*, 2:707; 7.29, Elizabeth Seton to Marie Françoise Chatard, *CW*, 2:400.

23. In the nineteenth-century United States, a college was a boarding school offering secondary education for boys, comparable to modern middle and high school levels.

## The Sulpicians

The Sulpicians in Baltimore were gracious to the Sisters; nonetheless, clashing personalities with those appointed superiors of the Sisters of Charity challenged Mother Seton's resolve and goodwill. This was the greatest obstacle to overcome, but eventually, Divine Providence created equilibrium in the working relationship.

### *Father William Dubourg*

The enterprising Father Dubourg proposed provisional Regulations, presided at the first Council meeting and oversaw the election of officers. The Sisters selected Mother Seton as their spiritual leader or Mother of the community. Father Dubourg preached their first retreat and then imposed a ban on correspondence with a priest whom the sisters admired in Baltimore. Mother Seton responded to the sisters' fury and wrote Archbishop Carroll that Father Dubourg "*was acting like a tyrant.*"<sup>24</sup> In late August 1809, his Sulpician superior confronted Father Dubourg, who abruptly resigned in anger. Mother Seton expressed ruefully that "*my own troubles will teach me, I hope, how to comfort others.*"<sup>25</sup> She apologized and pleaded with Dubourg to reconsider his resignation, but to no avail.

### *Father John B. David*

The Sulpicians named a new superior, Father John Baptist David, a native of Couëron (near Nantes), France.<sup>26</sup> His authoritative manner and disdain for female competency triggered personality clashes with many of the sisters, including Mother Seton. She acknowledged to Carroll, "*The truth is I have been made a Mother before being initiated... circumstances have all so combined as to create in my mind a confusion and want of*

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24. 6.4, Elizabeth Seton to Archbishop John Carroll, [August 6, 1809], *CW*, 2:78.

25. *Ibid.*

26. John Baptiste David, P.S.S. (1761-1841).

*confidence in my Superiors which is indescribable.*”<sup>27</sup> Despite Mother Seton’s efforts and “*constant prayer to our Lord to help me, yet the heart is closed and when the pen should freely give him the necessary detail and information he requires it stops... I remain motionless and inactive.*”<sup>28</sup>

Anxiety and feelings of insecurity seized Mother Seton, who wrote a friend, “*Everything here is again suspended and I am casting about to prepare for beginning the world again with my poor Annina, [Catherine] Josephine, and Rebecca, as we have reason to expect from many things passed lately that our situation is more unsettled than ever.*”<sup>29</sup> Although David probably had initiated the acquisition of the Rule of the Daughters of Charity, he resigned within two years in order to assist Bishop Flaget in his Diocese of Bardstown, Kentucky, on the western frontier of the United States.

### ***Father John Dubois***

In contrast to the short terms of Father Dubourg and Father David, their successor, Father John Dubois, a Parisian by birth, served twenty-five years as the Superior of the Sisters of Charity.<sup>30</sup> He made valuable contributions to the community’s ecclesial and governmental organization as well as to the Vincentian formation of the Sisters. In Paris, Father Dubois had worked for five years with the Daughters of Charity as chaplain at the Hospice of the Petites Maisons. Mother Seton considered Father Dubois to be “*all kindness and charity*” and valued him as “*excellent*” for his

27. 6.9, Elizabeth Seton to Archbishop John Carroll, 2 November 1809, *CW*, 2:88; 6.23, Seton to Carroll, 25 January 1810, *CW*, 2:106.

28. *Ibid.*

29. 6.57, Elizabeth Seton to George Weis, 9 August 1810, *CW*, 2:155-156.

30. John Dubois (1764-1842), after his ordination in Paris (1787), was an assistant curé of St. Sulpice and chaplain to the Hospice des Petits Maison directed by the Daughters of Charity; an émigré from France (1791); joined the Society of Saint-Sulpice (1806); founded Mount St. Mary’s College and Seminary near Emmitsburg (1808); chaplain, then Superior General of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s (1810-1826); 3<sup>rd</sup> bishop of New York (1826-1842).

### *Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton*

practical and pastoral approach.<sup>31</sup> They collaborated well and had an amicable relationship.

#### *Father Simon Bruté*

Father Simon Gabriel Bruté, a native of Rennes, France, and Father Dubois were instrumental in inculcating the spirit of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in the Sisters of Charity.<sup>32</sup> They helped Mother Seton form the Sisters as servants of the poor able to see the face of Christ in persons whom they served materially and spiritually. Father Bruté served in administrative, pastoral, and educational roles in Baltimore and Emmitsburg. He was also Mother Seton's spiritual director. After her death on January 4, 1821, Father Bruté noted, "*I truly believe her to have been one of those truly chosen souls... For it seems to me impossible, that there could be a greater elevation, purity and love of God, of heaven and for supernatural and eternal things, than were to be found in [Mother Seton]. O how deeply impressed was she with the greatness of God!*"<sup>33</sup>

### **The Vincentian Charism**

Mother Seton was the first to introduce and enculturate the Vincentian charism in North America. In order to meet the needs of the Catholic Church in America, the Sulpicians helped Elizabeth adapt the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity* (1672) as the *Regulations for the Society of the Sisters of Charity*

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31. 6.4 Elizabeth Seton to Archbishop John Carroll, [6 August 1809], CW, 2:77-78.

32. Simon Bruté (1779-1839) received a medical degree from the Sorbonne (1796); ordained to the priesthood (1808), and entered the Society of Saint-Sulpice. Bruté immigrated to the United States (1810) with bishop-elect Benedict J. Flaget who brought the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity* and Vincentian literature to the United States for Mother Seton's community. Bruté served in administrative, pastoral, and educational roles in Baltimore and Emmitsburg until named first bishop of Vincennes, Indiana (1834). He was Mother Seton's spiritual director of Mother Seton.

33. Simon Bruté, "La Mère," 5 July 1821, ASPL.

*in the United States of America* (1812).<sup>34</sup> The familiar words of Chapter 1, Article 1, echo the transnational timelessness of the Vincentian charism, sown in a new land for a new time. “*The principal end for which God has called and assembled the Sisters of Charity is to honor Jesus Christ Our Lord as the source and model of all Charity.*”<sup>35</sup> Mother Seton advised her Sisters “*to meet everybody in the grace of the moment*” in order to assess the mood of “*the one [with whom] we are to meet.*”<sup>36</sup> In an instruction, she reflected with her Sisters on their service to God:

*“Jesus lives in us... we are a part of his Body... As the beating of the heart sends the blood to every part of the body to nourish it, [how] does the life of our Jesus animate us? Do we indeed give him the true service of the heart without which whatever else we give has no value?”*<sup>37</sup>

Among the items Father Flaget brought from France was the three-volume opus, *La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu, Vincent de Paul* (Louis Abelly, 1664). Mother Seton rendered a selective translation of Abelly’s biography of Saint Vincent for use in her instructions. She focused religious formation on the Vincentian tradition so that the Sisters of Charity would do “*all their exercises in the Spirit of HUMILITY, SIMPLICITY, and CHARITY, in union with those our Lord did when on earth.*”<sup>38</sup>

In order to form the Sisters of Charity in the tradition of Saints Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul, Mother Seton rendered selected English translations of twenty-three French texts of conferences, biographies, and instructions.<sup>39</sup> In addition to excerpts from Abelly’s biography of Saint Vincent, Mother

34. A-12.3, Rule of 1812, *CW*, 3b:499-534.

35. *Ibid.*

36. 7.31, Elizabeth Seton to Rev. Simon Bruté, [June 1816], *CW*, 2:402.

37. 9.15, [Retreat Meditations], The Sisters of Charity Meditate on the Service of God, *CW*, 3a:331-332.

38. 13.2, Life of Vincent de Paul, “Institution of the Sisters of Charity,” *CW*, 3b:280.

39. See Part XIII, 13.1-13.23, *CW*, 3b: 217-496.

## Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton

Seton also prepared the first translation in English of the *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras* (Nicolas Gobillon, 1676).

In 1812, Archbishop Carroll and Father Jean-Marie Tessier (1758-1840), Sulpician superior in Baltimore, approved the Rule, and the Sisters commenced their novitiate. At its conclusion, on July 19, 1813, eighteen Sisters, including Mother Seton, renewed the promises of their Baptism and made vows for the first time of poverty, chastity and obedience. They committed themselves “*to the corporal and spiritual service of the poor sick, our true Masters, the instruction of those committed to our charge, and to all the duties pointed out by our Rule.*”<sup>40</sup> Mother Seton penned a meditation, “St. Vincent’s Day,” to help the Sisters prepare to make vows for the first time although, thereafter, the Sisters of Charity renewed their annual vows on March 25, the feast of the Annunciation.

*“O beloved Lord... we are all in your presence. Our hearts speak with ardor to review all the resolutions of our service to You ... prepare our hearts with the most abundant graces, kindle the sacred fire on every one of these altars of love and sacrifice which each one of our hearts raise to you with all possible zeal for these glorious moments.”*<sup>41</sup>

## **The blessing of God**

Blending Elizabeth Ann Seton’s aspiration to teach with Cooper’s purpose and the Sulpicians’ vision, the Rule of 1812 ranks female education as a priority of the Sisters of Charity. “*To honor the Sacred Infancy of Jesus in the young persons of their sex, whose hearts they are called upon to form to the love of God, the practice of every virtue, and the knowledge of religion, whilst they sow in their minds the seeds of useful knowledge.*”<sup>42</sup>

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40. A-12.4, First Vow Formula, *CW*, 3b, 563-564.

41. 9.15, [Retreat Mediations], St. Vincent’s Day, *CW*, 3a:329-331.

42. A-12.3, Rule of 1812, *CW*, 3b:563-564.

St. Joseph's School is the first free Catholic school for girls staffed by Sisters in the United States. Since education of poor, day scholars required funding, a few months later, St. Joseph's School also admitted tuition-paying boarding students. Day scholars and boarding pupils, according to their level (grade placement), received religious education and faith formation. The Sisters also taught them grammar, spelling, reading, writing, geography, parsing, arithmetic, French, music, fine sewing, etc.<sup>43</sup> Cordiality and friendship permeated Mother Seton's correspondence and relationships with the Sisters, pupils, parents, and alumnae with whom she wished to maintain bonds of affection by sharing joys and sorrows.

Mother Seton was a pioneer Catholic educator in the United States, but she is not the founder of the Catholic parochial school system in which parishes finance a school for children. Rather, Mother Seton was an innovator who made values-based academic education, religious instruction and faith formation accessible to children from impoverished families.

In response to requests, Elizabeth also missioned sisters to Philadelphia to manage Saint Joseph's Asylum (1814), the first Catholic orphanage in the United States. The community opened a mission at Mount Saint Mary's College and Seminary (1815) to oversee the infirmary and domestic services for the Sulpician institution. Mother Seton proudly sent Sisters of Charity to her native city to establish the New York City Orphan Asylum (later Saint Patrick's Orphan Asylum) in 1817.<sup>44</sup> In a letter to the Filicchi, Mother Seton referred to the mustard seed of the Gospels: "*All our affairs at St Joseph's go on with the blessing of God... Three branches are gone from our house to sow the little mustard seed — and religion smiles on our poor country in many ways.*"<sup>45</sup>

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43. 12.8, Regulations of the School of St. Joseph, *CW*, 3b:124-127.

44. 7.103, Elizabeth Seton to Rev. Simon Bruté, 1 August 1817, *CW*, 2:494.

45. 7.117, Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 16 September 1817, *CW*, 2:508. Cf. Luke 13:19.

## Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton

The Sisters of Charity interwove social ministry, nursing care and education in faith in line with social justice and religious values in all their services. In accord with the secondary purpose of their Rule, the community prioritized education “*to all female children in whatever station of life they may be for which the Sisters will receive a sufficient compensation, out of which they will endeavor to save as much as they can to educate gratis poor orphan children.*”<sup>46</sup> Wherever Sisters of Charity cared for orphans, they also opened a free school and a select school (tuition-based). Mother Seton told her pupils:

*“Your little mother, my darlings, does not come to teach you how to be good nuns or Sisters of Charity; but rather I would wish to fit you for that world in which you are destined to live: to teach you how to be good mistresses [wives] and mothers of families.”*<sup>47</sup>

Mother Seton’s successors continued to extend and expand missions and apostolic development. The Sisters of Charity were the first in the United States to:

- Manage nursing services in Catholic health care, the Baltimore Infirmiry (1823);
- Establish a Catholic hospital, Saint Louis Infirmiry (1828);
- Institute a Catholic psychiatric hospital, Mount Hope in Baltimore (1840).

## **Signs of the Times**

Mother Seton modeled the Sisters of Charity on the original Daughters of Charity of Paris. After she had reviewed the proposed English version of the Common Rules, she remarked, “*I never had a thought discordant with them as far as my poor*

46. A-12.4, Constitutions of the Sisters of Charity in the United States of America (1812), *CW*, 3b:541.

47. Charles I. White, *The Life of Mrs. Eliza Seton*, (1853), p. 362.



*power may go in fulfilling them.*”<sup>48</sup> Her intent was to establish an American community<sup>49</sup> under the ecclesiastical governance of the Society of Saint-Sulpice in the Archdiocese of Baltimore but not a diocesan community answerable to the Ordinary. The Constitutions clearly state that Sisters of Charity “*acknowledge Vincent de Paul as their chief patron and founder.*” The General Assembly of the State of Maryland granted legal status of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s in 1817.<sup>50</sup>

Father Dubourg was the first to mention a “*plan of life,*” but Father Dubois directed its development. Mother Seton rejected a diocesan model and an international affiliation, in favor of a unique model:

*“Under the authority of the Archbishop of Baltimore and the Superior of the Seminary of St. Sulpicians in Baltimore, who shall appoint the Superior who is to govern their society... There shall be a central Government from which will emanate all the other establishments and...composed of the Superior; the Mother, and her Council, [elected for a term of three years.]”*<sup>51</sup>

*“Although this Institution is the same in substance as that of the Sisters of Charity in France, it will have no connection whatever with the Company or Government of the said Sisters in France or any European country, except that of mutual charity and friendly correspondence.”*<sup>52</sup>

Having spent her girlhood in colonial New York during the American War of Independence (1775-1783) from Great Britain, one can easily understand her viewpoint. However, had

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48. 6.83, Elizabeth Seton to Archbishop John Carroll, 5 September 1811, *CW*, 2:195.

49. Elizabeth Seton founded the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s just 26 years after the *Treaty of Paris guaranteed the independence of the former-British colonies in North America*. See Ellin M. Kelly Collection, APSL.

50. A-7.73a, Act of Incorporation, *CW*, 3b:758-60.

51. A-12.4, Constitutions of the Sisters of Charity in the United States of America (1812), *CW*, 3b: 541-62.

52. *Ibid.*

### *Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton*

Mother Seton lived another thirty years, she would likely have recognized Divine Providence in signs of the times that led to the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's unification with the Company of the Daughters of Charity in 1850.

Immediately after his episcopal ordination in 1790, John Carroll invited the Society of Saint-Sulpice to establish a seminary in the United States.<sup>53</sup> Due to the turbulent times of the Revolutionary period, émigré Sulpicians assumed external ministries other than priestly formation. Thus, in United States, the Sulpicians addressed urgent needs of this pioneer Church.

Tides of political and ecclesial change early in the nineteenth century marked a new era for clergy and religious women in France: the reestablishment of the Daughters of Charity (1800), of the Society of St. Sulpice (1814) and of the Congregation of the Mission (1816)... all this was concurrent with the foundation and development of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's (1809-1820).

After the French Revolution, the Society of Saint-Sulpice held two General Assemblies in 1829 and 1845 resulting in the promulgation of decrees for all Sulpicians internationally to return to their founding charism, the education and formation of priests. Sulpicians in the United States were obligated to free themselves from all obligations except as seminary professors. The Sulpicians' objective for the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's was to preserve the Vincentian charism and the integrity of the community as a whole, lest bishops decimate it by incursions to impose their authority.<sup>54</sup> Father Louis-Regis Deluol, (1787-1858), ecclesiastical Superior of the Sisters of Charity, initially had no success in interesting the Congregation of the Mission in assuming responsibility for this Community.

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53. Cf. <https://www.generalsaintsulpice.org/en/who-are-we/chronolog>. Accessed 23 June 2021.

54. Bishop John Hughes of New York created a conflict in 1846 that resulted in the withdrawal of about thirty sisters from the Emmitsburg community to form a new community, the Sisters of Charity of New York.

For over ten years, he unsuccessfully explored options for the Emmitsburg community to unite with the Daughters of Charity.

Surprisingly, almost no documentation has survived about the role and any participation by the Sisters in the process except a reference that the majority pronounced vows on March 25, 1850, using the traditional vow formula of the Daughters of Charity.<sup>55</sup> In 1810, three Daughters of Charity (Sister Marie-Anne Bizeray, Sister Marguerite Voirin and Sister Augustine Chauvin), who were to sail to the United States, were unable to leave Bordeaux because Napoleon denied them passports. They wrote the American Sisters to explain their situation and enclosed a manuscript copy of the vow formula.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps these were the Daughters of Charity whom Monsignor Flaget had requested and whose passage the Sulpicians had financed. Truly, “*wisdom consists in following Providence step by step.*”<sup>57</sup>

### **“Citizen of the World”**

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton’s rich spiritual life revolved around Sacred Scripture, the Eucharist, service of people in need and fidelity to the Church. Her secret was a relational spirituality akin to Incarnational spirituality. She loved the Bible and read it avidly. Psalm 23 was her favorite psalm throughout her life. She took the Word of God to heart and was therefore able to recognize and do the will of God. Encountering God in prayer spawned her faith-filled perspective, and communion with Jesus in the Eucharist strengthened her resolve to overcome obstacles. Grace and her deep faith enabled her to see the hand of God and discern the “real presence” in persons, circumstances and events. Her inner peace and sanctity flowed from how she accepted the Paschal Mystery in her life, carrying her crosses with deep faith.

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55. The sisters at Cincinnati declined, withdrew, and formed a new community, the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati (1852).

56. Marie-Anne Bizeray, D.C., to My Dear Sisters, 12 July 1810, ASPL.

57. L. 720. Vincent de Paul to Bernard Codoing, 6 August 1644, CCD II, 521.

### *Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton*

Christ-like service of her neighbor spanned Elizabeth's adult life, during which she continually longed for eternity, for union with God. Her understanding of the centrality of the Paschal Mystery permeated bonds of human companionship, which flourished into mutually meaningful spiritual relationships. For example, her friendships with Rebecca Seton (her sister-in-law), Antonio and Filippo Filicchi (her benefactors) and Simon Bruté (her last spiritual director) were rooted in shared ideals.

Throughout her forty-six years on earth, Elizabeth viewed herself as a pilgrim on the road of life, facing each day with eyes of faith and looking toward eternity. Her spiritual daughters cherish her memory, keep her legacy alive and honor her as a saint. The mustard seed that she planted over 200 years ago has borne fruit. Today, the Company of the Daughters of Charity has two Provinces in North America and belongs to the Sisters of Charity Federation; these congregations of 2,500 Sisters serve in diverse charitable ministries in 26 countries. The National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton welcomes visitors in person and virtually: <https://setonshrine.org/>

A notable Vincentian woman of yesteryear, Elizabeth Bayley Seton is a saint for today, “*a citizen of the world.*”<sup>58</sup> Saint Elizabeth Ann urges us to confide our whole hearts to God. During her life, she experienced insecurity with courageous reliance on Divine Providence. She is a model and intercedes for all persons who wish to “*commit themselves to work for social transformation to eliminate the unjust structures that cause poverty.*”<sup>59</sup> Guided by the light of faith and anchored in hope, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton responded to God's call, fulfilled her mission and enriched the Church with her legacy of charity. In her own words, “*Faith lifts the staggering soul on one side, hope supports it on the other, experience says it must be and love says let it be.*”<sup>60</sup>

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58. 7.103, Elizabeth Seton to Simon Bruté, 1 August 1817, *CW*, 2:494.

59. *Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity* (2004), C. 24e.

60. 6.30, Elizabeth Seton to Julia Scott, 26 March 1810, *CW*, 2:117.

## Reflection Questions<sup>61</sup>

1. The service of God consists in the exercise of faith, hope, and charity. Do we give God the service of *faith* in applying to our spiritual duties? in confiding in His grace and assistance in our spiritual and temporal wants?
2. Do we serve God in hope? Looking to His promises? Confiding in His love? Seeking His kingdom, and leaving the rest to Him?
3. Our charity, does it extend to all? Is our love for all in Jesus? Is our whole heart truly His? Do we unite it so closely with Him so that life, soul and body all are all devoted to Him?

Sister Betty Ann McNEIL  
*Daughter of Charity*

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61. See 9.15, “The Sisters of Charity Meditate on the Service of God,” *CW* 3a:331-332.

### Louise de Marillac and Saint Joseph

In the apostolic letter *Patris corde*, Pope Francis wishes to “*share some personal reflections on this extraordinary figure, so close to our own human experience.*”<sup>1</sup> Among Christians and other people of good will, his reflection awakens a desire to establish a more intimate relationship with Saint Joseph that will enable them to know him better and love him more intensely so as to strive to imitate his life and implore his intercession more. For us, this apostolic letter also raises our interest in learning about the relationship that Louise de Marillac may have had with Saint Joseph.

#### *1. A Gospel figure who gradually comes out of the shadows*

The image that we have of Saint Joseph and our idea of his significance in our everyday life comes from a slow process of reflection. Gradually, the “*husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus,*” took his place over the course of centuries. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke left for posterity an admirable, concise and eloquent portrait of this good and enigmatic man. With simple lines, they reconstruct his portrait. *Descendant of David, he lived in Nazareth and worked as a carpenter.* A just, humble and virtuous man, he respected the law and had great trust in Yahweh. Poor of heart, he ardently hoped to see the coming of the Kingdom of God. A man with a contemplative heart, he marveled before mystery, which explains his silence and his admirable consent. He married Mary and, *before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. He was unwilling to expose her to shame and decided to divorce her quietly.* Obedient to the angel who spoke to him in a dream,

1. Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde* on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the proclamation of Saint Joseph as patron of the Universal Church, Introduction

he took his wife into his home and, when the child was born, named Him Jesus. Mary referred to him as the *father* of this little boy, just as their family and friends did. From that time on, his only preoccupation was to care for, protect and help *the child and His mother* and to contemplate the mystery enveloping them.<sup>2</sup> According to the evangelists, this was the unique and sublime mission of this silent man, indispensable for knowing and passing on the true origin of Jesus, His real identity and that of His mother Mary.

In seventeenth-century France, the Church's veneration sprang from this source that would grow with time. The Eastern Church, closer to the testimony of people who had lived with Joseph of Nazareth and passing on their recollections, kept alive the memory of the husband of Mary. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, some Fathers of the Church recorded homilies sharing their reflections stemming from meditation on Gospel texts on Joseph.<sup>3</sup> In the High Middle Ages, several translations circulated of *The History of Joseph the Carpenter*,<sup>4</sup> which witnesses to a simple, loving and lively devotion among the faithful of Syria and Constantinople. At that time, Mary's husband was not qualified as a "saint" and had no popular following. However, the sustained yet fragile influence of his presence did not die out. Some mystics brought out the greatness of the *Carpenter of Nazareth*.

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2. Cf. Mt 1, 2:13, 55-56; Lk 1, 2; Jn 12:46

3. In the East, Saint John Chrysostom spoke of Joseph in his *Homilies on Saint Matthew* and Saint Ephrem in his *Sermons on the Savior's Birth*; in the West, Saint Jerome put forward his teaching in *Adversus Hervidium de Mariae Virginitate perpetua* and his *Commentary on Saint Matthew* and Saint Augustine in his *Sermons*.

4. *The History of Joseph the Carpenter* is an apocryphal text of the New Testament that demonstrates popular piety in the early Church. In this text, Christ recounts the life and death of Joseph. It was the source of the readings for the office for the feast of the saint on April 26. Various translations passed from the East to the West until the dissemination of a summary by the Dominican Isidore of Isolani around 1340.

### *Louise de Marillac and Saint Joseph*

At the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century in France, indications of interest in Joseph appeared.

**Bernard of Clairvaux** (1090-1153), deeply in love with Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, a great mystic and tireless preacher, presented a summary of past and contemporary reflections on the adoptive father of Jesus and thus began the great movement of devotion to Joseph.

During the time of Saint King **Louis IX** (1214-1270), (1254), Jean de Joinville returned from the Seventh Crusade with the relic of the *Cincture (belt) of Joseph the Carpenter*.<sup>5</sup> To conserve it and expose it for the veneration of the faithful, he had a church built in Joinville and asked to be buried there with the relic. The Cincture of Joseph became a medium for the movement of devotion that was beginning to develop in France and that would lead to the birth of a cult for the saint. Joseph's virtues and graces were proclaimed in homilies and published in books. Why not pray to him since he had such a decisive and important role in salvation history?

Between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century in France, a strong desire emerged for a feast in honor of the husband of Mary on the liturgical calendar, and it was the chancellor of the University of Paris, **Jean de Gerson** (1363-1429), a profound theologian, great mystic and ardent apostle, who made the request to the Holy Father. A group sprung up around Jean de Gerson and his teacher, **Pierre d'Ailly** (1350-1420), to champion devotion to

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5. See <https://www.fondation-patrimoine.org/les-projets/ceinture-de-saint-joseph-chapelle-saint-joseph-notre-dame-de-joinville>



Saint Joseph. They zealously propagated this devotion and cult and contributed significantly to the improvement in theological reflection regarding the saint.<sup>6</sup>

At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Sixtus IV (1414-1484) officially introduced the cult of Saint Joseph into the Church, making widespread the feast day of March 19, as it appeared in the Roman Breviary published in 1479, although it was not obligatory in every country.

During the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in France, the Wars of Religion broke out between Catholics and Protestants seeking political and religious hegemony. During this time, devotion and cult dedicated to Saint Joseph gained real momentum in Italy thanks to Father Isidore of Isolani (Dominican) and in Spain thanks to Teresa of Avila. The same would occur in France once the Wars of Religion ended.

## ***2. Saint Joseph's popularity in the historical context of Louise de Marillac (1600-1660)***

Specialists indicate that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, devotion to this saint experienced a spectacular blossoming in France. When peace was restored under Henri IV, Saint Joseph appeared as one of the most venerated saints thanks to the impetus of the Catholic Reformation. With the birth of the French School of Spirituality supported by Louis XIII, the older movement of devotion reemerged; orders and religious congregations, drawing from their own traditions, redoubled the expansion of

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6. See Masson, A.L. "*Jean Gerson, sa vie, son temps, ses oeuvres*" [*Jean Gerson: his life, his times, his works*]. Lyon, 1894; Gerson, Jean. "*Sermo de Nativitate gloriosae V.M. et des commentationes virgine sponsi ejus Joseph*" [*Sermon on the glorious Virgin Mary's nativity and commentaries on her most chaste spouse Joseph*], "*Considerations sur saint Joseph*" [*Thoughts of Saint Joseph*]; Ailly, Pierre. "*Tractatus de duodecim honoribus S. Joseph*" [*Treatise on twelve honors of Saint Joseph*], 1416.

### *Louise de Marillac and Saint Joseph*

this devotion and cult. The number of faithful wishing to honor and imitate Saint Joseph continually increased. Let us examine what characterized this Parisian devotion from 1600 to 1660.

The driving force of this pious movement came primarily from religious orders, especially in convents. All over France, religious houses and churches appeared under the patronage of Saint Joseph. Since the beginning of the century, the face of the city of Paris was being transformed by the building of many new convents: in 1602, it was the Discalced Carmelite nuns; in 1603, the Ursulines and the Jesuits; in 1604, the Capuchins nuns; in 1608, the church of the Feuillant monks (Cistercians). In 1610, the Jesuits set up their novitiate; the Discalced Carmelite monks arrived in 1611 along with the Dominicans in the Great Convent; in 1618, the Madelonnette Augustinians were founded; in 1620, the Daughters of Calvary; in 1621, the Benedictine nuns of Val-de-grâce; in 1622, the Annunciation Sisters; in 1623, the Visitation Sisters and the Feuillantine nuns; in 1627, the Recollects; in 1641, the Daughters of the Cross. These religious houses were imbued with the enthusiasm of youth and novelty, the fervor of intense religiosity promoted by the Catholic Reformation and zeal for building a livelier and more committed Church. With time, this produced the strength of devotion mentioned above, especially from the inherited passion of religious and monastic traditions of the Discalced Carmelites, Teresa of Avila, Benedictines, Dominicans, Feuillants, Franciscans, Capuchins, Jesuits, etc. Convents became centers of piety and cult in honor of Saint Joseph; preachers made known his greatness and virtues and encouraged imitation of him and prayer to him. In 1621, Pope Gregory XV's declaration making March 19 an obligatory feast throughout the Church was welcomed with great joy. On March 13, 1661, Louis XIV declared this day a public holiday for all of France.

**During the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century,** more books on Saint Joseph were published in France than in any other European country. To make him known, works translated in French from

Spanish and German authors were published. In 1604, *The Image of Chastity in the Life and Action of Saint Joseph, Husband of the Virgin Mary* by the Franciscan Andrés de Soto;<sup>7</sup> in 1619, *The Greatness and Excellency of Glorious Saint Joseph* by the Carmelite Jerónimo Gracián of the Mother of God;<sup>8</sup> in 1620, *The History and Life of Saint Joseph* by the Benedictine Karl Stengel;<sup>9</sup> other works written by French authors<sup>10</sup> would come out in several editions and be translated in different languages. They were written in the vernacular to reach the largest number of people, especially the laity. The pace of these publications was rapid as if to respond to readers' growing demand.

**During previous centuries**, confraternities already existed for carpenters and those working in the building trades. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they began also to receive people who wanted to live their Christian life in a committed way. They were initially established in connection with convents and then spread to all the parishes of France. When the Jesuits preached missions, they

7. Initially published in Spanish in 1593 in Valladolid with the title *Vida y excelencias del bienaventurado San Joseph, esposo de la Virgen sanctissima Nuestra Señora* [*Life and excellency of the blessed Saint Joseph, husband of the Most Holy Virgin, Our Lady*].

8. Initially published in Spanish in 1605 in Toledo with the title *Sumario de las excelencias del glorioso San Joseph esposo de la Virgen Maria* [*Summary of the excellence of Glorious Saint Joseph, husband of the Virgin Mary*].

9. Initially published in Latin in 1616, with the title *Josephus, hoc est sanctissimi educatoris Christi, Dom. Deique nostri in terris apparentis, ac aeternae Virginis Mariae sponsi vitae historia, compendio quantum potuit adumbrata, ex fide dignioribus auctoribus collecta*

10. In 1629, *Tableau des qualités éminentes de Saint Joseph* [*Portrait of the Eminent Qualities of Saint Joseph*], by the Feuillant Charles de Saint-Paul. In 1631, *Dévotion de Saint Joseph* [*Devotion to Saint Joseph*], by the Feuillant Pierre de Sainte-Marie. In 1634, *Tableau des divines faveurs faites à saint Joseph* [*Portrait of Divine Favors granted to Saint Joseph*], by the Jesuit Etienne Binet. In 1639 *La dévotion à Saint Joseph* [*Devotion to Saint Joseph*] by the Jesuit Paul de Barry. In 1644, *La Gloire de saint Joseph* [*The Glory of Saint Joseph*], by the Jesuit Jean Jacquinot. In 1645, *Le trésor inestimable de saint Joseph* [*The Priceless Treasure of Saint Joseph*], by the Carmelite Antoine de la Mère de Dieu. And in 1657, *Les grandeurs de saint Joseph* [*The Greatness of Saint Joseph*], by the Sulpician Jean-Jacques Olier.

### Louise de Marillac and Saint Joseph

established these confraternities, and then all the religious orders wanted to have confraternities associated with their convent. The Jesuit Jean Jacquinot said, “*Few good cities in France have not established [confraternities of Saint Joseph] authorized by Bishops and even with the approval of the Sovereign Pontiff, who has favored them with indulgences and privileges in order to attract people more powerfully to the honor and service of this great saint.*”<sup>11</sup> The first confraternity in Paris was founded by César de Vendôme at the Feuillants’ convent in 1626. A few years later, in 1649, the Duchess of Guise obtained a fragment of the relic of the Cincture of Saint Joseph from Joinville for this confraternity.

**During the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century**, this devotion became fashionable throughout France, and, although it was directed at simple and pious people, it also appealed to high society and even the Court. The construction of new convents was financed by noble families that supported with great interest and enthusiasm the spirituality of the orders and congregations that they helped financially. These noble families made gifts of buildings, land and interest income for their subsistence; they even encouraged one of their children or other relatives to enter the convent and participated in initiatives of devotion or cult. The royal family cultivated this devotion in a very special way. In 1629, Louis XIII, accompanied by Cardinal Richelieu, went to Joinville to venerate the relic of the Cincture of Saint Joseph. That same year, Anne of Austria enrolled as a member of the confraternity of the Feuillants’ convent. In 1654, Louis XIV did the same, and after his marriage in 1660, it would be the turn of his wife, Marie-Thérèse of Austria. In 1638, Louis XIII had consecrated France to the Virgin Mary, and on Saturday, March 19, 1661, in the chapel of the Louvre, Louis XIV consecrated France to Saint Joseph.

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11. Jacquinot Jean, *La gloire de saint Joseph [The Glory of Saint Joseph]*, Chez Pierre Palliot: Dijon, 1644, p. 732

In fidelity to the spirit of the Catholic Reformation, the promotion of devotion to saint Joseph was intended to direct the faithful's piety to the mysteries of the faith. In the teachings of Popes and spiritual figures of the Middle Ages, Joseph was presented as someone necessary to the mystery of the Incarnation. He lived in great intimacy with Jesus, a model of a simple, everyday life, a teacher of prayer by his silence and contemplation of mystery, an example of humility and of the hidden life. Because of the authority that he exercised over the Child Jesus, he is the channel through which we receive graces and assistance. Members of the different confraternities were invited to take Saint Joseph as their patron, advocate and model and to make this commitment by an annual vow, renewable each March 19. Propagators of this devotion called the faithful to develop a life style in accord with that of the Holy Family of Nazareth, adopting the qualities of the head of the family, and encouraged their prayer life that, depending on the level of their spiritual life, ranged from simple intercessory prayer, to knowledge of Saint Joseph's life, to contemplative prayer. Devotees were invited to pray before a picture, painting or statue of the saint; many of them kept on their person a small statuette to remind themselves of his presence over the course of the day and to favor constant prayer.<sup>12</sup> By the end of the century, his attribute as the "patron saint of a good death" was widespread.

Among those in the circle of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac who spread devotion and the cult of Saint Joseph was **Pierre de Bérulle**. In his writings, he demonstrated Joseph's love for Jesus and dedicated many pages to presenting the exemplarity of Jesus' childhood. Bérulle's relationship with the Carmelite nuns, especially with Anne of Saint Joseph, led him to be a major propagator of devotion to Saint Joseph.

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12. Paul de Barry in his previously cited book, *Devotion to Saint Joseph*, reinforced this practice with the example of Teresa of Avila, who took a picture of Saint Joseph with her on her trips to found monasteries. The Jesuit who accompanied Francis de Sales in his final moments found in his breviary nothing other than one holy card of Saint Joseph.

### Louise de Marillac and Saint Joseph

**Francis de Sales** is also considered one of the primary propagators of devotion to Saint Joseph. Paul de Barry considered that among “*the ten people who loved Saint Joseph most and who give a wonderful example of esteeming him and having devotion for him,*” Francis de Sales was fifth after Jesus Christ Himself, the Virgin Mary, Teresa of Avila and Gaspard de Bono, Order of Minims (in Valencia).<sup>13</sup> He spoke of Saint Joseph in *Introduction to the Devout Life* and in *Treatise on the Love of God*. He also wrote about Saint Joseph in *True Spiritual Conferences*. He further spoke about him in a letter to Jean Pierre Camus and in two letters to Jeanne Françoise de Chantal and most notably in sermons preached in 1612, 1614, 1621 and 1622.

**Jeanne-Françoise de Chantal**, Foundress of the Visitation Sisters, strove to imbue her Sisters with devotion to Saint Joseph. In Visitation convents, March 19 was solemnly celebrated: incense at Mass, solemn office with first and second vespers, singing of the *Magnificat*, the *Te Deum* at matins and, if possible, a sermon and a procession.<sup>14</sup> She dedicated the monastery of Annecy to Saint Joseph. She prayed daily before a painting of the saint and kept a holy card of Jesus with Mary and Joseph in her book of Rules.

**Jacques Bossuet** wrote sermons on Saint Joseph that are considered still today the most complete and beautiful texts. In the early afternoon of March 19, 1661, after the consecration of France to Saint Joseph, he celebrated the glories of the new “defender of the nation” in the presence of Anne of Austria at the Louvre.

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13. Barry, P. *La dévotion à saint Joseph [Devotion to Saint Joseph]*, Lyon, 1639, p. 77

14. *Directoire pour l'office* in the Book of Customs and Directory for the Visitation Sisters, Paris, 1637

### 3. *Saint Joseph in the writings of Louise de Marillac*

As a child, Louise came to know Saint Joseph when she was at the Royal Monastery of Poissy where her teachers gave Louise her first lessons in sacred history, including those about the birth and childhood of Christ. Joseph was always there alongside Jesus and Mary. These Dominicans surely had the teachings of the Dominican Family, and Saint Joseph was very present in the monastery.<sup>15</sup> The convent housed a rich patrimony of sculptures, pictures and paintings presenting Gospel scenes, which adorned the walls and other chosen spaces. If, as Dominique Poinsenet<sup>16</sup> affirms, Louise de Marillac learned charity by contemplating Saint Louis serving the poor, she must have noticed the depictions of the holy king adoring the Child Jesus, full of the devotion for Saint Joseph that enflamed him after the Seventh Crusade.

Around 1604, when Louise arrived in Paris in the home of the devout woman, she opened herself to the prevailing spirituality, particularly the popularity of Saint Joseph.

Later, when Louise would spend time during Advent and around Pentecost with the Capuchin nuns in their new convent in the Saint-Honoré neighborhood in Paris, she shared with the nuns what their Rules allowed, according to her biographers.<sup>17</sup> They

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15. In the 13th century, the Dominicans Saint Albert the Great in his work *Mariale*, Saint Thomas Aquinas in *Commentary on Saint Matthew* and *The Golden Chain*, and Saint Jacques de la Voragine in his *Golden Legend*, relating the Annunciation and the birth of Jesus Christ, wrote their thoughts on Saint Joseph although they did not develop an actual devotion; it was Isidore of Isolani who, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, gave the greatest momentum to this devotion in the Dominican orders and in the Church in Europe in general.

16. Poinsenet, Dominique. *De l'anxiété à la sainteté : Louise de Marillac [From Anxiety to Holiness: Louise de Marillac]*, Arthème Fayard: Paris, 1958

17. Poinsenet, Dominique. *De l'anxiété à la sainteté : Louise de Marillac [From Anxiety to Holiness: Louise de Marillac]*, Arthème Fayard: Paris, 1958; Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac: a portrait*, Chapman: London, 1959; Charpy, Elisabeth. *Louise de Marillac: Come Winds or High Waters* [trans. Clara Orban and Sr. Mary Jo Stein], Vincentian Studies Institute: Chicago, 2018, p. 3

### Louise de Marillac and Saint Joseph

also say that she “spent much of her time in religious houses, which were then attracting the faithful by the renewed vigor of their observance and by their fervor”<sup>18</sup> and “heard the Jesuit and Capuchin preachers.” It is thus possible that she “was influenced by the monks”<sup>19</sup> as well in her desire to practice this devotion to Saint Joseph. It would even seem that she made a retreat in 1625 in the recently-founded Carmelite monastery on rue Chapon, very close to her house when she lived on rue Courteau-Vilain,<sup>20</sup> guided by the Oratorian Father Ménard or by Madeleine de Saint-Joseph, a prioress with close ties to Pierre de Bérulle, both great propagators of devotion to Saint Joseph. However, no indication has come down to us showing that Louise was involved in this devotion before the death of her husband.

When we speak of “devotion,” we are referring to a deep sense of respect and admiration for a saint because of his virtues and the exemplarity of his life. When a saint awakens devotion in a person, the desire develops in that person to imitate him and to implore his assistance in order to receive, thanks to his intercession, the graces needed. In general, devotion to a saint favors the relationship with God and the development of an authentic spiritual life. In this sense, Saint Joseph must have been someone with whom Louise spoke relatively frequently and wanted to establish a relationship of admiration and affection, the focus of many times of prayer, someone to whom she would address her requests in a desire to imitate him.

We glean limited information about her relationship with Saint Joseph from her writings. Allusions to the saint are too few and spaced out over the course of her 69 years of life. The figure of Saint Joseph only appears on four occasions:

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18. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac: a portrait*, Chapman: London, 1959, p. 25

19. Martínez, Benito. *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres [Determined for a paradise for the poor]*, Editorial CEME: Salamanca, 1995, p. 41

20. *Ibid.*, p. 43



1 – In the short catechism that she wrote in 1630 for her personal use on her visits to the Confraternities of Charity or for the use of the teachers whom she visited and to whom she entrusted schools in villages or, a little later, for the first Daughters of Charity who would administer schools in different missions. In this catechism, she presented the figure of Jesus Christ and identified Joseph as the *husband* of Mary, simply mentioning, “*He was given to her as her guide, and he remained a virgin.*”<sup>21</sup>

2 - Around 1633, she made a weekend retreat, probably of three days, at the end of Advent or during the Christmas Season.<sup>22</sup> Saturday’s meditations were on death. On Sunday, she focused on the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word, with the Nativity as background. The topic of her first meditation on Monday was “*the life of Our Lord from the age of twelve until the age of thirty.*” She considered “*the hidden life of Jesus on earth*” and emphasized that he “*chose holy poverty. He subjected Himself to the Blessed Virgin and to Saint Joseph by His obedience to them.*” During her meditation, she noted her longstanding and heartfelt desire to imitate Jesus Christ. She felt impelled to “*spend the rest of [her] days honoring the hidden life of Jesus on earth.*”

3 – Two of Louise’s letters to Anne Hardemont in Ussel dating from 1659 mention Saint Joseph. The Sisters had arrived in Ussel in May 1658. A year and a half later, the service they were to render those who are poor was not yet clear, and Louise was aware of Anne Hardemont’s suffering. In her first letter,<sup>23</sup> Louise, instead of encouraging Sister Anne to be generous, which did not seem necessary, called for her to ask God for the “*grace to enable [her] to imitate the inaction of the Son of God. During His stay upon earth, He did not always work to the full extent of His powers. His labor in the family of Saint Joseph*

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21. *Documents*, Doc. 824, p. 963

22. *Spiritual Writings*, A. 8, p. 717-720

23. *Spiritual Writings*, L. 575, p. 659

Louise de Marillac and Saint Joseph

reveals this.”<sup>24</sup> In the second letter,<sup>25</sup> Louise tried to convince her that she was honoring “*the state in which the Son of God found Himself when, after leaving the temple where He had been working for the glory of God, He went with the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph to obey them. He thereby accomplished the will of God by toiling for many years at the humble tasks of a carpenter’s shop. Yet He had come upon earth to labor for the salvation of the entire human race.*”

We observe that in all these texts, the emphasis is on Jesus Christ. Joseph is in the background; he is simply part of the scene as the husband of Mary in the first text, as the head of the family whom Jesus obeys in the second and finally, in her two letters, as the head of household in which the young Jesus lives, obeys and unpretentiously works in the carpenter’s shop.

Around 1633, Vincent de Paul asked her in a letter “*not to go to the poor today. In that way you will honor the inactivity of the Son of God and that of Saint Joseph, who, although he had the power of heaven and earth in his care and under his authority, nonetheless, wished to appear powerless.*”<sup>26</sup> In her meditations, Louise contemplated the *inaction* of Jesus Christ and *His hidden life* in Nazareth, based on the Gospel passages on Jesus’ childhood as part of the mystery of the Incarnation. The Gospel figure of Joseph of Nazareth appeared several times during the formation of the Sisters assembled for conferences with Vincent and Louise. Aside from one time when a Sister put forward imitation of Jesus Christ, Mary and Saint Joseph, “*who worked all their lives,*”<sup>27</sup> the other references concern themes like:

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24. Vincent de Paul brought up the theme of imitating Jesus’ submission to Saint Joseph in the conference of July 31, 1634, that of July 5, 1640 and in conference 22 on reconciliation. See also conferences 45, 47 and 81 and letter 642 of Louise de Marillac.

25. *Spiritual Writings*, L. 642, p. 660

26. CCD I, 156

27. CCD IX, 381

- **Honoring and imitating the “*submission*” of Jesus Christ** to Mary and Joseph as a motivation for obedience.<sup>28</sup>

- Maintaining a **hard-working and poor life style** like that of **Jesus Christ** when He lived with Joseph, unrecognized in the eyes of the world, working hard to earn His living.<sup>29</sup>

- Reinforcing “*a cordial relationship*” among the Sisters, like that which existed among “*Saint Joseph, the Blessed Virgin, and Jesus.*”<sup>30</sup>

- **Dedicating time to “*prayer*” like Jesus Christ**, who left Mary and Joseph to go pray.<sup>31</sup>

These texts show us Louise’s idea of Saint Joseph, first what she received in her childhood and enriched by pious books and the teachings of preachers and especially by her meditations on Gospel passages. She drew inspiration for the structure of her retreats from Saint Francis de Sales, Gerson and the New Testament.<sup>32</sup> In a way, it is logical that her idea shares some of the characteristics of prevailing devotion of the time. However, her perspective on Saint Joseph is very simple and does not stray from the Gospel passages about Jesus’ childhood.

When Louise died, Vincent, who knew her well, said with simplicity and conviction, “*She did what Saint Paul said, ‘It is no longer I who live, but Jesus who lives in me.’ In this way she strove to make herself like her Master by imitating His virtues.*”<sup>33</sup>

This focus on Jesus Christ, which I would call absolute, characterized her life, at least after the death of her husband when she decided to restructure her life, making sure that everything around her could help her to meet the unique goal she had set for

28. CCD IX, 7, 14, 59, 427; CCD X, 72, 228, 230, 461

29. CCD IX, 137-138, 343, 380-381; CCD X, 102

30. CCD IX, 119, 122

31. CCD IX, 326

32. *Spiritual Writings*, L. 63, A. 10, A. 11

33. CCD X, 585

### Louise de Marillac and Saint Joseph

herself. She defined it in the following way: “*May the desire for holy poverty always live in my heart in such a manner that, freed from all bonds, I may follow Jesus Christ and serve my neighbor with great humility and gentleness, living under obedience and in chastity all my life and honoring the poverty that Jesus Christ practiced so perfectly.*”<sup>34</sup> She wrote this around 1626, at a time when devotion to Saint Joseph was at its high point in Paris; that same year, the confraternity of the Order of Feuillants was founded. In this document in which Louise defined her rule of life, she wrote a little later, quite naturally, “*Therefore, I shall cultivate a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin, my guardian angel and the Apostles, with the desire of imitating their lives to the best of my ability since they are imitators of Our Lord.*”<sup>35</sup> There is no allusion to Saint Joseph. This is how she expressed the primary orientation of her life, which was a driving force for her original spirituality and the influence that she had on French society through the Daughters of Charity.

## CONCLUSION

### **A woman centered and rooted in a Gospel spirituality**

We might wonder, if Saint Joseph had such a special place in the prevailing spiritual context of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Paris, why is there no reference to Louise de Marillac’s devotion to Saint Joseph in biographies on her or in her writings? I will respond with a hypothesis.

In fact, after her husband’s death, Louise’s life took another direction. She felt the need to open herself to other horizons, impelled by the powerful experience of Pentecost 1623 and accompanied by her new spiritual director, Vincent de Paul. Progressively, she left behind a way of life that constrained her and impeded her growth. She decided to break with this milieu: “*Is it not reasonable that I belong entirely to God after having spent so much time in the world? I thus tell you... that I desire*

34. *Spiritual Writings*, A. 1, p. 689

35. *Spiritual Writings*, A. 1, p. 690

*this with all my heart, and in the way that will be pleasing to Him,*” she wrote to Hilarion Rebour, a cousin of her husband, informing him of Antoine Legras’ death.<sup>36</sup> She began a process of discernment to come to know God’s will for her.

She expressed this break clearly in actions. She left the Marais neighborhood with its many convents and mansions, where high society lived, and moved to the other side of the river, to the Saint-Victor neighborhood on the Left Bank. Her Marillac relatives remained in the Marais and helped its social, spiritual and religious ambiance to flourish.<sup>37</sup> She chose a poorer neighborhood, more in harmony with her new scale of values and her desire to live Gospel poverty but also in order to be closer to Vincent de Paul’s residence. His apostolic life style strongly attracted her. A different type of relationship with God was maturing in her; she began to follow another spiritual path. What was essential in her Christian life was to have a deeper experience of God and to discern within the action of the Spirit. Her mission became the accompaniment of young women at the service of the Confraternities of Charity, their animation and their formation. The Gospel, which was the source inspiring her new form of life, cut through every aspect of her personality. Gradually, the Spirit of Jesus Christ<sup>38</sup> was imprinted upon her soul, in her memory (keeping in her heart the memory of her readings and prayer), in the depths of her mind and her will to practice the teachings of Jesus Christ fervently and lovingly.<sup>39</sup>

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36. *Documents*, Doc. 841, p. 988

37. Her uncle Michel contributed actively to the entrance of the Carmelite nuns in Paris, and his son Michel was a professed member of the Capuchins; her aunt Valance had one son who was a Jesuit, another who belonged to the Order of Minims and two daughters who entered the Carmelites; her uncle Louis and aunt Catherine were so close to the Feuillants that Louis was buried in the mausoleum of the convent church.

38. *Spiritual Writings*, A. 8

39. *Spiritual Writings*, A. 26

### Louise de Marillac and Saint Joseph

New convents were built in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighborhood and the Saint-Jacques neighborhood, but their offerings were no longer among Louise's primary interests.

Interestingly enough, in May 1629, the same year that Louis XIII and Richelieu went on pilgrimage to Joinville to venerate the relic of the Cincture of Saint Joseph, Louise began pursuing a different path that led her down the highways and byways to visit the Confraternities of Charity that Vincent de Paul and his companions had founded. From then on, belonging to another confraternity no longer had any meaning or attraction. The Confraternity of Charity has for patron Jesus Christ, whom she resolved "*to follow... wholeheartedly, without any reservation. Filled with consolation and happiness at the thought of being accepted by Him to live [her] entire life as His follower,*"<sup>40</sup> allowed her to "*serve [her] neighbor with great humility and gentleness,*" the primary task of her life.

After 1633 and once she would commit herself by vow to the formation of the young women who joined her to serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor of the Confraternities of Charity, she had to define more clearly the identity of this group that would soon be known by the name of "*Confraternity of the Servants of the Poor of the Charity,*"<sup>41</sup> emphasizing its secular character and differentiating it from other types of groups. In order to preserve the purpose for which God had founded it, this confraternity had to remain prudent and keep its independence in relation to bishops and parish priests. These instructions were given to the Sisters sent to Angers and Nantes in case their bishop would ask them who they were and what they did.

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40. *Spiritual Writings*, A. 5, p. 715

41. This is the name with which the first Sisters were approved in 1646 by J.F. Paul de Gondi, then Coadjutor to his uncle Jean François de Gondi. In 1655, it was approved with the same name by J.F. Paul de Gondi when he was already the Cardinal de Retz and Archbishop of Paris.

Louise de Marillac considered herself a devout woman and, following the tendencies of her time, had her personal devotions, carried out in accord with Vincent, to which were added those that she shared with her Sisters. Jean Calvet states that she belonged to nine or ten confraternities,<sup>42</sup> six of which are found in her will: “*Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet for the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament; the Jacobins on rue Saint-Jacques for that of the Five Wounds of Our Lord; the Franciscans of the Great Convent for the Cord of Saint Francis; the Jacobins of Saint-Honoré for the Rosary; the Augustinians of Saint-Germain for the Cincture of Saint Monica, and Saint-Laurent for the Association of the Company of the Most Blessed Sacrament.*”<sup>43</sup> All of them are oriented toward Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary except the Confraternity of the Cord of Saint Francis, which she continued to sustain her choice of poverty, and that of the Cincture of Saint Monica, to support her in her worries and suffering about her son. Although she considered it “*an honor to have been admitted*” to these confraternities, at the age of 54, she admitted “*to neglecting greatly the devotions*” recommended by them. The customs of the time and a sort of ambient spirituality led her to enroll, but these confraternities did not have the attraction of the novelty of her project of Charity, which, she was convinced, “*it was God*” who inspired.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to devotions that we could call “official,” which she practiced with interest and recommended to her spiritual daughters, such as devotion to the Virgin Mary, the angels and the apostles, she had great devotion to the feast of Pentecost<sup>45</sup> as well as to Francis de Sales,<sup>46</sup> to God’s Law (the Commandments),<sup>47</sup> to the sign of the cross and to the five wounds. She taught them in her short catechism.<sup>48</sup> Other devotions, present in her writings

42. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac: a portrait*, Chapman: London, 1959, p. 52

43. *Documents*, Doc. 847, p. 995

44. *Spiritual Writings*, A. 2 “Light,” p. 1

45. *Spiritual Writings*, A. 1, A. 8, A. 48, A. 53, A. 68, A. 92

46. *Spiritual Writings*, A. 2, A. 10

47. *Spiritual Writings*, A. 1

48. *Documents*, Doc. 824

### Louise de Marillac and Saint Joseph

and practiced by the Sisters, are those of the relic of Saint Maurice of Angers,<sup>49</sup> Saint Roch in times of the plague,<sup>50</sup> and the Holy Tear in Vendôme, near Châteaudun.<sup>51</sup> To this we must add the prayers that she composed to Saint Denis and Saint Fiacre.<sup>52</sup>

If there are no references to confraternities or devotions to Saint Joseph, there is a reason. Today, we think that Vincent de Paul was critical of these devotions, advising her “*not to overburden [herself]*.”<sup>53</sup> However, Louise and the Sisters were free to keep the devotions that they wished. In Angers, a Sister wanted to belong to the Confraternity of Saint Francis. Louise, knowing that this desire was “*not against their Rules,*” thought that if this Sister joined, “*this would necessitate her going out.*” Louise felt that “*the Company to which they belong would preclude all other confraternities*”<sup>54</sup> and invited the Sisters to realize that, if they did not focus on the essential, “*all other acts are more prejudicial than helpful.*”<sup>55</sup>

More than a woman of *devotions*, Louise de Marillac is a *devout* woman, a woman of *devotion*, in the sense of the word as described by Saint Francis de Sales. “*Devotion that is true and living presupposes the love of God, rather it is nothing else than a true love of God. It is not, however, love as such. In so far as divine love enriches us it is called grace, which makes us pleasing to God. In so far as it gives us the strength to do good, it is called charity. But when it grows to such a degree of perfection that it makes us not only to do good but rather moves us to do it carefully, frequently and promptly, it is called devotion... In short, devotion is nothing else than a spiritual agility and liveliness by means of which charity realizes its*

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49. *Spiritual Writings*, L. 265

50. *Spiritual Writings*, L. 520

51. *Spiritual Writings*, L. 587

52. *Documents*, Doc. 845; *Spiritual Writings*, A. 35

53. *CCD I*, 375, L. 266

54. *Spiritual Writings*, L. 55, p. 65; see also L. 284

55. *Spiritual Writings*, M. 69, p. 804



*actions in us, or we do so by charity, promptly and lovingly.*"<sup>56</sup> Louise lived this form of devotion perfectly.

She made sure these devotions had only a very secondary place in her life and spirituality and did not minimize nor distract from what is essential.<sup>57</sup> The Founders had a deep desire to contribute to the Church the newness offered by "*this way of life which is totally spiritual, although... employed in exterior works which appear lowly and despicable in the eyes of the world but which are glorious in the sight of God.*"<sup>58</sup> They wanted to pass this on clearly and unequivocally to society. They chose to commit to live the Gospel and contributed, personally and with the young servants of the poor, to the renewal of Christian life.

In the social and ecclesial milieu where they lived and worked, they felt responsible for bringing out the service of Christ in the person of the poor, carried out with "*devotion, gentleness and humility,*"<sup>59</sup> as the very essence of their Christian identity.

Alongside Louise, Madame Goussault understood this well when, during one of her visits to the Confraternities of Charity, she observed that in some places, she "*found many devotions, but the Hôtel-Dieu [where the poor are] is not visited at all and is in disorder.*"<sup>60</sup>

While we cannot positively determine that Louise had devotion to Saint Joseph, we can nonetheless find in her the virtues of this saint that devout people strove to imitate: a deep *love for Jesus*, imbued with simplicity, closeness, tender love and joy; perseverant *contemplative prayer* of His mystery; *love for silence, material poverty* and a quiet, simple *love of humble*

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56. Saint Francis de Sales. *Introduction to the Devout Life*, SFS Publications: Bangalore, 1995, p. 3-4

57. *Spiritual Writings*, L. 55, L. 303, L. 148, L. 449, L. 453, L. 480B, M. 69

58. *Spiritual Writings*, L. 651, p. 674

59. *Spiritual Writings*, L. 547, p. 81

60. CCD I, 193, L. 135

*Louise de Marillac and Saint Joseph*

*work in lowly tasks that are despicable in the eyes of the world; prompt and joyful submission and obedience to God's will.*

Following the thinking of Saint Ephrem, Saint Francis de Sales attributed to Saint Joseph, the just man, the image of the palm tree from Psalm 92:13. While its flowers remain hidden in the spring, it grows gradually and bears much fruit until its old age. This symbolizes *humility and the hidden life*, so desired by Louise, who also wanted to remain “hidden in God”: “*I must live in such a way that my purity of intention, in all of my actions, will hide me from the eyes of the world so that I may be seen by God alone and ignored by the world.*”<sup>61</sup>

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61. *Spiritual Writings*, A. 8, p. 718

# Mary, model of humility

“Mary’s secret is humility...

Mary is “the servant of the Lord”  
She says nothing else about herself,  
she seeks nothing else for herself...

Today, then, let us ask ourselves:  
how am I doing with humility?

Do I want to be recognized by others,  
to affirm myself and to be praised,  
or do I think rather about serving?

Do I know how to listen, like Mary,  
or do I want only to speak  
and receive attention?

Do I know how to keep silence, like Mary,  
or am I always chattering?

Do I know how to take a step back,  
defuse quarrels and arguments,  
or do I always want to excel?”

Pope Francis, Angelus,  
August 15, 2021

