

*E*choes of the Company



General Assembly 2021

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**for a new
missionary
momentum**

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Letter of February 2, 2022

Dear Sisters,

“[Jesus’ parents] took Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord” (Lk 2:22).

Today, February 2, I had the joy of presenting Father Tomaž Mavrič our request to renew vows. It is an emotional moment lived out in an awareness of the presence of each one of you and of the responsibility that this represents. I shared with him my strong sense of your desire to serve your brothers and sisters increasingly well. Your many letters describe your missions, encounters with people living on the streets, women in distress, children ravaged by life, elderly people whom solitude and a sense of uselessness make despondent, patients infected with HIV, adolescents seeking adults who can inspire them, whole families of migrants wandering on roads that lead nowhere. You put your creativity at the service of charity; for that reason, with the limitations that can exist in each one of us, you ask to give yourselves anew to the Lord in the Company. You wish to *“give yourselves to God for the service of Christ in persons who are poor”* (cf. C. 16a).

Father Tomaž grants us permission to renew our vows on March 25 and assures us of his support and prayer. I also assured him of ours, particularly during these months of preparation for the General

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*Spiritual
Life*

Letter of February 2, 2022

Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, which will take place this coming June-July.

Today, we celebrate Jesus presented in the Temple in accordance with the law and faith of Israel, that of Mary and Joseph. God was made flesh and came to give His life to all of humanity. The Presentation in the Temple prefigures this. February 2 takes on a special importance for us because, following Christ, we also wish to give our life to God by serving our brothers and sisters. Each year, the Company offers us the extraordinary possibility of renewing the profound commitment of our entire being by the vows of service of those who are poor, chastity, poverty and obedience. This renewal allows us to review events and our inner journey, to continue courageously down the road of service and to revive our joy of the gift of self despite obstacles and sometimes even doubts. The Lord holds our hand on this path, and He alone makes our fidelity possible.

“The one who calls you is faithful, and He will also accomplish it” (1 Thes 5:24).

Each day, the Word of God calls us to confidence. The Lord is indeed present and lovingly supports us when we entrust ourselves to Him. It is in this spirit that we prepare to renew our vows.

We were so aware of His presence during the General Assembly. In thanksgiving and gratitude, you express this in your messages.

Now, treasuring all that we experienced, I am gradually going over the content of the discussions that took place, and I notice a special emphasis on the urgent need to review our life style to make it more consistent with the vow of poverty. This came out particularly during the reflection on the challenge of care for our common home.

Obviously, the situation of the world was very present throughout those weeks. The international picture is characterized by increasing poverty, a deep wound afflicting so many people. Moreover, we are immersed in an atmosphere of almost indecent overconsumption that disgracefully leaves behind those without the bare minimum for survival. In addition, the greater role given personal responsibility, which is in itself good, can nonetheless give way to subjective interpretations devoid of community discernment in the light of the Gospel.

This complex context, which has changed so much, challenges us. It therefore seems important to consider the vow of poverty anew and attempt to specify personal and community points of conversion in order to make sure that our very human contradictions abate and that the power and joy of the Gospel increase in our life.

For all these reasons, I have chosen this year to develop a single vow, poverty, knowing that all the vows are connected.

A participant in the General Assembly spoke up to say that the Constitutions are very clear on this subject, and we simply need to follow them. With a fresh perspective, let us reread Constitution 30 and Statute 16.

Let us begin with the quote from Saint Vincent introducing this Constitution:

“Who would want to be rich after the Son of God willed to be poor! ... Sisters, you chose Him at the time you entered the Company, you gave Him your word; and as He led a life of poverty, you must imitate Him in that respect” (August 20, 1656, Poverty, CCD X, 166 and 169).

“The Son of God willed,” and in the same way, *“we chose”* to lead a life of poverty. It is a decision, or rather a freely-offered response, from the moment of entrance into the Company, to

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choose over and over until the end of our days, year after year. Let us examine ourselves, whatever our age in vocation.

Constitution 30 and Statute 16 provide us with the essential elements. It is up to us to give them concrete form, casting off certain accommodations made with our conscience that can find their way into our daily life over time.

Where am I in my promise to live the vow of poverty, following Christ?

Following Christ

“The Son of God assumed poverty in a spirit of abandonment to the Father and as a sign of His mission in the world” (C. 30a).

The Son, out of love for the Father, in the Spirit, freely became poor, chaste and obedient, and we have committed to continue the mission of Christ in this way. The Trinitarian dimension appears in this first sentence of the Constitution on the vow of poverty. It is the foundation of the vow, of all the vows.

Following the poor Christ who *“has nowhere to rest his head”* (Mt 8:20), we are led by the vow of poverty to give up certain goods and ways of living because we have responded to a call. We are called to open ourselves to another horizon, that of a freedom that implies abandoning a life that is too focused on our own needs and turning increasingly towards others.

“The Daughters of Charity live evangelical poverty after the example of Jesus Christ. He shared the life of all and especially of those who are poor. Throughout His public life, He reached out to people suffering from insecurity, rejection, illness, etc. He felt one of them, went out to meet them, ate with them in their homes, experienced the simple joys of everyday life and maintained fraternal relationships.

He owned nothing of His own, which allowed Him to live completely free from all attachments” (Guide Preparation for vows, pages 77-78).

The vow of poverty is a means to be freer and therefore more available to hear the cry and suffering of those experiencing any form of destitution.

Living the vow of poverty following Christ’s example is rather like creating an opening that makes us closer to our brothers and sisters, more authentic in our relationships and more credible for the proclamation of the Gospel.

Living poverty

“They... commit themselves to total dependence in the use and disposal of the goods of the Company, as well as in the use of their personal goods” (C. 30a).

A total dependence. This is the commitment that we made and renew each year. Of course, the term “dependence” is broad and can have a negative connotation when it implies domination, loss of the freedom to think or infantilism. Here, however, it is very clear. It entails a dependence that we choose *“in the use and disposal of the goods of the Company, as well as in the use of [our] personal goods.”* This is what we promise and that we might do well to revitalize. How should we live this today?

“They are co-responsible for the management and use of these goods, in dependence on their Superiors and according to the spirit of the Company” (C. 30c).

The notions of co-responsibility and dependence are found in the same sentence. We might regard this as contradictory; however, co-responsibility does not dispense from dependence because nothing belongs to us. This means that it is a deliberate and free dependence to exercise simply, without intransigence,

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in trusting dialogue with Sister Servants and Visitatrixes and in community discernment (Cf. Guide *Preparation for vows*, page 80).

Once again, we own nothing of our own, not cars, computers, money, salaries, pensions, services, etc. We have to admit that exercising co-responsibility in dependence and choosing to place all in common do not come easily. This Gospel challenge requires faith, integrity and maturity because it is more than an external attitude. It is an action taken out of conviction. Under these conditions, it can become a prophetic sign in a society that places so much value on ownership and independence.

The consequences for the use of goods are quite practical: taking care to inform and give accounts, making sure that each Sister has what she needs, sharing donations received in community, making the care of goods held in common everyone's business and making the effort personally not to act as the owners of goods (spaces, material, etc.).

We know from experience that not owning things individually creates a real freedom from wealth, which can really imprison us and hinder us from placing our trust in God alone. *“In proportion as a Sister is attached to poverty, the love of God increases in her. Her heart is in God”* (Saint Vincent, August 5, 1657, CCD X, 244).

Perhaps we sometimes need to recover our initial fervor and discern in all lucidity what would be more consistent with the vow of poverty.

We must keep this inner state alive through a less self-centered stance, openness of heart and a joyful generosity.

“Enlarge the space for your tent” (Is 54:2).

“This poverty finds its fullness in poverty of spirit. The poor in spirit are blessed; they possess the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, they accept with serenity contradictions, failures, their own limitations, and those of others” (C. 30a).

Poverty of spirit is a lifelong project, a path of happiness. *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3).*

This Beatitude, which we are called to make our own, invites us to go against the tide of what the world promotes. Society drives us towards profitability, efficiency, possession and accumulation, not just of goods but also of knowledge, “contacts” and “friends” in network settings... Priority goes to possessing!

Poverty of spirit opens another perspective to us, that of considering what we do not have as an opportunity to leave more space for God and for welcoming others in the fullness of who they are. It means not being afraid to have a heart of flesh, in opposition to hardness of heart and proudly thinking ourselves rich with no need for others. It means accepting to receive, to admit our vulnerability and to trust.

Like humility, poverty of spirit is a path that leads progressively to God.

“Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it” (Lk 18:17).

Our everyday life comes with its annoyances, whether in community or in the mission. Minor or major events lay bare our limitations, our weaknesses and those of others. Poverty of spirit allows us to consider them for what they are without dwelling on them so that we can remain at peace.

How can I cultivate this spirit if I indiscriminately encumber myself with everything that is just waiting to overrun me? Not

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only material goods, but also the omnipresence of information, the multiplication of communications, addiction to the telephone, hyperactivity, the excessive desire for recognition, etc.

Emptied of any inordinate preoccupation with self, the freed space becomes a place of listening and attention, which readies the heart for welcoming and opens hands for giving and receiving.

We well understand that poverty of spirit is a journey and is never acquired once and for all. It invites us to “let go,” to trust Him who can do all things and to humbly acknowledge what is given us. Everything comes from Him! Some days, we see this more clearly, and then we are flooded with a simple sense of gratitude.

“Daughters of Charity acknowledge that all that they have comes from God. Happy to have no other treasure than God, they give thanks for this” (C. 30a).

Joy is the reward for poor hearts, a real and lasting joy, a peaceful joy to be shared.

With a Gospel-based life style

“The Sisters choose a modest, simple life style” (C. 30b).

Several times, the members of the General Assembly alluded to consistency between a modest, simple life style and the commitment to living the poverty of the Gospel and of our identity as servants.

Each one of us wishes to have a simple life style, and that is often how local communities attempt to live. However, it is always possible to progress in both simplicity and modesty or sobriety.

Simplicity and sobriety seem to align with the concerns of a portion of our fellow citizens attuned to the future of the planet. It is interesting that the adjective “happy” is sometimes connected with “sobriety.” “A happy sobriety!” Yet another association

of contradictory terms. And yet, let us reread this passage from *Laudato si*:

“Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack” (Laudato si, 222).

Paragraph 223 also deserves to be revisited because Pope Francis insists on the fact that a simple and modest life style is liberating, directs us toward what is essential and gives us true joy, that of intensely living each moment that is offered us.

It would be good to establish concrete points of a simple and modest life style for the Company as a whole, but contexts are so different. Therefore, I put forward some suggestions for reflection that could be common to all Provinces. They could prepare hearts for discussions and lead to Provincial and local community guidelines.

The Assemblies’ theme could be useful for this reflection. Ephata! break through the gate... go towards... encounter.

Open our mind: recall why and for whom we are gathered together.

Open our eyes and ears: become more aware of what poor people around us and elsewhere in the world experience.

Open our understanding: discern different types of needs together: vital needs, secondary needs, needs that are inappropriate given our identity as servants.

Open our heart: decide in community to practice greater solidarity and sharing.

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Open ourselves! A life style on which the vow of poverty leaves its mark makes it easier to come out of our comfort zone in order to go in a more credible way towards our brothers and sisters, in other words, our friends, whom we encounter in the peripheries, neighborhoods, the streets and our houses.

We all dream of a simpler life style, in both material terms and interpersonal relationships. Why is this sometimes so difficult?

What if we dared in community to go towards more fraternity, friendship, conversations without any motives, humor, simplicity, joy... Then, it would become easier to consider the question of “*the spirit and practice of poverty*” together and to review with an attitude of mutual goodwill what could be done better.

“The Sisters often make a personal and community review in which they discern their real needs, their use of goods and of the earth’s resources, their life style, and their duties of justice and charity. This is a means of preserving the spirit and practice of poverty” (S. 16a).

Let us ask the Lord to accompany us on this path of renunciation. May He give us the humility and courage necessary to review our way of living the vow of poverty and of placing in common the goods available to us and to progress towards a simpler life style more consistent with our identity as servants.

Contemplation of Christ, closeness and listening to our brothers and sisters will help us to make progress in this regard.

On this February 2, let us ask Mary to guide us on the path of holiness, the path of service, the path of evangelical poverty. Mary was the first to practice it in simplicity, humility and charity. In this way, she offered her Son who gave His life for us and showed us the road to follow, that of the poor, chaste and obedient Servant.

Let us pray for all those who have not chosen to live poverty, much less destitution. Christ went out to meet them and invites us to do likewise.

I conclude by very warmly thanking and assuring of our prayer Father Tomaž Mavrič, Father Robert Maloney, Father Gregory Gay, Father Javier Alvarez, Father Patrick Griffin and Father Bernard Schoepfer. Let us also hold in prayer Sister Juana Elizondo and Sister Evelyne Franc, always attentive to the joys and sufferings of the Company.

I wish you a happy feast of the Presentation of the Lord and a good preparation for Renovation.

Affectionately and with the assurance of my prayer,

Sister Françoise PETIT
Daughter of Charity

Letter of February 24, 2022

Dear Sisters,

The grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us always!

All of you are rightly worried about the situation in Ukraine and in particular for our Sisters. Although the situation changes from hour to hour, I can already give you some news.

Three Provinces have communities in Ukraine.

The Province of Slovakia has two communities in the west (Svaljava with 3 Sisters, Perecyn with 3 Sisters). For now, the Sisters feel safe. Schools are closed and people continue to go to work. Representatives of the Vincentian Family will have an online meeting this February 25 to see what can be done.

The Province of Krakow has 4 communities (Storozyniec with 3 Sisters, Sniatyn with 4 Sisters, Balta with 3 Sisters and Odessa with 3 Sisters). Sister Anna (the Visitatrix) was there and was supposed to return to Poland this morning, but the flights are cancelled. She is on her way home by car, but, for the moment, she is stuck at the border. The Odessa Sisters have left and are on their way to Sniatyn. The Sisters of Balta have already arrived in Sniatyn. All of them wanted to stay in Ukraine, and they organized relief, in Sniatyn and Storozyniec, with the Priests of the Mission, for the refugees.

The Province of Chelmno-Poznan has 1 community in Smotrycz with 3 Sisters and 1 annex in Mariupol with 2 Sisters.

Sister Malgorzata (the Visitatrix) is in constant contact with the Sisters. The Sisters of Mariupol have been sent to Smotrycz where there is a shelter. The Sisters want to stay and be available for the service of the elderly and the sick.

The three Provinces are counting on everyone's prayers for the country and for the population. We assure them of our affection and our prayers.

I will communicate to you as soon as I have any other news.

Sister Françoise PETIT
Daughter of Charity

Letter of March 2, 2022

Dear Sisters,

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

For a week now, we have all been following the news and praying together for peace in Ukraine and that region of the world.

The Visitatrixes are in regular contact with the Sisters on the ground. Again, I offer you some updates:

Two Sisters from Sniatyn left for Storożyniec to attend to the needs of displaced people and elderly people who are alone. Sirens sound from time to time, and then everyone takes shelter in cellars.

In Smotrycz, the Sisters have taken on the responsibilities of the staff at the House of Mercy and care for the sick day and night. Local residents are united and have demonstrated great solidarity.

Most of the local communities in Poland have answered the call to house refugees in conjunction with the Conference of Major Superiors and Caritas. Local communities in other countries are also preparing to receive refugees.

A Ukrainian Sister who had gone to Poland for a gathering of young Sisters can no longer return to her country, but this means that she remains in Krakow where she participates in welcoming her fellow citizens. She can thus serve as a translator.

Allow me to share with you this text from a great Ukrainian poet, Lessia Oukraïнка (1871-1913), which speaks of the spirit of this people:

*No, through my tears, I keep my smile,
And I sing amid misfortunes,
Beyond all hope, I nonetheless want to hope,
I want to live: away with you, thoughts overwhelming me!
On the steep slope of the mountain,
As one carries the cross, I will carry my stone,
And climbing with the heavy burden,
I will nonetheless sing a song of joy.
Yes, through my tears, I keep my smile,
And I sing amid misfortunes,
Beyond all hope, I nonetheless want to hope,
I want to live: farewell, thoughts that overwhelmed me.*

The Visitatrixes of Poland and Slovakia thank you for your support and prayer that they know you are offering.

This serious crisis must not cause us to forget other countries that continue to suffer instability and violence. Ethiopia remains in a state of uncertainty regarding its relationship with the Tigray region. The Visitatrix, who has remained at the Motherhouse since the end of the General Assembly, returns to her Province on March 9. Let us pray for her and her Province. The situation is complex; it is difficult to say anything more.

Madagascar has experienced devastating weather with two cyclones in quick succession, which swept across the east coast and the south of the country. The Sisters' buildings—those of a school, a hospital and several health clinics—sustained heavy damage with roofs torn off.

In Burkina Faso, the situation of violence is taking hold, and the Sisters again had to leave their local community in haste.

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Let us pray for our Sisters, for these women, men and children and for countless others who are suffering. May we know how to be present, wherever we are, to those who are going through difficult times in their lives. Poverty exists everywhere, in all countries and regions. Let us open our eyes, our hands and our hearts.

I take advantage of this message to wish you a good beginning of Lent, a privileged time of encounter with the Lord. Let us remain in communion with each other and be confident. The Lord accompanies us.

With my sisterly affection,

Sister Françoise PETIT
Daughter of Charity

Letter of March 19, 2022

Dear Sisters,

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

On this day when we celebrate Saint Joseph, I am writing to share some news with you. To my great joy, I can tell you that the General Council is now at full strength. All the General Councillors have arrived. We are taking the time to get to know each other and to learn to serve and live together, among ourselves and with you.

Preparing the Inter-Assemblies Document was our priority. It is currently being translated, and you will receive it in the near future. You will be able to acquaint yourselves with it and integrate it into the life of your Provinces by updating your Provincial and then Local Community Plans.

We also reviewed the delegations assigned to each General Councillor:

- Quasi-Province: Sister Luisa FARRI
- UN: Sister Anna WIWIEK SOEPRAPTIWI and Sister Theresa EKE
- Website: Sister Hanna CYBULA
- Echoes of the Company: Sister Antonia GONZALEZ GRANADO and Sister Luisa FARRI
- Vincentian Family (on the international level):
 - **Vincentian Family Office: Sister Julie KUBASAK**
 - **VMY: Sister Anna WIWIEK SOEPRAPTIWI**
 - **Association of the Miraculous**

Medal: Sister Ana Amélia CUNHA

- **MISEVI: Sister Alicia**

Margarita CORTES CAZARES

- **AIC: Sister Hanna CYBULA**
- **DREAM: Sister Theresa EKE.**

During our last two special Council meetings, we also made two appointments. For the Secretary General: Sister Marie Odile HERBET was re-appointed, which she accepted with the faith and availability that characterize her.

We also appointed the Treasurer General. Sister Isel NEGRELLI, from the Province of Curitiba, currently in the General Secretariat, was appointed to take the place of Sister Teresa SANNO. We owe our gratitude to Sister Teresa, who over these six years has dedicated all her skill and enthusiasm to the service of the good administration of the affairs of the Company and the accompaniment of Provinces in economic matters. Sister Isel will assume this position once a Sister can replace her in the General Secretariat. We thank her for having accepted this mission with great generosity as well.

We continue our study of the propositions that were addressed to the Superioress General with her Council at the conclusion of your Provincial Assemblies. Some Provinces have already received a response to theirs.

I conclude by again giving you some updates on our Sisters in Ukraine, Poland and Slovakia. The Visitatrixes do not hesitate to go to the heart of the action. All the Sisters continue their commitment at the service of refugees, who are arriving in increasingly greater numbers, or with those crossing various borders. The Sisters regularly must take shelter in cellars and experience the same stress that the local population has on a daily basis; they collaborate with volunteers from numerous associations. Local communities in Poland and Slovakia continue to house dozens of refugees who, for the most part,

are just passing through. Let us pray, let us be in communion with the Ukrainian people on this feast of Saint Joseph and, with Pope Francis, let us entrust our brothers and sisters to the Lord's mercy:

Father, you entrusted to Saint Joseph what you held most precious: the child Jesus and His Mother, in order to protect them from the dangers and threats of the wicked.

Grant that we may experience his protection and help. May he, who shared in the sufferings of those who flee from the hatred of the powerful, console and protect all our brothers and sisters driven by war, poverty and necessity to leave their homes and their lands to set out as refugees for safer places.

Help them, through the intercession of Saint Joseph, to find the strength to persevere; give them comfort in sorrows and courage amid their trials.

Grant to those who welcome them some of the tender love of this just and wise father, who loved Jesus as a true son and sustained Mary at every step of the way.

(Pope Francis, Message for the 2020 World Day of Migrants and Refugees)

United with each one of you, I assure you of my prayer and sisterly affection.

Sister Françoise PETIT
Daughter of Charity

Letter of March 25, 2022

Dear Sisters,

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

All throughout the day on this March 25, thousands of Daughters of Charity, following Mary, reaffirm their desire to continue the journey in response to Christ’s call: *“Come, follow me”* (Mk 10:21). Each Sister committed anew to give herself to Him through the vows of service of those who are poor, chastity, poverty and obedience, an occasion to give thanks and to become ever more aware of the strength of a vocation in the joy of the gift.

“You are poor Daughters of Charity who have given yourselves to God for the service of persons who are poor” (C. 7b, Saint Vincent, October 22, 1650, CCD IX, 432). Saint Vincent and Saint Louise have left us a rich heritage of advice and conferences as well as their life witness. Let us allow their thought and example to inspire us. They were totally imbued with the Gospel, and following Christ directed their entire life.

All for Christ, with Christ in trust and humility, with a firm and joyful boldness.

All for Christ, with Christ in trust

“Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled” (Lk 1:45).

Each one of us advances down a path of faith, driven by the desire to serve. Over the course of time, this disposition becomes more and more deeply rooted in trust in God. It is an openness of heart and mind, a process of taking focus off ourselves that calls for leaving room for the surprises that God's plans always have in store for us, something to which we must attend because this is where we welcome God's grace, "*the grace of fidelity*" that we request today.

We have all had the experience of contemplating a child who, fearlessly and with open arms, turns an expectant and trusting face to all those around him or her. Let us be this child who is not afraid to be loved and looked upon.

"I abandon myself to You and throw myself into Your arms, as a child in the arms of her father, always to do Your holy will... I abandon myself to You for everything" (Saint Vincent, June 9, 1658, CCD X, 411).

Today, we make anew an act of trust in the Lord because He alone makes it possible for us to live the vows, with our talents and our weaknesses.

All for Christ, with Christ in humility

"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38).

Doesn't living the vows following Christ mean living them humbly, like Him who is "*meek and humble of heart*" (Mt 11:29)?

Chastity calls us to love like Jesus, without possessing the other person or expecting everything from the other person.

Poverty impels us to give up goods but also to accept ourselves with our vulnerability, our health, our age, our inability to live community life better...

Letter of March 25, 2022

Obedience leads us to not want to be at the center, to let go of our own suggestions in order to subscribe to those of the local community, to accept a mission that we think is beneath or beyond our abilities...

We wish to live the service of those who are poor as a “humble servant.” The General Assembly used the word “*leaven*,” which conveys a simple and fraternal closeness, an unobtrusive humility placed at the service of our brothers and sisters and lived in reciprocity.

The vows cannot be practiced without this humility, in regard to which Pope Francis said during the general audience of December 22, 2021, “*Humility alone opens us up to the experience of truth.*”

Saint Vincent also understood this: “*Truth and humility go well together*” (L. 94 to François du Coudray, December 23, 1631, CCD I, 140).

All for Christ, with Christ, with a firm and joyful boldness

“*Observing the boldness of Peter and John and perceiving them to be uneducated, ordinary men, they were amazed, and they recognized them as the companions of Jesus*” (Acts 4:13).

The apostles’ firm and joyful boldness finds its source in the certainty of knowing that the Lord is at work in them, at all times and in all things. It is in this same state of mind that we promise anew to give ourselves to God in the Company and that we “*vow to serve those who are poor and to live in chastity, poverty, and obedience.*” Otherwise, how could we be so audacious? Saint Louise encouraged the first Sisters along these lines.

“*Go then courageously, advancing moment by moment on the path on which God has placed you in order to reach Him*” (Saint Louise to Sister Cécile Angiboust, February 8, 1653, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 410).

Without a doubt, we all want to open ourselves to God's grace; we all desire to place ourselves ever more fully at the service of our brothers and sisters by the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. Let us support each other and constantly ask the Lord to accompany us on this path of "all for Christ, with Christ," in trust and humility, with a firm and joyful boldness. Today, let us be thankful!

Now, here is some news about the life of the Company, in other words, about our life.

First of all, some good news for the Company and for the Church: Sister Gabriella Borgarino (1880-1949), who was born in Boves, Italy, and died in Luserna San Giovanni, was declared Venerable on January 20, 2022. Her entire life was dedicated to the service of elderly people and sick Sisters. She was an example of simplicity and humble holiness in everyday life. The intensity of her faith was what allowed her to be favored with apparitions of the Sacred Heart.

The Province of Peru, after a three-year missionary experience in the Amazon rainforest, decided to open a local community in Purus among the indigenous population with a view to the four dreams articulated by Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia*: fight for the rights of the poorest people, preserve its cultural riches, maintain its natural beauty and incarnate the Gospel through the presence of Christian communities.

In the Province of Fortaleza, Brazil, after discernment and several site visits, three Sisters have been sent to Vila do Mel (Diocese of Picos), a poor, isolated village. The Sisters' mission is to take part in the support of families and in pastoral services in a region strongly influenced by Evangelical churches.

In addition to the Provinces of Poland and Slovakia, our Sisters in Romania (Province of Graz-Central Europe), Italy, Spain

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and, little by little, other European countries are offering their assistance to Ukrainian refugees. At the Motherhouse, given the significant number of refugees in France and particularly in Paris, the decision was made to house women and children in a part of the building called Babylone. This will be done in partnership with Sant'Egidio, the Red Cross and the Office of the Mayor of the 7th Arrondissement. The Sisters of the Motherhouse are preparing with generosity and dedication. The first families should arrive gradually over the last week of March.

May Mary, especially present on this sacred day of the Renovation, accompany us on our life journey, and may we celebrate together the joy of a renewed gift.

“May it be done to me according to your word.”

May those who this year are going through a more difficult time for one reason or another, be able to count on the prayer of all and on their local community to help them to regain their taste for a life totally given to God.

With my deepest affection and my gratitude for all your testimonies, signs of the vitality of the Company, I assure you of my prayer.

Sister Françoise PETIT
Daughter of Charity

2022 Lenten Letter

Mystics of Charity for the XXI Century and Beyond

To all the members of the Vincentian Family

My dear brothers and sisters,

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

After six years, my term is coming to an end. With this Lenten letter, I would like to summarize the reflections for Advent and Lent of these past six years, starting with my first message to the Vincentian Family for the Feast of Saint Vincent de Paul in 2016. In that letter, I first shared in some detail about the title of “Mystic of Charity” given to our Founder. Through this title, so dear to my heart, I tried to discover for myself and, at the same time, share with you, what I eagerly hoped to understand in greater depth; that is, what it means to become a “Mystic of Charity.”

The searching over these six years does not end here by any means; rather, it is a small beginning and an invitation to continue immersing ourselves in the richness and depth of what it means to become a “Mystic of Charity.” It invites us continually to seek the deepest possible union with Jesus, to become “*like Carthusians in their houses and like apostles outside them*,”¹ “*a contemplative in action and an apostle in prayer*.”²

1. Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, edited by John E. Rybolt, CM, translated by William Quinn, FSC, New York: New City Press, 1993, Book I, Chapter 22, page 124.

2. *Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission*, IV, 42.

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As we read this year's Lenten letter, and go through the shared reflections of the past six years, we are invited to choose one point or area to which we feel Jesus is calling us to return in a more decisive and radical way, where we feel especially in need of His grace and mercy to accomplish His dream for us.

The theologian Karl Rahner, at the end of the 20th century, pronounced these prophetic words: *"The Christians of the 21st century are going to be mystics, or they will not be."* Why can we call Saint Vincent de Paul a "Mystic of Charity"?

We all know Vincent was a man of action, so we may be surprised to hear him also referred to as a mystic. But in fact, it was his mystical experience of the Trinity and in particular the Incarnation that was the font of all his actions in favor of poor people. Giuseppe Toscani, CM, united mysticism and action and came to the heart of the matter in calling him a "Mystic of Charity." Vincent lived in a century of mystics, but he stood out as the Mystic of Charity.

Being a mystic implies experience, the experience of Mystery. For Vincent it meant a deep experience of the Mystery of God's Love. We know that the Mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation were at the heart of his life. The experience of the Trinity's inclusive love of the world and the Incarnate Word's unconditional embrace of every human person shaped, conditioned, and fired his love of the world and everyone in it, in particular, sisters and brothers in need. He looked upon the world with the eyes of Abba and Jesus and embraced everyone with the unconditional love, warmth, and energy of the Holy Spirit.

Vincent's mysticism was the source of his apostolic action. The Mystery of God's love and the Mystery of the Poor were the two poles of Vincent's dynamic love. But Vincent's Way had a third dimension, which was how he regarded time. Time was

the medium through which the Providence of God made itself known to him. He acted according to God's time, not his own. "Do the good that presents itself to be done," he advised. "Do not tread on the heels of Providence."

Another aspect of time for Vincent was the presence of God here and now – "God is here!" God is here in time. God is here in persons, in events, in circumstances, in poor people. God speaks to us now in and through them.

For Vincent, the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of spirituality were both indispensable. He saw love of Christ and love of the poor as inseparable. Again and again, he urged his followers not just to act but also to pray, and not just to pray but also to act. To the objection: "But there are so many things to do, so many house duties, so many ministries in town and country; there's work everywhere; must we, then, leave all that to think only of God?" he responded forcefully:

No, but we have to sanctify those activities by seeking God in them, and do them in order to find Him in them rather than to see that they get done. Our Lord wills that we seek above all His glory, His kingdom, and His justice, and, to do this, we make our primary concern the interior life, faith, trust, love, our spiritual exercises, meditation, shame, humiliations, our work and troubles, in the sight of God our Sovereign Lord... Once we're grounded in seeking God's glory in this way, we can be assured that the rest will follow.³

3. CCD XII, 111-112; conference 198, "Seeking the Kingdom of God," *Common Rules*, Chapter II, Article 2, 21 February 1659. CCD refers to the series, *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; future references to this work will use, as above, the initials, CCD, followed by the volume number, then the page number.

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You might describe Vincent as a “bi-spectacled” mystic. That is to say, he was (seeing) experiencing the same God through two different lenses, both at much the same time. One lens was his own prayer; the other was the person who was poor as well as the world he or she lived in. Each angle of view influenced the other, the one deepening and sharpening the perception of its opposite. Vincent “saw” (and felt) God’s love through both these perspectives at the same time and acted vigorously to respond to what he was seeing.

One of the central mysteries of Saint Vincent de Paul’s spirituality is the **Incarnation**. He left us the following thoughts on the Incarnation:

According to the Bull which established our Congregation, we are bound to honor in a special way the Most Holy Trinity and the Incarnation, mysteries beyond words. We should therefore try to carry this out most faithfully and, if possible, in every way, but especially in these three ways: (1) frequently honoring these mysteries by a prayer of faith and adoration, coming from our inmost heart; (2) dedicating certain prayers and good works each day to their honor and, above all, celebrating their feast days with special dignity, and the greatest possible personal devotion; (3) trying constantly, by our teaching and example, to get other people to know these mysteries and to honor and worship them.⁴

The **Holy Trinity** is another of the central mysteries of Saint Vincent’s spirituality. In the *Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission*, we find the following words: “As witnesses and heralds of the love of God, we ought to show special honor and

4. CCD XIIIa, 454-455; document 117a, *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, (17 May 1658); *Common Rules X*, 2.

*devotion to the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation.*⁵ Jesus helps us to understand the relationship among the three Persons, the inner connectivity among them, and the influence of the Trinity on each individual person as well as on society as a whole. The Holy Trinity is the ideal model of “relationships”!

The third pillar of Saint Vincent’s spirituality is the **Eucharist**.

In writing about the pillars of our spirituality and talking about the Incarnation and the Holy Trinity, Saint Vincent suggests that in the Eucharist you find it all. He writes,

*There can be no better way of paying the best honor possible to these mysteries [the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation] than proper devotion to, and use of, the Blessed Eucharist, sacrament and sacrifice. It includes, as it were, all the other mysteries of faith and, by itself, leads those who receive Communion respectfully or celebrate Mass properly, to holiness and ultimately to everlasting glory. In this way God, Unity and Trinity, and the Incarnate Word, are paid the greatest honor. For these reasons, nothing should be more important to us than showing due honor to this sacrament and sacrifice. We are also to make a great effort to get everyone else to pay it similar honor and reverence. We should try, to the best of our ability, to achieve this by preventing, as far as we can, any lack of reverence in word or act, and by carefully teaching others what to believe about so great a mystery, and how they should honor it.*⁶

This understanding that in the Eucharist you find it all is accompanied by other prophetic and inspirational words,

5. *Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission*, IV, 48.

6. *Common Rules* X, 3; cf. *op. cit.* CCD XIIIa, 455.

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coming from his deepest life experience, “*Love is inventive to infinity.*”⁷ One of the best known of Vincent’s phrases, he used these specific words while talking about the Eucharist, trying to explain what the Eucharist is, what the Eucharist does, what we find in the Eucharist.

Jesus’s imagination found this concrete means to be with us always, to accompany and to remain with us until the end of the world. His Love, inventive to infinity, keeps surprising us today, here and now!

The fourth pillar is the **Blessed Virgin Mary**.

1. *We should also show special devotion to Mary, the Mother of Christ and of the Church. According to the words of St. Vincent, she, more than all other believers, penetrated the meaning and lived out the teaching of the gospel.*
2. *We should express our love for the Immaculate Virgin Mary in many different ways, celebrating her feasts with devotion and praying to her frequently, especially through the rosary. We should make widely known the special message expressed through her maternal care by the Miraculous Medal.*⁸

The principal fount from which Vincent drank as a Mystic of Charity was **daily meditative prayer, daily meditation**.

One of Saint Vincent’s most quoted statements, from a conference given to the members of the Congregation of the Mission, expresses Vincent’s attitude eloquently:

7. CCD XI, 131; conference 102, “Exhortation to a Dying Brother,” 1645.

8. Constitution IV, 49.

*Give me a man of prayer, and he'll be able to do anything: he can say with the holy Apostle, "I can do all things in Him who sustains and comforts me" (Philippians 4:13). The Congregation of the Mission will survive as long as it's faithful to the practice of meditation because meditation is like an impregnable rampart, which will protect the Missioners against all sorts of attacks.*⁹

Vincent was speaking of daily meditative prayer, daily meditation. He assured his followers,

*Let's all of us really devote ourselves to the practice of meditation, since through it all good things come to us. If we persevere in our vocation, it's thanks to meditation; if we succeed in our works, it's thanks to meditation; if we don't fall into sin, it's thanks to meditation; if we remain in charity, if we're saved, all that is thanks to God and to meditation. Just as God refuses nothing in meditation, so he grants almost nothing without meditation.*¹⁰

Spiritual Direction

Saint Vincent often spoke of the need for spiritual direction. *"Spiritual direction is very useful. It is an occasion for advice in difficulties, encouragement in weariness, refuge in temptation, and strength in dejection; in a word, it is a source of well-being and consolation, if the director is truly charitable, prudent, and experienced."*¹¹

The goal of speaking with a spiritual guide, expressed clearly since the time of the desert fathers and mothers, is simple: purity of heart. Knowing that, Vincent recommended spiritual

9. CCD XI, 76; conference 67, "Meditation."

10. CCD XI, 361; conference 168, "Repetition of Prayer," 10 August 1657.

11. CCD III, 603; letter 1192 to Sister Jeanne Lepeintre, 23 February 1650.

direction at least several times a year,¹² especially during times of retreat or a liturgical season like Lent.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

Saint Vincent saw mercy as the core of the Good News. He described it as “... that beautiful virtue of which it is said, ‘Mercy is the distinctive feature of God.’”¹³ The *Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission* encourage us to take part in the sacrament of Reconciliation frequently “so that we might achieve continuing conversion and authenticity of vocation.”¹⁴

Faith Sharing

These *Constitutions* recommend it,¹⁵ urging us, in a prayerful context, “to share with one another, in fraternal dialogue, our spiritual and apostolic experience.” The form for doing this is up to us, to the community to which we belong. Vincent liked sharing to be frank and concrete. He stated:

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

12. Cf. *Common Rules* X, 11.

13. *CCD* XI, 328; conference 175, “Repetition of Prayer,” 2-3 November 1656.

14. Constitution 45, § 2.

15. Constitution 46.

*of time, people might know that he had been a persecutor.*¹⁶

Another foundation of Vincentian spirituality is **Providence**.

Saint Vincent, trusting totally in Providence, became himself Providence for others, for the poor. “... *let us leave it to the guidance of the wise Providence of God. I have a special devotion to following it, and experience has shown me that it has accomplished everything in the Company, and that our acts of foresightedness hinder it.*”¹⁷

What made Saint Vincent a Mystic of Charity is the fact that **prayer** was at the center of his life.

Prayer takes on a transforming power. Prayer is a state of being, a continuous relationship with Jesus. I am talking, listening, and sharing with Someone who is the “Love” of my life and whom I long to resemble.

*Take my word for it, my dear confreres, take my word for it, it's an infallible maxim of Jesus Christ, which I've often proclaimed to you on His behalf, that, as soon as a heart is empty of self, God fills it. God remains and acts in it; and it's the desire for shame that empties us of ourselves; that's humility, holy humility. Then it won't be ourselves acting but God acting in us, and all will go well.*¹⁸

The Sick and the Elderly: Saint Vincent spoke about the role of the sick on several occasions:

16. CCD XI, 44; conference 36, “Humility.”

17. CCD II, 462; letter 678 to Bernard Codoing.

18. CCD XI, 281; conference 141, “The Ecclesiastical State” [September 1655].

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But for the Company—the poor Company—nothing special should be permitted either in food or clothing! I make exception, as always, for the sick. Oh, the poor patients! For them, even the chalices of the Church should be sold. God has given me tender feelings in that regard, and I ask Him to give this spirit to the Company.¹⁹

Wherever we visit a sick person, inside or outside the house, we should look on this person as Christ rather than as just a human being, since Christ said that He regarded any service done to such a person as being done to Himself.²⁰

Vincent de Paul, in becoming a “Mystic of Charity,” came to understand and live the relationship with the sick and elderly as it was presented by Jesus.

At the beginning of this letter, I wrote that the searching for what it means to be a Mystic of Charity does not end here by any means; let us continue to immerse ourselves in the richness and depth of its meaning.

So as not to lose hope on this pilgrimage, we recall that it is Jesus who called us to follow Him on the path of our vocation. He remains always with us, as does Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, Saint Vincent de Paul and all the other Saints, Blessed, and Servants of God of the Vincentian Family. May they keep interceding for us.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Father Tomaž MAVRIČ, CM
Superior General

19. CCD XII, 334; conference 220, “Poverty,” [5 December 1659].

20. *Common Rules*, VI, 2.

Retreat day in preparation for Renovation 2022
Follow Jesus!

“While the crowd was pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God, He was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret. He saw two boats there alongside the lake; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, He asked him to put out a short distance from the shore. Then He sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. After He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, ‘**Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch.**’ Simon said in reply, ‘Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets.’ When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their nets were tearing. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come to help them. They came and filled both boats so that they were in danger of sinking. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said, ‘Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.’ For astonishment at the catch of fish they had made seized him and all those with him, and likewise James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners of Simon. Jesus said to Simon, ‘**Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.**’ When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Him.”¹

1. Luke 5:1-11

Follow Jesus!

Light for my feet, light in whom I believe, Jesus, Son of God!

I want to follow you, Jesus the Servant.
I want to follow you despite my lack of faith.
I want to follow you in your night of agony.
I want to follow you to the foot of Golgotha.²

Introduction³

Wherever we are in our faith, we express our desire to follow Jesus. On our faith journey, we experience God's love for us, and we want to respond with our own love, but we are often helpless about how to progress or how to go further.

Jesus Himself actually gives indications for following Him. Consider how He calls His first disciples in this passage from Luke's Gospel. Whether we want to grow in faith, to give our life to Jesus or to respond to a specific vocation, four useful attitudes come out in this Gospel passage. These four attitudes are four acceptances, four means for placing our will and freedom at the service of Jesus, all out of love for Him.

I. ATTITUDES FOR FOLLOWING JESUS

The first attitude is accepting Jesus' teaching.

Jesus is on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and the crowd, eager to hear His teaching, is pressing in on Him. We do not know what He actually says. However, Jesus touches hearts and feeds souls, and many come to spend time listening to Him. The crowd is so large that Jesus asks one of the crews of fishermen to take Him out a short distance from the shore so that He can speak to everyone more easily. Jesus takes advantage of the well-known

2. Cf. Jo Akepsimas, *Lumière sur mes pas* (H 26-36)

3. From a reflection by Father François Labadens, Priest of the Emmanuel Community

fact that the water amplifies sound so that as many as possible can hear His voice.

While the fishermen had only half-listened as they washed their nets, Simon and his companions are now with Him in the boat and have nothing else to do than listen to His teaching.

The same thing happens in our life: it is Jesus who decides when He will teach us something. Just as Simon and the other fishermen did not really chose, neither do we have control over the way that God will speak to us. God is the master, and He chooses the means that He wants. He may speak to us through an intuition that forms in our minds, through words from the Bible that we receive, through something said by a friend, etc. Our primary mission is accepting to receive Jesus' teaching.

We should humbly accept to discover something new. Then, what differentiates between hearing and accepting a teaching is the attitude of our heart. In order to accept Jesus' teaching, we need to be open to what is new, to what is unknown to us. This implies an openness to being surprised, made uncomfortable and even destabilized.

After love for Jesus, humility is the fundamental virtue that allows for welcoming what He wants to tell us. Let us humbly accept the newness of His Word that will change things in our life, make us discover something new, perhaps even cause us to change our opinion.

The second attitude is accepting to act *with* Jesus and not *for* Jesus.

What do the fishermen in the boat do after hearing Jesus speak? They do not show off to prove to Him that they are the best fishermen in the region. They simply do what He asks them despite their surprise at His request.

Acting *for* Jesus leads to exhaustion. Each one of us should ask this fundamental question: **Do I do what I do *with* Jesus or *for***

Follow Jesus!

Jesus? Unfortunately, we can do many things for Jesus without ever asking His opinion. As a result, we spread ourselves thin, we wear ourselves out and we keep our commitments out of sheer determination, forgetting that anything done without charity is useless.

To follow Jesus, we need to act with Him and not just for Him. Do we take the time to discern if Jesus is really asking us to make all the commitments that we make, often generously? Desiring to follow Jesus also means accepting out of love to give up certain things in order to concentrate on what Jesus asks of us.

Don't worry, Jesus is realistic, and He gives us the means to do what He asks of us. Here is an interesting yardstick: in a day, God gives me the time necessary to do all that He asks of me. Therefore, if I do not have the time to do everything, that means that I have taken on excess tasks. Let us put our minds at ease here as well: God also wants us to rest and to have amicable social relationships. He is not a merciless taskmaster but a gentle, close friend. Let us not hesitate, therefore, to ask Him to watch over all our activities and to live every instant with Him.

The third attitude for following Jesus is accepting to obey.

There's a word that isn't fashionable! Obey? Nonetheless, if we want to follow Jesus, that is, if we agree to be guided, we then accept to be taken to unknown places. As a result, it is to be expected that some "**whys**" remain temporarily unanswered.

In this passage from Luke's Gospel, Jesus asks Simon to do something ridiculous. Simon is a professional fisherman; it has long been his career. He has caught nothing all night, and now this stranger, who doesn't look like a fisherman at all but has a build more like that of a carpenter, asks him to cast his nets! Simon reacts by expressing his lack of understanding, but he accepts to obey: "**At your command I will lower the nets.**"

Why does he obey? It is because he has had the time in the boat to listen to Jesus' words, and he understands that there is

something extraordinary in them. Simon's obedience comes from the fact that he has spent time listening to Jesus, which brings us back to the first attitude of accepting Jesus' teaching.

Obedience in our everyday life is not an abdication of our intelligence but a favorable welcome of something that comes from beyond us. Jesus speaks to us through our conscience, our intelligence, our brothers and sisters, the least among us, etc. Obedience bears fruit.

As with Simon, it is in obeying that we understand why Jesus asks something of us. Peter finds himself with another type of problem: there are too many fish in his nets! Obedience leads him to an abundance that he has never known. This is what Jesus offers us: if we accept to follow Him, we will do things we could not even imagine. By accepting to go beyond our comfortable limits, we allow God to act powerfully in us.

Obedience is connected to faith. In this obedience, which is not the obedience of a slave but our free and voluntary act of love, we build up our faith. Faith is precisely this obedience, without any completely tangible proof, to a call from God. Cardinal Newman said, "*Faith looks off from self to Christ and, instead of seeking impatiently for some personal assurance, is set by obedience, saying, 'Here am I, send me.'*"

The fourth attitude is accepting who I am in order to allow God to transform me.

After the episode of the miraculous catch of fish, Jesus calls Simon, James and John to follow Him. He does this in a particular way, saying, "**From now on you will be catching men.**" The first apostles then decide to leave their nets, boats and family. Their life changes radically, but at the same time, they remain the same, fishermen. The difference is that they will no longer fish for the same thing: in the place of fish, it will be men.

Follow Jesus!

This is a fundamental lesson when we wish to follow Jesus. Jesus does not transform us into someone different. In the Gospel, Jesus takes Simon's trade to give him his new mission: this is a way of respecting his identity with great sensitivity while radically changing his life.

Jesus respects us too much to transform us into someone else. Each one of us is “**precious in [His] eyes**” (Is 43:4). God has created us and has a unique plan for each one of us. Jesus does not desire in the least that we be different. Therefore, our life can change radically as a result of Jesus' call, but the grace of God does not change who we are. On the contrary, it makes us become ever more fully ourselves.

Following Jesus does not eliminate us but instead reveals us more and more to ourselves and to the world. Our qualities, talents, desires, everything that makes us who we are, all of this is thus called to grow through cooperation with Jesus. Ultimately, in responding to Jesus' call to follow Him, we accept His help to grow interiorly, to make all that He has already sown in our heart grow and bloom.

Light for my feet, light in whom I believe, Jesus, Son of God!

Lord, help me to imitate your way of living and acting:
you said that you had come upon earth to serve, not to be
served.

Teach me to show great gentleness toward all,
to imitate your goodness in welcoming them.

Like you, I want to love tenderly,
to be very respectful to all those I meet,
to be affable and gentle to those in the greatest need.

Lord, teach me to maintain always
great esteem for my neighbor.

Your life on earth,
your death and resurrection
bear witness to your love for all.⁴

4. Sister Elisabeth Charpy, *At Prayer with Louise de Marillac*, p. 15

II. FOLLOWING JESUS IS A CHOICE MADE DAILY⁵

“The liturgy on February 2, World Day for Consecrated Life, shows Jesus who goes out to meet His people. It is the feast of encounter: the newness of the Child encounters the tradition of the temple; the promise finds fulfillment; young Mary and Joseph encounter the elderly Simeon and Anna. Everything, therefore, meets as Jesus arrives.

What does this mean for us? Above all, that we too are called to welcome Jesus who comes to meet us. To follow Jesus is not a decision made once and for all; it is a choice made daily. We do not meet the Lord virtually, but directly; we encounter Him in our lives, in the concreteness of life. Otherwise, Jesus becomes only a nice memory of the past.

When we welcome Him as the Lord of life, however, as the center and the beating heart of everything, then He is alive and lives anew in us. What happened in the temple also happens to us: around Him, everything meets, and life becomes harmonious. With Jesus, our courage to carry on and our strength to remain firm are restored.

The encounter with the Lord is the source. It is thus important to return to the source: to retrace in our mind the decisive moments of encounter with Him, to renew our first love, perhaps writing down our love story with the Lord. This would be good for our consecrated life so that it does not become a time that passes by, but rather a time of encounter.

If we call to mind our original meeting with the Lord, we become aware that it did not arise as something private between us and God. No, it blossomed in the context of a believing people, alongside many brothers and sisters, at precise times and places. The Gospel tells us this, showing how the encounter takes place within the people of God, in its concrete history, in its living

5. Pope Francis, homily, Saturday, February 2, 2019

Follow Jesus!

traditions: in the temple, according to the law, in the context of prophecy, in young and old together.

It is like this in the consecrated life too: it blossoms and flourishes in the Church; if it isolates itself, it withers. It matures when the young and elderly walk together, when the young rediscover their roots and the elderly welcome those fruits. When we walk alone, however, when we remain fixated on the past or jump ahead in trying to survive, then the consecrated life stagnates.

The Gospel also tells us that God's encounter with His people has both a starting point and a destination point. It begins with the call to the temple and arrives at the vision in the temple. It is a call that is twofold. There is a first call "**according to the law.**" It is the call of Joseph and Mary, who go to the temple to fulfil what the law prescribes. The text emphasizes this almost as a refrain, four times. This is not something forced: Jesus' parents are not constrained to go, nor do they go merely to perform an external duty. They go in response to God's call.

Then, there is a second call, according to the Spirit. It is the call of Simeon and Anna. This too is strongly emphasized, three times. In the case of Simeon, it refers to the Holy Spirit, and it concludes with Anna the prophetess, who was inspired to give thanks to God. Two young people run to the temple, called by the law; two elderly people, moved by the Spirit.

What does this twofold call, by the law and by the Spirit, mean for our spiritual life and our consecrated life? It means that we are all called to a twofold obedience: to the law – in the sense of what gives order to our lives – and to the Spirit, who does new things in our lives. This gives rise to the encounter with the Lord: the Spirit reveals the Lord, but to welcome Him, we need to persevere every day. Even the greatest charisms cannot bear fruit without an ordered life. On the other hand, even the best rules are not sufficient without the freshness of the Spirit: the law and the Spirit go together.

The encounter that is born of the call culminates in vision. Simeon says, **“My eyes have seen your salvation.”** He sees the Child, and he sees salvation. He does not see the Messiah who works miracles, but a small child. He does not see something extraordinary, but Jesus with His parents, who bring a pair of turtledoves or two pigeons to the temple, the humblest offering. Simeon sees God’s simplicity and welcomes His presence. He is not looking for anything else, is not asking for or wanting something more; it is enough to see the Child and take Him in his arms: **“Now, you may let me go in peace.”** God, as He is, is enough for him. In God, he finds the ultimate meaning of his life.

This is the vision of consecrated life, a vision that is simple and prophetic in its simplicity, where we keep the Lord before our eyes and hold Him in our arms, and everything else is worthless. He is our life; He is our hope; He is our future. Consecrated life consists in this prophetic vision in the Church: it is a gaze that sees God present in the world even if many do not notice Him; it is a voice that says, **“God is enough, the rest passes away”**; it is praise that gushes forth in spite of everything, as the prophetess Anna shows. She is a woman of advanced age, who has lived for many years as a widow, but she is not gloomy, nostalgic or withdrawn into herself; on the contrary, she arises, she praises God and speaks only of Him.

This, then, is the consecrated life: praise that gives joy to God’s people, prophetic vision that reveals what counts. When it is like this, then it flowers and becomes a summons for all of us to counter mediocrity: to counter a devaluation of our spiritual life, to counter the temptation to reduce God’s importance, to counter an accommodation to a comfortable and worldly life, to counter complaints, dissatisfaction and self-pity, to counter a mentality of resignation and **“we have always done it this way”**: this is not God’s way.

Consecrated life is not about survival, but new life! It is a living encounter with the Lord in His people. It is a call to the faithful

Follow Jesus!

obedience of daily life and to the unexpected surprises from the Spirit. It is a vision of what we need to embrace in order to experience joy: **Jesus.**”

To conclude: I would like to quote these encouraging words from Benedict XVI: *“If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and He gives you everything. When we give ourselves to Him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life.”*⁶

Light for my feet, light in whom I believe, Jesus, Son of God!

O Lord, responding to your call which invites me to follow
Christ
and to be a witness to His charity to persons who are poor,
I renew my baptismal promises and give myself to you
in the Company of the Daughters of Charity.⁷

Grant me, O Lord, the grace of fidelity,
through your Son Jesus Christ crucified,
and through the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin.⁸

Father Bernard SCHOEPFER, CM
Director General

6. Benedict XVI, homily, Sunday, April 24, 2005

7. 2nd vow formula

8. 1st vow formula

2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Province of Indonesia

Children's right to a better future

Indonesia, the world's largest archipelago, is a country marked by great diversity. With 300 million inhabitants, it is the fourth most populous nation in the world, with a large Muslim majority at 87%, Catholics at 3% and other Christian groups at 10%.

*General
Assembly
2021*

The country has had a difficult history, characterized by colonization, military rule, dictatorship and civilian strife. Towards the late 1960s, the country achieved national stability and economic development, but this did not include political freedom and human rights. In 1998, Indonesia began its transition to democracy, ushering in political, economic and social reforms, but challenges continue to persist in Indonesia, including fundamental religious groups advocating for extreme imposition of Sharia law (Islamic law), which perpetuates discrimination against women.

Violence against women is systemic because it occurs in a never-ending circle. The government has been neglecting the marginalization and repression of women. Adolescent girls are more likely than boys to be subjected to harmful traditional practices such as child marriage (14-16 years old) and female genital mutilation (FGM). Indonesia has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. One out of every nine girls is married before the age of 18,

Children's right to a better future

and girls from the poorest households are five times more likely to be married as children than their wealthier counterparts. The rate of FGM is 52 percent. The island of Borneo (Kalimantan) in the north has a large population, and people living in the remote areas of Borneo are very vulnerable to human trafficking. Young girls are majority of the victims and are often “sold” overseas.

I was sent on mission to Batucilin in South Kalimantan after six years in the Fiji Islands. We are a small local community of three Sisters. On February 6, 2016, a Sunday, I opened the door to frantic knocking from a mother with her three children. She looked very tired, very shabby and very frightened. I was alone in the house since the other two Sisters were at another mission station for the Eucharist with the villagers.

The story of Clara and her children

They were hungry, thirsty and had not slept for three days. The mother, Clara, is a widow with three children, Andreas (6), Yuni (12) and Tere (15). While eating, they recounted their story: they ran away from their house in North Kalimantan and crossed the border to South Kalimantan. They travelled on foot through the jungle for two weeks. They lacked food and literally starved. When they finally arrived in South Kalimantan, they asked people whether there was a Catholic church, and someone showed them where we lived. Our house was located right behind the church building.

Why did they run away from their home? They were all about to be taken and sold to Taiwan by their uncle (their father's brother). Since their father passed away, they had lived with their uncle's family. Due to poverty, the uncle wanted to sell this poor family with beautiful children. A person was worth more than 36 million Indonesian rupiah (equivalent to only \$2,500). The transaction was already done, but a day before they were taken away to be sold, they fled through the jungle so that their uncle could not chase them.

They stayed with us for two weeks in a simple house in the back garden where the gardeners sleep while we processed their departure to Java Island where the majority of our houses are. It was not safe for them to remain in the Kalimantan. The process was not easy at all because they did not carry documents such as ID cards and birth certificates. Their uncle had confiscated all their documents, and since he had already received money from the buyer, he was able to send people to look for them. This was a very dangerous situation that we faced and made human trafficking very real indeed. Their transfer to Java was made possible with the help of several groups, including the government. We finally got plane tickets despite their lack of documents. During the trip, they wore Muslim clothes with a hijab, a veil covering the face, so that people would not recognize them because their uncle also had the borders, ports and airports watched.

Rebuilding a New Life

Finally, they arrived safely in Surabaya, Java Island. They stayed in our dormitory behind the Provincial House in Kediri. With the help of government agencies in charge of combatting human trafficking, they received new documents that enabled them to continue their studies. The mother Clara presently works with us. The eldest daughter, Tere, is now studying at Catholic University. A brilliant student, she is studying digital business. Tere's sister Yuni is now ready to enroll in the university, and their younger brother Andreas is in junior high school.

Tere's Testimony

“In 2016, my mother, my two younger siblings and I were forced to leave our hometown in North Borneo due to the often-experienced threat of human trafficking in our village. Many of the children in our village have also experienced similar misfortunes. However, I consider myself lucky because I was able to escape and meet the Daughters of Charity. The Sisters brought us to Kediri and offered us shelter and education up to this very day.

Children's right to a better future

I have reached university-level education. I could not imagine what our life would have been if the Sisters did not take us in that day we knocked at their door. If they did not shelter and protect us, I would have been forced to marry at 15 or been sold to other countries. God saved me and my family through their kind hands.

I sincerely pray for all the girls out there who find themselves in the same situation and experience similar misfortune. May they be able to change their lives, improve their potential and prove that young women like us from a rural village can reach our dreams.” This is a response to the problem of child marriage.

Some concrete responses by the Province:

Since that experience, our Sisters in Borneo and West Papua have been working hard to promote awareness and counseling for poor families in order to prevent child marriage and fight against human trafficking. The children have the right to make their dreams come true. One of our efforts to avoid child marriage is to build dormitories for children in remote places on the island, provide them with school opportunities and educate them well. A dormitory is occupied by 200 girl students in North Borneo, cared for by the Daughters of Charity. We also have another dormitory occupied by 150 boys. This dorm is run by priests of the Congregation of the Mission. The boys who live in this dorm are Dayak, the indigenous people of Kalimantan. They consist of elementary to junior high school students. To continue to senior high school education, the boys and girls transfer and live in designated dormitories in our school in Java. Later on, we will establish a girls' dormitory for those continuing their education to the university level. These are small efforts to protect the girls from child marriage and human trafficking in the island of Kalimantan.

Sister Anna Wiwiek SOEPRAPTIWI
Daughter of Charity

2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Province of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton
At the service of migrants

The Somali-British poet Warsan Shire says it best in her poem entitled “Home.” *“No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.”* The plight of migrants impels them to seek a better life, security, shelter, safety, health, food, employment, opportunities to grow and reunification with family members, relatives or friends in the United States. It is worth risking their life and that of their children rather than face starvation, incarceration, injury or being killed in their country of origin.

The image of the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt comes to mind. Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus fled from Bethlehem as their lives were in danger. They had no choice but to escape rather than to stay and risk being found. These are the same choices the migrants take. They chose LIFE. The two women from Central America who witnessed their husbands’ death in front of their eyes chose to live, escape and risk their health and safety.

Ephata! Be opened... break through the gate... encounter! The four Seminary Sisters and I had the privilege of volunteering for two weeks at the U.S.-Mexico border in Laredo, Texas. We assisted migrants, refugees and asylum seekers so they could be on their way to their cities of destination in the United States. With the constant influx of migration of Central and South Americans as well as Haitians and Africans entering through Mexico, volunteers are desperately needed in border cities.

At the service of migrants

On our first day at La Frontera shelter, we had time for a brief welcome and orientation by Bishop Jaime Tamayo of Laredo, Mrs. Becky Solloa, the Executive Director of Catholic Charities, and her staff. To maintain the health and safety of all transients, staff and volunteers, the shelter receives only COVID negative or vaccinated persons from state and federal customs and border processing/holding facilities.

Two weeks prior to our arrival, the Bishop explained, the socio-political situation in his border town changed. Apparently, the Mayor of Laredo received complaints from his constituents blaming the migrants for the increase in COVID infections in the city. According to Mrs. Solloa, the accusation is false and without merit since both the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the US Customs and Border Security have the ability to provide COVID testing and vaccinations through their on-site medical personnel. The exception to this is the Customs and Border Patrol. The Bishop and Mrs. Solloa believe that the mayor, without any discernment or perhaps appropriate health and human services advice, decided to intervene recklessly. He instructed the Customs and Border Patrol to transport persons caught crossing the valley or river (not tested for Covid nor vaccinated) to other cities in Texas.

There were plenty of opportunities to assist in the shelter. One could do any of the following tasks: intake (getting information from travel documents), phone individual or family sponsors, arrange transportation, cook, clean the rooms/hallways/common spaces, change sheets, do laundry, sanitize rooms, prepare or serve meals, pack up travel bags, receive, sort and organize donations, assist in the “ropa room” (clothing and supplies), give out hygiene products, direct people in the facility, wash baby bottles, give medicine for children and adults as prescribed by the volunteer physicians, etc.

Pope Francis continues to draw our attention to the suffering of the migrants and refugees in detention camps, to the abuses and

violence that victimize them, along with their journey of hope, rescue operations and push backs. He challenges us to “*a call to conversion from the prophet Hosea, to turn our eyes and seek the face of God motivated by the desire for a personal encounter with the Lord with his immense love and redeeming power*” (Homily, July 8, 2020).

At La Frontera shelter, we saw the faces of God’s beloved poor – men, women, mothers, fathers, infants, children and young adults. They each had their own stories to tell. We heard the horrors of their suffering in the detention facilities. I was able to tour the Customs and Border Patrol holding facilities. The cells were divided in categories: men, women, men with children and women with children. All were held in air-conditioned cells with bare floors and glass windows. Each person was given a mylar blanket because Laredo’s temperature outside is from 90 to 100 Fahrenheit, and inside it is called the “freezer.”

Seeing how undignified and inhumanely they were treated, I couldn’t stop my tears. It was like animals being monitored inside the zoo or in big wire cages. I found myself murmuring “*They are not animals; they are not criminals; they are human beings.*” The migrants, the guards, the officers, the office personnel, all were created in the image and likeness of God. Each one has the right to equal dignity and respect. I didn’t blame the border patrol officers for this arrangement. It’s their duty to make sure the borders are safe and secure. This inhumane treatment confirms without a doubt that we have a broken immigration policy and system in the country.

I remember putting my hands in praying position as we walked pass the glass windows of the holding cells. With tears rolling down my face, I prayed to our Blessed Mother for their continued protection, begging her to help them get to their destination safe and well.

At the service of migrants

Our Laredo border experience was filled with “Ephata” moments. The faces and images of the children, men, women, transgender, young women and young men will be etched in my mind forever. I’ve witnessed their strength, determination, tenacity, endurance, grit, patience and commitment. I blessed them on their journey, and they blessed me by witnessing that their sufferings were not in vain. They reminded me of the story of Elizabeth and Mary who rushed to each other’s side in their times of pregnancy. Like the two women with their children whose husbands were murdered in front of them, they represent unyielding faith and unwavering hope.

They crossed the border safely and made it alive. They made it to their promised land. It is so true what Saint Vincent tells us: the poor teach us and evangelize us. The children who passed through the shelter taught me to be joyful even when circumstances are dire, unknown, bleak and despairing.

The women and men taught me to hold on to faith, hope, and love even when things seem to be crumbling to pieces and all around there is nothing but suffering. I hope and pray that these “Ephata” moments will serve as the graces and blessings I need to continue to be open. May these moments break down the barriers of my daily conversions in order to encounter God as I continue my ministry as a Seminary Directress.

Sister Marie Rachele CRUZ
Daughter of Charity

TESTIMONIES - CHALLENGE OF PASSING ON THE FAITH TO YOUNG PEOPLE

2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Province of España Sur

Educating, an act of love

“To educate is an act of love, is to give life. And love is demanding, it calls for the best resources, for a reawakening of the passion to begin this path patiently with young people”
(Address of Pope Francis to participants in the plenary session of the Congregation for Catholic Education, February 13, 2014).

Since I became a Daughter of Charity, I have served in the field of education and youth ministry. At present, as Provincial Councillor in the Province of España Sur, I support our education ministries, ensuring that their mission is none other than spreading the Good News among their students.

Educating in values and passing on the faith at this moment in history is not easy. As we educate young people in the human values that underpin Christianity and in Vincentian values, so important for us, we face several difficulties:

- The breakdown of the family means that children and young people grow up without emotional ties and consequently lack the ability to form healthy relationships with their peers and with the adults in their educational settings.
- Our society lacks a well-defined scale of values which would allow them to establish clear criteria and make decisions in their daily lives and for the short-term future.

Educating, an act of love

- A digital environment and widespread use of technology cause violence, manipulation, isolation and loneliness in many people.
- Our methodologies are inadequate to meet these challenges as true educators, and not just as teachers.

Nonetheless, we have been called to “break through the gate” and overcome the obstacles that lull us into inertia, to “go towards” new structures and to “encounter” the children, adolescents and young people of our time.

“And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man” (Lk 2:52).

We are convinced that values are integrated progressively in a young person’s life and that faith is a gift and a grace that grows in the measure that an individual develops as a human being in all dimensions. Therefore, we are always looking for ways to impart values to the children and young people whom the Lord has placed in our care so that they might be happy, free and involved in the society in which they live in a way that is consistent with Gospel values.

Consequently, beginning in the 2015-2016 academic year, after a careful study of our plan for evangelization, we decided to offer the **Young Vincentian** Program to all our students. This is a formative process adapted to the pace, circumstances and personality of each student. It is developed in three phases: **SOWING** (5th, 6th and 7th grades); **TRAINING** (8th and 9th grades) and **BUILDING** (10th, 11th and 12th grades and vocational training). This formation takes place mainly through individual mentoring sessions and inter-scholastic or regional gatherings among the schools of the Province.

Part of the program’s toolkit is the bonding of each student with others throughout our Province, which creates a sense of identity

and unity. The mission of the mentors is integral to the project, and all teachers have a part to play, so they are offered formation in how to accompany and mentor the young people.

The objective of this program is to allow all students to design their own plan for personal growth and growth in Vincentian values; this culminates with each one drawing up a personal life plan.

The program is offered to all students without exception to help them to grow in all dimensions of personhood through the discovery, recognition and development of all their talents. To achieve this, we use the **Portfolio of the Young Vincentian**.

They are offered meaningful experiences and gatherings:

- “**Vincentian Open World**” in **5th and 6th grades**, around the feast of Saint Vincent, is when they are first invited to participate in **VMY groups**.
- The “**Young Vincentian**” **Gathering for 7th graders** is held around the feast of Saint Louise. This is their opportunity to begin drawing up their growth plan and to share with peers from other schools.
- Presentation of the chart of values and the young Vincentian song.
- Individual mentoring in values using a **comic book** that presents scenarios in which they are challenged to make decisions.
- The students complete their **Young Vincentian Growth Plan (Portfolio)**, and during **8th and 9th grades**, their mentors or teachers provide **accompaniment** as they do self-evaluation so that they become the ones to promote their own growth.

Educating, an act of love

- Opportunities for service and “**Double V**” **Gatherings** (Vincentians with a Vocation) in 10th to 12th grades.

Our dream is that our students leave our schools well-equipped for life such that they, too, can say that they have grown in “wisdom,” “age” and “favor.” Additionally, we dream that some of them, in their life plans, will consider the possibility of giving themselves to the Lord to “follow Him more closely” as Daughters of Charity, Priests of the Mission or members of the vast Vincentian family that we all form.

Sister Carmen MACHADO
Daughter of Charity

TESTIMONIES - CHALLENGE OF PASSING ON THE FAITH TO YOUNG PEOPLE

2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Province of Mexico

At the service of young people in Belize

Young people's reality in Belize

Belize is a small, poor country with a youthful population, many of them foreigners coming from other Central American countries. The reality of migration means that people of different cultures and languages live together in Belize.

The country offers limited opportunities for young people: there are few universities, limited career opportunities and a high cost of living. As a result, most youth decide to work on farms or in jobs for which they have no preparation, such as construction, cleaning and maintenance... As in many other places in the world, drugs pose a danger for them. Criminal groups try to recruit them, and members of gangs are also migrating into the country.

These young people come from broken families where there is physical, verbal and sexual violence. They have been on their own for some time or in the care of acquaintances, which puts them at risk. They are in the grip of technology, prey to individualism, loneliness and isolation, drawn to video games and pornography as they seek to fill the void they feel.

The mission in Belize is still new, only seven years old; it is located in Dangriga in the Stann Creek District of southern Belize. We belong to Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish where we

At the service of young people in Belize

share the mission with the Redemptorist priests who arrived when we did. The area had no pastoral services at the time, so we looked for an available site and found people full of faith willing to collaborate with us. As we began to visit in the surrounding area and slowly to become familiar with the situation, some youth came forward with their desire to be active in the few chapels that existed. We saw the Reign of God as the future for these young people though they live with the threat of danger. We were full of hope and envisioned the possibility of something new.

We began to hold gatherings of young people and to invite them to participate actively in their faith communities; this infused youthful energy into the chapels.

The young people were becoming happier and forming friendships in their groups, and they slowly began identifying themselves with the Church. It had been more than ten years since there was any ministry to youth in the diocese. We have been forming youth leaders at the village level since 2015. Little by little, this formation integrated a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, bringing them to seek God's plan for their lives. Once young people have formed a relationship with Jesus Christ, they become the best evangelizers of other young people because they speak the same language, live in the same context with the same worries and needs and know which threats stalk their peers. The witness of their lives speaks more powerfully than words.

Another aspect that stands out is the passing on of our charism to the youth. We've progressed to taking them to meet Jesus Christ in persons living in poverty by visiting homes, helping persons who are sick or live alone and sharing faith with other young people. They are taking on an active role in their own formation. They are slowly integrating Gospel values and passing them on to other young people who now see the youth groups as a place where their participation impacts their lives.

Along the way, we've had successes and also made mistakes. The young reject anything outdated, and that has challenged our creativity in presenting the Gospel message to them in a way that does not minimize the message and its values nor the commitment it calls for. And so, some walked away when the groups moved from being somewhere that was just fun to be and took on a more focused identity and commitment.

The fact of being in a place of migration with few opportunities for young people means that they return to their country of origin to continue their studies or work far from home, which keeps them from following up on their process. However, it is also an advantage that a trained leader, wherever he or she may go, will pass on his or her experience.

There are cultural conflicts among the young people due to the different ways they understand and live values within their own cultures.

Since we are an Interprovincial local community, it has been a challenge for us to harmonize our different approaches to serving youth.

Another difficulty that the young people face is a generational clash and lack of communication with the leaders of the chapel communities, who have not managed to integrate them in pastoral activities. The young people become discouraged and want to give up.

Despite these difficulties, the ministry of the mission has progressed, and we see the need to reflect on the future, both for the youth and for persons living in poverty. Consequently, one idea that emerged is to give youth a Marian identity in line with the Vincentian charism, and so we have begun to form a group of young people who will become Vincentian Marian Youth.

Challenges for passing on values

Due to the pandemic, we needed to come up with new ways of meeting and being with young people, taking advantage of modern means of communication.

- The leaders in the villages must become aware of the importance of including the youth in the life of the communities.
- We must get to know and give importance to young people's values because they have something to say and to offer us. We have to create a climate of sharing and encounter.
- Formation has to include them and make them feel that they are part of their communities and that they contribute to their growth.
- We want to continue forming groups of Vincentian Marian Youth in the villages.
- We can have an impact on their experience of abandonment and help them to heal from their past and broaden their vision of themselves and their situations.
- We will engage in vocation ministry so that they become acquainted with other lifestyles.

Young people are demanding “Ephata!” of us. We have to restore and guide them and let ourselves be moved by the Holy Spirit so that, with their values and ours, together we can cry out with joy that the Reign of God is possible today.

Sister Elizabeth SANCHEZ
Daughter of Charity

TESTIMONIES - CHALLENGE OF PASSING ON THE FAITH TO YOUNG PEOPLE

2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY Province of Belgium-France-Switzerland At the service of the VMY

This is my experience on the topic of passing on the faith and Christian values to younger generations. First, I will explain my service with the young people around me. Secondly, I will try to share with you my observations about the life of young people and finally, my reflections on how to improve this transmission and on the hope that fills me.

Service with young people

In September 2016, I was appointed the National Sister Advisor for the Vincentian Marian Youth in France (VMY France). I was familiar with this movement as I had been a member of the VMY when I was young. It had evolved to remain as close as possible to young people. Nonetheless, I knew how difficult it is to reach young people today. For a number of years, the movement was no longer well-known in France, which could cause us to ask if it was well-adapted to today's young people. My reflection focused on the importance of making the history of this movement known. The Virgin Mary had asked Catherine to pass on the following message to Father Aladel: *“The Blessed Virgin would like you to begin an organization. You will be its founder and director. This will be the association of the Children of Mary.”* Very quickly, this Marian association was established in France and then throughout the world. Following the example of Saint Catherine, we should thus continue to pass on this history that made it possible and makes it possible today for so

many young people throughout the world to encounter Christ.

I began speaking about this movement whenever I was invited to do so. I would share about it during interpersonal encounters and during larger gatherings, for example, meetings of the Association of Marian Works. I found that the people whom I met listened to me with interest, which always impressed me. They were discovering this movement, its history, etc.

Subsequently, some people wanted to get involved in order to serve young people. Families wished to enroll their child. New groups were formed. With each encounter, I had to listen and adapt what was offered.

My observations about the life of young people

The children and young people come from different backgrounds. I was surprised to realize that some young people traveled a long distance to their VMY group. These young people are inquisitive. Transmission is really important. I am always impressed by the interest they show when we give a testimony of our faith during gatherings. These young people ask many questions and are looking for meaning. They have dreams that they want to see come true. I remember a young woman explaining to me a project that she wanted to carry out. She wanted to help other people. With time, she encountered difficulties that became a source of misunderstanding and suffering. What could I do? Nothing more than listen, accompany, advise, encourage...

Little by little, older young people wanted to oversee the children. Some years ago, VMY youth leaders had already spent many years in the movement. Today in France, that is no longer the case. We had to rethink how to incorporate these young people who wished to place themselves at the service of the children.

Families were also discovering the movement and similarly sought accompaniment.

At the request of a young woman, a group was established for older youth. Young people continue to join this group this year. They want to meet each other, share their questions, pray together, etc.

How can the passing on of the faith be improved?

I find great joy in the presence of the children and young adults. They reflect, get involved, believe... I think that, following Christ's example, it is important to walk alongside them. Of course, this raises questions for us, calls us into question. The way that we pass on the faith changes but remains very much a reality.

When we form a group, we have to accept that the young people will come, stay or leave. Christ alone is at work in the heart of each young person. We are only an instrument in the hands of Christ.

It is important to allow young people to express themselves as they wish, to ask their questions as they come to their mind. It is up to us to adapt in order to journey together. Sometimes the transmission takes place as the questions arise.

Young people are very attuned to the consistency of our lives. It is important that our words match our acts.

We can grow discouraged at times. Sometimes the young people sense this. I remember some comments: a young person asked me the date of the next meeting so he could be there, a mother told me how important these meetings are... Therefore, we must continue forward together.

It is important to plan projects for the children and young adults despite the work they entail. Many projects come to be in connection with experiences. Let us not forget to involve the young people in realizing projects. They have many desires that are just waiting to grow.

At the service of VMY

With the young people and their families, we advance together. Transmission requires time, listening, presence... Christ is there, present. We should accept unexpected events and our inability to control everything... We constantly have to adapt. May Mary always accompany us so that we might continue down this path at the service of children, young adults and their families.

Sister Marie-José PAQUIN
Daughter of Charity

TESTIMONIES - CHALLENGE OF PASSING ON THE FAITH TO YOUNG PEOPLE

2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY Province of the Near East Promoting fraternity between Christians and Muslims

The Document on Human Fraternity (Abu Dhabi, February 4, 2019 – Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar) *“invites all people who have faith in God and faith in human fraternity to unite and work together... in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters”* and *“to adopt the culture of dialogue as a path, mutual collaboration as the code of conduct and reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.”*

BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH WE ENCOUNTER YOUNG MUSLIMS

The Province of the Near East consists of five countries: Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Syria and the Holy Land.

In Egypt, we have a total of four schools in Cairo and Alexandria. The majority of students whom we receive are Muslim.

In Lebanon, 4 out of 17 of our schools have a large majority of Muslims. These schools are primarily in the capital city of Beirut.

In Syria, we have just one school, located in Damascus, which has a majority of Christian students.

Our Mission

Above all, we hope to offer our students a space of fraternity where Christians and Muslims rub shoulders and respect each other in their religious and cultural diversity and diverse traditions. Similarly, we aim to offer them quality education, develop their knowledge and skills and provide them with human, academic and spiritual formation founded on our charism and the teachings of the Church. Selecting our teachers from among our Christian graduates helps us in fulfilling this mission.

WHO ARE THEY (THEIR PAINS, THEIR DREAMS, THEIR JOYS, THEIR DIFFICULTIES)?

The majority of students in Egypt are girls, which is very important for us in Egyptian society where girls (women) do not yet enjoy full rights. These girls become educated women, women who can stand tall and are formed to honor their future duties in society and to claim their rights.

In all our schools, we are keen to develop our students' sense of belonging to their milieu: family, school and country. These young people dream of growing up in a setting that encourages them to continue their university studies, and a good number wish to continue their specialization outside of their country. They come from families with insufficient income. Some come from families with difficulties, particularly relational ones, with separated or divorced parents. They experience problems characterized by fear, confused emotions and especially lack of self-confidence. We encounter other young people influenced by their rather superstitious and moralizing strict religious upbringing.

The families that send their children to our establishments trust us and are looking for an institution to escape their

often closed and fundamentalist environment. They value our education and are looking for solid moral, human and Christian values. Indeed, through the students, our education ministry touches thousands of families, the building block of society and humanity, a broad spectrum of people whom we influence by what our presence and witness inculcate in them: the spirit of Jesus Christ, the spirit of charity and openness to the other person, to all others.

Alongside this teaching, the various movements and extra-curricular activities that we offer aim to help young people blossom and to develop their skills and potential. The school forms the man, the woman of tomorrow who, in addition to education, acquires principles, values and the tools to integrate into the society of tomorrow and courageously face life. In our establishments, we work primarily for the promotion of those who are poor; young people learn two foreign languages in addition to their native language, which will make it easier for them to find an opening in different fields and to obtain a good job.

WHAT DOES THIS MAKE YOU THINK (DIFFICULTIES, QUESTIONS, ETC.)? WHAT SUGGESTIONS DO YOU HAVE FOR IMPROVING DIALOGUE AND FRATERNITY? WHAT GIVES HOPE?

In our mission, we regularly ask ourselves the following questions. What kind of student do we want to form for the future? Which values do we inculcate in the students in our schools through our teaching? What are the challenges and the possibilities for the future? How can we continue to support poor families that do not have the means to educate their children in our schools? In short, how can we improve the mission of our schools?

Our educational mission encourages us to go forward, to work against the tide of worldly values despite all the difficulties and

Promoting fraternity between Christians and Muslims

obstacles: pointless laws, outdated educational curriculum in our countries, governments that try to eliminate Christian schools, major economic and social problems that waste our time and sap our energy. Add to that fundamentalism (ISIS and others) that has been increasing in recent years in the East and that influences some of our youth.

A challenge that we face in our works is gaining acceptance of women's rights to education, work and the exercise of their political rights; protecting them from sexual exploitation and from being treated as merchandise or a means of pleasure or economic profit. Therefore, we must work to put an end to all the inhumane practices and current customs that humiliate women's dignity and work to change the laws that keep them from fully enjoying their rights. In collaboration with the UN, the refugee shelter in Damascus houses battered women, subjected to violence by their husband, and Iraqi and Syrian refugee children, all Muslim. We provide education for the children and work for the women's promotion.

Despite the difficulties and challenges, we try to confront individualist, selfish and conflictual tendencies, radicalism and blind extremism in all its forms and manifestations. We are strongly convinced that the true teachings of religions call for remaining anchored in peace and supporting the values of mutual understanding and dialogue. Spreading the culture of tolerance, acceptance of others who are different and harmonious co-existence among human beings could arm upcoming generations against the domination of materialist thinking, the danger of a policy of reckless greed for profit and of indifference based on the law of force and not on the force of the law.

Establishing spaces for dialogue, formation sessions, gatherings with our partners in education – parents, teachers and graduates – and communicating expectations clearly in order to meet the common goal are initiatives that we try to take in order to

contribute to achieving the shared educational mission.

Acceptance of others who are different, respect of beliefs and sharing sufferings and difficulties help us to overcome the insecurity that we experience in the countries of the Province of the Near East and to invent a way of “living together” in peace.

“You are human; you are a child of God; you are my brother, period!” (Pope Francis in the airplane returning from Bagdad)

Sister Rania AZZI
Daughter of Charity

TESTIMONIES - CHALLENGE OF PASSING ON THE FAITH TO YOUNG PEOPLE

2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Province of Vietnam

Passing on the Christian faith and values to young Sisters in formation

OUR CONTEXT IN VIETNAM RELATING TO RELIGIOUS FORMATION

The Vietnamese have a natural and deep sense of religion. Though our folk religion is ancestral veneration, many Vietnamese today consider themselves as “non-religious”; only around 7% of the population are Catholic. Our religious history is strongly influenced by the Triple Religions of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. There are many positive values inherent in our culture such as love for peace, hospitality, studiousness, conscientious, respect and filial devotion to parents and the elderly. However, those traditional virtues are severely affected by the current education and globalization in our country. Communist ideology reduces the sense of sin in people’s consciences and creates in them a mentality of doubt and self-defense. Globalization results in individualism and consumerism.

Our education brainwashes the young towards efficiency that promotes indifference, impurity and dishonesty and deprives the youth of the ability to think and discern. The Triple Religions and our long historical wars have made people closed and hesitant to tell the truth. The excessive proliferation of mass media attracts people, especially the youth, to a virtual life, ambiguity in manner, way of thinking and lifestyle.

Our young people can be likened to sailors on the ocean without a compass. Their parents either are very busy earning money so that they have very little time for their children or indulge their children rather than educate them. At school, the young are forced to achieve by any means. They struggle alone between high aspirations and emptiness, between lights and shadows of what is happening in our society, so they lose direction. They go to Google for answers to their every question, which is never a right solution. Entering the community, they bring all their concerns, restlessness, even the question of who they are. They badly need to be listened to and accompanied with empathy and understanding.

MY EXPERIENCE IN THE FORMATION OF THE YOUNG SISTERS

a. Accompaniment in the 3 dimensions indicated by the Constitutions

Having gone through the different previous stages of formation, the young Sisters had certainly made progress in many aspects. But because of our context, there are important areas where they needed more attentive and focused accompaniment, like better self-understanding, Spirit-led discernment and getting deeply rooted in God and the Vincentian charism. I was privileged to be their companion on this journey.

The human dimension was a close and practical accompaniment helping the young Sisters understand, discover on a deeper level their strengths and limitations and appreciate their talents. They learned the joys and challenges of collaboration in planning and organizing activities, doing the household tasks of cleaning, cooking and cultural presentations. We do an evaluation at the end of the activities.

The spiritual dimension was an initiation in prayer, the Sacraments, the contemplation of Jesus, *lectio divina*, faith-

sharing, making reflection papers and preparing the liturgy and the slow but persistent effort to grow closer to the person of Jesus in a more personal relationship...

The apostolic dimension was time spent reading and studying the *Catechism* and teachings of the Church, getting more deeply rooted in Vincentian spirituality in order to help them build a solid Vincentian background for their mission as Daughters of Charity. Enough time was provided for personal study that included setting objectives for tasks, giving account of their life and their service/work and participating in apostolic reflection.

b. Other forms of accompaniment

Formal communication and informal conversations

We had personal and individual conversations for spontaneous sharing and clarifications other than the regular monthly communication. These enabled us to build a trusting and caring relationship, encouraging them to express themselves freely; together, we discern in the light of Scripture and the Vincentian charism.

Values clarification

Sometimes I challenged them or demanded more when needed. The essential task was to help them shift their value system in accordance with Christian faith and the values of consecrated life. Growing in inner freedom, this clarification and discernment helped them set God as the first priority, not work, achievement, fame or anything else. Hopefully, they learn to seek God in all things. They also learned to have the eyes and reaction of faith and less of a demanding rationality. They gradually became serene with their self-discovery, accepted their strengths and limitations, found joy upon completing some simple chores and found the meaning and purpose of each action or work.

PERSONAL REALIZATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Personal formation and grounding in God

I realized my great need for self-formation. I was urged to go to God more frequently; I read the teachings of the Church and of our Company more so that I could share and accompany more effectively. I was aware of my responsibility for growing in my own humanity and in the spirit of the Company.

A supportive local community and effective collaboration among the formators

When I was Sister Servant, I was supported by other Sisters in our community. When I was assigned to the Seminary, our formation team met weekly or at any time needed to plan and share information. We took the time to share and study together. In collaboration and co-responsibility, we journeyed with each other in the same direction.

It is essential to know the milieu from which our young Sisters come as well as possible.

A number of young Sisters have come from broken or problematic/dysfunctional families. Some of them were exposed to pornography during their college studies, and these situations have caused some psychological issues when they came to community.

The purification of a value system they grew up with is imperative before they can begin to embrace Christian and Vincentian values.

The young Sisters received an imbalanced education in schools totally conditioned by communism, and they struggle with the demands of Christian values and consecrated life. It is a very real struggle between light and darkness for them.

The tension between a time-bound formation program and the formation needs of the young Sisters

The problems of the young candidates are more numerous and complicated whereas the formation stages have their own time frame. This becomes a pressure for the formators when they evaluate at the end of each stage to consider the recommendation of a candidate for the next step. *The role of Sisters Servants and local communities in the transmission of faith and Christian values to the young as examples and companions and an updated formation for formators to enable them to keep up with the fast changes of the time in which we live are of non-negotiable importance.*

I close this testimony with deep gratitude for how my mission in formation has formed me in ways I cannot fully express. The mission of accompaniment in the transmission of Christian and Vincentian values made me experience God Himself in all things, through His Word and through signs that He challenged me to read and understand in faith. Lastly, I am more and more convinced of how grace works. *“I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth”* (1 Cor 3:6). Each of us contributes our best in bearing witness to and transmitting our faith and Christian values to younger generations... and God will do the rest.

Sister Lucia Ngoc Tuyen NGUYEN
Daughter of Charity

Good Friday witnessed Jesus' community falling apart.

Judas betrayed Him,
Peter denied Him
and most of the disciples ran away.
All of Jesus' work to create a little community
seems to come to nothing.

It is then, at the darkest moment,
that we see this community reborn,
at the foot of the cross.

His mother receives a son, His closest friend,
and the beloved disciple receives a mother.

It is the Church that is born.
Jesus calls Mary, "Woman,"
for she is the new Eve.

This new Eve is the Mother
of all those who live in faith.

Behold, then, our family:
Behold our mother and our brother.

