

*E*choes of the Company



General Assembly 2021

MAY
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**for a new
missionary
momentum**

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On the occasion of the 2022 Renovation

Motherhouse, March 25, 2022

Sister Françoise, Father Bernard, my very dear Sisters, I am so happy to be with you today. We have not had the opportunity to gather like this in quite some time. I had planned to come here three times at the beginning of last year, on January 1, February 2, and March 25, but the Covid-19 pandemic upended those plans. Another unforeseen occurrence prevented me from coming to Paris on February 2 of this year. Now, finally, I can spend these few moments with you.

*Spiritual
Life*

I propose to address two topics today:

- 1) the follow-up to your General Assembly,
- 2) some branches of the Vincentian Family.

After I finish my presentation, I would like to offer you, in the time that remains, the opportunity to ask questions or make comments.

I - THE FOLLOW-UP TO THE 2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

As you know, you had a wonderful General Assembly last October and November. There was a very participatory and peaceful atmosphere, which made much fruitful dialogue possible, leading to a proposal for the Inter-Assemblies Document, of which the General Council has completed the final version.

However, from experience, I know that, frequently, out of sight is out of mind. Several months have passed since

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the closure of the Assembly, and many other events have intervened. It could be that you barely remember those wonderful days in November. It would be a shame if all the hard work put into preparing for and conducting that Assembly were forgotten. Fortunately, in due time, you will receive the Inter-Assemblies Document, which you will then use to elaborate your Provincial Plans and, from those, your Local Community Plans. In that way, you will have before your eyes over the next six years the results produced by the Assembly members. It is a grace that the Company has in place this excellent trajectory to assure that the efforts made and the decisions reached during the General Assembly are not overlooked or neglected.

Let me simply encourage you to keep alive the spirit of the Assembly. In particular, I ask that you continue to focus on the four topics that marked, in a special way, the discussions that were held there; that is, human rights and holistic development for those most abandoned in society, care for our “common home,” “living together” in fraternal community, and passing on the faith and Christian values to younger generations. These are very important not only for the Company, but also for the whole Church and society in general.

As I mentioned in my opening address to the General Assembly, the first of those topics, ***human rights and holistic development for those most abandoned in society***, touches the very essence of your vocation: the service of Christ in the person of the poor.

Nevertheless, it can sometimes be very frustrating to see the needs of the poor but be unable to respond to them as you would like to do. In this case, you are obliged, while continuing to do everything you can for them, to place them in God’s hands. This is what Saint Vincent did when he could not respond to the sufferings of the galley slaves as he wanted to do. *“I can only be deeply grieved by the intense sufferings of the poor slaves and by my inability to procure some relief for them; may it please God to have pity on them!”*¹

1. *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume VII, p. 523; letter 2819 to Jean Le Vacher, Consul in Tunis, 18 April 1659. Future references to this work will be indicated using the initials *CCD*, followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, *CCD*

In spite of your inability, at times, to relieve the suffering of the less fortunate, you must and do continue striving to help them find a way out of their conditions of poverty. The systemic-change method is a marvelous tool for doing this. In using it, you teach those who are poor how to help themselves, how to address their own needs, where to seek assistance. More importantly, you instruct them in the best ways to stand up for their rights and seek justice in response to their needs and circumstances.

Care for our “common home” is a theme so dear to the heart of the Holy Father that five years after devoting his first encyclical, *Laudato si’*, to it, he proposed a seven-year action platform to address integral ecology. The care of creation comes under the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, but the action platform has its own website (<https://laudatosiactionplatform.org/>), which provides resources to communities and individuals to participate in integral ecology.

As we all know, there is no dearth of problems on our planet. In addition to climate change, we can cite war, poverty, racism, inequality, injustice, and many more. It would be difficult to single out one of those as the most critical problem. However, it has been said that climate change is it, because it affects all living creatures, and if it is not sufficiently addressed, and on a global scale, within this decade, we may reach a point of no return.

That is why care for our common home and integral ecology must be tackled in the here and now. We must not forget either that climate change affects the poor and vulnerable of our brothers and sisters more than those who are well-to-do. As servants of the poor, therefore, you surely will want to care for our common home because, in doing so, you also are caring for the least fortunate in society.

The members of the General Assembly also discussed the theme of *“living together” in fraternal community*. We all are aware of what a challenge this can be. It is said that you can choose your friends but not your relatives. Those of us who live in community cannot choose our companions either. Thus, we can end up with a mix of personalities and cultures in any given house. Whenever a new person is added or

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removed from that house, the situation changes. It takes time to build relationships and become a united local community. Saint Louise and Saint Vincent had a suggestion for making that possible. At a Council meeting in 1647, Saint Louise asked Saint Vincent,

“Father, there’s something to be said now about the way our Sisters should act when they’re together. Wouldn’t Your Charity consider it advisable for them to spend some time together each day-half an hour or so to share with one another what they’ve done and the problems they’ve encountered, and to talk over what they’ll have to do?”

He replied,

“O mon Dieu! yes! ..., that’s a real need: close communication with one another; sharing everything. Nothing is more necessary. It unites hearts, and God blesses the advice received, with the result that things go better. Every day at recreation you can say, ‘How did things go with you, Sister? Such and such happened to me today; what do you think about it?’ You can’t imagine what pleasant conversation this makes. When, on the contrary, each one does her own thing, saying nothing about it, that’s intolerable... So, Sister; that’s a real need: nothing should happen, nothing should be done or said, unless each of you knows it. You must have this mutuality.”²

For her part, Louise also had a suggestion that would help to promote harmony in a local community. In 1652, the first group of Sisters were established in Poland. Three years later, another three were sent to join them. Louise reminded the former,

“My dear Sisters, you have always assured me that although you are three persons, you are but one in heart; in the name of the most Holy Trinity that you have so honored and must continue to honor, I beg you to open wide this heart to allow our three Sisters to enter into this cordial union so that the last three arrivals will be indistinguishable from those who arrived first. I assure you that they are coming with these dispositions and with the sole desire of pleasing God. They are all without any attachment to their own satisfaction, just as you are, my dear Sisters. This does not mean that nature does not at times provide

2. CCD XIIIb, 281; document 160, Council of 20 June 1647.

even the most perfect with occasions for struggle, but you realize that this is to test the fidelity of souls desirous of belonging completely to God. Do not be surprised then, my dear Sisters, when such a thing happens; rather this is a time when our souls must be moved, despite the weakness of our nature, to practice heroic virtue by spontaneous acts of humility and gentleness of heart and to prove that we desire to be truly Christian. Thus we will honor Jesus Christ by practicing the virtues which He, Himself, in His holy humanity, taught us.

May I ask something of you, my dear Sisters, which seems very necessary to me? It is that you never speak Polish among yourselves without letting our Sisters know what you are saying. This will help them to learn the language more quickly and will prevent other problems which could arise if you acted otherwise.”³

Those of you who live here in the Motherhouse or on a foreign mission might do well to heed Louise’s advice about the use of another language. However, for the majority of Daughters of Charity, the use of different languages does not exist. Nevertheless, Saint Louise surely would want you to extend her thinking to other circumstances, such as, adapting to a companion’s moods, demands, habits, etc. We sometimes have to make heroic efforts to “live together” peacefully. This requires much patience, humility, and charity.

The fourth theme that was an object of much discussion at the General Assembly was ***passing on the faith and Christian values to younger generations***. We know well that, since the pontificate of Saint John Paul II, the Church has made considerable strides in reaching out to the young. The biennial World Youth Days are a testimony to that. While these are held on a universal level every two years, countries are encouraged to host their own such gathering in the intervening years. I am sure that some of you have accompanied groups of young people to these events and know how much they arouse the participants’ energy and enthusiasm.

3. *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac, Correspondence and Thoughts*. Edited and Translated from the French by Louise Sullivan, DC; New City Press, Brooklyn, 1991, p. 478; letter 447 to Sisters Marguerite, Madeleine, and Françoise, Warsaw, 19 August 1655.

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Nevertheless, as enjoyable and enriching as World Youth Days are, young people need more sustained accompaniment in order to grow in their faith. They need regular moments of prayer, including times of silence before the Blessed Sacrament, *Lectio Divina*, reciting the Liturgy of the Hours or the rosary together, and frequent participation in the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. These may come naturally to those who are from a family with a strong religious background. However, many others are “on their own” when it comes to prayer and worship. Therefore, they will depend on people like you to lead and guide them.

Those of you who are involved in direct service of young people, especially teachers, will have many opportunities to be present to them, responding to their questions and challenging them to live their faith in service to others. Those who have little or no contact with youth will have to make efforts to reach out to them. Fortunately, our Vincentian Family has several wonderful associations that can help in this regard. This leads to my second concern, dealing with the Vincentian Family.

II -THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY

As many of you know, I am sure, the Superior General serves as Director General of three of the lay branches: the Association of the Miraculous Medal (AMM), the Vincentian Marian Youth (VMY), and the Lay Vincentian Missionaries (MISEVI).

The *Association of the Miraculous Medal* has thousands, perhaps millions, of members throughout the world. Its focus is prayer and the promotion of devotion to Our Lady through the Miraculous Medal. It is a public association of the faithful, composed of laity, clergy, and members of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life who wear the Miraculous Medal and honor it with a Christian and apostolic life, each member doing so according to his or her state of life. Working together, they seek to foster a better life in communion with others and accomplish apostolic activities through spreading the 1830 message of the Blessed Virgin to Saint Catherine Labouré. Anyone can belong to this association. It is primarily a prayer association but also encourages some assistance to or service of the less fortunate.

Like the Association of the Miraculous Medal, the *Vincentian Marian Youth* grew out of the apparitions to Saint Catherine Labouré here at the Rue du Bac in 1830. Its first name was the “Children of Mary” and, of course, it continues to retain the Marian aspect. The members are young people. The association seeks to form them to live a solid faith, following Jesus Christ; to live and pray like Mary in simplicity and humility, assuming the spirituality of the Magnificat; to foster, animate, and maintain the missionary spirit; and to prepare them individually and communally to collaborate in the Church and society with other pastoral workers.

The members of VMY carry out different apostolic activities from their own centers and in coordination with parishes or other branches of the Vincentian Family. Among these are:

* Socio-charitable service: collaboration and support in the social work of the Daughters of Charity, regular visits to the sick and the poor in their respective homes, work in the marginalized and rural areas with disadvantaged groups (children, young people with adaptation concerns, women and immigrants, etc.).

* Evangelization: support in parish catechism (for children, young people, and adults), activities for the evangelization of young people (workshops, gatherings, etc.), support in the popular missions organized by the Congregation of the Mission.

As is obvious, this association is excellent for involving young people in faith and service. It has thousands of members in approximately half the world’s countries and has National Statutes in many of those. The headquarters of its International Secretariat just moved from Madrid to Manila. In both those cities, it has been able to count on the support and assistance of the Daughters of Charity and the members of the Congregation of the Mission.

The *Lay Vincentian Missionaries* are of more recent origin. They respond to the appeal of Vatican II that reminds us that, by the nature of our baptism, we are all called to holiness and mission. Growing primarily out of the Vincentian Marian Youth, in the beginning their principal goal was the missions *Ad Gentes*. Now, however, MISEVI

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embraces both local and foreign missions. This association is growing but remains much smaller than the two previously mentioned. Hundreds of MISEVI members are working in short-term or long-term missions. Some go to any part of the world, and some share the Gospel in their home countries. They are involved in such activities as: evangelization, teaching and literacy programs, programs for refugees and the homeless, programs for those with disabilities and special needs, health care, special programs for literacy and empowerment of women, listening centers for victims of alcohol and violence, child care, youth ministries in dioceses with the local Church, formation of pastoral groups, visits to jails and prisons, etc.

I bring up these three associations because I would like to encourage you to promote and support them. A Daughter of Charity from the General Council is a member of the International Council of each association. On the national level, Daughters of Charity serve as advisors on the National Councils of each one, and many Sisters work with the associations' members on the local level. Because each one, directly or indirectly, grew out of the apparitions of Our Lady to Saint Catherine, it is natural that you would promote and support them.

Therefore, I ask you to continue developing these three associations on the Provincial and local levels in your respective countries. If, however, one, two, or even all three are not present in your area, then I request that you make efforts to establish them. All the associations have international websites where you can find information on how to do this. Please feel free to work in collaboration with our confreres. I often have encouraged them too to develop and support these three associations.

I also would like to mention two other associations, which are important members of our large Vincentian Family; that is, the *International Association of Charities* (AIC) and the *Saint Vincent de Paul Society* (SSVP).

As you know, AIC is the oldest member of our Vincentian Family, even older than the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity. In many countries, the Daughters of Charity work closely with both associations, often serving as advisors on their local or

national councils. I am very grateful for this collaboration and urge you to continue to foster it.

If you have any problems or questions with regard to promoting and supporting AMM, VMY, and MISEVI, you may turn directly to me as their Director General. Should there be financial or other reasons that make establishing one or another of these associations difficult, we will try our best to help. I very much want to see these associations established and developed in countries or regions where they are not at present. I count on each of you, wherever possible, to assist in this task.

All three associations can serve to strengthen young people in their faith, teach them the value of service to others, and help them become committed members of the Catholic Church, promoting its values in a world badly in need of them. We know that many young people are idealistic. They seek to live more simply, avoiding the pitfalls of our consumer-driven society, caring for all creation, and assisting those in need. By reaching out to them, you can show them how to achieve those goals and thereby promote a more just and peaceful social order.

Finally, on a more personal note, I ask you to keep our upcoming General Assembly in your prayer. As you may know, it will be held from June 27 to July 15 in Rome. The Preparatory Commission has worked hard to make sure that everything is in place for the smooth running of this important event. Of course, there remain a few last-minute details to resolve. However, at this point, we count most of all on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit during the proceedings, which is why I beg the assistance of your prayer.

Father Tomaž MAVRIČ, CM
Superior General

Letter of May 9, 2022

Dear Sisters,

Little by little, we have grown used to celebrating the feast of Saint Louise after Easter, in the joy of the resurrection and in the expectation of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Christ is risen indeed! This gives us confidence and strength, for each day, in one way or another, death touches us directly or indirectly.

Saint Louise often meditated on the Pascal Mystery; she lived it in her own life and invited the Sisters to do the same: “... *choose the life of Jesus Crucified as the model for our lives*” (A. 21b, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 732) or, on another occasion, “... *no one will rise with Jesus Christ who has not first of all died in this way*” (L. 580, July 5, 1658, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 600).

We are often confronted with this mystery in our personal and community life. Humanity as a whole continues to experience suffering and violence, but at the same time, we recognize that it is lit up by glimmers of the resurrection, such as: movements of solidarity, the witness of men and women who get back on their feet, accounts of conversion that move and renew us, examples of beautiful fidelity, young people who choose to give themselves to God in the Company or elsewhere... Let us open our eyes and our heart to see them.

In the Inter-Assemblies Document, the first gate to open is that of *an eyes wide-open spirituality* with the key of *contemplation*. A faith perspective... having eyes open to God and to the world in order to love and serve it. Saint Louise was such a woman, entirely focused on God and on all people living in poverty. It is thus that she progressively closed the gap between contemplating God and looking at those who suffer, clearly placing the Gospel at the center of her life, in particular,

“Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40).

“Contemplation in order to love better” is a life path that Saint Louise travelled and that we are invited to pursue.

Contemplation...

The phrase chosen by the members of the General Assembly, “*an eyes wide-open spirituality*,” and its corresponding key, *contemplation*, call us to strengthen our inner conviction that everything is founded on Christ, the cornerstone. The guidelines expressed in the Inter-Assemblies Document provide specifics: see Christ present in all of our brothers and sisters, recognize the Risen Jesus, take the time to marvel... It is simple, and yet we know that it takes a lifetime to learn to:

- have a welcoming and kindly way of looking at our neighbor, after the example of the Good Samaritan, keeping our eyes open so as not to pass by a person who is suffering, whoever he or she may be, in the name of our common humanity.
- not attempt to avoid the stranger, the sick, the prisoner, the marginalized, the lonely or elderly person, one who is becoming disoriented, etc.
- see in the way of Jesus, He whom we meet each day in the Word of God as well as in major and minor events of everyday life.
- look at God and our brothers and sisters and allow ourselves to be looked at by them because we belong to the same family, that of the children of God. It is a fraternal gaze that causes growth and motivates.

Contemplate, look: this means being able to receive what God calls us to live each day, to receive each encounter as a gift from heaven.

Saint Louise, from the Light of Pentecost to the end of her life, sought and developed this “*eyes wide-open spirituality*.” Her deep union with God in prayer, her devotion to contemplating Christ Crucified and her desire to be guided by the Spirit led her progressively to hone what became the salient trait of the charism of the Company:

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“We must continually have before our eyes our model, the exemplary life of Jesus Christ. We are called to imitate this life, not only as Christians, but as persons chosen by God to serve Him in the person of the poor” (L. 217, August 29, 1648, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 261).

Open our eyes to our model, Jesus Christ, in order to serve Him in our brothers and sisters... one and the same contemplation, a single gaze rooted in the mystery of the Incarnation, the heart of our life totally given to God and to those who are poor.

... in order to love better

“We must try to meet often in the presence of Our Lord, contemplating His practice of charity toward the neighbor” (L. 347, June 1, 1651, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 355).

The guidelines articulated on pages 4 and 5 of the Inter-Assemblies Document repeat for today what Saint Louise continually taught the first Daughters of Charity: contemplate Jesus’ relationship with His Father, listen attentively to those whom we meet, care for them and allow them to evangelize us.

Pope Francis, in his message during our General Assembly, stressed this necessity to return constantly to our history:

“This has characterized you since the beginning. A Company of women created to bring the love of Christ to those who are poor. This has led you, throughout the entire world, not only to care for poor people in large institutions, hospitals, orphanages and schools, but also to visit them, to go to encounter them in the places where they live, to participate with them in pathways of human growth, in promotion of life and spiritual care” (Pope Francis to the Daughters of Charity, November 20, 2021).

Contemplate in order to love better, “coming and going,” because such are our beginnings and our present. Each day, throughout the world, Daughters of Charity live this out and have this boldness that leads them to go forth to meet those living on the peripheries, those suffering and the person next door enduring loneliness.

Only trust, sustained by contemplation of Christ, can impel us to open our doors and our heart because we know that the Lord supports our personal, community and Provincial weaknesses, even those of the Company as a whole.

Saint Louise, imbued with the Lord and sure of His presence in all things, fearlessly sent the Sisters on mission:

“They will often recall that they were established to honor Our Lord Jesus Christ, their patron, and reflecting on this, they will take great care to imitate His holy virtues, particularly humility, simplicity, modesty and charity, being the essence of the spirit of their Company. To be helped in these practices, they will often think that Our Lord is present to them” (Advice to the Daughters of Charity going to Arras, given by Mademoiselle Le Gras, *The Daughters of Charity at the Beginning – Documents*, p. 758).

Let us listen to Saint Louise and give thanks for her life; let us give thanks for this path that she traced out for us and that we try to follow in faith and generosity. Let us pray for each other, that we might be able to continue in the same spirit and bear witness to the Lord’s love for all. *“Do whatever He tells you”* (Jn 2:5).

Among the glimmers of the resurrection, I mentioned young people who choose to give themselves to God. Between now and the end of July, 46 postulants will enter various Seminaries of the Company, and 12 Sisters will make vows for the first time. We hold them in prayer in a special way on this May 9 and entrust their journey to Saint Louise.

Let us also pray for the two Sisters at the International Missionary Center who will soon conclude their preparation for the mission *Ad Gentes*. Sister Martha HI KIM, Korean (Province of St. Louise de Marillac-Asia), is sent to the Province of Congo for Tanzania, and Sister Anna Loan DAM THI LOAN (Province of Vietnam) is sent to the Province of Central Africa.

Happy feast of Saint Louise to all!

Affectionately and with the assurance of my prayer,

Sister Françoise PETIT
Daughter of Charity

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2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Presentation of the theme:

“Ephata”

A

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In September 2018, the members of the General Council met to choose the phrase from the Gospel that would serve as a springboard for the Assemblies. As is the case every six years, we wanted to give a powerful dynamic, a momentum, but one that corresponds to today’s needs.

We already had the essential subjects to address because during the Visitatrixes’ Inter-Assemblies Meeting in May 2018, they had expressed what they felt was important for the Company. The following topics came out, almost unanimously: communion, solidarity, justice, communication, care for our common home and, above all, the culture of encounter.

These suggestions as a whole led us to prioritize encounter, an encounter focused on mission.

One Sunday in that month of September 2018, the liturgy inspired us with the passage from the Gospel of Mark 7:31-37 and Jesus’ invitation: “*Ephata, be opened.*” In prayer and reflection, we all felt that the Spirit had spoken and guided us to this Word with so much life.

This is how Ephata became a call for the entire Company in all the local communities and Provinces, a call to open hearts and minds: to be opened to God, to our brothers and sisters around us and to our Sisters in community.

From the beginning, this call has been heard in the Company; it is just the words that have changed. If we look at the last two Assemblies, “Open to the Transforming Spirit” and then “The Boldness of Charity for a New Missionary Momentum,” Ephata represents continuity yet with specificities tied to our unsettled time. Fidelity and creativity are the two driving forces of the Company, for which we can give thanks.

The situation has changed significantly since September 2018. The world has turned us upside down. How can we live Ephata in a period of lockdown, when borders closed, when trips even within a country were forbidden, for us, a Company precisely without borders? A lockdown for the Daughters of Charity who, by their vocation, have for cloister the streets of the city!

Nonetheless, in all the Provinces, you met this challenge and continued with even more determination to open yourselves in one way or another.

This is because Ephata concerns all the dimensions of our life. Ephata is first and foremost welcoming the One who is the source of all, who sends us as He sent His disciples.

Then, there are interior Ephatas, Ephatas in perspective, in relationships, geographic Ephatas, Ephatas that impel us to conversion, missionary Ephatas.

In 2019, Pope Francis expressed so well the meaning that we wanted to give to this Assemblies process. I will read the quote, which I think you know:

“People in love never stand still: they are drawn out of themselves; they are attracted and attract others in turn; they give themselves to others and build relationships that are life-giving” (Pope Francis, Message for World Mission Day 2019). Sister Monica will illustrate my words and give a testimony on her Ephata, that which was asked of her when she left her Province of Nigeria to come serve at the Motherhouse.

Sister Françoise PETIT
Daughter of Charity

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Experience of a Sister from Nigeria
Sent on mission to the Motherhouse

As I set out to reflect and prepare this presentation, the song by Rev. Carey Landry titled, “*Lose yourself in me and you will find yourself,*” came strongly to my mind.

I received the news of my mission to the Motherhouse with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I felt honored to have been chosen to embark on the mission, and, on the other hand, I was afraid and confused. My then-Visitatrix, Sister Gloria Aniebonam, gave me the information on Good Friday, April 19, 2019. It was a thing of joy to think that I was going to come to serve at the Motherhouse, the heart and cradle of the Little Company, the ground on which our Blessed Mother stepped her feet in 1830, but I was also confused, afraid and worried.

Confused because I had just been transferred to a new community six months previously and I was trying to settle down. As a matter of fact, my new community had started negotiating for a teaching job for me in the diocese. The process had just begun, and my Visitatrix knew this. So how could all of that be terminated all of a sudden?

Afraid and worried because my health was not too good at the time. I had been gravely ill the previous year (I almost lost my life). I had not fully recovered, and I was still unable to do much. Also, my mum was in very bad shape because of her chronic arthritic condition, which had almost rendered her immobile. As a matter of fact, I had taken permission from my Sister Servant to go and spend some days with her and also accompany her to the hospital. I was still in the village with her when I received an urgent call from my Sister Servant that the

Visitatrix needed to see me urgently. I set out back to Port Harcourt the very next day, and when she gave me the news, I went blank and speechless. It was like a dream to me. The very first thing I said to my Visitatrix was, “Sister, you know that my mother is ill. I need to be close to her.” And her response was, “Don’t worry, Monica, God will take care of your mother.” I had to say, “Yes,” not because I was convinced but because of my vow of obedience. With my mouth I said, “Yes,” but my heart was closed. As I walked out of her office that day, a lot of questions ran through my mind: How would my mum take it when she hears of it? How is she going to cope? What if she dies soon after I leave? I thought of my health too and wondered if I would be able to adequately fit into the rhythm of life at the Motherhouse, knowing that there is no feet dragging there. [This I knew very well because I had had the privilege of visiting the Motherhouse on two occasions already – the first time in 2002 (for a retreat) and in 2018 (for Vincentian Formation for African Sisters)]. I knew that at the Motherhouse, every Sister is smart and agile, up and doing, even the old! These and many more thoughts filled my mind, but especially the thoughts of my ailing mother. And as I was thinking and worrying myself almost to death about her, I remembered the words of Jesus: “*Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me*” (Mt 10:37). This really weakened me. I had to gradually and painfully surrender to Jesus in and through prayer. The whole process was rough and tough, but I am glad that the Spirit of God took control and gave me strength to let God have His way.

My discoveries:

- Fear of the unknown can cripple or paralyze me and prevent me from living out my life to the fullest and from truly and freely giving myself audaciously to God for service.
- My “givenness” to God in community for service requires me to keep my heart always open to accept God’s new and everyday calls.
- My life in Christ involves a lot of dying to self, and I am still a toddler in that regard.

“Ephata Testimony”

What I received:

- Grace to loosen up.
- Courage to drop the plan that was underway and to accept God’s new plan for me.
- Peace of heart and mind.
- Participating at the Domestic Assembly here at the Motherhouse last year tremendously helped me to look back and to thank God for the unique faith experience.

What this has changed in me:

- I am more attentive to the subtle ways God makes demands of me on a daily basis.
- I have a deeper appreciation of the Blessed Virgin’s acceptance and abandonment of herself to God’s design for her life, and like her, I am learning to trust more in God’s Divine Providence and to abandon myself more and more to His holy will.

Sister Monica EBUOGBEI
Daughter of Charity

2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Presentation of the theme: “Break through the gate”

Surely the first *word* that each of us heard was the word spoken by Jesus himself: *Ephata*, that is, “*Be opened.*” This is the only word that Jesus spoke in this whole account, and obviously it is not directed at the ears of the deaf man but at his heart. This word has come down to us, as Sister Françoise just explained, and each Daughter of Charity has experienced that this *word* is and will always be addressed to the heart of the Company and the heart of each one of us individually; it contains a fruitfulness that frees us for love and service.

To the extent that we open ourselves, the Spirit can inspire us to go further, to take an additional step and *break through the gates*, moving us to reacquaint ourselves with the creative boldness of our Founders and the beauty and power of the charism and, from these living roots, foster our response to the challenges of a new era.

In referring to living roots, I am thinking of the Charter of the Company, this very unique way of conceiving of our vocation at that time, which is for me the *major gate broken through*, opened by Saint Vincent and Saint Louise in the history of the Church, the history of religious life, contemporary society and the very life of those who are poor. With this gate, many other gates that transcend time were opened and have led the Company to the geographic and existential peripheries of those who are most abandoned.

The life force that emanates from this inspiration of the Spirit in our Founders continues to be a source of hope and apostolic courage for breaking through gates, going forth to encounter others. Indeed, “*Going outside the gates remains a symbol of all the goings forth of*

Presentation of the theme: “Break through the gate”

our Founders and Foundresses,” a “recovering of the charism” (cf. *Proclaim*, 62).

Let us allow this question to challenge us: *Through which gates might the Company need to break?* I share with you some of these “gates,” because together we will discern and discover many others during this Assembly.

- the gate of the fears that paralyze us, of “unchangeable” ideas and of preconceived structures in order to welcome the urging of the Spirit who recreates and renews in the midst of weakness.
- the gate of our presences, ministries and life styles in order to review them in freedom and establish missionary priorities that always opt for those who are poor and excluded.
- the gate of cultural barriers in order to allow for the diversity and richness that the Spirit brings forth and that are a source of opportunities.
- the gate of the uncertainty caused by a decrease in membership so that realism about the scarcity of Sisters does not prevail over the real needs of the weakest people nor “rein in” or asphyxiate missionary projects and dreams.
- the gate of inter-generational living in our Provinces in order to recover the sense of gratitude, valuing each stage of life and vocation, and passing on what is essential in our vocation.
- the gate of political and social divisions so we can clarify our positions and decisions regarding the right of respect for the dignity of every human being, for justice and for truth.
- the gate of care for creation, our common home and for an economy for the common good in order to increase solidarity with those most in need.
- the gate of fraternity without borders, open to all, to recover the essence of the Gospel.

- the gate of service in collaboration with the Church, with other religious congregations, among ourselves on all levels and with the Vincentian Family in order to assume the mission as a real possibility for sharing gifts, mutual assistance and communion of charisms and as a fraternal path.
- the gate of the effects of the Covid pandemic, the profound changes that have occurred and their repercussions on all levels in order to face challenges and strive to offer a response inspired by the Gospel.

Perhaps this is the “itinerary” of the life of the Company to break through the gates and go towards others with an open heart. Let us ask the Holy Spirit, giver of life, always to show us the way.

This is precisely the itinerary of Sister Rita, originally from the Province of Amazonia, who will share with us how she broke through the gate to come out of herself and enter into the indigenous culture.

Sister Iliana SUAREZ
Daughter of Charity

2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Experience of a Brazilian Sister
The mission in Amazonia

Before describing how I “broke through the gate” to serve the indigenous people of the Amazon, I would like to invite you to the source of my vocation, the first time when I broke through the gate.

Just like an eaglet, I began to fly little by little. I left my parents’ home to study in the city. Then, I went to another city for a live-in experience with the Sisters, and then to Postulancy. I entered the Seminary and was sent on mission to the state of Maranhão, leaving Ceará, my home state. After several years, I was sent to Belém do Pará, then to Manaus and to Boa Vista.

The **geographical shifts** took place at the same time as **internal** shifts. You get involved, you are taken in. It’s like the story of the “salt doll” that wanted to come to know the sea, and to do so, it had to dive in, to use itself up, although it had to abandon its form as a doll to become part of the water. This was my experience in the Amazon. I was taken by the new realities of rivers and forests, but also by the new challenges such as long trips, days and nights on the rivers, risking my own life and feeling the reality of poverty, austerity and many other needs.

Approaching the indigenous reality was a bold step forward, for I came to know a vast universe that I had never imagined. I could hold onto the dream that “a new world is possible.” When I saw indigenous people living on their own land, with their own cultures, fighting to defend their rights, I felt more committed to the indigenous cause. However, initial enthusiasm is not enough for inculturation.

Participating in the indigenous world demands self-emptying, commitment, time, listening, patience, respect, closeness, trust and love. After journeying alongside them for a long time, we could count on their trust. Once we earn their trust, they “baptize” us with a new name. They named me “Magikiab” in Wapichana (an indigenous language), which means to grow no longer, and in Portuguese “Piaba,” which is the name of a small fish.

Before beginning to work with indigenous people, I participated in a specialized training including the history of indigenous people, their organization before and after contact with invaders, anthropology, culture, civil and indigenous rights, land and territory, practical experience and awareness of the activities of organizations that accompany them such as the Indigenous Missionary Council and others.

Entering into the indigenous culture gave me a new perspective on what is different. I abandoned my concepts and prejudices; I observed, participated in the work and everyday life, patiently listened to long, repeated speeches that they gave to keep their memory and history alive. Indigenous people have their dreams and fight to see them come true. They persist in the fight to defend life, protect the environment and especially the usufruct of the land, for the respect of their cultures and dignity and so that their descendants might live in the freedom of the children of God. For them, accumulation is not a synonym of wealth and happiness; living with what is necessary is enough for the community and for the good of all.

Despite the long path already traveled, they are not exempt from the problems of human society such as drugs, domestic violence, divisions and the influences of capitalism presented as a model of development. It is gratifying, however, to see that they are aware of the risk of being deceived and corrupted. They thus form new trustworthy leaders in order to continue the struggle.

What a wonderful experience I had, what a gratifying mission to see the progress of new generations taking leadership in the areas of education, health, law and economy in accordance with their own structures and cultural traditions. It is wonderful to accompany the

“Break through the gate” Testimony

growth of the indigenous population, the experience and the action of other cultures, peoples and nations. I had a real experience of setting new goals, of opening myself to newness, of mobility, of the gratification of working with other missionaries, lay people and national, international, inter-congregational and mobile groups.

I experienced a real Ephata, a coming out of myself. An interior change took place in me: I changed my idea of an “almighty God” to that of a loving, understanding God who is a companion. I learned to look differently at the earth and nature. Today, I am more courageous in taking risks. I really think that God closely accompanies the struggle of the oppressed and those who join them to defend life. Let us not be afraid to break through the gate...

Sister Rita LOPES DE LIMA
Daughter of Charity

2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Presentation of the theme:
“Go towards”

Go towards: “*No one goes among the people like the Daughters of Charity do...*” (Saint Vincent de Paul, conference of August 24, 1659, CCD X, 527).

In the Bible, to GO, in its many variations, means “*to pursue a way of life, to go forth, to seek.*” “Go!” is a command to action, a moving in the direction one is sent: “*The LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you’*” (Gen 12:1). It is a call to mission: “*So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt*” (Ex 3:10). It is a commissioning: “*Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation*” (Mk 16:15). It is a promise of joy! “*Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me*” (Mt 28:10).

When we were barely an intuition in the hearts and minds of Vincent and Louise, God already had, in His plan, a group of women who will *pursue coming and going as a way of life*, thus the Charter... “*for cloister, the streets of the city*”; a group of women *always on mission* because “*no type of distress should be foreign to them*” (C. 11a); a group of women *commissioned to be servants and to seek out* “*the poorest and most abandoned*” (C. 11b); and finally a group of women *who find joy in going* because “*a Sister will go ten times a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day she’ll find God there*” (Saint Vincent, conference of February 13, 1646, CCD IX, 199).

The GOING TOWARDS of the Company, and of every Daughter of Charity, is a purposive, deliberate and intentional going. “*From*

Presentation of the theme: “Go towards”

the very beginning, Saint Vincent and Saint Louise... sent forth their Daughters on the highways of the world” (C. 25a). Across the centuries, we have inherited from the Sisters who came before us a legacy of single-mindedness in serving the poor no matter the cost, and a stout-heartedness that enabled missionaries to cross oceans and learn languages all in the name of bringing God’s tenderness to the poor.

Every going towards, then and now, is an act of fidelity to the charism, an affirmation of belonging to the Company and a declaration of a free, unconditional availability to the will of God. This is not to say that we do not feel the sadness of loss, the regret of having to leave much-loved services, communities, places of mission and people, which have defined us for so long and have given us much joy. But after the example of the Sisters who have gone before us, we affirm that we *“belong neither here nor there, but wherever God wants [us] to be... [we] are chosen to be at the disposition of Divine Providence”* (Cf. Saint Vincent, conference of July 31, 1634, CCD IX, 10). And we know how threatening this can be at times because God has a particularly unique way of overturning our plans and our lives.

In her May 9 letter, Sister Françoise assures us: *“This ‘yes’ to God does not remove all difficulties for undertaking the mission entrusted to us or any other form of change: of local community, in stages of life, in health.”*

Saint Louise encourages us: *“Go then courageously, advancing moment by moment on the path on which God has placed you in order to reach Him...”* (L. 360b, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 412).

“Where does the Company have to be and how should this presence be at the beginning of the 3rd millennium? There, where darkness reigns; there where the taste of life should be given; there where the dough should be transformed” (Father Quintano, *The Company in the 3rd Millennium*).

And so today, Sisters, in this historic General Assembly held amidst a world situation of sickness, anguish and death, but also of so much compassion, grace, generosity and solidarity that broke physical and

geographic frontiers, Vincent reminds us: *“Like the Apostles, you go from place to place”* (Saint Vincent, conference of November 2, 1655, CCD X, 117) and exhorts us:

“Go, therefore, [Sisters], go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally that He may bring you back in perfect health and full of good works” (Cf. Saint Vincent de Paul to Saint Louise de Marillac, May 6, 1629, CCD I, 64-65).

I now invite Sister Solange from the Province of Belgium-France-Switzerland to share her experience of “going towards” people living in prostitution and a glimpse of what she has learned from them.

Sister Maria Teresa MUEDA
Daughter of Charity

2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Experience of a French Sister

Going towards women
living in prostitution

I have volunteered for eighteen years with an association called “Freedom to captives” (named after Luke 4:18). For women living in prostitution, “freedom” suggests getting out of trafficking and all the imprisonments that prevent them from having full access to life.

Every Thursday, I go out with one other person to meet them in the streets, following the same route, to see, for example, if “Rita” will be on a particular stretch of the sidewalk, “Cocotte” in a particular hallway of a building; this prepares our heart for encounter, an unconditional encounter with empty hands, eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart. They are the ones to receive us since the stretch of sidewalk is sort of their home (they pay the “Mamma” for it).

They are courageous women, always ready to fight to survive despite the violence of their clients, their pimps and ethnic rivalries. They possess a strength that keeps them from foundering; they are fighters. Where do they draw this strength for survival? They are above all people and not prostitutes or transgendered; they are living in prostitution but are not limited to that; they bear within themselves values and talents, and God loves them as they are.

They speak to me of God who is close to the humble and to prostituted people. We need to find them places where they can feel safe, a break from the street environment, to allow them to express their suffering and distress and to develop a sense of beauty, silence, solidarity and fraternity as well.

Daring an encounter thus means going towards them as they are, disappearing when a client arrives, accepting that they check their telephone to show us that they do not wish to speak to us today; sometimes it is very contemptuous.

For me, it is not only a matter of serving them but of forming bonds of friendship, tender love, of understanding them non-judgmentally, of receiving all this suffering and richness as a gift of God because they cause me to grow in my humanity and my faith in the God of Love.

Here is what I have learned from them:

- To discover and live some measure of universality: the women are from several countries, so I must accept that I will not understand everything of their language and culture.
- To receive their friendship often expressed by touch; “allow myself to be touched” in all the senses of the word and show that we love them unconditionally since for them all encounters involve a cost: the pimp, the client, the “madam,” the stretch of sidewalk.
- To speak in a way that defends and respects them: they are my sisters, and we belong to the same people of God. These battered young women, old before their time, are believers, people who pray in the streets; their gestures and words speak to me of God. With them, we take the time to talk to the Lord, each one in her own language. It is often the Tower of Babel, but God is present at the heart of this encounter.
- To dare to approach them, be at their level, become their companion, walk with them, seek the sense of my presence, listen through their darkness but also my own, not choose the most likeable person. They all have a right to my presence and my friendship. Sometimes I do not know where I am going in the encounter, but I know that the Lord is there at its heart and that He is waiting for me.
- Not to judge them. Their shared stories make me understand their path of suffering: sold by their family, repeatedly raped, burnt on their legs with cigarettes, struck by mercenaries...

“Go towards” Testimony

and there they are, smiling, welcoming, always ready to leave their hell.

I discovered that in each stage of life, my way of being at the service of these young woman evolves. I have white hair, and they expect from me the attention, unconditional relationship and tender love of their grandmother back in their home country (often the only emotional and family tie remaining in their country).

What is their future? They could never return to their country: rejection by their family, dishonor, failure to respect the commitments made during the voodoo ceremony. We are the memory of what they share with us about the children of the family, of their suffering.

Accept to suffer with them. Like Saint Vincent, “I suffer with your suffering.” My encounter with these young women moves me; I am afflicted by their distress, and I think this was how Jesus felt in the Gospel. We often read, “Jesus was moved with compassion.”

Saint Vincent said, *“Do not care for prisoners if you do not accept to be their subjects and their students. Those whom we call ‘miserable’ are those who must evangelize and convert us. After God, it is to them that I owe the most!”*

Sister Solange RAULT
Daughter of Charity

2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Presentation of the theme:
“Encounter”

It's my pleasure to be able to share with you a few thoughts on the word “encounter.” Although it is the last word in the Assemblies' theme, that doesn't make it the least important! Quite the contrary! Genuine encounter is a divine grace that gives birth to new things and can change our life and the life of others. An authentic encounter begins when we have the courage to “stop,” to let ourselves be disturbed in order to give whoever approaches us a little of our time, an encouraging word and above all our presence with all that we are so that the other person feels accepted, loved and important in someone's eyes.

Just like Jesus: He let himself be disturbed; He stopped to encounter, to offer an understanding, sharing and compassionate regard and to speak about the unconditional nature of God's love for all people, especially for those who are “labelled” and marginalized.

We, the Daughters of Charity, also experience encounter with God, in community and in the service of persons who are poor daily. Each encounter is an opportunity for us to discover *Christ in those who are poor and those who are poor in Christ* (C. 10b). It is an opportunity to create a relationship, to welcome the other person, to give hope. The Gospel show us many examples; let us take a moment with a few of them.

Consider Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus. Jesus does not see a tax collector, a rich and dishonest man; rather, He sees in Zacchaeus a “man,” a person created in the image of God with his sinful condition.

Presentation of the theme: “Encounter”

On the other hand, Zacchaeus himself has the desire to meet Jesus. He is short of stature... but he overcomes the limitation of his height by climbing a sycamore tree! And Jesus enters into dialogue with him, making us understand that each encounter is a discovery of the other person, an interaction.

Another of Jesus’ significant encounters is with the sinful woman. Again, He does not see the prostitute; He sees a woman, a person, and values her way of giving freely and her human gestures. Jesus does not label people; He awakens a person to each encounter by proclaiming mercy made evident in forgiveness.

On the road to Emmaus, the two discouraged and hopeless disciples are conversing. Jesus goes out to meet them, mixes with them, walks with them and makes their hearts burn. Every authentic encounter sets hearts on fire and changes lives!

Chapter two of Mark’s Gospel speaks of four men with an intelligent and creative faith, who make it possible for a paralyzed man to encounter Jesus by removing the roof of the house. A single man could not satisfy the paralyzed man’s desire, but together they succeed. Is not our community life like these four men’s way of acting together? We draw strength in community for our mission, and, imbued with the inner fire of charity and creativity, we do everything in our power to enable people who are poor to encounter Jesus even when that seems impossible.

I am very much aware that encountering each other during this long period of Covid was and continues to be very difficult, sometimes even impossible. It’s true that technology with its “virtual gatherings” helped us to maintain relationships, but it did not allow us to encounter each other in the deepest sense of the word. It is precisely in this situation that we rediscovered the importance of relationships consisting of listening, fraternity, closeness, understanding looks and hands that touch to heal and show closeness. Indeed, as Pope Francis says, in order to have a real encounter, we need to *“hit the streets... [otherwise], we remain mere spectators... in order to know, we need to encounter, to let the person in front of me speak, to let his or her testimony reach me”* (Message for the 55th World Communications Day, January 23, 2021).

Dear Sisters, I wish for all of you and for myself, wherever we may be, that we might take risks and dare the encounter as Mary did after the Annunciation.

Mary breaks through the gate in haste... it is the haste of encounter and service, the haste of those who want to announce Christ present in them.

Mary goes out to encounter Elizabeth with boldness and courage. A strong woman, she faces a long, dangerous journey alone.

Mary encounters Elizabeth... it is the joy of encounter, not of a chance encounter but one desired by God Himself. It is the encounter of two mothers visited and sent by God to respond to His loving plan.

Let us follow Mary's steps as well in order to encounter and serve each person whom the Lord places on our path... then, yes, we will feel our hearts burning within us and we will be a blessing for those who are poor, for the Church and for the Company. This is my wish for us!

Now, Sister Rochelie, originally from the Province of St. Louise de Marillac-Asia, will present us her encounter with God in the midst of darkness, in evacuation centers during a war on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines.

Sister Luisa FARRI
Daughter of Charity

2021 GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Experience of a Sister from the Philippines

God in the Midst of Darkness

Darkness...

On May 23, 2017, a war that lasted for 5 months broke out between Philippine government forces and an alliance of ISIS-aligned rebel groups and foreign fighters in Marawi. Marawi, on the southern island of Mindanao, is officially known as the Islamic City of Marawi, the largest Muslim city in a predominantly Catholic Philippines. The intense fighting and aerial bombing left approximately 300,000 homeless. About 200,000 of those displaced went to evacuation centers... mostly women and children whose fathers, husbands and brothers were either killed or taken by the rebel group and forced to become ISIS soldiers.

At the heart of darkness...

Mindanao State University in Marawi has 45,990 students, about 10% of whom are Christians. A local community of four Sisters is inserted in the university to support and accompany the Christian students. The Sisters were forced to leave the area to ensure the safety of the students who refused to leave without them. I was part of the first group of four Sisters sent by the Province to the evacuation centers.

The grace that transforms everything...

I grew up seeing, hearing and experiencing the conflict and the violence between Christians and Muslims. Growing up, I was also told to keep my distance from the Muslims... that I cannot befriend them. I went to Marawi, a Daughter of Charity, yes, but carrying with me fears, mistrust,

biases that were products of my personal history. We were advised to wear civilian clothes so as not to be too visible, not to call too much attention and to facilitate moving around the five evacuation centers, but after thoroughly reflecting on the matter, we opted to wear the habit... so we could easily be identified, approached when help is needed.

I was stiff with fear and insecurity on my first visit, pressed on all sides by people, always conscious that we could be attacked and taken any time. But as the days progressed and we began to share stories, sat close together and looked at each other, a certain comforting familiarity began to mark our conversations. There were moments when all the differences, all the historical, religious and cultural scars that separated us melted away in the face of a shared humanity: we were all afraid, we all felt unsafe, we all have the same God even if we call Him different names. The men, women and children at the centers had experienced losses from which they will never recover: no houses, no future, lost loved ones. I was ashamed of my anxieties in the face of their grief and desolation.

The encounter that redeems

In the span of one month, we had moved from being enemies and strangers to being friends and brothers and sisters. I never thought that the day would come when I could entrust my life and my safety to people whom I was taught to mistrust. But all through our visits to the different camps, our Muslim friends and guides protected us with their lives; they led us through unknown roads and pathways as we walked to the other centers to avoid encountering the rebels. They taught us when to keep still and be quiet, and when to feel safe.

I went to Marawi believing that I would give... I came back from Marawi richer than I ever was, having received so much from my Muslim friends. My Marawi experience taught me that at the heart of darkness, God's light and love shine... that grace transforms everything... that when we open ourselves to encounters, we receive redemption.

Sister Rochelie BLANCIA
Daughter of Charity

CHALLENGE OF THE MYSTIQUE OF LIVING TOGETHER

With a fraternal heart purified day after day

C

Challenge
of the
Mystique
of living
together

Pope John Paul II told young people gathered in 1980 at the Stadium of Princes in Paris, “*The heart is the opening of the whole being to the existence of others, the capacity for figuring them out, for understanding them. Such a true and deep sensitivity makes us vulnerable, and that is why some people are tempted to reject it and harden themselves; loving is, therefore, essentially to give oneself to others.*”

Our lives are made for love; we are called to be artisans of peace and fraternity in Christ’s name so that all might recognize that the saving truth is found neither in gold nor silver but in the child of Bethlehem. It is this child who inaugurates the only authentic revolution, the revolution of love.

Today, the global situation regarding the coronavirus is less threatening, allowing us to see each other “for real,” as young people say, to gather, to share in the simple happiness of being with each other. However, we should not forget all that was experienced during the periods of “lockdown,” the great reactions of solidarity and collaboration to relieve persons who are poor, all the creativity put to work to break down, in one way or another, all the barriers that went up and distanced us from each other.

The fraternity lived in local communities during this pandemic period continues to call us forth today to

constantly return to the fraternal dimension of our vocation and do everything to “take care” of our Sisters. These testimonies of fraternity, Gospel pearls of everyday life, are collected in this and the next two issues under the heading “Challenge of the mystique of living together.” They encourage each one of us to rejoice today to be able to tenderly and peacefully love our Sisters in the situation that is ours and to confidently and enthusiastically throw ourselves into this because *“This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

Echoes Coordinating Committee

Province of Cameroon

Fraternity, a shared diversity

A spiritual writer, Jean-Pierre de Caussade, author of *Surrender to Divine Providence*, advises living in the present moment, accepting obstacles with love and humility and connecting ourselves to God daily. He also states that, in one way or another, every event expresses the will of God, He who wants to do everything possible to improve the fate of those who love Him.

Of course, God does not “order” the evil that a pandemic, for example, represents, but God may allow it so that we might draw some lessons.

This Covid-19 pandemic places us in an unprecedented situation of difficulties and tragedies on a global scale and disrupts our plans. This omnipresent threat calls into question the certainties that we had taken for granted. We painfully live this unimaginable paradox: in order to survive, we must isolate from each other. However, in learning to live isolated from each other, we become more aware of how essential life with others is.

The urgency of this crisis also calls for solidarity, cooperation and unity. In our local communities, in our workplaces, in cities and villages and even throughout the world, mutual assistance is coordinated, charitable gestures and actions abound. In this context, we should afford special attention to the weakest among us: elderly people, disabled people, prisoners, displaced persons, etc.

The local community in Fouban, made up of five Sisters, is located in western Cameroon in the department of Noun. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Sisters were present in the medical center of Kuéka, assured parish ministry and the education of disabled children and,

with the Vincentian Family, served elderly people, displaced persons and prisoners.

All of a sudden, this extremely serious illness appeared in a spectacular way in Foumban, causing panic. In the local community, we had taken measures to face this pandemic while continuing our service of persons who are poor in the hospital, the neighborhood, the parish and the prison.

Services were restructured. At the medical center of Kuéka, we had to change our routine and adopt preventative measures. The center had to hire additional staff to welcome patients at the door, distribute masks and hand sanitizer and set up hand-washing stations. Material to fight the pandemic (masks, sanitizer, oxygen, etc.) was increased in the lab and hospital wards.

Together, with courage and trust in God, we endeavored to welcome patients to our health care facility. First, we went with a Vincentian priest to all the ward rooms to pray and place a Miraculous Medal on all the patient beds even if the majority of the population is Muslim. (Cameroon has nearly 5 million Muslims, and Foumban is the center of Islam here.) All together, we prayed to God.

Signs explaining the preventative measures to follow were posted all over, and messages broadcast by radio and television, as well as the words of our Bishop, helped the population to understand the gravity of the situation.

The Sultan, King of Bamoun and a Senator of the Republic, asked us to scrupulously observe the preventative measures ordered by the government, to avoid all gatherings and to limit contacts that would contribute to community transmission of the illness. He further requested that the doors of mosques and Catholic and Protestant churches be closed and that everyone continue to pray at home to beseech humanity's protection against Covid-19 and peace everywhere in the world, especially in Cameroon, as a means to celebrate the policy of peaceful co-habitation among the monotheistic religions in Noun.

Challenge of the Mystique of Living Together

The parish had to suspend all its activities and celebrations; the parish kindergarten, primary school and intermediary school were closed. What sadness and desolation for both Christians and Muslims. Fortunately, the parish priest quietly came each day to the community house to celebrate Eucharist, which allowed us to continue to distribute communion to the sick in their homes. At the same time, we brought food, medicine and other supplies to elderly people, disabled children, prisoners and displaced persons.

Up to this time during the pandemic, we have received and tested 920 people at the medical center, 205 of whom tested positive and 15 who were hospitalized; 187 people were treated as out-patients, and three died. We received many forms of financial, material and spiritual assistance from the Province, the Motherhouse, an NGO (Manos Unidas), the Cameroon Survival Initiative, Ricover, the Sultan and Archbishop Kleda of the Archdiocese of Douala, who is also a phytotherapist. The Archbishop placed the country under the protection of the Virgin Mary and, thanks to his knowledge, prepared two treatments based on medicinal plants to treat the symptoms of coronavirus. All the patients who took these traditional medicines, called Adsak Covid and Covid elixir, were cured.

Two therapeutic solutions against Covid-19: Covid exlir and Adsak Covid

In Cameroon, these two plant-based treatments offered by Archbishop Kleda were administered free of charge in about ten Catholic health facilities in Douala, Yaoundé, Bafoussam and our medical center. At the end of January 2021, the prelate's treatment had already made it possible to relieve more than 10,000 patients. Since then, these remedies have been authorized by the government as “supplementary therapy” for this pandemic illness.

In our center, this plant-based medicine allowed us to care for more than 750 patients. We give thanks to God for this gift given to Archbishop Kleda and pray to God for all our benefactors, particularly Nescafé for what it did for the medical staff.

Covid-19 calls us to draw lessons from this pandemic: first of all, that humanity has no borders and then that we should become aware of the fragility of life. We hold on to eight ideas from this difficult situation:

- * The fragility of the human being.
- * Belonging to the human family: beyond borders and ethnic groups, we are all equal, created in the image and likeness of God.
- * We are not masters of our fate; we do not have total control over things.
- * Exclusion is a form of suffering for all. We should remain benevolent toward others, whatever their situation.
- * God is the master of our lives; He invites us to have faith in Him, to trust Him in trials and storms. Love and faith chase away fear.
- * The importance of intercessory prayer for all those who suffer and of placing ourselves under the protection of the God of mercy.
- * The vanity of our lives. This health crisis reminds us what is really important in life.
- * The hope that God's life is stronger than death: *"I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."*

Contemplating Jesus' suffering and solidarity with each of us, we learn how to live each day trusting in God. Strengthened by His love, we strive for conversion in order to practice more humane relationships with others and to serve those who are poor increasingly well. *"Our prayers are not magic formulas,"* said Monsignor Beschi, Bishop of Bergamo (Italy). Faith in God does not magically solve our problems, but it does give us the inner strength to truly commit ourselves to the service of our suffering brothers and sisters.

Even if we do not share the same faith, we can all draw forth the best of ourselves from these testimonies of universal fraternity. We are grateful when the human race works together to make life win out; it is the sign that the love of God is indeed present among us.

Local community in Fouban

Province of the Near East

Brothers all

The encyclical *Fratelli tutti* draws us into a universal desire for living in fraternity with everyone, recognizing the dignity of each human person.

“We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead...” (*Fratelli tutti*, 8).

In this period of Covid-19, many families, businesses and even entire regions are suffering from isolation, separation and grief. Our local communities have not been spared these difficulties. Several Sisters lost a member of their family and could not accompany the deceased to their final resting place. Thus, as soon as restrictions were relaxed, the Sisters in the Holy Land came together with those of Jerusalem to unite our prayer for all the deceased of our families and communities. Despite the pain of these losses, we were truly happy to be together again.

“We want to be a Church that serves... in order to accompany life, to sustain hope...” (*Fratelli tutti*, 276).

One day in February, a young couple arrived at the hospital for the birth of their first child. The Arab-Israeli father and American mother had been living in Israel for only a short time. The delivery was complicated, and the baby’s life was in danger. The medical team immediately came together to save the boy’s life, but he risked a severe life-long disability. The entire local community began to pray, and I was asked to offer spiritual accompaniment to the parents, especially the mother, who only spoke English. For a month, we discussed their difficulties and worries amid high levels of Covid-19 in the country; we also shared our faith and prayer.

Little by little, the health of little Angelo improved, and he was able to leave the hospital after a month. Since then, we continue to share by telephone, and the parents promised to come and see us when their baby is a little stronger.

“It is my desire that, in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity” (Fratelli tutti, 8).

Like several hospitals in the country, ours opened a specialized ward for mothers and children struck by Covid-19.

However, the virus also reached the geriatric ward, which was then subjected to a very strict lockdown. Many employees who tested positive were placed in quarantine. Their absence sorely tried the medical staff. The hospital administration then issued a call to all the hospital staff to face this major medical crisis and ensure continued care in the geriatric ward. Volunteers set into action. In addition to providing care, they strived to fight against the stressful atmosphere caused by this pandemic, doing everything possible to support the patients and their families. We admired all these gestures of solidarity despite the fear of contagion with dangerous consequences for their health. We gave thanks to God for so much dedication and generosity.

Nazareth Hospital local community

Province of Cali

A community experience during the pandemic

The local community of the Santa Luisa social service in Circasia is located in the department of Quindio in central Colombia.

We are five Sisters; the two youngest are involved in education ministry, and the three others, 75-83 years of age, help in the house, accompany Vincentian Family groups, offer preschool education to poor children in the town's home for children and work to empower mothers.

During the pandemic, the two Sisters were not going to the school, and we had to come up with a way to spend our days together. After some time of confusion, we drew up a schedule together for housework, meal preparation and individual activities. In the afternoon, we decided to unite ourselves to the suffering of the population, the news of which was increasingly worrisome. On the street-facing window of our oratory, we posted a large sign that read, "***You are not alone. Here, we accompany you in prayer. Please leave us your prayer intentions.***" Next to the sign was a basket with a pen and small pieces of paper on which people could write their intentions. Each day, we read them and then placed them at the feet of the Virgin Mary, and we prayed the Divine Mercy chaplet for these intentions at 3 o'clock.

We also scheduled an hour of physical exercise as indicated through the internet by a Mexican physiotherapist with whom we had established a friendship.

The two Sister teachers taught the older ones to use social networks, platforms and other tools that allowed them to communicate with the members of Vincentian Family groups whom they accompanied. It turned into a very rich experience for all.

We also took advantage of these social networks for our personal formation on Catholic websites: a conference, “Renew me,” led by Father Miguel Guerra from Mexico and meetings with Father Pedro Justo Berrio, a Colombian priest. This helped us to improve our life together. Finally, we enrolled in a free online course on handicrafts.

We became more aware of the extent of our human complexity and learned to better accept ourselves as we are for a more serene community life.

“We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father’s love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son” (17th World Youth Day, Pope John Paul II, homily of July 28, 2002).

Today, we better understand the importance of making the most of all that is offered on the internet for human growth because, in order to be women of hope, we should first develop our humanity and place all our energy and the tools we have at the service of community life.

Yes, “hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile” (Fratelli tutti, 55).

Sister María NORBEY GUTIÉRREZ
and the local community in Circasia

Province of Krakow

“War never again!”

(Saint John Paul II)

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*News
from the
Provinces*

The events of life, be they joyful or sorrowful, always alter our personal history: the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, assuming a position of great responsibility as was the case, for example, for John Paul II the day of his election, October 16, 1978, but also, for us, the day of our entrance into the Company or the day we made vows for the first time... There are also events that change the course of history for an entire people.

February 24, 2022

In the history of Ukraine, February 20, 2014, is called “Black Thursday” because of the tragedies that occurred that day. Since then, another Thursday has been written into its history: February 24, 2022! That morning, residents were awakened by the sound of their cell phone announcing an incoming text message: “It’s starting! The sky is closed.” Almost all the Ukrainian airports were on fire, and military barracks were bombed, including in Podilsk, 25 km (15 miles) from Balta. The radio announced the first victims of this armed conflict. There was panic all around; people had to pack their bags and evacuate in a half-hour. Leaving, they would take a last look at their house, perhaps for the last time.

Today, the 35th day of the war, we know that those who chose to hide in basements or shelters had to flee three weeks later to protect their children.

Mission of Charity

In this difficult and uncertain time, the Sisters of our four local communities in Ukraine wished to remain there to help those who are poor. However, as a precaution for their safety, it was decided that the Sisters in Balta and Odessa move to the west of the country.

The whole world is surprised by the strength and unity of the Ukrainian people. What no government managed to do during the last thirty years since the country's independence, the invasion of the Russian army and the war accomplished. Without hesitation, the Ukrainian people united against the invader, some of them enlisting to defend their country and others helping to evacuate residents, care for them and find them safe shelter.

The first days of the war, there were long lines on both side of the border: some were leaving the country while others were returning to defend their homeland.

As Daughters of Charity, we try to respond to the most urgent needs. First, we arranged travel for those who, after fleeing the most at-risk regions, stop for a few days in Sniatyn before setting off for Poland. Each day, many requests come to us from different areas of the country, and we arrange for the transportation of women, children and elderly people toward the border.

At the border, we receive all the humanitarian assistance collected in Poland (by the Province, MISEVI, Caritas...) and transport the food, medicine, hygiene products and other goods on to Sniatyn.

Many of the numerous refugees who settle in Sniatyn and Starozyniec need assistance. Volunteers bring these refugees, soldiers and those who remain in the combat zones what they need. We send packages to the families of the children whom we had been serving in Balta.

In the local community of Sniatyn, the Sisters carry on with home visits to elderly people with no one to care for them and work at the kindergarten where they enroll many young children who fled eastern Ukraine with their parents.

Sisters' Testimonies

In Starozyniec, the Sisters continue to prepare meals for those who are poor. Each day, we entrust the Ukrainian people, soldiers, health care workers and priests to God and thank Him for all the benefactors, families hosting refugees abroad and volunteers who give of their time to support their brothers and sisters in need.

Prayer is our weapon, and we “fight” with it each day. We offer Miraculous Medals and rosaries to soldiers and others who are involved in the defense of the country. We often go to pray at the grave of Blessed Marta Wiecka, who is called the “little mother,” where we always meet individuals or small groups who come to ask for her intercession.

The border

After the attack on the nuclear power plant of Enerhodar (Zaporizhzhia), many people moved westward. On March 5, we brought a large group of refugees to the Polish border. We had already gone there several times, but that day, mothers had to walk more than 12 kilometers (7 miles) with their young children before being able to cross the border. We were able to continue in a vehicle until the first check point, where there was a line of more than 500 people. After the first checkpoint, the driver was able to remain in the vehicle, but we had to continue on foot. At the second checkpoint, there was another line of more than 500 people. Finally, we were able to pass the second checkpoint and then meet up again with our driver who was waiting for us with the vehicle. At that point, a volunteer approached to ask us to take a severely disabled elderly woman, who was walking with great difficulty with her cane, and her husband, who had on his back two bundles tied to each other: two small sheets as their only treasure. We took them into our vehicle, even if it was already quite full.

Along the way, we got to know these new passengers: Natasza and Andrij had decided to leave their home in Kiev three days ago and had eaten nothing in the last day.

When we arrived at the border, we discovered that we again had to wait in a line that was longer than the two previous ones combined. Night was falling, and it was cold. I took the couple, incapable of standing for hours, straight to the border control. Although it was not far, it took us a

long time to make it there. This difficult journey was a beautiful lesson of love for me: the husband supported his disabled wife as best he could and gently encouraged her. Andrij did not want me to help him carry his bundles. They finally crossed the border. What a relief! I left them some supplies for the rest of their journey before bidding them farewell and going back to my group of mothers and children.

The evacuation of civilians to less dangerous areas is an experience rich in fraternity and solidarity but also in suffering and exhaustion, even to the point of fainting for some. SSF-Rescuers without Borders does what it can, but the lack of medicine and especially the language barrier are not always easy to overcome. How can they know if fainting is due to a serious illness? In most cases, it is a result of exhaustion, and a little hot tea, chocolate or some movements help them to recover. The medics tend to the more serious cases.

This is more difficult for sick or autistic children; they have a separate tent where it is calmer and they can stay with their mother.

People avoid saying that they feel poorly so that they don't lose their place in line. It was in such a case that the medics brought a Vietnamese mother from Kiev, in a worrisome state due to insufficient nourishment. Waiting for his mother to recover, her son placed himself at the service of the volunteers distributing food and drink to those who needed them.

The meaning of words

In such difficult situations, people look at life differently, and ordinary words take on new meaning. The word “war,” having become so real, fills us with fear and suffering. The word “silence,” for its part, does not mean that bombing and air raid sirens have stopped but that a loved one is alive.

Far away, and yet so close

Today, the world can locate Ukraine on the map and knows Ukrainian cities such as Mariupol, Kharkiv, Irpin and Chernihiv. People who house refugees learn the name of the city from which they come, where they left everything and where they want to return right away after Ukraine's victory.

Sisters' Testimonies

Millions of Ukrainians whose lives are punctuated by sirens describe the hell of living in the cities of Okhtyrka, Izium, Bucha, Hostomel, Sieverodonetsk, Kramatorsk, Enerhodar, Trostianets, Nizhyn... and Mariupol...

The “Golgotha” of Ukraine

One day follows another, and tragedies pile up. Here are a few among so many others.

As bombs are heard falling, a mother creeps into the garden to bury her daughter under a tree and then crawls back to the shelter where her younger child, seriously wounded, is waiting for her.

A woman is raped in front of her husband; immediately afterwards and before her eyes, her husband is shot point-blank because he was judged too nationalist.

A young woman married the first day of the war stares at the lid of the casket closing on the face of her husband who just died.

The first day of the war, a young family goes to visit the elderly parents. The parents have an appointment at the hospital, and upon their return, they find their house bombed and their children and grandson buried under the rubble.

As the air raid siren is ringing, a young pregnant woman runs to shelter. A shot is fired, and she falls and dies on the spot.

The Resurrection

After the Golgotha of Jerusalem, there was the Resurrection, and Jesus went to Galilee. This is the hope of the Ukrainian population.

Sister Halina LUPTOWICZ
Daughter of Charity

Province of Krakow

*“I was a stranger,
and you welcomed me.”*

How many times have we been moved as we read the testimonies of our Sisters throughout the world describing the situation of refugees forced to flee their country due to military conflicts or religious persecution... but we never imaged that we would abruptly find ourselves in the same situation and witness the arrival of a countless stream of people forced to leave their homeland, house and security... A large number of Ukrainians arrive daily in Krakow.

The first Ukrainian families were welcomed to the Provincial House of Krakow on February 28, 2022; they settled into the rooms ordinarily reserved for guests or those passing through. Each day, though, their number increased. The Provincial House is located across from the main train station, and the Caritas volunteers directed mothers and children to us even if they intended to continue traveling further. This allowed them to regain their strength over several days. We prepared two large dormitories, which were quickly filled, and we set up a third large room for them. Other neighboring local communities also hosted several families who did not know where to turn.

We wondered how it could be possible to set off on such a long journey with small children, luggage... and the awareness of leaving everything behind.

Those passing through who are staying at the Provincial House eat there, except the noon meal, which they have at the neighboring local community. The children go to the day center run by our Sisters. Several Daughters of Charity and two Ukrainian volunteers serve them.

Sisters' Testimonies

The Provincial House of Krakow continues to house refugees who wish to take a break before traveling further, but they are currently slightly less numerous.

In total, fourteen local communities in the Province host nearly 150 Ukrainians, including seven families (seventeen individuals) at the Provincial House, mainly mothers with their children, but also adults and elderly people.

Each local community accompanies these families for whom they obtain the documents necessary for remaining in Poland. The Ukrainian children go to various schools; thirty-nine of them attend kindergartens run by the Daughters of Charity. Some adults have already found work, and those whose health requires medical care receive it.

We are grateful to all those who materially and spiritually help us to offer this hospitality, both in Poland and with our Sisters in Ukraine. May the Lord grant us peace and cut short all this suffering.

Sister Monika DŁUBACZ
Daughter of Charity

*In preparation for the 30th anniversary
of the martyrdom of
Blessed Lindalva Justo de Oliveira*

Short biography of Sister Lindalva



Introduction

“It is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity” (Lumen Gentium, 40).

*History of
the Company*

Among those who decide to follow Christ, some stand out for their radical commitment to love Him faithfully even unto death. These men and women who seek to do only the will of God hold nothing back for themselves, not even their own life. The Church puts them forward as models of virtue and prophetic action, sources of inspiration for everyone who seeks to continue the mission of the Son of God.

Rather than rattling off prayer upon prayer to them, it is preferable to contemplate their way of living and acting as a means to help us apply the Good News of Jesus, in fidelity to what the Spirit inspires in our hearts, within the reality of our life and the life of those who are poor. *“By fixing our eyes on them and feeling united with them, [...] we learn how we can and should realize what Christ taught us and how to put what He preached into practice.”¹*

1. MOLINARI, P. Verbete. In: DE FIORES, Stefano; GOFFI, Tullo. *Dicionário de Espiritualidade [Dictionnary of Spirituality]*. São Paulo: Paulus, 1993, p. 1040.

Short biography of Sister Lindalva

In the Vincentian Family, many lay people, Sisters, Priests and Brothers, living their specific vocation, are presented by the Church as models of holiness for all those who are called to follow Jesus according to the charism of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac. The variety of specific vocations, the diversity of apostolic experiences and the differences in eras and social realities in which they lived make these models of Vincentian holiness a source of spiritual richness and an inexhaustible missionary inspiration. Their life should be read in the light of the Gospel and Vincentian values that they developed as they were attentive to the calls of their context.

In recent years, the Company of the Daughters of Charity has celebrated the beatification of four Sisters, two of whom were martyrs. In 2013, twenty Spanish Sisters were beatified as martyrs from the Spanish civil war. There would be much to say about the objective and necessity of the canonization process since beatification is the first step. However, beyond the “official” recognition of the Church, it seems important to reflect on how these brothers and sisters who have gone before us can be a source of inspiration for our vocation and service of persons who are poor still today. Blessed Lindalva Justo de Oliveira represents the Brazilian culture and the way that the Vincentian charism is inculturated in our country.

Sister Lindalva’s gift of self to Christ through joyful and tireless service of persons who are poor was marked by the gift of her life, recognized by the Church as martyrdom. For her beatification to serve its purpose, we should know her story and some aspects of her personality that are a sign and encouragement for a meaningful life.

Birth and youth

Lindalva was born on October 20, 1953, at Sítio Malhada da Areia, in the city of Açú - Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, the sixth of thirteen children. She was baptized on January 7, 1954, the date chosen for the liturgical celebration of her memorial.

Her family was materially poor but rich in the values of Christian faith, work and family unity. It is thus not surprising that, as a Daughter of Charity, Lindalva would demonstrate a strong faith, tireless dedication

to the service of elderly people and great cordiality in her relationships with her Sisters.

Her parents wanted to educate their children in the faith and to offer them the possibility to study. At home, Lindalva learned the importance of studies in order to serve competently. As a Daughter of Charity, she would continue them: a course in Biblical catechetics, a driver's license in order to drive the Sisters and elderly people to their medical appointments. *"The Sisters are convinced of the need for ongoing formation, not only to understand more fully their vocation and its significance in the Church and in the world, but also to keep their cultural and professional knowledge up to date, always with a view to better service."*²

At a very young age, Lindalva demonstrated her sense of responsibility, her availability and her attention to others. Aware of the efforts made by her parents to raise their children, Lindalva wanted to help them and was always ready to collaborate with her mother in household tasks or the care of her younger brothers and sisters. Nonetheless, she liked to play like any other child her age; her passion was dressing her clay dolls with scraps of cloth.

A little older, she wanted to be pretty! *"Whenever she could, she would spend time brushing her hair and making up her face. Her sisters teased her, calling her 'little princess.' She would not respond but would instead invite them to care for themselves and put on a little makeup to make a better impression."*³

The two main lessons that Lindalva learned at home were love of work and the ability to collaborate with others. Very young, she liked to help sick people and children in her free time. This desire to be of service to others reveals her attention to others' needs and her capacity to cooperate with others for the common good.

2. C. 58.

3. PASSARELLI, Gaetano. *Fidèle jusqu'au martyre. Bienheureuse Lindalva Justo de Oliveira, Fille de la Charité de Saint Vincent de Paul. Profil biographique et spirituel* [Faithful to martyrdom: Blessed Lindalva Justo de Oliveira, Daughter of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. Spiritual and biographical portrait]. Médiaspaul, 2010, p.16.

Short biography of Sister Lindalva

After obtaining her diploma as an administrative assistant, she worked in a textile factory in the women's clothing department; she was also a cashier in another store and a service station. She spent little on herself and preferred to buy things for others, particularly for her brother's family as a sign of her gratitude for the hospitality that he had offered her.

What characterized her youth was a simple life dedicated to her family, studies and work but also to pastimes on the beach with her friends. She resembled any young Brazilian seeking to establish her life and give it meaning.

Lindalva thus had a normal childhood and adolescence in a Christian family. However, one day, she confided to one of her friends that she preferred reading the Bible to watching television. Little by little, she discovered the beauty of life. Later, she would discover the beauty of Christ present in those who are poor, which would satisfy her heart and give meaning to her life.

Discerning and accepting her vocation

Lindalva's house was located on the outskirts of the city of Natal-Rio Grande do Norte. She would never forget her neighbors, and whenever she could, she would bring clothes for the children.

After her father's death, a Providential encounter with a Daughter of Charity would sow a Vincentian seed in her heart. This seed would grow as she visited the retirement home. *“What had up to then been a simple collaboration, a volunteer service, began to have a clearer purpose. Her workday completed, she would go to help the Sisters in the home for the elderly, or she would simply return home to dedicate herself to reading and studying the Bible and guitar. She resumed her studies, not to earn a degree, but to acquire professional skills and help those in need, be they children or elderly people. Therefore, some days she took a class to be a home nurse aide.”*⁴

With the elderly, Lindalva was full of joy and laughter. For many of them, her kindness and willingness to help restored their happiness and

4. PASSARELLI, p. 23.

self-respect. Her attitudes reflect her deepest convictions as she would describe them in her request to enter postulancy: *“I want to find heavenly happiness, overflow with joy, help my neighbor and have boundless energy for doing good.”*⁵ People who knew her would say the same.

Later, what would impress her Sisters was the solidity of her vocation and her gift of self to serve the poorest of the poor, two values firmly anchored in her reserved and reflective personality. Never saying much about what she felt or wanted, Lindalva remained in an attitude of seeking God’s will, attentive to what the Lord might tell her in prayer or Holy Scripture, and available to serve those most in need.

This relationship with those who are poor would become the “fertilizer” that would cause the seed of her Vincentian vocation to sprout. Although this decision surprised her family, it was the result of a path traveled simply, quietly but seriously. Therefore, her commitment to the Company was peaceful and complete: *“The concept of holiness appears in its true richness as a reality lived deliberately, which penetrates the life of the person precisely because, with the richness of his or her being and the spontaneity of his or her free will, the person unites with God and gives him or herself to Him with ardent love.”*⁶

Daughter of Charity and martyr

On July 16, 1989, Lindalva entered the Seminary of the Daughters of Charity. She deepened her vocation, the Vincentian charism and the spirituality of the Company.

The letters that she wrote to her family and friends witness to her joy in giving herself to God and to persons who are poor. *“With my heart full of joy and remembrance, I am writing to tell you how happy I am to have received the grace of being called by God and to experience such a grace-filled Seminary... My joy is immense...”*⁷

Her faith, her trust in God and in others and her ability to overcome difficulties led her to accompany and advise members of her family experiencing very difficult situations. Her letters express genuine

5. PASSARELLI, p. 25.

6. MOLINARI, p. 1032.

7. PASSARELLI, p. 32.

Short biography of Sister Lindalva

affection, the certainty that every human being is capable of goodness and the firm conviction that God's grace can transform a life. Her "pastoral letters" were very successful.

Sister Lindalva had her apostolic experience at the hospital in Recife. She noticed the humiliation of the poor patients from distant rural areas: their dirty clothes were taken and thrown in a corner. Demonstrating initiative, courage and creativity, Sister Lindalva did not hesitate to pick up, wash and mend these clothes in order to return them to their owners at their discharge from the hospital.

At the end of Seminary, Sister Lindalva was sent on mission on January 26, 1991, to Abrigo Dom Pedro II (retirement home) in Salvador, an ideal place to put into practice the life plan described in her letter requesting admission to postulancy: "*overflow with joy, help my neighbor and have boundless energy for doing good.*"⁸ Her contagious good humor and tireless availability brought happiness to the local community, the house and the infirmary of elderly people for whom she had responsibility.

In community, she always wanted to learn and go deeper into her vocation. She participated in community gatherings, and if she had to return to the infirmary in the evening, she asked a Sister to go with her.

She listened attentively to the elderly people, comforted them and demonstrated patience with the most difficult and weakest ones. Her Sister Servant observed, "*... she never had to be asked to take care of someone; above all, she sought the best for her sick residents...*"⁹ She played guitar, sang with them and strove to show appreciation for the small services that they could render inside or outside the retirement home, for which she would reward them with a little money, clothes or shoes.

Sister Lindalva took great care of the personal hygiene of the elderly as well as the cleanliness of their beds and clothes. Her concern was not limited to their physical wellbeing. She prayed with them and accompanied them so they could participate in the Eucharist and the sacrament of Reconciliation. Those who could move about were invited to go to the Shrine of Bonfim. Sister Lindalva was a good driver,

8. PASSARELLI, p. 25.

9. PASSARELLI, p. 48.

so whenever she drove the chaplain home, she brought some elderly residents with her to give them an opportunity to go out.

The elderly residents were grateful for the affection that she showed for each one of them, and even if she sometimes corrected them and drew their attention to certain details, they admired her greatly. When she went to Mass or a prayer service, one resident or another always wanted to go with her. Sister Lindalva put into practice one of the lessons of Saint Louise: “... *try to win their hearts by support and cordiality*” (Saint Louise, L. 105, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 115).

Sister Lindalva also established a good relationship with social services, which helped her to present the elderly people’s needs and defend them when necessary.

Faithful to the Founders’ inspiration, Sister Lindalva was aware of the importance of going towards and encountering those who are the farthest off. She joined the group of Ladies of Charity (AIC) of the parish and visited the sick and elderly with them. Gaining awareness of the abandonment and indigence of many people through contact with that reality impelled Sister Lindalva to lobby social services to take appropriate measures. Knowing the necessity of demanding that public officials fulfill their role, she understood the importance of working in partnership with institutions and lay people for the good of those who are poor. All this is very much in line with our Constitutions and Statutes: “*In loyal collaboration, the Sisters work jointly with others in a spirit of sharing, living the values that the Company professes. Cooperation with private or public agencies enables them to offer better service and more extensive Gospel witness.*”¹⁰

For two years, Sister Lindalva bore witness to her immense joy in giving her life to Christ present in the elderly people whom she served. “*The serenity and joy that Sister Lindalva found in her action on behalf of others, such as all her Sisters and the people around her, was evident. Even in the tensest moments, she was gay and smiling because she placed all her hope in God.*”¹¹ Sister Lindalva thus incarnated in her life what had so impressed Saint Vincent several centuries earlier: “*Some people have the holy custom of never approaching anyone except with*

10. S. 9a.
11. PASSARELLI, p. 54.

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a cheerful smile on their face, and show, by a few cordial words, how happy they are to see them... Showing a sad, mournful countenance is to do the opposite, which makes the hearts of those who approach you turn cold” (CCD X, 391-392).

In 1993, Augusto da Silva Peixoto was admitted to the retirement home, but only due to political influence, for he did not meet the conditions for admission to this institution. With his strong character, he wanted preferential treatment. Even though he was reprimanded by Sister Lindalva and his overtures were sternly rejected, he ended up nurturing a passion for the Sister and began harassing her relentlessly. Despite the residents’ displeasure, he continued to insinuate himself disrespectfully, causing great confusion in Sister Lindalva, who spoke about this difficulty to another Sister. The latter advised her to speak about it with the Sister Servant, to which she replied she would speak to the competent authority, that is, the social worker, while not giving her all the details. We do not know if the whole local community was aware of this difficult matter. However, during one recreation, Sister Lindalva told her Sisters, *“I would rather shed my blood than leave.”*¹²

The social worker called Augusto to order, and Sister Lindalva was more reserved with him. This added to Augusto’s anger and, losing all reason, he plotted the young Sister’s death. After buying a fish knife, he waited for his opportunity.

On Good Friday, April 9, 1993, Sister Lindalva prayed the Stations of the Cross with the parishioners around the retirement home and then went to her service to distribute breakfast to the elderly residents. It was then that Augusto grabbed her from behind and stabbed her 44 times. Wiping the knife on his own clothes, he said, *“She never wanted me! She got what she deserved...”*

Augusto was arrested, and when he was asked for the motivation for his criminal act, he admitted that he was in love with her and desired her, but she had never returned his advances. The elderly people who saw the crime declared that if Sister Lindalva had given in to Augusto’s desires, she would not have died.

12. PASSARELLI, p. 57.

Sister Lindalva wanted to remain faithful to her vocation, and she died for that. *“All over the city, the opinion that her death was a real martyrdom spread. Sister Lindalva died a martyr to defend her purity... If the belief that she was a martyr was widespread, as the retirement home residents, the Sisters and the general public thought and said, a voice endowed with great authority reinforced it. The Archbishop of Salvador, Primate of Brazil, His Eminence Cardinal Lucas Moreira Neves, said during the funeral homily, ‘I have no doubt that Sister Lindalva is considered a martyr by the Church.’”*¹³

In January 2000, the beatification process opened, and on December 2, 2007, the Church beatified Sister Lindalva Justo de Oliveira, martyr, during a celebration in Salvador (Bahia).

While Sister Lindalva lived her Vincentian vocation only four years, she did not spare herself, always seeking to give herself totally in a creative way in response to the needs of those who are poor. According to Louise de Marillac, what is most important is not the length of time but the intensity of the dedication to serve: *“My dear Sister... Let me tell you that you must put your hand to everything without thinking that you are there only temporarily. Even if we were to be in a place for only a week, we should work there as if it were to be for our entire lives”* (Saint Louise, L. 200b, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 209).

One of Sister Lindalva’s widely-recognized characteristic traits was joy, a fruit of her simple, deep faith, of her love for God and those who are poor and of her gratitude for the gift of her vocation.

Saint Louise’s words to a Sister sent to Poland seem to apply well to Sister Lindalva: *“I admire the guidance of Divine Providence in your life, my dear Sister, and because of it, I believe that God, in His divine love, desires you to love Him uniquely, entirely and unselfishly and to have no other concern or even satisfaction except those which pertain to Him and to your neighbor”* (Saint Louise, L. 448, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 480).

Divine Providence could work in Sister Lindalva thanks to her generous and free heart that she wished to configure to Christ, thanks to what she

13. PASSARELLI, p. 69-70.

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learned from her parents and thanks to her desire to serve those who are poor according to the Vincentian charism. *“Conforming oneself to Jesus Christ means becoming more human, thus progressing on the path of holiness, letting oneself be touched and implicated by the gift of salvation and assuming the grace and the commitment of becoming a savior like Jesus, ready to pursue His mission of doing good and of leading people to life.”*¹⁴

In Jesus, Sister Lindalva found the love for which her heart had longed since her youth. This love that transformed her life allowed her to encounter God in all of His creatures and to be for them a sign of His joyful love that cares for each one of them, first and foremost the poorest and most vulnerable.

*“In my prayer, I continually feel such a great desire to love God that I am sure I will reach that point even if it takes me to the last day of my life to do it. How beautiful it is to love God and Blessed Mother! If I love you, my heart is in God. I can only see God through the people with whom I am in contact, whoever they may be. Everything is changed into joy and love in contact with life and nature; it is important to be free to love and to understand that we cannot imagine the future except in Him.”*¹⁵

Sister Carolina MUREB SANTOS
Daughter of Charity

14. TEIXEIRA, Vinícius Augusto Ribeiro. *No Coração da Trindade: meditações para retiros espirituais [At the heart of the Trinity: reflections for spiritual retreats]* Belo Horizonte: O Lutador, 2013, p.133.

15. PASSARELLI, p. 37.

O Mary,
may we allow
your sweet gaze to reach us
and the perpetual warmth
of your smile.
Guard our life with your embrace:
bless and strengthen every
desire for good;
give new life and
nourishment to faith;
sustain and enlighten hope;
awaken and animate charity;
guide us all
on the path to holiness.

Pope Francis
Saint Peter's Square, October 13, 2013

