

# *E*choes of the Company

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Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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**for a new  
missionary  
momentum**

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## Letter of August 15, 2022

Dear Sisters,

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*“He has helped Israel His servant, remembering His mercy...” (Lk 1:54)*

*Spiritual  
Life*

The Church invites us to celebrate the Assumption of Mary while meditating on her Son’s resurrection: *“Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep”* (1 Cor 15:20). With Mary, let us enter into this mystery.

At the Motherhouse Chapel, restrictions tied to the Covid-19 pandemic caused a considerable reduction in the number of people who typically came daily. Of course, there were no longer many groups from France or elsewhere for more than two years.

And now, everyone is back! What a joy to see “regulars” and pilgrims come, kneel at the foot of the altar, give thanks or implore Jesus through Mary. God forgets no one and continues to do great things.

The Sisters whose service is welcoming at the Chapel – at the entrance, in the alleyway, in the various offices or in the sacristy – are witnesses and missionaries, listening to the joys and trials presented to Mary with such confidence. They attentively take the time to lend an ear, dialogue and pray for those who confide to them about their life or that of their loved ones.

All these Sisters say that these encounters and the fervor of all those who enter the Chapel evangelize them and revitalize their own faith. Let us give thanks for the mission that they accomplish at the service of the Gospel, through the message of Mary, as thousands of people will come this August 15.

*“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior!” (Lk 1:46-47)*

Rejoicing with Mary on this day is an opportunity to celebrate her hope because she always hoped and *“teaches us the virtue of waiting, even when everything seems to lack meaning”* (Pope Francis, general audience of May 10, 2017).

The situation in the world is objectively hopeless in part; violence is at our doorsteps and sometimes even in our houses. Recall our Sisters in Burkina Faso whose community house was vandalized. This happened three more times... They had to resign themselves to leaving for the other local community in the country.

Some regions of Latin America are currently experiencing worsening repression. Along with the people, the Sisters take up the challenge of fighting for human rights that are unscrupulously flouted by those in power. The Sisters know that God is present and that *“He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly”* (Lk 1:52).

In May, Sister Hanna Cybula, General Councillor, and I had the joy of spending several days in Slovakia to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Province. These are joyful, prayerful and very sisterly moments! It is the joy of the encounter.

We also took a full morning to listen to the Visitatrixes or their Assistants, Provincial Councillors or Sisters directly involved in Ukraine to take stock of the situation of the local communities in this country, Russia and Belarus as well as in Poland and Slovakia.

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- Despite the uncertainty and danger, the Sisters have returned to Odessa as well as to Balta, close to Moldova. They stress the difficulty to move about, the alarms, the atmosphere of war and suffering. They are essentially at the service of women and children, elderly or disabled people because most of the men have been called up for military service.
- Of course, there is no longer a local community in Mariupol, but neighbors sent the Sisters a photo of their house, which has remained standing amid the destruction.
- Twenty-four children from a home in Kharkiv have made it to the service of the Sisters in Storozyniec, who will care for them as long as necessary.
- The Sisters of the three local communities in Russia say that, for now, there is no danger, but prudence is essential along with silence! Communication with the Province can take place by telephone.
- In Belarus, the Sisters in the three local communities are in a similar situation, with tension increasing, frequent controls and many young people leaving to go abroad.
- In Poland and Slovakia, welcoming of refugees continues.

The discussion brought out the intense collaboration, both within the Company and with the Vincentian network and beyond.

At the Motherhouse, the group from Ukraine housed here, fifteen women and eight children, is beginning to diminish in number. Three families have been able to acquire housing, and others should in turn obtain a studio or an apartment. The successful outcome of these administrative procedures is the result of collaborative work among the employee from Sant'Egidio, the France-Terre d'Asile Association and the local government. It is possible that some of the women may remain a little while yet,

among others, Izolda, 82 years of age, widowed and quite alone. All of these weeks spent together have offered us beautiful encounters, some common celebrations and very simple day-to-day connections. We might say that we have shared friendship and joy, for which thank the Lord. Let us continue to pray that each of them might regain at least some confidence in a still very uncertain future.

Elsewhere, conflicts are dragging on. For example, in Tigray, between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Boldly, the Province of Eritrea nonetheless chose to open a local community to the southwest of Omhajer (Diocese of Barentu). It is an agricultural and animal-raising region but devastated by wars and drought. In her request to open this local community, the Visitatrix wrote, *“This great poverty and the continuous cry of the people never gave us peace of mind to stay in our comfort zone.”*

And then, the Province of España-Este is also opening a local community of four Sisters in Barcelona in the slum of a multicultural neighborhood called “Del Raval.” They participate in the activities of an association that works with people who are homeless and collaborate in parish ministry.

The reality of the Company, like that of the world, is made up of light and shadows, of suffering and moments of resurrection, the Pascal Mystery of everyday life to live in faith.

Mary, who knew the joy of her “yes,” the joy of the gift of self and also knew suffering at the foot of the cross, shows us the path of life in this. She invites us to tend towards the hope that gives meaning to our present and opens us towards a future in God’s presence.

To conclude, I can also add that the three Provinces whose Visitatrixes and delegates could not come to the General Assembly received visits in May and June from General Councillors to share with them what happened there. Sister Anna

Letter of August 15, 2022

Wiwiek went to Vietnam and Sister Theresa Eke to Madagascar and Congo.

Sister Luisa Farri has gone to the Province of Cologne-Netherlands several times. This is because a process towards a reconfiguration is about to come to a conclusion. The thirteen Sisters in the Netherlands will join the Province of Belgium-France-Switzerland this August 21. The twenty-six Sisters in Germany will join the Province of Graz-Central Europe a little later. This choice was made to facilitate relationships going forward in terms of language. Let us pray in a special way for the Sisters of Cologne-Netherlands who are going to separate and for the two Provinces that are going to welcome them in a sisterly way.

The other Councillors have also gone to Provinces to try to make up for some of the time lost during recent years due to Covid. Sister Hanna Cybula went to the Province of Warsaw, Sister Antonia Gonzalez met with the local communities of España-Este, Sister Julie Kubasak went to get to know the Province of Rosalie Rendu in Great Britain, Sister Ana Amelia Cunha accompanied the Province of Portugal at the time of the change in Visitatrix and Sister Alicia Margarita Cortes Cazares traveled to the Provinces of Central America and of Cali (Colombia).

Other visits are being prepared, and, like Mary, the General Councillors set out in haste and joy towards your Provinces to meet with you, a sign of communion in the Company. “*God is love and wants us to go to Him through love*” (Saint Vincent, around 1630, CCD I, 81).

Thank you for your many messages for August 15, which move me and open me to your realities; thank you for your very necessary prayer. Let us remain united in order to better serve and live with our brothers and sisters. You can count on my prayer as well as that of all the Councillors.



It just remains for me to wish you a wonderful feast of the Assumption along with all those around you. After the example of Christ and with His Mother Mary, let us be messengers of love and hope.

Sister Françoise PETIT  
*Daughter of Charity*

Communion, participation, mission  
in the Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity  
for the building up of the community and the world

INTRODUCTION

Pope Francis' teaching on the reform of the Church brings together some essential ideas for the life and mission of the Church concerning synodality and consecrated life. Pope Bergoglio's Church of charity is very close to that of which Saint Vincent de Paul dreamed and which he built up.

During his first pastoral experiences in the countryside (in Clichy, on the de Gondi lands, in Châtillon-les-Dombes), Vincent realized that, hidden behind the appearances of an ignorant people, there was a surprising predisposition for the rebirth of Christianity. Later, thinking back on his experience, he would say,

*“If there’s a true religion... what did I say, wretched man that I am...! God forgive me! I’m speaking materially. It’s among them, among those poor people that true religion and a living faith are preserved; they believe simply, without dissecting everything; they submit to orders and are patient amid the abject poverty they have to suffer as long as it pleases God, some from the wars, others from working all day long in the great heat of the sun; poor vine dressers, who give us their labor, who expect us to pray for them while they wear themselves out to feed us!”<sup>1</sup>*

The saint of charity considered “religion,” that is, Christianity, the religion of those who are poor.

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1. CCD XI, 190; conference 125, Repetition of prayer of July 24, 1655  
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*“What I retain from my experience of this is the discernment I’ve always made that true religion-true religion, Messieurs, true religion is found among the poor. God enriches them with a lively faith; they believe, they touch, they taste the words of life. You never see them in their illnesses, troubles, and food shortages get carried away with impatience, or murmur and complain; not at all or rarely.*

*“They usually remain at peace during trials and tribulations. What’s the reason for that? It’s faith. And why? Because they’re simple, God gives them in abundance the graces He refuses the rich and wise of this world.”<sup>2</sup>*

These texts reveal Vincent’s sympathy towards country people, this people forgotten by a great part of the Church. He said, *“I’ve seen those poor men treated like animals.”<sup>3</sup>*

In this context, we can find an initial element for renewing the missionary sense of the Church, in particular the theological conception of the Church, otherwise known as ecclesiology. In Vincent’s thinking and action, we see the connection between his vision and his action, allowing us to express the project for the reform of spiritual life for consecrated life in the following way: it is only by rediscovering fraternal charity and living it that a real reform of the missionary Church will be possible, and then a synodal spirituality will emerge. To begin such a reform, as Pope Francis has also said, *metanoia* – personal, community and pastoral conversion – is necessary, through a renewal of spiritual life.

In this time when the Church is calling for reflection on a synodal style in order to live based on it, this means is thus put forward for the Daughters of Charity.

A review of some articles from the Constitutions will trace out for us a community process to subscribe to the present time and open perspectives of hope towards fruitful existential paths.

2. CCD XII, 142; conference 201, Simplicity and prudence

3. CCD X, 103; conference 71, The Purpose of the Company

**Consecrated life is a prophecy for life!**

The Word of God introduces us into the mystery of God; fraternity opens us to the service of others; synodality creates ecclesial communion. These fruitful paths enable us to wake up the world and lead it to God, the author of life and history.

**I – TOWARDS THE SPIRITUAL RENEWAL  
OF CONSECRATED LIFE  
VINCENTIAN COMMUNITY  
IN THE IMAGE OF THE BLESSED TRINITY**

Through Vincent de Paul’s life, works and teaching, we discover the spiritual depth of a mystic at the heart of this man of charitable action. References to the Trinitarian mystery of God are not lacking in his conferences, for this mystery should inspire the life of the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

Vincent wanted the union of the Divine Persons to animate the life of their communities: *“In the first place, there must be close union among yourselves and, if it were possible, it should be like the union of the three Persons of the Most Blessed Trinity.”*<sup>4</sup> The model of unity of life that Vincent puts forth is inspired by the unity of the Church of Jerusalem, in the multitude of believers (cf. Acts 4:32). The unity of the community of Jerusalem, *“of one heart and mind,”* is the visible fruit of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples on Pentecost.

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4. CCDIX, 44. [*“Devotion to the Most Blessed Trinity is one of the fundamental points of Vincentian spirituality. Born in the Carolinian era, this devotion received official recognition in 1334 when John XXII instituted the liturgical feast for the universal Church. Contemplation of the Trinity is intense in Saint Ignatius and the Ursuline Marie of the Incarnation. Saint Vincent draws on Augustinian spirituality according to which all of life should draw inspiration from the Trinity (cf. De Trinitate 15, 39: PL 42, 1088). For him, the apostolic action of the Daughters of Charity is seeking the unity of God from which the unity of brothers is born, thus charity and gentleness. Here as well, spirituality and apostolate are one. Saint Vincent found God in his brothers and found his brothers in God”* (note in the Italian edition).]

For Vincent, passion for the unity of God, lived and manifested in local communities, translates into a boundless loving commitment to the service of those who are poor. *“The concept of communion lies at the heart of the Church’s self-understanding, insofar as it is the Mystery of the personal union of each human being with the divine Trinity and with the rest of mankind, initiated with the faith, and, having begun as a reality in the Church on earth, is directed towards its eschatological fulfilment in the heavenly Church.”*<sup>5</sup>

Keeping the mystery of Divine life before his eyes, Vincent taught the Daughters of Charity to live and witness to charity, which is God. In the light of his teaching, we discover the theological richness of his preaching and life that can help the Church to live as a community that generates God’s love.

Three points are emphasized:

- Unity, in the image of the Trinity;
- Communication of the apostolic work, approaches of the Trinitarian mystery;
- Unity that leads to acts of charity.

The Daughters of Charity should live the mystery of the three Divine Persons’ communion.<sup>6</sup> For Saint Vincent, this implies that, in their identity and apostolic work, they should be communities of communion of life. In Father Dodin’s thinking, community life according to Vincent de Paul’s ideal is founded on fidelity to the heart of Christ and the heart of those who are poor, on prophecy, understood as evangelization and the spreading of love of God in the world, and on the contemplation of Christ in those who are poor.<sup>7</sup> Vincentian communities are communities of Christocentric

5. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion, *Communio notio* (May 28, 1992), 3.

6. Cf. J. LOSADA, *La Iglesia, Comunidad de Caridad*, [The Church, community of Charity], in *La Caridad carisma vicenciano*, XX semana de estudios vicencianos, Ceme, Salamanca 1993, 151.

7. Cf. A. DODIN, *La organización y el espíritu de la vida común según Vicente*

### Communion, participation, mission in the Constitutions

life (live from Jesus and in Jesus), communities where Christ is the model and to whom all members must configure themselves.<sup>8</sup>

The purpose of communities is mission.

*“Saint Vincent brought confreres together with Church approval so that, living in a new form of community life, they might undertake the evangelization of the poor. The Vincentian community is, therefore, organized to prepare its apostolic activity and to encourage and help it continually. And so, members, individually and collectively, should strive to fulfill their common mission through a wholehearted spirit of renewal in fraternal union.”<sup>9</sup>*

Mission and service are at the origin of the Vincentian community. This means that it is not fulfilled on its own without mission or service. The danger of a community created for mission is excessive activism that gets in the way of community activities. Evangelization, mission and the service of those who are poor are key words that define the Vincentian community.<sup>10</sup>

Let us highlight some theological foundations:

- Faith in Christ is at the origin of every vocation; following Christ is the response to this.
- The faith experience is the experience of Christ, and the experience of Christ is an experience of love.
- The life and existence of communities is rooted in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity: *“The Church finds the ultimate source of its life and action in the Trinity. The*

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*de Paúl, [The organization and spirit of life in common according to Vincent de Paul] in III semana de Estudios Vicencianos. Ceme, Salamanca 1975, 150 s. 8. Cf. M. PÉREZ FLORES, Reflexiones sobre la vida en común del misionero vicenciano, [Reflections on the community life of the Vincentian Missionary] in Vincentiana 34/2 (1990), 126-127.*

9. Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission, C. 19

10. See Constitution 32a: *“Called and assembled by God, the Daughters of Charity live a community life the better to fulfill their specific mission of service.”*

*Congregation, within the Church, does the same;*"<sup>11</sup> and again: "*The local community is modeled on the Trinity, as desired by the Founders, who wanted the Sisters to be one in heart and to act in one same spirit.*"<sup>12</sup>

The Constitutions present important elements for communities:

- the practice of the five virtues (humility, simplicity, gentleness, mortification, zeal);
- community life driven by charity;
- prayer life and especially the Eucharist;
- co-responsibility and participation;
- sharing of goods;
- autonomy of each local community;
- integration in the local community;
- attitudes of esteem, acceptance and respect;
- mutual correction and the desire for conversion;
- writing the Local Community Plan;
- evangelization and the service of persons who are poor;
- the relationship with authority.

Vincent, by giving birth to communities through his passion for Christ and for those who are poor, contributed to the process of reform of the missionary Church. At the beginning of this new century, Pope Francis is working along those same lines. In *Evangelii gaudium*, he places mercy at the center of ecclesial reform. Mercy is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, proclaimed and lived in the everyday life of missionary disciples.<sup>13</sup>

It is up to consecrated people to rediscover their specific place in the Church and their way of being joyful witnesses of the love of God, like watchmen, *waking up the world!*

11. Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission, C. 20

12. Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity, C. 32a

13. Cf. S. FARÌ, *Lectura vicenciana de la Evangelii gaudium : compromisos que implica para la consagración del vicenciano*, in *Vincencianismo y vida consagrada*, [A Vincentian reading of *Evangelii gaudium: commitments that it implies for Vincentian consecration in Vincentianism and consecrated life*], Editorial CEME, Santa Marta de Tormes, Salamanca 2015, 453-485.

## II – LIVING COMMUNION UNDER THE SIGN OF FRATERNITY

### THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, MISSIONARY DISCIPLES OF GOD’S LOVE

Saint Vincent worked for the renewal of Christian life by becoming a spiritual and missionary model rooted in the process of conversion put forward by Jesus. He never felt that he was beyond the need for conversion. “Conversion” does not just mean “going back” but “changing direction,” “placing oneself in another perspective,” choosing to allow oneself to be loved by God and to love one’s neighbor.<sup>14</sup>

This proposition for the renewal of Christian life enters into a logic of proximity with those who are poor and fraternal love lived in community, with a style called *synodal*. The synodal style is a human and relational process that heightens our conversion to the things of God, to mutual love in the community and with our enemies, to the gift of self for the weakest among us, to the building up of a world of peace and harmony among differences.

For consecrated persons, particularly Daughters of Charity, the style of communion-synodality is an ongoing exercise of openness to the other person, a characteristic element of baptismal life. Communion is a goal and not to be taken for granted, but it is a proof of faith life. Building communion is a relational process that is learned through better knowledge of one’s identity and that of others. Each person is considered a treasure because each one brings something new to relationships.

Essential traits for conflict management are availability and listening. This begins with a constant exercise of conversion to open oneself to the Other who comes, to the Word made flesh out of love, to God who is Trinitarian communion. The Trinitarian dimension of consecrated life commits us to welcoming others

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14. Cf. J.P. RENOARD, *San Vincenzo Depaul. Una vita fuori dal comune*, [St Vincent Depaul. An extraordinary life], par N. Albanesi, CLV- Centre liturgique vincentien, Rome 2020.



and living in communion. From a Gospel perspective, accepting others is the fruit of a rebirth from above, along the lines of Jesus' invitation to Nicodemus (cf. Jn 3:1-21). In fact, "*men and women suffer from the loss of identity; they are immersed in numerous identities, often virtual, that serve as masks and change according to the occasion.*"<sup>15</sup>

Saint Vincent expected his Daughters to live their lives in a *relational authenticity*. Otherwise, it is not possible for them to really build fraternity and reach the goal of communion. Community union comes from Jesus; He is the gift and the goal for the community to reach. The community should live the relational dimension by nourishing itself with the Word of God and the sacramental life in order to create a bond with social and community life.

*"Union is so excellent," said another Sister, "that Our Lord willed to give himself to us under the beautiful name of Communion. That's why we must ardently desire that union always exist among us, since God loves it so much."*<sup>16</sup>

The Sisters' witness of fraternity is supported by the experience of the life-giving love of communion who is God, through a deep life of prayer and sacramental union. The connection between the sacramental dimension and that of community life represents the relational logic that supports the Sisters in their desire for conversion, dialogue and mutual service. In the conference "Concealing and excusing the faults of the Sisters," Vincent speaks of a marginally observant Sister and advises the others not to scold her but to be good examples for her; this will help her to get back on track. Confession and Eucharist are also effective means for practicing charity and acceptance. Prayer helps to grow in charity and the ability to bear with others.<sup>17</sup>

15. CIVCSVA, *Proclaim*, 5.

16. *CCD IX*, 81

17. Note to the Italian edition, IX, 214

### Communion, participation, mission in the Constitutions

The beauty of community life does not consist in preventing diversity but in harmonizing differences. In the same way as an orchestra needs the diversity of many instruments, each of them with its characteristics and particularities, so it is for community life: it is a matter of harmonizing the specificities by exercising listening, humility and openness. Authority aims to orient differences in a harmonious way, not to efface them. Unity includes the expression of the characteristics of each personality within a community organization, which should find harmony and balance.

*“Superiors realize that the authority they exercise has been entrusted to them in order to accomplish the mission of the Company in the Church, to stimulate its fidelity to the charism of the Founders, and to provide for the formation and welfare of its members. They should promote and maintain unity while respecting diversity. This allows for a more efficacious apostolate and greater vitality in the Company and leads to different options with regard to ministries and life style; these choices are always made in function of the service of Christ in persons who are poor; according to the spirit of their vocation” (C. 61).*

This is not a utopia; it is an exercise of charity that takes place each day, at every moment, with each Sister. The Constitutions pay attention to this process of the exercise of communion with a synodal sense. Fraternal unity requires continual review of behaviors.

*“In this way, the community becomes a communion where each one gives and receives, and where each Sister places all that she is and all that she has at the service of the others” (C. 32b).*

The exercise of life in common is never achieved once and for all; it must be nourished and verified. How can we verify this ongoing movement that supports us and commits us in the relational dynamic of fraternal communion? The Constitutions offer some essential points for this process of communion.

“The charity to which they are called is the very charity of Christ Jesus, which:

- causes them to love God with all their being,
- fosters and maintains communion among the Sisters,
- urges them to serve those who are poor and to help every person to fulfill his/her vocation of child of God, without distinction of race, culture, social condition, or religion” (C. 18c).

The center of communion for the Daughters of Charity is thus Christ Himself. There isn't any shortcut that can teach us to love and to accept being loved. It is the God of love, source of all love, who teaches us to love with the freedom of the children of God. It is possible for creatures not to love God, but we cannot keep Him from loving them. The God of love looks on us with mercy; He never looks at us to judge or condemn us but always with providential care.<sup>18</sup>

The Constitutions offer details for better understanding the specificity of community life. The Sisters live and are nourished by the love of God, for both vocation and mission. The theological center of the entire life of a Daughter of Charity is the title she is given at the beginning of Seminary, “daughter,” which is the most intimate expression in terms of engendering. This expresses both the bond or belonging and the purpose. Like each child in a human family, the Daughters of Charity are engendered by the love of God and sent to witness to it in Gospel-based fraternity.

The constant quest for communion within the local community is based on the *radicality of the evangelical choice* and consists in responding to Jesus' call to love God and one's brothers and sisters as much as possible. Above all, we should let the Blessed Trinity love us so that the God of love strengthens our life and

18. See THOMAS AQUINAS, *Super Ioannem*, cap. 1, lec. 16. On this topic, cf. I. SCHINELLA, *Il Segno di Giona. Per un'antropologia della Misericordia nell'epoca del post-umanesimo e della neuroscienza*, [The sign of Jonah. For an anthropology of mercy in the age of post-humanism and neuroscience], Cantagalli, Siena 2016, 321.

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our personal and community faith. Without the love of God, no one can bring the Gospel, which is Jesus Christ, the Word of love incarnate. Only a correct understanding of the tension between communion and synodality places us as a Company in a pilgrim state, able to see the goal to reach without trying to take short cuts. It involves being attentive to different situations of life and placing oneself at the service of all to free from all forms of oppression, starting with social, racial and religious marginalization.

The vocation of the Daughters of Charity is to witness to the charity of Christ by a life of service for communion. Life in common teaches us to acquire a close relational style.

There is yet another challenge for the Daughters of Charity: because of their charism, desired by Saint Vincent, the Sisters must live an ever-expanding and more radical logic of communion as the height of human and Christian fulfillment.<sup>19</sup> The challenge is to incarnate the charism in different realities by opening oneself from the particular to the universal. Fraternal life is not limited to a single community but should be open to the life of others.

*“The Company is international. The charism is incarnated and made visible in various cultures and countries throughout the world:*

- *by its life,*
- *by its membership,*
- *by its organization and representation,*
- *by **communion**, collaboration, and sharing among the Provinces” (C. 6).n,*

This challenge must be taken up constantly. It is a question of living the charism harmoniously so that particularities are lived in an atmosphere of existential peace. The proposed course

19. Cf. G. BURDESE, *San Vincenzo de' Paoli e le figlie della carità nelle conferenze spirituali. Il martirio della carità*, [Saint Vincent de Paul and the Daughters of Charity in the conferences. The martyrdom of charity], Jaca Book, Milano 2010.

aims for personal fulfillment, making people capable of opening themselves to sharing according to the teachings of the Gospel. This experience is possible when each Daughter of Charity is involved and accepts being implicated in a process of active *participation* in the life and mission of the local community, in accordance with the missionary mandate received through Baptism.

### III – ENCOURAGE ACTIVE AND CONSCIOUS PARTICIPATION

#### THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY IN THE RENEWAL OF ECCLESIAL LIFE

Complete, responsible and active *participation* in the life and mission of the Church was one of the most novel foundational elements of the Second Vatican Council. *Participation* goes well beyond “simple contribution” to a process; it means being aware and fully aware in the process. Here again, this is a challenge. It is untenable for the baptized or consecrated people not to participate fully in the life of the Church.

To reach this objective and nourish the conscience of all the baptized, resolute action is necessary in terms of formation that could support and strengthen them in their duty of witnessing and thus of participating in the life and mission of the Church community. In other words, *participation* is both a condition for communion and an expression of it. Because communion is not achieved once and for all but is a gift to receive and a task to accomplish, it should be expressed in concrete forms of involvement and empowerment.

Therefore, *participation* represents the fundamental way to build community, keeping in mind all the aspects of Christian life: liturgy, catechesis, charitable works and works of solidarity.<sup>20</sup>

20. Cf. E. BORGHI-G. DE VECCHI (a cura di), *Alle radici della comunità cristiana. Liturgia, catechesi e carità per vivere insieme*, [At the roots of the Christian community. Liturgy, catechism and charity to live together], Edizioni San Lorenzo, Reggio Emilia 2022.

### Communion, participation, mission in the Constitutions

From this point of view, communion only exists if there is sharing, involvement and discernment. These three elements witness to communion, the reason for living community as an always-growing human reality. In the light of the Constitutions, the Daughters of Charity are called to create conditions for communion and infuse it into decision-making processes and personal and community discernment. From this *ad intra* dimension, the *ad extra* **dimension will occur; life characterized by participation** in communion becomes the expression of an experience of relationship, from a human and Gospel-based perspective.

*Participation* is a way of stating the missionary commitment of the Daughters of Charity, called to evangelize and be evangelized. The *kerygma* is a way of expressing the Incarnation; it is also an essential existential dimension for the life of each Sister. The most authentic application of God's *participation* is found in the Word made flesh, taking on our human condition. The communication of God's love can be expressed as a human-relational process of assistance and mutual solidarity, supported by the grace of the Holy Spirit who acts in persons and communities that are open to ongoing conversion.

*“Spiritual formation: which instills in the Sisters faith convictions founded on the experience of God, prayer, and sound biblical and doctrinal knowledge, which nourish their love of the Church and their sense of **participation** in its mission”* (C. 52b).

The root of participation is faith, but for faith to grow, it needs a solid Biblical and doctrinal formation and a personal and community prayer life. The experience of God is vital for expressing, within the community and diverse settings, the love of the mission of the Church, which is the active participation in the mission entrusted it by Jesus.<sup>21</sup>

This participatory process is inherent to the consecrated life of the Daughters of Charity. It should be open to renewal concerning positions of community leadership. These roles

21. Cf. B. FORTE, *La trasmissione della fede*, [Passing on the faith], Queriniana, Brescia 2014<sup>2</sup>.

demand discernment and a concern for the good and the growth of the community, calling for an always active participatory involvement. As the Constitutions say, it involves choosing a responsible style of participation in order to create an atmosphere of fruitful collaboration for personal and community life.

*“The Visitatrix is designated for a six-year term by the Superioress General with her Council. She can be designated again for only three years. The Province proposes, for the approval of the Superioress General, a method of **participation** of the Sisters of the Province in the designation of the Visitatrix”* (C. 73b).

Here is the central aspect of participation: *the method*. It means coming to agreement on a shared method that offers guidance in order to ultimately designate a Visitatrix. As Pope Francis would remind us, this process has nothing to do with the reasoning of a “majority party.” As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger affirmed, the Church is not a democracy. In this reasoning, consensus is not the main factor.

For a community of Daughters of Charity, the essential values to live are humility, sharing, service. Concerning the responsibility of government, we should add some necessary skills and knowledge to allow the Sisters to participate in building up the community based on a plan and good organization, the objective being to serve the Son of God in the person of the poor.

*“It is in view of the service of Christ in those who are poor that the local community works out its Community Plan. Every Daughter of Charity tries to be open to and accepting of the thinking of her Sisters. Regardless of age, duty, or ministry, each Sister is aware of her responsibility to contribute with all the wealth of her personality and culture to the common mission”* (C. 35a).

For the decision-making process, especially when it concerns people chosen for government, like the Provincial Council, we must add a way of experiencing participation with active involvement, a conscience and human maturity. Aware of the mission of the Company, the Sisters should reflect and choose the

### Communion, participation, mission in the Constitutions

Daughters of Charity who have a sense of service according to the Gospel and relational, organizational and administrative skills to help the community develop in an atmosphere of communion and participation according to the spiritual ideal of the Vincentian charism.<sup>22</sup>

*“The Provincial Councillors are designated by the Superioress General with her Council. For the designation of the Councillors, the Province presents for the approval of the Superioress General a method of **participation** of the Sisters of the Province” (C. 76a).*

We could speak of a process that involves both Gospel values and the human abilities and skills that should be placed at the service of the Kingdom of God. The deepest sense of *participation* lies in the exercise of responsibility for the good of individuals and for the common good, which has the goal of serving people, whatever their condition and state of life. In all human environments, the Gospel must be announced and incarnated with the radicality demanded by Jesus, “no ifs, ands, or buts.” It is the logic of the love of the mystery of the Incarnation that becomes the total gift of self of the Daughters of Charity, in relation with chastity:

*“As a response of love to a call of Love, chastity involves participation in the Paschal Mystery, the mystery of death and life” (C. 29b).*

The heart of consecrated life is this response to the total and radical gift of the Son of God in human flesh, deified and borne within the Trinity. Consecration is a response of love to uncreated Love, who accepts immolation on the altar of the cross.

The root of the vow of chastity is found in the Pascal Mystery. This vow represents our bond with the Bridegroom; it is the mystical nuptials with the Lamb, victorious after suffering and dying. Chastity is not an obligation; it is a freeing choice, capable of sublimating all the aspects of human relationships and leading

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22. Cf. C. RICCARDI, *Spiritualità vincenziana. Contributo allo studio del vincenzianesimo*, [Vincentian spirituality. Contribution to Vincentian studies], CLV-Edizioni Centro Liturgico Vincenziano, Roma 2007.



them to the Pascal Mystery. It is not a question of constraint, sacrifice nor suffering but a commitment to loving God above all else and to loving others in a disinterested way.

Chastity, received each day, each moment, like a Trinitarian gift, and nourished by the desire of consecrated persons, participates in the intimate life of God.<sup>23</sup>

In the logic of the Gospel, participation and chastity are almost equivalent. Only a free heart is able to welcome each and every person indiscriminately, respecting the other person in his or her difference. Participation is a hospitality and a total gift of self to witness to the Trinitarian love in all places in order to serve those who are poor and proclaim the Gospel to them.

(to be continued)

Father Salvatore FARI, CM

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23. It could be beneficial to read G. FORLAI, *Spudorata castità. Cos'è, come si vive, come ci guarisce*, [*Shameless chastity. What it is, how it is lived, how it heals us*], San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano) 2016.

## The mystique of living together

### *Perspectives and hopes*

This reflection on the mystique of living together ties in with the work carried out during the most recent Assemblies. It also closely relates to the synodal path that we are traveling in the Church and its invitation to be *experts in the art of encounter*.<sup>1</sup>

Saint Mark's Gospel passage meticulously describing the cure of the deaf-mute man illustrates this reflection. In addition to physical healing, the deaf-mute man's heart becomes able to hear the invitation to conversion, to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and to proclaim that He is the Savior of the world.

The command, "*Ephata! Be opened!*" challenges us as well and makes us come out of ourselves, discover the beauty of being children of God and live in fullness a joyful relationship with Him and with our brothers and sisters. In the light of this Gospel passage, our reflection will focus on these points:

- The mystique of living together: perspectives and hopes
- The joyful experience of the mystique of living together, the gift of community
- The urgent need to break through the gate, go towards and promote encounters.

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1. Pope Francis, homily to open the Synod on synodality, October 10, 2021

## I. The mystique of living together: perspectives and hopes

*We should clarify from the start that “mystique” does not consist in an intimist practice, disconnected from real life, but rather in having a new vision of reality enlightened by faith. What characterizes the mystical experience is the free gift of the love of God who “loved us first” (1 Jn 4:10).*

We are living in a time that is both fascinating and complex, in which we observe the insatiable thirst of the human heart for love, truth, justice and peace, as Pope Francis writes in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*: *“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. Fraternity between all men and women. Here we have a splendid secret that shows us how to dream and to turn our life into a wonderful adventure. No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together.”*<sup>2</sup>

The Covid-19 pandemic, which has taken the lives of so many of our brothers and sisters and exacerbated the difficulties of the most vulnerable, has brought out many challenges and questions as humanity alternates between sorrow and hope. What is the Holy Spirit saying today to the Church, the Company and each one of us? How can we respond to the calls and challenges of this historic moment? *“In the heart of every man and woman is the desire for a full life, including that irrepressible longing for fraternity which draws us to fellowship with others and enables us to see them not as enemies or rivals, but as brothers and sisters to be accepted and embraced.”*<sup>3</sup>

Underlying this longing for fraternity, we recognize the call of the Holy Spirit who urges us to discover and communicate the

2. Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 8

3. Pope Francis, Message for the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2014

### *The mystique of living together*

mystique of living together. The Church and the Company invite us to this. *“Love impels us towards universal communion. No one can mature or find fulfilment by withdrawing from others. By its very nature, love calls for growth in openness and the ability to accept others as part of a continuing adventure that makes every periphery converge in a greater sense of mutual belonging. As Jesus told us: ‘You are all brothers’ (Mt 23:8).”*<sup>4</sup>

### *Encourage welcome, accompaniment and hospitality*

In these particularly difficult times, given the alarming increase in inequalities and the tragedy of migrants and refugees with their difficulty in becoming part of society in the countries where they arrive, it is even more necessary to encourage welcome, accompaniment and hospitality, wonderful prophetic signs for our times.

From the beginning, Daughters of Charity, who hold all forms of suffering in our hearts, have been sent to assist those who are poor everywhere, no matter the form of poverty. *“You... have given yourselves to God... to assist the sick poor, not in one house only... but everywhere, as Our Lord used to do, for He made no exceptions; He assisted everyone who came to Him for help.”*<sup>5</sup>

Over the 389 years of the Company’s existence, it has tried to respond to the calls of those who are poor, serving the most afflicted and abandoned with courage and generosity. The tragic events of 1652, when the city of Paris was surrounded by armies and practically overrun by the large number of refugees, led to a truly heroic response from the Company. The Sisters threw themselves into welcoming and caring for the multitude of helpless poor people. One thousand three hundred poor people were fed at the Motherhouse and eight hundred refugees were cared for in the Saint Denis neighborhood. At Saint Paul Parish, four or five Sisters fed about fifteen hundred poor people in

4. Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 95

5. Saint Vincent de Paul, Conference of October 18, 1655, CCD X, 102

addition to caring for seventy or eighty sick people...<sup>6</sup> This has continued everywhere over the past four centuries.

### *Develop a spirituality of tenderness*

Jesus always treated people who are sick, marginalized and excluded from society with tenderness and understanding, never condemning nor humiliating anyone. We need to learn from Jesus to see people in a positive light, not mistrusting them or judging on appearances. Blessed Sister Rosalie also knew how to excuse those who are poor. “*The world says, ‘It’s their fault. They are... vicious [and] lazy.’ ... If we had suffered as they have... we would be far from their equal. Are they sometimes violent? It’s because they’re hungry!*”<sup>7</sup>

In a way, tenderness is a wakeup call in an environment often charged with aggressivity. Tenderness makes what appears impossible possible: it rejuvenates the elderly, calms the worried child, makes those experiencing sadness smile and disarms those who think they are strong. Tenderness is a virtue that is “*a sign of strength of spirit and a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love.*”<sup>8</sup> We express tenderness when we draw close to our brothers and sisters in an attitude of dedication, concern and care, without dominating, humiliating or overprotecting them.

To help us in this, the Church calls us to contemplate the Virgin Mary, an icon of tenderness and mercy who maternally cares for each one of her children, especially the meekest and poorest ones. Like at the wedding feast of Cana, Mary intervenes with her Son (cf. Jn 2:3) and surrenders to His will. “*Whenever we look to*

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6. Cf. Saint Vincent de Paul, L. 1511 to Lambert aux Couteaux, Superior, in Warsaw, CCD IV, 400

7. Henri Desmet, *Soeur Rosalie, une Fille de la Charité, 50 ans d’apostolat au quartier Mouffetard [Sister Rosalie, a Daughter of Charity, 50 years of ministry in the Mouffetard neighborhood]*, p. 321

8. Pope Francis, homily of March 19, 2013

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*Mary, we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness. In her we see that humility and tenderness are not virtues of the weak but of the strong... ”<sup>9</sup>*

### **Live according to the logic of gift and unconditionality**

Whoever follows Jesus discovers that free and unconditional love is possible. It is a real challenge in a world characterized by the insatiable thirst for possessions, which weakens relationships and life in common. The logic of gift and unconditionality stems from the intimate experience of feeling favored by God’s love. “*Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give*” (Mt 10:8).

The poor widow who places her two small coins in the treasury of the temple contrasts with the ostentation of the pharisees who draw attention to themselves in giving alms. Jesus says to His disciples, “*Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood*” (Mk 12:43-44).

We are called to be witnesses of a new fraternity, based on the logic of gift and unconditionality, capable of transforming people, of favoring relationships and sharing despite the temptations of an easy life and an obsession with personal well-being. A person’s real treasure lies in the capacity to give of oneself without seeking anything in return, to serve others freely, to forgive wholeheartedly without considering oneself better than the other person, to return good for harm or offenses.

The logic of gift is the foundation for fraternal life; without it, humanity runs the risk of dying of a spiritual drought: “*For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? [...] And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same*” (Lk 6:32-33). Unconditionality that unites us to others that culminates in the joy of coming out of

9. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 288

oneself to give oneself to others, is greater than any right or duty.

### ***Tend to people in their weakness***

In today's society, we observe problems caused by the loneliness of chronically ill and elderly people and by no family ties or very weak ones among homeless people and those in prison. In large urban centers, many people find themselves isolated with limited or no communication. Indifference and solitude are symptoms of a dehumanized society.

Given the weakened connections, divisions and social breakdown, it is crucial to tend to people in their weakness and appreciate the value of accompanying the most vulnerable, weak and abandoned people, stirring in them the hope that does not disappoint. Faith is a powerful support in times of suffering and loneliness. It is a privilege to be able to contemplate the Lord and to visit so many hopeless, exhausted and forgotten people in His name. “*A Sister will go ten times a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day she'll find God there.*”<sup>10</sup> There is a deep connection between faith and love of our brothers and sisters, especially the weakest ones, those whom we should never leave alone.<sup>11</sup>

Devoted care involves challenges, sacrifices, great generosity and availability. Closeness, tenderness and support are expressed through care. Our responsibility of caring for people who suffer a loss of their mental abilities entails protecting them against manipulation and negligence and scrupulously respecting their dignity.

Caring for especially weak people produces great joy. I remember a woman who dedicated many years to caring for a woman with Alzheimer's disease who said, “Each moment that I was with her was a gift of God for me.”

10. Saint Vincent de Paul, Conference of February 13, 1646, *CCD IX*, 199

11. Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 48

## **II. The joyful experience of the mystique of living together, the gift of community**

### *Praise of the glory of the Most Holy Trinity*

The mystique of living together is rooted in the spirituality of communion that originates in the mystery of the Trinity who lives in us and in the heart of our brothers and sisters. This leads to becoming aware of the loving presence of the Lord in ourselves and in others. In silence and in confident dialogue with Jesus, we discover everything that improves human relationships. Each person is an inexhaustible treasure.

The Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian life; it is the light that enlightens our way.<sup>12</sup> Asserting that “*God is love*” (1 Jn 4:8) is confessing that God is Trinity, family, community. Therefore, a person’s “*highest vocation*” is “*to enter into communion with God and with our brothers and sisters.*”<sup>13</sup>

As the central mystery of the Church, the Most Holy Trinity is at the heart of the liturgy. We call upon the Most Holy Trinity when making the sign of the cross, in the Eucharist, in the other sacraments, and at the end of liturgical prayers. The doxology, “*Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit*” already appeared in a second-century text, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, where we read, “*To [Jesus Christ], with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be glory forever and ever. Amen.*”<sup>14</sup>

All fraternal communities in the Church wish to reflect the depth and richness of this mystery by configuring themselves as a human space inhabited by the Trinity.<sup>15</sup> Trinitarian love speaks to us of gift, communication and communion, which are

12. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 234

13. CIVCSVA, *Fraternal life in community*, 9

14. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, chapter 22

15. Cf. *Vita consecrata*, 41



constitutive dimensions of community. We are called to bear witness to this communion in the midst of a world scourged by violence, inequality and division.

The Founders encouraged the Sisters to live community relationships inspired by the Most Holy Trinity. *“There must be close union among yourselves and, if it were possible, it should be like the union of the three Persons of the Most Blessed Trinity; for how, dear Sisters, could you practice charity and gentleness with persons who are poor, if you didn’t practice those virtues among yourselves?”*<sup>16</sup>

### ***Praise of community life***

*“How good and how pleasant it is, when brothers dwell together as one!*

*Like fine oil on the head, running down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron...*

*Like dew of Hermon coming down upon the mountains of Zion.*

*There the Lord has decreed a blessing, life for evermore!”*  
(Psalm 133)

Psalm 133 is a hymn to community, steeped in freshness and delight, like a fine perfume on the head and face, or the dewdrops that in the morning seep into parched, lifeless land. The context of this psalm is the annual pilgrimage of Jewish people to the temple in Jerusalem.

The pilgrims sing the happiness of living united in the same faith, hope and love. Fraternal communion expresses a beauty and a special attraction that raises questions. In his *Apology* responding to the Gentiles, Tertullian offers us a first-hand witness of how the first Christians lived. The pagans, intrigued by the harmony among Jesus’ disciples, enthusiastically exclaimed, *“See how they love one another”* (cf. Acts 4: 32-37).

16. Saint Vincent, Conference of January 6, 1642, CCD IX, 44

### *The mystique of living together*

Zealous Church Fathers who took care to keep the Master's teachings alive encouraged the first Christian communities' witness that filled their contemporaries with admiration. Let us consider a few of their texts:

*“Let the strong not despise the weak, and let the weak show respect unto the strong. Let the rich man provide for the wants of the poor; and let the poor man bless God, because He has given him one by whom his need may be supplied. Let the wise man display his wisdom, not by [mere] words, but through good deeds. Let the humble not bear testimony to himself, but leave witness to be borne to him by another.”*<sup>17</sup>

*“Have a regard to preserve unity, than which nothing is better. Bear with all, even as the Lord does with you. Support all in love, as also you do. Give yourself to prayer without ceasing. Implore additional understanding to what you already have. Be watchful, possessing a sleepless spirit. Speak to every man separately, as God enables you. Bear the infirmities of all, as being a perfect athlete [in the Christian life]: where the labor is great, the gain is all the more.”*<sup>18</sup>

### ***The beauty of community life in accordance with the Gospel***

In today's information and communication society, it is essential to foster human relationships inspired by Gospel values. *“The Word, the genuine source of spirituality from which to draw the sublimity of the knowledge of Christ Jesus (Ph 3:8), must inhabit our everyday lives. It is only in this way that its power (cf. 1 Th 1:5) can make inroads into human frailty, can grow and build places of community life, and correct our thoughts, affections, decisions and the dialogues woven in a spirit of brotherhood. Following the example of Mary, listening to the Word must become the breath of life in every moment of existence.”*<sup>19</sup>

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17. Saint Clement of Rome, Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 38

18. Epistle of Ignatius of Antioch to Polycarp, chapter 1

19. CIVCSVA, *Keep watch!* 9

We know from experience the power of words and their capacity to enhance or put a damper on life together. A friendly word is a healing balm and a cause for joy and encouragement in times of sorrow. The Word of God indicates how we should speak: *“No foul language should come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for needed edification, that it may impart grace to those who hear”* (Eph 4:29). Many problems in human relationships could surely be resolved from an attitude of attentive and kindly listening. *“If you are willing to listen, you can learn; if you pay attention, you can be instructed,”* we are told in the book of Sirach.<sup>20</sup>

Saint Vincent and Saint Louise gave great importance to the quality of human relationships in community. *“Cordial respect will help you to take in good part whatever your Sisters say to you, for we don’t get angry at what’s said by a person we love... Those who don’t follow the maxim Saint John taught his disciples are angered by everything, misinterpret everything, and never excuse anything... The practice of cordiality engenders the respect you owe one another - not as the world manifests it, Sisters, by pretense and outward show, which it will never be, but from a motive of charity and in the way Saint Paul taught us, ‘Anticipate each other in showing respect’ [Rom 12:10].”*<sup>21</sup>

We are convinced that genuine community life requires taking special care of times for communication in all its varied forms: faith sharing, community review, apostolic reflection, mutual information and simple communication of day-to-day happenings. *“I have the impression that the two of you are living together in great peace and with the desire of animating one another to strive for union and cordiality. This creates a climate in which you communicate with one another, telling one another what you did while you were apart and letting one another know where you are going when you leave the house. In this instance one of you acts from an obligation of submission while the other*

20. Sirach 6:33

21. Saint Vincent, Conference of January 1, 1644, CCD IX, 123-124

*The mystique of living together*  
*has the duty of support and courtesy.*”<sup>22</sup>

Communication fosters peace and unity in the community, encourages co-responsibility and promotes participation. On the contrary, lack of dialogue gives rise to individualism, indifference, anonymity, isolation and solitude. Sometimes an exhausting pace of life saps all energy and gets in the way of the calm necessary for listening and dialogue. It is important to take time, be able to wait and reflect in order to develop a well-founded opinion and think a decision through. We should discern all the information that we receive as well as the appropriate use of the means of communication since they “*can expose people to the risk of addiction, isolation and gradual loss of contact with concrete reality, blocking the development of authentic interpersonal relationships.*”<sup>23</sup>

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante describes the lowest circle of hell as a frozen lake where the devil is seated on a throne of ice. His dwelling place is extinguished love.<sup>24</sup> This is a poetic way to express the pathetic reality that where love is extinguished, there is hell. The lack of love is hell!

### ***The mystique of living together in community, light and prophecy***

In a troubled world that is trying to overcome the serious consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, in a society that fosters individualism, self-centeredness and indifference to the situation of those who are poor, an attractive and radiant witness of fraternal communion is even more necessary. “*We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization*

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22. Saint Louise, L. 425 to Sister Laurence, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 463

23. Pope Francis, *Christus vivit*, 88

24. Cf. Pope Francis, Message for Lent 2018

of indifference”<sup>25</sup> “Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another... This was Jesus’ heartfelt prayer to the Father: ‘That they may all be one... in us... so that the world may believe’ (Jn 17:21). Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community!”<sup>26</sup>

A welcoming and friendly community life that shines forth peace, joy and hope and is poor and simple is a prophetic sign, a proclamation of the Good News of the Lord. “*This joy is a fruit of the Spirit and embraces the simplicity of existence and the monotonous texture of daily life. A joyless fraternity is one that is dying out... A fraternity rich in joy is a genuine gift from above to brothers and sisters who know how to ask for it and to accept one another, committing themselves to fraternal life, trusting in the action of the Spirit.*”<sup>27</sup>

Do we live out community life with the fervor of the first Christian communities, in synch with the Word of God and the breaking of the bread, in fraternal communion, sharing what we are and what we have? Some signs of a community’s spiritual vitality are an atmosphere of faith, joy and apostolic zeal, a desire for conversion and an ability to forgive, review and change. This is why it is necessary to carefully discern in the Local Community Plan the objectives that we wish to reach and the appropriate means.<sup>28</sup> We cannot fail to mention the interest in personal growth and the attention paid to formation as a process of progressive configuration to Christ and a transformation of mind and heart.<sup>29</sup>

The local community has a responsibility to proclaim the Kingdom of God, bearing witness to Jesus Christ through its life and service: “*Encourage one another, and may your mutual good*

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25. Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, 52

26. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 99, 92

27. *Fraternal life in community*, 28

28. Cf. Constitutions 32-36

29. Cf. *Vita consecrata*, 69

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*example speak louder than any words could.” “... you may be certain that all will go well. You will be respected by those outside the Company, and the union and cordiality prevalent among you will be so strong...”<sup>30</sup> *Evangelii gaudium* indicates what weakens or dampens love in our communities: *selfishness, spiritual sloth, sterile pessimism, the temptation of isolation and worldliness that focuses on appearances, thus diminishing missionary zeal.*<sup>31</sup>*

It is of vital importance to become aware of the prophetic strength of fraternal communion. “*Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world.*”<sup>32</sup>

### **III. The urgent need to break through the gate, go towards and promote encounters**

#### ***Break through the gate, enter and exit***

A gate has a suggestive, meaningful symbolism. The Gospel teaches us that Jesus is the gate leading to salvation and fullness of life (cf. Jn 10:9). The Acts of the Apostles recounts how the apostles had the doors locked and lived in terror until the Holy Spirit poured forth His gifts on them.

A gate allows access between two different areas and can make the passage easier or be an obstacle. An always-open gate gives access to grace, light and truth. However, gates are often closed due to suspicion, mistrust and prejudices... There is also the scandalous gap between those who are privileged and those who are the poorest. We need to break through so many gates in order to come to a renewed humanity, one transformed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit!

30. Saint Louise, *Spiritual Writings*, L. 402, p. 450; L. 554, p. 579

31. Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 81-109

32. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 11

We urgently need to break down the barriers of injustice that engender poverty, insecurity, fear and powerlessness. It is urgent to cross over the barrier of indifference that humiliates the other person and impedes wonder at newness. How necessary it is for us to open our eyes to see the misery of the world and the wounds of our brothers and sisters and sharpen our hearing to hear their cries for help!<sup>33</sup>

It is urgent to open the gates to respect of life, caring for it from conception to natural death. It is paramount to support women who face discrimination or are victims of slavery and who courageously choose to be mothers despite many difficulties. There is an urgent need to defend the family, threatened by ideologies presenting models opposed to the Christian concept of life. Fighting for the dignity of the person and the defense of human rights is a priority.

It is essential to open the gate of truth in the context of relativism and subjectivity that negate absolute values, with serious consequences for human and social life. An attitude of discernment is necessary given the “fake news” that spreads falsehoods, sometimes under the cloak of half-truths. As Pope Francis points out, the worst temptations into which we can fall, both with communication technology and in daily life, are calumny, defamation and disinformation.

It is vital to open the gates of peace and hope given so many situations of anxiety and despair. “*Listening to one another can lead to mutual understanding and esteem, and even to seeing in an enemy the face of a brother or sister.*”<sup>34</sup>

A great challenge is to open the gates to the message of Jesus Christ. The human person has a deep thirst that cannot be quenched by material objects. Therefore, the Daughters of Charity’s “primary concern is to make God known to them, to

33. Cf. Pope Francis, *Misericordiae vultus*, 15

34. Pope Francis, Message for the World Day of Peace 2020

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*proclaim the Gospel, and to make the Kingdom known.*”<sup>35</sup> Today’s society, passing through a crisis of values, needs a compass to guide its steps. Do we have the concern for revealing to children and youth the joy of the Gospel and the happiness of following Jesus Christ? Do we encourage them to come to know the Vincentian charism by inviting them to serve persons who are poor?

### ***Go towards the geographic and existential peripheries***

We are called to be a Company that “goes forth,” to serve coming and going with joy, generosity and selflessness as Saint Vincent and Saint Louise did. This requires availability and mobility.<sup>36</sup> The charity of Christ impels us to make the suffering of those who are poor our own.

We need to be present in the hovels of extreme poverty, discouragement and loneliness, showing that God’s tenderness has no limits.

Come out of ourselves to go towards the places where people suffer from multiple forms of poverty, where many of our brothers and sisters live without sufficient resources for a dignified life. Go forth to encounter the most cut-off people, the forgotten people, those who need comfort and assistance.

Go towards inhospitable places where there are migrants and refugees, where the human person is the object of abuse, trafficking and slavery.

Go towards the neglected rural world where the resources of the earth are exploited, to outlying urban areas populated by marginalized, uprooted and excluded people. Go forth to jails, “*one of the harshest peripheries, one with the most pain. To go to a prison means first of all to say to yourself: ‘If I am not here, like*

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35. Constitution 10a

36. Cf. Constitution 12



*this woman, like this man, it is only by the grace of God.”*<sup>37</sup>

Go towards people affected by chronic illnesses and pain, accompanying the weakest and least privileged people, hearing their evangelizing calls that can resonate in us. Go towards the peripheries of weakness to care for defenseless children and abandoned elderly.

Go forth towards the deserts where God seems far off or absent, offering children, adolescents and young adults models for meaning that give direction to their lives based on faith and hope. The rising generations desiring freedom and seeking happiness need to build their lives on solid foundations and to hear the voice of Christ calling them to be His friends. They need to know that in Him they will find Love and Life, true freedom and the fullness of happiness.

### ***Encounter each other, create spaces for fraternity***

Contemplating the beauty and greatness of creation, our eyes enlightened by faith discover how each thing speaks to us of God. Like the psalmist, we feel induced to bless and praise our Creator: “*Lord, my God, you are great indeed! You are clothed with majesty and splendor, robed in light as with a cloak*” (Ps 104:1-2). This experience generates joy, gratitude and the recognition that everything is a gift from God who created the world out of love and called us to be His children and live as brothers and sisters.

Because we are created in the image and likeness of God who is Love, our hearts always feel the desire to live in communion. “*Nothing, in fact, is as specific to our nature,*” Saint Basil affirmed, “*as entering into a relationship one with another, having need of one another.*”<sup>38</sup> In our media-driven culture, it is necessary

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37. Pope Francis, address to the Community of Christian Life, April 30, 2015

38. Benedict XVI, Message for the 43<sup>rd</sup> World Communications Day (2009), quoted in the Message of Pope Francis for the 53<sup>rd</sup> World Communications Day (2019)

### *The mystique of living together*

to create spaces for encounter and communion, coming out of oneself like a real exodus.

The mystique of living together is an exercise in profound humanity that implies transforming the social fabric tainted by indifference into spaces and times imbued with Gospel values. Faith impels us to foster encounters and develop relationships since a person finds fulfillment in openness to others. The mystique of living together leads to favoring human and spiritual bonds, fostering the exchange of gifts, the sharing of goods and the accomplishment of projects in common. *“Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a “mystique” of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage.”*<sup>39</sup>

A local community of Daughters of Charity is called to create fraternal connections with children, youth, adults, people experiencing homelessness, etc., to favor encounters, times and spaces for sharing, praying and celebrating the faith, places where those who are poor feel welcomed as brothers and sisters, gather as family and enjoy the warmth of friendship. These encounters give them what they need to live in a dignified way and help them to discover and love Jesus because in Him alone can they find love, peace, joy and hope.

### ***Bethany, an icon of authentic encounter***

Bethany is a village three kilometers from Jerusalem. Martha, Mary and Lazarus, Jesus’ friends, lived there. It was a real home that Jesus enjoyed visiting: the atmosphere there was one of faith and love; it exuded peace and produced calm.

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39. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 87

During His public life, Lazarus' house was a refuge for Jesus whenever He was in the area. He enjoyed these family gatherings where He received and extended friendship. There was mutual trust. There, His words were understood and accepted; they were treasured.

In our day, many impoverished people yearn for encounters and need to create or strengthen bonds and dwell in spaces where they feel accepted and loved. We are called to create new "Bethanys," new places of encounter, warm and fraternal spaces filled with the good odor of the Gospels, where those who are poor feel they are the favorite sons and daughters, loved and blessed by God the Father.

For the Daughters of Charity, Bethany is the ideal place to learn the mystique of living together, in the beauty of everyday life, enthusiastically listening to the Teacher like Mary and serving Him with a humble and simple love like Martha.

Sister Rosa-Maria MIRO  
*Daughter of Charity*

### Province del Caribe (Cuba)

#### Sharing of experiences

C

Challenge  
of the  
Mystique  
of living  
together

*“In the face of so much pain and suffering, our only course is to imitate the Good Samaritan. Any other decision would make us either one of the robbers or one of those who walked by without showing compassion for the sufferings of the man on the roadside. The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbors, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good” (Fratelli tutti, 67).*

Cuba is a country with a tropical climate, consisting of plains and limestone plateaus, with the exception of the southeast, which is mountainous. Our small local community of San Vicente is located to the south of the capital, in Madruga. At quite some distance from Madruga, there is a very tiny and underprivileged hamlet, Santa Brigida, made up of about ten families who live in a very insecure financial situation. These families, forgotten by society, housed in a make-shift shelter, living below the poverty line, try to survive. Their priority is finding something to eat!

The report by Social Services on this village is distressing: no sanitary facilities (potable water is only delivered only twice a week, and there is no place to store it), no health care, no refrigerator to

preserve food. Each day, they have to find something to eat, and this often causes considerable violence. Social services comes from time to time to bring assistance for these families, but this does not last.

The social situation is very complicated, and the families are dysfunctional. Most of the women are without work, some women take on small jobs to avoid problems with the justice system, and the numerous children are left to their own devices. This has psychological and physical consequences: when they grow up, they live in a dishonorable way, cutting themselves off from others. Violence and the law of the strongest prevail. This way of life is passed on from one generation to the next. For the time being, there is no sign of a solution to this tragic situation.

During the pandemic, we, the Daughters of Charity of Madruga with the help of Vincentian collaborators, tried to offer them some assistance and a little fraternal warmth. We know that every person, however disfigured he or she may be, wants to live his or her full dignity and needs not just food and hygiene but also acceptance, fraternity and values education.

In community, we are discerning how to promote these very needy families and help them to have a more dignified life. Seeking solutions together to offer a response to this precarious situation, wishing to always do more and networking are means that help us to persevere in this difficult mission of sowing without knowing what fruit might result.

We ask God for the ability to find the means to support our brothers and sisters in great difficulty. As Pope Francis reminds us, *“that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters”* (Urbi et Orbi Blessing, Sagrato of St. Peter’s Basilica, March 27, 2020).

The Sisters of Quinta San Vicente local community  
Madruga, Cuba

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Province of España-Sur (Morocco)

Saint Charles de Foucauld

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News  
from the  
Provinces

*“If I was able to do a little good, if I could settle in the Sahara, it is, after Jesus, because I was a military officer and traveled to Morocco. God prepares well ahead and makes actions, be they good, evil or done without thinking at all of Him, serve for the salvation of souls”* (letter to Louis Massignon, December 3, 1911).

A little over a year ago, when the canonization of Blessed Charles de Foucauld was approved, a committee was formed with members from the dioceses of Rabat and Tanger (Morocco) with the purpose of making him known through different activities: prayer services in parishes and religious communities, creation of on-line media concerning his life, improving access to some of his writings, offering retreats, preparing thanksgiving celebrations following his canonization or other festive gatherings. Collaborating in this committee, I received the un hoped-for gift of participating in the canonization on May 15, 2022, in the company of other members of the committee and pastoral agents of the two dioceses. I hope that God will help me to remain faithful to this unmerited grace.

This new saint is known to many of us. At some point in our life, most of us have sung or prayed his prayer of abandonment with devotion. During my Seminary, we learned a sung version, but I went many years without knowing much about Charles de Foucauld. In recent years, I have become more familiar with him thanks to several people who live his spirituality.

Why has he attracted such different people for so long? What do we know about him? I would dare to say that it's mostly his life in the desert and his prayer of abandonment. What most amazes me is that he was not able to realize his desire to gather disciples or communities during his lifetime, but after his death, communities were born in different places and with diverse forms to deepen his spirituality and choose, as he did, the spirituality of Nazareth in North Africa, whatever their place of implantation. The spirituality of Nazareth is configuring oneself to Christ in a life of work, relationships and ordinary encounters and recognizing God's presence in everyday life...

Someone who doesn't know Charles de Foucauld well might picture a person totally dedicated to prayer, living in solitude and having a relationship with a few inhabitants of the desert from time to time. However, how impressive it is to see the intensity of his daily activity! In his numerous letters to his family and friends, we read that he often had to stop praying, studying and learning the Tuareg language to welcome the people who came to see him. He dedicated time to them, listened to them, offered them something to eat and a place to rest. He always chose this attitude because he wanted to be "the universal brother." In 1911, he wrote his cousin, Raymond de Bli: *"If I closed the door today to work in peace, maybe no one would come tomorrow."* In 1916, a few years before his death, he wrote his sister Marie de Foucauld: *"My day is spent coming and going between the chapel or my desk to the door. Only a little good can be done being available at every hour of the day and night."*

## Sisters' Testimonies

Quite a journey was necessary for him to be capable of such statements. After the wandering of his adolescence and young adulthood, he decided at the age of 23 to explore Morocco. Having thrown himself into his work, its quality earned him the gold medal of the French Geographic Society. This experience in Morocco turned his life upside-down and was, as he himself said, the dawn of his return to the faith. After numerous encounters with intelligent and very Christian people, he decided to meet a priest with the desire to recover his faith. Father Huvelin asked him to make his confession and receive communion. For him, this was a very profound encounter with Jesus, and he understood that he could no longer live except for Him. He wanted to imitate the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth. He continued to explore his vocation. Having become a monk at the Trappist monastery, he remained there seven years, but his quest for radical poverty impelled him to leave the monastery to set off for the Holy Land. He hired himself in the service of the Poor Clares of Nazareth and Jerusalem to live in silence and solitude. After four years, he was ordained a priest. Wishing to reach those who did not yet know the Gospel, he decided to live as a hermit in the Sahara Desert in Algeria. In order to get to know the Tuareg people better, he studied their language and culture and became their friend through his goodness, pastoral assistance to wounded soldiers and to the sick as well as through the letters that he wrote to their families in their name. Totally open to the will of God that he discovered through events, he always let the love of Christ guide him, and divine grace worked a profound transformation of his person day after day.

Before I was sent on mission to Morocco, I had never really had any contact with the writings of Charles de Foucauld. However, the day that I discovered that the Gospel passage of Matthew 25 touched him the most and led him in God's hands to go towards the poorest people, I was truly happy. As for our Founders, he gave flesh to this Gospel passage, in a Muslim milieu, with the Tuareg people. He wanted to live as the brother of all: *"I want all the people here, Christians, Muslims, Jews, non-believers, to*



*look on me as their brother, the universal brother. They begin to call my house 'the fraternity,' and this makes me happy"* (letter to his cousin Marie de Bondy in 1902, soon after he moved to Algeria).

*A few months before his death, he wrote to René Bazin: "We must work to make the Muslims accept us and become for them the sure friend to whom they go when they are in doubt or in pain, on whose affection, wisdom and justice they depend absolutely. It is only when we get to that point that we can do any good for their souls. Inspiring an absolute trust in our truthfulness, in the uprightness of our character... giving an idea of our religion by our goodness and our virtues, being in an affectionate relationship with as many souls as possible, Muslim or Christian, native or French, this is our primary duty. It is only after fulfilling it well for a long enough time that we can do good. My life consists thus in being in relationship as much as possible with those around me and in rendering all the services that I can."*

At his death, the Tuareg leader and his great friend, Moussa Ag Amastane, wrote to his sister Marie: *"As soon as I learned of the death of our friend, your brother Charles, my eyes closed... I cried and spilled many tears, and I am in deep mourning... Charles the miracle worker did not die just for you, he also died for all of us. May God grant him mercy, and may we meet together in paradise!"* These words prove that interfaith dialogue is possible through friendship, regular mutual listening among people of different religions, attitudes of welcome, of encounter... Today, in all the places where we encounter people who are different from us, let us as well learn to build universal fraternity.

In Rome, we were able to attend talks and exhibits on the life and spirituality of Charles de Foucauld. On Sunday, May 15, 2022, our participation in the Eucharist for the canonizations was a very moving time, a true time of grace.

### *Sisters' Testimonies*

Now, to make Charles de Foucauld better known among Moroccans, we are preparing gatherings, pilgrimages and thanksgiving celebrations in the parishes of the two dioceses. These are joyful and enriching moments that fill our hearts with immense gratitude towards this new saint. May he be a true inspiration for us on our vocation journey.

Sister Inma MARTI  
*Daughter of Charity*

Province of Cologne-Netherlands  
The mystique of “living together”  
in our retirement homes

“When we dream alone, it’s only a dream. When we dream with others, it’s the beginning of a new reality” (Helder Camara).

A few days ago, I couldn’t fall asleep at night. My thoughts about our future robbed me of my sleep. I was thinking about the life in common that we lead and wondered if it was truly imbued with the love of the Lord and inner freedom that He promised us, that is, a freedom that draws its strength to serve those who are poor serenely and live in the presence of God and dream with Him. My reflection on the mystique of living together led me to ask myself several questions:

- In our local communities and works, do we work in a concrete, effective and direct way for fraternity?
- Do we exercise fraternal charity humbly towards those most wounded by life?
- Do our love and charity shine like a ray of light in the night?
- In our local community, which is becoming smaller and older, do we still have enough energy to live quality relationships in our life in common?
- Do we live dialogue, trust, respect and reconciliation?

In the morning, some answers came to mind.

## Sisters' Testimonies

*“Here we have a splendid secret that shows us how to dream and to turn our life into a wonderful adventure. No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together.”<sup>1</sup>*

A mystique is often assimilated with a certain withdrawal from the world, a self-centeredness, pious practices and a private interior life. However, mystics of all times have had a very clear vision of the world as it is, but from a different perspective from ours, in the light of the love of God. Their living faith in God led them to commit themselves for love, solidarity and freedom and to fight against injustice, violence, poverty, suffering and all that destroys our earth. The Christian faith touches the depths of our lives but also of social coexistence in the world and our responsibility for it. *“Do not conform yourselves to this age”* (Rom 12:2), such is our mission. *“What is the real root of our Christianity? Aren't we too subjected to this world? Do we still really have the desire to be saved in relationship to this bourgeois world? Do we still keep something of what the Gospel calls 'soul' and 'life' in opposition to our world of possession?”<sup>2</sup>*

Various situations from recent months during the pandemic came to mind. At the beginning, the residents of our retirement homes were not permitted to have visitors, and this lasted weeks. This situation was especially stressful for our collaborators. However, through their exceptional commitment and their kindness, they countered solitude and grief with very beautiful signs of hope.

During the Christmas and New Year holidays, many staff members and Sisters were struck by Covid-19, and the holidays took place in the middle of a lockdown, in terrible isolation.

1. Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 8

2. J.B. Metz, *Mystique des yeux ouverts* [Eyes wide-open spirituality], Fribourg 2011, p. 206

“Christmas didn’t happen this year,” one Sister sadly said. However, during these holidays, despite it all, there were many “signs of incarnation”: contacting those who were sick by telephone, being united in prayer and liturgy, accepting overtime to replace sick employees, bearing with sadness, abandonment and despair and accepting to be “interrupted” by the suffering of others.

I saw the reality of Sisters who live in “little communities” in retirement homes; they too need the help of lay people and must find the means to live together well in their “little community” despite their age, weakness, psychological difficulties, differences in character and even in religious expression. These Sisters who want to be contact people for others truly are that for residents, staff, visitors, family members and other Sisters. They listen, comfort, share, contribute their life experience, faith, humor and wisdom. They do all this in an environment where people have little to no religious formation or are non-believers. This is why it is important to accept other values, other interpretations, other temporal structures and other cultural contexts.

The Sisters live “differently”: they make vows, give up many things, live in community, gather several times a day for prayer in common and observe personal times of silence and meditation. These interruptions in everyday life are a central part of their lives. Their interpretation of reality is shaped by their orientation towards God. They take the time to not stay on the surface level of things.

*“Let us realize that as our minds and hearts narrow, the less capable we become of understanding the world around us. Without encountering and relating to differences, it is hard to achieve a clear and complete understanding even of ourselves and of our native land. Other cultures are not ‘enemies’ from which we need to protect ourselves, but differing reflections of the inexhaustible richness of human life. Seeing ourselves from the perspective of another, of one who is different, we can better*

### Sisters' Testimonies

*recognize our own unique features and those of our culture... To see things in this way brings the joyful realization that no one people, culture or individual can achieve everything on its own: to attain fulfilment in life we need others. For 'man is a limited being who is himself limitless.'"<sup>3</sup> Yes, I will continue to live the dream that God has for me, to the extent that, attentive to His calls, I will try to respond generously.*

Claudia VONIER  
Coordinator

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3. Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 147 and 150

# 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the canonization of Catherine Labouré

July 27, 1947 - July 27, 2022



*History of  
the Company*

### INTRODUCTION

The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the canonization of Catherine Labouré offers us the opportunity to revisit her very rich life as well as the historical, political and ecclesial context in which Catherine and the local community of Reuilly lived. It is also an opportunity to marvel at details that shaped her life.

We know that, just after her mother's death, young Catherine gave herself to the Virgin Mary, in a fit of tenderness and trust, and took her as her "Mother." However, we might also think that a deep spiritual relationship developed between Catherine and Vincent de Paul, following her dream in the church of Fain, to the point that he became her spiritual "Father." The mysterious exchanges between Vincent and Catherine can be thought of as at the origin of the visits of the Blessed Virgin. During the mysterious dream in the church of Fain, Vincent announced to Catherine that God had plans for her. Vincent de Paul really seems to have been chosen by God to prepare Catherine for her future mission. We also know that, the eve of the feast of Saint Vincent,

### 75th anniversary of the canonization of Catherine Labouré

celebrated at that time on July 19, Catherine asked the Founder for the grace of seeing the Blessed Virgin, whom she had longed to see for such a long time. Catherine was not seeking apparitions in the strict sense of the word; she simply wanted to meet the Virgin Mary, to see her Mother; this is not the same thing. *“I had seen our Founder, I saw Our Lord, and I hadn’t seen my Mother.”* There she was, carried away in a new desire, that of seeing her Mother: *“I went to bed thinking that Saint Vincent would obtain for me the grace of seeing the Blessed Virgin.”*

Allow me a little aside to consider more specifically two apparitions, chosen because of their repercussions in the history of the Church and their context of a religious congregation. I am referring to the apparitions de Paray-le-Monial in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and those of the Rue du Bac in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The connection between these two apparitions can help us to grasp the richness of their messages. Indeed, if it was a Visitation nun who received mystical revelations in 1675 with the mission of spreading devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a devotion so dear to Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane Francis de Chantal, it was a Daughter of Charity who received the revelation of the Medal in 1830 with the mission of disseminating it and praying to Mary Immaculate with the invocation *“O Mary conceived without sin,”* a devotion so dear to Saint Louise and Saint Vincent de Paul. We could deduce that the Holy Spirit, in a way, had already inspired in our Founders what would later be confirmed in the universal Church by the Medal. Mary Immaculate is the pathway by which God comes to us, but she is not just the Mother of God, she is also Mother of the Church and unfailingly guides us towards her Son and towards humankind, her children.

## **I – AN ABSOLUTE DISCRETION**

We could read the history of Catherine’s life like a detective novel, but on the condition that we specify that it is a mystical detective novel. Indeed, once the Medal was disseminated and it was said that it resulted from apparitions in Paris, people wanted



to know who had this privilege and where this visionary was. However, no one managed to unmask Catherine, who carefully remained incognito all her life. It was only when she sensed death coming that after receiving the Virgin Mary's consent, she opened up to her Sister Servant because Mary's request for the statue of the Virgin with the globe had not yet been honored.

Although these apparitions were never officially recognized by the Church since Catherine never revealed herself, except to her confessor as desired by the Virgin Mary, through the Medal's message that proclaims that Mary is conceived without sin, the faith and sensibility of believers have been enlightened and acceptance of the dogma was eased. The "Holy Medal," as the Church called it, referred to as the "Miraculous Medal" by the people themselves due to the miracles worked thanks to restored confidence: countless healings, particularly during the cholera epidemic in 1832, and conversions, the most spectacular of which was that of the young Jewish banker, Alphonse Ratisbonne in 1842.

Catherine's absolute discretion is a beacon for us, a call to live our servant vocation humbly, after the example of Mary the Handmaid and Jesus the Servant.

## **II - SOME SURPRISES**

On December 11, 1907, 31 years after Catherine's death, her cause for beatification was introduced before Pope Saint Pius X. Before the beginning of this beatification process, in 1881, the Sacred Congregation of Rites had ordered the removal of the statue of the Virgin with the globe, placed in the Chapel of the rue du Bac one year earlier. In 1885, Pope Leo XIII had the statue returned, and the Sacred Congregation of Rites authorized publication of the Office of the Miraculous Medal. Catherine was beatified on May 28, 1933, by Pope Pius XI. Two months before the beatification, on March 21, 1933, Catherine's body was exhumed from its casket in Reuilly. Found in a perfect

### 75th anniversary of the canonization of Catherine Labouré

state, it was dressed anew in a habit of the Daughters of Charity and placed in a reliquary at the Chapel of the Motherhouse, 140 rue du Bac in Paris, today called the Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. On July 27, 1947, Catherine was canonized by Pope Pius XII despite the attempts of the Secretary General of the Congregation of the Mission, Father Coste, who did not believe in the apparitions. He intervened twice in Rome to say that Catherine Labouré had lost her mind because one day in Reuilly, during the summer of 1871, she said to dig one and a half meters deep to find a flat stone like a tombstone and what was necessary to build a “church.” It sounded like a hidden treasure. The workers dug several times but did not find anything. At that point, no one could understand this incredible prediction. The meaning only became clear at Catherine’s death when the Sister Servant, Sister Dufès, having received permission to keep her body in Reuilly in opposition to all practices and usual regulations, was seeking in vain an appropriate place for her tomb, and she seemed to hear these words echo: “*the tomb is under the chapel in Reuilly.*” There was in fact a useless cavity in the middle of the house; the architect had even wanted to fill it in. However, the previous Sister Servant had refused; no one knows why. This cavity seemed to offer itself for her sepulture. Behold, the police commissioner, not knowing this prediction, directed to bury her at precisely “one and a half meters.” The tomb was thus arranged with a tombstone. This was the “treasure!” The tomb in Reuilly quickly became a chapel, a place of pilgrimage, where people came to turn to Catherine’s intercession while waiting for her canonization that would authorize twenty-three churches, basilicas or chapels to be dedicated to her in every corner of the globe.

However, to fully grasp Catherine’s holiness and the difficulties that she faced, it is important to understand the economic, social and religious situation in which she lived. In this period, France was very turbulent, shaken, destabilized, compromised on all levels.

### III – A TURMULTUOUS POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

#### *Revolutions and sufferings of all sorts*

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a difficult century, somewhat like our 21<sup>st</sup> century. France had barely emerged from the 1789 Revolution, an internal war lasting several years, worse than recent terrorist attacks. After this major 1789 Revolution, three others followed: one in 1830, another in 1848 and a third in 1871. Catherine lived through these three later revolutions; she lived at the heart of this troubled, uncertain period that was so trying for those who are poor. While 1830 was blessed for her and for the Company, it was also the stage of real revolutionary chaos! It was in this context that the Virgin Mary came to meet Catherine.

*From an economic point of view*, the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the period of the industrial revolution with the development of technology and its prodigious inventions: steam engines, weaving looms, etc. It also engendered tragic social consequences: the working conditions of peasants and workers became inhumane, with children obliged to work in factories as young as seven years of age... This suffering led to alcoholism and all sorts of criminal behavior. The social environment deteriorated and created revolts all over. This decline led inexorably to a disastrous situation: on the one hand, the rich, and on the other hand, the poor, two worlds totally foreign to each other. Those who were poor no longer had anything, suffered from the cold and hunger, old age or illness; they lived in tiny squalid rooms without any basic amenities. It is difficult in our days to imagine such a destitute working class. A civil war broke out July 27-28-29, 1830. This revolution, called “Les Trois Glorieuses,” would be short but particularly bloody and extremely anti-religious. It produced a complete upheaval: August 2, 1830, King Charles X had to abdicate.

*From a political point of view*, the “conservative” monarchy was replaced by another very different one, a constitutional monarchy,

### 75th anniversary of the canonization of Catherine Labouré

characterized by abandonment of the absolute monarchy of divine right and by a regime that was very hostile to the Church. Louis-Philippe I, the Duke of Orléans, agreed to assure the continuation of the Kingdom. One year later, the cholera epidemic was rife. It was a period of famine, financial crisis and increased extreme poverty; the resulting indignation was expressed in class struggle. Revolutionary students recruited rioters among the workers from the Saint-Antoine and Reuilly neighborhoods.

**In February 1848** came the third French revolution, followed by uprisings until June. In this civil war, more than 5,000 people were killed. In the working-class neighborhood of Reuilly, life was nothing more than one demonstration, skirmish and popular uprising after another. On rue de Reuilly, one battle caused 42 deaths and wounded many. The last king, Louis-Philippe of Orléans, had to abdicate, leading to the exile of the House of Orléans, which would have devastating consequences for the life of the Enghien Hospice, founded in 1829 by the Duchess of Bourbon and financially supported by the House of Orléans.

## **IV – THE ENGHIEH HOSPICE AND THE HOUSE OF REUILLY: ADAPTATION, TRIBULATIONS, DETERMINATION**

At the hospice, the Sisters cared for the elderly servants of the royal family, former valets and gamekeepers, along with indigents leaving hospitals. Now the hospice suddenly saw its resources greatly reduced! Sister Montcellet, who had just been named Sister Servant of the hospice, suffered at seeing the material and moral destitution of the inhabitants of Reuilly; she no longer wished to limit herself to the hospice but wanted the Sisters to be involved in charitable works on behalf of such a poor population. Despite the lack of finances, she borrowed money and built what she called the “*Providence-Sainte-Marie*” at the other end of the huge hospice garden, facing the rue de Reuilly (no. 77). The buildings of the primary school and works for youth were inaugurated the following year, and the Sisters began the instruction of girls. Sister Montcellet then had another

building constructed housing a shelter for children orphaned due to cholera, a clinic, an emergency assistance center and a social services office intended to provide food, wood and a roof for the neediest people. On Sundays, the little girls of the neighborhood came to learn reading, writing and catechism.

As early as 1860, the new Sister Servant, Sister Dufès, welcomed about twenty boys to teach them to read and write. She set them up in the waiting room of the *Providence Sainte Marie*. As their number kept increasing, it was decided to serve them in three or four large rooms of the Enghien hospice. However, the little old men of the hospice did not at all appreciate these kids' cries and games.

Six years later, after another cholera epidemic, a *small orphanage for boys* was set up in the attics of the hospice, but all those boys were terribly restless and undisciplined; they were the sons of insurgents of the 1848 revolution. One day, they set to erecting barricades in the street of the hospice, so calm at that time. Soon afterwards, the royal foundress ordered the withdrawal of all the activities organized for these boys as well as the small orphanage from her hospice because, she said, "It does not support the purpose of the Foundation." She no longer accepted at the hospice any more than the seven Sisters assigned to it. The other 25 Sisters, involved in the works of the neighborhood, would go to stay at the other end of the garden, in the building at 77 rue de Reuilly, including Sister Dufès. Catherine assumed responsibility as the directress of the Enghien hospice, without the title. For religious services and spiritual exercises, the seven Sisters of the hospice would join the local community now in the buildings of the Providence Sainte-Marie, rue de Reuilly. A solution had to be found for the boys and orphans who were housed in the hospice.

Thanks to benefactors, Sister Dufès had facilities built for the classes and a covered playground on property located at 79 rue de Reuilly. There were soon 300 children and adolescents participating in the evening course. On Sundays, recreational

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activities were organized for the poorest children as well as a club for shared life, leisure and education in the spirit of comradery. Each day, when Catherine crossed the garden separating the hospice from the community house, about 500 meters, she crossed paths with poor children and the young workers, whom she loved and who came spontaneously to meet her and snuggle up to her. Catherine had the extraordinary grace of big-hearted grandmothers and a particular grace of communion among generations, whether it be with the neighborhood children, her young nephews and nieces or postulants and young Sisters. This contact with young people seems to be one of the traits of Catherine's character and charism. However, a new tragedy was in the works.

### *WAR AGAINST PRUSSIA*

**On July 19, 1870**, Napoleon III, President of the Republic since 1848, sought to restore French power in Europe. With a sort of recklessness regarding the danger in which he was placing the French people, he declared war on Prussia. The French, including the Sisters of the local community, were excited at the thought of a future victory. Catherine, for her part, was not enthusiastic; she knew that war brought its burden of tears and blood. She only thought of the sufferings it would cause. "*Poor soldiers,*" she said. The coincidence of this date, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first apparitions, might remind us of the sadness on Mary's face when she mentioned the bad times to come. Catherine loathed wars and revolutions, not out of attachment to a political regime or even a social order but out of love for the Church and for those who are poor, who always end up paying, even for the uprisings to which they are incited to "free" them. Catherine never allowed her political preferences (as much as we might be able to guess them) to interfere with her charitable action. It is difficult to serve one's neighbor in all things, including the social and civil domain, while respecting the Gospel.

The war took a turn for the worse. Val-de-Grâce Hospital asked the Sisters in Reuilly to take in 200 wounded people. The Sisters squeezed to make room, placing some patients in the classrooms of “Reuilly” and in the orphans’ shelter transformed into a field hospital and others in the hospice where Catherine would have the role of nurse. The mayor asked the Sisters to take responsibility for the distribution of meals to the wounded. Catherine took control of the kitchen in order to provide food for the elderly men and the wounded in the two field hospitals. That represented 1,200 meals a day. Rationing made this task difficult, but the Sisters were ingenious in getting them “extras.” Despite their exhausting work, the Sisters were satisfied with a hunk of coarse black bread and held out thanks to their sheer will, passionate dedication to others and boundless selflessness. To cap it off, it was a very cold winter. The mercury in the thermometer, below zero, kept going down. Paris was hungry, cold and crushed by bombs. The news of the war was very bad.

On January 18, 1871, two generals were secretly preparing an attack against the Prussians and mobilized all the troops possible. Officials came looking for able men at the Reuilly field hospital, some of whom were scarcely healed. “*Poor lambs,*” said Catherine, “*they are being led to the slaughterhouse.*” The attack failed. The Prussians entered Paris. On January 28, an armistice was negotiated with German Chancellor Bismark, and Napoleon III gave himself up. It was a national disaster. People thought that the end of the war would mark a return to calm, to normal life. They were soon disillusioned. The country went towards a civil war that greatly alarmed the Sisters as anti-clericalism again reared its head.

### ***THE COMMUNE OF PARIS (MARCH-MAY 1871)***

March 18, 1871, began the popular revolt of the Commune of Paris, which would last more than two months. It was the beginning of a period of anarchy with terrible violence and massacres. The revolutionaries, called Communards, were

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fiercely hostile to everything that recalled the society of the past; they dreamed that this anarchical movement of popular resistance might allow the communist party to take power. A radical anti-clericalism reigned, primarily affecting priests and religious. Since the Enghien hospice belonged to the House of Orléans, the Sisters saw the specter of the Revolution that cut through the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, Catherine, unshakeable, kept her exterior calm despite nasty comments and the mockeries of children riled up against the Sisters by their own mothers. “*Do not be afraid!*” she said. “*We must pray that God will cut short these bad days.*”

On April 2, the government, having taken refuge in Versailles, ordered the bombing of insurgent Paris. In this context, the Communards took measures to protect themselves against the Versaillais (name given by the Communards to the troops obedient to the government) and in a few days, had imprisoned more than 200 priests, not to mention civilians, prominent figures, officers, etc.

On April 7, two soldiers at the Reuilly field hospital went before the Communards to denounce the presence of two injured Versaillais soldiers among the wounded. The insurgents immediately came to the field hospital to seize and shoot them, but Sister Dufès refused to hand them over and had them escape. Mad with rage, the Communards wanted to take the Sister Servant. Catherine, the longest-standing member of the community, intervened, saying, “*If you take Sister Dufès, you’ll have to take us all.*” “*Why not?*” thought the Communards! However, the Sisters took care of the hospice, field hospital, school, clinic, soup kitchen; they also brought assistance to the neighborhood, so their arrest would be highly unpopular. The Communards left, but immediately afterward, an arrest warrant was issued against Sister Dufès, accusing her, among other things, of being at the service of the House of Orléans. Warned in secret, the Sister Servant decided to leave for Versailles and then continue on to Toulouse.



Catherine anticipated the violence that would arise when the Communards would come for Sister Dufès and not find her. That's when she had a bold but very clever idea. The best defense was to go to the headquarters of the Communards of Reuilly. She would plead the case of her Sister Servant to defuse the revolutionaries' anger. Catherine charged ahead: the Communards were stunned to see her on their territory. There she was, before the revolutionary committee, made up of some sixty strapping lads wearing red belts and screaming, bellowing and pounding the table. Catherine knew some of them, but she had known many more who were like them. They didn't frighten her. She let them howl. When they had let off some steam, she looked at them, smiled and asked them with the calm of her inner goodness, "*Would you kindly allow me to explain myself?*" She explained courageously in few words. Some resumed yelling and violently surrounded her to grab her. They didn't have time as one of their comrades, a soldier whom Catherine had nursed, stood up, pushed them away, freed Catherine and led her to the exit, releasing her from these raging madmen. In the end, Catherine freely left the office. That very evening, the forces that had been occupying the house of Reuilly withdrew.

During Sister Dufès' absence, Catherine replaced her, but the situation in Reuilly was more uncertain than ever, particularly because pressure from the Versaillais was growing stronger and battles were drawing closer. The local community of Reuilly was under constant surveillance, and over the days, some of the Sisters managed to leave the house at too much risk and take refuge in the outlying area or with their families. The community now had only fourteen Sisters for the essential services. Throughout the final week of April, the Sisters faced all sorts of dangers.

On April 22, two Communard women showed up at the community and declared that they would teach school in place of the Sister teachers. The people had to be cut off from the Church, and the Sisters had to be removed from the education of working-class children as it was no longer acceptable to deaden the minds

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of children of the common people with religion. However, these two women were crude, rough and mean with the children. One of them, called Valentin, was scandalously disreputable. She was especially monstrous with Catherine, infuriated that she didn't defend herself against her cruelty. For Catherine, pardoning offenses was a reflex. We must think, however, that these two teachers went too far because they inspired indignation, even among their supporters.

On April 24, Communards returned to the local community, claiming to make a search of the house for a priest supposedly hidden there. There was no one. How much longer would the Sisters avert disaster? It was impossible to say. The atmosphere was explosive. The next day, Communards, fully armed this time, burst into the Enghien hospice. They knocked about the Sisters who were there, brandished pistols under their noses and yelled that they had come for Sister Catherine. It wasn't an arrest but a convocation issued by the office of the mayor of the neighborhood. Catherine was brought before the revolutionary tribunal as a witness for the prosecution to accuse Citizen Valentin, the fanatic teacher, as the Commune had had enough of this woman's abuses and wanted to convict her. Knowing that she had done great harm to Sister Catherine, the Communards were sure that Catherine would condemn her. Surprise! Catherine demonstrated astonishing indulgence, acting as a witness for the defense and absolving Valentin. Vengeance didn't exist in Catherine; she did not consider her wounds nor betrayals but God who reconciles. Forced to let Valentin go, the Communards couldn't figure out on which side the Sisters were. For three days, everything seemed a little calmer, but the threat from the Versaillais increased, and the Communards' situation grew increasingly unstable...

On April 28, searches and threats resumed, more violent this time. The Sisters were accused of stealing property of the people. These were religious objects found in the chapel. Catherine explained, stating that they had simply protected articles belonging to the

local community because they feared that they would be stolen. That afternoon, the discussion got more heated! The insurgents burst in again with new accusations against the Sisters, claiming they killed three neighborhood women. Catherine again found herself convoked for an interrogation. Before the revolutionary tribunal, she remained unshaken despite death threats; she explained that there was surely an error and escaped thanks to her calm.

However, a few hours after her departure, the Communards regretted having let her go free. In anger, they invaded the house of Reully where the fourteen Sisters had gathered and threatened them with death. The Sisters took refuge on the upper floor. Through the floorboards, they heard cries and warnings. The occupiers decided not to move, but in the evening, they discovered in the cellar the bottles of wine for the field hospital and started drinking. They fell asleep in a drunken stupor, and their leader, Siron, a former convict, lay down across the doorway. The worst was averted. At midnight, no longer hearing any noise, the Sisters cracked the door open and left on tiptoes, stepping over motionless bodies. They made it to another part of the house and prepared their departure. It cost Catherine to leave her old men. From then on, it would be the Communards who would take care of them.

***ON APRIL 30, 1871, THE SISTERS WERE DISPERSED ACCORDING TO POSSIBILITIES OR FAMILY AND COMMUNITY TIES.***

Catherine reassured the worried Sisters and asserted that the community would be back together in Reully before the end of the month of May, a prediction that seemed crazy at the time. Catherine and Sister Tranchemer went to Saint-Denis where Sister Randier was Sister Servant and then to Ballainvilliers where Sister Mettavent was Sister Servant with an orphanage, a kindergarten, a pharmacy and where elderly women from Reully had been housed for several weeks. Catherine wrote Sister Dufès to give her news and announce, simply and straightforwardly, that the

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whole community would be in Reuilly for the conclusion of the month of Mary. Violence, however, kept increasing; the last week of May was particularly bloody: more than 20,000 Communards were shot and 40,000 taken prisoner, including 1,000 women and 600 children. Most of them were destined to go before a firing squad or to spend life in prison. The Versaillais multiplied the number of executions and forced the insurgents to back down; as vengeance, the Communards went to the prison and shot all the priests as well as the Archbishop of Paris, Monsignor Darboy. On May 26, in the rue de Reuilly, rioters were shot on the spot. The next day, central Paris was burnt. What would become of the Motherhouse? Catherine was imperturbable: *“Don’t worry about our houses; the Blessed Virgin protects them. They won’t touch them.”*

#### **THE SISTERS’ RETURN TO REUILLY**

The Commune ended May 28, 1871, and the Sisters returned to the house at Reuilly on May 31. Catherine’s prediction thus came true! The Enghien hospice was in a mess, but the damage was insignificant, and Catherine, happy to see her old men again, got busy repairing what had been damaged. Amid these material concerns, she did not forget the mission that Mary Immaculate had entrusted to her.

Three months later, the Third Republic was proclaimed, and two years later, Marshal Mac Mahon was elected President of the Republic. His wife, Mrs. Mac Mahon, a duchess by birth, a very distinguished woman always dressed in the latest fashion, made the acquaintance of the Sisters of Reuilly. She quickly recognized Catherine’s generosity of spirit, which touched her, and she soon became her friend, eventually even considering herself something of her disciple.

It is interesting to see that Catherine, this simple peasant woman, entered as easily in relationship with people of the nobility as with those who are poor, Communards and employees such as

Cécile, the linen maid who spent twenty years under Catherine's orders and had only positive memories of her. Through her great simplicity and incomparable charity, she was always at the service of communion. This was Catherine's style. She could make everyone take an interest in the difficulties experienced by the destitute families in the neighborhood, and the marshal's wife always generously offered her assistance.

## **V – A FRANCE VERY DIVIDED IN TERMS OF RELIGION**

### ***THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY: “THE ENLIGHTENMENT” (1715 - 1789)***

The Enlightenment was a bourgeois philosophical movement. Philosophers and intellectuals exchanged ideas to contribute to the progress of science and oppose the obscurantism caused by the royalty and the Catholic Church. All the ideas put forward by Enlightenment philosophers are at the origin of the 1789 French revolution. Two years later, the revolutionary government would approve the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, requiring that all priests swear an oath of fidelity to the nation. Bishops and priests were then chosen by the nation. The clergy was divided: some accepted, others refused. Then, all religious congregations were abolished, and the women of these banned congregations also had to swear the oath to the nation on pain of dismissal.

### ***GOD WATCHES OVER THE COMPANY***

In 1800, the Daughters of Charity, who remained faithful, did what they could, but it was no longer the Company as Saint Vincent had founded it. The Company was in a sorry state. When the Company seemed powerless to get back on its feet, God sent it Catherine Labouré as a new type of “Marguerite Naseau”! Born in 1806, Catherine would be at the origin of a new era for the Company.

In 1814, with the Restoration (monarchy), King Charles X allowed the reopening of parishes. Priests were again given

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responsibility for them. The institution of the Church was reestablished, but it was less clear if France was still Christian. The Restoration awakened in the bourgeois milieu what was called the Voltairean spirit, that is, agnosticism. Adding to this situation of dechristianization was, on the one hand, the development of many satanic movements active in intellectual and bourgeois milieus and, on the other hand, the precocious and degrading work to which children of catechetical age were subjected.

### *IN 1830, A REMARKABLE EVENT IN THE CAPITAL*

Despite this tumultuous religious situation, a very different type of event would leave its mark on religious memory: the translation of the relics of Saint Vincent de Paul, which would take place three months before the bloody revolution of the “Trois Glorieuses” at the end of July.

Before the 1789 French Revolution, the remains of Vincent de Paul were in a silver reliquary in the chapel of Saint-Lazare Priory. When the revolution broke out, revolutionary leaders wanted to take the reliquary. The Treasurer General at that time negotiated such that Saint Vincent’s remains were removed and placed in a chest. In 1792, the chest was entrusted to a notary, Mr. Claret, who kept it until 1800, when the government of Napoléon I reestablished the Daughters of Charity, primarily to assure services in hospitals and hospices. However, the canonical status of the Daughters of Charity being that they have not just a Superioress General but depend on a Superior General, Mother Deleau pointed out that it was necessary to reestablish the Congregation of the Mission, which would occur.

On January 20, 1801, the government gave the Company a building, rue du Vieux Colombier. Mother Deleau gathered the Sisters, who put the habit and cornette back on. Mr. Claret returned the relics of Saint Vincent to her. In 1815, the Daughters of Charity moved into a house at 138 rue du Bac (today, 140), and

the remains of Saint Louise and of Saint Vincent were transferred there. When the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission was reestablished, they were given the Hôtel de Lorges, 95 rue de Sèvres, in compensation for the former Saint-Lazare Priory.

On April 25, 1830, a huge solemn procession was organized for the translation of the relics of Saint Vincent to the new house of the Vincentians, rue de Sèvres. It must be said that a deep respect for Vincent de Paul remained in popular thinking. If there is any heart that sums up tenderness for those who are poor, whomever they may be, it is that of Vincent. That is why about 50,000 people could be seen participating in this religious procession that set off from Notre-Dame Cathedral of Paris. The reliquary was surrounded by Vincentian priests and the canons of the cathedral, followed by the chaplains of the King, the King himself, the Archbishop, bishops and then high-ranking public officials. There was also the crowd of poor people and Daughters of Charity, about a hundred young Seminary Sisters, including Catherine, delighted to honor the man of her dreams and inspiration for her vocation.

After the transfer of these relics, it was during the week of April 25 to May 2, 1830, that Catherine had the vision of the heart of Saint Vincent in three successive phases; it was not his relic, but his heart totally given to the poor, sick, prisoners, foundlings... While Catherine was praying Vincent to teach her for what she should ask "*with lively faith*," Vincent again beckoned to her. During this new profound spiritual encounter with her "spiritual Father," Catherine let herself be instructed by the three different colors: peace and unity to be built, charity to be enflamed in hearts to the ends of the earth, trials to face with confidence. Catherine did not entirely understand what she saw, but she felt something. It was only during the apparition in the night of July 18 that the Virgin Mary would enlighten her on what she should understand, explaining the events that would bring upheaval to France and, at the same time, the development of the spiritual family of Saint Vincent for the whole world.

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Therefore, all these events that took place in Paris in 1830 reveal a mixture of the social turmoil and of religious fermentation. In this ambiguous environment, three months after this huge religious procession, a new anti-royalist and anti-clerical revolution broke out because, at this time, the Church and the throne were intertwined.

**It is in this context that the visions of the heart of Saint Vincent, of Our Lord in the Eucharist and the Marian apparitions are situated.**

Before the human and spiritual suffering holding sway in the country at the dawn of the industrialized society, the Virgin Mary seems to have wanted to remind people of important truths. In this anticlerical context, the apparition presented a striking contrast: while “all of Paris”<sup>1</sup> was applauding Satan, at the rue du Bac, Mary crushed him. The apparition showed “Our Lady of Light,” divine light that attracts without blinding and has nothing in common with the so-called “enlightenment” of the philosophers of the previous century. Divine enlightenment brought by Mary is the antidote to the anticlerical ideas and religious indifference of the times.

## VI – WHAT SORT OF HOLINESS?

Father Laurentin wrote, *“Looking to Catherine day after day in her everyday life and her heroic adventures in community, she appears as the first witness of a new type of holiness, one without glory or triumph, which the Holy Spirit lifted up for modern times.”*

### CATHERINE’S VISION

Aside from the exceptional visions, Catherine lived a normal life, a life of love and work. She accomplished the most ordinary

1. “All of Paris” refers to personalities in Paris who regularly attended worldly cultural events in the capital or went to places that were in vogue.



activities of her life of service deeply united to God. Her simplicity is truly fascinating. In her, everything was simple: she did everything for God, and this great interior clarity of her soul gave her a spiritual finesse, a capacity to see God in all things and to see all things in God. This is Catherine's real secret; it is one of her charisms. Because she was united to God, she looked at events and people in a way that sees unity and not division. When the old men came home drunk, others were astonished that she didn't scold them more and that she remained kindly towards them. She tirelessly replied, "*I can't help myself, I see Our Lord in them.*" Catherine did not look at betrayals; she looked at God who loves and reconciles.

### CATHERINE'S CHARISMS

Catherine also received very special gifts: all the supernatural universe would be made "visible" to her, including angels, at least her guardian angel who, during the apparition of July 18-19, led her to the chapel to meet Mary there. From her youth, Catherine possessed the gift of perceiving matters of faith and of intuitively communing with the invisible universe. She never seemed surprised by phenomena that unfolded before her eyes or that resounded in her ears; it was almost natural for her to see Heaven.

We should also emphasize the importance of the visions of Our Lord in the Eucharist, sacrament of communion par excellence with God and with one's brothers and sisters. It's something that happened in the depths of her heart as she had mysterious access to the Real Presence and received exceptional graces of an extraordinary depth. We shouldn't try to imagine what it was like because it isn't imaginable; this is a profoundly intimate encounter. These visions reveal above all that, in Catherine's mystical intuitions, Jesus is never separated from His Immaculate Mother. In the same way, the cross will always be mixed with the Marian apparitions: the cross on the small golden globe and on the back side of the medal with the two pierced hearts.

Sometimes, Catherine had supernatural intuitions expressed as predictions, for example:

During her vision of Christ in the Eucharist on June 6, 1830, Feast of the Blessed Trinity, the vision became saddening, even worrisome: *“It seemed to me that Our Lord was stripped of all his kingly adornments.”* This vision of the Passion of Jesus is quite different from previous and following ones, and Catherine added, *“I do not know how to explain it, but I had the thought that the King of the earth would be lost and stripped of his royal garments. All sorts of ideas that are impossible to express came to me on the evils that would ensue.”* Here, theological and spiritual realities and an historical event are mixed and assimilated: connecting the earthly and heavenly kings, the premonition of the July Revolution and the fall of Charles X. It was a few weeks earlier that she had announced these revolutionary days and had even given details: *“the throne will be overthrown.”* Now, according to historians, the July Revolution was sudden and unpredictable a month before it occurred. No one anticipated a change in dynasty. King Charles X had just gilded his coat of arms above all hopes. After having sent his troops to North Africa on June 14, 1830, Algiers fell in three weeks, on July 5. All the French thought that this king was very glorious. In the eyes of the public, June 1830 was not a troubled month in which the people anticipated a revolution. However, that is what happened! Twenty-three days after his victory in Algeria, King Charles X was overturned. *“This suggests that Catherine was in harmony with the (secret) movement of history of which she had a premonition that the most informed politicians of her time did not sense or only in a confused way, without daring to fear it.”*<sup>2</sup>

Catherine would also announce that the house in Reuilly would be protected during a violent fire in the wallpaper factory contiguous

2. Jean Guitton, *Rue du Bac ou la superstition dépassée* [*Rue du Bac or beyond supersitition*], p. 45.

with the chapel; this is what happened in 1863 contrary to all expectations.

During the civil war of 1871, she spoke of the Virgin Mary's protection of the community. Indeed, the Sisters made it through the Commune without serious harm.

At the beginning of 1876, she predicted her death: "*I will not see next year;*" as well as the revelation of the totally unpredictable location of her burial under the chapel of the local community: "*You won't need a hearse, I will go to Reuilly.*" As we know, Catherine died December 31, 1876, and was buried in Reuilly, contrary to all customs and usual regulations.

## CONCLUSION

In the historical context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Catherine showed herself to be a woman at the service of communion.

She, who so intensely lived the Eucharist, sacrament of communion par excellence, had a special grace of communion with all: persons who are poor, the Sisters, her family... and even among generations and social classes. Her life wonderfully illustrates this line from the encyclical *Laudato Si*, "*human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself*" (n° 66); she bears witness that by going towards God, we do not distance ourselves from others but, on the contrary, we become truly close to them because "*every creature is the object of the Father's tenderness*" (cf. n° 77). In addition, the rural world in which Catherine grew up was surely for her a school of realism; she had contact with nature, and the beauty of landscapes reminded her of the Creator's goodness. We could well imagine with what awareness she proclaimed, "*I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.*"

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At the height of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the apparitions' call to prayer, deep faith and active charity also takes on significant meaning. By sending Mary as ambassador to Catherine, God took a stance against extreme poverty and injustice. It would also be interesting to focus on the request of the Virgin Mary holding the globe in her hands. We might be struck by the modern character of this apparition with the very new idea of "Mary, Queen of the Universe." For Catherine, the universe meant not the cosmos and the stars but all the countries of the earth, all of humanity in the sense that we speak of the universal Church, that is, all nations. Catherine's silence made her experience a painful wait for the statue requested by Mary; however, the significance of this representation was and remains today of capital interest. This message is not only for Catherine's time; it is for us.

In light of the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, we could hear the dream of fraternity and social friendship expressed by the Virgin Mary. The golden color of the globe is like an invitation to live fraternal love that goes beyond the borders of geography and space and to sow peace and fraternity everywhere by placing oneself at the service of the poorest of the poor, of those who are abandoned or excluded. The little cross atop the globe might remind us that fraternity is granted us through Christ, our Brother. Fraternity is not a choice; it is a gift of God to receive and a task to accomplish. The Immaculate Virgin, totally united to Christ, is the human being best able to teach us to live as brothers and sisters of the same Father. This is a formidable challenge to meet: work to reestablish communion among all and work so that each person might find his or her place in a new world.<sup>3</sup>

Sister Anne PRÉVOST  
*Daughter of Charity*

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3. Sources : Father Laurentin, *Vie authentique de Catherine Labouré, Vie et Preuves* [Authentic biography of Catherine Labouré: Life and documentation]; Father Dodin, *Sainte Catherine Labouré et la Médaille miraculeuse* [Saint Catherine Labouré and the Miraculous Medal]; Anne Bernet, *La vie cachée de Catherine Labouré* [Catherine Labouré's hidden life].

**In Mary,  
we see the destination of our journey:  
she is the first creature who,  
with her whole self, body and soul,  
victoriously crosses the finish line of Heaven.  
She shows us that Heaven is within reach.  
How come? Yes, Heaven is within reach,  
if we too do not give in to sin.  
Some might say, “I am weak.”  
But the Lord is always near you,  
because he is merciful.  
Do not forget God’s style:  
proximity, compassion and tenderness.  
He is always close to us,  
with his style.**

**Pope Francis  
cf. Angelus, August 15, 2022**

