

# *E*choes *of the Company*

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Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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## Letter of 1st January 2012

Dear Sisters,

### *The Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us forever!*

It is with the Gospel of this day that I send you my wishes for a holy and happy year in 2012, which will see the opening of the Year of Faith as well as the *Synod on the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*.

*“When the shepherds arrived in Bethlehem, they found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.”* (Lk. 2:16-19)

May you have the joyful enthusiasm and the simplicity of the shepherds as you witness to your faith in Jesus, the Son of God. And if some are amazed at what you say, your life and your service of those who are poor will confirm your words. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his apostolic letter *Porta Fidei*: *“The Year of Faith will also be a good opportunity to intensify the witness of charity.”* For *“what the world is in particular need of today is the credible witness of people enlightened in mind and heart by the Word of the Lord, and capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life, life without end.”* (n° 14 and 15)



*Spiritual  
 Life*

## Letter of 1st January 2012

It is also my wish that you follow the example of Mary, Mother of God, in order to welcome and review in prayer all that the Lord prepares for us for the year 2012.

Before giving thanks with you for 2011 and extending my good wishes, allow me to offer my gratitude for the many cards and greetings that you sent me for Christmas. They express your love for the vocation to which the Lord called you, two, five, ten, thirty, fifty or more years ago. I also read in them your joy of belonging to the Company, your devotion to the service of those who are poor, and your concern especially for the Provinces experiencing difficulties.

In fact, all the continents have suffered during this past year, either from the bite of natural catastrophes, or strong political jolts, or serious economic problems, and sometimes the three things at the same time. We are affected by such events twice, for they touch us sometimes personally, as their principal victims, because of the flagrant injustice in our world, are always the poor whom we serve.

These situations of crisis are a new call to commit ourselves to a more humane society (cf. our Inter-Assemblies Document p. 13 and 23) through concrete services, our own concern for formation and discernment, and our efforts to alert and sensitize those around us. Caritas Christi urget nos!

We find this same idea in the January 1st message of Pope Benedict XVI to young people and to those who are in contact with them. The Holy Father explains how important it is “to educate young people in justice and peace,” to listen to the younger generation and help them to work for the common good and “the right use of freedom.” The Sisters in the world of education, ministry to youth, social work with children, and the Sisters involved in formation know well these challenges; it is my wish that they draw renewed courage and hope from the message of the Pope.

With the General Councillors, I gave thanks, during our end of the year celebration, for the events that stand out in 2011 in the life of the Company...the Encounter of the newly appointed Visitatrices, the Seminarium, the Beatification of Sister Marguerite Rutan, the birth of three new Provinces (St. Louise-USA, Cologne-Netherlands, Graz-

Central Europe), without forgetting all our visits in your Provinces which helped us to understand better the contexts of your lives and service, and which remain precious memories.

The year 2012 will also be a very important one with the Inter-Assemblies Encounter of the Visitatrices in May and that of the Provincial Directors in July. I thank you for keeping these two meetings in your prayers, as well as the implantation of a mission in the Republic of Central Africa in mid 2012. It is confided to the Provinces of Central Africa and Eritrea and it is our wish that it will be a sign of hope for those who are poor and for the Company.

To conclude, allow me to go back to the words of Saint Louise to Sister Cécile Agnès, on January 8th 1657:

*“I urge you, during this new year, to renew your first fervour for the service of God, so as to obtain from His goodness the grace of fidelity and perseverance in fulfilling His holy will. If you realized how fortunate you are to be in a place where everything contributes to your sanctification, you would praise God continually for having chosen you for this work.”* (SW, page 532).

Yes, let us bless God continually! Let us bless Him for His unfailing love, let us bless Him for new vocations, for the availability of the Sisters who, in 2011, have accepted, in faith, a missioning, for those who left from the International Mission Center or directly from their Provinces of origin to go “further.”

The Holy Father ended his apostolic letter Porta Fidei with these words: “Let us entrust this time of grace to the Mother of God, proclaimed ‘blessed because she believed.’” (Lk.1:45) In the same way, let us place in the hands of our only Mother the coming year so that it may be a year of grace, of missionary enthusiasm, a year of spiritual growth for the Company!

With my devoted affection, the assurance of my prayer and wishes for each of you for a good and holy year in 2012,

Sister Evelyne Franc  
Daughter of Charity

## The Daughters of Charity today an epiphany of hope today

*New Year's Day Conference at Rue du Bac, January 1st 2012*

Dear Sisters,

I begin with a heartfelt “Bonne Annee!” to all here in Paris and to Daughters of Charity throughout the world on this first day of 2012. It is my heartfelt prayer this New Year will be one of growth in grace in the Lord Jesus and a time to live more intensely the charism of our Holy Founders, Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac.

“Christ is the Rule of the Daughters of Charity.” (**Constitutions, No. 8, A**) Those words open the section “Given to God” from your Constitutions. Quite fittingly, they express the conviction of our Holy Founders, who often reminded us that all our labors must be rooted in Jesus Christ. Nurtured by the Word of God and the Eucharist, maintained by fidelity to prayer, this love of Jesus deepens and directs how we live out our vocation of service to Christ’s poor.

I know your Director General, Father Pat Griffin used as the theme for his retreat “*Starting Afresh from Christ*”, an instruction issued by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life. It is a worthy, relevant instruction for New Year’s Day and this new year. Like Jesus’ disciples, we know it is in Christ “*we live and move, and have our being.*” (**Acts 17:28**) A new year gives us time to reflect on who we are and who we can become in Christ.

Today, I offer you some thoughts from this instruction and on the coming feast of the Epiphany to help you grow in your vocation. Saints Vincent

and Louise, taught us it is by commitment of mind and heart to Jesus that the apostolate and community life will bear fruit. “*Starting Afresh from Christ*” reminds us of the unbreakable bond not only with the Lord Jesus, but with our founders and forebearers who have preceded us on this great journey:

*“Yes, one must start afresh from Christ. It was from him that the first disciples started in Galilee; from him, that throughout history men and women of every status and culture, consecrated by the Spirit in the strength of their call, have started out; for him they have left family and homeland, following him unconditionally, making themselves available for the announcement of the Kingdom and doing good for all.” (RDC, Part III, no. 21)*

“Starting afresh from Christ” is not just an instruction or a noble idea; it is about a way of life. Saints Vincent and Louise had considerable challenges that could have blurred their vision or diverted them from the direction God had in mind for them. But once they heard and heeded the message of Jesus, their actions proved they were “*available to announce the Kingdom and doing good for all.*” (**SAFC, c.f. above**) Our Holy Founders learned how to “start afresh from Christ” by their constant willingness to seek his presence in those who live in poverty and reverence them as a manifestation of Christ among us.

This value, central to our charism, was given to your Constitutions by St. Vincent, who said: “*The main purpose for which God has called the Daughters of Charity and brought them together is to honor our Lord Jesus Christ as the source and model of all charity, serving him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor...*” (**Common Rules, I, 1**)

The Advent and Christmas stories of our salvation, the hymns, and the religious rituals of these feasts make this a time to truly “lift up our hearts to the Lord” as we pray at Mass. But as bearers of the Vincentian charism, we must remember, at its core, Advent and Christmas are stories of God’s presence among us as one who was poor. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were ordinary people of their day, living on the edge with few resources. They were refugees who lived simply, did manual labor, and with the help of family, they survived as best they could. Does this sound contemporary to you? It should; this is the reality of the world of today’s poor.

### *The Daughters of Charity, an Epiphany of Hope*

The Epiphany is a “final feast” of this holy season that I would like to reflect upon with you. We know the story, hymns, and traditions that comprise the visit of the Magi to the newborn Jesus. Matthew’s Gospel story is rich in symbols: three non-believers, led by a star, travel great distances into the heart of Judaism, seek out the Messiah, and offer exotic gifts. And after their visit, they disappear into obscurity. It is truly a fascinating and mysterious story.

There are two phrases from Matthew’s Gospel to help us understand the great mystery at work in this story. First, after arriving in Jerusalem, the Magi tell Herod, “*We have seen his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.*” (Mt 2:2) They are seekers, unafraid of the hidden or mysterious. Secondly, finding Jesus, the Magi “saw the child with Mary, his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage.” (Mt 2:11). They are mysterious figures who went to great lengths to find the Messiah. Once they found him, they freely shared their treasure. Afterward, the Magi return to a life of obscurity, deeply affected by their experience.

Is it a leap of faith to apply a similar analogy here today? I don’t think so. Your vocation as Daughters of Charity is to be today’s Magi, bearing God’s gift of care for those living in poverty. You go daily to your apostolate, where God’s poor are always waiting for you. Your rising and guiding star is Jesus, present in the Word of God and the Eucharist.

Like the Magi, your journey is arduous, difficult, and often mysterious, as people are woven in and out of the fabric of your life. But the gift you so generously share with those who live in poverty is the Vincentian charism. Often they recognize and embrace the gift at once. At other times, you must patiently wait for them to accept your gift. And sadly, sometimes they may never do so. But still you go!

Your gift is one of care, a care that is compassionate, competently delivered, and Christian, an ‘epiphany’ in the fullest sense of the word. It manifests God’s love made visible in Jesus. *Your vocation as Daughters of Charity is to be an epiphany of hope for those living in poverty.* Unlike the Magi who had only one chance to bring their gifts to Jesus, every day you have the opportunity to share them with God’s poor. As you have seen in the example and lives of Sisters who have gone before you, in a lifetime of bearing those gifts, you become the gift!

To be that epiphany of hope for the poor, you must experience the power of God’s love in your lives. “Starting Afresh from Christ” reminds us that if we are to be living reminders of the Lord’s love to those living in poverty, we must rediscover our first love, Jesus Christ:

*“The primacy of love is his. The following is only a response to the love of God. If ‘we love’, it is ‘because he first loved us’ (1 Jn. 4:10, 19). This means recognizing his personal love with that heartfelt awareness which made the apostle Paul say, ‘Christ loved me and gave up his life for me’” (Gal. 2:20). (Part III, no. 22, Para. 4)*

As we begin a new year, now is the time for all of us to “start afresh from Christ;” to renew our minds and hearts in prayer, to reflect on the Word of God, and unite ourselves with Christ and one another in the Eucharist. Then we will once again hear the call of Christ and follow him with renewed love and fidelity as did our Holy Founders, Vincent and Louise.

A book I recently saw on the subject of women mystics had an intriguing title: “Why Not Become Fire?” The title was taken from a prayer of Julian of Norwich. The authors used the title to suggest its answer to be a relationship with Jesus. Once we experience the presence of Christ in our lives, we become “on fire” with his love. It shows in our apostolate and community life. Vincent and Louise knew well this fire of God’s love. An often used quote of Vincent is: “If the love of God is a fire, then zeal for souls is its flame.” This is not surprising, as both our Holy Founders were truly committed contemplatives engaged in zealous action.

In this New Year, I put this challenge simply and lovingly before you as Daughters of Charity: ‘start afresh from Christ,’ so that you may become an “epiphany of hope” for those living in poverty and for one another in community. The calendar and liturgical year set before you the passage of time and change of seasons. Enter into this year with quiet confidence and peace, knowing the Lord Jesus loves you, watches over you, and gives you the strength to serve.

And in this New Year, I ask you to look to the words and actions of our Holy Founders Vincent and Louise. Their lives were epiphanies of hope for sixteenth and seventeenth-century France and the Vincentian family today. Take time to read and reflect on their words in the year ahead so

you may draw deeply from the riches of the charism they have left us.

Finally, I ask you to look to Our Blessed Mother, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, whose love and maternal care for the Daughters of Charity is well known in rue du Bac. Mary's "Fiat" made possible the Incarnation, the "Word made flesh." Hers was a life of perfect discipleship and deep, abiding faith. From the moment of the Annunciation to the foot of the Cross, Mary stood firm. She is our mother, our eternal hope, and, as we pray in the "Litany of Loreto," the "cause of all our joy."

May the grace and peace of the Lord Jesus, the intercession of Mary, and the charism of charity of our Holy Founders Vincent and Louise be yours throughout this New Year. May the Daughters of Charity continue to be an epiphany of hope for the Church and God's poor!

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.  
Superior General

## *"Washing the disciples' feet"*

### **1. The Dignity of Work**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

At the Last Supper in John's Gospel, Jesus knows that it will be his last night with his disciples, and he wants them to remember him and to remember him in a particular way. He has had fears and signs of how they still think of themselves in relation to other people in roles of leadership. And so, Jesus asks himself how he can change their attitudes. In his own life, he reflects upon an experience which had influenced him deeply with its symbol of humility and service.

He had been at the house of a Pharisee to eat when a woman came in--a woman who was known to be a public sinner--and this woman calmly comes forward and begins to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair (Luke 7:36). The religious leader is scandalized, but Jesus is moved by the woman's effort and willingness to humble herself before everyone in this act of service. And so Jesus speaks to her of the forgiveness of her sin. This was an experience and an image which has stayed in the heart of Jesus and he cannot forget it.

And now at the Last Supper, faced with the need to leave something precious for his disciples who will be called to leadership in the new community, he takes this precious memory and decides to leave it for them. So, he gets down on his knees and begins to wash feet. This act astonishes his disciples and prompts Peter's refusal. But Jesus insists, and this becomes the symbol of leadership and of service. We heard this story read to us earlier this morning. Did you listen to it carefully? It is filled with lessons for each of us.

## The Dignity of Work

The question which Jesus asks his disciples after washing their feet is central: “Do you know what I have just done?” “Washed our feet” is not the whole answer. “Giving an example of leadership as service” begins to describe it. Perhaps saying it the other way is more accurate: “giving an example of service as leadership.” It is a lesson which does not usually come easily. As we picture in our minds what happened at the Last Supper, we see Jesus at work. At the feet is the place of the servant, the student, the petitioner, the beggar, the listener. When he asks us, “Do you know what I have just done?” Our answer needs to be better thought out. And, **sometimes, I need to ask myself what am I doing?**

I will divide the presentation today into two parts. In the first, I will reflect with you on the dignity of work, and in the second, we will consider the nature of work as service.

### THE DIGNITY OF WORK

In the story of creation, work is not a punishment imposed upon the first humans. Even without the fall, human beings would have had to work and tend the garden. That is clear in the story.

*“This is the story of the heavens and the earth at their creation. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens— there was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the LORD God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the ground.”* (Gen 2:4-5)

This is before the “fall.” The human was expected to work on the soil. The punishment which comes after the fall is not work but the disproportion between the work which is done and the yield:

*“To the man (God) said: ‘Cursed is the ground because of you! In toil you shall eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bear for you, and you shall eat the grass of the field. By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, until you return to the earth, from which you were taken; For you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’”* (Gen 3:17-19)

From the beginning God intended human beings to work and be creative through the work of their hands. It was part of human dignity. We create

and express ourselves through our work. We establish relationships in the created order and with one another of mutual support and generous service. When God blesses creation, one of those realities which he calls “good” is work.

Jesus was raised in a household where work was part of the reality of each day. He is identified as “the son of the carpenter.” Joseph was a worker—it is one of the titles by which we call him—and his son learned the same profession. Jesus was a carpenter, a worker. One need not have too much imagination to think about all the work which characterised the life of Mary as a woman in first century Israel. The manual labour required for maintaining a home was considerable. And so, Jesus came from working-class folk.

The story of the washing of the feet is a very good illustration of what we mean by work. Unfortunately, when we carry out this rite as part of the Holy Thursday service, we often reduce it to a minimum. The greatest concern is that it should not take up too much time because people will be bored. We are insistent that there be twelve people, and, in some places, we insist that those twelve be men. The actual washing of the feet is done without drama. The minister, usually preceded and followed by an army of helpers, goes to the first person who has already bared his one foot. A bowl is placed under the one foot, the minister pours some water, a clean towel is dropped on the already clean foot and the minister pats it a few times, and then stands up and moves to the next individual. Usually, we can only call this ceremony “the washing of the feet” because there is more than one person; otherwise, we would have to call it “the washing of the foot.”

This was not the way that Jesus did it. I want to emphasise three points as I visualize this encounter. First of all, he washed all the feet by himself. He carried the bowl and poured the water and used the towel to dry the feet. Secondly, he washed both feet of each disciple, and one may presume that the feet were dirty and it took a little time. And thirdly, he washed all the disciples’ feet. He could have done one of the disciples and then have said, let us pretend that I washed all of your feet. Even when Peter offers him an opportunity to wash one set fewer, Jesus refuses. He wants to wash both feet, of all of them, by himself.



## The Dignity of Work

There are lots of lessons which one can draw from this washing of the feet. One of them is this: Jesus wanted to show the disciples what real work is. As they watched Jesus working, the disciples had the opportunity to meditate on the nature of work along with everything else that was going on. Jesus wanted to show them that to be his disciples, they needed to be real workers and not simply folk who played at work. Real work involves:

- Time: it takes time to wash all those feet. Rushing from one to the next and trying to get everything done in a few minutes was not his style. He was content to take whatever amount of time was necessary to get the job done correctly.
- Effort: real work requires one to get deeply involved and be willing to work up a sweat. Doing something without exhausting oneself in some way does not really engage one. One should be tired after working hard—either mentally or physically or both.
- Thoroughness: There is no sense in doing only part of the job, doing only the part that people will see. Real work engages one in the whole task. No sweeping under the carpet or only dealing with half the person or issue.
- Personal commitment: Expecting someone else to do more or to do their share is not the way to take on a task. One commits to doing it oneself thoroughly and pays less attention to what the other is doing. (We do not know their story.)

At the end, Jesus identifies this work as that of the master, not the slave. He tells his disciples:

*“Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me ‘teacher’ and ‘master,’ and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do. Amen, amen, I say to you, no slave is greater than his master nor any messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it.”* (John 13:12-17)

The teaching in this passage is in the doing—blessed are you if you do it! So, when Jesus asks us the question: “Do you know what I have just done for you?” one of the ways we need to be able to respond, is connected with what he has taught us about work: its dignity and its nature.

The Church has certainly written on the importance and dignity of labor, most notably Leo XIII’s “Rerum Novarum” (1891) and John Paul II’s “Laborem Exercens” (1981). But, we can also look to the writings and activities of our founders to discover something about the importance of work in the Congregation and the Company.

Vincent always identified himself as coming from working class stock. One of his most easily identifiable and characteristic lines captures his sense of the importance of work as he speaks to his followers: “Let us love God, my friends, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brow.” One can feel the impetus to work in these words. We are also familiar with his well-known reflection as he returned to Paris after preaching a mission. He speaks about his fear that the walls of the city will fall down upon him as he returns when there is so much work which yet remains to be done. Vincent’s intuitive sense of his need, and the community’s need, to be labouring for the Kingdom was profound. And it was all in response to the summons to love God in deed.

Louise is no less convincing. As she writes to her Sisters, she most often seems to address the letter to the Sister who is a Daughter of Charity, Servant of the Sick Poor. The focus upon a Daughter being a servant is constant. She tells her Sisters:

*“O my dear Sisters, how the desire to love God and the practices of that love make all things marvellously sweet! Oh, what a great consolation it is for good souls to have the opportunity to prove the love they bear Him, as you do, by the service that you render to the poor. . . . I beg Our Lord, with all my heart, to bless your work and to make you realize how favored you must consider yourself because of the grace which he has given you.”* (“Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac,” Translated by Sr. Louise Sullivan, DC, L. 130C, c. 1650, p. 329)

The list of tasks which Vincent and Louise undertook for the needy people of their time is impressive by any measure. Working on behalf

## The Dignity of Work

of the poor—both for their physical and spiritual welfare—defined their communities, us.

The dignity of work must be recognized because it is a major part of our lives. One thing needs to be clear: each of us has only one life. I do not have a spiritual life, and a working life, and a community life, and a family life, and so on. We might speak that way sometimes for convenience, but these are all part of the one life which is mine. My work needs to be an integral part of my life because it is such a big part of it, and it is my whole life which is given to the Lord. My tasks in my office, in the corridor, in the Chapel, and in the Provinces are all part of my ministry. I need to think of them that way and carry them out with that attitude. I need to bring them before the Lord each day as part of my offering and they need to be part of my prayer.

I will not try to describe the many, many tasks which all of you carry out in the course of a day, but you, too, must see them as having dignity and as part of what you bring to the Lord. These tasks should capture something of what we have described in the washing of the feet.

**Time:** Just as the washing of the feet took time, your job and my job should (and does) take time. It is not something to be rushed so that we can get on to something more important. It is how we serve the human community in whatever great or small way. We take on the task. When we deal with people, we do so with patience and calmness; when we are working on a task, we do it with generosity of heart; when we need to reflect, we do so with depth and focus. We do not exercise control over how much time that the Lord has given us, but I am confident that he does not intend us to rush from one thing to another. We need to take our time with each other and with the responsibilities which are ours. However much time we have, it will be enough. We just need to use it well.

**Effort:** Have you heard that expression “Anything which is worth doing is worth doing well.” Can you imagine Jesus washing the feet of the disciples and only going through the motions? Only pretending to wash their feet while in reality, he was more interested in simply providing them with a photo opportunity? That does not seem possible. I imagine him as really putting himself into it while gently yet firmly getting their feet clean. I am attracted by that type of effort. It seems like a waste

of my time to do something which will not be helpful or attractive to others. Part of the dignity of the task and my own dignity lies in giving it my best effort.

**Thorough:** I am fascinated by the idea that Jesus washed both feet of all the disciples. He could easily have washed only the feet of Peter (I cannot imagine him washing only one of his feet), and then speaking about what he did and what it meant. But, no, Jesus washes all their feet. He was going to be thorough and everybody was going to experience his careful and complete effort. No half measures for Jesus! One of the interesting things about Michelangelo’s statue of David is that it is meant to be placed in the center of a room. Most statues are made to be placed against a wall or in a niche and viewed only from the front; as a result, all of the great effort and detail goes into the front. David, however, is meant to be viewed from all sides and is set up in the center of the viewing hall. The genius of Michelangelo is visible from all sides. Our work should be like that. We do the best job that we can and completely. It reflects the dignity of our work and our own dignity and the humble service which we provide for others.

**Personal commitment:** Speaking of great works of art, we know that lots of artists sign their work. They are proud of what they did and are willing to be associated with it. Their art reflects something of who they are and is an expression of themselves. Can you imagine Jesus washing the feet of the disciples and not paying attention to what he was doing? Part of me, whimsically, imagines Jesus signing his name on their feet after he cleaned them: “Washed by Jesus.” I imagine that he was personally involved in the effort. But this signing was not necessary, I think that every time the disciples washed their own feet for the rest of their lives, they remembered how Jesus had washed them and they thought about him and what he was teaching them. And what they needed to do for others. Our work offers an invitation to involve ourselves personally because it contributes to our common good and the effort of our Company.

We hold out for ourselves and our prayer on this day, the image of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. It is a powerful image. It reminds us of the dignity of work and the way in which it allows us to express ourselves in service to the community.

## 2. Work as Service

### INTRODUCTION

When we read stories in the Scriptures, sometimes we need to pay attention to the objections put forward in the story. These often draw our attention to what is important to hear and learn. When Jesus is going to the home of the Centurion to heal his servant, it is the objection of the Centurion (“Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter my house.”) which provides the context for Jesus’ lesson. When we read about Jesus being at the home of Martha and Mary, and Martha does the cooking while Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, we might not learn as much as we could from this situation if Martha had not voiced her objection: “Tell Mary to help me!” After the resurrection, when the disciples encountered the resurrected Lord but Thomas was not with them, it is Thomas’ objection to their account of Jesus’ appearance which leads to further and deeper reflection (“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nail marks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25) Mary’s question at the Annunciation (Luke 1:34); Nicodemus’ question about “being born from above” (John 3:4); Peter’s disagreement with Jesus’ foretelling of his passion and death (Matt 16:22)—these all provide objections and subsequent enriching clarifications. You get the idea. The question/objection is part of the lesson, and it is true in the story of the washing of the feet as well.

Peter protests against Jesus washing his feet. Thanks, Peter. Peter’s objection provides Jesus with the opportunity to speak further about the importance of the washing of the feet and the lesson to be learned from it.

*“Jesus came to Simon Peter, who said to him, ‘Master, are you going to wash my feet?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later.’ Peter said to him, ‘You will never wash my feet.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Unless I wash you,*

*you will have no inheritance with me.’” (John 13:6-8)*

Jesus uses some pretty strong words here: “Unless I wash your feet, you will have no inheritance with me.” It seems like a pretty strong reaction just for not allowing one’s feet to be washed, but Jesus is insistent. The lesson which he has to teach deals with leadership and service and what they both mean. Unless one allows one’s feet to be washed, the lesson goes unlearned. You have to experience it. The message is about service and respect for the person who is served. Unless one treats the person served with respect, one does not carry out the service well.

Our Scripture reading has many things to teach us about the service of work. I will suggest several texts to you.

### 1. SERVICE INVOLVES: PUTTING ONESELF LAST

A conversation among the apostles about which of them was the greatest leads Jesus to tell them something about discipleship which seems so paradoxical: “If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all” (Mark 9:35). Being last and being the servant does not seem to make sense when one thinks of being first. But, have you ever thought of the freedom which accompanies being last on line. You do not need to hold your place. Whenever you go away, and for however long, when you return, your place is still there waiting for you. There is no need to keep a list of the jobs which are mine and those which belong to someone else. The dirtiest job is always mine. It is always my turn to do this particular thing. I am jealous of no one, because I am their servant. The role of servant in ministry and in one’s work really offers a lot of freedom, but it needs to be embraced. It cannot be imposed on me.

I like the simple story of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law in the Gospel of Mark. Listen to the way in which it is told:

*“On leaving the synagogue Jesus entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John. Simon’s mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. They immediately told him about her. He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her and she waited on them.” (Mark 1:29-31)*

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The really interesting part for me is how Peter's mother-in-law immediately takes up the role of simple service after her encounter with Jesus. It offers a clear illustration of the character of a disciple as the one who serves the community, and no attention is called to her. She simply gets up and begins to serve at table. And she serves Jesus.

Genuine service is done without celebration or spotlight. One carries it out in simplicity for the good of the community and the other. That is also the character of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. He puts himself in the role of servant and invites his disciples to follow his example.

When he asks "Do you know what I have just done?" he is inviting us to think. Do you know what you are doing in your service? What will your answer be? Are you laboring with the attitude of one who is in the last place?

## **2. SERVICE INVOLVES LAYING DOWN ONE'S LIFE**

In John's Gospel (15:13), Jesus says simply: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." This laying down of one's life has broader application than simply dying for the other.

Let us be clear on this point: we have only one life and we live each day one-day-at-a-time. We cannot take a day and put it in a bottle and save it for some time when we need another day. One needs to "lay down one's life" each day; there is no saving up days. If we do not choose how to "lay it down," it simply passes without benefit. People "lay down their lives" every day for someone else. Parents do it for their children, teachers do it for their students, police officers do it for the citizens, doctors and nurses do it for their patients, and so on. And choosing to dedicate one's life for another in this way is what Jesus calls "no greater love."

Paul speaks about this practice as "a libation:"

*"My boast for the day of Christ may be that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. But, even if I am poured out as a libation upon the sacrificial service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with all of you."* (Phil 2:16-17)

In ancient religious rituals, a libation is a liquid offering poured out on the ground as a sacrifice. Paul is speaking about the work which he has

done to promote the faith of the community as a holy act for him and one which contributes to the growth and stability of the community. He does not consider his efforts to have been without purpose—he did not run in vain or labor pointlessly. And what he did, he did willingly: he laid down his life freely.

So, too, Jesus handed over his own life; it was not taken from him but freely given.

*"This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again."* (John 10:17-18)

So he laid down his life for his friends. He does this ultimately on the cross, but he also did it each day in his ministry of word and action. Notice that in the story of the washing of the feet, he lays down his garments and later he takes them up again.

And it must be the same way with us. We must be willing to lay down our lives for the sake of those we serve, our brothers and sisters, our community. The way in which we do that each day is through our work. We contribute to the good of the community and the Church by the simple labor which we carry out to accomplish our common goal. This is a laying down of life, and it must be freely chosen, otherwise it is a burden and something imposed on us. I choose to work each day with the Daughters of Charity for the building up of the Church and the service of the poor. It is how I lay down my life; it is the libation which I pour out.

Like the love of parents, this laying down of life must be free. We do what we do, not out of fulfilment of the rule or law (though these might be involved) but out of love. We are bound not by legal requirement but the bonds of care for the other. We place the other person first, and so we open ourselves to their needs and desires rather than our own. We do it with our whole lives, daily, for the Lord.

Jesus asks us: "Do you know what I have done?" Do you know what you do in the service of laying down your life? Do you do it consciously and willingly in your labors?

### 3. SERVICE INVOLVES GENEROUS EFFORT

Another character of service which I would like to highlight comes from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus says simply:

*“Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles.”* (Matt 5:41)

The circumstance suggested by this statement was common in the time of Jesus. The Roman Empire was the major world power and the Roman Army was granted certain privileges. So, if a soldier was walking along a road carrying a pack, he had the right to press someone travelling along that same road into service for the distance of a mille passum “a thousand steps.” In other words, the soldier had the right to require someone to carry his pack for a mile, and that person had the duty by law to accept. What Jesus is saying, therefore, is do not stop at the required distance, but go another mile. Move beyond what is required to the area of grace/gifts. Do not stand on justice, go to mercy. Do not be limited by the law, but gracious as moved by the Spirit. It was a unique teaching -- a position which would (or could) change the world and the way in which we deal with one another. We will not allow more to be taken from us than we would give freely

In a family and community there should be much less “counting the cost.” Things are done from the heart. It is the unexpected kindnesses, the unsolicited praise, the unsought thanks which makes community grow. It is the heartfelt gratitude, the charitable correction, the willing forgiveness, which draws people together in a bond of trust and friendship and community and love. This should be the characteristic of Christian service.

In a community where every member did exactly that which he or she was required to do--not one bit less, but not one bit more--there would be no surprises. There would be no happy celebrations, no gifts, no smiles, no games, no hugs, no pats on the back. Real homes and communities are built by people who obey the rules only as a starting point. After that, they take upon themselves all kinds of things which no rule could possibly require. And generous service is infectious.

Jesus' story of the multiplication of the loaves and fish has many interesting elements, but one is surely the fact that, in all the stories, there are always baskets of food left over after the feeding of the people. Jesus does not make just enough for everyone, but an overflowing amount. At the wedding feast of Cana, Jesus does not make just enough wine or inferior wine, he makes enough and more than enough for everyone, and it is good wine. When Jesus washes the feet, he washes everyone's feet. Shallow gestures were not the way of Jesus. When he worked at service, he did so with a gracious and generous heart.

In every society, there are people who refuse to obey the law, thereby making life harder for themselves and for everyone else; in every society, there are a few individuals who exceed the demands of law and custom, thereby making life a little better for everyone. Lots of people, however, fall in the middle. They live within the law. They meet the demands of life, but seldom if ever go beyond them. It cannot be that way with us. At the heart of Christianity lies a generous heart which is attentive to the other in a way which cannot be legislated. We labor with an attitude of generous service.

When Jesus asks us “do you know what I have just done for you?” We certainly want to respond “more than is required.” When we work, we want it to have that same character.

### 4. SERVICE INVOLVES NEVER GROWING WEARY: (1 Thessal 3:13)

In two of his letters, Paul encourages his community to remain strong in living out their faith in action:

*“Let us not grow tired of doing good, for in due time we shall reap our harvest, if we do not give up.”* (Gal 6:9; cf. 2 Thessal 3:13)

Paul must have thought that this instruction was necessary and important for these communities to hear. We can imagine the kind of circumstances which may have existed in those communities which prompted this encouragement from Paul. Paul certainly sensed that weariness was a real possibility for his communities, perhaps because he felt it himself on occasion. Sometimes it is difficult to find the strength to continue to do the right thing, and these words can speak to our experience. This weariness touches the mind and heart rather than simply the body. It

### Work as Service

requires a special kind of energizing.

Note that this weariness is characterized by attempting to follow the Lord and do what is right. Yes, even those who attempt to live the Gospel get worn out by its demands.

When I think of the word “weary”, two passages often spring to my mind. One is from Isaiah (40:28-31):

*Do you not know or have you not heard? The Lord is the eternal God, creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint nor grow weary, and his knowledge is beyond scrutiny.*

*He gives strength to the fainting; for the weak he makes vigor abound. Though young men faint and grow weary, and youths stagger and fall. They that hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar as with eagle’s wings; they will run and not grow weary walk and not grow faint.*

In this passage we find those who should be healthiest overcome by weariness. The young are so weary that they stagger and fall. But all people are strengthened by him who is the real source of their strength, the Lord. And due to this confidence in the Lord they learn to soar as though on eagle’s wings. They will run and not grow weary.

The other passage is taken from the Gospel of Matthew (11:28-30).

*Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

Again the call is for those who are wearied to come to the Lord who will help in the carrying of the burden. One is not released from the yoke, but is yoked with the Lord.

So Paul encourages his communities to derive strength from the Lord and one another, and never grow weary of what they are doing in the service of the Lord. Easy words to say, but words which can only be lived as one drinks from the source of all strength--the words and the body of the Lord.

“Do you know what I have just done for you?” Jesus asks. Do you have the strength and willingness to do the same for others?

### **CONCLUSION:**

In the first session, we considered the dignity of work and how Jesus demonstrates some of these characteristics in the way in which he washes the feet of the disciples—time, effort, thoroughness, and personal commitment. In the second session, we considered how work is a service which we do for others and we considered some of the characteristics of this service—placing oneself last, laying down one’s life, giving generous effort, and never growing weary. The image and the Scripture have a lot to say to us about the character of work and our work. We have been asked to reflect upon what we do for the Company and the Church in this community by our humble yet willing service. We have been invited to consider how well we commit ourselves to this effort. Peter needed to think seriously about it, and we do as well.

From the time we were founded, the Company has sprung from working class women. We cannot read the stories of our foundations without being impressed by the labour of Louise and Vincent and our early Sisters. Faithful to that Spirit, we seek to follow the example of Jesus who washed the feet of his disciples and thus showed them the path to service in their labors. May it be our path as well!

Father Patrick Griffin, CM  
Director General

## Work as Service

Dear Sisters,

*I have spent my first Christmas and New Year in Paris. I have been able to spend these days in quietness and prayer. Most of my time was spent reading the letters and good wishes you sent me. This was a special blessing for me because I was encouraged, not only by your promise to remember me in your prayers but also because you shared with me your fidelity in serving the poor and living community life. This great number of letters posed a challenge as I was only able to answer a tiny number of them. So I would ask you to accept this message as the expression of my sincere good wishes and a personal note to you.*

*At Christmas I had the privilege of celebrating the Eucharist and preaching the homily at Midnight Mass. My prayer and reflection led me to concentrate on the first cry that came from the mouth of the newly born Saviour. When he took in his first breath and then strongly breathed out, I heard him give a threefold message. The first point of this was a proclamation “I, Emmanuel, am with you.” God is present with his people, with us. The second point was an affirmation; “I am sharing your life.” Jesus has come to learn the high point and the depths of human existence, in love and in hatred, in generosity and envy. And the third point is an invitation; “Come to me.” At first it was Mary and Joseph who drew near; then the shepherds and the magi and finally the faithful and the sinners of Israel. Jesus invites everyone to come to him. The invitation is for us, also.*

*As we continue on our path of following the Lord, this first cry of Jesus can be a source of encouragement for us. Jesus is with us. He really does share our life and he invites us to be truly united to him on life’s journey. I hope and pray that we may be able to recognize him in our prayer, in our communities and in the care we show for the poor.*

*Be assured that I will try to affectionately carry out my duties in your regard and that I will keep your apostolates in my prayers. Vincent and Louise must be rejoicing to see us living alongside the people we meet and serve. I am sure that Mary will continue to intercede for us that we may continue to strive to remain faithful to the message and ministry of Jesus.*

Your brother in Christ,

Father Patrick Griffin, CM

Province of Cuba

## “Saint Catherine Laboure Community” on mission in Baracoa

### BACKGROUND HISTORY

At the extreme eastern end of Cuba is the region of Guantanamo. Baracoa was the first town to be colonized by the settlers and is situated in the north-west of this region. Built on the edge of Honey Bay, the town is overshadowed by a mountain range. The region of Guantanamo has magnificent scenery (sea, mountains, rivers, lush vegetation) which leads us to praise the God of creation. The people there are simple and hospitable. They have a deep sense of God but they are also very poor.

Evangelization of the country began in 1511, and in 2011 we celebrated the 500th anniversary of this event. The mission of the Daughters of Charity in the town of Baracoa is the most recent work of the Province; the first three Sisters arrived there on 21st July 1998.

Before the revolution took place in Cuba in 1959, the Daughters of Charity were already in Baracoa. One of their works was to teach in a small primary school there. But two years later the communist government nationalized education and confiscated all Catholic schools including the one run by the Sisters who then left Baracoa. However, the two years they spent there, left a testimony of great kindness towards the children who today are numbered among the

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elderly citizens of the town. But God wanted our work to continue and that is why we came back. At present we are not teaching in a school there but we have a range of works that energize our community.

Today Baracoa has a population of 80,000 and most of these people live in rural areas. Cocoa, coffee and coconuts are the main crops but these products are sold at low prices. In recent years tourism has been on the increase.

As Daughters of Charity we are part of the pastoral program for the diocese of Guantanamo-Baracoa. The diocese is very widespread; it is a mountainous district and access to it is very difficult. Not many people devote their time to pastoral work. We do this work together with three diocesan missionary priests and some committed lay people.

### **TYPES OF POVERTY THAT PRESENT US WITH A CHALLENGE**

The Province of Guantanamo, where we have our mission, is considered to be the poorest region in the country. We keep saying “one form of deprivation brings others in its wake.” We cannot always take on board the many forms of poverty we encounter; first of all, the totalitarian government does not allow us to serve as we would like to do, and secondly, people lack the motivation to work.

The major forms of poverty relate to:

- the precarious living conditions of large families crowded together in the same dwelling place,
- the low salaries paid both in the country areas and in the towns,
- unemployment and the lack of motivation to look for work because there are few opportunities here for finding employment,
- agriculture is under-developed and food products are badly distributed. The people have to stick to a basic household shopping basket fixed by the State. This continues to shrink and life is difficult for families.
- drought in the mountain villages; streams are at a very low water level and the aqueducts are in a very bad state of repair.
- circumstances in family life such as very early marriages, pregnancies that occur too soon, domestic violence, divorce, alcoholism...Also, people have lost the capacity to make any

critical judgment because they are not able to express themselves freely. The values of truth, fidelity, justice... have become distorted.

All these different forms of poverty stem from many years of a political system which has penetrated all parts of society.

### **THE MISSION OF THE COMMUNITY**

*“The Company is missionary by nature; it strives to maintain the flexibility and mobility necessary for responding to the calls of the Church in the face of all forms of poverty.” (C 25).*

We are a community of four Sisters and we continue to work along the lines of previous endeavors here. We chose as our community priority “To give a new impetus to our mission based on a renewed sisterly community focused on Jesus Christ, to produce signs of hope which challenge us to change.”

Remembering the words of Saint Louise, “We have the happiness of being Daughters of the Church” ... we share the pastoral priorities of the Vicariate region. We devote a lot of time to the formation of lay people, to our apostolate with children, young people, families and elderly persons and to supporting new and isolated communities in rural areas. It is an opportunity for us to grow in collaboration and co-responsibility in order to build up the Kingdom of Heaven.

### **OUR OBJECTIVES ARE THESE:**

- Helping families and providing formation for them; visiting people in their homes, workplaces and adult education courses,
- teaching catechism to the children
- the formation of young people; weekly meetings to discover the Gospel, commitment to serve and to learn how to animate others through games
- accompanying sick people, in collaboration with teams of lay people; visiting the sick in their homes and in hospital
- evangelizing rural areas; groups of adults and young missionaries go to the country areas to proclaim the Word of God. At the



### With the Founders in Our Times

present time we are preparing to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of the statue of Our Lady of Charity of Cobre which will take place in 2012. This will be an important opportunity to meet families and to revive faith.

-collaborating with the Vincentian Family on various projects; providing breakfast for the elderly, helping and accompanying families that have children with encephalitis; supporting people devastated by cyclones (a workshop for the repair of mattresses). Every month team members come together for a time of formation and prayer.

We work in three different parishes; each one comprising about twelve different communities. This mission is a gift from God for everyone (priests, sisters and lay people); it helps us to broaden our horizons as we discover the needs of other people. In spite of fatigue and our limitations, we experience each day the joy of our community and sisterly service. *“Oh sister, how consoled you will be at the hour of death for having spent your life for the same cause that Jesus Christ gave his life. It is for charity, for God, for the poor! And what greater act of love could one perform than to offer oneself entirely, according to one’s state and office, for the salvation and relief of the afflicted.”* (Coste VII p. 382, Letter of 24th November 1658)

### CONCLUSION

One of the challenges we have to take up is to avoid offering “paternalistic” services which prevent the poor from being the agents and protagonists of their own history and human development. Thanks to everyone’s daily efforts and participation, we will be able to respond to the appeal made at the 5th General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM): *“Disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ so that our peoples will find life in Him.”* (John 14:6)

The Sisters of the “Saint Catherine” community

## Province of Santo Domingo

### The Rose Colored House

#### Brief history of the Community

The Daughters of Charity in response to their charism of assisting the most abandoned, began to engage in a work with orphaned or abandoned children affected by AIDS.

The Casa Rosada situated in the neighborhood of Tres Brazos, is a charitable institution set up to receive orphaned or abandoned children who had contracted AIDS. This house was opened on July 18th 2001, and accepted children from the Mariloly Home where the Daughters of Charity worked in the district of Trè Brazos in Santo Domingo.

We wanted to improve the quality of life of these sick children by responding to their needs so that they could develop physically, intellectually and spiritually.

Of the six Sisters in the Community, four work in direct service at the Casa Rosada with a team of lay people: educators, teachers, members of general health services. We try to give them the best of care, attention, teaching and welfare to help them regain their health. Two Sisters work outside of the house in a day-care and social service.

Every day, our Community experiences are many and varied, as we discover the presence of God in the joy of the children, in solidarity with the volunteers and in the people who knock at our door.

We discover the footprints of God through the story and circumstances of each child. Often, because we lack information or because of our human

### *With the Founders in Our Times*

limitations, the situations are not clear to us, but we live in the trust that God accompanies us in our mission.

#### **Nataly**

Here is an example which showed us clearly that God is especially interested in our children. We saw it most especially during all the steps taken over several months to find Nataly's family. Nataly, who is 13 years old, is in a special school, loves to paint and wants passionately to find her family and her real name.

Nataly's story:

After the death of her mother, the little girl, Nataly, became ill. At the request of her brother, Alfredo, who lived on the streets and worked as a shoe shine boy, a friend of his uncle took the little girl to the Robert Read Cabral hospital for sick children. Then, no one dealt with this little girl any longer. Having no information on this child, they concluded that she had been abandoned. The office of public assistance sent the three-year-old child to the Casa Rosada. She arrived in a critical condition, grossly malnourished, with tuberculosis, pneumonia, and AIDS. As soon as her health was better, Nataly was sent to Mariloly where she was surrounded with care. But she missed her family, and that impaired her ability to relate to others and her behavior: she was sometimes docile and calm, respecting the rules and the schedule, sometimes very aggressive, insolent, disobedient and crying over nothing. Little by little, Nataly became aware of her family situation.

A terrible thing happened at school at the beginning of her first year. When she came to class, the teacher called the register of the students. Hearing her first and family name which had been given to her, she protested vehemently and, of course put the teacher in an awkward position. The principal tried to find out from Mariloly what was wrong. When the child returned to school, she was calmer, but continued to reject this name. So it was explained to her that someone had given her this family name so that she could go to school, but that, later, we would find her real name. From that time on, Nataly's behavior changed, she was completely different and wanted to run away. It became almost impossible to talk to her.

It was absolutely essential that we begin research to find her family. After much research for several years, we were at last able to find some people who had known her mother, Martha, and her son, Alfredo, who was therefore Nataly's brother.

Finally, we found the family who was taking care of Alfredo. Seeing the precarious situation of this family, we couldn't think of asking them to take Nataly into their home as well. We tried to meet Alfredo but he refused to see us. He said that he knew nothing of Nataly's father or of her family.

Nataly felt more and more frustrated and filled with anxiety, especially when she saw the other children in the home leave to see their family for a weekend. Her behavior with the adults and with the other children was very aggressive.

We went back to see Alfredo's host family and explained Nataly's situation. After a long conversation, the parents confirmed that Alfredo knew his father and therefore the father of Nataly. Alfredo remained silent and indifferent to anything we proposed. But we did not want to rush him because he was the only link who could reunite Nataly to her family.

On several occasions, we made contact with Alfredo, but in vain, as he continued to insist that he knew nothing of his natural family. However, the mother of the host family promised to try to convince him to talk to us.

We prayed a lot. One day, Alfredo, agreed to meet us and revealed the name of his paternal grandfather and where he lived. Members of the social service team left immediately to find this man and did in fact find him. This was the very place that Nataly had lived with her parents. All the neighbors knew the child, but they thought that she had died like her mother. Then the grandfather called his son, Nataly's father. It was great news for the family, Nataly, and the Casa Rosada. Immediately, her family, the neighbors, and friends came to see Nataly at the Mariloly home. Nataly was the youngest of four children of her father (two boys and two girls).

*How can we describe that moment when the family was reunited with Nataly?*

### With the Founders in Our Times

The grandfather, Francisco, said, as he sobbed, that this was a miracle that the Blessed Virgin obtained, for he had prayed so much to her to find his granddaughter. He will never stop thanking her. Then her father, Ricardo, told us his story. He had lived two years in Villa Mella with his companion Martha and their little girl, Nataly (whose real name was Martha Maria). Then they separated and, without saying anything to him, the mother left with the child, separating her from Ricardo. Three months later, Ricardo found them in the outskirts of Santo Domingo. Then Martha and Nataly disappeared again. Ricardo tried to find out where they were, but no one had any information. Sometime later, he learned that Martha had died. He began to search for Nataly, but in vain.

Ricardo continued searching where he thought he might find some signs of her but always without success. In the street, he met Alfredo several times, who didn't know anything either. One day, seeing Ricardo in good health, Martha's family were completely surprised because they thought that it was he who had transmitted AIDS to his companion which caused her death.

It was then, a very difficult moment for us, that we had to inform Nataly's father and grandfather that the child was infected with AIDS. Generally, families have a difficult time accepting the children carrying the HIV virus because they are afraid of the contagion. But, both of them accepted the truth. The grandfather cried, *"Now, I am going to love her even more,"* and the surprised father said: *"She is my daughter, now that I have found her alive, allow me to take her, I have looked for her for so long..."*

It was a very moving moment; everyone was filled with gratitude to God.

We planned a time of preparation for the family and Nataly, with a definite departure date. It was decided that she would finish the school year and spend the weekends with her family. On June 5th 2010, we returned her to her family. She was so happy.

Once again, we have confirmation that the Providence of God never ceases to accompany us.

The Community of the Casa Rosada

### SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of St. Louise  
(former Province of Evansville)

### God's Providence during the flood in Nashville, Tennessee

After torrential rain, six Daughters in Nashville, Tennessee, USA, along with thousands of other Tennessee residents, suffered from a disastrous flooding of the Cumberland River and Richland Creek on May 1st -2nd, 2010. With the help of ropes fastened and strung between trees and buildings, a team from St. Thomas Hospital staff rescued the Sisters, *guiding them through raging waters that overturned the refrigerator and other heavy equipment in the house, and cars in the parking lot.*

The next day was a beautiful, warm day in May. The sun shone, the flood waters in our area had somewhat receded, and spring flowers were again trying to show their loveliness. On that morning we gathered to survey the damage from a higher level. Our home below was swamped, covered by ten feet of muddy, murky waters. We strongly identified with the victims of the Indian Ocean Tsunami, who had lost so much more than we did.

Yet we will never forget a unique sign of God's Providence: From the fire escape on the second floor of the house, the day before we had watched the waters overtake our garden, standing there was a two-foot cement statue of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, placed on a pedestal. Nearby, a huge



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from the  
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### Sisters' Testimonies

wooden fence, ten feet high, had broken up into huge chunks and wildly crashed and careered through the yard. One of the pieces cascaded right past the statue which remained upright on the ground. We saw in this a sign of Mary's presence at the heart of the catastrophe and we carefully rescued the statue.

Dominican Sisters in the city offered us refuge in their monastery, none of us realizing at the time that we would be living on the third floor of the monastery for three months. Finally, in July, the Community provided us with a house in a quiet neighborhood and furnished it with items from a community house the Province had recently closed. A good example of recycling! We give thanks for the many hands that helped us to make this house a home.

A few weeks later we held open house for our neighbors who had been so good to us, and for staff members from our ministry sites: hospitals, clinics, and Catholic Charities. In our 6th month of residence, we took part in our scheduled three-year Visitation with Sister Honora Remes, a reflective time which offered insight into what the flood meant to us and also helped strengthen our desire to be stronger, more faith-filled Daughters of Charity. Sister Honora asked us to relate our experience of community during our displacement by sharing a symbol of what that time meant to each of us. Five symbols were shared:

- The rainbow that appeared in the sky after a violent storm on the evening we learned we were to be given this new home. This heavenly arc was a sign of hope and promise of peace.
- The "teeter totter" (see saw), symbol of the local community's felt need and temptation to not "rock the boat" and to keep peace, sometimes by "sticking our heads in the sand" in the face of conflict or settling for peace at any price.
- The sunflower, a blossom replete with unfolding depths of intricate design, challenging artists and architects to capture its beauty flowing from the center. The sunflower image helps each one of us, different as we are, to open our eyes and hearts to Christ our center.
- The planter given us as we first occupied our new home. This pot includes numerous varieties of garden species. We soon realized that in order to survive, each plant would need

different amounts of water, sun, shade, etc. We realize that our different temperaments had experienced the flood disaster and ensuing transition in unique ways that require understanding and special types of nurturing.

- The statue of Mary now guarding our new home after withstanding the flood that destroyed our former residence. Mary still stands as a sign of God's protection.

We will summarize our reflection on the flood with an appropriate verse from Psalm 127: "If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders toil." The house we continue to develop into a community home has evolved through God's Providential intervention and by many generous "builders" who did not toil in vain. For this we give thanks!

For this and all unspoken, written, and silent memories we give thanks to God.

Sister Sherry Barrett,  
Daughter of Charity

Province of Japan

**The Daughters of Charity faced with  
the Japanese policy of  
confining people suffering from Hansen's disease  
and liable to spread this to others,  
to strict enclosure in so-called "sanatoriums"**

In April, 1989, the Company of the Daughters of Charity sent me to serve on the Japan Catholic Bishops Conference Social Department Committee for BURAKU Problems.

**Historical survey of discrimination**

Discrimination problems in Japan spring from two major problems: "Buraku discrimination (those of the caste of untouchables) and discrimination of persons with Hansen's disease. During the feudal era, there was discrimination, but the people of the Buraku caste, and people with Hansen's Disease, (called "wandering lepers" at that time), collaborated with one another.

In 1868, the feudal social system crumbled and Japan entered into the era called Meiji which restored imperial power. The government united all Japan as one nation and in 1871 abolished the system of discrimination against Baraku as well as other forms of discrimination. The prohibition of Christianity was also dissolved.

But, in reality, discrimination remains very much alive, even in our time. With regard to the lepers, the prejudice that it is hereditary persists, even within the medical world, and even long after the Norwegian, Hansen, identified the bacteria which causes the illness.

In 1907, a law was passed to confine the lepers who were in a situation known as "wandering lepers" in one of the five public establishments created for this purpose.

The rules governing these establishments required absolute isolation. When the patients were taken there, they were forced to:

1. change their name, so that they would no longer be identified by ordinary people from outside the institution. In this way their family would not suffer from the same discrimination.
2. practice a religion controlled by the administration.
3. use only money belonging to the "sanatorium."

Corporal punishment was not rare and in 1915, an amendment to the law of 1907, authorized the directors of the establishment to exercise disciplinary sanctions against patients who were not keeping the rules. The condition of the lepers was becoming worse. The practice of sterilization was introduced throughout the establishment though there was no legal basis for this. Their justification for this measure lay in the plan to institute, in fact, a quarantine for life and to offer the patients a full conjugal life provided that they did not have children.

The name "sanatorium" for these leprosariums was only a cover and the most able-bodied persons had to carry out various duties: caring for the seriously ill, distributing the food, cleaning the toilets, cutting wood for the heating and even cremation of the dead.

In 1931, a law for the prevention of leprosy came into force and made the confinement of patients obligatory. The leper-houses were to be integrated and from that time on were managed exclusively by the State. They moved toward a policy of confinement for life. In these establishments, special cells were even built to confine patients who were a threat to discipline. These cells, in which a total of a hundred people were held in inhumane conditions and where twenty would die, were not abolished until 1947.

However, from 1941, a treatment by a Promin drug had been available in the United States and also in Japan since 1947. Whereas throughout the

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world, work was being done to ease the prevention measures, considering that a suitably treated patient was no longer contagious; nothing like this was being done in Japan. Indeed, those who defended the policy of continued isolation admitted the possibility of remission but refused to regard leprosy as cured and the Japanese government did not change the system of complete isolation for people with Hansen's disease.

From 1951, onwards, associations of activists were created in favour of improving the living conditions of lepers and began to demand an amendment to the law. The law was going to be amended permanently in 1953, but it would make things worse. Certainly, daily living conditions were clearly better but the law was becoming more severe on the whole. It was, in fact, obligatory for doctors to report cases of leprosy and follow the obligation of confining the patients.

In fact, **the law would be repealed only in 1996**. The abrogation of the law created many problems such as the absence of social protection and difficulties in having access to the health-care system for the patients after they left the leprosarium.

### **The health policy regarding Hansen's disease and the "sanatoriums"**

This policy led by the Japanese government deprived those with Hansen's disease of all possibility of leading a fully human life. A legal process had been opened to obtain compensation. A letter was sent to an association of Japanese lawyers denouncing the fact that in spite of the abolition of the "Law for the Prevention of Leprosy," living conditions for the lepers had not changed and this situation was intolerable. Support groups for the cause of the lepers were born and with 13 former lepers, they began a juridical process with the goal of obtaining reparation for the "violation of their constitutional right to happiness" occasioned by the law on the prevention of leprosy which in fact brought about their confinement. Three years later, the lepers won the case for the restoration of their human dignity. Their reputation was finally restored with reparations for the prejudices caused by the State. It was on May 11, 2001 that the court of Kumanoto, in southern Japan, ordered the State to compensate the group of 13 former lepers who had instituted the proceedings. The Prime Minister apologized to more than 100 former lepers and awarded them compensation.

When this news of May 11, 2001 was reported in the media, I discovered the existence of these people whom I believed belonged to past. This revelation was a shock to me.

Today, M. Hiroshi Shima is striving to make these sad stories known to future generations so that this tragedy will never happen again.

### **OUR COMMITMENT TO LEPERS WHO HAVE BEEN CURED**

After that May 11, 2001, the Commission of the Social Department of the Catholic Conference of Bishops decided to research the facts in the national sanatorium on the island of Oshima: "Oshima Seisyoen" (Pine tree garden), one of the 15 leprosariums in Japan. This was the beginning of our relationship with them. When our research progressed through listening, to one another, we were shocked by the suffering and the unbearable situations experienced by these patients.

In these "Sanatoriums," why were there courts, prisons, and even executions based on false accusations?

When I asked why a medical institution such as a sanatorium needed such a disciplinary system, I was told that there were violations of the law. In the "sanatorium," people who disobeyed were put in cells under horrible conditions and many died of hunger, were frozen or went mad. Very few were capable of returning to normality. The last surviving witness who worked at distributing food in this very harsh prison shared with us some terrible testimonies.

Mrs. M. worked every day as a nursing aide. She wanted to marry outside the sanatorium and have many children. On the day of her marriage, she learned that her husband had been forcibly sterilized before the wedding. The case of Mrs. M. is not an isolated one. In 2005, a report issued by the Japanese Minister of Health indicated that more than 4,000 sterilizations and/or abortions were performed among the tens of thousands of people confined by force in the sanatoriums.

Mr. Y. When the police found lepers living in the cities, the villages or the mountains, lepers who were hiding from the local people, they took them to the national "sanatoriums." This is the case of Mr. Y. found at

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the age of 19 when he was cutting wood in the forest. Examined by the public health doctor, he was found to have leprosy and was sent to the sanatorium, with the assurance that he would return home within one year. Now, he is 72 years old; incapable of working. Having neither family nor friends, he prefers to remain in the sanatorium, having no other place to go. He said one day: "I ask myself why and for what purpose I was born, and why I am still living? I will live out my life here."

The island sanatorium still exists for the simple reason that most of the patients have nowhere else to go, are more or less handicapped and are all very old. At present there are about one hundred lepers on the island.

In the report ordered by the Japanese Minister of Health and Social Affairs of January 2005, one can read that during the forced abortions performed in six sanatoriums managed by the State between 1924 and 1956, 114 human fetuses of which some had come to term, indeed some were already born, are conserved in formalin. In the absence of evident traces of experimentation, no one knows exactly what was destined to happen to the aborted fetuses.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of political exclusion being brought to an end, nearly 5,000 elderly lepers are determined to remain in the sanatoriums, having no other place to live. They are now in the 13 public sanatoriums where they have spent on average 40 years of their life. All are without family for every family was subjected to such discrimination by those around them that they cut off all ties with their patient.

We continue to visit them; little by little they open the door to their heart and share with us their secrets. We feel obliged to transmit these sad testimonies to other generations in order that this may never be repeated. I strongly feel the demand of the Gospel to be a "sign of contradiction" by relating their sufferings. I try to do as Jesus himself did, who put himself in the same position as the oppressed. This is not easy.

Sister Andréa Ruriki HASHIMOTO  
Daughter of Charity

### **An Ongoing Story of a Way of Looking at the Poor**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Introduction: Why a history of this gaze?

#### **1) A GAZE THAT FORMS, A GAZE THAT SEEKS** (1581-1617)

- seeing from "the inside" (1581-1595)
- seeing from "the outside" (1595-1617)

#### **2) A GAZE THAT FOCUSES, A GAZE THAT HOLDS OUR ATTENTION** (1617):

- Gannes-Folleville
- Chatillon

#### **3) A WAY OF LOOKING THAT GIVES A BROADER, MORE UNIVERSAL VIEW** (1618-1648...)

- From the meeting of one poor person to the discovery of all the poor
- from the little parish of Chatillon to Madagascar
- from the poor to Jesus Christ, from Jesus Christ to the poor.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Of the few old portraits of St. Vincent that have been preserved, those of Simon François de Tours, of Nicolas Pitau, of Van Schuppen, and of René Lochon are undoubtedly the ones that show his eyes most impressively. We see in these a great quality of attention, of observation; we also discover there a hint of mischievousness, so characteristic of the Gascons; above all we find in them a great kindness.



*History  
of the Com-  
pany*

## An Ongoing Story of a Way of Looking at the Poor

This gaze, this way of looking, is not that of a dreamer, nor of a “sanctimonious or pious person” such as those who existed in the 17th century and which Saint Vincent himself denounced with vigour and humor in this famous passage;

*“Let us love God, brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows; for very often many acts of love of God, of devotion, and of other similar affections and interior practices of a tender heart, although very good and desirable, are, nevertheless, very suspect if they don’t translate into the practice of effective love. ‘By this,’ says Our Lord, ‘is my Father glorified, that you may bear much fruit.’ We have to be very careful about that; for there are many who, recollected exteriorly, and filled with lofty sentiments of God interiorly, stop at that, and when it comes to the point of doing something, and they have the opportunity to act, they fall short. They flatter themselves with their ardent imagination; they’re satisfied with the sweet conversations they have with God in meditation and even speak of them like angels; but when they leave there, if there’s a question of working for God, of suffering, of mortifying themselves, of instructing poor persons, of going in search of the lost sheep, of being happy when they lack something, or of accepting sickness or some other misfortune, alas! They are no longer around; their courage fails them. No, no, let’s not fool ourselves.” (XI, 32-33)*

### **BUT WHY A HISTORY OF THIS WAY OF LOOKING?**

The Gospel, as we know, frequently highlights the way Christ gazes on someone...as if it had some importance in the announcement of the Message. In the story of the man with the withered hand, Saint Luke includes this detail: “and *looking* around at all of them, he said to him: hold out your hand.” (Luke 6:10) With the widow of Naim, “The Lord *looked* at her and had pity on her.” (Luke 7:13) With the rich young man, “Jesus *looking* at him, loved him...” (Mark 10:21) And at the Passion, after Peter denied him: “And immediately, as he was still speaking, the cock crowed. And the Lord, *turning around, looked* at Peter...” (Luke 22:61) Without wanting to read more into these texts, it seems likely that the evangelists and the witnesses were struck by Christ’s gaze, the way he looked at others, because they no doubt recognized in this a certain quality of relationship with human beings.

And in the conferences and writings of Saint Vincent, the verbs TO SEE, TO LOOK are also used frequently and sometimes in a very significant way.

To Pope Innocent X, whom he asked to intervene on behalf of peace, he described the horrors and the injustices of the war and added: “It is a small thing to hear or read these things; they must be *SEEN* and *ASCERTAINED WITH ONE’S OWN EYES*.” (Coste IV, 445-446)

To Brother Jean Parre who organized the aid in Picardy, he writes with regard to the poor who are to be helped: “*Now, to discern this correctly, those poor people should be observed in their own homes so you can see for yourself who are most in need and who are less so.*” (Coste VI, 388)

When one knows Saint Vincent a little, one cannot be surprised by all these delightful expressions related to SEEING. Indeed, Saint Vincent is not a theorist; he favors the concrete, a man of experience who needs to see, to look deeply in order to analyze and to begin to act.

A way of looking at or seeing the poor seems, therefore, to be a topic worth studying, something very valuable with regard to Saint Vincent, and will surely go far beyond a simply inventory of how Saint Vincent saw the poor. This way of looking, as we understand it here, is the mysterious place of encounter between reality and personality, that place of synthesis between what one sees and what one is. “The history of a way of looking at the poor” must therefore be the history of a personality, of one person’s holiness”...the history of M. Vincent in his relationship with the poor.

### **I. A GAZE THAT FORMS, A WAY OF LOOKING THAT SEARCHES (1581-1617)**

In optical work there is a procedure which corresponds fairly well with this first stage in Saint Vincent’s life: a process of *adaptation*. This process (of adaptation) brings into view, gradually and often by trial and error, the objective, and does this with increasingly clear images. In some way, this is how the gaze, the way of looking, of Saint Vincent, is sought and formed. Perhaps in the beginning, between 1581 and 1595, the young Vincent was too close, too involved in a situation of poverty, to have an objective view; then, between 1595 and 1617, he was far too distant from



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it. But this first and long stage was certainly the most useful and valuable for Saint Vincent in the adaptation of his way of looking at the poor.

### 1. SEEING FROM THE INSIDE (1581-1595)

Saint Vincent's first view of the poor was seeing his parents, his family, his neighbors, his surroundings. *A poor person seeing the poor.* Vincent was born in April 1581, in the village of Pouy, near Dax. He was the third of six children (4 boys and 2 girls). His father, Jean de Paul, and his mother Bertrande de Moras were, according to his expression, "poor laborers," owners of a small farm with a few acres of land. It was there that he spent his first fourteen years, surrounded by affection no doubt, but subjected, very early on, to the hard life "of the poor people of the country:" *"I am a farmer's son, who tended swine and cows."* (IV, 219)

This first experience of poverty and of work will be striking for him, as the first experiences of childhood, family and social atmosphere are always striking. So Saint Vincent saw the poor first of all "from the inside," and in many passages in his writings and conferences one can easily note the child's way of seeing his mother and his sisters coming from the fields, his father and his brothers, his neighbors working under the blazing sun to gather a little millet to feed the family.

Furthermore, it is, explicitly from his childhood memories that Saint Vincent draws his examples when he speaks of the poor country people.

*"It will be very easy for me to speak to you about the virtues of good village girls because I know them by EXPERIENCE and by NATURE, since I'm the son of a humble tiller of the soil, and lived in the country until I was fifteen".* (IX, 67)

We will notice the insistence on "through experience and by nature" and the explicit reference to those first fourteen years. It is therefore very likely that in the course of such realistic descriptions which follow, Saint Vincent saw again, in his imagination, his mother and his sisters. He is 62 years old but his memory of childhood remains sensitive and clear:

*"Good village girls don't boast of what they have... and don't think they are clever, but act in a straight forward manner. They speak quite*

*simply... they are very abstemious in what they eat. Most of them often make do with bread and soup, although they are constantly engaged in hard work.... In that part of the country where I come from, dear Sisters, the people are fed on a little grain called millet, which is set to cook in a pot; at mealtime it's poured into a dish, and the family gathers around it to take some for their meal and then go back to work."* (IX, 68-70)

These last words "and then they go back to work" are perhaps most significant in describing the rhythm of life in the poor family of Ranquines, the meal being only a short pause in a laborious day. Moreover, Saint Vincent continues:

*"(Good village girls) are content with what they have, both in food or clothing... They come home from work, worn out and fatigued, wet through and covered in mud, to eat their meager lunch, and they are barely there when, if the weather is suitable for work or if their father and mother tell them to go back to it, they do so at once, without paying too much attention to their weariness, or the mud, or how they look."* (IX, 75)

These are descriptions of a reality that is clearly defined. Saint Vincent as a child and adolescent had obviously experienced these poor, short meals because of the work; he saw his mother, his sisters "worn out, fatigued, wet through and covered in mud;" he ate a bowl of millet. At a very young, age he learned to look on bread as a luxury. (IX, 75)

Many other passages in the writings or conferences of Saint Vincent are also rooted in this first familial experience of poverty. We even find there sometimes the echo of a feeling of injustice, if not of rebellion, which marks the world of the poor and which germinates in misery. In these texts, for example, where Saint Vincent draws a parallel between the easy life of the ecclesiastics who have adopted something of a middle class life, and the hard life of the peasants:

*"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*

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*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!*

*“We look for the shade; we don’t want to go out in the sun; we’re so much in love with our comforts! During the mission we’re at least in church, sheltered from the bad weather, the heat of the sun, and the rain, to which those poor people are exposed. And we cry for help if someone gives us something to do that’s the slightest bit out of the ordinary. My room, my books, my Mass! We live on the patrimony of Jesus Christ, on the sweat of poor people. I’ve often had this thought that puts me to shame: ‘Wretched man, have you earned the bread you’re about to eat, THAT BREAD COMES TO YOU FROM THE LABOR OF THE POOR?’” (XI, 190-191)*

There again he is speaking clearly, with a vehemence and even a violence born of a true and hard experience in the midst of the poor, of the real, concrete life of the poor.

We will see that after 1617, and in relationship to the poor, Saint Vincent will always feel that he is “one of them.” He will see them as a poor person sees the poor; he will speak as a poor person speaks of the poor because, according to his own expression, he knows the poor “by experience and by nature.”

Because of this, his relationship is usually spontaneously just, real, without complex or exaggeration. He is in his own “milieu” as we say today, his gaze is from “the inside” and he sees naturally the values of this world of the humble, of the workers, but also its limitations and its faults. He knows the cunning of misery, and he speaks of it in a way so real that it can *appear* shocking today. (XI, 26; VI, 388...) One must be of their “background” to dare to speak that way with neither indulgence nor censure, in the world of the poor; roughness often being a form of sincerity and the habit of being truthful. For fourteen years, Saint Vincent lived in this world. It is primarily in these years that his charity is rooted and takes shape.

The fact of having been poor, of having left the world of the poor, the “social milieu” of the poor has, indeed most probably given Vincentian charity its *realism*. Certainly, after 1617, after his “conversion,” Saint Vincent will see in the poor a mysterious presence of Jesus Christ, but

seeing the poor in this authentically mystical way will never water down in any way the meeting with the *human* poor person and the concrete and social conditions of his life. For Saint Vincent, the poor person will always, and above all, be this man, this woman, this child living in a given situation of misery and injustice.

We would need to evoke here all the meticulous studies, the direct contacts, the sociological investigations in the field, which usually preceded the charitable and social interventions of Saint Vincent: whether it be the prisons, the abandoned children, the beggars, the unemployed of Joigny or aid for victims of the war. Under the pretext of Christian and supernatural charity, we have sometimes had the tendency to forget or minimize human values and realities; Saint Vincent never fell into this trap which distorts charity. And this attention of Saint Vincent, this “social” realism in relationship to the poor, he certainly had, in great part, drawn from “his nature and his experience” of poor village people. During his first fourteen years, in Pouy, he had had plenty of time to realize that neither good thoughts, nor beautiful words, nor even fervent prayer was enough, any more than alms are in the face of poverty, misery and injustice. This way that a poor person looked on the poor, this seeing from ‘the inside’ has, undeniably and profoundly marked the charity of Saint Vincent de Paul and has given him his human quality and his solid realism.

#### 2. SEEING FROM “THE OUTSIDE” (1595-1617)

Those first fourteen years, in Pouy, were, therefore, very important. M. Vincent became aware of that only later, when he would decide to dedicate his life to the poor.

In 1595, without regret it seems, the young Vincent left the family farm, the rough life of the laborers and, until 1617, he had many experiences; various situations followed successively: schoolboy, student, great traveller, chaplain to the court, parish priest, private tutor..., but during this very chaotic period, a project took shape and was pursued methodically : M. Vincent wants to change his “social background,” settle into another milieu; he effectively separated himself from the poor and saw them only occasionally from afar... “from the outside.”

### An Ongoing Story of a Way of Looking at the Poor

So in 1595, Vincent was sent to a little school in Dax, near the Cordeliers, and he lodged with a middle-class family named de Comet. This was a huge change, a new experience for the young man from the Landes who, until then, had hardly ever left the farm and the village of Pouy. We find the echo of what happened to him psychologically and mentally with this childhood memory, which he himself evoked in the course of the last conferences that he gave to his missionaries. Saint Vincent was 79 years old and his father had died 62 years earlier!

“I was just thinking about that again, and I remember that when I was a little boy, as my father used to take me with him into town, I was ashamed to go with him and to acknowledge him as my father because he was shabbily dressed and a little lame. O wretched man that I am! I ask pardon of God; I also ask your pardon, and that of the whole Company...” (XII, 351)

As a schoolboy in Dax, the young Vincent already began to separate himself a little from his background. He left Pouy to study and to obtain a situation which would allow him to help his family. That was also the plan of his parents and, in his will, his father asks that everything be done so that Vincent may continue his studies. However, at that time, the path that was the most accessible to the poor was the ecclesiastical state and it was this path that Vincent took, with some haste and great success.

Practically illiterate at the age of 14, he was ordained priest at 19 and a half years old while he pursued his studies in theology at the University of Toulouse. Like many poor students, he found board and lodging at Buzet in Tarn. He left the University with a bachelor's degree in theology, something which already placed him on a very creditable level among the clergy of that time, Vincent de Paul embarked upon a series of voyages with the goal of finding a situation which matched his ambitions...a bishopric perhaps? He goes to Bordeaux, to Marseilles, twice to Rome, and to Avignon. For two years, all trace of him is lost. Some people ascribe his debatable captivity in Barbary to this period. We find him again in 1608 in Paris where he hastens to form relationships which enable him to join the group of chaplains at the court of Queen Marguerite de Valois (Queen Margot). It is 1610; and the young priest Vincent is 29 years old when he writes his mother this letter, dated February 17th which reveals clearly his plan, as well as his great attachment to his family.

February 17th 1610

Mother,

*The reassurance that Monsieur de Saint-Martin has given me with regard to your good health has gladdened me, as much as the prolonged stay which I must necessarily make in this city in order to regain my chances for advancement (which my disasters took from me) grieves me, because I cannot come to render you the services I owe you. But I have such trust in God's grace, that He will bless my efforts and will soon give me the means of an honorable retirement so that I may spend the rest of my days near you. I spoke of the state of my affairs to Monsieur de Saint-Martin who told me that he wished to continue the benevolence and affection which Monsieur de Comet so kindly manifested for us. I asked him to tell you all about it.*

*I should very much like to know how things are at home, and whether all my brothers and sisters and our other relatives and friends are well, and especially whether my brother Gayon is married and to whom. Also, how is everything with my sister Marie, at Paillolle? Is she still alive and sharing the house with her brother-in-law Bertrand? As for my other sister, I imagine she cannot but be well-off, so long as God is pleased to give her a companion. I should also like my brother to have one of my nephews study. My misfortunes and the little service that I have as yet been able to render at home may make him unwilling to do so, but let him reflect that the present misfortune presupposes good luck in the future.*

*That is all, Mother, that I can tell you at present, except that I beg you to offer my humble respects to all my brothers and sisters and to all our other relatives and friends. I pray to God unceasingly for your health and for the prosperity of the family, as one who is and who shall be for you, Mother, a most humble, most obedient, and helpful son and servant.*

Depaul

*I entreat you to offer my humble respects to all my brothers and sisters and to all our relatives and friends, especially to Bétan. (I, 15-17)*

“...my chances for advancement”... “the means of an honest retirement”... “the state of my affairs” These expressions explain very well the mentality,

## An Ongoing Story of a Way of Looking at the Poor

the plan of M. Vincent in 1610, and no doubt for a long time afterwards. There is nothing scandalous in this but, in some way, nothing either that anticipates the future. At 29 years of age, Saint Vincent is thinking of an honest retirement and he thinks it will be soon. And it is precisely at that time, when he believes he is to achieve his goal, that disappointments and difficulties multiply. Already, the preceding year, he had been publicly accused of a theft he had not committed. This was a serious trial. He, who was busy forming influential relationships, saw himself suddenly obliged to change his neighborhood and parish.

But in 1617, how does Saint Vincent look on the poor?

### **BUT IN 1617, HOW DOES SAINT VINCENT LOOK ON THE POOR**

Since 1595, and his entry into the little school in Dax, this had hardly been a question for him. These 22 years had been dedicated, above all, to the pursuit of a human plan, to a desire for promotion and to the search for a good situation. There is no egoism or vanity in that. M. Vincent knows that his family has made huge sacrifices for his studies; he considers human success and his return to the country as a sort of justice.

In 1622, on the occasion of a mission in Bordeaux, he will go to Pouy, find his family in the same poverty, and return distraught. He himself recounts:

*“The day I departed, it was so painful for me to leave my poor relatives that I did nothing but weep all the way back, and wept almost constantly. Those tears were followed by the thought of doing something to assist them and to better their situation, to give this to one, that to another. My mind was deeply moved and I was sharing in this way what I had and what I didn’t have.... This troubling passion for improving the lot of my brothers and sisters plagued me for three months; it was a constant weight on my poor mind...”* (XII, 180)

This testimony enables us to better understand what the plan, the ambition of M. Vincent was from 1595 to 1617...a period during which “the poor” hardly had a place, were put aside; perhaps Clichy was a happy parenthesis. Gliding progressively and methodically into the world of the important and the rich, he saw the poor only from a distance, from the “outside,” he saw them from the side of the rich and in their name.

We are touching here on an aspect of the behavior and spirituality of Saint Vincent, apparently rather contradictory and quite controversial for our thinking today. After 1617 and until his death, Saint Vincent dedicated all his time to the evangelization and the service of the poor; however, he did not stop maintaining contact with important people, the rich and the powerful. How, indeed, was Saint Vincent’s way of seeing able to reconcile a passion for the poor and a kindness, a profoundly pastoral concern for everyone? The answer is perhaps in the famous sermon of Bossuet “on the eminent dignity of the poor,” a sermon that was said to have been requested and inspired by Saint Vincent himself, at the end of his life.

In this sermon, the conception of the Church appears really to be turned upside down by the simple fact that the poor occupy the first place in it. The powerful and the rich are not excluded from it but they enter and are saved only in the measure that they put their power and their riches at the service of the poor. And Bossuet concludes this sermon in this way:

“The Church of Jesus Christ is truly the city of the poor. The rich, and I do not fear to say this, the rich being of the world ...their presence is only tolerated in the Church. Come then into the Church, O rich people! At last the door is open to you, but realize that it is opened for you by the poor, and only on the condition that you serve them. It is only for the love of his poor children that God allows these strangers to enter. See the miracle of poverty! The rich are aliens who are admitted into the Church, but it is their service to the poor which will give them their citizenship there. Their service will expiate the contagion that they have contracted by their contact with their riches. Consequently, you rich of this world, you who take so much pleasure in your magnificent worldly titles, in the Church of Jesus Christ you will only be known as the servants of the poor.”

This text of Bossuet reconstructs faithfully enough what one could call the “political, social and pastoral” thinking of Saint Vincent and expresses his behaviour in the society of his time. The period of 1595-1617, and especially from 1610, enabled him to see close up the faults and the “sins” of the rich but also the untapped worth and the resources in this world and it is thus that “serving the poor” he was able to “naturalize” (to use Bossuet’s word) so many of the rich and important people, to begin through Louise de Marillac, to open their eyes and their heart to the

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misery and the injustice and lead them to become “servants” of the poor.

### **II. A WAY OF LOOKING THAT CENTERS, A WAY OF LOOKING THAT HOLDS ONE’S ATTENTION (1617):**

In January 1617, M. Vincent was tutor in the de Gondi family. He could consider it fortunate that he had attained this situation to which he had aspired for years. But he was having a serious spiritual and moral crisis; he was experiencing disillusionment. Speaking later to a priest who was experiencing the same trial, he said, perhaps remembering his own experience:

*“...since he was no longer preaching or teaching catechism, he was assailed in his idleness by a violent temptation against faith. This teaches us, in passing, how dangerous it is to remain idle, either in body or in mind, for just as the land, no matter how fertile it may be, if allowed to lie fallow, it immediately produces thistles and thorns, so our soul cannot remain idle very long without experiencing certain passions or temptations that lead it to do evil.” (XI, 26-27)*

It is in this state that M. Vincent begins the famous year of 1617. He is most certainly very far from imagining the journey that he was going to take in the course of that year, especially the two events which are going to shake him up and give meaning to his life again.

#### **1. GANNES - FOLLEVILLE, JANUARY 25, 1617**

At the end of January 1617, Madame de Gondi was staying in one of her chateaux, in Folleville (Somme). M. Vincent who accompanied her, was called to the bedside of a dying man in the neighboring village of Gannes. He went and heard the confession of the old man... We will let M. Vincent himself recount what happened:

*“This grace prompted the peasant of Gannes to acknowledge publicly, even in the presence of Mme de Gondi, whose vassal he was, the serious sins of his past life. ‘Ah, Monsieur! What’s this?’ that virtuous lady then said to the saint. ‘What have we just heard? No doubt it’s the same for most of these poor people. If this man, who is considered an upright man, was in a state of damnation, what will it be like for others who live*

*more badly? Ah, M. Vincent! How many souls are being lost! How can this be remedied?*

*That took place in the month of January 1617, and, on the twenty-fifth, the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, that lady asked me to preach a sermon in the church of Folleville to urge the people to make a general confession, which I did, pointing out to them its importance and usefulness. Then I taught them how to make it properly; and God had such regard for the confidence and good faith of that lady—for the large number and enormity of my sins would have hindered the success of this act—that He blessed what I said; and those good people were so moved by God that they all came to make their general confession. I continued to instruct them and to prepare them for the sacraments, and I began to hear their confessions. But there was such a large crowd that, even with the help of another priest, I couldn’t hear them all. Madame sent someone to ask the Jesuits of Amiens to come to assist us...*

*Next, we went to the other villages belonging to Madame in that area, and did the same as in the first one. There was a huge crowd, and God gave His blessing everywhere. That was the first sermon of the Mission and the success God gave it on the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, and He certainly had a plan in mind on that day.” (XI, 3-4)*

The conclusion of this testimony surely shows the capital importance that Saint Vincent gave to the event of Gannes-Folleville, which may surprise us. For a priest, really what could be more normal, especially in a time of Christianity as it was lived in the beginning of the 17th century, than to be called to the bedside of a dying person? That’s true, but if M. Vincent was a priest for seventeen years, he had been in a pastoral situation only for the sixteen months he was in Clichy. Sixteen months in seventeen years is certainly very little time, and what would have been quite ordinary for a pastor of a parish, became for him, a real event. And even more, providentially, he experienced this in the presence of Madame de Gondi who was quite scrupulous, always more or less anxiety ridden by the fear of damnation.

In this account of Saint Vincent, we see clearly that Madame de Gondi played an important part in the event. It is she who seems to be the first to react, dramatizing and generalizing the plight of those who carried

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guilt in their conscience. “Ah, Monsieur! What’s this?” that virtuous lady then said to the saint. “What have we just heard? No doubt it’s the same for most of these poor people. If this man, who is considered an upright man, was in a state of damnation, what will it be like for others who live more badly? Ah, M. Vincent! How many souls are being lost! How can this be remedied?” And it is Madame de Gondi who prompts M. Vincent to respond, it is she who asks him to preach the next day, she who suggests the subject for the sermon, she who finally invites him to continue this experience in the other villages.

It is possible, even probable that, without Madame de Gondi, the event of Gannes-Folleville would have had far less importance and impact. As we have seen, M. Vincent was in a time of crisis and was, no doubt, unlikely to respond alone, or to respond so positively. But, urged on by Madame de Gondi, he agreed to preach the next day, January 25th and the way he insists in the account on the success of it and of the sermons that followed, certainly seems to indicate that we have here one of the keys to the event and to its repercussions in the personality and the life of Saint Vincent. Psychologically, for a man who doubts himself, a success is often a sort of revelation, at least an encouragement. But beyond that, it appears certain that Saint Vincent felt called and completely turned upside down by the massive reaction in the parish of Folleville, as he had by the moving “public” confession of the peasant in Gannes. He was now sure that these poor people of the country were abandoned and needed only a priest, a sermon, a sign of pastoral care to arouse in them an unexpected enthusiasm. “All those good people were so touched by God that they all came...and the crowd was so great that we were no longer able to manage” and we had to ask the Jesuit Fathers from Amiens to come.

This happened in Folleville, on January 25th 1617, and six months later, M. Vincent secretly left the de Gondi family to go to a little parish in the Dombes: at Chatillon. What happened between January 25th and August 1st, 1617 that so changed him that his plan of an “honest retirement” was abruptly abandoned? In many subsequent texts we can certainly find, as an echo, the agonising changes of M. Vincent during these six months: pages, for example, where he draws a parallel between the abandonment of the poor people of the country areas and the rush of the clergy and the monks to the cities, close to the rich and important people.

Contemplating the abandonment of the poor that he saw in Folleville and surrounding areas (beginning with the poor peasant in Gannes), and faced with the massive response of the poor people on hearing the Word of God proclaimed, Saint Vincent undoubtedly became painfully aware of the mediocrity, the uselessness of his life as a priest for the past seventeen years. And while he had sought and found an easy and good situation with those who were in high places, the poor people of the country live and die without even a priest to evangelize and help them. As he would write in the contract of the Mission:

“...the inhabitants of the towns of this kingdom are assisted through a large number of Doctors and religious, who preach, catechise, and exhort and preserve them in the spirit of devotion, *only the poor people of the rural areas remain, as it were, abandoned.*” (XIII, 213)

After January 25th 1617, this observation began to haunt M. Vincent. He was no longer centered on himself, on his future, his retirement, or his family. He is definitively focused on the poor and that is why he left the de Gondi family and any idea of promotion, in order to become, for the rest of his life, (he thought!) a good country pastor.

A very courageous decision, even heroic for a man 36 years old, an age that was certainly more advanced in the 17th century than it is today, but still quite a limited option! Folleville had revealed to M. Vincent the *spiritual abandonment* of the poor country people and he left for Chatillon to preach, catechise, and to prepare and administer the sacraments. His attention is certainly focused on the poor, but not yet all the poor. The event at Chatillon will reveal to him a responsibility, a vocation that is infinitely broader and more demanding!

## 2. CHÂTILLON (AUGUST 20-23, 1617)

On August 1st 1617, M. Vincent takes possession of the presbytery of Chatillon-les-Dombes (now Chatillon-sur-Chalaronne, near Bourg-en-Bresse, Ain). It was a rural parish with about 2,000 inhabitants, one of the most difficult and neglected in the region. M. Vincent began his work and twenty days after his arrival, a second event, which seemed just as ordinary as the one in Folleville, touched him deeply and helped him to discover better what God wanted of him. M. Vincent himself recounts:

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*“I, though unworthy, was Pastor of a small parish. As I was about to give the sermon, someone came to tell me there was a needy man who was sick and very badly lodged in a poor barn. I was informed of his illness and poverty in such terms that, moved by compassion, I made a strong plea, speaking with such feeling that all the ladies were touched by it. More than fifty of them set out from the town, and I did the same. When I visited him, I found him in such a state that I judged it wise to hear his confession. As I was taking the Blessed Sacrament to him, I met the ladies returning in droves, and God gave me this thought: ‘Couldn’t these good ladies be brought together and encouraged to give themselves to God to serve the sick poor?’” (IX, 165-166)*

*“I suggested that all those good persons animated by charity to go there might each take a day in turn to make soup, not for those sick persons only, but also for others who might come afterward, and that’s the first place where the Confraternity of Charity was established.” (IX, 193)*

It is now August 20th 1617, and three days later an association of ladies responsible for visiting, caring for, and feeding all the sick poor of the parish “in their homes” was established. This was the very first foundation of Saint Vincent.

The event in Chatillon, like that of Folleville, obviously seemed quite ordinary, but M. Vincent had the conviction that in both cases God clearly manifested himself. Speaking of all these foundations, especially the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, he always affirms that everything truly began in Folleville and Chatillon.

In Chatillon, M. Vincent seems to have become aware especially of two realities which directed his action from then on:

- on the one hand, he perceived that there could be no evangelization of the poor without effective intervention for the improvement of their living conditions;
- on the other hand, he discovered the major, irreplaceable role of the laity, as much for the evangelization as for the promotion of the poor.

In Folleville, M. Vincent had been radically changed and challenged by the *spiritual abandonment* of the poor, their abandonment by the Church, especially by the priests. In Chatillon, he became aware of their *material abandonment*, the abandonment by society or more precisely, he understood that this material abandonment concerns also and directly the Church and the Priests who can no longer confine themselves to evangelization alone. From then on, two adverbs returned constantly on the lips and under the pen of Saint Vincent: “*spiritually and corporally*,” two adverbs which for him became inseparable. We find them already in the first rules of the Confraternity of Charity of Chatillon (November-December 1617). The following is the introduction:

*“Since charity towards the neighbor is an infallible sign of the true children of God, and since one of its principal acts is to visit and bring food to the sick poor; some devout young women and virtuous inhabitants of the town of Châtillon-les-Dombes, in the Lyons diocese, wishing to obtain from God the mercy of being His true daughters, have decided among themselves to assist spiritually and corporally the people of their town who have sometimes suffered a great deal, more through a lack of organized assistance than from lack of charitable persons.” (XIII b, 8)*

Although written in a style which seems a little difficult and outdated today (devout young women) and (virtuous inhabitants,) this rule of the first foundation of M. Vincent already contains the seeds of all that would later characterize his charitable and social action. We find here his astonishing power of observation and organization, his respect especially for those who are poor and the concern that he always has for their advancement. It is important to quote here at least this passage, which concerns visiting the poor sick. Obviously, M. Vincent wants those ladies to understand that the sick poor have a right to the same care, to the same consideration as those highly placed in society.

*“When the person whose turn it is has received from the Treasurer whatever is needed on her day for providing food of the poor persons, she will prepare the dinner and take it to the patients, greeting them cheerfully and kindly. She will set up the tray on the bed, place on it a napkin, a cup, a spoon, and some bread, wash the patient’s hands, and then say grace. She will pour the soup into a bowl, and put the meat on a plate. She will arrange everything on the bed tray, then kindly encourage*

We are reminded of the description of the meal at “Ranquines” when Saint Vincent was a child: the millet that was put in a pot to cook and that was served in one dish, everyone in the family coming to eat from it. No napkin, or plate! The gestures that M. Vincent told the members of the Confraternity of Chatillon to perform are the same things that he had noticed when he was with important, highly placed people and he insisted that the poorest of the poor be treated the same, and that “the ladies” at their bedside act exactly like the servants of Madame de Gondi! It is in these details that he reveals already what will be one of the great characteristics of the relationship of Saint Vincent towards the poor: respect, the sense of their dignity, and concern for their advancement.

And the rule continues:

*“She will say some little word to him about Our Lord, making an effort to cheer him up if he is very downhearted; sometimes she will cut his meat or pour him something to drink. Once she has him beginning to eat she will leave if he has someone with him, and will go to find another patient, acting with him in the same way, remembering to begin always with the person who has someone with him and to end with those who are alone so she can spend more time with them. Then, she will return in the evening to bring them their supper, using the same system and order as above.”* (XIII b, 13)

One can’t help but notice the delicate attention regarding the sick poor who are on their own. Even when Saint Vincent assumed the most important responsibilities in the Kingdom: intervening in the reorganization of the prisons, the hospitals, the schools, etc., he will also always remain concerned about respect for the person of the poor and very sensitive and solicitous in everything that concerns their dignity.

Having come to Chatillon to preach, catechise and evangelize, in fact, M. Vincent began what we would call today a “social action.” He understood that true evangelization of the poor begins first of all with seeking solutions to situations of injustice and misery. He also understood that in this domain, the laity play an irreplaceable role. This last discovery can seem rather commonplace today; it was praiseworthy and significant

in the 17th century. And we know that the eight women who constituted the first Confraternity of Charity of Chatillon were followed by an incalculable number of women and men, rich or poor, that Saint Vincent knew how to gather together, organize, and animate for evangelization and the service of the poor. There again is an essential characteristic of Vincentian action and spirituality which has its origins, no doubt, in the event at Chatillon.

The year 1617 had been, therefore, a particularly valuable year for Saint Vincent, the year of the “conversion.” At the beginning of January, he was still hesitant, disenchanted, troubled in his faith, uncertain. And then, in that year, he decided to devote the rest of his life to the evangelization and advancement of the poor.

*His way of seeing, his ‘gaze,’ is definitively focused, centered on the poor to the point that everything else, everyone else, is seen in reference to the poor. His way of seeing is centered on ALL the poor, so much so that he is no longer able to separate human promotion and evangelization, the dignity of those who are poor and the social dimension of injustice of which they were the victims. That is the balance sheet that one can call the “conversion” of Saint Vincent de Paul in 1617, which translates into a certain way of seeing the poor and seeing his own life, the world and the Church WITH REFERENCE to the poor.*

### **III. A WAY OF LOOKING, OF SEEING, THAT GIVES ONE A BROADER, MORE UNIVERSAL VIEW (1618-1648...)**

After the spiritual and pastoral experience of Chatillon, Saint Vincent thought he had finally found his vocation, his path: he would be a country pastor, like the “curé of Ars” some two hundred years later near the same region. A country pastor having a plan (a pastoral plan we would say now): to give priority to the poor, to arouse and animate the laity for this, focus on the areas of promotion (Saint Vincent said “service”) and evangelization. We find in the documents of the process of beatification the impressive assessment of his pastoral action during the course of some six months in the parish of Chatillon. (XIII a. 49-57)

Actually it was only six months because the de Gondi family could not be consoled at his departure and took every step necessary to oblige him



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to return to his position with their family. Saint Vincent left Chatillon around Christmas 1617, but he did not return to the de Gondi family to take up his position as tutor. He came back to dedicate himself totally to the 7,000 or 8,000 poor people in the villages who lived on the family's huge estates. Perhaps the memory of the old man in Gannes had some influence in this decision which, we will see, was not a step backwards. On the contrary! Saint Vincent believed he was called to be and remain a country priest. Providence destined him to an infinitely wider field of action and, day after day, experience after experience, he became progressively aware of this.

When he returned to the de Gondi family, he thought of profiting by and making the most of the major experiences of Cannes-Folleville and of Chatillon; he preached missions in each of the villages located on the de Gondi lands (as in Folleville) and, inspired by the first Confraternity of Charity in Chatillon, he put together teams of lay people to help the sick poor. The objectives are, therefore, clear and the field of action was determined: rural missions and confraternities for the sick poor in their homes. Missions and confraternities were in some way the two parts of his pastoral and social action.

At the beginning of the year 1618, he thought he could remain there and, in this way, live his priesthood and his charism. He had perfectly assimilated the experiences of Gannes-Folleville and Chatillon and the poor people of the villages would benefit from it.

But Saint Vincent is decidedly neither a man of specialization nor of limited field of action; he is too attentive to what we would call today "the signs of the time." For the moment, *sociologically*, he concerned himself only with the poor of the rural world; *geographically*, he limited himself to the area, vast though it was, of the de Gondi estate. Between 1618 and 1648, events would be for him, as Pascal said, "the MASTERS that God gives us" and would lead him to broaden indefinitely his sociological concept of the poor, to extend his view and his sense of responsibility to embrace the ends of the world.

In order to follow this providential journey of conversion, embracing irresistibly the dimensions of the Church and of the world, the best way, undoubtedly, is to evoke quickly the evolution of the three main

foundations of Saint Vincent from a sociological point of view and then geographically: first the Confraternities, then the Congregation of the Mission and finally the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

#### ***I. A BROADER WAY OF SEEING***

*From his encounter with one poor person to his discovery of ALL the POOR.*

##### A) THE "CONFRATERNITIES"

When Saint Vincent returned to the de Gondi estate, he thought of founding a confraternity in each village on the model of Chatillon; to visit the sick poor in their homes. But in September 1618, when preaching a mission in Joigny, he visited a little hospital. From the experience of Chatillon, he thought that the most abandoned sick were those who remained separated from everything and everyone, and he became aware that the hospitalized poor were also among the most destitute. Never mind, his youngest foundation will evolve to respond to this call. (XIII b, 24) In this particular case, the evolution is minimal and without problems since it a question of broadening an institution conceived for the sick poor in their home to the hospitalized sick, but what one could call the "*Vincentian reflex*" is already discernable. *Saint Vincent is not a man of institution or of specialization. He accepts spontaneously the reality of the poor as it is and whatever it is and modifies the plan, the project and structures to adapt endlessly to the reality of the poor and to their particular needs.*

In 1619, Vincent, through the intervention of M. de Gondi, was named "chaplain general of the galley slaves" (equivalent to the chaplain general of prisons today). This responsibility brought him into close contact with a new form of misery and we see that immediately the foundation of the "Confraternity of Charity" adapted to respond to this call of the poor prisoners. (XIII b, 43)

On October 23, 1620, the Confraternity was again reorganized and, this time, at its very core, becoming a mixed association. This was another occasion when Saint Vincent's view was broadened considerably... in step with what he encountered and observed. Until this time, apart from prisoners, it had been limited to the service of the sick poor (which

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would remain for Saint Vincent a sort of preference and priority); but wider experience led him to be aware of the number of other forms and situations of misery and injustice: poor children (problems of education and apprenticeship,) the elderly, the adults without work, the orphans, the widows and even what he called “the bashful poor,” those ruined by the war. As always, the “Vincentian reflex” showed itself, quick, adaptable, and the Confraternity adapted to respond effectively to these diverse calls of the poor. (cf. XIII b, 49)

It is now 1620, barely three years after the revelation of Chatillon and already far different from those eight pious ladies and virtuous inhabitants of the first rules of the Confraternities. Since then, Saint Vincent’s compassionate gaze had spread to the hospitals, to the prisons, to schools, to apprenticeship, to the elderly, to poor widows and to the bashful poor. It will be like this throughout the life of Saint Vincent, and since then, in the work of the Confraternities of Charity (today: teams of Saint Vincent (in France) and the International Association of Charities (on an international level).

### B) THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION.

This was founded by Saint Vincent on April 17, 1625. The process is exactly the same: in the beginning it comprised a small team of priests dedicated to the evangelization of “*poor country people*,” living and working on the de Gondi estate: an institution, therefore, which was specialized and “*localized*.” (XIII a, 213-217)

Yet, very quickly, this “sociological specialization” and this geographical limitation were challenged and questioned by the circumstances, demands, and the calls of the poor and, there again, the structure, the projects, the plans of the Congregation of the Mission never stopped evolving, adapting to new situations of poverty with which it was confronted.

This was a particularly insecure condition for a young institute, and in one of his best conferences, that of December 6, 1658, Saint Vincent, now 78 years old, challenges, mimics and almost ridicules (in good Gascon style) the attitude and the reactions of his young disciples, too timorous for his taste, when faced with the incredible range of missionary and social engagements that were proposed to them.

“But what sort of men will turn us away from those good works already begun? They’ll be undisciplined, undisciplined, undisciplined men who seek only to enjoy themselves and, provided they have enough to eat, don’t bother about anything else. And what else? They’ll be. . . I’d rather not say. They’ll be men who coddle themselves (as he said this, he folded his arms, mimicking lazy men), people who *HAVE ONLY A NARROW OUTLOOK*, limiting their horizons and plans to *A CERTAIN CLOSED CIRCLE* within which they *SHUT THEMSELVES AWAY*, so to speak, in one spot; *THEY DON’T WANT TO LEAVE IT*, and if they’re shown something *OUTSIDE IT* and go near to have a look, they immediately go back to their center point, *LIKE SNAILS INTO THEIR SHELLS*.” And the secretary, who was obviously captivated by the content and tone of this passage, adds the following note: In saying this, he made certain gestures with his hands, turning his head and speaking in a certain contemptuous tone of voice, which conveyed even better what he was trying to express than the words he was actually saying.” (XII, 81-82)

It is certainly true that to follow Saint Vincent, in the Congregation of the Mission, it is better not be a “snail!” Founded first and exclusively for the evangelization of poor country people, progressively the institute had to conform and adapt to all the forms and situations of misery and injustice that Saint Vincent saw and recognized, both in the city and the country areas; in the prisons, the hospitals, the orphanages, etc. Quickly becoming aware of the importance of good pastors dedicated to the poor, Saint Vincent also engaged his confreres in the formation of the clergy. We can understand that “people who coddle themselves and have a narrow outlook” could feel a little overpowered by such a missionary program. Not Saint Vincent, even at 78 years old! As he said over and over again, “the poor are our masters and Lords.” They are who they are, and it is up to us to adapt, to change, to meet them where they are.

### C) THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY.

The Company of the Daughters of Charity was founded in November 1633 by *Saint Vincent and Saint Louise de Marillac*. We could add to these two well-known names, that of Marguerite Naseau: a poor village girl from Suresnes who came to Saint Vincent one day in 1630 “to serve the poor.” Because of his experience in Chatillon and also his long stay with the de Gondi family, Saint Vincent was working to direct the

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generosity of people who wanted to help the poor. Marguerite Naseau, reminding him suddenly of his own poor peasant background, led him to think of something that we would call today the apostolate from within, or the necessity for the milieu to find within itself the springs of its own advancement and its own salvation. The commitment of Marguerite Naseau, “the first Daughter of Charity” according to Saint Vincent, (IX, 66) is certainly at the beginning of the foundation of the Daughters of Charity.

Originally planned for visiting the sick poor in their homes, in places where the Confraternities of Charity were established in Paris, they very quickly found themselves in hospitals, poor schools, serving prisoners, on the battle fields caring for the wounded...and...every where the poor were to be found.

We find there exactly the same type of evolution as that of the Confreres and the Congregation of the Mission. It certainly seems that this is a deviation, or rather the original grace of all the foundations of Saint Vincent. In the beginning, certainly for a short time, the objective appeared very precise and defined but the discovery of forms of poverty that seemed practically infinite, in the Kingdom of France and in the world, led Saint Vincent to constantly broaden the horizons of his institutes and adapt them accordingly. That hardly seems to concern him. In a conference to the Daughters of Charity on October 18, 1655, he even presents this improbable diversification of the works and commitments as a grace and sort of reward from Providence!

“You have given yourselves to God principally to live as good Christian women, to be good Daughters of Charity, to work at the virtues proper to your end, and to assist the sick poor... and when God saw how well they were doing it, seeking out the poor in their own homes as Our Lord most often did, He said, ‘These Sisters please me; they have done so well in this ministry that I’M GOING TO GIVE THEM A SECOND ONE.’ That referred to those poor abandoned children, Sisters, who had no one to care for them, and Our Lord willed to use the Company to look after them, for which I thank His Goodness... So then, when He saw that you had taken that on with so much charity, He said, ‘I also want to give them another ministry’... It’s assisting poor criminals or convicts.” (X, 102-103)

And that is how Saint Vincent, no doubt with some humor and lots of faith, justified the diversity of commitments of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. The poor are innumerable and infinitely diverse but they are “Lords and Masters;” and it’s up to the servants to adapt to them.

In this way, sociologically, Saint Vincent’s view never ceased to broaden from 1617 and, with him, the horizons of his foundations. It always seemed good to him to refuse to make choices with regard to the poor; he accepts them all, as they are, in their specific situations, with their needs and their particular demands. His outlook is constantly broadened and adapted, as his structures and institutions must be as well.

### **2. A WAY OF SEEING THAT IS UNIVERSAL**

*from the little parish of Chatillon...to Madagascar*

From the poor old man in Gannes and the abandoned family in Chatillon, Saint Vincent, always attentive to Providence as manifested in events, comes to feel solidarity with and almost responsible for all the misery and injustices of his time. GEOGRAPHICALLY the process is the same, and his field of awareness will make him extend his activities to the ends of the earth.

In August 1617, the horizons of M. Vincent were those of the small rural parish of Chatillon-les-Dombes. In the beginning of 1618, his “pastoral and social” territory expanded all over the de Gondi estate and, ten years later, on August 1, 1628, he wrote to Pope Urban VIII, speaking of the works and the first missionaries:

“...they are now carrying out all these pious works, not only in the villages and towns belonging to the noble founders...but they have also labored in many other parts of this Kingdom of France, as in the Archdiocese of Paris and of Sens and in the dioceses of Châlons, in Champagne, of Troyes, Soissons, Beauvais, Amiens, and Chartres, always to the great satisfaction of the Most Reverend Archbishops and Bishops of these places, bringing about the salvation of the poor people...” (I, 49)

And after the Kingdom of France, it would be Italy, Poland, Ireland, Algiers, Tunis and finally Madagascar in 1648. From that time on, charity and the compassionate glance of Saint Vincent will have truly found their

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field of responsibility and action. ALL the poor EVERYWHERE they are to be found.

The foundation of the *Mission of Madagascar* was certainly, for Saint Vincent, a very important stage and a revelation on the same level as that of Folleville and of Chatillon. And so his charity expanded to include definitively the whole Church and the world of the poor. And, until his death, he was very much concerned with the universality of the outlook and total availability of his disciples. A priest of the Mission who was not immediately disposed to leave for Madagascar was only a *shell* of a missionary and a *wet hen*.

On August 30th 1657, he learned that, of all the priests that he had sent to the great island, only one had survived, the others, having been victims of shipwrecks, (the voyage lasted *more than* six months!) or victims of fevers as soon as they arrived. And Saint Vincent asked his community:

“Someone in the Company may say perhaps that Madagascar should be abandoned; flesh and blood will use that language and say that no more men should be sent there, but I’m certain that the Spirit says otherwise. What! Messieurs, shall we leave our good M. Bourdaise all alone there?... could we possibly be so base and unmanly as to abandon this vineyard of the Lord to which His Divine Majesty has called us, merely because four, five, or six men have died? And tell me what a fine army it would be if, because it lost two or three, four, or five thousand men—as they say happened at the latest siege of Normandy—it would abandon everything! What a nice sight an army of runaways and poltroons like that would be! Let’s say the same of the Mission; it would be a fine Company of the Mission if, because five or six had died, it were to abandon the Lord’s work! What a cowardly Company, attached to flesh and blood! Oh, no! I don’t think there’s a single member of the Company who has such little courage, or who isn’t ready to go to take the place of those who have died. I don’t doubt that nature may tremble a little at first, but the spirit, which has the upper hand, says, ‘I’m willing; God has given me the desire to go; no, this loss can’t make me abandon my resolution.’” (XI, 372-374)

Actually there was never a lack of volunteers to fill the void in the Mission. Madagascar both haunted Saint Vincent and was also his great passion during the last years of his life. A few months before his death, he wrote

to M. Boudaise, who had died two year before...but communication was tragically uncertain then!

“Let me tell you, first of all, Monsieur, of our well-grounded fear that you are no longer in this mortal life, seeing the short time that your confreres who preceded, accompanied, and followed you lived in that ungrateful land, which has devoured so many workers who were sent there to do the groundwork. Oh! If you are still alive, how great will be our joy when we are assured of this!”

and he ended this letter by saying:

“Please pray also to Our Lord for me because I will not last much longer, given my age, which is over eighty years, and my bad legs, which are no longer willing to carry me. *I would die happy if I knew you were alive.*” (VIII, 184)

It is impressive to discover the way this elderly man’s outlook focused on the island of Madagascar so far away, when so many foundations, so many works and so many emergencies were calling out to him in France and other parts of the world. It has been a long time since he dreamed of remaining a good country pastor. According to the motto which he gave to the Daughters of Charity “*Caritas Christi urget nos*” (the charity of Jesus Christ presses us), the charity of Christ impelled him always to further endeavors and he felt responsible for ALL THE POOR whoever they are, just as they are and wherever they are...EVERYWHERE, as he said to the Daughters of Charity:

“That’s how you must act in order to be good Daughters of Charity, and to go wherever God wants: if to Africa, then to Africa; to the army, (to care for the wounded) to the Indies, wherever people may ask for you, it doesn’t matter; you are Daughters of Charity, you must go.” (X, 105)

“...Sisters, give yourselves to God from this very moment to go *WHEREVER* He wants to use you, and say to Him, ‘I abandon myself to You and throw myself into Your arms, as a child in the arms of her father, always to do Your holy Will. I’m from Le Havre de Grâce, or I’m from Metz or Cahors, or from here or there, from *WHEREVER* you wish.’” (X, 411)

## An Ongoing Story of a Way of Looking at the Poor

We remember that one day Saint Vincent spoke ironically about the people “*who have a very limited horizon, who limit their view and their plans to a certain circle where they close themselves in...*” Saint Vincent’s way of seeing had a very wide horizon and yet, remarkably, he knew how to always pay extraordinary attention to the poor person, to his dignity, and his particular suffering. In becoming broader and more universal in his outlook, his way of seeing never ceased to become deeper and we are touching here, no doubt, the heart of his experience and even the source of his charity.

### **3. A WAY OF SEEING THAT GOES DEEPER**

*from the poor to Jesus Christ, from Jesus Christ to the poor*

The charity of Mr. Vincent is a little like the image of the famous and very ancient oak tree close to the house of Ranquines. It spreads and multiplies its branches indefinitely because regularly and vigorously it takes care of its roots and strengthens them.

Indeed, as the outlook of Saint Vincent extended to all forms of poverty, and to the poor everywhere, even to Madagascar...this view of the poor deepened to the point of meeting Jesus Christ himself in them.

In the famous year of 1617, the poor old man in Gannes and the poor sick family in Chatillon are for Saint Vincent, obviously and before all else, human persons in a specific situation of misery and abandonment; it is in the face of this very specific form of distress, that he acted immediately.

But these poor people soon appear to him to be different, to be more than human people. In meeting them, he has the impression, the realization of having, in some way, met Jesus Christ.

For seven years, as we recall, he questioned himself, and multiplied his experiences: priest at court, pastor in Clichy, tutor in an important family... never really being able to give up his plan “*of an honest retirement.*” He sought advice from the most illustrious spiritual masters, such as Berulle, but remained in doubt and confusion. And then, two encounters with the poor, one after the other, in the space of barely six months, bringing him unexpected light, seemed capable of compelling him to radically change his view and his life. He is more and more convinced that in Folleville,

as in Chatillon, God intervened in some way in his life and he intervened through the intermediary of the poor.

Saint Vincent recalled and reaffirmed this obvious intervention of God every time he spoke about the events of Gannes-Folleville and of Chatillon:

“Alas, my dear confreres, no one had ever thought of that! We didn’t even know what missions were; we weren’t thinking of them at all and didn’t know what they were all about, and that’s how *IT CAN BE RECOGNIZED THAT THIS IS A WORK OF GOD.*” (XI, 162)

“Would you call human what human understanding didn’t foresee and what the human will neither sought after nor desired in any way whatsoever? (and it certainly seems true that in January 1617, Saint Vincent was far from imagining that he would consecrate the rest of his life to the evangelisation of the poor!) Poor M. Portail (his first companion in the Mission) never thought of it; neither did I; it has all come about *CONTRARY TO MY EVERY EXPECTATION* and without my ever thinking of it in any way.” (XII, 6-7)

And, in order to prove the undeniable intervention of God in this experience, he recounts again the providential event of Gannes-Folleville.

There was the same reaction, the same certainty with regard to the event of Chatillon, which, we see now, was in seed, the origin of the foundation of the Daughters of Charity.

“It may be said in truth that it’s God who established your Company. I was thinking about this again today and I said to myself, ‘Did you ever dream of founding a Company of Sisters?’ Oh no, not I! Was it Mlle Le Gras? (Louise de Marillac, co-founder of the Daughters of Charity) She did not think of it anymore than I did. I can tell you in all truth... *THAT IT WAS GOD*, and not I.” (IX, 165)

And to prove it, Saint Vincent again recounts what happened at Chatillon.

It seems, therefore, very clear to Saint Vincent that God manifested himself to him in some way, in Folleville and Chatillon and he manifested

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himself in the person of the poor. He knows from experience what this means, God speaks and *REVEALS HIMSELF PREFERABLY IN THE POOR*. He would say one day to the Daughters of Charity:

“You are serving Jesus Christ in the person of the poor and *THAT IS AS TRUE AS WE ARE HERE.*” (IX, 19)

These last words give us an idea of the extraordinary realism with which he lives this presence of Jesus Christ in the poor.

Saint Vincent tried later on to understand these experiences of Folleville and Chatillon, which can be qualified as “mystic,” and to present them in the light of two particular Gospel passages.

For the experience in Gannes-Folleville, he prefers the passage in Luke 4:18: Jesus returns to Nazareth, at the beginning of his public life, and enters the synagogue. He reads before the assembly a text from the prophet Isaiah:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because HE HAS ANOINTED ME TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “TODAY this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* (Luke 4:18-22)

For Saint Vincent, after the experience of Gannes-Folleville, this Gospel text affirms clearly that Jesus Christ came to evangelize the poor, deliver the captives and free the oppressed. Priorities of the “mission” of Jesus Christ, the poor must, therefore, be the priorities of the Church of Jesus Christ. But the poor, or most of them, are abandoned by the Church, as they are by society. As a young priest, M. Vincent, himself, for some 17 years, had sought out and rubbed shoulders with rich and important people. The experience of Gannes-Folleville reminded him forcefully and providentially of the priorities of the Gospel. Following Jesus Christ, and in his image, he dedicated himself, therefore, to the “the priorities:” the poor, the captives, the oppressed and he will work unceasingly to bring the Church of his time back to its first priority: the evangelization

of the poor.

Around 1620, as he preached missions in the villages located on de Gondie estate, something happened which led Saint Vincent to deepen more and more his reading of this Gospel passage in Luke. He met a Protestant who challenged him by saying;

*“You told me, Monsieur, that the Church of Rome is led by the Holy Spirit, but I find that hard to believe because, on the one hand, we see the rural Catholics abandoned to Pastors who are ignorant and given over to vice, with so little instruction in their duties that most of them hardly know what the Christian religion is. On the other hand, we see towns filled with priests and monks who are doing nothing; there are perhaps ten thousand of them in Paris, yet they leave the poor country people in this appalling state of ignorance in which they are lost. And you want to convince me that all this is being guided by the Holy Spirit! I’ll never believe it.”* (XI, 28)

It is Saint Vincent himself who recounts this remembered event to his confreres and we can easily imagine how this violent objection of the Protestant moved him deeply...it was three years, nearly, there were still a number of these ten thousand priests “doing nothing and far removed from the poor people of the country!”

The following year, Saint Vincent returned to this region to preach a mission; the Protestant attended it and was very moved by the way the priests spoke to the poor people and by the care they took in their spiritual and corporal service: “Now I see that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Roman Church, since such care is taken in the instruction and salvation of poor village people.” (XI, 29)

And Saint Vincent ends this account by saying:

“Oh! What a happiness for our Missioners to confirm the guidance of the Holy Spirit on His Church *BY WORKING*, as we do, at *THE INSTRUCTION AND SANCTIFICATION OF THE POOR!*” (XI, 30)

Certainly this event helped him understand his vocation better and deepen it. It is only in the measure that the Church makes the poor its priority, that

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it is faithful to its vocation and, consecrating himself to the evangelization of the poor, Saint Vincent is henceforth convinced that he is, without any doubt, in line with the mission of Jesus Christ.

With another passage of the Gospel, Saint Vincent's way of looking at the poor reaches an even deeper level. It is Matthew 25:31-46. The apostles asked about entering the Kingdom and Jesus spoke of the "last judgment:"

"Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'"

In astonishment, the "elect" asked when had they visited, clothed, fed, cared for the poor and Jesus added:

"The king will answer them, 'truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, *YOU DID IT TO ME.*'"

This Gospel passage of Saint Matthew is evoked in the official Act instituting the first Confraternity of Charity (14, 126) and it seems right that this text was, for Saint Vincent, the "light of Chatillon" which allowed him to understand and reflect deeply on the event which he experienced. We remember that on August 20, 1617, someone came before Sunday Mass to speak to him about a poor family, outside the village, who were struck down by sickness. His homily at Mass was an appeal to help these poor people and the response of the parish was inspired. From this came the first Confraternity of Charity: "I was hungry and you gave me food...I was sick and you came to visit me..."

It is easy to see the connection between this text from the Gospel and the event. Saint Vincent saw it and, even better, he lived it. He took the Gospel literally and tried to live it every day in relationship to the poor. Undoubtedly this is how his gaze found its truest depth: *the poor person is Jesus Christ.*

"Serving the poor," he told the Daughters of Charity, "is serving Jesus Christ...You serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor and that is as

true as that we are here. A Sister will go ten times a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day she will find God there... Go to visit a chain gang, you will find God there; look after those little children (abandoned), you will find God there. You go into poor homes, but you find God there." (IX, p. 199)

For Saint Vincent, this is not a facile and spiritual formula, it is the living echo of a profound personal experience; the echo of Gannes-Folleville and of Chatillon which he hears again each time he encounters a poor sick person, someone on a chain gang, an abandoned child...And this conviction, one could say this *EVIDENCE*, of a mysterious solidarity between the poor and Jesus Christ, this identification one with the other, modified and renewed definitively Saint Vincent's outlook.

So, his charity, his personal way of serving the poor avoided, most of the time, the temptation to "paternalism" even if the way things were done at that time can seem rather strange today. Jesus Christ being in the poor, being the poor person...we can be, Saint Vincent thought, in relationship with the poor only as a servant. This was a rather revolutionary way of thinking, especially in the 17th century. The lady of the Confraternities, the priest of the Mission, the Daughter of Charity are not the wealthy, the masters who are condescending, who share, who bend down toward the poor, the benefactors; they are servants who, as the psalm says, *lift* their eyes toward their masters. Saint Vincent continually insisted on this point and it is probable that this reversal of behavior and thinking, in the exercise of Christian charity, was as beneficial in the Church and in the world as the innumerable foundations and social undertakings founded and inspired by Saint Vincent.

For him, his conversion of outlook was only the logical consequence of a conviction, an experience: Jesus Christ is in the poor; in some way, the poor person is *Jesus Christ.*

With this new perspective, the risk remains (we have made frequent mention of it during this study) of serving the poor as a sort of devotion, a "good action," a spiritual search that is undertaken more or less without self-interest. In Saint Vincent, there is none of this. He knew "by experience and by nature" the condition of the poor and his encounter with Jesus Christ never got in the way or lessened his attention to the

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concrete, human and social situation of the poor, nor his sense of the dignity of the person in need.

Saint Vincent deepened his way of seeing to the point of truly seeing Jesus Christ in the poor but, even then, without ever obscuring the reality or the values of the poor. What remains in terms of this study is to highlight an aspect, perhaps the most characteristic one, of the way Saint Vincent looked on the poor: a unified way, or to use his own term: “simplicity.” The period which preceded the great year 1617 revealed to us a Vincent de Paul who was a complex character, doubting everything, especially himself, multiplying attempts and experiences in an uncertain, anarchical, manner. After Folleville and Chatillon, because he had decided to dedicate himself to the evangelization and the service of the poor, everything seemed suddenly unified; he was simpler in personality and in his life. Everything was related to and organized around this conviction: *Jesus Christ is in the poor; the poor person is Jesus Christ.*

He settled into a marvellous and completely natural continuity between faith and commitment, between prayer and life, between two worlds that, too often, people regard as distinct, if not separated. For Saint Vincent, the Christ whom we seek in prayer is also in the poor, and there is no longer any difficulty. He said to the Daughters of Charity:

“Sisters, the service of the poor must *ALWAYS* be preferred to *EVERYTHING ELSE*. You may even omit hearing Mass on Holy Days, but only in case of great necessity... In this way you are sure to be faithful to your Rules, and even more, since obedience is regarded by God as better than sacrifice. It’s God, Sisters, whom you want to serve. Do you think God is less reasonable than the masters of this world? If the master says to his valet, ‘Do this,’ and if, before his order is carried out, he asks him to do something else, he doesn’t find fault with the valet for setting aside what he had been told to do in the first place; on the contrary, he’s more pleased. The same holds true of God. He has called you to a Company for the service of the poor; and to make your service pleasing to Him, He has given you Rules. If, when you are observing them, He wants you elsewhere, fine, Sisters, go there with no doubt that it is the Will of God.” (IX, 171-172)

It is easy to see in this text, the disconcerting spontaneity with which Saint Vincent speaks of the God who speaks in the rules, the God whom one meets in meditation and the Mass...and the God who calls in the poor: it is, for him, the same Master who commands one thing first and then something else later. In this case, according to the well-known and very meaningful expression of Saint Vincent: it is “to leave God for God,” God in the Mass for the same God present in the poor.

In the same way, in the life of the believer, everything is unified and for the disciples of Saint Vincent everything must be simple: the poor person is present in their prayer and Christ is present in the poor they serve.

In this way the gaze of Vincent de Paul has become as simple as it is meaningful and profound. This is how Saint Vincent de Paul saw the poor. And so we understand how he could say to his missionaries one day:

“...but turn the medal, and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, who willed to be poor, is represented to us by these poor people... O God! How beautiful it is to see poor people if we consider them in God and with the esteem in which Jesus Christ held them!” (XI, 26)

Father Jean Morin, CM



## The Church

“If you are hoping God will send an angel from heaven to give you more enlightenment, he will not do this; he has sent you the Church.” (VI, 265).

### All people are members of a mystical body

All people are part of a mystical body: *we are all members of one another*. Even among animals, it has never been heard that any part of the body has not felt the pain of other parts of it or that any part of a man has been bruised, injured or maltreated without the other members of the body feeling it. That is impossible. All the members of our body are so united and closely linked that when one part feels pain, the other parts feel it, too. How much more is this true of Christians who are members of the same body and members of one another so that they suffer together. What! To be a Christian and see a brother suffering without grieving with him and sharing his pain! That would be lacking in charity it would be a *PAINTED RESEMBLANCE OF A CHRISTIAN, one would be lacking in charity and worse than the beasts.*” (XI 4, 559-560)

### Laborers who actually work

“The Church is like a huge field of corn that needs laborers for the harvest, but *LABORERS who really work*. There is nothing more in keeping with the Gospel than to bring together on the one hand, light and strength for the soul in prayer, reading and recollection, and then *to go and help others to share* in this spiritual food.” (XI-4, 733)

### Men of the Gospel

The Church has too many solitary individuals....and too many useless persons and many more that tear it apart, *what it needs is MEN OF THE GOSPEL* who will strive to purify it, enlighten it and unite it with its divine spouse. (III, 181)

### Confirming that the Holy Spirit guides the Church

“What a happiness for us missionaries *to be able to show that* the Holy Spirit is guiding his Church and *working*, as we are working, for the *instruction and sanctification of the poor.*” (XI-4, 729)

### You can love God just as priests do

“It is not man’s status or dignity that gives him merit but his works which make him like Our Lord. It is through these works that he strives for perfection, practices virtues and gains salvation. This is shown in the gospel of the Last Judgment where we are told that told that the Lord will place at his right hand those who have practiced virtues, especially the virtue of charity, and it is only they who will enter the kingdom of heaven. So it is the practice of virtue that binds us to his love, and it is *his love* that will lead you to new acts of virtue. If you have a great love of God, you will act in this way. *So you can love God just as priests do*, and a poor young woman can love God *as much as the learned.*” (XI-3, 404)

### It is not the status....but rather the charity

When a priest celebrates Mass, we have to believe that it is Our Lord himself who is the sovereign high priest who is offering the sacrifice; the priest is only Our Lord’s *minister*...so does this mean that the acolyte who is serving the priest and those who are present at the Mass, share in the sacrifice he offers and that they offer with him? There is no doubt that *they participate, and at a deeper level than he does, if they have more charity than the priest. It is not the status of the priest or religious that makes their actions more pleasing to God but CHARITY that makes them more meritorious if they have more of this virtue than we do.*” (XI-4, 464)

## Staying Close to You

It is passing;  
the time I have left is passing.  
Help me, Lord, to live this time  
close to You.

It is passing,  
and I don't know how much time remains for me.  
Help me to live this time in trust.

It is passing;  
this time I have left, and I feel it is fragile.  
Help me, Lord, to live it relying on you.

It is passing;  
the time I have left sometimes makes me fearful.  
Help me, Lord, to live it in hope.

It is passing,  
the time I have left is your gift.  
Help me to live it for your greater glory.

It is passing.  
The time I have left is passing away.  
I beseech you, Lord, that I may spend it in you.

Extract from "Chainon" no. 214

