

*E*choes *of the Company*



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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SISTER EVELYNE FRANC, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Letter of February 2, 2012

February 2, 2012

Dear Sisters,

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

On February 12, I had an appointment with our superior general, and I had the joy of presenting to him our request for the Renovation. We began by making a virtual tour of the world, stopping at each Province of the Company. We recalled the joys and the sorrows of the past year, and the courageous responses of the Company, through each one of you, to religious persecutions, natural catastrophes, and new forms of poverty. The Inter-Assemblies Document “Open to the Transforming Spirit,” seemed to us to be a tool that was well-adapted and well-used, for our on-going formation, focused on the mission.

After that, I presented to the superior general our desire to pursue our journey with Christ, in the manner of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, while we are clearly aware of our weaknesses, our mediocrities, and our fears.

Father Gregory grants us the grace of renewing our vows on March 26, the Feast of the Annunciation. I thanked him in the name of all of you and, with you, I am grateful for this opportunity which is offered to us to give ourselves anew to God for the service of Christ in those who are poor.



*Spiritual
Life*

*My spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*¹

In order to prepare for this Renovation, I would like to take as a main theme the virtue of charity, linking it to the writings of our founders, the Inter-Assemblies Document, the documents of the Church, and the challenges of our daily life.

Indeed, before going to meet our superior general, I meditated on my own and your request for the renewal of the vows, from the perspective of charity. You remember, perhaps, that I reflected on hope in 2010 and last year on faith.

One of the votive masses included in the Missal, the one praying for charity, begins with this antiphon: *“I will remove from your body the heart of stone, says the Lord, and I will give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you... You will be my people and I will be your God.”*²

This promise of God was fulfilled in the Incarnation of His Son and is accomplished each time that we let ourselves be transformed by the Spirit of Love, each time that we ask for His help to quench the thirst that we feel: *“thirsting to live in deeper communion with our Sisters and in proximity of life and heart with people who are marginalized; thirsting to respond with creative charity to the appeals of persons living in poverty.”*³

May our renovation of 2012 enable us to root ourselves more profoundly in love, to live charity, the heart of our vocation, more radically.

Saint Vincent, who was declared by Pope Leo XIII to be the patron of works of charity, and Saint Louise, by Pope John XXIII as patroness of all Christian social workers, have shown us the way. They were apostles of charity and, driven by the Holy Spirit, they faithfully followed Jesus, *“Adorer of the Father, Servant of His Loving Plan, and Evangelizer of those who are poor.”*⁴

1. Lk. 1:47-48.

2. Ez. 36:26-28.

3. Inter-Assemblies Document, p. 4.

4. Constitution 8a.

Both of them ask us to be faithful to the name that we bear:

*“Each of you was inscribed in the book of charity when you gave yourselves to God to serve the poor, Sisters...therefore, you must live in conformity with the name you bear, since it’s God who has given this name to the Company ... Therefore, preserve it carefully; strive always to have the robe of charity, of which the signs are love of God, love of our neighbor, and love of our Sisters.”*⁵

*“... you must be strong women. In fact, since you are Daughters of Charity in name, and since you know that true charity loves and endures everything, even the worst contradictions and things that are repugnant, I hope that all of you practice this.”*⁶

Let us then reflect together on this beautiful name that we bear, on the necessity of being *strong women*, according to the expression so strikingly used by Saint Louise.

Progressively, we will look first **at charity as a gift and God’s promise to human beings** and its links to justice and truth, and then in the second point, the **charity of communion** and its prophetic witness.

1. Charity, a gift and God’s promise to humanity

As Pope Benedict XVI said in the Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, “Charity is God’s gift to humanity, His promise and our hope”.⁷

Charity, fruit of the Holy Spirit, is the love of the Father and of the Son. Our Lord Jesus Christ was the one who revealed to us this charity, this *“mystery that is inaccessible to reason alone...”*⁸ as is the intimate life of God the Father, Son and Spirit. Saint John expressed it magnificently: *“God is love.”*⁹

5. Saint Vincent, conference of March 4, 1658, On mutual charity and the duty of reconciliation. X, p.379.

6. Sainte Louise de Marillac, letter to Sister Jeanne Lepintre, August 1648, SW p. 252.

7. Cf. *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 2.

8. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 237.

9. 1 Jn. 4:16.

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Charity, explained Pope Benedict XVI, does not mean primarily an act or a sentiment of kindness, but a spiritual gift, the love of God which the Holy Spirit pours out into the human heart and leads this same heart to give itself totally to God and to the neighbor.¹⁰ The commandment of love does not consist in “a ‘commandment’ imposed from without and calling for the impossible, but rather of a freely-bestowed experience of love from within, a love which by its very nature must then be shared with others. Love grows through love.”¹¹

Charity does not consist only in giving; it is being open in order to receive. Charity is the great engine which energizes and gives meaning to our action.

*Love and truth meet, justice and peace kiss.*¹²

Charity implies justice in such a way that it is not possible to live charity separate from justice. Without justice, charity could be manipulation: “*If we love others with charity, then first of all we are just towards them.*”¹³

So, several provinces participate actively in the diocesan committees of justice and peace¹⁴ in order to further the reign of true charity. It is to “*dare to take prophetic stances*”¹⁵ in the face of violations of human rights, of flagrant inequality or shameful exploitation; to be close to those who live in conditions unworthy of every human being. I give thanks for all these actions, often carried out in collaboration with other organizations. Added to all that, is the emergency assistance and the ministry of listening and accompaniment offered by many Sisters, some well advanced in age, to all those who are marginalized.

It is also necessary to **unite charity to truth and truth to charity**. This is the object of the social doctrine of the Church which announces, whether convenient or inconvenient, the truth of the love of Christ, and therefore, sheds light on the socio-economic scandals which undermine our society.

10. Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus of September 25, 2005.

11. Deus Caritas Est, n.18.

12. Ps. 85:11.

13. Caritas in Veritate n. 6.

14. Cf. Constitution 24e.

15. Inter-Assemblies Document, p. 9.

Indeed, charity goes further than social aid and cannot remain there; it involves more than a work of human promotion. Charity expresses the vocation of the Church, sent to announce the Good News to those who are poor. Charity is a confession of faith. “*Love—caritas—will always prove necessary, even in the most just society.*”¹⁶

The Daughters of Charity are not professionals in social action, but *strong women* deeply committed on behalf of those who are poor. Truly, the service of a Daughter of Charity is a vision of faith and a concrete expression of love,¹⁷ an encounter with Jesus Christ present in those who are poor: “*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.*”¹⁸ The parable of the Last Judgment, the one most commented on by Saint Vincent, was his source of inspiration. It holds the key to the Vincentian mystique of service which leads us to recognize, to contemplate, to love and to serve Christ in persons who are poor.¹⁹ The invisible God wishes to make Himself visible in those who are poor so that all human beings can discover Him and love Him.²⁰

Saint Vincent loved to remind the Sisters of this and used concrete expressions, a true Vincentian anthology of Gospel wisdom: “*You are serving 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’ll find God there.*”²¹ “*Our Lord is, in fact, with that patient who is the recipient of the service you render Him.*”²² “*Poor people are our masters; they are our kings; they must be obeyed, and it’s no exaggeration to call them our kings because Our Lord is present in persons who are poor.*”²³

16. Deus Caritas Est, n. 28.

17. Cf. Constitution, 16b.

18. Mt. 25:40.

19. Cf. Constitution 10a.

20. Cf. 1Jn. 4:20.

21. Saint Vincent, conference of February 13, 1646, On Love of Vocation and Assistance of the Poor. CCD IX, p. 199

22. Saint Vincent, conference of November 11, 1657, On the Service of the Sick and Care of One’s Own Health. CCD X, p. 268

23. Saint Vincent, conference of November 25, 1658, On the Order of the Day. CCD X, p. 489.

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Guided by the Holy Spirit, Saint Louise kept the flame of the Charity of Christ alive; she animated and motivated the Sisters to live the mystique of service: *“Be very gentle and courteous toward your poor. You know that they are our masters and that we must love them tenderly and respect them deeply.”*²⁴

Do we live charity as a gift from God?

Do we exercise our charity in justice and truth?

2. Charity of Communion

The Founders saw community life as *“one of the essential supports of the vocation of the Daughters of Charity.”*²⁵ The Community of the Daughters of Charity is a reality of faith which is built on the solid foundation of the call of the Lord.

Saint Vincent and Saint Louise stimulated the Sisters to live in charity, in union and harmony among themselves, as it exists in the Holy Trinity²⁶ for there would be no paradise without this divine union. The Inter-Assemblies Document also invites us to *“enhance living together in great union and cordiality”* and offers us some very concrete ways of doing this.

The message of Jesus *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,”*²⁷ colors every page of the Gospel. It is the basis of the value and necessity of community love, of *“living together in great union and cordiality”* and at the same time, it authenticates the identity of His disciples.

In the light of the Gospel message, under the impulse of the Spirit, a life style is born marked by a great current of community love, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles and which Saint Paul describes like this:

24. Saint Louise de Marillac, letter to Sr Cécile Agnès, May 4 1650, SW, 320.

25. Constitution 9.

26. Cf. Saint Vincent, Conference of December 2, 1657, On Obedience, X, 308.

27. Jn. 13:35.

*“Love is patient, love serves... it does not seek its own interest..., it does not take offence... it bears all things... it endures all things; Love never ends.”*²⁸

Living together well is a challenge today; a call to a community life which radiates peace, joy and hope. Union of hearts increases our strength, doubles our energy, and gives us wings.

Living together well presupposes a life of intense faith which is nourished by the sacramental life, most especially in the Eucharist, by prayer, by listening to and welcoming the Word; a faith which is enriched when personal experience is shared, and is the mystery of communion and of relationships. Apostolic reflection, spiritual charity, and mutual correction as well as the different forms of community sharings are some excellent means of,²⁹ growing in this Community awareness.

In order to *live together in great union and cordiality*, we are invited *“to deepen a spirituality of communion among ourselves, to build local Communities where loving and trusting relationships flourish,”*³⁰ and to live community life in such a way that it is *a prophetic witness of love and a way of hope*. This spirituality of communion also leads us to see the positive in each person, to welcome her and value her as a gift, to bear the burdens of others with love.³¹

Living together in great union and cordiality will lead us to be *a prophetic witness of love and a way of hope in promoting communion*. In a society marked by divisions and borders, we are called to be creators of harmony and peace, to confront difficult situations and to go beyond little conflicts; called to build bridges which bring people together, to work for reconciliation and forgiveness.

28. 1 Cor. 13, 4-8.

29. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document p.21 and following

30. Inter-Assemblies Document, p. 11.

31. Cf. Novo millennio ineunte, 43-45.

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To be a prophetic witness of love and a way of hope, inviting others to drink at the source of charity. In a world which suffers the consequences of an estrangement from God, the strength of love can change and transform human life. Love is the leaven of community, the vehicle of communion, and the seed of hope. We are called to communicate the joy of faith, to make known the message of the Gospel and the beauty of the charisma to young people who are searching to give meaning to their life.

To be a prophetic witness of love and a way of hope, opening up new avenues of service to those who are poor. In a society weighed down, crushed by the crisis which runs through it and destabilizes it, we are called to sharpen our way of seeing in order to detect where we find those suffering most profoundly, the places of greatest dehumanization. We are called to manage the resources of the earth with a profound sense of justice and solidarity.

The grace of the Renovation will give us a new impetus *to be a prophetic witness of love and a way of hope*, solidly anchored in the love and fidelity of the Lord who remains with us forever.

The hours which preceded the Passover, remained deeply engraved in the heart and the memory of the disciples of Jesus. The Gospel of John preserves the details of this farewell supper of the Lord, with the institution of the Eucharist and the commandment of love; Jesus wants to strengthen the faith of His own and to encourage them to love as He loved and to remain in His love.³² The word “remain” suggests many things; it evokes persevering fidelity, active connectedness, and unconditional loyalty.

“*To remain in love*” is a call to renew and update our gift through the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience which make us “*available for the purpose of the Company: the service of Christ in persons who are poor.*”³³

32. Cf. Jn. 15:9-17.

33. Constitution 8b.

*Let us remain in love, welcoming “chastity as a gift that frees the heart and gives it the dimensions of the heart of Jesus Christ.”*³⁴ In a social context of permissiveness which fosters superficiality, we feel ourselves called to witness to the beauty of chastity, as an expression of a heart without boundaries which *loves those who are poor* and each person in an attitude of joyful availability.

Let us remain in love, happy to have no other treasure than Him, giving thanks to Him and committing ourselves by the vow of poverty to total dependence in the use and disposal of the goods of the Company, as well as in the use of our personal goods.³⁵ In a social context which proclaims money as the absolute, we feel ourselves called to love poverty and to lead a simple way of life which shows that God is the only treasure that endures.

Let us remain in love, offering to God our freedom, committing ourselves by the vow of obedience to obey our superiors according to the Constitutions and Statutes.³⁶ In a social atmosphere marked by individualism, subjectivism, and indignant revolt, we feel ourselves called to love the will of God, letting ourselves be guided by the mediations through which He acts.

Does our Community life reflect “living together in great union and cordiality, a prophetic witness of love and a sign of hope?”

How can the renewal of our vows be a response to the call to remain in His love?

Conclusion: “*Let everything you do be done in love.*”³⁷

34. Constitution 29a.

35. Cf. Constitution 30a.

36. Cf. Constitution 31a.

37. 1 Cor. 16:14.

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Let us do everything through love; the pedagogy of charity finds its inspiration in the Good Samaritan who sees the man who is half dead... he is touched, lets himself be called, goes beyond his inner feeling and immediately moves to action, bandages the man's wounds, puts him on his own mount and takes him to an inn. Furthermore, he seeks the collaboration of others, so that the care is continued.³⁸ For us as well, affective charity culminates in effective charity which always involves an attitude, that of a servant, and a relationship lived in gratitude. It is a question of serving those who are poor in a personal way: listening to them, giving them time, accompanying them in their solitude, and knowing how to collaborate with humility.

Let us do everything through love, like so many Sisters who have preceded us and who have been witnesses of the charity of Christ, from the time of Marguerite Naseau and Jeanne Dalmagne, Saint Catherine Labouré and so many Sisters who were victims of their commitment in times of epidemics, of wars, of catastrophes, etc. who, in anonymity, have been true martyrs of charity. Their fidelity to self-giving, even to the end, is the best fruit of charity.

In a recent biography, it was said that Blessed Sister Rosalie was often questioned about the motives for her inexhaustible charity, about the reasons which pushed her to serve everyone without regard for political affiliation. Each time, she was content to respond: *"I am a Daughter of Charity and only that."*³⁹

Let us do everything through love; the living and invigorating contact with Christ suffering and crucified in His brothers and sisters, and our identification with Him, are the principle and the source of our action. Let us pray for good and solid vocations, *strong women* who come to give themselves to God *"to be servants of Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ, in a spirit of humility, simplicity and charity."*⁴⁰

38. Cf. Lk. 10:25-37.

39. Sister Louise Sullivan, Sister Rosalie Rendu: A Daughter of Charity On Fire with Love for the Poor, p. 283.

40. Constitution 50.

Let us do everything through love and let us prepare the Year of Faith which will begin October 11, by meditating on the name that we bear, on the witness of charity which the poor and all those around us have a right to expect of us, so that through our service, the God of Love may be manifested.

United with the entire Company, whatever our age in vocation, our type and place of service, let us pray, every day, for the gift of charity. *"O God, eternal and all-powerful, who filled Saint Vincent and Saint Louise with Charity, listen to our prayer and give us your love, make us discover and serve Jesus Christ in our brothers and sisters, the poor and the unfortunate. At their school, teach us to love, in the sweat of our brow and the strength of our arms, with humility, simplicity and charity..."* Let us ask, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, the Star of evangelization, the grace to proclaim with all our being, the wonders of God.

*Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;
and the greatest of these is love.*⁴¹

I have passed on to Father Gregory our profound thanks for his missionary animation and his dynamism. I also expressed to Father Patrick our gratitude for his wise and warm accompaniment. With all of you, I also greet with respectful and affectionate gratitude Father McCullen, Father Maloney, Father Quintano, Father Javier, and certainly, Mother Duzan and Mother Elizondo to whom we feel so close.

With my affectionate devotion and the assurance of my prayer for each of you,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

41. 1 Cor. 13:13.

The Season of Lent, 2012

To all members of the Vincentian Family

*“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts
are restless until they rest in you”.*

-St. Augustine of Hippo

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

*May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts
now and forever!*

We live in a world filled with restlessness. Life’s demands often come upon us at a fast and furious pace. Along with the realities of war, poverty, terrorism, political unrest, economic and ecological disasters, we are a people wearied by life. Our sentiments can be like those of the psalmist: *“How long, O Lord? How long will you hide your face from me?”* (Ps. 13:1)

In the midst of these challenges, the Church offers us a precious gift: the season of Lent. It is a sacred space, a time beckoning us to pause, draw back from life’s daily grind, and drink more deeply of Jesus’ story of our salvation: his life, passion, and resurrection. Simply put, Lent is a time of sabbatical for the soul.

As a people claimed by Christ and committed to the charism of St. Vincent de Paul, this holy season can help us better live out our Catholic faith and the Vincentian way. Like Vincent, our identity is rooted in Christ. A reading from the first Sunday in Lent tells us Jesus *“suffered once for our sins, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God.”* (1 Peter 3:18) These forty days of Lent are not only a time for prayer, penance, and almsgiving, but for reflection, connection, and action.

A TIME FOR REFLECTION

The Sunday Gospels in Lent give us much food for thought as they reveal the person and power of Jesus. He is seen as a mystic emerging from the desert, the Messiah transfigured before the apostles, a prophet driven to decry injustice in the temple precinct, a wise teacher willing to dialogue with a Pharisee, and a suffering servant ready to glorify God by embracing his Passion. In these Gospels and in the daily Scriptures for the Eucharist during Lent are stories of God’s love and mercy to Israel and Jesus’ words and deeds in proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

By praying the Lenten Scriptures and partaking in the Eucharist, we open ourselves to the great mercy of God, manifested in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. It was Vincent de Paul’s willingness to reflect deeply on Jesus’ life and teachings, and his eagerness to integrate them into his life that made him a “mystic of charity.” Vincent was imbued with a drive to serve the poor, and he motivated and empowered others to do the same. But what fed his restless soul were not ideas and accomplishments, but a mind and heart given to reflection and contemplation:

“We cannot better ensure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor, in the arms of Providence, and with genuine renunciation of ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ.” (St. Vincent: CCD, Vol. 3, p. 384, Letter 1078, 4 December 1648)

Vincent’s personal conversion in making the teachings of Jesus his own, and to founding communities and organizations to serve the poor, were the fruit of his life-long commitment to prayer and reflection. In making time for reflection, we are like the Greek elders who asked the apostle Philip: *“Sir, we would like to see Jesus”* (Jn.12:20). And as Vincent’s life teaches us, God never refuses an invitation to commune with us. Lent is the time for us to do so.

A TIME FOR CONNECTION

The fruit of time spent in reflection and prayer is a deeper connection with God, oneself, our neighbor, and the poor. In a restless world of discord and disconnection, Lent helps us to deepen our discipleship with Christ and better live our Vincentian charism. We can learn from Vincent, whose

The Season of Lent, 2012

genius in bringing people together to achieve the common good, endures today. The Lenten Gospels portray Jesus as always fervently doing the Father's will. By his prayer and in his Passion, Jesus always remained connected to God.

Years ago, a popular advertisement in the USA used as its slogan "We're all connected." In today's digital age, this refrain is all the more relevant. Our faith and charism challenge us to connect Jesus' command to love God and serve our neighbor more profoundly. Lent calls us to examine more clearly the presence of the suffering Christ in the world so we might understand their plight and be Christ to them.

As superior general, I have the privilege of visiting the Vincentian family throughout the world and witnessing how our charism connects the poor to Christ. Allow me to share two such encounters. Both are ministries coordinated by the Daughters of Charity serving vulnerable children at risk and living in poverty.

During a visit to Haiti to see the progress of our Zafen Project, I visited a school started by Daughters of Charity in response to the plight of the *Restavek children*. It is truly tragic: between 175,000 to 300,000 of these children come from families unable to take care of them, and so are sent to work as "indentured servants" for relatives, acquaintances, or other Haitian families. Called "*Restaveks*", (French-Creole for "rester- avec - to stay with"), their lives are not restful, nor do they belong "with" the family they serve. Often mistreated and abused, *Restaveks* cannot attend school, and lack food, clothing, and health care. At the Daughters' school for *Restaveks*, they are taught to read and write, fed, and treated with a care, respect and dignity they have never known. To learn about the *Restaveks*, go to: <http://www.restavekfreedom.org>.

In Ghana, as in many developing nations, the exploitation of children is ever present. In Kumasi, Ghana's second largest city, many homeless children live on the street and survive by begging or day labor. Often beaten and abused, many become victims of human trafficking. The Daughters of Charity, with the Archdiocese of Kumasi, founded "Street Children Project", a drop-in center providing respite from the perils of the street. It offers them a place to rest (although it is just floor space), the use of bathrooms to shower and wash, clean clothes, literacy classes,

outreach, and alternatives for these children. It is a quiet space amidst a harsh life of exploitation. To learn more about this work, go to: <http://www.streetchildrenprojectksi.org>.

I think you would agree that these two Vincentian works would be near and dear to the hearts of Saints Vincent and Louise. They stand as wonderful example of grassroot efforts to respond to the cry of the poor and forgotten to the Good News of Jesus. Lent is a time not only to reflect on Jesus' life, but to connect with God's poor and act on their behalf.

A TIME FOR ACTION

"What must be done?" This was the question Madame de Gondi put to Vincent in 1617 as both witnessed the spiritual plight of peasants on her vast family estate. His answer to that question is echoed in today's world in the priests, brothers, sisters, and lay people who are the living, organic heart of the Vincentian Family. Ours is a global reality with an outreach much greater than Vincent and Louise could ever have imagined.

But the Lenten season reminds us that the suffering Christ in his Passion is present in our world in countless ways. As disciples of Jesus, it is our task to act on their behalf. "*Whatever you did for the least of my brethren, you did to me.*" (Mt. 25:40) It is our task, both individually and collectively as bearers of the Vincentian charism to respond in love and service. While there is always much to keep us busy, let me to suggest another type of action.

At our recent General Assembly, the Congregation of the Mission adopted a five-year strategic plan with yearly objectives to better live out our Vincentian vocation and the charism for the Vincentian Family. The objective we are focusing on this year is "Systemic Change", which we define as working not only to alleviate the conditions of the poor, but to change the societal structures which engender poverty. To encourage our confreres to make systemic change part of their provinces and ministries, there are suggested strategies. While some are specific to the Vincentian Community, I will share with you several strategies I believe can be used by all branches of the Vincentian Family:

- *To favor works that promote systemic change in society, develop local self-government, formation of self-help*

groups and indigenous micro-credit programs;

- *To provide legal assistance to defend the poor and promote justice;*
- *To create programs that counter human trafficking and promote life, access to universal health care, care for the environment, the dignity of women and children, the rights of migrants, and participation in civil society.*

These strategies for “systemic change” from the Congregation’s plan offer you a rich diversity of ideas for action. Systemic change is an important goal for the Vincentian Family. I believe we can all find ways to adapt it to our works and educate others about its importance.

In Lent and throughout this year, we have the opportunity to grow in our faith by reflecting on God’s Word and partaking in the Eucharist which deepens our bonds of connection to the service of the poor. It is a daunting task, but as members of the Vincentian Family, our “mystique of charity” inspires us to remember whom and why we serve:

I beg Our Lord that we may be able to die to ourselves in order to rise with Him, that he may be the joy of your heart, the end and soul of your actions, and your glory in heaven. This will come to pass if we humble ourselves as He humbled Himself, if we renounce our own satisfaction to follow Him by carrying our little crosses, and if we give our lives willingly, as He gave His for our neighbor whom he loves and whom he wants us to love as ourselves.” (St. Vincent: CCD, Vol. 3, p. 616, Letter 1202, 27 March, 1650.)

Our restless world, along with the plight of the Restavek and Kumasi children can seem at times to be overwhelming. But our faith in Jesus and the Vincentian charism provide us with renewal, strength, and confidence to face the future with hope. Through the intercession of Mary, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, I pray this Lent will be a time when God’s grace and goodness may be more fully manifested in your life and the lives of all whom you serve.

Your brother in St. Vincent,
G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

Letter of March 22, 2012

Dear Sisters,

May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us now and always!

Before the feast of the Annunciation, in accordance with the way this is organized in our local Communities, we will each participate in a day of retreat, in order to prepare for the Renovation of our vows. On this occasion, may I ask you to pray for our Sisters who are facing some delicate situations?

As you can well imagine, the list is long...

- the Sisters in Libya who, thanks be to God, were able to return to this country after having left a few months ago,
- the Sisters of the Philippines who serve in resettlement camps for the survivors of the cyclone which, shortly before Christmas, hit Cagayan de Oro and Iligan City in the northern part of the Island of Mindanao,
- the Sisters of Nigeria who, a few weeks ago, also had to leave their Community of Kano, in the northern part of the country, because of attacks against Christians,
- the Sisters of the Province of Congo who are helping the victims of the explosion which killed several hundred people, wounded thousands of others, and left many homeless in Brazzaville...

These Sisters need the support of our prayers in order to continue their valiant service in these extremely difficult conditions.

Letter of March 22, 2012

Please allow me to further explain the current challenges facing our Sisters who live in Syria. This country, along with Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, and the Holy Land, is part of the Province of the Near East. There are three local Communities, two of which are located in Damascus:

Saint Joseph House, opened in 1854, where four Syrian Sisters serve in a school for over 800 students, animate the Vincentian Family, and welcome Iraqi refugees to Zabadani.

- Saint Louis Hospital which was founded in 1905. A Community of six Sisters (four Lebanese, one Egyptian, and one French) serves the patients in this 100 bed facility.
- The third Community is the most recent one, dating from 2007. It is situated in the northeast part of the country, near the Khabour River (a tributary of the Euphrates), close to the borders of Iraq and Turkey. One Syrian Sister, one Iranian Sister, and one Lebanese Sister work in pastoral ministry in several villages providing Christian formation of children, young people, and their parents. They also manage a nursery school. One vocation has already come from Tall Arbouche.

The Sisters of these three Communities perform their service with serenity and strive to be witnesses of peace, unity, and solidarity in a country gripped by violence. They cannot communicate easily with the outside world, and they trust in your prayers.

In his conference of October 22, 1650 “To Some Sisters Being Sent to the Country” (CCD IX, p. 430) Saint Vincent commented on the virtues that the Daughters of Charity must possess ... he begins with humility, then charity, and in the third place he calls for support.

At the end of this conference which, according to a note by Sister Julienne Loret, seems to address several groups of Sisters, Saint Vincent advises them to be faithful to God in their service. He refers to the care of the dying as well as that of school children, then he reminds the Sisters of the origin of their vocation. “If he (the Bishop) asks you, ‘Do you make religious vows?’ tell him, ‘Oh, no, Monsieur! we give

ourselves to God to live in poverty, chastity, and obedience.” Then Saint Vincent continues, “Give yourselves totally to God to do well what you are going to do. Ask Him for the spirit of His Son, so that you may be able to perform all your actions as He did His.”

Let us give thanks to God for the fidelity of our Sisters who are preparing for their Renovation in crisis situations and let us pray that the ordinariness of our daily lives will not diminish the quality of the gift of ourselves to God. Through the joy of our new yes and in thanksgiving for our vocation as Daughters of Charity, I wish you a happy and holy Feast of the Annunciation.

With my devoted affection and the assurance of my prayers,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

Conference in preparation for the Renovation 2012

“The Love of Jesus Christ Crucified Urges Us”

Not everyone has a motto that describes their life. A bishop, of course, has a coat of arms which is usually accompanied by a motto; branches of the military often have sayings which describe them; some organizations use words in their publicity which try to capture their purpose. And, yes, communities of consecrated women and men are also usually numbered among these groups which have a quotation which attempts to capture their spirit. You have a motto which has described the Daughters of Charity from early in your history. It was a motto and a seal that St. Louise thought very important and one that St. Vincent fully agreed with: “The Charity/Love of Christ Crucified Urges Us.”

I like the fact that it appears on your seal, especially because this type of imagery is important in the Bible. I am reminded of a beautiful passage from the Song of Songs. Note the way in which “seal” and “love” are combined and the way in which the seal is placed upon the heart and the arm, upon one’s thoughts and one’s actions:

*Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;
For Love is strong as Death, longing is fierce as Sheol.
Its arrows are arrows of fire, flames of the divine.
Deep waters cannot quench love, nor rivers sweep it away.
Were one to offer all the wealth of his house for love he would
be utterly despised. (Song of Songs 8:6-7)*

Part of me just wants to stop here and reflect on this powerful and passionate description of dynamic love. We could contemplate what it means to be sealed in the love of Christ in word and deed; this love which is stronger than death. Each of us could ask ourselves how the

vows capture the passionate character of that love for the other person. And we are sealed by it.

In earlier times, a seal was placed on a document or an object to indicate a number of things. First of all, the seal designated the owner of the document, and secondly, the seal guaranteed the security of the contents, and finally, the seal indicated the authority which the document had. (St. Paul, for example, describes the Christian believer as being “sealed with the Holy Spirit” [Eph 1:13]). In the Song of Songs passage, someone is sealed with love. That, too, is an echo of us who proclaim in this way the One to whom we belong, the reason for which we are called and the source of our strength.

As you think about your opportunity to renew your vows at this time, you can consider how that renovation is sealed and described by the words of your motto: the love of Christ crucified urges us. Today, I would like to offer you the chance to reflect on that motto and how it describes who you are, what you do and why you do it. I will do this by carefully considering the different elements in your seal and the kind of reflection which these components give rise to, individually and then as a whole. There is a great richness in this motto which offers much food for reflection, as well as encouragement for the renovation.

1) The Love of Christ

The first phrase “the love of Christ” in your motto can be understood in at least two ways, both of which are an important interpretation of the words and they complement each other.

(a) The Love which Christ has for us

One of the ways in which we can interpret the phrase “the love of Christ” is the love which Christ has for us. The Bible contains many striking descriptions of this truth. Jeremiah writes about God’s love for us: “With age-old love I have loved you” (Jer 31:3). And Jesus is the embodiment of that love. The Gospel of John reminds us that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16). Jesus lived that love each day. He says that there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. And that is exactly what Jesus does for us.

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The fullest expression of his love for us takes place on the cross. But this is only the final act in a whole lifetime of acts of love.

When we look to Christ as our example and model, we read about the way in which his love is expressed in feeding the hungry at the multiplication of the loaves and fishes; we can see how he heals the sick by countless miracles in which he gives sight and hearing and movement to people who are afflicted; we hear how he loves those who are isolated from the community and welcomes them back with his touch and his presence in their homes; we feel the way in which he comforts those who mourn. The love of Christ reaches far and wide and embraces everyone who is willing to open themselves to his presence. Even when someone is not prepared to give themselves to Christ at a particular point in his or her life, Christ is prepared to love them—see the example of the rich young man. This is the love of Christ which urges us into action.

Vincent writes movingly of the love that Christ has for us and its effect:

“Let’s look at the Son of God; what a great heart of charity He had; what a fire of love! . . . Only Our Lord, . . . was so enamored with the love of creatures as to leave the throne of His Father to come to take a body subject to weaknesses. And why? To establish among us, by His word and example, love of the neighbor. This is the love that crucified Him and brought about that admirable work of our redemption. . . . if only we had a little of that love, would we stand around with our arms folded? Would we let those we could assist perish? Oh, no! Charity can’t remain idle; it impels us to work for our salvation and consolation of others.” (CCD 12, #207 – “Charity,” May 30th 1659, p. 216.)

It is difficult to read this passage without thinking of your motto and seal. The love of Christ, which was most fully demonstrated on the cross, models for us the love which should impel us to care for each other.

Christ tells us in no uncertain terms: “As I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (Jn 13:34) and that is this notion which is captured in the words of our motto as we find ourselves urged by his love to care for one another. As we experience the love of Jesus in our lives, we are driven to express that love in our actions towards others.

“The love of Christ crucified urges us.”

(b) The Love which we have for Christ

A second way in which we can interpret this phrase about the “love of Christ” in our motto is with reference to the love we have for Christ. A number of people demonstrate their love for Christ in various ways. Our Blessed Lady, at the foot of the cross, is one of the most poignant and visual of these examples. Perhaps the most explicit example, however, is that of Peter after the resurrection of Jesus:

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” He then said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” [Jesus] said to him, “Feed my sheep. Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, “Follow me.” (Jn 21:15-19)

Peter is invited to consider his love for Jesus not just once but three times. And each time he is asked the question it has different meaning, as does his answer. You can imagine yourself being asked the same question by someone three times. The first time you are asked, you might just give the easy answer off the top of your head without even really paying attention to what it is about. When the question is repeated, you wake up. Now you try to answer the question seriously and at greater length. And when the same question is asked a third time, you might become very thoughtful (even nervous, perhaps even angry) and give serious consideration to your answer and what it really means.

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Imagine Peter when he is first asked by Jesus if he loves him. The answer might come from Peter's lips easily and without thought. "Yes, of course I love you, now let us move on to important matters!" The second time Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, Peter would have paused and now taken some time to think about the ways in which he had shown that love over the past three years. With some thought and confidence, Peter can answer, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you and I have shown that in numerous ways." But, when Jesus asks Peter a third time whether or not he loves him, Peter is deeply troubled. It is clear to him at last that Jesus wants him to think deeply about the meaning of this question and the importance of his answer. He must think more deeply about what it means to love Jesus and the kind of demands that this makes on a person's life. When he answers Jesus this third time, there is more humility, more recognition of personal weakness, yet greater desire to love Jesus more deeply, with all that entails.

And notice that each time Jesus asks about Peter's love, and each time that Peter professes that love, Jesus tells him to "feed my lambs, feed my sheep." Profession of one's love for the Lord leads to the taking on the responsibility of caring for the Lord's people—his "lambs" and "sheep." With each deeper proclamation of love, this responsibility is broadened. Is it possible to reflect on this question without recalling Vincent's famous words of encouragement: "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"?

How about you? What would happen if you allowed the Lord to ask you, "Do you love me?" three times today? What would your answer be? How deeply would you be willing to examine your own response? If you allow yourself to be so deeply inflamed with that love of Christ, with what eagerness could you hear the summons to take care of the Lord's poor at a deeper and deeper level? It suggests the implications of our motto: "The love of Christ crucified urges us." You vow yourself to responding in love to Christ with your whole selves in service. At what level of love are you able to renew your commitment?

2) Crucified

There are many ways in which we might reflect upon "Christ crucified" in our motto. One might single out two thoughts in particular: first, the greatness of Jesus' love in his willingness to give himself for us on the cross; and second, the Christ whom we love is being crucified now, in our time and place, in different ways—how do we respond to him?

a) Christ Crucified

The word "crucified" prevents our reflection on love from becoming too theoretical and illusory. "Crucified" insists that we take up the physical order: flesh and blood and suffering. There is nothing theoretical about crucifixion. In the time of Jesus, crucifixion was a shameful and horrible death. It was not simply a means of executing someone, it was meant to teach a lesson. People were crucified in public places with their crimes announced on their crosses so that anyone passing by might see and resolve never to commit such an offence. Jesus was willing to accept this most terrible of deaths for us. He tells us: "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down on my own" (Jn 10:18). In the letter to the Philippians, Paul wants to make this clear; he emphasizes that Christ not only died for us, he died on a cross (Phil 2:8). It is the love of this Christ who was crucified which urges us into action of service and community.

St. Louise loved to reflect on the cross:

" . . . I am going to follow You to the foot of Your Cross which I choose as my cloister. There, I shall leave behind all earthly affections because Your voice has called me and urged my heart to forget my people and my father's house so as to be open to Your great love. Therefore, at the foot of this holy, sacred and adored Cross, I sacrifice everything that might prevent me from loving, with all the purity that You expect of me, without ever aspiring to any joy other than submission to Your good pleasure and to the laws of Your pure love." (Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac, A.27 – "On the Pure Love We Have Vowed to God," p. 828)

It is this love of Christ on the cross that guided and sustained her in her ministry and prayer.

b) The Crucified Christ Among Us

Crucifixion was not a form of death dealt out to the powerful, but to the lowly—slaves and those without influence. (Paul, being a Roman citizen, was spared this kind of death.) We might consider how our love for Christ drives us towards those who are most powerless in our own society—those who are on the margins and who are treated as worthless while subjected to all kinds of abuse. The suffering of these men, women and children, victims of poverty and abuse with no one to help them, can remind you of Jesus crucified. We know about people who in various ways suffer the pain of crucifixion within our own societies. They may not actually be killed; but even if they die a natural death, they are not mourned.

The focus of the Daughters of Charity from the very beginning was on ministering to those who were most vulnerable. Vincent and Louise repeatedly went out of their way to emphasize that the Sisters should not work with those who had other means of care. The most abandoned and isolated were to be their special charges—those we might regard as the “crucified” ones in our world. Our Constitutions say simply that “God awaits [us] in those who suffer” (C. 7b).

Yes, “the love of Christ **crucified** urges us.” In our renovation, we vow to walk and serve along the way of the cross.

3) **Urges Us**

There is power in this verb “urges.” It suggests more than movement; there is an urgency, a compulsion to act despite the cost and whatever the consequences. I am reminded of the prophet Jeremiah who finds the carrying out God’s will in his life an on-going difficulty. Yet, he feels helpless before its force: *I say I will not mention [the Lord], I will no longer speak in his name. But then it is as if fire is burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding back, I cannot!* (Jer 20:9).

He suffers for his proclamation of the word, but when he resolves to stop proclaiming the message of the Lord, he experiences a great fire burning within his heart and he has to let it out—he has to proclaim the

word of the Lord. He must live the prophetic vocation! He is urged, he is driven, he is impelled to make the Lord known. He cannot do otherwise.

St. Vincent picks up this theme as he writes about the power of charity, of the practical love of Christ: “*When charity dwells in a soul, it takes full possession of all its powers; it gives it no rest; it’s a fire that’s constantly active; once a person is inflamed by it, it holds him spellbound.*” (CCD 11, #129 – “Repetition of Prayer,” August 4, 1655, p. 203)

Saint Vincent wanted his daughters and sons to live out their charism with zeal. In the seal of the Daughters of Charity the flames round the cross symbolize their zeal in serving the poor.

How about us, do we feel that same compulsion? Are we willing to vow ourselves to this demanding way of living? Our Inter-Assemblies Document refers to “*profound thirsts, ardent longings, and pressing calls*” (IAD, p. 5). What are the calls that the Holy Spirit is making at this time? In what way is the love of Christ urging us to act?

When Jesus is asked which is the greatest commandment, his response is clear: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength*” (Mk 12:30). We note that the encouragement to love the Lord is not simply to do so by actions, but also engages one’s heart, mind and spirit.

In our mind we recognize the injustice, the misery and the sufferings of the poor in our world. We are moved to reflect on what we can do to promote justice and we are made to feel the urgency of doing this.

In our hearts, we experience that compassion which so characterized Jesus’ relationships. How often do the Scriptures tell us that he was “moved with compassion” (e.g., Mk 6:34; Matt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Lk 7:13)! Our hearts feel the pain of others and bring us to look for ways of relieving their suffering.

In our soul—in that deepest part of ourselves which seeks intimacy with God—we desire to respond to those who are in need. The urging surges up from within. When we touch that deepest part, that best part, that

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part of us that is made in the image and likeness of God, we are urged/driven/impelled to respond.

In our strength, of course, we can serve the poor with all our being. St. James strongly insists on the need to offer effective, personal action.

“What good is it, my [sisters], if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (James 2:14-17)

It may sometimes sound strange to people to speak about leaving prayer to carry out some task for the poor, but it goes to the very heart of our spirituality. Consider the story of the Good Samaritan. Consider the story of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25. Can you imagine those who had not cared for the poor justifying their inaction by saying to the Lord that they were at prayer? No. Loving the Lord needs to urge us to action on his behalf, action that leads others to him. When we love God with our whole mind, our whole soul, our whole heart and our whole strength, we are ready to make that total gift of self which the vow promises. Our love for Christ needs to be expressed in that way, and it takes on human form in the ways in which we respond to our brothers and sisters in need. And we respond not simply as individuals who do the best we can, we respond as a community—*the love of Christ impels us*. The love of Christ urges us to work together in serving the people of God. If we are in community it is in order to support one another and move together towards Christ. Our Constitutions remind us that *“the Gospel witness of the local community is a . . . clear sign of the presence of Jesus Christ, loved and served in persons who are poor”* (C. 59). The witness given by our sisters gives us strength and determination. Together, we offer effective witness and the possibility of change.

Conclusion

“The love of Christ crucified urges us.” Do you feel the forcefulness and the implications of these words as you think about giving yourselves entirely and in community for the service of Christ in your brothers and sisters who are poor?

What is there in “the love of Christ crucified” that “impels” you to renew your vows?

- Your love of Christ and wanting to be like him;
- Your love of Christ and wanting to serve him in others despite your weaknesses
- Your love of Christ which yearns to relieve the suffering of the crucified people of our time;
- Your love of Christ which enables you to accept yourself as you are. We have to accept our giftedness and our limitations.
- Your love of Christ which wants you to be faithful
- Your love of Christ which commits you to loving and serving.

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm. For Love is strong as Death, longing is fierce as Sheol. Its arrows are arrows of fire, flames of the divine. (Song of Songs 8:6)

Father Patrick Griffin
Director General

Motherhouse, March 26, 2012

“Four Friends” for our Renovation

My dear Sisters:

Today is a day that for you is both familiar and at the same time unique; the annual renovation or renewal of your vows. Although the vow format and formula are familiar to you, each year brings new challenges as you renew your vows. This unique event, foreseen by Saints Vincent and Louise as essential to the nature of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, is a reminder to exercise vigilance in your vocation. The vigilance the Lord calls you to have, is not a fearful or defensive way of thinking, as is often ascribed to the word vigilance. Rather, it is a “vigil”, an invitation to embrace a new freedom, a way to radical discipleship with the Lord Jesus. St. Vincent expressed it simply and clearly in your Common Rules:

“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...” (Constitutions, p.28; C.R., I, 1)

It is the person and presence of Jesus Christ, who called, inspired, and sustained our Holy Founders that we still seek today. This call, nurtured through prayer, reflection on God’s Word and the Eucharist, molds and shapes your life. It unbinds us from our self-centeredness, enabling us to give ourselves to God in community to serve the poor.

To assist you at this time of renovation and renewal of vows, let me begin with a parable which I believe speaks of the profound mystery

at work in your life as a Daughter of Charity. It is the parable found in both Mark’s (Mk. 2: 2-12) and Luke’s (Lk.5:17-26) gospel, of the paralytic, who was lowered through the roof to be healed by Jesus. I’m going to rename it the “Parable of the Four Friends”, but first, let me tell you the story.

“They came to Jesus bringing a paralytic carried by four men. Unable to get near Jesus because of the crowd, they opened up the roof above him. After they had broken through, they let down the mat on which the paralytic was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Child, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the scribes were sitting there asking themselves, “Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming. Who but God alone can forgive sins?” Jesus immediately knew in His mind what they were thinking to themselves, so He said, “Why are you thinking such things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, pick up your mat and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth”— He said to the paralytic, “I say to you, rise, pick up your mat, and go home.” He rose, picked up his mat at once, and went away in the sight of everyone. They were all astounded and glorified God. (Mk. 2:3-12)

Let us reflect together on this parable, as it is a story with several key themes: illness and stigma; faith and determination; and friendship and healing. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus is beset by crowds desperate to be with him; he cannot even visit his own family. The paralytic is the most disadvantaged of all people seeking Jesus, as he is immobile and looked down on because of his illness. In the ancient world, illness was seen as a penalty from God for one’s sins, and disability a punishment from God for the sins of one’s family or ancestors. That is why the first thing Jesus says is “Your sins are forgiven”. Before relieving the man’s terrible burden of illness and disability, Jesus first affirms to all present. the paralytic’s God-given dignity. Disabled and marginalized, this man would do whatever it took to experience Jesus’ healing. Like other parables, this story invites us to have a deeper faith and conversion of heart. There are two subtle, but crucial aspects to this story which I draw to your attention.

“Four Friends” for your Renovation

First, there is the paralytic. Imagine what must have been going through his mind as he was lifted up on a roof, lowered down to the surprise, and annoyance of many seeking time with Jesus, as he became the center of attention. Although his body was paralyzed, his heart and will were not. He sought Jesus.

Both Gospel passages refer to “four men” who lifted the paralytic up to the roof and then lowered him down to Jesus. This was a major task, requiring imagination and commitment. These four men were probably good friends of the paralytic because it is only good friends who are prepared to take risks for other people.

How does this beautiful story relate to our celebration today? I believe there are some important parallels.

First, like the paralyzed man on the mat, each of us has some experience of paralysis in our life. The word ‘paralysis’ has two definitions: *loss of voluntary movement from damage to nerve or muscle function;* and *failure to take action or make progress.* Certainly, we know about the physical paralysis that can occur when we have to face the reality of ageing and illness. But the other definition is just as true. We know the paralysis that comes on us when we feel helpless in the apostolate or our best efforts do not bring about the intended results we had hoped for in work or in community. The lives of the poor contain many examples of this type of paralysis. I know many Daughters of Charity who, in accompanying the poor, experience the same privations and frustrations.

That is where our four friends come to help us! They lift us off the mat of paralysis of our human failure and so enable us to take action and make progress. They undo the roof of the limits we put on ourselves, move the walls we can create to isolate, and bring us to Jesus as no other power could. They guide us to our goal of giving ourselves to God to serve Him in the poor. These four friends are the vows of *chastity, poverty, obedience, and service of those who are poor.*

These four friends - the vows - enable you to live the life God called you to, following in the footsteps of Jesus, especially in the way he is revealed to you in the poor, as experienced by Saints Vincent and Louise. The Constitutions speak simply and beautifully of how these

“four friends” can guide you throughout your life in the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

For Daughters of Charity, the vow of chastity is *“a gift that frees their heart and gives it the dimensions of the heart of Jesus Christ for an unconditional gift, and total availability in the service of those who are poor...a response of love to a call of Love.”* (C. 29a, b) This friend leads you to overcome the pains of loneliness to work with Jesus in a spiritual and fruitful apostolate.

The vow of poverty *“finds its fullness in poverty of spirit...It inspires Daughters of Charity to place at the service of their brothers and sisters their person, talents, time, work, as well as their material goods.”* (C.30a) This “friend” helps us to be converted day after day to evangelical poverty so that we may have a better understanding of people the Lord puts in our path and share their life.

The vow of obedience is *“lived in co-responsibility and subsidiarity,” with a “common seeking and humble, loyal acceptance of God’s will, made known to the Company... through the cries of those who are poor, the calls of the Church, the signs of the times, and the Constitutions and Statutes.”* (C.31 b) It enables us to replicate in faith the attitude of the obedient Christ. This “friend” helps us to seek and clarify in our minds what God’s will is for us within the greater design of God’s love for all humanity.

The final “friend”, your vow of the service of Christ in the poor, is one that binds the other three together. It allows us to integrate the call to be chaste, poor and obedient, into an active life of service nourished by prayer, the Eucharist and the gift of community. As you Constitutions state: *“Seeking to make the Lord known to those who are poor, they proclaim the Gospel...explicitly when possible, but always through the witness of their lives.”* (C. 24 b)

As you renew your vows, I ask you to reflect on how, in the past year, you have allowed God to, as the letter of Peter says “call us out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1Pt. 2: 9) Light and darkness are important themes, both in scripture and life. But in the vowed life, we must acknowledge that God is always at our side, in times of light and

“Four Friends” for your Renovation

times of darkness. Where there is paralysis, allow these four friends to help you “*arise, and pick up your mat*” (Mk.2: 11). Today, rediscover your four friends. Let them lead you more deeply into the mystery of God’s love and Jesus’ presence in your life.

This Feast of the Annunciation reminds us that Our Blessed Mother’s humble, simple, yet resounding yes! to God, first made possible the way of faith we share today. Both Vincent and Louise found in Mary one whose “Fiat” inspired them to seek her intercession. Come to Mary, our Mother, whose life, prayer, and special care for the Daughters of Charity are an integral part of our spirituality and history. Give Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal a special place in your prayer today and every day.

May I end with one of Blessed Pope John Paul II’s favorite quotations attributed to St. Catherine of Siena, “*If you are what you should be, then you will set the world ablaze!*” A great thought to ponder at this time of renovation and renewal of your vows.

Father Gregory Gay
Superior General

TODAY’S CHALLENGES

Province of Central America (Panama)

**The Charity of Christ Presses us
to Serve Orphans**

PRESENTATION

The Daughters of Charity arrived in Panama in 1875 with a group of other Daughters of Charity expelled from Mexico. They began work in a hospital for foreigners. Some Sisters went to work in Saint Thomas Hospital, other Sisters to serve orphans in different homes.

In 1889, the orphanage of San José de Malambo was founded by Senor Manuel Jaen, to “help orphaned, abandoned and mistreated children in this dear country.” The establishment was opened to the public in 1890, and its administration was confided to the Daughters of Charity.

What we see in Panama today is similar to the context in which Saint Vincent and Saint Louise lived in 1660. The San José de Malambo orphanage is located in the Caceres district in Arraijan. It is still managed by the Daughters of Charity. The children and adolescents, boys and girls, coming from different places in the Republic, are marked by misery, hunger, sexual abuse, lack of schooling and, increasingly, by the AIDS virus. These are the sad realities of the 21st century, at the same time as we are seeing such scientific advances and great achievements in technology.

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*Today’s
Challenges*

OUR MISSION

Our local Community, made up of seven Sisters, serves 170 orphans in difficult circumstances. A School Center ranging from preschool classes to high school graduation, accepts boys and adolescents like those of the orphanage.

Faced with the challenges of new forms of poverty, we commit ourselves, in our service at the San José de Malambo orphanage: to being a dynamic presence of the charity of Christ, to defend the rights and dignity of children and to help them participate in their own development.

“The Daughters of Charity see those who suffer, those stripped of human rights and dignity, and those in poor health as children of God and brothers and sisters with whom they are in solidarity.” (C. 16c).

We have created programs in which we work against everything that could hinder the development and the dignity of children:

- mistreatment received
- lack of motor, sensory and intellectual development
- illnesses, notably AIDS
- sexual abuse

On one occasion, a baby, named John, was brought to the home. His parents had thrown him into the public toilet to get rid of him. Having heard the cries of a baby, the neighbors took him out and took him to the hospital. He remained there two months and then spent one year at the orphanage. We cared for him and surrounded him with a lot of love so that he would survive, but because of his many burns caused by the detergent used in the toilets, he died.

In this tragedy, so contrary to the dignity of the human being, we recognized the face of Christ.

Another time, “Jean and Marie, two babies of five and seven months, arrived at the orphanage, contaminated by AIDS. They were seriously malnourished and had little chance of survival. Thanks to the care, attention and the love of a Daughter of Charity, they are now two and

a half years old. They sing, jump, run, go to preschool and they are happy.”

OUR CONVICTIONS

Fidelity to the Vincentian Charism strengthens the life of a Daughter of Charity. This charism guarantees that the poor will always be served.

Confidence in Divine Providence underpins the works for the poor.

In faith, we believe that God awaits us in those who suffer.

Constant union with God drives us to be witnesses of his love in the midst of the world.

CONCLUSION

In the 21st century, through a message that is always new and by adapting ourselves to the situation today, we strive to serve abandoned children with great love as our Founders did. Saint Louise de Marillac, teacher of orphans in the 17th century, continues to speak to us today, exhorting us to educate these poor children in the best way possible.

Our service of the poor nourishes our contemplation of God, day after day, when we recall the comforting words of Jesus: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me.”(Mt. 18:5) Through the witness of their life, the poor lead us to God and evangelize us. May Mary, Only Mother of the Company, continue to accompany us and help us become true, humble and simple servants.

The Community of the Orphanage San José de Malambo
(Panama, Province of Central America)

Province of Australia

A New Community for a New Way of Serving the Poor

After prayerful discernment and consultation among the Sisters of the Province, and in order to respond to the needs of people living in the area, the Provincial Council, Province of Australia, made the decision to establish a new local Community in South West Sydney. This response was further enhanced by the opportunity offered us to respond to the call to collaborate with the wider Vincentian Family, in this case with the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

Three Sisters were missioned to this new community for mission in Green Valley, South Western Sydney, NSW.

Sister Olive, recently returned from Mission in Fiji and after completing a Clinical Pastoral Education Program, serves with the St Vincent de Paul Society Rosalie Rendu Volunteer Home and Visitation Program, which is engaged in offering pastoral care to various people who are housebound and living on the margins of society.

Sister Maggie, the second Sister appointed to this local Community, after returning from the inaugural session of the Vincentian Integration Experience in Chicago, has been appointed to continue her work with various Vincentian Family Ministries and continues to develop formation and education resources to be used within the Vincentian Family. One of her main ministries for this current year, a new form of service to the Province, is retreat ministry to the Daughters of Charity and Vincentian Fathers and Brothers. In addition to this ministry, Sister Maggie is engaged as part-time prison chaplain in a women's prison in Western Sydney where 200 women are incarcerated.

Sister Carole who was appointed to serve as a Transpersonal Art Therapist with the St Vincent de Paul Society "Caroline Chisholm Center for Social Justice," uses art to help people in difficulty express their problems. Sister Carole supervises the development of a Creative Arts Program at the Center.

Each of the three Sisters, while living in Community in Green Valley, commute to the location of the centers in which they serve, Olive and Carole to Vincent de Paul Society services and Maggie to the various centers and schools to which she has been invited and to the women's prison. Each of these locations is in different directions which require up to an hour's travel to and from the Mission. After their day of ministry in the different services, each one returns to her local Community and shares with the other two Sisters what has "taken place today" in her ministry. This generates much discussion in the local Community as all three Sisters share their ministry challenges, joys and sorrows, take these to their prayer and gain support from one another. We would like to tell you a bit more about the work done in the Caroline Chisholme Center.

Demographic studies of Mt. Druitt conducted in 2001 by the City of Blacktown Social Plan identified the fact that a high proportion of Mt. Druitt residents were migrants from non-English-speaking nations, who tend to work in blue-collar jobs. The 2006 census conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, states that 46% of the 13,583 Mt. Druitt residents were born overseas, more than double the national average. The most common occupation categories were clerical (18%), laborers (16%), machine operators (15%) and trades people (14%). The suburb had a higher than average number of rented properties (38%), although a smaller than average number of these (5%) were state housing. There are numerous smaller suburbs nearby which draw on the community resources of Mt. Druitt.

In 2007, the Caroline Chisholm Center run by six salaried staff and 30 volunteers assisted 4,300 people with various needs. In 2008, the people receiving help rose to 5,087 and in 2009 the number of people assisted rose slightly to 5,384. In the financial year 2011 they helped 7,196 people by way of food, clothing, financial assistance, budgeting skills, accommodation, court support, medical expenses, immigration support, phone calls, counseling, and finding employment. Fifteen hundred of

Today's Challenges

these were homeless people. The breakdown of these people receiving aid is as follows: 3,000 single persons, 2,600 single parent families, more than 1,000 couples with children and 1,500 homeless people. Alongside the social welfare service, there is also a counseling and therapy service. Clients using these services for counseling or therapy are referred from the welfare section of Caroline Chisholm Center, from the Department of Community Services, from the courts or from other agencies. The center has a full time counselor, an art and sand-play therapist, a social worker and a visiting psychologist.

Another feature of the center is adult education, where participants are prepared for obtaining a driving license, an anger management program, parenting skills, computer skills and the creative arts program where clients can learn new skills, develop their creativity, and build a sense of community. It is through this process that their self-esteem is built up. Because of an increased number of clients being referred for therapy, and enrollments for the creative arts program, Sister Carole's employment schedule was increased to four days a week. Initially, Sister Carole didn't plan to work with children, but a large percentage of the clients referred to her were children, so in 2009 she completed sand-play therapy training over a four-month period. Art therapy and sand-play therapy complement each other very well and have been invaluable in working with children as well as with adults. Clients can have difficulty in putting into words how they feel, or what they have endured, or they just don't consciously know how they feel or what is happening within their lives. These two forms of therapy help clients to unblock those areas, allowing them to see where change needs to happen, enabling them to work out solutions and empowering them to make the necessary changes for the healing process to begin. The clients work on issues in a supportive, trusting and safe environment. Sister Carole's work environment is a little room with shelves that has miniature symbols from all areas of life that the clients use to tell their story in a sand tray which becomes "their world." This world can be seen from different aspects and different perspectives. It is a world where the client is in control and where she or he can move, replace, observe, dialogue with the objects and work out solutions. Sister Carole's role in all this is to listen with great respect. Sister Carole is constantly amazed by the fragility of life and the enormous capacity of the human spirit to overcome hardships, struggles and suffering. One

morning a week, Sister Carole also teaches a variety of creative art classes. Each program lasts for about two months. These consist of sewing, mosaic work, pottery, jewelry making, silk painting and making Christmas decorations and presents. Some of the clients make gifts for their families and some sell their goods on eBay which helps to increase their income. The clients enroll for this program and can come from services within the Caroline Chisholm Center or from other agencies.

Sister Carole has initiated Sister Maggie and Sister Olive into creative art which they do together during their community evening. On one such occasion all three had a two hour silent meditative prayer session of painting mandalas. They each began a mandala and after ten minutes left the mandala they had been working on and moved to the next one, adding to what was already there. This process was repeated three times before the mandalas were complete and the activity they engaged in together illustrated what community life is for them.

We believe this new ministry in South West Sydney continues to nourish our contemplation and gives meaning to our community life, just as our relationship with God and our life in common continually revitalizes our apostolic commitment. (C.16b)

Sister Maggie REYNOLDS, Sister Olive MANGAN,
Sister Carole JONES
Daughters of Charity

Designation of Visitatrixes and Appointment of Provincial Directors

DESIGNATION OF THE VISITATRICES

REGION OF ALBANIA: Sister Tonja TUSHI has again been designated Regional, September 14, 2011.

PROVINCE OF GRAZ-CENTRAL EUROPE: Sister Elfried Magdalena POMWENGER has been designated Visitatrix of the new Province, October 2, 2011.

PROVINCE OF MEXICO: Sister Maria Graciela RUBIO MONCADA has been designated Visitatrix again for three years, September 9, 2011.

PROVINCE OF RIO DE JANEIRO: Sister Maria Cristina D'ABRUZZO has been designated Visitatrix, succeeding Sister Jeny Borges da SILVA, January 18, 2012

PROVINCE OF VIETNAM: Sister Cat Hy NGUYEN THI KIM VAN has been designated Visitatrix, succeeding Sister Justina TRAN THI TUOI, January 11, 2012

PROVINCE OF SARDINIA: Sister Caterina BUA has been designated Visitatrix, succeeding Sister Clementina DESSI, January 18, 2012.

PROVINCE OF RECIFE: Sister Maria Ilza FERREIRA has been designated Visitatrix, succeeding Sister Silvia Maria de OLIVEIRA MOTA, February 22, 2012.

PROVINCE OF WARSAW: Sister Maria LESZCZYNSKA has been designated Visitatrix, succeeding Sister Stanislaw KOKOSZA, February 22, 2012.

PROVINCE OF CENTRAL AMERICA: Sister Maria Elena HERRERA CUEVA has been designated Visitatrix, succeeding Sister Rosa Elvira GOMEZ MENDEZ, March 21, 2012.

PROVINCE OF CALI: Sister Gloria Maria AGUIRRE FRANCO has been designated Visitatrix, succeeding Sister Maria Lia GIRALDO HERRERA, March 21, 2012.

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APPOINTMENT OF THE PROVINCIAL DIRECTORS

PROVINCE OF FRANCE NORTH: Father Yves BOUCHET has been appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for a mandate of six years, November 7, 2011.

PROVINCE OF CHINA: Father Jan Van AERT has been reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for a mandate of three years, March 13, 2012.

PROVINCE OF CHELMNO: Father Pawel SLIWINSKI has been reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for a mandate of three years, March 23, 2012.

PROVINCE OF KRAKOW: Father Josef LUCYSZYN has been appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for a mandate of six years, March 23, 2012.

Father Marcin STASIOWSKI has been appointed Vice-Director, for the houses of the Province located in the territory of the former Soviet Union, March 23, 2012.

PROVINCE OF CUBA: Father Gilbert WALKER has been reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, March 26, 2012.

Nominations

PROVINCE OF GIJON: Father Juan VELASCO ROBLAS has been reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for a mandate of three years, April 4, 2012.

PROVINCE OF VIETNAM: Father Joseph PHAN THAI HOA has been reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for a mandate of three years, April 4, 2012.

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of the Philippines

Typhoon Sendong, at Cagayan de Oro
December 22, 2011 to January 2, 2012

Loving the World with the Heart of God

At the height of Typhoon Sendong which struck Northern Mindanao, and especially Cagayan de Oro and Iligan City, on December 16 and 17, 2011 we, the Daughters of Charity from the Philippine Province, heard the cries of the poor and responded by assisting the local church under the leadership of Archbishop Antonio J. Ledesma in their relief and rehabilitation efforts. Our Sisters serving in the Diocese of Cagayan de Oro appealed for us to go there. Sister Maria Teresa L. Mueda, D.C., Visitatrix, called for volunteers and different teams of sisters took turns to be present where their services were needed. In the process we found ourselves working closely with both Church and government agencies, particularly the Department of Social Welfare which was responsible for administering relief in these two towns which were declared natural disaster zones.

THE FACE OF THE GOD OF PROVIDENCE:

I felt the God who provides very real as I witnessed persons from different sectors of society, both from government and non-government organizations, bringing relief supplies or offering assistance for current basic needs and a long term program of rehabilitation. These were from the locality, from the region, from national and international groups. They put their skills at the service of people, assisting them physically, socially, economically, spiritually, etc. (providing food, accommodation in the evacuation centers, and listening therapy). It

An Ongoing Story of a Way of Looking at the Poor

was a tangible revelation of God's providential care for the victims of Sendong.

THE GOD WHO CALLS PEOPLE TO MISSION

An endless stream of people came to help the typhoon Sendong victims and worked together in a real spirit of collaboration. These volunteers had a sense of mission and of taking part in a global, long-term and holistic response to people's needs. Their commitment went far beyond ties of family or group. In times like these when people affected by the disaster needed immediate assistance because of the magnitude of loss in terms of life and property, it was important that those providing relief should work together. Without this sense of a common mission, the victims would have suffered even more.

THE GOD WHO IS PRESENT IN HUMAN MISERY

The number of Sisters who were mobilized to help the victims of the tragedy witnessed to God's presence in the world of the poor and for me it was an occasion for thanking God for the Company. Our presence in two of the largest evacuation centers in Cagayan de Oro enabled us to collaborate with the departmental organization and to promote an ordered system of relief for poor people.

Each day the Vincentian Fathers and diocesan priests celebrated Mass in the evacuation camps or in the cathedral which was very close to where we were staying. This meant that we could be continually available for service from morning until late at night even though we were very tired. We celebrated Christmas and New Year in the evacuation centers with a simple but participative liturgy and a program organized by the evacuees themselves. These people were for us a real lesson in courage and faith. It was the first time that we had celebrated Christmas away from our local communities.

THE GOD WHO BRINGS US TOGETHER

On Christmas Day we gathered as a community for lunch to celebrate with our three sisters assigned to Cagayan de Oro and the two

Vincentian priests who were working with us. It was for us a time of consolation and support, something for us to share with the people in the different camps where, together with the people affected by the disaster, we prayed and renewed our act of consecration to God.

The prayers and financial support of the whole Company were a source of comfort and support for the victims of Sendong and for us it was an occasion to thank God for such great generosity.

CONCLUSION

When our temporary service came to an end we returned to our local communities, happy that we had been able to be a small light in the darkness and bring a ray of hope for the future which is in the hands of God.

Sr. Mary Ann L. GUEVARA, DC
Daughter of Charity

Vincent de Paul, Founder

Your Community and its eminently apostolic style were not spontaneous creations that may be studied and understood more deeply outside of context. Before being an institution, it was a stage in the spiritual journey of St. Vincent de Paul. So, for us to have a right understanding of the Company, we must start from the man and the history of your origins. This is what I propose to do in the first part of our study.

Your Community, perhaps more than the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission, seems to me like the echo and reflection of Vincent's personality. Yours is without doubt the foundation that reveals him the most, in his originality, his audacity, his balanced outlook and his efficiency.

To take even a quick look at Vincent de Paul is certainly the best way to prepare ourselves to understand in depth your Community, into which he put the best qualities of his personality.

Unfortunately, and I have often noticed this, we hardly know the man, Monsieur Vincent. During the time of our formation, we were too quickly made to discover his holiness and his virtues. We knew that he was mortified before discovering he was sensitive and how he showed this; we learned that he renounced his family attachments before asking ourselves if he loved his family and how he loved it... and so on. This method appears to me misleading and dangerous for the study of any person's sanctity. But it is particularly damaging for those who

are interested in Saint Vincent and his human personality which was so complex and had such great influence.

How can we focus on such complexity in a few short quarters of an hour? We will have to be content with a quick study of some points that I hope will provide a sufficiently instructive outline for you.

First of all, in what concerns the social and family origins of Vincent de Paul, factors that are always important for a man or woman, let us never forget that Vincent was a countryman, a Gascon and he was poor.

I. SOCIAL AND FAMILY ORIGINS OF SAINT VINCENT

HIS RUSTIC BACKGROUND

How many times did Vincent recall this aspect of his origins! Often we remember only the aspect of humility or humiliation of this because, as I said a moment ago, we are too eager to arrive at his holiness. But there is here an important psychological reality, and in the thirteen volumes of letters and conferences of Saint Vincent, we often find a countryman's mentality and reflections. We see this, for example, in what is wrongly called his slowness to act, or again in his attitude to money, to important people, or even in his way of speaking about Providence and about his foundations, as a peasant might speak of his fields and his harvests!

If I am emphasizing the rustic side of Vincent de Paul, it's because this profoundly marked the community. Your founder was someone with a country background, and he remained so until his death in 1660. As if by chance, the two major experiences of his life, Gannes and Châtillon, took place in a rural context. What is even more important for you, the first generations of Daughters of Charity, following Marguerite Naseau, were almost exclusively from a rural background.

We shouldn't be surprised then that in one of his most beautiful conferences, Saint Vincent proposed to you the spirit and virtues of good country girls as an ideal.

GASCON

Vincent de Paul, Founder

Vincent de Paul was also a Gascon and remained one throughout his life. He was conscious of it and was proud of it, knowing very well what it meant to be a Gascon. Here is proof among many others, gleaned from his correspondence. Writing to Firmin Get, superior at Marseilles, who in some business matter only told part of the truth, Vincent was astonished: “*Please allow me to ask you, Monsieur, your reason for having concealed from me what you told me in your last letter about having borrowed twelve hundred livres (books) from the Administrators of the hospital... I must confess, Monsieur, that this has surprised me more than anything that has happened to me for a long time. If you were a Gascon or a Norman, I would not find it strange. To think, however, that a straightforward man from Picardy, whom I consider one of the most sincere men in the Company, would have hidden that from me – how can I not be surprised at that...?*” (Coste V, 199-200). Obviously we should not conclude from these lines that Vincent habitually told only half truths. Yet, some twenty-five years in the southwest of France have allowed me to say that Gascons have their own particular way of understanding what is real and discerning what is essential from what is relative.

In Saint Vincent there are many nuances to be grasped, and even some apparent contradictions that could surprise non-Gascons. When he spoke, surely his tone and his mimicry often softened the rigor of what he said, or when he was explaining a point.

Sometimes, he also appeared amused by the story he was telling. One day he wrote to the Superior of Warsaw: “*Mademoiselle Le Gras brought to our parlor the little dog that is being sent to the Queen. He loves one of the Sisters of Charity so much that he will not so much as look at anyone else. As soon as she goes out the door, he does nothing but whine and cannot keep still.*” We marvel how he used every possible opportunity to learn from situations when he adds: “*This little creature has made me very much shamed, when I see his single-hearted affection for the Sister who feeds him but see myself so little attached to my Sovereign Benefactor and so little detached from all other things.*” (CCD V, 364)

At times this almost reaches the level of comedy, as when he explains to the Daughters of Charity that they shouldn't take every temptation

as a tragedy, and that they have to distinguish between temptation and temptation: “*Nevertheless, Sisters, sometimes there are passing temptations, as in the case of a good Capuchin I used to know. Once, while he was still a novice, he was attending Vespers. Since he had been a famous hunter, the pleasures of the chase came to his mind. All he did was think about horses, hounds, and birds; he was pursuing a hare. In a word, that's how he spent the time of Vespers. When he came to himself, he was really amazed. 'What's this?' he said. 'You want to be a Capuchin and here you are, returning from the chase. You're not fit to be a Capuchin; you should leave.' And off he went to find his Prior saying, 'Father, have them give me my clothes; I want to leave.' 'What's wrong, Brother?' said the Prior. 'O Father, I'm not fit to be a Capuchin; I just came back from Vespers; and all through the Office I never left the hunt.' 'What, Brother? You went hunting during Vespers? And were you in the choir?' 'Yes, Father, but all I could think about was the chase. That's why I beg you to have them give me my own clothes, for I'm not fit to be a Capuchin.' 'Well, tell me, Brother,' said the Prior, 'when you were hunting like that, when you were pursuing the hare, did you cry out, Oh! the greyhound! Oh! the greyhound!' 'Oh no! Father; I didn't say a word.' 'Well then, it's nothing, Brother. You'll make a fine Capuchin.' And so he remained in the Order, lived to a ripe old age, and attained great perfection.* (CCD XIIIb, 283-284)

One of Vincent's secretaries, and by chance he, too, was a Gascon, Brother Bertrand Ducournau, born in Amou (Landes), adds a significant note to the December 6th 1658, conference: Note: *In saying this, he made certain gestures with his hands, moving his head around and speaking in a certain contemptuous tone of voice, which conveyed even better what he was trying to express than what he was actually saying.* (CCD XII, 82)

In a spirit of generosity and out of concern for fidelity and order in the Communities, after Saint Vincent's death, people showed a tendency to interpret his thinking in a more rigid way and to make absolute what was for him just relative, to put the secondary and the essential on the same plane, and to take everything literally. Ah! If only Bertrand Ducournau could teach us to read Saint Vincent as we should! In our Vincentian study as in all Vincentian studies, it is good and important to recall that so attractive side of Vincent de Paul's personality ... He

was a Gascon.

POOR

Finally, Vincent was poor and came from a poor family. It is essential to remember this, and in order to understand it better, it would be interesting, for example, to compare Vincent de Paul's relationship with the poor and that of Louise de Marillac. Certainly the two relationships are animated by a marvelous charity, and we must add that in some situations, Louise seems to have seen more clearly than Vincent, nowhere more particularly than in the matter of your foundation.

Nonetheless, Vincent de Paul's relationship with poor people has the advantage of being spontaneous because he was of the same background as the poor. He has their mentality and their concerns; he shares their hierarchy of values and preoccupations. So it is not enough to say that you were founded for the poor; we must add that you were founded by someone who was poor. This is essential for a good understanding of your Community and its spirit. The first generations of Daughters of Charity were almost exclusively recruited from among the poor, and you know how your founder often reminded them of it.

What I am saying here is important. In our days, poverty in the Community has become an apostolic duty, a virtue, a vow.... We should remind ourselves that at the beginning it was a normal situation, a natural mentality, a regularly lived social experience, a series of spontaneous responses, a vision born of experience. For example, the first Daughters of Charity lived "*In rented rooms*"... they were dressed "*in the style of countrywomen.*" (CCD XIIIb, 125), not in order to better insert themselves in a milieu or a neighborhood, not even to be poor among the poor, but simply because they were, in fact, poor and they were servants: because having the mentality, reasoning and reactions of the poor, they naturally included themselves in the way poor people lived. And Vincent de Paul encouraged them in this. All this is so true that he hesitated before accepting women of higher social standing into the Community. There is, then, a sort of continuity, a sort of natural solidarity between the poor and the Community, at the level of social class.

The Community was therefore founded by a poor person and initially with poor women. These origins, this social context profoundly marked the structures and the spirit of the Community of the Daughters of Charity.

Rustic, Gascon, poor... so many aspects of the personality of Vincent de Paul that we must know in order to grasp the richness and the special features of your Community. It would be good to be able to study him in greater depth and so learn more about his character. I will only recall here two particular features: his sensitivity and what, for want of a better term, we could call his pragmatism, or his respect for an experience and an event.

HIS SENSITIVITY

I recall it here for two reasons. In the first place, because it is often an aspect of Saint Vincent's personality that is not well known, as we feel over and over again the need to underline his mastery of himself, his prudence, his mortification, his modesty, etc. Secondly, because this aspect of Saint Vincent's personality certainly had a great influence on the style of relationships that he wanted in his communities.

You know quite well that we do not have two hearts, one for sensitivity, affection, friendship and the other for supernatural charity...one for family and friends, and the other for the poor! We have only one heart, and if Vincent de Paul loved those who are poor with so much tenderness and passion, it's because he had a human heart capable of loving and being passionate.

Yes, Vincent de Paul was sensitive, very sensitive. He loved his parents and his family tenderly, so much so that a simple visit back home disturbed him for three months : "*... 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. I say this to my own shame, and I say it because perhaps God allowed that to make me understand better the importance of the Gospel counsel of*

Vincent de Paul, Founder

which we're speaking. 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." (CCD XII, 180)

This text is from May 2, 1659, (Vincent was 78 years old), and is often quoted for the advice that he gives in the passage that follows, about detachment from family. Before thinking about this, we should recognize, in the telling of this remembered experience, the extreme sensitivity that Vincent manifests, a sensitivity that is found throughout his correspondence and to the last hours of his life. Several texts will help us know this better.

Around 1627, when the Congregation of the Mission was just starting and Louise de Marillac was not yet definitively settled in her vocation, Vincent wrote her, "...*But let us go on to little brother Michel (the son of Louise de Marillac). That certainly concerns me, my dear daughter. I sympathize with his sufferings and those which you also have because of your love for him. Oh, well! Everything is for the best. What shall I tell you now about the one whom your heart loves so dearly in Our Lord? (N.B. this concerns Vincent himself) He is a little better, I think, but still suffering somewhat from his slight chills... Well now, I have said enough to my daughter. I must conclude by telling her that my heart will have a very fond remembrance of hers in that of Our Lord and solely for that of Our Lord... "* (CCD I, 54-56).

Around the same time Vincent wrote to Louise de Marillac: "*I am writing to you at about midnight and am a little tired. Forgive my heart if it is not a little more expansive...*" (CCD I, 28). And a little later: "... *I could not tell you how ardently my heart desires to see yours in order to know how this has come about in it, but I am quite willing to mortify myself for the love of God, in which love alone I desire yours to be immersed.*" (CCD I, 46)

It was no different with the Missioners. On March 22, 1652, after receiving a note from M. Lambert aux Couteaux, he wrote to him: "*I received your letter of February 19th I was a little disappointed when I opened it and saw only half a page of writing. However, the little there was did not fail to give me great consolation, since it informed*

me that you and your little community continue to enjoy good health." (CCD IV, 340). And to the same person he wrote on the following May 3: "*I received your letter of April first. If you are happy that our correspondence should continue on a weekly basis, I can assure you that I feel the same way. To give you two proofs of this, as Thursday draws near I begin to get a little impatient to receive your letters because they are usually delivered to me on that day, and I was very disappointed not to get any by the next to last regular mail."* (CCD IV, 370-371).

To his confrere of 25 years, M. Vincent wrote on May 10, 1647: "*No, I cannot stop writing to you, even though I have no new reason to do so. For now, I use that of recommending that you take care of your health and of M. Blatiron's."* (CCD III, 194).

A delicate and tender friendship for Louise de Marillac and likewise for Jeanne de Chantal, tenderness for his confreres and friends, here is Vincent de Paul as himself: a deeply sensitive person, capable of affection, tenderness and friendship. To discover him in this way opens new horizons; real horizons on his marvelous charity for the poor. This characteristic of the founder deeply marked his foundations. However, we have spoken much in our communities about modesty, prudence, propriety, particular friendships, detachment from family, etc... and it is quite true that Saint Vincent spoke of these. But we have not recalled often enough and still do not recall sufficiently what he said, for example, about cordiality.

"...*this joy you feel in your heart when you see someone you love and, in the second place, it shows in your expression; for, when a person has joy in her heart, she can't hide it; you see it clearly on her face. In the third place, we also express cordiality by friendly words... when a Sister approaches you, let your friendship for her be seen from your expression that you are pleased to see her. To act like that witnesses to the cordiality we have in our hearts by a certain joy we feel interiorly, which puts a kindly, gracious expression on our face while talking to our Sister or to other persons. That's called cordiality, and it's an effect of charity, you see; so that, if charity were an apple, cordiality would be its color. You sometimes see persons who have a rosy complexion that makes them beautiful and attractive. Now, if the apple were charity, its*

Vincent de Paul, Founder

color would be cordiality.” (CCD X, 390-391)

Yes, Vincent de Paul was highly sensitive and remained so until his death. It is evident that this contributed to creating the style of relating to people that is found in your Community. It is moreover symptomatic that when speaking of local communities, Vincent most often used the term “family”; when, for example, he wrote to superiors, he asked for news...of their “little family”!

HIS PRAGMATISM or rather HIS AVAILABILITY

At the beginning and foundation of your Community, we should not picture Vincent de Paul shut up in his room, seated at a desk, with on his right the latest documents from the Council of Trent and on his left the constitutions of existing women’s religious orders, composing the rules that he thought of presenting to Marguerite Naseau, Barbe Angiboust, Marie Joly or some other Sister. For Vincent, everything flowed from life, event or experience, according to a phrase that he used at the end of his letter of August 5, 1642, to Bernard Codoing, the superior in Rome: *“Such is my belief and such is my experience.”* (CCD II, 316).

This is certainly a key phrase, a principle that allows us to touch the deepest level of his personality and of his foundations. Vincent de Paul was not a man of theories. He belonged more to the Old Testament prophets who read events and found God and God’s action in history.

God speaks and manifests himself in events. God was made manifest in Gannes-Folleville, in Châtillon-les-Dombes, in Vincent’s encounter with Louise de Marillac and with Marguerite Naseau. Vincent looked at the event, reflected on it, analyzed it and responded to it.

All these make it very difficult to understand a Vincentian foundation, to enter, for example, into an understanding of your Community and its spirit by way of principles, rules and structures because this is not the route that your founder took. It would have been entirely contrary to his mindset, to his type of personality and his type of holiness. Formulations, structures, and rules were always less important than experience and life. Not that he didn’t attach any importance to them;

God knows how often he reminded us of the rule. But for him, life experience and events were first and always the priority. He wrote to Monsieur Portail on February 14, 1648: *“I have no doubt that the Administrators intend to have the upper hand in everything. When they speak to you again about the rules for the hospital, please tell them, as if it were coming from you, that a good maxim for those whom God uses to establish holy and new works is to defer as long as possible making the regulations. Experience teaches that what is feasible at the beginning is sometimes harmful as things go on, or subject to troublesome inconveniences and, on this account, some Communities, like the Carthusians, did not draw up their Constitutions until a hundred years had passed.”* (CCD III, 272).

We must listen to life, respect life, and interpret life. We will see in following the history of your origins how Saint Vincent followed this principle and how your Community and your style were dictated by events, especially by the cries of the poor. Constituted in this way by the rhythm of experience and by the very heart of events, your Community found itself quite naturally adapted to the needs of the poor and of the times.

This has been a quick exploration of the man, Vincent de Paul. Too quick, alas! Believe me when I say that I would like to speak longer to you about this. What do we know about Vincent? However, a deeper understanding of his personality and his path to sanctity would be useful, so that his sons and daughters might know themselves better, identifying themselves and situating themselves more precisely in the world and the Church of today. To study Saint Vincent not like a historian stuck in the past but like a son or daughter, who in order to identify him or herself, wants to sensibly reflect on their relationship with a father; a relationship that has nothing alienating in it but, on the contrary, reveals itself to be profoundly liberating.

II. BIRTH OF A COMMUNITY

This rapid study of Vincent de Paul’s personality has already opened to us several horizons with regard to your Community. The fact that he was a countryman, a Gascon, poor, highly sensitive, attentive to events... all these characteristics have colored your life. This is particularly

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true of the last named feature, as we will see in following the stages in your foundation. I am almost sure that after having travelled a little with Vincent de Paul from 1617 to 1633 you will come to the same conclusion as Vincent himself did: *“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) It was just as far from her mind. I can tell you in all truth... that it was God, and not I.”* (IX, 165)

However, we should not see in this sincere statement simply an example of humility! It’s awful, this tendency to moralize about everything. No, it is not humility, it is faith! It is the evidence of having encountered God in events. Which events? Here they are... you be the judge.

1. CHATILLON-LES-DOBES (August 20th 1617)

It is from here that your Community came into being, with its spirit, its originality, its action and even its structures. You will see how the event was first of all intensely experienced by Vincent de Paul. Before giving rise to the idea of your Community, Châtillon was a significant step in the personal journey of Vincent de Paul, a response and a light for his anguished soul.

Think back! From 1581 to 1595 Vincent lived with his family. In 1595 he began his studies, and he was oriented to the priesthood, which, at the time, was the only “career” available to the poor. Let those who doubt this reread the letter from Vincent to his mother from February 1610. His goal is clearly expressed there: *“... give me the means of an honorable retirement so that I may spend the rest of my days near you.”* (CCD I, 15). Vincent is just 29 years old! Almsgiver at the court of Queen Margot, he acquired an abbey that he thought would be profitable, and that’s where everything gets complicated, where all sorts of challenges come one after the other and pile up.

He first thinks of becoming an Oratorian; then he is the pastor of Clichy and finally finds himself tutor in the de Gondi family. He experiences terrible temptations against faith that plunge him into darkness. It is in these circumstances that on January 25, 1617, an event revealed God to

him: Gannes-Folleville. On a personal level he intervenes very little; it is Madame de Gondi who prods him to action! Then he gradually understands and decides to abandon the honorable retirement he had in mind. So in order to return to a rural parish, where he would have daily contact with poor country folk, he goes to Châtillon-les-Dombes.

He had been there three weeks when a second event happened, occasioned by a sick, isolated and abandoned family. This time Vincent reacted right away and on his own. Since January 25th and the Folleville sermon, he had reflected; now he is ready to read and interpret the event.

This took place on August 20, 1617. Three days later (who said Vincent was slow?) the first confraternity was founded to respond to the needs of those living in poverty. This confraternity exercises its charity in people’s homes, a revolutionary idea that would give birth to your Community. It was a confraternity of eight associates who gave themselves to God for the service of the poor, which is another element to which we will return. It is a confraternity that guarantees its services, corporally and spiritually, two adverbs that will be characteristics for you. Finally, it is a confraternity of people who recognize Jesus Christ himself in the person of the poor, in conformity with the Gospel affirmation of Matthew 25:31: “Whatever you do to one of the least of mine, you do to me.”

All these points are essential for you; they define you, and are found already in the two first rules of Châtillon, that of August 23, 1617 (CCD, XIIIb, 3-5), and that of November 1617 (CCD, XIIIb, 8-22).

On August 20, 1617, he had not thought in any way about Daughters of Charity, and yet all the essentials are already in place. Your foundation was not a preconceived idea, not part of a master plan, but simply an event read and interpreted, a response to a question presented by a situation of poverty, a response to a call from God.

2. ENCOUNTER WITH LOUISE DE MARILLAC

At the end of the year 1617, giving in to the insistent pleading of Madame de Gondi, Vincent returned to the de Gondi household. He returned not

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as a tutor but as a missionary. He set himself to going from village to village, preaching missions and establishing Confraternities of Charity. Around 1624 a woman asked him to be her spiritual director. She is an anguished, rather complicated person and entirely centered on personal and family problems. She, too, is far from thinking about Daughters of Charity.

It is interesting to read the wonderful correspondence, exchanged at the time, between Louise de Marillac, lost in her problems, and her dynamic director.

In his replies to her letters, Vincent certainly begins by speaking to her about the problems that she confronts. Then little by little, he speaks of the missions that he is undertaking and his encounters with persons living in poverty. From 1627 on, he begins to ask little favors of her: four shirts (CCD I, 29), two poor girls (CCD I, 35), twelve shirts (CCD I, 37). Gradually, Louise de Marillac comes out of herself and becomes interested in the poor.

In May 1629, without Vincent de Paul or Louise de Marillac suspecting it, a decisive change is made: Vincent asks his directee to make the visitation of the Confraternities of Charity spread out through the de Gondi territory. It's the famous first blue seal letter, or sending on mission: *"Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works."* (CCD I, 64, 65).

Although he only half expresses this, in Vincent's mind, Louise de Marillac has truly become the person in charge, the visitatrix of the confraternities: an important step toward the foundation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

3. THE CONFRATERNITY OF SAINT SAUVEUR (1629)

In the provinces the Confraternities multiplied very quickly and functioned well (cf. CCD XIIIb, 1-103). Then came a new and

interesting step toward the foundation of the Company: Paris wanted them! An initial confraternity was established in the parish of Saint-Sauveur, a second in Saint Nicolas de Chardonnet, the parish of Louise de Marillac, who is herself elected leader of the confraternity. It is at this time that events unfold quickly. Let's listen to Vincent recount this Parisian step.

"The Ladies at Saint-Sauveur had a Confraternity of Charity in their parish; they were serving the sick themselves, carrying the soup pots, medicine, and everything else. Since most of them were of the upper class, were married, and had families, they were often inconvenienced by carrying this soup pot, became disheartened, and talked of finding some servants who would do it for them." (CCD IX, 358). This is the first allusion to future Daughters of Charity: "some servants who would do it for them". It did not come from Vincent nor Louise de Marillac BUT from the ladies of Saint-Sauveur... "inconvenienced" by carrying this soup pot!

After Châtillon-les-Dombes, events came together providentially: the first Confraternity, the encounter with Louise de Marillac, the multiplication of the Confraternities, the sending of Louise to visit them, and finally, a reaction of discouragement on the part of the ladies of Saint-Sauveur, bring us to 1630.

4. THE INITIATIVE OF MARGUERITE NASEAU

Vincent said this about Marguerite Naseau: *"When this good young woman heard of the project, she wanted to be part of it and was accepted by the Ladies."* (Coste IX, 358). The situation was clear: *"the ladies...talked of finding some servants who would do it for them;"* this was the first time. The second time: *"and this good young woman wanted to be part of it."*

Vincent's testimony shows that it was Marguerite Naseau who took the initiative. She heard about the ladies' project, and she expressed the desire to respond to it.

This first step is the keystone of the foundation, the major event. It is not surprising that Vincent considered Marguerite Naseau *"the*

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first Daughter of Charity” (CCD IX, 66), even if she died before the foundation of the Company.

The ladies did nothing more than request the aid of some servants who would undoubtedly be remunerated for carrying out their job, and here it is that a selfless vocation comes to light because in what had only been thought of as exercising a profession, Marguerite Naseau imposed the mystic reality of a VOCATION. Thanks to her, what could have been a fading out of the confraternities became considerable progress for them. Marguerite, in short, was not only a servant, but she presented herself as voluntary servant who gave herself to God for the service of the poor. She incarnates the providential prototype of the Daughter of Charity who would gradually bring Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac to the idea of founding a specific community.

5. THE INTUITION OF MADEMOISELLE LE GRAS

To understand the events that followed, it suffices to bring together three texts that complement and shed light on each other:

- CCD IX, 473: “We were so impressed with that poor young woman that we accepted others who presented themselves, and they did what she had done.”
- CCD IX, 358: “The Ladies in other parishes wanted to do the same and asked me if there was any way...”
- CCD IX, 66: “She attracted to this, other girls whom she had helped to detach themselves from all superficial things and to embrace a devout life.”

These three testimonies underline Marguerite Naseau’s decisive role. The women asked for other servants, Marguerite attracted them, and they came forward, were accepted and placed in different parishes of Paris.

During this time Louise de Marillac was carrying out her visitations, and very quickly and this is not sufficiently well known, she decided to take Marguerite Naseau with her to the Confraternity of Saint Nicolas. (CCD IX, 194). The time they spent together in the same parish was, without doubt, essential for the events that followed. Living with Marguerite Naseau and seeing her serve those who were poor must

have helped Louise de Marillac to reflect, to look ahead, to imagine and perhaps, already, to desire.

Visiting the confraternities, she found here and there some village girls dispersed in the parishes of Paris. Who was the first, Louise or Marguerite, to say: why not come together from time to time? It probably was from a suggestion put forward one day that the Company of the Daughters of Charity was born.

Vincent recounted it himself: “A Charity was next set up in Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, then at Saint-Benoît, where there were some good country women. God blessed them so much that, from that time on, they began to meet and come together almost imperceptibly.”

Note these expressions:

- “from this time on”; that is to say from 1630...
- “they began to come together and to assemble”: this suggests spontaneous movement, corresponding to a very natural desire...
- “almost imperceptibly”; it seems that Vincent had not noticed it, at least at the beginning (CCD IX, 166)

However this may be, it is the very first indication of Community reported in your history: “They began to come together...” From an idea thrown out, by whom?, the village girls employed in the Parisian Confraternities came together from time to time. Where, then? In the home of Mademoiselle le Gras, it would seem.

Your Community, therefore, is not the result of a project. It sprang spontaneously from lived experience because it was just a few girls engaged in doing the same thing and who felt the need to come together and talk about it.

The group came together around an animator. Louise de Marillac appears, in effect, as the necessary leader of this type of spontaneous communal experience. It is so true that in 1631, after several reunions of this informal type, Vincent wrote to Louise de Marillac: “As for the rest, I beg you, once and for all, not to give it a thought until Our Lord makes it evident that He wishes it... You are trying to become the servant of those poor young women, and God wants you to be His

own.”(CCD I, 111).

A significant text! The visitatrix of the confraternities feels more and more attracted to this group of girls who retain the spirit of Châtillon, and Vincent seems to take to the idea. He is first and foremost preoccupied with the general direction of the confraternities that are multiplying everywhere, and he counts on Louise de Marillac for this. She, more intuitive, sees how Marguerite Naseau is living; she has shared several times with the girls and remains persuaded that the future of the poor rests on them. However, she continues to carry out her role as visitatrix of the confraternities and carries out her visitations for two years while maintaining these meetings with the young women... imperceptibly!

In May 1633 Vincent wrote to Louise de Marillac: “*With regard to your employment, my mind is not yet enlightened enough before God concerning a difficulty which prevents me from seeing whether it is the Will of His Divine Majesty.*” (CCD I, 200). A solution is coming closer, but there is still an obstacle.

Three months later, another letter: “*I think your good angel did what you told me in the letter you wrote me. Four or five days ago, he communicated with mine concerning the Charity of your young women. It is true; he prompted me to recall it often and I gave that good work serious thought. We shall talk about it, God willing, on Friday or Saturday...*” (Coste I, 216).

By November 29th 1633, Vincent believes that the moment has arrived: Louise de Marillac becomes finally “the servant of these poor girls”.

This is the magnificent history of your origins that were completely spontaneous. Don't think that after November 29th 1633, the rhythm is going to change and that it will just be a religious institution where all will be fixed, measured out, calculated. This was not Vincent's way of working, nor that of your community. To realize this it is enough for you to reread the precious conference of July 31, 1634 (CCD IX, 1-13) or the Rule of 1645 (CCD XIIIb, 123-127). Vincent remains true to your origins: the Daughters of Charity are servants and above all servants of the poor. So it is the poor who will be the ones who command, and the institution will remain always at their service, adapting itself to their

calls and their needs. From them comes the community's lifestyle, housing, manner of dress, which as Vincent says himself, were unheard of and inconceivable in the Church.

It is time to conclude. I should speak to you about community for the Daughters of Charity, of an institution as such. Yet up to now, I've only spoken of a man and history. Am I straying from my subject? I do not think so. Starting off as we did, from Vincent de Paul himself and from events, has allowed you, I think, to study the matter in the way that Vincent himself did.

Before leading to the foundation of your community, Châtillon was a decisive step in someone's life, their coming out of self-absorption and finding an equilibrium that built itself in a total gift to those who are poor. So we have to see a man, his discovery and his conversion. After this there was just a marvelous unfolding of events: the Confraternity of Châtillon, the Confraternities of the de Gondi lands, the progressive entrance into the scene of Louise de Marillac, the two years of informal reunions that passed almost unperceived, and finally November 29, 1633.

This is how you were born; your Community came into being, not from well drawn up or preconceived plans, but first of all from the life, personality and spiritual journey of Vincent (Châtillon and the confraternities), from the initiative of Marguerite Naseau, and from the intuition of Louise de Marillac: which gives you three founders, without our being able to say which one played the most determining role. You were born from these informal and spontaneous meetings, you were born of the sharing and exchanges among Marguerite, Barbe and Marie Joly, independently of all structures and directives.

What is certain and illuminating for understanding your Community, is that your three founders encountered each other because of and around a common point: the service of Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. This was the MOTIVE for the foundation of the confraternities after Châtillon; this was the MOTIVE for Louise de Marillac's commitment to the confraternities; this was the MOTIVE for the initiative of Marguerite Naseau in the parish of Saint-Sauveur.

It is this common link that we are going to develop, because this is what gives your Community its character of being an APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY.

III . AN APOSTOLIC GROUP

In studying the **apostolic** nature of a group or judging its apostolic value, we usually begin today by considering its insertion and questioning the **in** and the **with**. How does this group situate itself and to what point does it insert itself in the Church, in the specific pastoral work of the Church or the area, etc.? This is the first question and the first test.

Then comes the second question and test. How, and to what point, does this group work and live with others in the pastoral project? Often we stop at this, and we think or declare that such and such a community is apostolic because it has its place in the pastoral work of the whole area and because it works and lives authentically with other active members of a local area, for example. So today we have no problem in seeing a community as apostolic simply because it lives in low-income housing projects, takes part in neighborhood meetings, and is more or less closely united with others; while one might question the apostolic character of a community that lives in a hospital or a school.

There is a lot of truth in this but also some wrong judgment or illusion, and today it takes a certain courage to say it or remind others about it

Certainly it is not possible to be apostolic without being IN, in the Church. Only the Church is apostolic, only she received the mission to announce Jesus Christ, and it is only in the measure that one is in the Church that one participates in her apostolic character.

Neither is it possible to be apostolic without being WITH, with the bishop and all those engaged in the local Church or in an area. All this is clear, irrefutable, and anyone who doubts this should go back to the documents of Vatican II.

But what is often overlooked is that to be authentically IN and WITH, it is important for the Daughters of Charity to first of all be themselves, to be themselves together, in order to constitute a Community/

Communion, without forgetting, of course, to be at the same time a Community/For. It's only in this way that they really deserve to be called an "apostolic group".

A. A COMMUNITY "COMMUNION"

The historical review of your origins showed us Vincent de Paul moving from the idea of a community among us, to a community for, thereby shifting the center of the community reality from the interior to the exterior. To paraphrase an expression that has become famous, we might say that for Vincent de Paul, the community is not men or women who look at themselves, but men or women who together, look in the same direction, towards those who are poor: "*It is for this*, affirms Saint Vincent, *that God called you together, it is for this that God created your Company.*" (CCD IX, p. 97) What is essential is expressed in CCD IX, p. 432: "*If he asks you who you are and whether you are nuns...tell him that you are not...say that you are poor Daughters of Charity who have given yourselves to God for the service of the poor.*" We will try to deepen our awareness of this essential characteristic of community for the Daughters of Charity, but first of all we recognise that misunderstandings and tensions could come from divergences on this level, differences that are all the more serious given that it is perhaps here that we find the essential.

In order to understand and live in your community you must, like your Founder, move on from the idea of 'among us' to the concept 'for others'. We must move away from a dichotomy (community on the one hand...activity on the other) to unity, that is to say, a community for service in which everything is conceived with that in mind This is the important basis of the apostolic nature of a community of Daughters of Charity.

There is much talk today of a crisis of identity, and it is too often imagined that to be authentically **with**, you must become or be **like**. For a priest, for example, to be with people at a deep level, he would have to become like them (work, dress, household, etc.). I know that motivations are complex and nuanced, and I only evoke here a rather widespread tendency in order to state our problem. In the same way, for a Daughter of Charity to authentically be with the active members

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of a sector or with the personnel of a hospital, would require that she become more and more like them.

After a long period when the different states of life, the hierarchical levels, the institute and functions, took pleasure in emphasising what differentiates and distinguishes them, we are in another, or a completely contrary situation, where there is a tendency to play down and relativize differences for the good of common action. In the name of the same pastoral goal and in one or the same struggle for others, it is easy enough to confuse, as in the good old days we confused unity and uniformity.

Uniformity, at least when it is not well understood, and that was often the case, means to be LIKE: with as little difference as possible, to resemble each other as much as possible in life style, dress, eating, praying, etc.

Unity, on the other hand, is BEING YOURSELF and BEING WITH. It is clearly more difficult, but so much more worthwhile.

It is as Daughters of Charity that you must enter the pastoral work of the Church; with priests, lay people, organisers, religious and all who commit themselves to working for the salvation of the world and the liberation of people. Collaboration means putting your whole self at the service of others, at the service of those who are poor. Yes, I said: all your being, your personality, your vocation, your charism...

What I have just said about individuals applies also to communities. In order to be apostolic, a community of the Daughters of Charity must be with everyone and especially with those who work for the poor. It should be in the Church and in its pastoral mission. But... to be authentically **with** and **in**, it must BE ITSELF and BE ITSELF TOGETHER.

This means that your Community is first of all constituted by the conscious awareness and communication of what is essential to your vocation as Daughters of Charity. We will consider from a communal angle what we just mentioned about the individual. The Community is a communion in the same consecration, the same relationship with

those who are poor, the same mystique of service.

1. UNION IN THE SAME CONSECRATION

Yes, I did say: in the same consecration. It could be that among the Daughters of Charity there may be two ways of perceiving and living consecration. This fundamental divergence could have serious repercussions, not only on the level of sisterly relationships, but also on the image that the Community projects of itself and the way it sees itself in the world.

Consecration or service? This is often the way the problem is approached. To say, for example, that priority should be given to service is sometimes perceived as a rejection, or at least a diminution or questioning of consecration, vows and the spiritual life, prayer... It is said, with some exaggeration, that it is putting activism before prayer, man before God.

What do we find in the writings and the conduct of Saint Vincent? First of all, nobody can deny that from the time of Marguerite Naseau, the Daughters of Charity were always totally given to God. Let us understand what this means: I did not say that the Daughters of Charity always pronounced vows. That is what religious do, and not what Daughters of Charity do.

Unfortunately we do not have time to dwell on this point. But what cannot be ignored is that from the earliest days of the Company, in order to be a Daughter of Charity, a woman had to give herself totally to God: *“To be a Daughter of Charity is to love our Lord tenderly and steadfastly...”* (CCD IX, 466). Your identity is inscribed above all in this relationship with Jesus Christ; your Community is above all a shared faith and a total gift lived together. For those around you this should be a witness to and proclamation of Jesus Christ. We will say in a moment that in line with your consecration and your vocation, local communities should in no way resemble convents. On the contrary, they should appear as groups of believers, cells of faith in Jesus Christ. Those who live among you must see and know that you are Daughters of Charity by your love of God: *“Daughters of Charity, that is, daughters of God.”* (CCC IX, p. 50)

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You see, then, that your relationship with God and total gift to Jesus Christ are essential to your vocation as foundations of your Community, and it is evident that this relationship must be deepened and expressed in prayer. But according to Saint Vincent, consecration for the Daughter of Charity to God, has this particular character; it is for the service of those who are poor. And this FOR changes everything, it orients and unifies everything. It is the unifying element between consecration and service. Remember your identity card: “poor girls totally given to God for the service of the poor”.

Saint Vincent did not say: girls who give themselves to God and serve the poor, as if he made a distinction between consecration and service. He combines the two because his thinking and his wishes come from the same impulse and movement. It is certainly to God that a sister gives herself, but she gives herself to God in order to serve those who are poor. It is a consecration with a specific orientation, end, and apostolate. Note that you live all this without putting it into words. It is enough to ask a Daughter of Charity if she entered the Community for God or for the poor, she will be confused, which for me is the sign that you are still faithful to your identity card.

However, a temptation has threatened and still threatens your Community, that of unconsciously replacing **for** by **and**. **For** deliberately puts the focus of your Community outside of itself, in the poor, while **and** makes the Community a reality in itself, an absolute, an “among ourselves” that is alien to apostolic life.

Believe me, I am not making a play on words. These are two totally different perspectives, one of which, that of the **and**, would not be long in threatening the unity of the Daughters of Charity if it prevailed. It would tend to make the Community a place of turning inward, something jealously preserved, another world that is quite distinct and separate from that of service, separated sometimes to such a degree that moving the priority from service to the community, one would experience a sort of split personality that would give the impression that you had become religious.

However, the community cannot be regarded as the place of consecration when service is not part of it. For you the community

is the place of consecration **for** service. The service of those who are poor must remain at the center of the community; they are the reason for the existence of your community: “*This is why God has brought you together and why he formed your Company*” (CCD IX, 97).

You are together, you are a community for the service of the poor. Given totally to God and consecrated, certainly, but “**for**”! Here is the fundamental basis of any community of Daughters of Charity. And when I say: communion to the same consecration, this means communion to being FOR, that there is unanimity on this characteristically Vincentian way of seeing yourselves. This unanimity should obviously be reflected in the particular style of your communities, it should be visible to all, and especially to those who are poor. They should understand that the community is not a citadel, a secret and inaccessible world, but the place of meeting their servants. I cannot enter here into detail, but you know very well that the FOR that characterizes you should be manifested and expressed in a thousand ways: in your attitudes, your reflexes, your mentalities, and even in more material ways, in the layout and arrangement of your places of residence. We would do well to reflect on an event that, to all appearances, is quite trivial. It was discussed during the first Council meeting of the Company on June 28th 1646. It concerned the arrangement of a parlor in the Mother House! (CCD XIII b p. 249).

2. UNITY IN THE SAME RELATIONSHIP WITH THE POOR

Every community of the Daughters of Charity should also be characterized by a common relationship with those who are poor. When Vincent speaks to Daughters of Charity about the poor, three words come up time and again in his discourse, one adjective and two adverbs: **all**, **everywhere** and **truly**. He means to talk about all those who are poor, everywhere they are to be found, but only the truly poor. We will take each of these words and emphasize the repercussions that they should have on the service given by your communities and even on your lifestyle.

A unity of relationship with ALL who are poor.

You are very familiar with the foundational text found in CCD X, 92:

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... the Sisters at the Hôtel-Dieu have as their aim to work first of all at their own perfection, and after that to care for the patients; this, in a certain sense, is doing the same as you do; however, they have no Rule obliging them to assist everyone without distinction, that is, all persons who are poor, and you're bound to be always ready to practice charity, without exception of persons or places. God chose you for that... ”

The text is clear, and Saint Vincent frequently recalls this fundamental characteristic of your relationship with those who are poor. A community of Daughters of Charity is a community for all the poor, without exception. This universalism of perspective, preoccupation, action and welcome is essential for every community of Daughters of Charity. It is true that from the time of Vincent de Paul, each local community has had its own identity, its professional or pastoral specialization, hospitals, schools, dispensaries, etc. Furthermore, communities are often marked by the milieu in which they are inserted: a working-class, rural, or neighborhood setting. We have also seen how the first Daughters of Charity were inserted in Saint-Sauveur or Saint-Benoit parish 29 days out of 30! However, specialization should never be contrary to the universalism of perspective and welcome for all those who are poor, whether these be peasants, workers, marginalized people, handicapped, elderly, prisoners or children. Every poor person should feel welcomed by a community of Daughters of Charity, whatever its specialization.

The society in which we live is often compartmentalized, harsh and intolerant. Without being neutral and uncommitted, a community of Daughters of Charity should jealously safeguard its universal availability for all those who are poor: “you should, without exceptions either of persons or places, always be ready to exercise charity. God chose you for this.” It is at the level of this universality that “Communities/sisters” should be found, one that is very engaged in the world of the worker **and** a hospital or school community, for example. It doesn't matter what service is offered **provided** it is for the poor and the truly poor.

A community in relationship with the poor EVERYWHERE:

“The nuns of the Place Royale have as their principal aim the assistance

of the poor sick women whom they admit into their hospital (they don't take men) and, because those are their Rules, they believe they're working out their salvation by observing them. “But you, dear Sisters, 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, not in one house only, like those in the Hôtel-Dieu, but everywhere, as Our Lord used to do, for He made no exceptions; He assisted everyone who came to Him for help...” (CCD X, 102)

Everywhere! In this adverb, so frequently used by Vincent, there is the idea of movement, an echo of the experience at Châtillon and a charity that goes out into the home... You were born from that charity in motion, which does not wait for the poor to come to it, but which goes out to them: these are servants who must be mobile.

It would be interesting to make a study in the writings of Saint Vincent on the Daughters of Charity on a theme like this: The Daughter of Charity and the verbs TO GO and TO COME! It is interesting to notice that when Vincent imagines or describes a Daughter of Charity, how often she is in the street, carrying something on her back or in her arms: “... a Daughter of Charity is always mixing with people... out of the house and among the people most of the time...” (CCD X, p. 363). “There is no one who goes among the people like the Daughters of Charity...women who go and come...” (CCD X, p. 527)

You know very well the thinking behind your way of life; this ought to influence your communities: communities invented for movement, for disruption, for unpredictable situations and emergencies. Not a community where you settle down, but a community from which you go out towards those who are poor: a base for departure, a springboard, a beehive, the runway of service. It is not a train station either, of course! Because more than other people, the Daughter of Charity needs a place where she can regain her physical, moral and spiritual strength. You understand that it has a specific mentality, perspective, and let us say a spirituality; but a spirituality that should translate into a lifestyle, into the hierarchy of your values, and even into the way you organize things on a material level. A community designed for movement...

A community in relationship with those who are TRULY poor.

You remember the response made by Sister Marguerite Moreau to the Queen of Poland who wanted her for her service: *“Ah, Madame, what are you saying? There are only three of us to serve the poor, and in your kingdom you have plenty of other people more capable than we are to serve Your Majesty. Allow us, Madame, to do here what God is asking of us, as we do elsewhere.”* (CCD IX, 463) This reply won the admiration of M. Vincent and communities of Daughters of Charity must repeat it more and more in our own times, and say to the local bishop, the vicar general or the area administrators, “Please allow us to do here what God asks of us, “to serve the poor.” As I said just now, your service must have a universal aspect to it but at the same time it must be exclusive, serving only the poor. And M. Vincent added, “those who are truly poor.” According to this criterion, an authentic community of Daughters of Charity has to show union and unanimity. Whether this community is dealing with working people and another one is serving country folk, another one working in a hospital or a school, this should not be detrimental to unity. From the time of St Vincent and the earliest days of the Company, there has always been pluralism and an ever increasing number of options. On the other hand, any tensions or lack of balance will endanger unity since this will distance you from those who are genuinely poor. This preference for the poor and your working only for the poor, will be for you an identifying sign and it is in this that the Daughters of Charity will recognize one another. It is also the way in which the world will recognize you.

There will, of course, be demands made by working with others in the apostolate, the urgent needs of the locality, priorities, and filling in for other people.. But you cannot, even on a temporary basis, be untrue to what you are, or compromise what is essential to your vocation.

The great danger in working in the apostolate is that of standardization. This means that in a given area, each person can be called on indiscriminately to take on a particular responsibility or commitment, no matter what their charism may be, simply to meet the urgent needs and priorities of the area or diocese. In such cases communities must show the same courage as Marguerite Naseau or Barbe Angiboust,

“Please allow us to do here what God is asking of us.” (CCD IX, p. 463)

This courage must be evident, too, in every local community which makes a continual review of the commitments and activities of each of its members. This takes place in an atmosphere of transparency and sincerity which will remove any temptation to too easily justify the status quo! The community must be obsessed with concern for the poor and this concern has to be shared by all and be ongoing; this will soon be seen as a grace of conversion.

We have just analyzed the specific, identifying and unifying relationship that the Daughters of Charity have with the poor; a relationship that is for **all the poor, wherever they are to be found, and that these people be genuinely poor.** More than customs and structures, it is in a common fidelity to these basic convictions that a community of Daughters of Charity is built and flourishes “according to the mind of Saint Vincent.”

3. COMMUNION IN THE SAME MYSTIQUE OF SERVICE

This is the third level of communion: the same mystique of service. We don’t need to emphasize Vincent’s insistence on this point. For him the word “servant” was the most accurate and complete synonym for Daughter of Charity. Marguerite Naseau committed herself to working in the Confraternity of Saint-Sauveur as a servant, sharing the living conditions and duties of all servants at that time.

It was the same for all who followed Marguerite Naseau. The first Daughters of Charity were no more than servants, and this situation put them naturally among the poor. They didn’t have to deal with the problem of social insertion or find a way of being present among the poor: they were there already.

This being said, Vincent gave the Daughters of Charity a mystique of service, which should create deep unity in your communities. If we continue in the way that we studied your particular relationship with the poor, we could similarly deepen our understanding of this mystique of service by referring to three typical expressions from

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the lips of Vincent de Paul: “In the person of...” “nevertheless...” “corporally and spiritually”. Each of these terms allows us to enter into the very heart of your vocation.

“**In the person of...**” “*You serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor.*” Since Châtillon this has been the basis of Vincent’s action. It is the conviction that animates Marguerite Naseau, and it is around this conviction that the first community of Daughters of Charity was built.

What happened at Châtillon was experienced and interpreted in the light of Matthew 25:31. This Gospel text is the basis of Community and characterizes its spirit and its spirituality. “You will go ten times a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day you will meet God.” (CCD IX, 199) Vincent de Paul is so convinced of this that he dared to say that in leaving prayer or Mass to go and serve the poor, you lose nothing...so much does he appreciate the reality and truth of Jesus Christ’s presence in the poor.

Review of life has almost become the key element of community sharing. It would be interesting to show how today it matches what Saint Vincent wanted and what the first communities of Daughters of Charity lived. Unfortunately, too often our sharing remains superficial. We have indeed learned to look at reality, and this was not a luxury: What poor people have I encountered? What is their family, professional and social situation? What values do they live by? What is their struggle? In this way we have learned to look and learn. But for Daughters of Charity, a review of life should go further in order to attain the Vincentian mystique that should animate the community. Was I able to recognize Jesus Christ in them, and how? It is at this level of questioning and searching that all the members of a community should come together. The commitment may be different for a social worker, a nurse, a teacher, an older sister working in the kitchen or at reception, but the searching for and meeting of Jesus Christ in the poor are common to all. It is only at this level that communion will be possible and effective among you.

In the expression “in the person of” the personal dimension of the poor person is also highlighted. We do not have time to develop this aspect. However I must say that in our world that is more and more socialized,

where justice and charity take on an increasingly administrative aspect, every community of Daughters of Charity, whatever its service, should remember its origins. It is because, in Saint-Sauveur and the Parisian Confraternities of Charity, the charity of Jesus Christ had lost contact with the person of the poor, that Marguerite Naseau and her companions intervened, and your Company was born. Obviously there is no question of returning to the pastoral and social methods of the 17th century, nor even those of 15 or 20 years ago. But is not the greatest demand of the poor today, of marginalized people, for example, to be recognized as human beings? Do not forget that you should be among those most attentive to the cry of those who are poor today.

“Nevertheless...”

“*The service of the poor must be preferred to everything else.*” (CCD IX, 171). This is a typically Vincentian declaration about service. This principle should also have profound repercussions on your communities and life style.

First of all everyone in the community has to agree on this priority and have the same hierarchy of values, otherwise there is a risk of endemic tensions and frequent conflicts. We go back again to what I said to you before about your consecration. If in a community there are Daughters of Charity who are consecrated to God **and** serve the poor and others who are consecrated to God but **for** the service of those who are poor, they will never arrive at unanimity about a hierarchy of values. Some will place service before all else while others will prioritize regularity or practices. Some will wish for a way of life designed in function of the poor and service while other will want a more religious or convent-like style.

It is true that Saint Vincent never missed an opportunity to recall the observance of the rule, and he often denounced capriciousness, egoism and independence. Yet it is no less certain that he placed the service of the poor, around which he conceived and organized your communities, at the head of your hierarchy of values.

“Corporally and spiritually”

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These two adverbs designate a final level of communion and unanimity for Daughters of Charity as well as the final essential aspect of your mystique of service. Here again we find an echo of Châtillon! These two adverbs can already be found in the introduction to the rule of the confraternity in November 1617 (CCD XIIIb, 8).

Today many questions arise about service and especially corporal service. Obviously many things have evolved since Saint Vincent, and it is certainly true that centuries of good work that was somewhat paternalistic have given the terms “service, corporal service” a pejorative and anachronistic connotation. What was important for Vincent de Paul, and remains today a duty for each community of Daughters of Charity, is the combination of two concerns: corporal and spiritual service, or to use the language of your constitutions, human and Christian promotion of those who are poor, of all those who are poor and of all aspects of the poor person.

A Daughter of Charity, whatever her role, her profession and social or professional appointment, remains a worker for the Gospel, a Daughter of the Church. Each community of the Daughters of Charity should be a cell of evangelization, the place where you take up the promotion of the poor person in his or her totality, as a human person, a child of God, and one of Jesus Christ’s special ones. In the community, there will undoubtedly be those, who by reason of their role and perspective, will be more attentive to human promotion and fighting for their rights; others, because of their formation and their convictions, will be more concerned with salvation and evangelization. However, the implantation in general should be the place where, thanks to sharing and apostolic reflection, each day the synthesis of two forms of service at Châtillon is born anew: a synthesis that is especially needed in the Church of today.

It is time to finish. When speaking about the local community of the Daughters of Charity, we did not start from structures or principles but from a man: Vincent de Paul, his personality, his path to God and your origins. We have seen a community imperceptibly arise from the life and service of those who are poor and constitute itself in the life and service of the poor. It is not surprising that your group is so oriented outward and also centered on those who are poor. For you, community

is not first of all a question of “among-us” but “together FOR”. In order to understand a little better this particular type of community, we referred to the identity card that Saint Vincent gave you: “*If you are asked who you are, say that you are poor girls given to God for the service of the poor.*” (CCD IX, p. 432) Of course, with regard to your community, we have not only the poor to consider. We will now study the aspect of “among-us,” that is to say the relationships, the exchanges, and sharing inside your communities as Saint Vincent saw them; we will discover some very interesting and sometimes astonishing things.

I do not, however, regret having put the emphasis so much on thinking about your communities in relation to the service of the poor and for the poor. After all, it is always right to begin from the center, and for you the center is in the person of the poor, that is to say in Jesus-Christ in the person of the poor because “*that is why God has brought you together...*” (CCD IX, 97).

B. A COMMUNITY “FOR”

When we speak about community, we think spontaneously of an internal reality, so internal that it holds a mystery... It’s all that happens behind the “community” door which of course remains closed!

There are times of working with others... of “among-us” life... There are reserved places... more or less accessible to the “goyim” (Jewish word for Gentiles)... There are procedures, responsibilities, initiatives, relationships and reactions that a Daughter of Charity has for people outside... AND, those she has for the sisters in the house!

When people approach a community they often have the impression of entering another world, another life, one that is rather removed from life because the community is a world made up only of Daughters of Charity. Community: is “among us”!

Certainly, the “among-us” aspect exists and should exist. It is the same in a family, in the home of a worker. We will talk about this later.

However, for Vincent, this was not “top priority”. What’s more, to approach community from this angle is inevitably to misconstrue and

misunderstand it.

For Saint Vincent, community is never an absolute: it is a privileged and necessary means to achieve a better service of those who are poor. The only reason there is this “among us” is because of those who are poor and their service: *“You must also remember that your principal concern, which God asks especially of you, is to be very attentive in serving the poor, who are our lords. Oh yes, Sisters! They are our masters. That’s why you must treat them gently and kindly, reflecting that this is why God has brought you together; and why He formed your Company.”* (CCD IX, 97).

It could not be clearer: you are brought together **for** the service of those who are poor. This is the Vincentian basis of your type of community, which should be found in your spirit, your reflexes, your mentality, your behavior in the local community and even in the material layout of your establishments.

We are going to try to quickly see the demands and the style of such a community as well as the way in which you should be seen and perceived from the outside, taking into account this **“for”**.

Of course, this is not to transform your homes into refuges for the poor, into welcome centers or some sort of residence for the people. We rarely find this type of situation in the life of Vincent de Paul except at moments of great national crises. Let us add that this occurred especially with the priests, and for a reason: the Daughters of Charity were living in rented rooms and a single house! Furthermore, note that in today’s social context, such initiatives would be misconstrued.

1. Your communities are places where women given to God for the service of those who are poor, are gathered.

According to Vincent, a Daughter of Charity who hasn’t given herself completely to God could not be there. This has been a constant since the time of Marguerite Naseau.

2. Your community is a faith reality, something that is visible because lived, and yet your local community is not a convent.

Not that you should have anything against convents: they are very useful, but they are not for you. Consecration? Yes. Consecration to God? Obviously. But consecration **for**. And if this consecration should be lived and visible, the **“for”** also should be lived and visible.

However, a sort of dichotomy has always tended to operate. The **“for”** would only be for the hours and places of service; it would be outside of the community, the latter becoming the place of and time for consecration, the “convent” designed for the religious perfection of its members.

From this point of view, you were born out of a sort of reaction to the behavior of the Ladies. From that time each local community of the Daughters of Charity should be, and be seen as, a sign of faith in Jesus Christ, as the sign of total self-giving to Jesus Christ, in the locality where it is implanted. This presupposes that the community is a meeting place of believers, “of good Christians,” as Vincent said: a faith reality and a visible reality, without being ostentatious or overzealous. “Daughters of Charity, that is to say daughters of God.”

Don’t anyone say now that I am questioning consecration, unless it is religious consecration. The latter could change everything in your community and make it unrecognizable. It would tend to make the community a place of jealously guarded self-fulfillment, a world completely different from the work place, one where really very few things bring to mind the service of the poor except, for example, the community room where the photos of Most Honored Father and Most Honored Mother are enthroned, and where order reigns, an impressive void. We must not be too quick to draw conclusions from appearances, and simply see that it is very religious and rather like a convent. This material setting could influence people’s outlook and reactions. Remember the story of the parlor!

Your communities are, therefore, meeting places of women completely given to God **“for,”** and this **“for”** should be what someone feels more than anything else when they come in your door.

3. Your communities are at the service of the truly poor; they should therefore be universal and yet exclusively for the poor:

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“The Sisters at the Hôtel-Dieu have as their aim to work first of all at their own perfection, and after that to care for the patients; this, in a certain sense, is doing the same as you do; however, they have no Rule obliging them to assist everyone without distinction, that is, all persons who are poor, and you are bound to be always ready to practice charity, without exception of persons or places. God chose you for that.” (CCD X, 92).

In Vincent de Paul’s time it was clear. We do not choose our poor, we serve them as they are: sick in their homes or the hospital, orphans or the aged, wounded soldiers or galley slaves, etc. This extraordinary versatility delighted Vincent who considered it the grace of the Company: *“...you must be ready to serve the poor anywhere that you will be sent”* (CCD X, 104). At the local level, he hoped for versatile communities.

Social and pastoral situations have certainly changed and specialization has become a necessity, just as competence has. Milieus are different, and you must take into account laws about insertion and the demands of specific neighborhoods. Yet each community of Daughters of Charity should always be, and be seen as, a sign for the poor whether these are handicapped, prisoners, migrants, country folk, workers, children or the elderly. This is a point on which each of your communities can evaluate itself from time to time. Otherwise, it could lose an essential aspect of its Vincentian identity: universality of perspective and heart.

But universalism with exclusivity, which corresponds to Vincent’s experience and his progress toward the truly poor. He regularly reminded sisters of this. In a letter to Sister Marguerite Moreau, he advised her to remind even the Ladies of it: *“Allow us, Madame, to do here what God is asking of us, as we do elsewhere.”* (CCD IX, 463)

In every pastoral plan and each pastoral insertion, there is a risk of standardization. What should count first for a Daughter of Charity: the urgings and priorities of a diocese or sector OR RATHER the demands of a charism?

An important and difficult question today, but fortunately rather simple as far as you are concerned. For the Church of Vatican II: priority is

given to the poor. It would be a little shocking if in some situation a community of Daughters of Charity was brought into a pastoral plan which would distance them from the poor! It could always take up, if not the terms, at least the words of Sister Marguerite Moreau: *“God has called us to serve the poor.”*

4. Your communities should also be relay communities. The novel feature of the Daughters of Charity on which Vincent de Paul probably insisted most was your mobility.

After visits to the house at Chatillon, you were designed for movement: *“... you go through the streets, and also in the houses where you are sent to look after the sick... a Daughter of Charity is always mixing with people.”* (CCD X, 362-363) *“...They will consider that, since their ministries oblige them to be out of the house and among the people most of the time ... they need greater perfection...”* (CCD X, 527) *“... The Daughters of Charity are not nuns, but Sisters who come and go like seculars...”* (CCD VIII, 277). Some have called this the theme of the streets or the schism of the Daughter of Charity. You understand that with such directives given by the Founder, and with such a mobile vocation, the local community of the Daughters of Charity has to be quite a different thing from a convent as a place for sisters to settle down and take refuge! This would be an appropriate moment to bring up again the famous description: *“They have for monastery the houses of the sick, for chapel the parish church, for cloister the streets of the city or the wards of the hospital.”* (CCD X p. 71) Such is your convent and your cloister.

Your community should therefore think of itself more like a relay, a pause between two errands or departures, rather than as a place and a time of stability, installation or residence. Your implantation ought to be a hive of activity, where you enter and from which you leave continually. This characteristic of the community should also influence its mentality, ambiance, reactions and even its organization and layout.

5. Your Communities must safeguard priorities.

An essential element of a community’s unity is unanimity with regard to the same hierarchy of values, strong agreement on this point. It

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is also what gives it its identity. A contemplative community, for example, gives priority to praise and adoration, and this should be seen and felt when you come to it; you would perceive a certain quality of recollection, of silence, a particular form of dress and liturgical gestures.

With regard to communities of Daughters of Charity, Saint Vincent specified on many occasions: “Service of the poor should be preferred above all things” (cf. CCD IX, 215-216). In order for his words to be properly understood, he gave detailed examples, comparing the duty of prayer and service, the commandment of the Sabbath and service, the necessity of an annual retreat and service. By doing this, he inculcated in his communities the hierarchy of values proper to the Daughters of Charity, there must absolutely be unanimous agreement of a community about these values that give it its identity that will be recognized by people outside. Unfortunately there is the danger of thinking this is confrontational or a want of faith if it is not ranked first in traditional values.

6. Communities for evangelization.

This, too, is a point on which Saint Vincent insisted: corporal and spiritual service. It’s the pastoral combination of the experience at Gannes and Châtillon. It’s a holistic approach to the poor person. Paul VI and Vatican II drew attention to all men and the whole man; Vincent de Paul wanted to serve all the poor and every aspect of the poor person.

In the 17th century, this was an unheard of and revolutionary idea; Vincent was aware of this and said: “*So then, you must take the sick poor two kinds of food: corporal and spiritual, that is, to tell them some good thought from your meditation--five or six words to prompt them to fulfill their Christian duty or to practice patience. God has reserved this for you. Neither church history nor secular history states that anyone has ever done what you are doing--with the exception of Our Lord--which gives you great reason to humble yourselves.*” (CCD IX, 467) And elsewhere: “*We wouldn’t, in fact, be doing enough for God and the neighbor if we only gave the sick poor, food and medicine, and if we didn’t assist them, in accordance with God’s plan, by the spiritual service we owe them. When you serve poor persons in this*

way, you’ll be true Daughters of Charity, that is to say, daughters of God, and you’ll be imitating Jesus Christ.” (CCD IX, 50)

A community that orients itself either to human promotion only or evangelization only, risks dangerously distorting its image and compromising its spirit and identity. What is important and specific, is the way that human promotion and evangelization are combined in a project, a concern and commitment. This is an area where you must continually be reviewing your communities: “*When you serve poor persons in this way, you’ll be true Daughters of Charity.*”

7. A community of servants.

There is no need to recall the vast number of texts on this point. The word “servant”, as we said earlier, is synonymous with Daughter of Charity. Today, the word has lost much of its original meaning and could even be ambiguous. In the time of Vincent de Paul, it placed someone designated as servant, in a specific position on the social ladder and created among them and those like them, genuine solidarity. In contrast to the word “Ladies”, it implied a close relationship with the poor person. The servant was not above the poor; she didn’t know any better than they did what they needed; she was not an educator, much less a benefactor. On the contrary, in relation to the poor, the servant found herself in some way dependent on them.

In the same way today, the Daughter of Charity is not WITH the poor nor LIKE the poor. She is FOR them, which simply means being at their service.

For Saint Vincent, it was an attitude dictated by the Kingdom, and by the new concept of people and the world, taught by Jesus in the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount.

Father Jean MORIN, CM

JOY

**Christianity gives us joy,
just as love gives joy.**

**But love is always,
too, a renunciation of self...**

**It is always an “Exodus,”
hence it is painful.**

**True joy is something
different from pleasure.**

**Joy grows and continues to mature
in suffering,
in communion with the Cross of Christ.**

**It is only in this way
that the true joy of faith is born.**

Benedict XVI, July 25th 2005

