

*E*choes *of the Company*



Visitatrixes' Encounter, May 2012

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VISITATRIXES' ENCOUNTER

Introduction

Visitatrices' Encounter May 4-17, 2012

On May 4, 2012, sixty-nine Visitatrices and one Regional came from the four corners of the earth after being convoked for the Inter-Assemblies Encounter.

After the special time of retreat there came this moment of grace to strengthen our spirit of faith, to let ourselves be guided and transformed by the Spirit, to reinforce the main thrusts of the 2009 General Assembly, to exchange ideas on different situations and new signs of the times, to renew our missionary fervor and to look towards the Company of the future. Once again each participant discovered how great a treasure we possess in the Company's universality. The Encounter comprised three main sections.

First part: **Letting ourselves be transformed by the Spirit for conversion on a personal and a provincial level.** This first part brought together three topics.

1st topic: **Allowing ourselves to be transformed by the poor.** The poor are the sacred space where God awaits us, the sanctuary of God's permanent presence where He calls us to incarnate the charism and make present His love. Fr. Jean-François Berjonneau shared with us his experiences of working with poor people, his concern to listen to Christ speaking through them and allowing the Church to be a family where they felt accepted and at home.



Visitatrices' Encounter

2nd topic: **Allowing ourselves to be transformed as part of the Church.** Urged on by the great challenge of the New Evangelization, the Church's fundamental mission is to evangelize and to proclaim Christ with the boldness and the creativity of the Holy Spirit. Fr. Fernando del Castillo, CM, brought together the two concepts of the evangelization of the poor and the mission formation of Sisters.

3rd topic: **Allowing ourselves to be transformed as a Company.** The Holy Spirit inspires us and makes us able to witness to his love for those who are poor. Sister Evelyne Franc asked the Visitatrixes to cultivate in themselves the interior dispositions necessary for the Company to live a permanent Pentecost.

Second part: **Reinterpret and have a deeper understanding of the mission of the Visitatrix,** after reflecting on the Guide for Visitatrixes and the other Guides (for Treasurers, Secretaries, Provincial Directors, Sister Servants).

Times set aside for personal reflection, sharing of experiences and plenary sessions for sharing provided the opportunity for feedback from the groups and to have dialogue in order to learn from one another and seek together ways of living out this specific mission. Some questions were dealt with by the "resource" panel; the Superior General, the Director General, the Treasurer General, the Secretary General, the Sister in charge of the Archives. Finally, Sister Elisabeth Robert, Superioress General of the Institute of St Francis of Assisi, dealt with the relational aspect of this mission.

Third part: **Preparing for the General Assembly of 2015**

Several half days were devoted to preparing for the 2015 General Assembly in conformity with what is prescribed in the Constitutions.

In the course of the Encounter, the Visitatrixes were able to hear life testimonies from different parts of the world. Some shared situations that were very specific to their own Province; all the Sisters had the grace of following in the footsteps of St Louise as they made two pilgrimages: one to the church of Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs and the other to Chartres.

Opening of the Visitatrixes' Encounter

May 14, 2012

It is with great joy that we begin, or rather we continue, this Visitatrixes' Encounter at the Motherhouse, after the refreshing grace of this week of retreat preached by Father Patrick and...the Holy Spirit.

We have been convoked by the Lord to this community Encounter which unites all the Provinces and the Region of the Company, represented by each one of you. Only one Visitatrix was not able to come, as you know, Sister Graciela Pellerin, Visitatrix of Argentina, was not able to come for health reasons, but she assures us of her closeness in thought and prayer.

You are 69 Visitatrixes and one Regional (Sr. Graciela Pellerin being absent). It is interesting to note that 53 Sisters among you were present at the General Assembly of 2009 as Visitatrixes or delegates, 13 were present at the Encounter for newly designated Visitatrixes which took place in February 2011 and, among the six who have just begun their mission as Visitatrix, three were also delegates in 2009. So we form a group which is well motivated for the mission of today and that of tomorrow.

You come from the four corners of the world, where the Company is present and tries to live faithfully the charism of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. Once again, we are going to see how this inter-cultural dimension and this diversity are a great asset for our reflections and could be an even greater source of dynamism for the service of our deprived brothers and sisters.

This Visitatrixes' Encounter marks a pause between the Assemblies of 2009 and 2015. Like every event lived in faith, this is a moment of

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grace, an invitation to enter more deeply on the journey mapped out by the 2009 Assembly, under the influence of the Holy Spirit.¹ It is also an invitation to turn our sights toward the Company of the future which is being built here and now.

A little later today, the Commission responsible for animating the Encounter is going to present its objectives and the methodology for following the different parts of the program – linked to the fundamental theme on which our reflection is based. The Commission will also explain the plan envisaged for the work of these days. Today also, according to the indications in the program, you will have the occasion to present and share some significant aspects of your Provinces.

Before continuing with this quick introduction, I want to thank the members of the Animation Commission: Sr. Rosa Maria Miró, Assistant General and Sister Françoise Petit, Councillor General, assisted by Sister Miguelina Florido of Peru, Sister Christo Kumari Sing of North India and Sister Angèle Mbula of Congo. Also a word of thanks for the faithful presence of our translators, reinforced in number since the retreat, the Sisters in the control room and the help given by our two Secretaries, Sister Anne Prévost and Sister Marie Odile Herbet.

May I once again stress the importance of this Encounter:

We are going to reflect and dialogue on several themes, and this will be for all of us an occasion for on-going formation.

You will also have the opportunity to work on specific aspects of the service given by the Visitatrix, taking as a base the different Guides and the Guidelines of the Company put at your disposal. These documents are good instruments for facilitating reflection and discernment by the Provincial Council, with regard to the service of animation and decision making.

1. Cf Inter-Assemblies Document 2009-2015.

The Encounter also allows us to deal with preparation for the next Assemblies and to have meaningful dialogue on the themes that have surfaced.

As you know, this year 2012, will be marked by four ecclesial events which will produce abundant fruit for the Church, the Company and the world: the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, the 20th anniversary of the promulgation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Synod of the Bishops on new evangelization, and the beginning of the Year of Faith.

With the whole Church, we desire to welcome these great events as a *kairos*, a favorable time of grace for renewing our life of faith, for strengthening and energizing the missionary spirit of the Company and glimpsing the vast horizon of the new evangelization. Indeed, we are encouraged to:

- Once again make our own the great messages of the Council, a compass which continues to direct our path,
- deepen the tenets of our faith as summarized in the Catechism of the Catholic Church,
- renew in ourselves and in our Sisters, enthusiasm for communicating the faith, welcoming with hope the guidelines of the Synod.
- *“retrace the history of our faith, marked as it is by the unfathomable mystery of the interweaving of holiness and sin.”*²

According to the words of the Pope: “Reflection on the faith will have to be intensified, so as to help all believers in Christ acquire a more conscious and vigorous adherence to the Gospel, especially at a time of profound change such as mankind is currently experiencing.... Religious communities as well as parish communities, and all ecclesial bodies old and new, are to find a way, during this Year, to make a public profession of the *Credo*.”³

2. Cf. Benedict XVI, *Motu proprio*, *Porta Fidei*, n. 13.

3. Cf. Benedict XVI, *Motu proprio*, *Porta Fidei*, n. 8.

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It is for us, for you, to see how to prepare this public profession of the Credo, at the level of the Company, in each Province, each Local Community...we will speak about this.

The *Year of Faith* will also be a good opportunity to intensify the witness of charity.⁴

Our era is a complex one; the discernments that we must make are delicate ones, formation of Sisters, regrouping of Provinces, creating guidelines for our apostolic service. It seems to us sometimes “as if a shadow has fallen over our time, preventing us from clearly seeing the light of day.”⁵

In order that this greyness and these painful realities that we face every day do not discourage us we need to discover and listen, discern and welcome new signs that show the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the world. Are we sufficiently attentive to watching for where the Spirit is leading us in this stage of the history of the Company? What anxieties, what hopes fill you and each Sister in your Province? I am sure that after your prayers and reflection during the retreat, the sharing among you will be very fruitful.

A quick glance at the preparation of the Synod on the new evangelization can give us some pointers that could be the framework for our reflection. The Lineamenta emphasize the need to show our contemporaries that the Christian perspective is able to shed light on the great problems of life.

The new evangelization is not just proclaimed to others, it is primarily self-evangelization, then it means courageous going forward; it is synonymous with the mission which confronts the challenges of our time.

4. Cf. Benedict XVI, Motu proprio, Porta Fidei, n. 14.

5. Benedict XVI, Message for the 45th World Day of Peace, 2012.

It is a matter of helping our contemporaries to discover what is essential, to distinguish what is true, good and beautiful. In societies like that of this country, where politicians and intellectuals present as a sign of progress the right for persons of the same sex to marry, the right to organize the end of our life, our contemporaries need to breathe less polluted air; they are thirsting for another form of language. Through the witness of our life and service, this breath of pure air can circulate. All our objectives for social promotion, based on our Vincentian charism, must be framed with a view to recognizing signs of God in human activity, an evangelization aimed at true humanisation.

The gift of faith gives us hope in the Lord and keeps us from discouragement. The new evangelization invites us to confidence, to abandonment, to Providence, to seeing the world with new eyes, to renewing our commitment for the cause of those who are poor, sent as we are, by the Church and by the Company as apostles and witnesses of charity. These are the times of creative and prophetic courage, of joyful attention to the Spirit who guides us towards the whole truth.⁶

Now, just as in earlier days and throughout the long history of the Company, we feel the hand of the Lord guiding us. “*We have to allow God to act, for He’s our Father; so, as long as we trust God, He’ll take care of us,*”⁷ Saint Vincent said this to the Sisters in 1658, and these words are still very relevant today.

For her part, Saint Louise wrote to Barbe Angiboust who was experiencing some difficulties in Bernay, “*You can understand, my dear Sister, that more than ever we need the guidance of His Providence for this project and for all the other business of the Company.*”⁸

Pope Benedict XVI exhorts us in his apostolic letter Porta Fidei: “*Only through believing, then, does faith grow and become stronger; there is no other possibility for possessing certitude with regard to one’s life apart from self-abandonment, (...) into the hands of a love that seems to grow constantly because it has its origin in God.*”⁹

6. Cf. Jn. 16:13.

7. Saint Vincent de Paul, Conference of June 9, 1658, CCD X, page 404.

8. Saint Louise, SW, page 550, L. 524.

9. Apostolic Letter Porta Fidei, n. 7.

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During the next few days we will have the opportunity to deal with issues of great importance in the life of the Company. I hope that you will live these days of work in an atmosphere of prayer and reflection, of calm and inner peace, in a community atmosphere of cordiality and trust.

For the entire Company, this Encounter it is a special time of grace and blessing. It is a time of openness to the Holy Spirit so that we can let ourselves be transformed by the Spirit and so become “*instruments of God's work.*”¹⁰

We know we can count on the prayer of all the Sisters, especially our Sisters who are elderly and ill, who participate actively in the mission of the Company by offering what they are experiencing in this stage of pure and faithful love, a stage of giving themselves entirely to God.

The Company expects much of you, who have been entrusted with the mission of Visitatrix, and also asks you to dedicate all your energy, your availability and your enthusiasm to promoting the spiritual and apostolic vitality of each one of the Daughters of Charity¹¹ and so keep the flame of the charism burning in all the Provinces of the Company.

We implore the intercession of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise for the successful outcome of this encounter.

We confide to Mary, Mother of the Company, the reflections and the work of these days “*From the Annunciation to Pentecost she appears as a woman completely open to the will of God... Mary also symbolises openness to God and others; an active listening which interiorizes and assimilates, one in which the word becomes a way of life.*”¹²

Sr. Evelyne FRANC
Daughter of Charity

10. C. 17c.

11. Cf. C. 73a.

12. Post-synodal exhortation *Verbum Domini*, 27.

The Poor Are our Masters

May 15, 2012

I decided to borrow the title for my presentation from your master, Saint Vincent de Paul. The topic suggested to me was this, “*What do those who are poor have to say to us and to the Church today?*” I thought to myself that the most beautiful message that we can receive from the poor today is Christ, the presence of Christ, the Word of Christ. Because, in chapter 25 of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, Christ identifies himself with the poor, with the hungry, the sick, the strangers, the prisoners, et.al. He says that each time we enter into a loving relationship with one of the least, the little ones, we enter into relationship with Christ himself. Whatever be the faces of the poor, who are so diverse according to the country you come from, we could now add the current people that we all meet, the have nots, those without papers, those without homes, those without shelter, those without families, those countless persons who lose their footing in this global society in which the political and technological changes are accelerated at such a speed that it leaves a more and more scandalous number of excluded people or as Abbé Pierre described them, “the battered ones of existence.”

In all these categories of poverty, so diverse, so widespread and so complex, we Christians, and you who are consecrated in religious life, hear only the word of Jesus who, “though he was rich, became poor” in order to come closer to us and to open to us the Kingdom.

St. Vincent de Paul, your master, also speaks of this when he writes in his conferences to the Daughters of Charity, your Sisters: “*We must not judge a poor peasant man or woman by their appearance or their apparent intelligence, especially since very often they scarcely have the expression or the mind of rational persons, so crude and vulgar*

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they are. But turn the medal, and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, who willed to be poor, is represented to us by these poor people; that He scarcely had a human face in His Passion, and passed for a madman in the mind of the Gentiles and a stumbling block in the mind of the Jews.” (Coste XI, 26)

So I think it’s important to take time together to think about what Christ is saying to us through the poor person we encounter, and especially what path of deep conversion he is opening to us... how does it take hold of us, how does it transform us, how does it move us and turn our world upside down?

I’m going to use my experience as a prison chaplain for nearly 30 years. And I feel close to you in this because St. Vincent de Paul was the founder of prison chaplaincy. I will also draw on my experience as secretary of the Episcopal Commission for Migrants from 1992-1998 during which I had many relationships with undocumented persons trying to find a welcome into a society that turned them away, and who have appealed to the churches to hear their cries.

So, in connection with this, I would like to recount my first steps as a prison chaplain. During my first visit to the prison in Evreux, I received, my mission letter, so to speak, from a young inmate. When he heard that I was the new priest who had been sent to the prison, he said something I will never forget: “You see, Father, I have two prisons: the first is my cell, the steel door, the bars...I don’t know when I will get out of that one. But the second is the hardest: it is the hatred that I have for people! If you can free me from the second prison, you will be a winner! But I warn you, this is only the beginning of your troubles!” I think that through this inmate, Jesus showed me the path of my mission.

My talk will be in two parts:

- 1- How Christ transforms us as we accompany poor people.
- 2- How you can be mediators between the Poor and the Church so they may become the heart of it.

I: HOW CHRIST TRANSFORMS US IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE POOR.

1. AT FIRST THE POOR ALWAYS DISTURB US

In our schedules, which are often heavy, the poor often intrude in an unexpected way.

For example, I wanted to go away to prepare for this presentation. I was calm and then my mobile phone rang. It was Jean-Pierre whom I had accompanied in prison during his twenty years there. He was now in prison again and he was soon to be released and was counting on me to find him a place to live.

I imagine that often happens to you. You have planned some important, urgent work, you are very busy and suddenly, at the worst possible time, a poor person wants to come, and wants you to listen to him and he does not want to hear your excuses. Of course you are in community and the Sisters are ready to welcome these people who are in precarious situations. Nevertheless, that doesn’t mean that these excluded ones don’t often appear as disruptive trouble makers.

In our societies noted for efficiency, performance, profitability, and preoccupied to an extreme degree with organization, the poor always show up when and where we do not expect them. They don’t fit our criteria, our standards. They don’t live like us, don’t think like we do, don’t have the same habits that we have and this disruption is the first part of the relationship. It forces us to move out of our little world, to step aside to make room for that person who, in his suffering, asks for attention there and then. And in this gap, it is God himself who is appealing to us. This is what Michel de Certeau said in his book, *The Stranger or Unity in Difference*. (p. 14)

“It is from the unknown and as something unknown that the Lord always comes in his own home and among his people: I come like a thief” (Rev. 16:15; 3.3). “Those who believe in him are constantly called to recognize him, living far away or coming from elsewhere, unrecognizable neighbor or separated brother, walking in the street,

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locked up in prisons, among those who have nothing or are ignored, in a region beyond our boundaries. It is even the “mystic” who always appears in the Church as a troublemaker, an intruder and a stranger. This brings us to something even more confusing, but fundamental to the Christian faith. God is the unknown, the one we do not know, even though we believe in him; he remains a stranger for us in the human experience of our relationships. But he is also misjudged, the one that we do not want to recognize and who, John says (Jn.1:11), was not accepted in his own place by his own people. And this is how we will be judged ultimately; it is the test of the true Christian life: have we “accepted” the stranger, visited the prisoner, welcomed the other” (Mt 25, 35 -36)?

Jesus himself experienced this disruption when he had withdrawn to the region of Tyre and Sidon and wanted to remain incognito. It was here that a Canaanite woman came to him pleading with him on behalf of her sick daughter. His disciples, as some translations say, said to him, “Give her what she wants and send her away because she is shouting after us!” And it took some time for Jesus himself to recognize faith in her. The poor make us experience a harsh “otherness.” They always force us out of our usual ways of doing things and our “comfort zone.” And in so doing, they open in us a space for God...

2. WHATEVER THEIR PROBLEMS, THE POOR CRY OUT FOR RESPECT

When we have gone beyond the desire to send them away and we have accepted the disruption, we are open to showing them respect. We begin this journey of otherness which presumes we take the time to listen and understand the other person. And that requires staying power.

The person who is in front of me has a history, has been damaged, and can't always find the words to express his suffering. The first request may be hiding another one. For example, in a prison, the request for cigarettes or stamps may perhaps be only a preamble for a much deeper sharing. As Maurice Bellet, a priest and psychoanalyst, said: “Begin by showing respect.”

To respect is to resist the temptation to label the poor person in front of me and to immediately look for a solution for him or to send him to some social service agency. Respect opens us to the unique dimension of the person who is in front of us, who was created in the image of God and through whom Christ is speaking to us. This presupposes that we give the person time to speak, even if in the beginning we can barely hear what he is trying to say.

This sacred space which is called respect, also takes it for granted that we avoid any domination or paternalism in order to hear what the person is expressing in his words, and also what is being said beyond words. In the encounter of Jesus with the Canaanite woman, Jesus listened to the cries of this woman in distress and “he did not answer her at all.” It was the time for him to respect the distance which separated him from this woman and to adapt himself to her.

3. TO ADAPT OUR WAY OF SEEING THE POOR TO THE WAY GOD SEES THEM

The poor whom we encounter always present in some way, the following question: *Are you capable of loving me as I am?*

If we are meeting them for the first time, they call us to overcome our hesitation about how they look or their appearance which is sometimes repugnant. They call us to go beyond our apprehensions, sometimes our fears. If we walk beside them for a long time, they test our fidelity in accompanying them, even in a situation of crisis.

To enter into this conversion of outlook, we must always listen to this word of Christ in the Gospel: “Do not fear...Don't be afraid...” A conversion which enables us to see in a different way has roots even in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The source experience, which gives all his encounters with the poor their meaning, is his baptism in the waters of the Jordan where he had this deeply moving experience of the paternity of God. It's what Eloi Leclerc says in his book, The Greater God, *In the ineffable divine proximity to Him, Jesus has evidence that God is close...all people, without exception, are called to hear: “You are my beloved son.” At the same time that he discovers*

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the fatherhood of God towards him, he opens himself to the love of God for all people. He embraces his father's merciful regard for all human beings. It is especially in being true to the Father that he lets himself be overcome and led by this divine love for all human beings.

There is, therefore, a contemplative source for our encounter with the poor that we must never forget. It is because we have within us this Spirit of Christ that we are continually called to go to meet the very poorest.

From this personal experience of the action of the Spirit of Christ in us, we can, progressively, adapt ourselves to the way God sees all needy people whom we meet. God looks on them with tenderness. *"This poor man calls and the Lord hears him."* Do we know how to be simply the reflection of this divine goodness toward them? It is in seeing as Christ sees that we can go beyond the fears, the apprehensions, the hesitation that we have sometimes about entering into a relationship of life with the poor, so that they themselves feel loved by God.

4. THE POOR REVEAL TO US OUR OWN WEAKNESSES

What strikes me, when I enter a prison to meet the inmates, is that in the beginning I can never shake off a certain fear...fear of meeting situations of violence, fear of breaking one of the rules, fear of being confronted by a particularly aggressive prisoner, sometimes fear of not being equal to this task. These fears reminded me each time of my fragility, my limitations. And in this sense, this awareness of my fears is a positive factor for meeting the poorest of the poor.

This fragility forces me to work on myself to learn the truth of these fears and get beyond them because I know that I can be there for these prisoners and respond to them only if I have gone beyond these fears. It is also my faith in the person of Christ that helps me get past these fears. Be that as it may, I can reach these people who have had such an unsettled life and so many trials only in a way that is very humble, with great availability, stripped of any wish to dominate the person. This, in my opinion, is the meaning of the washing of the feet, as Jesus

showed us (Jn. 13:1-15): taking the position of a servant, kneeling down in front of the fragile person, listening to him, in an attitude devoid of all power.(cf. Jn 13, 1-15)

Humility is the necessary condition for the poor to be able to express themselves and for trust to be established between us.

This personal observation leads me to make some comments on the awareness of our own fragility when we encounter people in precarious situations. This sense of fragility in meeting those who are poor is ambivalent.

Sometimes meeting them awakens in us fears or wounds which have been buried for a long time and which resurface in this relationship. Sometimes this sense of fragility is so strong that it can lead us to reject the person and this can sometimes take us by surprise. We didn't know that we were capable of such rejection. In other circumstances, when we encounter a person in a precarious situation, whether it be financially or people with a health issue, or on a relational level, that person might in fact fill an affective need in us which hinders us from keeping a proper distance from the person. He or she is no longer free to follow their intended path.

But this feeling of fragility can be good if it is experienced in truth and keeps us from feeling that we are all powerful. It can also make us aware of the common human condition which links us profoundly to the person that we are meeting. This is what Dr. Xavier Emmanuelli, former Director of SAMU: (Social Humanitarian Emergency Medical Services) states: He describes this sense of fragility *"as whatever, in essence, creates unfailing solidarity in humanity."* And he adds, *"This is what I said, at the beginnings of social emergency, to my team trying to galvanize them, "Never forget that tonight, in the streets of Paris, you are going to meet people of the same rank, the same status as you." Fragility, this is what marks the status of the human being in a world which remains, whatever happens, incomprehensible and infinite."*

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This experience of our fragility in the encounter with the poor and the risks it entails, always calls us to be supported by someone or by a team that enables us to find the right distance which permits us to help the person in a precarious situation without being overwhelmed by their suffering. As Doctor Emmanuelli said again “*in the accompaniment of suffering, we must risk something of ourselves, certainly, but without losing ourselves totally, because then we become useless, or dangerous, for ourselves or for the patient.*” And he gives the following definition of compassion: “*Compassion, means understanding the suffering of the other and questioning oneself about it, it is to suffer oneself, but it is also to know how to defend a shipwreck, from what could be pain or moral suffering, and to know how to make the connection. This is a relationship of otherness. This is concern for the other. It is because the other person is suffering and in danger that I accompany him, because I know how to see in myself my own fragility. If one does not have this compassion, one cannot make the connection.*” (Id. p.146)

This experience enables us to understand the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ. It is only in admitting, in the love of the Father and in the strength of the Holy Spirit, our vulnerability, and in making ourselves poor, like him who, “*rich though he was, became poor... in taking the form of a slave, becoming like human beings and recognized in human form...becoming obedient unto death, death on a cross*” (2 Cor. 8:9, Ph. 2:7-8) that he taught us to know the power of his love and opened the way of the resurrection.

5. THE POOR REVEAL THE DISORDER OF THE WORLD AND CALL ON US TO MAKE A COMMITMENT

When Jesus presents his mission letter in the Synagogue of Nazareth, he does so using the words of the Prophet Isaiah: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” (Lk. 4:18-19)

For him, this meant **drawing near** to all people who fall into the category of living in a precarious status: the poor, the captives, the

blind, the oppressed. There is a priority here that is recognized and affirmed. But at the same time this mission has a **dimension of freedom**, of leaving the precarious status of imprisonment, of blindness, of oppression. The Good News that is announced is fulfilled by a definite dynamic of freedom from a particular slavery. We cannot content ourselves with interpreting this message of Isaiah taken up again by Jesus, as purely spiritual. Certainly it concerns the inauguration of the Kingdom of God as it is manifested in the person of Jesus. But it also implies the specific attitudes that the same prophet evokes in these terms in Third Isaiah: *Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?* (Is. 58, 6-7)

Proximity to those who are poor is therefore closely linked to every activity which aims at ending the oppression of which they are the victims and to enter into the struggle for justice and into a dynamic sharing. Such a step is an integral part of solidarity with the poorest people, according to the Gospel.

Moreover, Pope John Paul II himself gave this definition of solidarity in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*: “*(Solidarity) then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all. This determination is based on the solid conviction that what is hindering full development is that desire for profit and that thirst for power...These attitudes and “structures of sin” are only conquered - presupposing the help of divine grace - by a diametrically opposed attitude: a commitment to the good of one’s neighbor with the readiness, in the gospel sense, to “lose oneself” for the sake for the other instead of exploiting him, and to “serve him” instead of oppressing him for one’s own advantage (cf. Mt 10:40-42; 20:25; Mk 10:42-45; Lk 22:25-27).*

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Accompanying the poor, especially those who are victims of a social and economic order which is unjust, engages us in real combat against these “structures of sin” which John Paul II speaks about. It’s obvious that in the ministry of prison chaplaincy, this proximity to prisoners leads me in our dialogues to learn about their childhood. Often they come from a situation ravaged by unemployment, poverty, inadequate and degrading housing, the absence of a stable family life, the lack of consistent education which led to crime.

A young man had returned to prison for the fifth time for drug trafficking and when I asked how he was going to be able to move away from this kind of life, he said, “Jean-François, give me one good reason to live in the district where I come from!”

If in my meetings with those who are in prison, I don’t give my complete attention to the situation from which they come and if I do not contribute in some way or another, to finding, with them, a way of social and professional reinsertion when they leave prison, if I don’t struggle against all the stigmas which they can encounter after their incarceration, then the message of conversion and of liberation that Christ speaks to them may not be accepted. It is a reflection of the truth of this commitment that I want to live side by side with them in the name of Christ.

So there is in the relationship with the poor a place for engagement with them that can lead us to go even further. It calls us to analyze the economic, political and social situations that caused this misery. It involves us in a persistent struggle against all forms of oppression that keep so many people at the bottom of humanity. It also invites us constantly to put ourselves in the school of the poor because it is they who, from their own situation and in their own words, can tell us what the paths are for their own liberation.

6. THE POOR CALL US TO PRACTICE PATIENCE AND FIDELITY

Jesus himself knew the test of fidelity in his covenant with the poor. At a given moment he became aware that this relationship with those

excluded from his people could lead him into confrontation with the political and religious powers of his time who did not accept his mission. He also experienced the volatility of those who followed him. The same crowd who hailed him when he entered Jerusalem was capable of turning against him during the trial. His own disciples wanted to keep him from taking the risk of giving his life.

But in fidelity to the love of God his Father and to these people to whom he had been sent, he was faithful even to the end. He resisted all temptations of power, of domination in all forms, of seeking popular success. He remained steadfast in this choice of poverty and the gift of himself. And the Gospel tells us, “*He set his face to go to Jerusalem.*” (Luke 9:51)

In this companionship with the poor, sometimes we may experience trials and contradiction. The test may come to us, because of fatigue, the doubt that creeps into us about whether our commitment is well founded or the sense of failure in this solidarity with the poor. This test can also occur because of the risky nature of our commitment and the danger of approaching violence, a feeling of loneliness. It can also arise when the poor themselves, as we accompany them on the path of recovery, are prone to relapse and seem to be again pushed down by fate. It may then happen that we are tempted to give up.

One day, some friends told me that a young person I had supported in his fight for true freedom from using drugs, after a long rehabilitation course had relapsed into taking drugs. It was the fifth time that he had relapsed. I had the misfortune to tell these friends from whom I had heard the news: “This time, I give up.” And then this young man came and said to me: “If you only knew what it did to me, how bad I felt when I heard that you, too, had given up on me ...” This is what I call the sin against hope. The poor challenge us to faithfulness and patience, beyond the failures, despair and anguish that can hurt them, and sometimes win.

There is a spirituality in the “*Stabat Mater*” which shows the faithfulness of Mary who stood at the foot of the cross even though apparently there was nothing more that could be done and her son

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was dying amid the sarcastic taunts of the crowd. Only our faith in the resurrection of Christ, in a love stronger than all the misery and suffering that can assail our poorest brothers and sisters, can help us to remain close to them and keep “hoping against hope” as Paul tells us in the letter to the Romans. (Rom. 4:18)

7. THE POOR INTRODUCE US TO THE PASCHAL JOURNEY WITH CHRIST

Finally, those who are poor can lead us to live, even in our body, this paschal journey that Christ made to bring us to his resurrection.

We find these words of Pope John Paul II in the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*:

“In the light of faith, solidarity seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the specifically Christian dimension of total gratuity, forgiveness and reconciliation. One’s neighbor is then not only a human being with his or her own rights and a fundamental equality with everyone else, but becomes the living image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit. One’s neighbor must, therefore, be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her; and for that person’s sake one must be ready for sacrifice, even the ultimate one: to lay down one’s life for the brothers and sisters.” (cf. 1 Jn. 3:16)

The monks of Tibhirine give us a striking and shining sign of this solidarity even to the point of giving up their life. Day by day, in this difficult fraternity with the poor Algerian people suffering from fear and the violence of the civil war they lived through, they walked the journey of giving themselves. They wanted to remain the brothers of everyone, refusing to choose between the brothers of the plain, the soldiers of the Algerian army, and the brothers of the mountain, those who were Islamists, who opposed them with ruthless violence. In long and faithful contemplation of their Lord and Master Jesus Christ crucified and risen, and this long interior work of their prayer, they learned to overcome their fears, to make the choice to stay together alongside these poor people with whom they had made a covenant, to

strip themselves little by little of whatever hinders love and abandon themselves with confidence into the hands of this God who, in the person of Christ, tells us again and again *“There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for those we love.”*

We also, in the measure that we have made this definitive choice to link our life to the lives of those who are poor, let ourselves be led and shaped by them. Little by little we are led on the journey of their joys, their sorrows, their hopes, their struggles. We link our life to theirs. Like them, we go through darkness, fear, worry about tomorrow, the experience of our limitations, and our fragility. But we are also carried along by grace which allows them to welcome us as their brothers and sisters and to be supported by their friendship.

It is they who teach us, day after day, to give our lives as Christ did. Sometimes we receive from them words of hope of such as the words spoken to Jesus before he surrendered his spirit to the Father, when the good thief crucified beside him pleaded, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”* (Luke 23:42), a prayer that anticipated the resurrection.

II: THE PLACE OF THE POOR IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

1. VIEWS EXPRESSED BY THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

If Christ speaks to us personally and collectively about our encounter and solidarity with persons living in precarious situations, the life of the Church is concerned very much about this.

And since we are in the year of the 50th anniversary of Vatican Council II we can refer to certain texts which explain the place of the poor in the Church.

“Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the Church is called to follow the same route that it might communicate the fruits of salvation to men. Christ Jesus,

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“though He was by nature God . . . emptied Himself, taking the nature of a slave.” (Phil. 2:6) and “being rich, became poor” (2 Cor. 8:9) for our sakes.

Thus, the Church, although it needs human resources to carry out its mission, is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim, even by its own example, humility and self-sacrifice. Christ was sent by the Father “to bring good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart”, (Lk. 4:18) “to seek and to save what was lost.” (Lk. 19:10) Similarly, the Church surrounds with love all who are afflicted with human suffering, and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder. It does all it can to relieve their need and in them it strives to serve Christ.” (cf Lumen Gentium 8)

So in this text we see several essential points for the Church:

- Poverty as a sign of conformity to the person of Christ and as the way for mission.
- Recognition of the poor and the suffering as the privileged ones in the mission of the Church (the expression of the preferential option of the poor goes without saying)
- Recognition by the Church of the presence of Christ in the person of the poor.

To sum up these Conciliar statements, we could say, that a Church without the Poor is a disabled Church. Because Christ identified himself with the poor (hungry, sick, foreigner, prisoner...) because he designated the poor as the privileged recipients of the Good News, because he spoke of the search for the lost sheep as a priority for his disciples, the place of the poor is part of the mystery of the Church.

2. BUT THE ASSEMBLED CHURCH IS OFTEN DISTANCED FROM THE POOR.

Of course, I am speaking about the Church that I know in France and throughout Europe, where I notice that the poor are still very far from feeling at home in our Christian assemblies. No doubt for those of you who are coming from poorer countries, this remark does not apply as much. Nevertheless, on the whole, in many countries, the poorest

people do not feel on the same level in our Christian communities.

Our Christian communities are anxious to meet the material needs of the poor. They are for the poor, but not with the poor. Father Joseph Wresinski, founder of ATD (All Together in Dignity) Fourth World has written a book entitled, “The Poor are the Church.” We are a long way from that! Though we speak of the preferential option for the poor, the voice of the poor is still hardly noticeable in our churches. This gap must be considered and recognized clearly, without guilt, but also without complacency. It is important to measure this gap which holds us at a distance from those who are poor because it is also the basis of possible conversion. If we know how to recognize clearly the otherness of our communities, at parish or diocesan level, with regard to those who live in exclusion, if we become aware that our communities are “distorted” by their absence, then we can open a dialogue with them, in true reciprocity, avoiding the subtle temptations of hasty recovery which serves as a pretext for not hearing the disturbing cry of the poor. Because with our brothers and sisters who are most poor, it is always a question of our listening to them and being ready, in a true dialogue with them, to let ourselves be profoundly transformed by the word that Christ presents to us through their person.

3. IN ORDER TO HAVE A GENUINE ENCOUNTER WITH THOSE WHO ARE POOR, OUR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES NEED MEDIATION

When I speak of mediation, I think of people who are in a long and lasting relationship with the very poor, who are engaged in true solidarity with them, who have shared their suffering and their struggles, and who, at their side, have learned their language and have let themselves be transformed by them. These people, as members of the Christian communities, can be with their baptized brothers and sisters, servants of the encounter with the very poor. They can teach the Christian Communities to understand from the inside what these excluded people experience and listen to the word that Christ says to us through their life.

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You, yourselves, Sisters, are all witness of it in one way or another: It happens that in some humble places, marked by hospitality, the sense of prayer, the quality of listening to the other, a true encounter takes place between the excluded and the simple word of Christ. It happens that the long desire of the excluded to finally see their dignity recognized and their desire to be free of all oppression is there in the radiant light of the Gospel. It happens that prisoners and the oppressed are touched by the good news of the Gospel, and truly hear the words of Christ addressed to them “Get up, take up your mat and walk.” I am often the awestruck witness of this in prison. So the life of these vulnerable persons can be rekindled. Those who witness these little resurrections can be filled with the joy of Christ. *“At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.” (Lk .10:21)* This reminds us of the words of the Magnificat where the voice of Mary mingles with the voice of the poor whom we encounter: *“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;...” (Lk. 1:52)*

And when we are witnesses who are amazed at this wonderful encounter between the voice of the poor and the light of the Gospel of Christ, we cannot keep this to ourselves. And you have, then, a double responsibility:

- On the one hand to enable persons who live in exclusion and who have discovered the word of Jesus, to feel welcome in a community and to take steps toward reinsertion which is both spiritual and ecclesial,

- On the other hand to help Church communities, who are often distanced from the poor, to enter into relationship with these persons affected by suffering or misery, and to allow themselves to be converted by the word of Christ spoken to them through their relationship with the poor.

As Daughters of Charity, you can

- contribute to the formation of a more evangelic Church, inhabited and transformed by the presence and the world of the poor at its center.
- become the humble link between these poor people who have received hope through the Good News of Christ and our diocesan or parish Churches disfigured by the absence of the poor and waiting for a true encounter with them, and through them, an encounter with Christ.

4. YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES WITHIN THE CHURCH

As Visitatrixes I imagine that you don't always have the possibility of being in direct contact with the truly poor. But the Sisters of the communities for which you are responsible share the condition of the poor in their daily life. The testimonies that we heard at the beginning of this encounter show the quality of listening, and of the presence of the Sisters with vulnerable persons whom they meet. They share close up their suffering, their struggles, and sometimes their closeness to the Gospel. Sometimes with them you share in their wonder at the way Jesus acts toward the Canaanite woman or the Roman Centurion, sometimes their fatigue or their disappointments when they meet inevitable contradictions, as Christ encountered them. I imagine that your presence at their side is extremely important.

You are there to discern the gifts that the Holy Spirit places in the heart of each Sister who finds her joy in the service of the poor she guarantees in the most precarious places. You can listen to them and their experiences in order to help them reread the word of Christ spoken to them through this closeness to the very poor. When the experience is too heavy to bear because of extreme poverty or the collapse of hope, you are there to support, to accompany, to lift up. You are in some way guardians of these “Acts of the Apostles” who continue to live today in companionship with those whom the world abandons. And above all, you have the desire to bring to the heart of our communities all these pearls of the Gospel received by the very poor which lead our Church to brilliant light in the love which always remains in the Risen One.

CONCLUSION

This reflection is of urgent importance today for two reasons:

- Our global societies have been shaken by an economic and financial crisis unlike those of any other time. In one way or another, all the countries of the planet are affected by it. This crisis has dramatic consequences for the lives of families who do not know what tomorrow will bring. Increasing numbers of people without hope are migrating. Young people from poor countries want to come and find work in industrialized countries. Western countries close their borders to them and tend to recoil against them as a group. Everywhere, the challenge of solidarity is a startling reality.

- In this context, many Christian communities now experience a new level of precariousness, whether it be because of poverty which is rampant in their country, or because of violence, or in the West, the rapid decline in the number of priests and pastoral resources. If the communities of the Church know how to discern the spiritual issue involved in this new situation within the framework of this unregulated globalization, they can discover a new Gospel energy in the encounter with the poor, in dialogue with them and in working at their side so that their basic rights are recognized. In this commitment and in the deepening of the Eucharistic mystery which gives them life, they can again let themselves be strengthened by the passion of Christ who made himself poor among the poor even to the point of giving his life on the cross in order to open to the multitude of people, communion in the light of his Resurrection.

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Proclaiming Jesus Christ Today

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I. A NEW CULTURAL CONTEXT

We live in a time of tremendous change and significant shifts in every sphere of human life. This accelerated change in society has produced a **new cultural context** characterized by the weakening of spirituality¹, a crisis of truth, a perversion of freedom, which has become disconnected from the truth and meaning of human existence, and a clouding of the moral conscience: in short, it has led to a **spiritual crisis** for the human person. As Pope Benedict XVI stated “*A humanism which excludes God is an inhuman humanism ... Without God man neither knows which way to go, nor even understands who he is*” (*Caritas in Veritate*, 78)².

Aware of the extent of this situation, the Church has proposed New Evangelization as a **pastoral priority** and is conscious of the urgent need to “*remake the Christian fabric of the ecclesial community itself*” (John Paul II). New Evangelization is not a matter of techniques and strategies, but is a response to the contemporary world which arises from the Gospel. This response is Christ himself—Jesus is the Good News, the gospel—who offers salvation to everyone: “*the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes in him*” (Rom 1:16).

For some years the concept of New Evangelization has had a great and ongoing impact on the life of the Church and resonance within it. This is not some trendy idea or one more topic for reflection, nor the latest fad.

1. Caritas in Veritate 76

2. Caritas in Veritate 78

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As expressed in the introductory letter to the *Lineamenta* of the XIIIth Synod of Bishops, Ordinary General Assembly, New Evangelization is a worldwide undertaking which, along with the promulgation of the encyclical *Verbum Dei*, and the creation of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, seeks to meet the challenges in contemporary society.

The urgency of New Evangelization expresses the need to renew the missionary spirit of the Church and the need to undergo a new Pentecost in the Church: “*We need to rekindle in ourselves the ardent sentiment of St. Paul who said ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel.’*”³

All of us have a twofold role in the New Evangelization—we both proclaim the gospel and receive its proclamation. The proclamation of the gospel is important for those who hear it and for ourselves, too. The document states that this proclamation is so important that our own salvation is at stake. The synod document, quoting *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (80), asks: “*Can we gain salvation if through negligence or fear or shame . . . or as a result of false ideas, we fail to preach [the gospel]?*”⁴ Can we be saved if we fail to preach the gospel? The proclamation of the gospel is a pastoral priority, but it is, above all, the reason for the Church’s existence and the vocation of every baptized person. “*As long as she exists in this world, the Church must proclaim the Gospel of the coming of the Kingdom of God, the teaching of her Master and Lord and, above all, the Person of Jesus Christ*” (*Lineamenta*, 12).

The nihilism that pervades contemporary culture makes our witness to hope more urgent and necessary than ever before. Proclaiming Jesus Christ today demands that we re-examine our identity. We must ask ourselves, what is special about being a Christian? How are we living our Christian identity? “What is the quality of our faith?” The Church is aware of the ways she falls short in living faith, of the secularization coming into Christianity, and of the ineffectiveness of some ways she proclaims the gospel. The situation of some believers and some

3. *Lineamenta* 24

4. *Lineamenta* 2

Christian communities mirrors the frustration and despair of the disciples on the road to **Emmaus**. Certain ways of living the faith and of evangelizing lack vitality, and as a result they are not life-giving; our routine answers and customary activities are outdated and incapable of responding to today’s world.

In order to discover and define the essence of Christianity and our Christian identity we must engage in a **process of discernment** that helps us to interpret changes both within and outside of ourselves. In learning the meaning of these changes we will be able to present our faith anew (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4). The Synod document affirms that a mutual encounter between the Church and society must take place: the Church listening to and confronting society and society being confronted by the Church.

The document describes the situation of the world today by speaking of six characteristics of contemporary culture which describe both major shifts in society and possible responses to those changes from the perspective of New Evangelization. The context in which we are called to proclaim the gospel includes the following:

1. The culture of secularization which degenerates into secularism which sets God aside and consigns the religious aspect of life to the private sphere.
2. Immigration: the globalization of our societies puts them in flux.⁵
3. The means of social communication which exalt the emotions, the culture of a reality that is passing, a sort of virtual egocentricity.
4. The economic crisis which shows the failure of all economic projects that exclude God and the fragility of the human condition. “*The conviction that the economy must be autonomous, that it must be shielded from influences of a moral character, has led man to abuse the economic process in a thoroughly destructive way*”⁶ (*Caritas in Veritate*, 34)
5. Scientific research: without ethics, advances in science can become idols “religions of prosperity and instant gratification”

5. Cf. Z. Bauman, *The art of living*, Paidós, Barcelona, 2008

6. *Caritas in Veritate*, 34

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which prevent genuine human development.

6. Politics: new situations need to be enlightened by the teaching of the Gospel; “*the duty to seek peace; the development and liberation of peoples; improvement in forms of world and national governments; the construction of possible forms of listening, living together, dialogue and collaboration by various cultures and religions; the safeguarding of the rights of persons, entire peoples and, above all, minorities; support for the most vulnerable in society; and the stewardship of creation and the commitment to the future of our planet*” (Lineamenta, 6).⁷

The cultural context in which we are called to proclaim Jesus Christ has changed significantly, but the mission of the Church remains the same. We must re-examine the way we live our faith and humbly refine it in light of the secularization which threatens to eclipse the question of God, and of establishing our identity as disciples and missionaries. In the face of secularism which aims at eliminating the concept of God, we are invited to seek out new ways of being Church, of living as believers. New Evangelization encourages us to discover the face of God in Christ and to learn from him what it means to be truly human. The Church’s task is to sensitize society to the situation of poor people, to undertake specific works of justice and charity for the common good and to show concern for the five continents.

It is a matter of urgency that we:

- Give gospel responses to these new situations;
- Enter into dialogue with contemporary culture while maintaining critical judgment about trends and orientations in society;
- Humbly review the way that we ourselves live the faith.

II. THE MEANING OF MISSION

New Evangelization is the Church’s theological response to contemporary challenges. The Church’s proclamation reflects the mystery of the Trinity, the relationship between the Father, the Son

7. Lineamenta 6

and the Spirit. The Trinitarian God is the foundation of all evangelization: all ministry flows from the love of the Father who bestows his loving kindness and sends us the Son, who proclaims and accomplishes salvation, a mission continued by the Spirit.⁸

Accordingly, the ultimate goal of the Church’s mission is to make God known as revealed by Christ so that people may share in the very life of God.⁹ Jesus Christ is the greatest evangelizer; he communicates his Spirit to us so that we can proclaim his Kingdom. (cf. *Ad Gentes* 42). Without the Spirit there is no evangelization. The purpose of mission is **to make known** “*the God revealed by Christ through the Spirit: to evangelize is first of all to bear witness, in a simple and direct way, to God revealed by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 26)*; in other words, it is to reveal this God and enable people to approach God so that they can participate in the very life of God (*Redemptoris Missio*, 47). The aim of the Church’s mission is to embrace the life that the Father wants to bestow on the human family.

Jesus Christ, “the Good News of God”, the first and “the greatest evangelizer” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 7), the beginning and end of mission, pours the Spirit out on us so that we can proclaim God’s Reign (*Redemptoris Missio*, 18). The missionary mandate can only be carried out by the grace of the Spirit (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 74). There is no evangelization without the Spirit. Techniques and strategies are no substitute for the activity of the Spirit, both in the one who proclaims and in the one who listens.¹⁰ New Evangelization does not mean engaging in external activities, but being open to the action of the Spirit who challenges us with regard to our Christian identity, the way we live ecclesial communion, and our difficulty in forming authentic loving communities.¹¹

We are all called to evangelize, to be agents of evangelization who, union with the Church, understand our vocation from a missionary perspective. Evangelization is not a question of what we say but rather

8. As in *Ad Gentes*, 2-4

9. Cf. *Ad Gentes* 42

10. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 7

11. *Redemptoris Missio* 47

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the way we live in union as brothers and sisters in order to build the civilization of love.

III. A NEW MISSIONARY CONSCIOUSNESS: FROM PAUL VI TO BENEDICT XVI

The Church's mission, which began at Pentecost, has been evolving throughout history, but Christ's command to lead humanity to the Kingdom of God is still relevant.

A brief review of the most significant magisterial documents, beginning with Paul VI and on to Benedict XVI, will help us to see the development of the "new evangelization" which the Church proposes and to understand it as a renewal of the missionary spirit inspired by the Second Vatican Council. We will see that mission is the thread which runs through all the Council documents. The Council reminds us that being sent on mission is part of the Church's identity and that the Church exists to evangelize. The Church proclaims the Word, *Dei Verbum*, celebrates the paschal mystery, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and enters into solidarity with humanity, *Gaudium et Spes*, in order to bring the Good News of salvation to everyone. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* describes the missionary nature of the Church; the decree *Ad Gentes* further develops the understanding that her mission is directed toward all people. These documents continue to be a basic reference for theological and pastoral reflection on the Church's mission.

During the 1974 Synod a new paradigm for mission emerged: evangelization involves the entire Church. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) describes the role of evangelization in the modern world. "*Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 14).* The church's mission is a prolongation of Christ's mission (*Evangelii Nuntiandi, 1*). The mission of the church is presented in a more dynamic manner that emphasizes the centrality of the mystery of Christ as a response to the mystery of the human person (*Gaudium et Spes, 22*) Mission is the offer of salvation to all people of good will in whom grace is secretly at work. (*Redemptoris missio, 10*)¹²

12. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 7

JOHN PAUL II

The call for "new evangelization" was one of the great accomplishments of John Paul II through which he developed the reflections which Paul VI had begun in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. What is new about this impetus to preach the gospel to people of today? New evangelization is new because of the movement of the Spirit in the hearts of those who evangelize; it is new because its methods are better adapted to the present situation, and it is new in the countries that have already received the proclamation of the gospel. The key to resolving the problem of secularization within the Church, of apostolic apathy and the lack of vocations is recovering enthusiasm for evangelization: "*The love of Christ impels us*" (2 Cor 5:14).

John Paul II developed this theme at the Pontifical Council for Culture (1986) and in his apostolic exhortation, *Christifideles laici* (1986). In the apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Europa*, he speaks about the need for pastoral activity that evangelizes. In the encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), the first missionary encyclical in continuity with the understanding begun during the Council, the Pope describes the new situations of the mission, the agents and those responsible for evangelization, a specific area for cooperation and a missionary spirituality. The concept of salvation, affirming Christ as the only Savior, is clarified.

The phrase "new evangelization" was first used by John Paul II during his 1983 visit to Port au Prince, Haiti in the context of the 500th anniversary of the first evangelization of America. The Pope did not use the word "re-evangelize" because he did not want to be interpreted as criticizing the first efforts of evangelization. Rather he spoke about going forth to encounter people today with the same missionary zeal and creativity, and so bringing the gospel to the new continent of the present world, of the new culture, of the new generation and of the society of the future. The new continent is not defined by geographical boundaries but by the new culture that has been adopted. The new evangelization is not an attempt to restore previous models but rather opens up new areas for the faith and seeks to proclaim the gospel in a more adequate manner: "new times, new missionary zeal, new methods and procedures".

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Since secularization has affected every continent, though in different ways, the new evangelization is not a problem exclusive to the western world. The new evangelization is not determined by geography but by the cultural situation. A new continent has arisen peopled by those who are removed from and indifferent to the question of God.

The encyclical *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001) is a call to committed missionary endeavour that springs from an encounter with Christ. In order to recover the missionary thrust the Church ought to contemplate the face of Christ, enter into the dynamics of the new commandment and make all pastoral activity an expression of Christ's love. *"If we have truly contemplated the face of Christ, dear Brothers and Sisters, our pastoral planning will necessarily be inspired by the new commandment which he gave us: 'Love one another, as I have loved you' (John 13:34)" (Novo Millennio Ineunte, 42).*

The New Evangelization presumes that we take Christ as our starting point: *"Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a program which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication" (Novo Millennio Ineunte, 29).*

BENEDICT XVI

In 2007 Pope Benedict XVI, in his discourse at the 5th Conference of CELAM [Latin American Episcopal Conference] in Aparecida [Brazil], took up the call of John Paul II for a new evangelization. He said that the Church needs to proclaim in an integral manner the message of salvation, to always defend the dignity of every human person, to deepen the understanding of faith values so that the Good News becomes rooted in the life and the conscience of all people, to deepen the understanding of the lifestyle proper to the disciples of Jesus and to offer new opportunities to those living in poverty.

Benedict XVI, on the occasion of the celebration of the Pauline Year, proposed the revelation of the true face of Christ in the New Areopagi [see Acts 17:16-34] as a pastoral priority. The Church's

missionary activity ought to be directed at key social centers in the third millennium.

The Pope is in no doubt about the indispensable contribution made by the Christian faith and heritage in the new cultural context. The faith dimension is a configurative and regenerative element in society. Revitalizing Christian roots will help society "recover its soul", that is, recover the transcendent meaning of human existence and recover the meaning of the human person's true, integral development.¹³

Throughout his pontificate the Pope has been developing basic themes which create a foundation for Christian faith: God's love and mercy, the centrality of Jesus Christ and his redemptive work, the hope of eternal life, the primacy of charity in human behavior and the need to purify and sanctify humankind's everyday life. The Pope's own ministry is in itself a truly evangelizing action.

The announcement of a **Year of Faith** to be celebrated on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council should be understood in the same way: to view the faith as the central concern of our pastoral activity.

With this same objective in mind Benedict XVI created the **Pontifical Council** to promote evangelization (2010), convinced of the fact that *"the new evangelization is a priority in the Church's pastoral project for the present and the future" (Lineamenta, 24).* New evangelization inaugurates *"a new stage of history in her missionary dynamism" (Lineamenta, 10)* to lead people to Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

To develop this vocation of gospel service we need to listen anew to the gospel message. We have to allow ourselves to be evangelized,¹⁴ **nourished by the Word** (*Verbum Domini*, 96). As the Church listens to the Word she proclaims a message of hope, joy and peace to the world.¹⁵

13. Redemptoris Missio 18

14. Evangelii Nuntiandi 74

15. Redemptoris Missio 21 and 45

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In other documents of the Latin American bishops, documents that were formulated in Medellin (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992) and Aparecida (2007) the same missionary spirit is taken up. Among the more recent documents that of Aparecida stands out with regard to the three actions that it proposes: to relaunch the mission by incarnating the gospel in diverse realities; to redefine Christian identity at the present time in Latin America; to renew ecclesial institutions in order to make the task of evangelization possible.

To relaunch the mission presupposes giving new birth to evangelizing zeal in new areas of mission. As the bishops of Latin America gathered at Aparecida remind us: “*May no one remain with folded arms! To be a missionary is to announce the Kingdom with creativity and boldness in every place where the Gospel has not been sufficiently announced or welcomed, especially in the difficult or forgotten environments and beyond our borders*” (D.A. p.26, no 4).

One of the challenges for evangelization today is “*to promote and form disciples and missionaries who respond to the calling received and to communicate everywhere, in an outpouring of gratitude and joy, the gift of the encounter with Jesus Christ. . . . This is the best service—his service!—that the church has to offer people and nations*” (Concluding Document, p.35 no. 14).

IV. A NEW PARADIGM FOR MISSION

Since the time of the Second Vatican Council a new paradigm with regard to the mission has been in the process of being formed, that is, a new way of understanding the mission of the Church, moving from a Church-centered vision of mission to a missionary understanding of the Church. The mission remains situated in a new horizon of service to the mission of God; “mission” and “missions” are integrated in “new evangelization”. The documents of the magisterium reveal continuity in the missionary awareness of the church, as Benedict XVI reminds us in his apostolic letter *Porta Fidei*. This Year of Faith will start on October 11, 2012, a date that marks the anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and will end on November 24, 2013.

“*The Church desires to bring her unique message into today’s world and the present discussion, namely, to proclaim the Kingdom of God, begun in Christ Jesus*” (*Lineamenta*, 10). We can distinguish two stages in this process:

From *Gaudium et Spes* to *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Redemptoris Missio* different topics have been dealt with: the Church in the world, the preferential option for the poor, the evangelization of the culture of freedom, dialogue in faith and post-modernity. In the Instructions of 1984 and 1986, it is explained that the preferential option for the poor is not sectarianism or particularity, but rather a manifestation of the universality of the nature and mission of the Church. For John Paul II, the conflict with modern culture is a moral problem since a different human concept of the person makes it necessary to wonder what is specific to Christian morality (*Veritatis Splendor* [1993]).

The documents of the Magisterium, from the time of Vatican Council II to the present, express in an on-going manner the Church’s interest and concern for evangelizing those who are poor and for evangelizing the culture of freedom. Likewise, they convey the Church’s desire to accompany humanity in this stage of its history, characterized as it is by rapid and profound global change. Today Christ is the real sign of the times, the fundamental key to evangelization, to leading people toward God and to renewing our vocation as disciples and missionaries: “*Belief in Jesus Christ, then, is the way to arrive definitively at salvation*”.¹⁶

V. EVANGELIZING MEANS PROCLAIMING JESUS CHRIST

Evangelization is not simply the proclamation of good news. The word “gospel” appears in the Old Testament, in the prophet Isaiah’s Book of Consolation addressed to Israel (Is 40--66). “Gospel” connotes consolation which is neither affective nor fabricated, but is divine action that changes the situation of anyone who is in difficulty; consolation is salvation.

16. Cf. *Lineamenta* 2

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“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation, and saying to Zion, ‘Your God is King!’” (Isaiah 52:7). For the prophet Isaiah it is the Messiah who evangelizes and who is sent to console: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has sent me to bring the gospel to the lowly” (Isaiah 61:1). The proclamation that Israel received was the announcement of God’s coming among them, the end of the time of tears and sorrowing.

Furthermore, Saint Mark speaks at the beginning of his gospel of “proclaiming the gospel of God”. He is not referring to a book but to a proclamation: God reigns; to proclaim the gospel is to believe that God reigns now, in the present moment. To evangelize is to proclaim salvation, to announce the reign of God, the reign of justice and peace. This is the work of the Messiah, the only one who can bring the Reign of God for us (Mark 1:14). This announcement that God reigns implies that the gospel is to be proclaimed to all nations. Letting ourselves be evangelized means we must let God reign in us, let God’s kingdom come (Mark 16:15).

To evangelize is to transform cultural values to make them accord with the plan of God the Creator, to free humankind from everything that oppresses it and to communicate salvation. In his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* John Paul II states that to evangelize is to help persons to be fully human, to help people recover what is authentically human. Evangelization is an invitation to believe that God changes our lives and humanizes us when we allow Him to reign in us.

The Kingdom of God is not some spectacular event but the power and strength of God’s reign is found in what is insignificant. Jesus speaks about the Kingdom as a seed capable of producing abundant fruit (Matthew 13:19). The Word of Jesus makes our efforts fruitful, the Reign Jesus brings the power to leaven the dough and to have an impact on all people of all times. All the images that Jesus uses to speak about the Kingdom--yeast, seed, salt and light--are, in a certain sense, images of “death”. The seed must decompose; yeast has to be dissolved; salt become tasteless. In other words, evangelization means that we give ourselves generously and die to self even though

the fruitfulness of the Kingdom does not depend on us but on God

The **goal**, therefore, of all evangelization, is to help people today discover the mystery of God in their own lives and create the conditions in which faith can be reflected upon, celebrated, lived and prayed about (cf. *Lineamenta*, 11). It is in Jesus Christ, in his person and through the example of his life, teaching and actions, that God is revealed. (*Dei Verbum*, 4).

We cannot proclaim Christ without undergoing renewal. “Christian communities ought to know how to respond with responsibility and courage to the renewal required of the Church...” (*Lineamenta*, 9). This renewal is achieved when we contemplate the face of Christ, when we speak to him, when we try to help others see him (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 16), when our Christian life reflects our passionate love for Christ (*Vita Consecrata*, 109; *Christifideles Laici*, 64), and when we recognize the primacy of Christ as “Savior and Evangelizer” (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, 39).

This process of renewal is necessary because of the gap between the experience of faith and of our own lives. The real crisis in the Church is a crisis of faith. The Synod’s *Lineamenta* speak of people who are weighed down with weariness, with the secularism which surrounds us, with an indifference which invades every aspect of daily life and eventually erodes enthusiasm and vitality for sharing the faith. (*Lineamenta*, 96, 15). This weariness does not have to be interpreted as a crisis of identity, but rather as a feeling of helplessness in the face of a world that wants nothing to do with God.

Renewal should not be viewed as simply updating our knowledge,¹⁷ but rather as a process of personal conversion. The call to conversion is not so much a question of moral efforts on our part but rather our being open to grace. God calls us to live our faith deeply and not become rigidly fixed in the daily events of everyday life.

17. Cf. AG, 35, Spiritual renewal

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The Church, too, participates in this process of pastoral conversion to the mission. A new way of being Church is needed, with a new countenance marked by the action of the Son and the Spirit, which makes the Church an instrument of evangelization (*Lumen Gentium*, 4; *Redemptoris Missio*, 92). The Church does not proclaim ideas but is called to be a presence in the world, to share, to dialogue and to witness to a new life which shows the newness of life brought by Christ which favors unity and fraternity.

The proclamation of the gospel is an experience of communion.¹⁸ The Church is called to create mature ecclesial communities which recognize a love that precedes them, and saves them by sacrificing itself for mankind.¹⁹ The mission of the Church is to offer herself up for everyone so that all may be brought into the dynamic of being children of God and brothers and sisters of one another.²⁰

18. *This new evangelization which is addressed not only to all individuals but to whole groups of people in the diversity of their circumstances, their background and their culture, is meant to aid the formation of mature ecclesial communities, that is to say, ones where faith is deepened and practiced in its original sense of following Christ and living out his Gospel, meeting him in the sacraments and living a life of charity and service*

19. "It is not science that redeems man: man is redeemed by love. This applies even in terms of this present world. When someone has the experience of a great love in his life, this is a moment of "redemption" which gives a new meaning to his life. But soon he will also realize that the love bestowed upon him cannot by itself resolve the question of his life. It is a love that remains fragile. It can be destroyed by death. The human being needs unconditional love. He needs the certainty which makes him say: 'Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:38-39). If this absolute love exists, with its absolute certainty, then—only then—is man 'redeemed', whatever should happen to him in his particular circumstances. This is what it means to say: Jesus Christ has 'redeemed' us. Through him we have become certain of God, a God who is not a remote 'first cause' of the world, because his only-begotten Son has become man and of him everyone can say: 'I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20)" (Spe Salvi, 26).

20. "Christian community is profoundly and definitively based on the faith which assures us that we are truly children of the Father and brothers and sisters to one another." J. Ratzinger, *La fraternidad Cristiana* [Christian Community], Sigueme, Salamanca, 2005, p. 70

This experience of the superabundance of love brings about the **reconfiguration of humankind's social, cultural, moral, and institutional framework**. It is the human person of Christ, the second Adam, who reveals to us what it means to be truly human. There is no other way of evangelizing than by communicating our own faith experience.

VI. THE MISSION OF THE CHRISTIAN

Jesus is the Light but needs his disciples, his followers, his "friends" (Jn. 15:14-16) to keep the light burning brightly. The incarnation itself is the basis of the call that is extended to other persons to collaborate in Jesus' mission. The mission of Christians consists, first of all, in listening to the appeals made by people, to the pleas of men and women of our day, embracing and sharing in their suffering. The Spirit who prays in us in with indescribable sighs and groans does not want us to live in solitary intimacy with God, but wants us to participate in the very love of God and in the mission of Jesus. The Spirit sends us into the world to listen to the groaning of creation that is awaiting its final liberation.

"The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts" (Gaudium et Spes, 1). "The Christian community is composed of men and women. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds" (Gaudium et Spes, 1). Fifty years later this statement continues to be both valid and indispensable; the relationship between the Church and the world is not based on optimism which springs from historical experience, but on the solidarity of Christ with the entire human race.

Listening to the anguished cries of creation implies entering into dialogue and responding to the questions that well up from the hearts of men and women—**both dialogue and proclamation**. In the same

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way that Jesus went from Nazareth to Capernaum so, too, we must leave our small universe and engage with the world.²¹ Christianity spread to the great cities of that epoch: Jerusalem, Corinth, Athens, Ephesus, Rome, etc. We cannot remain in “Nazareth” concerned about “internal affairs”; we have to go to Capernaum to proclaim the Good News of the gospel in new circumstances. This cannot be accomplished if our-minds are closed or if, through fear, we remain anonymous; we can only evangelize by dialoguing with today’s society

Christ’s incarnation demands that faith be **inculturated** in every aspect of human life. The gospel needs to be expressed within a culture, although faith in Christ does not result from any culture, nor is it identified with any particular culture.²²

The Christian message moves toward **universality** in that **the love that God revealed in the Redeemer of the world is for the whole human race**. “*The plan of God is to consecrate all people who are scattered throughout the world*” (*Lumen Gentium*, 13-17). The God of Israel is not God of only one place, but rather is the God of all people, a universal God who “*makes us a ‘we’ which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is ‘all in all’*”.²³ We are united to God by His love which makes of humanity a people reconciled with one another.

The reason for this dialogue is **theological in nature**. The Church ought to enter into saving dialogue with all people because God continues to offer salvation to humanity.

Next, the mission of a Christian consists in **living our baptismal identity** as children of God in the Son through the gift of the Spirit. This identity which we must evidence is pure grace; we have to recognize and take hold of who we are and let the depths of our **Christian vocation** be obvious to others.

21. The Church in Europe. 50

22. “Christianity . . . while remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root”(Novo Millennio Ineunte, 40).

23. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 18.

In the context of new evangelization we will live our Christian identity in a new way, with **new fervor, new approaches and new ways of expressing** the faith. Deep union with Christ produces fervor; our missionary spirit will grow to the degree that we draw close to Christ and allow ourselves to be on fire with charity. New approaches derive from fresh attitudes and new ways of imparting the gospel; new expressions of faith are a sign of a restored presence of Christianity in the midst of society and give a new face to Christianity.²⁴

This new way of proclaiming the gospel does not refer to pastoral strategies but rather to a new and meaningful way of presenting the gospel that facilitates openness on the part of persons who can sense a reality that is beyond measure. We must look for ways to present the question of God honestly, with openness of spirit and lack of formality, with sound and rational arguments (*Lineamenta*, 16). As B. Sesboüe states, “*Today it is not enough to speak about God or Christ to people; we first have to speak to them about themselves. We must become listeners, must engage in a pastoral ministry of listening*”.²⁵

This is a new **global style** that includes thought and action, the personal and the communal, private and public, education and charity; it is a style that challenges us individually and as a group. Tactfulness and respect are part of this new style. Evangelization is an act of love, of compassion, of mercy toward our brothers and sisters. Attentive listening, proclaiming the truth with love, humility in our presentation, and confidence in the Lord, are part of this process of proclamation. We cannot present the gospel without being mindful of the religious situation of those we speak to, and their daily circumstances. “*For our witness to be credible, as we respond to each of these areas requiring the new evangelization, we must know how to speak in ways*

24. “*Zeal for the building up of the Kingdom of God and the salvation of our brothers and sisters is the clearest proof of an authentic self-donation on the part of consecrated religious. This is true because every attempt at renewal becomes a new impetus for the evangelizing mission*” (*Starting Afresh from Christ*, 9 [Instruction of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life]; cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 2).

25. B. Seboüe, *Invitación a la fe católica para las mujeres y hombres del siglo XXI* [*An Invitation to the Catholic Faith for Twenty-First Century Women and Men*], Saint Paul’s, Madrid, 2000, p. 14.

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that are intelligible to our times and proclaim, inside these areas, the reasons for our hope which bolsters our witness. Such a task is not accomplished without effort, but requires attentiveness, education and concern” (*Lineamenta*, 22).²⁶

Evangelizing in a new way and in new situations means manifesting who we are to those who cross our path in the “courtyard of the Gentiles” (*Lineamenta*, 5) those who are still searching, and creating cultural spaces where people can discover their original vocation (*Lineamenta*, 21).

Finally, the Church’s mission is to lead creation to ultimate liberation. We have to be concerned about everything that has been created so that all peoples and all creation may be a pleasing offering to God (Rom. 15-16). The mission of the Church is to show the world it has a meaning and reason for its existence.²⁷

A small flock or a great multitude?

Holy Family Cathedral, the work of the architect Antonio Gaudí, in the city of Barcelona, has been chosen to be an icon of the new evangelization. This sanctuary is a sacred space with towering spires rising toward the heavens, and it is like a forest of huge columns that invite us to look on high as if to capture mystery. Church and city enter into dialogue in a continual search.

Small flock or great multitude? J. Danielou²⁸ asks this question in his book *Iglesia y secularización* [Church and Secularization]. New evangelization proposes neither a Christianity which is for the elite nor a Christianity which is for the masses; we reject neither what Benedict

26. “Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 63)

27. The greatest liberating force, the great exorcism that purifies the world. For the many gods that come and go in the world, only one is Lord and God. (Jesus of Nazareth, Vol 1, chapter on the disciples.

28. J. Danielou, *Iglesia y Secularización*, [The Church and secularisation BAC, Madrid, 1973, p. 23

XVI calls “the Church of the people” nor faith’s presence in the public sphere. Evangelization can be fruitful and meaningful through the radicalism of the gospel.

This is the challenge that the Pope sets before us when he refers to the Church and Christian communities as “creative minorities”. Pope Benedict XVI uses this expression to state the fact that the destiny of society always depends on creative minorities. We Christians are called to be a significant creative minority which is neither narrow-minded nor arrogantly willful; we cannot be closed in on ourselves or attempt to transform all reality by our efforts alone.

For Christianity to be meaningful we must rediscover the essential basis of our faith; faith in a Triune God. We are privileged to be able to share in the grace of proclaiming Christ by giving the witness of our Christian life which ought to be a “fitting response to God” and “a service to our brothers and sisters” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 11).

Fernando del Castillo, CM

How the Daughters of Charity Are to Evangelize

1. CHARITY, THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

The fact that the Church has set new evangelization as a pastoral priority raises a challenging question for us: How can a Daughter of Charity evangelize? How can the Daughters of Charity collaborate in the new evangelization in a way that is in conformity with their specific identity? How can they promote lived charity that is rooted in the gospel and that evangelizes? How can they evangelize in the midst of new forms of poverty? I will attempt to approach these questions from a **pastoral perspective** with the hope of probing a new understanding of charity and its missionary dynamism, or, as John Paul II said, “*a new creativity of charity*”.

In a certain sense new evangelization implies a **change of mentality** in the ways we understand and practice charity. Jesus’ command to his disciples, “*Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature*” (Mk 16:15) continues to be relevant, but we need to re-examine how we understand and practice charity.¹ Charity cannot be limited to handouts, nor be satisfied with activities that do not involve commitment.

In order to rediscover the missionary dimension of charity, the charity that is the heart of the gospel, we need to reflect on our actions. We have to do something about charity that is carried out as routine, about weariness and individualism in our ministry: we must abandon isolationism in the face of new means of social connectivity, and eliminate a certain perfectionism in our apostolate, be open to new situations and move on from our comfort zone. ***There can be no evangelization without charity, without discovering the mystery of***

What is the essence of Christian charity? What do Christian faith and love add to “secular” works of charity?³ The essence of charity does not consist in carrying out a series of activities, but is, rather, taking on “**the gift that involves self-giving**”.⁴

Yet it is not enough to know that one is loved and to love others; in order to embrace the gift one must discover truth: “Truth is the light that gives meaning and value to charity”; without the truth charity degenerates into sentimentality, becomes an empty shell, and risks being ruled by our emotions.⁵ Unless charity is joined to truth the Christian experience of charity runs the risk of being reduced to an ethical code. Truth helps us to embrace reality, to identify the needs of others and to seek the holistic development of the human person. Truth demands of charity that we reflect on what we do, on the priorities and criteria which inform how we act.

2. “*Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the Church is called to follow the same route that it might communicate the fruits of salvation to all people . . . Thus, the Church, although it needs human resources to carry out its mission, is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim, even by its own example, humility and self-sacrifice. Christ was sent by the Father to bring good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart, to seek and to save what was lost. Similarly, the Church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder. It does all it can to relieve their need and in them it strives to serve Christ*” (Lumen Gentium, 8).

3. “*The entire activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of man: it seeks his evangelization through Word and Sacrament . . . and it seeks to promote man in the various arenas of life and human activity*” (Deus caritas est, 19)..

4. “*This ‘new heart’ will make it possible to appreciate and achieve the deepest and most authentic meaning of life: namely, that of being a gift which is fully realized in the giving of self. This is the splendid message about the value of life which comes to us from the figure of the Servant of the Lord: ‘When he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his life . . . he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied’ (Is 53:10.11. . . . This is the New Law, ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ (Rom 8:2), and its fundamental expression, following the example of the Lord who gave his life for his friends (cf. Jn 15:13), is the gift of self in love for one’s brothers and sisters: ‘We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren’ (1 Jn 3:14). This is the law of freedom, joy and blessedness*” (Evangelium Vitae, 49).

5. Cf. *Caritas in Veritatae*, 3

1. Tercer millenio adveniente, 33

How the Daughters of Charity are to Evangelize

Evangelization is not just the communication of a message or ideas nor values but is, rather **a resounding proclamation**. *“Humanity is loved by God! This very simple yet profound proclamation is owed to humanity by the Church. Each Christian’s words and life must make this proclamation resound: God loves you, Christ came for you, Christ is for you ‘the Way, the Truth and the Life’ (Jn 14:6).”* (Christifideles Laici, 34).

Charity proclaims the truth of Christ’s love in the midst of society, and to the degree that we act in conformity with the gift we have made, charity causes us to look upon God and even to profess faith in Him. In this way charity becomes **a way to meet God** in the human person.⁶ It is not easy to meet God in traditional ways; people need formation, need to be introduced to the way to find God. Charity is an exceptional means that allows us to bring Jesus’ presence to every situation, to reveal God, to make God’s presence felt, and to enable people to experience the living presence of the God they may not yet know.

Charity provides those who do not know God with a wonderful opportunity to taste and enjoy the experience of God. Charity makes God’s saving activity visible to people and also reveals humanity’s involvement in Christian salvation. The witness of solidarity and service is an exceptional way to evangelize, one that engages those who are disaffected or unbelieving. Love is the way many persons who do not have faith find access God.

The spirit of the Company consists in being given to God in community for the service of those who are poor, a service which is characterized by humility, simplicity and charity. *“May God in his goodness, dear Sisters, be pleased to pour forth abundantly on you his Spirit, which is nothing other than love, gentleness, graciousness, and charity.”* (Coste IX:221)

6. *“Saint John’s words should rather be interpreted to mean that love of neighbor is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and that closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God”* (Deus caritas est,16). *“In God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, even affecting my feelings. Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ* (Deus caritas est, 18).

For Saint Vincent de Paul **to evangelize is to love**; continuing the mission of Christ, evangelizer of the poor, means recognizing the importance of faith and charity and attending to peoples’ **spiritual and corporal** needs as two dimensions of one activity. *“Their primary concern is to make God known to them, to proclaim the Gospel.* (C.10a) Charity needs to be concrete and demonstrable; we must make every effort to make structures more just and humane, and be concerned for the whole person, not simply their material needs. Firm commitment opens the way for others to discover the love of God the Father.

From a Vincentian perspective, charity evangelizes when we are ourselves rooted in Christ and clothed in attitudes of adoration, service and compassion, when we trust in God’s Providence and conform our actions to those of Christ. At Christ’s school we learn to trust in God, to renounce ourselves in order to accomplish God’s plan by conforming our lives to Christ’s own obedience and surrender.

To evangelize is to love, to live in love and bring this light into the world. The Daughters of Charity evangelize when, with humility, they no longer believe they are the saviors of the world; they do not give way to the temptation to discouragement and are even able to accept failures.

The **Inter-Assemblies Document** invites us to view the world with the sensitivity of our Founders, to respond creatively to the new calls of those who are poor, to deepen the prophetic sense of charity, to seek the integral development of the person, and to live service as a mission that had been entrusted to the community.

To discover charity as the heart of the gospel implies that we do not reduce our encounter with God in Christ to a spiritual experience but rather that we give witness to charity in our everyday life. Love speaks about God but speaks about God not with words but with action.

Genuine love allows us to accept the other person, *“Go and do likewise”*. Are we willing to take heed of the evils and the injustices that affect persons living in poverty? Do we dare to put aside our occupations and duties, our concerns and interests in order to make

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room for compassion and for feeling the pain of others as our own pain? What is our response when confronted with new forms of poverty?

A society without love, without generosity, indeed, a society established on its own well-being soon degenerates into a selfish society. Without love there is no humanity. The humble, generous, on-going practice of charity is the best support for evangelization. **The beauty of disinterested and effective charity** is the best argument in favor of our faith. Charity toward the neighbor is a sign that the love of God has come into the world.

2. THE GOSPEL OF CHARITY; WITNESS AND FULFILMENT

The testimony of personal and community charity forms part of the evangelization process. *Redemptoris Missio* 42 affirms that charity is the primary form of evangelization. Witness is a non-verbal proclamation that gives credibility to the word and is a sign that raises questions--not because of concepts but because of our lifestyle. Our actions give credibility to our words, just as our proclamation explains the meaning of our witness (Cf., *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 22)⁷. The mission of Christians with regard to new evangelization is to make the charity of Christ visible by giving witness and creating “spaces for salvation”⁸ (*Dei Verbum*, 2, 4, 7, 17, 18).

Witnessing to the gospel of charity is possible thanks to Christ’s love which renews the hearts of men and women and enables them to love. Grace raises people up and makes them fruitful: “*By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples*” (John 15:8). The witness of charity has great power to evangelize because it is a sign of God’s love and because it opens the heart and the mind of men and women to the proclamation of the true word. Often people open themselves to the Truth as a result of the witness of charity. As *Evangelii Nuntiandi* says, “*Modern men and women listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers*” (41).

7. EN 22

8. *Dei Verbum* 2, 4, 7, 17, 18

People who give witness to charity seem to know when they should talk about God and when they should talk about love. In any case, such witness is not limited to giving example but rather contains a more profound truth because it expresses the truth about God and the truth about the vocation of the human person. Witness is not an end in itself, but rather it is a means of helping people to recognize a Presence, that of Christ. “*In Christ, charity in truth becomes the Face of his Person, a vocation for us to love our brothers and sisters in the truth of his plan. Indeed, he himself is the Truth*” (*Caritas in Veritate*, 1).

The salvation that is celebrated in the liturgy, sung in our hymns, professed in the formulas of faith, explained in catechesis, is incarnated and becomes reality in charity. It is God working in the life experiences of people that saves: goodness, truth and beauty save us. In the light of “structures of sin” which prevent us from living true charity, we are called to create “structures of salvation”, spaces and places where the poor can experience the action of God and God’s love for them. These “saving structures” are places where the common good is sought, where people recover their dignity, where justice is promoted and where people experience the power of God, the mystery of God’s Love. *In the face of this weight of evil, the Lord places before us something of greater weight, the weight of infinite love that enters into the world.*⁹

Communion with Christ makes us new persons, Christ makes us able to live in a way that is in accordance with the heart of God and to lead all humanity to Him. It is a question of assuming what we are and of being what we receive, the body of Christ, and letting ourselves be filled with the dynamism of Christ.

Creating spaces for salvation means being a resting place, creating receptive spaces where people are able to experience love through action more than through words. We need to unleash the creative dynamism that is within us. We must open ourselves to God’s action and take risks without being afraid of what the results might be, allowing ourselves to be transformed and led by passion and compassion.

9. Benedict XVI, Address to the Italian clergy, 23rd February 2007

III. WAYS OF PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL OF CHARITY

New Evangelization opens new paths and new horizons where we can proclaim the gospel of charity: new, not because they are novel but because they represent a change in attitude and pastoral approach. We have to put aside our concern for efficiency and results. We need to speak of God's liberating love through works and demonstrate the sacramental and evangelizing character of charity by developing a new pastoral approach with regard to charity. New Evangelization needs to develop a pastoral approach to charity that is rooted and grounded in love.

Like the sower in the parable we will encounter different types of soil. One of these is "stony ground" where charity has not taken root but has been lived in a superficial manner, as something external. We will also find soil where "weeds" choke the seed of charity. But we will also find "good" soil where charity has taken root. It is important that we learn how to detect the new paths along which we can proclaim the gospel of charity, but first we need to ask ourselves if the roots of charity have acquired depth in our own lives.

How are we ourselves embracing the gospel of charity? We can be the "soil by the wayside", that is, we can hear without really accepting the other person as when we don't have time.

We can be the "stony ground"; we practice charity but it has not been internalized nor have its implications and demands. We have good intentions and sometimes we show boldness but at other times we let our emotions take over or we are impatient to see results.

We can also be the "seed that falls among thorns" when we want to live the gospel of charity but we are dominated by more pragmatic, and apparently more urgent problems.

Finally, we can be the "rich soil": we are faithful to practicing charity and letting ourselves be challenged by the poor.

I would suggest that there are two paths, two pressing pastoral aspects of our call to proclaim the gospel of charity:

- a) promoting charity as a way of serving poor people in accordance with our charism,
- b) presenting the gospel of charity to families and young people.

In either case, in order to proclaim the gospel of charity we need to welcome others with an attitude of humility. *"Clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for God opposes the proud but bestows favor on the humble"*(1 Pet 5:5).

A HUMBLE AND WELCOMING ATTITUDE

The fundamental attitude we need to have in New Evangelization is to welcome others in humility. Vincent's understanding of humility has an apostolic dimension: the person who is a witness of charity feels sent to accomplish the will of God and, therefore, he or she lives this commitment in an attitude of detachment and confidence in God. From a pastoral perspective, welcome, dialogue, respect, listening, valuing the human person, and affirming the dignity of persons are all expressions of humility.

Humility also implies that we allow ourselves to be evangelized by the other whom we are welcoming, and that we be witnesses, not of ourselves, but of the love of God. Father Robert Maloney writes that *"Humility implies an attitude of service. . . . We ought to listen to God who speaks to us when we experience the good will of the poor who share the little that they have; when we experience their gratitude to God for the simple gifts they have been given; when we experience them waiting against all hope for God to provide for them; when we experience their reverence, concern and respect toward us as well as toward God. If we allow them, the poor will preach most eloquently to us"*.¹⁰

10. Diccionario de espiritualidad vicenciana [Dictionary of Vincentian Spirituality] "Humilidad" [Humility], R. Maloney, CEME, Salamanca, 1995, p. 296.

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Being welcoming is a fundamental attitude in the process of New Evangelization that enables us to reveal the face of Christ and the gospel of charity is made credible. This is not some strategy but a freely-given act of deep love.

This welcoming attitude has to be present in our pastoral approaches and planning, as well as something that is internalized. In a certain sense, welcoming others is a way of engendering and generating life. In the context of New Evangelization some writers speak of a “ministry of generation”. For charity to evangelize, the situations and expectations of people must be considered. This pastoral approach of welcome implies dialogue and listening to the other. Mindful of the fact that the Spirit acts in the one who evangelizes as well as in the one who is evangelized, and that those who are evangelized in turn evangelize us, we proclaim the gospel with “reciprocal esteem” and “mutual affection” (Rom 12:4-10).

Being welcoming and willing to accompany another is a pastoral attitude that, when we encounter another person, facilitates the perception of his or her life from the viewpoint of faith with the gospel as a starting point. Pastoral ministry is not a matter of words, but is, rather, an expression of concern for others through attitudes of service, compassion and tenderness. When we welcome another we help that person to look about and to undertake a journey; we accompany the other in the process of establishing his or her unique identity and in the faith journey. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* speaks of a “person-to-person transmission” (46) which helps people transcend themselves and discover what is best about them.

A) SERVING THE POOR IN THE CONTEXT OF A CULTURE OF SOLIDARITY

Preferential love for persons who are poor is an intrinsic demand of the gospel of charity and is the basic criterion for all pastoral discernment. In the context of the present situation, the proposed new evangelization demands that we broaden and update our concept of poverty. Without abandoning the old forms of poverty we have to discover the new forms that have arisen and we must respond to

them with the gospel of charity. Despite the economic development of recent decades, social inequality persists and continues to become more pronounced. The comfortable life lived in a materialistic way, and excessive consumerism, have favored the expansion of the so-called “post-materialist poverties” which generally affect the weakest and most defenseless members of society.

In the new evangelization the Church adopts the Lord’s humility and self-sacrifice and recognizes his face in the faces of persons who are poor and suffering.¹¹ In light of the mystery of redemption we need to rediscover the active and “creative” value of every form of human suffering. Only with the cross of Christ, only from the perspective of crucified love, can we find a hopeful response to poverty and the suffering that people experience today. Preferential love for the poor and the witness of charity are the work of the whole Christian community. The gospel of charity is “a proof of [the Church’s] fidelity to Christ, so that she can truly be the ‘Church of the poor’”.¹² The mission of the Daughters of Charity is to give witness to charity in a practical way with effective love, searching out new and pressing needs, transforming works, structures and methodologies in order to best respond to the needs of today.

Love that is founded on the love of Christ, is the way to internalize the Gospel of Charity more deeply in order to enter into the dynamic of the Reign of God. We need “a Samaritan heart” in order to enter into real contact with each person, in order to set aside familiar approaches to charity and enter new territory, presenting a new face of charity. When we leave the comfort zones where we have lived the gospel of charity until the present time, we generate new possibilities of making known the salvation that Christ offers to us, to persons who are poor and alienated, and to non-believers and non-practicing Christians.

Christians are called to respond with love to the suffering of the poor. This is our challenge. Faced with this challenge and with new forms of poverty we cannot respond with the old benevolence associated with the individual practice of charity. In a post-industrial

11. Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 8; *Gaudium et Spes*, 88

12. *Laborem Exercens*, 8

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world with its powerful institutions our response takes on a political dimension: we must serve those living in poverty and create with them paths of liberation. Love of neighbor cannot be mere sentimentality. Poverty is an institutional and political problem and has a social dimension. In the political sphere charity demands that we examine the causes of poverty, that we prophetically denounce the social mechanisms that cause poverty and that we organize to fight for global transformation, that is, transformation of structures and institutions so that they serve humanity and life.

Justice is the first step on the path of love. The underlying cause of injustice is the lack of solidarity between people and populations. “*As society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbors but does not make us brothers and sisters*” (*Caritas in Veritate*, 19). Love promotes justice because it is concerned about people who suffer and about establishing bonds of solidarity; it has no limits but does have an objective; fraternity, the civilization of love

B) PRESENTING THE GOSPEL OF CHARITY TO YOUNG PEOPLE AND TO FAMILIES

In the document *Presenting the Faith to Young People Today: a Strength to Live By*,¹³ the hierarchy expressed the need to change perspectives when interacting with young people, the need to develop a more flexible pastoral ministry that embraces the possibilities and the risks of the present situation, the need to explore new paths that focus us on what is essential, and the need to communicate the experience of faith by using narratives that are related to the lived experiences of the young. We need a ministry to young people that has flexible “membership”, one that is diversified and of high quality where young people can be introduced to the life of prayer, receive formation, and actively participate in committed service.

What seeds do we attempt to plant in youth ministry? We have to help them to discover the God of Jesus, to discover in Jesus of Nazareth the human face of God as someone actively present in our lives. Today Jesus continues to be a figure who attracts others. Jesus moves us

13. Document by the Bishops of Quebec

because he introduces us to a God who is love, who embraces us before all else and accepts us unconditionally. Jesus captures our hearts by the choices he made, by his life, by his welcome for the poor, his freedom and his life of complete self-giving.

We have to present the gospel of charity to young people from the perspective of our Vincentian charism. The gospel of charity is the dynamic and unifying center of an integral pedagogy of faith because it takes into consideration communion and solidarity and offers concrete paths for commitment through experiences of unity and service. The gospel of charity can help young people discover what is true and good and beautiful (cf. Phil 4:8) and it can help them to love and live their Christian vocation as following Christ, as the perfection of charity. In other words, **they learn to respond to Love with love; they learn to be rooted in love.** Faith teaches us to look at the world with the eyes of a believer, to discover a unique motive for how we live and act, to discover the other person as neighbor.

The challenge lies in helping young people approach the complex world of poverty. Words are not enough, nor are formation, meetings, and books; we need to bring young people into real and direct contact with the poor; we need to arouse their sensitivity and concern for others. It is necessary to promote charitable activities that allow them to proclaim and share the faith that they have received. We need to invite them to participate in activities on behalf of justice that require commitment and fidelity. We need to stimulate the work of volunteers so that these individuals develop a sense of citizenship which gives added value to their socio-political commitment.

We cannot think about young people without thinking of their families, too, nor proclaim the gospel to them without evangelizing the family. In New Evangelization, “special attention must also be given to the pastoral care of the family” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 47). The Lord sends us forth to proclaim the gospel of charity to families who may be tempted to close in on themselves because of the demands of work, busy schedules and, at times, anxiety about the future. Many Daughters of Charity are in direct or indirect contact with families and accompany them spiritually and materially. Saint Vincent told

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the first sisters that they should go to people's homes to visit families in order to assist them in their difficulties and proclaim the gospel to them. The family is the primary setting for New Evangelization. The family is the context in which evangelization takes place on a daily basis between husband and wife, between parents and children, and it is where the gospel is transmitted from one generation to the next. How can we help married couples and families live their vocation of love? How can we proclaim the gospel of charity to them? How, in light of their specific situation as family, can we present them with opportunities to commit themselves to those who are most poor? There are many broken families and many married couples who experience difficulties; lack of employment, problems related to immigration, inadequate housing and addictions are all factors that make family life difficult. People are increasingly experiencing loneliness, sickness, disability and ageing. Families that are united to Christ become places of charity which influence others by their shining example.

CONCLUSION

What can we contribute to the new evangelization? The ongoing freshness of charity promotes "a transcendent humanism" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 18). This renewal of charity can help us overcome the deviations and the loss of meaning from which charity suffers in certain contexts. We must re-examine our charitable activity so that we can renew our option for the poor and express it in new and concrete ways.

This charity involves the integral development of the human person, and includes concern for people's material and spiritual needs. We cannot separate the proclamation of the gospel from promoting human development. So it is a matter of serving the poor as much as it is of bringing the Gospel to them. We need to be aware that Christ is indispensable for true humanism and for the integral development of the human person. We need to deepen our gospel convictions and become more familiar with Jesus' gestures and sentiments in order to adopt his attitudes. The mission of a Daughter of Charity is to be a witness to charity, to proclaim and to make God's love, manifested in Christ, present through her works.

Charity evangelizes when it puts people at the center of life. We do not work with problems, but rather with people: "Man is the source, the focus and the aim of all economic and social life" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 25). What we do springs from what we are; what we do expresses our identity. We are challenged to live charity as a service to poor people, affirming their dignity, making them the center of life and helping people to respond to the creative plan that God has for their lives. Development is not only evaluated from an economic and technological point of view; authentic development must include and promote the spiritual dimension of the human person.¹⁴

Charity evangelizes in the first person and it is a constituent element of our vocation. It is a matter of "*doing good now, and doing it personally.*" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 31b). What we do springs from who we are; what we do is an expression of our identity. We have to be motivated by charity, anything we do that is not motivated by charity is worthless. "*If I do not have love, I am nothing*" (1 Cor. 13:2). We can be generous, we can work miracles, but without love our pastoral ministry will bear no fruit. The absence of love negates all our actions, even extraordinary actions.

We cannot be satisfied with things as they are, nor with the customary ways of expressing charity; we have to continually "rejuvenate our charity". This phrase was used by Paul VI.

How can we rejuvenate charity?

We "restore charity to its youthfulness" when we give witness to a community in a way that is truly sisterly and when what we do is in union with the Church. It is not enough to be professionally competent; we have to give ourselves and be concerned for others in a sisterly way. Charity "rejuvenates" when we encounter Christ, when we develop our social conscience for justice and charity.¹⁵ Charity "rejuvenates" when we allow ourselves to be evangelized by the poor. We can be well-organized and have all modern technology at our

14. Cf., *Deus Caritas est*, 76

15. *Deus Caritas Est*, 13, *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, #46; *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 41

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disposal, but if we lack charity then our works and institutions will lack soul and we will find ourselves without energy, and without Christ's enthusiasm. Techniques, ideologies, and volunteer enthusiasm always need to be converted to the love of Christ.

Charity, the heart of the Church's life and the very essence of the life of Daughters of Charity, is the authentic "*human ecology*"¹⁶ that we are called to promote in order to be a sign of God's love in the midst of the world. May charity renew our spirit of service at the school of the gospel and the school of our Founders.

Father Fernando del CASTILLO, CM

The Company, Called to Let Itself Be Transformed by the Spirit

May 17, 2012

1. Introduction

In 1623, 389 years ago, Louise de Marillac spent the feast of the Ascension "*greatly disturbed*,"¹ her heart filled with doubts about what direction her life was to take and even on the immortality of the soul. We know, through the account that she herself gave, that she felt "*incredible anguish*"² the following days and that she did not find peace until the feast of Pentecost, June 4, 1623. The Ascension is, therefore, a very important date for each one of us; as following our Co-Foundress, we begin our preparation for the feast of Pentecost.

For Saint Louise, Pentecost was a decisive experience. The "Light of Pentecost" at Saint Nicolas des Champs let her understand what the Lord was asking of her. Then, docile to the breath of the Spirit of Pentecost, she was able to guide and accompany the Sisters in their vocational journey.

For his part, Saint Vincent encouraged them to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit who, in different ways, fills the universe and inspires our daily action³, and is strength and consolation. He thought it important that the Sisters should understand how the action of the Holy Spirit bursts forth in every event. "*We'll know that we've received Him,*" a Sister said during the conference of May 31, 1648, "*when we find ourselves more loving and more open to the acquisition of virtue.*"⁴

1. SW, p.1.

2. Ibid.

3. Cf. Saint Vincent de Paul, Conf. of January 22nd 1645, Observance of the Rule, Coste IX, page 171ff.

4. Saint Vincent de Paul, Conf. of May 31st 1648, Mental Prayer, CCD IX, page 321,

16. Centesimus Annus, 38

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Today, as then, the Company feels called to let itself be transformed by the Spirit and to live a continuous Pentecost, by being open to the future with hope. This transformation requires openness and docility to the action of the Holy Spirit *“They endeavor to respond to the inspirations of the Spirit, convinced that they will be the instruments of God’s work insofar as they are faithful. Saint Louise de Marillac expressed the desire that the Company be dependent on the Holy Spirit so that it might carry out the Father’s plan and bear witness to the Son, risen from the dead.”*⁵

It seems to me that to enter into this reflection so essential for the life of the Company, we could pursue together a path that has three stages:

- The Company is born at Pentecost
- The Company is called to live a continuous Pentecost
- The Company looks to the future with hope, in the light of Pentecost

I. PENTECOST MARKS THE BIRTH OF THE COMPANY

Let us make more use of the writings of the Founders...⁶

At the beginning of this reflection, I would like to invite you to reread another episode from the early days of the Company which profoundly marked the Sisters forever, and most especially Saint Louise. It was the collapse of the floor of the Mother House, on the Vigil of Pentecost in 1642, now 370 years ago.

The account of this event is found in the conference given by Saint Vincent on February 13, 1646, on “Love of Vocation and the Assistance to the Poor,” four years after the event. I encourage you to reread this conference where Saint Vincent, in a very moving and forceful way, leads his listeners in a sort of apostolic reflection even before this term was ever used.

5. C. 17c.

6. Inter-Assemblies Document, page 11.

Saint Vincent comments on a very recent event; something that happened a few days earlier in fact; a Sister carrying the soup pot to the poor, had miraculously survived the collapse of a house that had led to the death of 40 persons. Saint Vincent saw in this a sign of the goodness of God who is the author of the Company and who chose us for his work. He insists on God’s special design on the Company and on each of the Sisters, and gives another example of this, the tragedy avoided when a beam in the floor of the Motherhouse collapsed some years earlier...Saint Louise was in the room a few seconds before the incident and Monsieur Vincent was scheduled to be there, too, with a group of Ladies.⁷

Mentioning the consequences for the Sisters who were listening, St. Vincent said: *“So then, dear Sisters, those are some strong motives to encourage you to have great respect for your vocation because it’s pleasing to God, and the neighbor is assisted by it. Live it joyfully and without fear because God himself is protecting you.”*⁸

For her part, Saint Louise saw the collapse of the floor of the Mother House in the light of Pentecost that she received in 1623; she discovered in these two facts a very special sign of Providence.⁹

She deduced from them some lessons for herself and for the Company. *“... great union with one another. Since the Holy Spirit is the union of the Father and the Son, the life which we have freely undertaken must be lived in this great union of hearts... this virtue as well as that of total dependence on Divine Providence, since this is one of the virtues which God clearly requires of us in order to ensure the preservation of the Company.”*¹⁰

The first Sisters were aware of the treasure they had received and felt responsible for preserving it faithfully. The grace of the charism kept them alert, attentive and sensitive to the cries of the poor, and audacious in going and coming through the villages and hamlets to serve others in joyful availability.

7. Cf. Saint Vincent de Paul, Conf. of February 13th 1646, Love of Vocation and Assistance to the Poor CCD IX, page 190ff.

8. Ibid, page 197.

9. Cf. Saint Louise de Marillac, SW A.2, page 1

10. Saint Louise de Marillac, SW A. 75, page 768.

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The gift of Pentecost remained a vivid reality for them and I would like to quickly evoke the luminous testimony of some of them who let themselves be transformed by the Spirit in the simplicity of their daily lives, exhausting themselves for charity, for God, for those who are poor.¹¹ Let us recall Sister Andrée, whose only regret was to have taken too much pleasure in serving the poor, for she went in all haste to serve them.¹²

From the beginning, the Sisters knew how to face risks and complicated situations. Using a word current today, we could speak of their resilience.

Distance and the difficulty of communications turned many journeys into adventures, like the one experienced by Saint Louise and the Sisters destined to go to Nantes. Sometimes, their heroism consisted in leaving a service, as in Mans, where the Sisters who had started a hospital under dreadful conditions, were severely criticized and persecuted.¹³ On other occasions they had to face misunderstanding, calumny and rejection as happened in Chars where a priest publically refused to give communion to Sister Marie Poulet; at a time of painful conflict the Sisters held their ground against the pressure of Jansenism, which led to their departure from Chars.¹⁴

There are many other Sisters who let themselves be transformed by the Spirit. They remained firm in adversity and knew how to view events in faith. In them, shone the light of Pentecost. Today, these *strong women* are the Sisters in Syria and those of Nigeria faced with violence and extremists, those of Haiti, Chile, Japan, and the Philippines, in the face of natural disasters, and I leave you to continue the list...Colombia, Mozambique, China....

II. THE COMPANY IS CALLED TO LIVE AN ONGOING PENTECOST

11. Cf. Saint Vincent de Paul to Sister Anne Hardemont, November 24th 1658; CCD VII, page 397.

12. Cf. Saint Vincent de Paul, conf. of May 25th, 1654, The Preservation of the Company, CCD IX, page 537.

13. Cf. Saint Vincent de Paul, conf. of December 9th, Virtues of the Sisters, CCD IX, pages 433-439

14. Cf. Saint Louise de Marillac, L. 529 b and 527b ; SW, pages 559-261

The General Assembly, impelled by the breath of the Holy Spirit, (has) been enkindled by the fire of a new Pentecost for the Company.¹⁵ The call to let ourselves be transformed by the Spirit is a path of renewed conversion which requires openness of heart and docility to His inspirations. The Inter-Assemblies Document offers us some ways of living our vocation and mission under the impulse of Pentecost. You have used it well in your Provincial Plans (seventy have been approved since the General Assembly). I will take these as my inspiration for developing this next part.

*A continuous Pentecost implies living rooted in Jesus Christ, “the source and model of all charity.”*¹⁶

Rooted in Jesus Christ

We need to be rooted in Jesus Christ if we are to live a continuous Pentecost. Pope Benedict XVI used a quotation from the letter of Saint Paul to the Colossians: “*As you, therefore, have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith...*”¹⁷ as the theme for World Youth Day in Madrid last year. He used the evocative image of the tree that can grow and stand upright because of the depth and vitality of its roots, in a passage taken from the prophet Jeremiah: “*Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.*”¹⁸

From this comes our great responsibility to open ourselves to grace, to work daily on the formation of our heart, of deepening our spiritual life, of nourishing it on the Word of God and the sacraments, and translating it into charity: “*if faith does not take on new life, deep conviction and real strength from the encounter with Jesus Christ, then all other reforms will remain ineffective,*”¹⁹ as the Holy Father

15. Inter-Assemblies Document, page 3.

16. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 6.

17. Col.2: 6-7.

18. Jeremiah 17: 7-8.

19. Benedict XVI, December 22nd 2011.

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Benedict XVI emphasized in his annual talk to the Roman Curia at the end of 2011.

A life rooted in Jesus Christ has the capacity to marvel, to know how to savor the beauty of every day in joy. On the contrary, there are people who, unfortunately, go through their life like tourists who feverishly photograph everything they see, taking lots of pictures, but who forget to contemplate the wonders that the Lord does. In the same way, the quasi permanent eruption of external stimuli (electronic messages, telephone, radio, television, etc.) in our day causes much distraction and makes reflection, interiority, and discernment difficult.

The active power of the Word of God

The Inter-Assemblies Document underlines the importance of giving central place to the Word of God and rediscovering its power in our life.²⁰

The Word is power if it gives us the impetus for renovation, if it encourages us to begin anew, to live the struggle of faith with enthusiasm and produce the fruits of charity, for, *“Faith without charity bears no fruit, while charity without faith would be a sentiment constantly at the mercy of doubt.”*²¹

The Word is power if we let it enlighten us. This light sharpens our eyes to see daily life in the spirit of the Gospel, in order to recognize the Lord in people and events and let ourselves be transformed by those who are poor.²² It is also a mirror which reveals our inconsistencies to us, our mediocrities. Each one of us can surely recall moments of grace, such as Lectio Divina experienced in Community, a biblical meditation during an annual or monthly retreat.

Challenges for a life of faith

20. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 5.

21. Apostolic Letter Porta Fidei, n. 14.

22. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 5.

We need to strengthen our convictions of faith, of seeing to our ongoing formation in order to proclaim the Gospel in the world where the loss of a religious sense constitutes the greatest challenge for the Church, as the Holy Father Benedict XVI said: *“in vast areas of the earth faith risks being extinguished, like a flame that is no longer fed.”*²³

In some places, we discover contradictory phenomena: a growing thirst for spirituality which can break out in esoteric cults and lead to extremes and, on the other hand, secularism which in subtle ways pollutes consciences and penetrates our societies.

The guidelines for initial formation which we sent after the Seminarium of 2011, highlighted how much the present time is touched by diverse ideologies, some of which are contrary to the faith and which demand from authority *“an informed judgment on the part of those responsible for formation regarding the choice of presenters and proposed teachings.”*²⁴

The present times are not easy and, faced with so many forms of internal and external pressures that lead to a comfortable and superficial life, to a certain moral relativism, you are called to guide, stimulate, and encourage the life of faith.

Do you offer the Sisters motivations of faith that help them live in fidelity to their vocation and mission? Do you know how to respond with your Council to certain ways of acting that are not in accordance with obedience? Do you discern with the Council, the Sister Servants and Sisters what is consistent with our Constitutions and what is not? Do you encourage them to live evangelical detachment and to break with whatever attaches them to people, places and services?

*A continuous Pentecost implies living together, so that our Community life becomes a prophecy of love and a way of hope.*²⁵

23. Benedict XVI, talk of January 27, 2012 to the participants of the plenary assembly of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

24. Guidelines for Initial Formation. After the Seminarium of May 2011, page 4.

25. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 9.

The prophetic witness of a community of communion

Living well together is a call to make of our Local Communities places of sharing the experience of God, open and welcoming communities in view of the mission.²⁶ This union, strengthened in the Eucharist, stimulates working for community harmony, giving and receiving with humility, and the acceptance of each Sister as the Lord himself.

To live well together is an attractive testimony which invites questions and can awaken an interest in the faith. “...the Church... urgently needs such fraternal communities, which, by their very existence, contribute to the new evangelization, inasmuch as they disclose in a concrete way the fruitfulness of the ‘new commandment’”.²⁷

The community is a gift, rather than a human construction, it is a theological space where the Lord is present,²⁸ and it is a place of vocational growth. In your Provinces, how do you encourage the Sisters to create, in Community, this climate of faith which supports and stimulates the vocation of each one? How do you support your Sister Servants who bear the responsibility of it every day? This meeting and your group discussions are an excellent opportunity to share your experiences on this subject.

A spirituality of communion

The Inter-Assemblies Document, echoes the invitation of the Church and calls us to deepen the spirituality of communion²⁹ which leads us to compassion, to remain attentive to the suffering of others, to carry the burden of our brothers and sisters,³⁰ “resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us.”³¹ All this calls us to improve the quality of life. “Communion originates precisely in sharing the Spirit’s gifts, a sharing of faith and in faith, where the more we share

26. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 5.

27. Vita Consecrata, n. 45.

28. Cf. Mt. 18:20; Vita Consecrata n. 42; Fraternal Life in Community, n. 8.

29. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 5.

30. Cf. Ga. 6:2.

31. Novo millennio ineunte, n. 43 ; Cf. Starting Afresh from Christ, n. 29.

those things which are central and vital, the more the fraternal bond grows in strength.”³² This last sentence challenges us about the quality of our sharing.

Challenges of community life

In an ambiance which excludes and marginalizes, it is essential that we learn to integrate diversity. Culture, age and different ways of thinking are current characteristics to which we must pay attention. “Formation should prepare for community dialogue in the cordiality and charity of Christ, teaching to see diversity as richness and to integrate the various ways of seeing and feeling.”³³ Attitudes of acceptance, kindness, forgiveness and mercy create communion. Positive words and actions give birth to hope.

We must ask ourselves how to recover the Community times and spaces which bring harmony and balance, and that foster unity of life, which can be undermined by tensions and superficiality. With courage and in truth, we must strive to have a community climate, a quality of relationships and of sharing, giving time for apostolic reflection and other community gatherings, in a climate of mutual listening and dialogue.³⁴

Our life style reflects the quality and depth of our total gift to God. The Inter-Assemblies Document points out the necessity to adopt a life style which respects the environment.³⁵ for “the threats arising from the neglect – if not downright misuse – of the earth and the natural goods that God has given us. For this reason, it is imperative that mankind renew and strengthen “that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying.”³⁶

32. Fraternal Life in Community, n. 32.

33. Starting Afresh from Christ, n. 18.

34. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 10.

35. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 10.

36. Benedict XVI, Message for world day of peace, 2010.

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The Guide for the Sister Servant highlights the need to reflect on what is necessary and what is superfluous and to review the way to live poverty.³⁷ The use of new technologies, most particularly when they invade Community space and time, calls for attentive discernment.

*A continuous Pentecost implies “to serve by ‘coming and going’ with courage and creativity to manifest God’s love to persons living in poverty.”*³⁸

Renew our ways of responding to the challenges of the new forms of poverty

The Inter-Assemblies Document calls us to “*renew our ways of responding to the challenges of the new forms of poverty exacerbated by the global crisis and dare to take prophetic stances against injustice.*”³⁹ Fidelity to the legacy of our Founders presses us to be prophets of charity in today’s world.

In his message to the General Assembly of 2009, Pope Benedict XVI called us to “*be audacious and creative in pursuing the material and spiritual service of the most deprived people in your society!*”⁴⁰ We are invited to live in a community of communion with all citizens of an intercultural world of profound changes, scientific advancements, and marvelous technologies, a world also where injustice, oppression, people trafficking and the culture of death extend their tentacles in ways that are amazingly accepted as normal.

The many faces of the poor are everywhere. “*Thousands of people have tried and continue trying to cross deserts and seas, searching for an oasis of peace and prosperity, better education and greater freedom. The precarious situation of these poor people should awaken everyone’s compassion and generous solidarity...*”⁴¹

37. Cf. Guide for the Sister Servant, page 58.

38. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 13.

39. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 6.

40. Message de Benedict XVI to the General Assembly 2009.

41. Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Africae munus, n. 84.

Do we clearly take up positions in favor of the deprived, for the defense of life from its beginning until its natural end, for the promotion of justice and peace? What are our priorities? If too often the solutions escape us and remain beyond our reach, there always remains proximity of heart, compassion, and personal contact with *suffering faces that pain us.*⁴²

It is on the Vincentian charism that we base the positions we take, our manner of serving and our way of collaborating. Do we ask ourselves what we do and how we do it in order to rekindle the flame of the charism and respond with renewed zeal to the urgent needs of the most deprived in society? *Do we develop missionary priority plans in the Provinces as we continue the revision of works and ministries?*⁴³

Availability and attitude of servant

To serve by coming and going means being available, in the attitude of servant, to offer our time joyfully, generously and freely.⁴⁴ Availability and gratuitousness are expressions of simple and humble love. These attitudes are essential in order to assume the responsibilities confided by the Community and which go beyond personal desires. To live in a servant attitude requires detachment from oneself, a great freedom of spirit and a profound understanding of the mission of the Company.

Every service of a Daughter of Charity is the expression of her total self-giving to God; she carries it out in the name of the Company and is sent by it. How do you help the Sisters to remain available and feel a continuing sense of being on mission? How to you awaken the Vincentian enthusiasm of the Sisters who “*turn everything to love?*”⁴⁵

Collaboration and networking

The Inter-Assemblies Document underlines the importance of *promoting new forms of collaboration with lay people and supporting their formation in the Vincentian charism.*⁴⁶

42. Document Aparecida 2007, n. 407.

43. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 10.

44. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 6.

45. Constitutions, page 8.

46. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 13.

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I would like to highlight the importance of establishing collaboration with the laity based on sound foundations. In a pluralistic world, it is essential to guarantee the Christian identity and the Vincentian spirit of the works of the Daughters of Charity; the missionary plan of the ministry must encompass the whole person in his human and transcendent dimensions. The witness of charity must be visible; attention to persons who are poor and the most deprived always remains our priority.

For good service in collaboration, it is important that we clearly define the role of the Province, the Visitatrix and her Council, the Sisters who are on site, to specify the people to whom certain responsibilities are delegated and clearly state what systems are in place for accountability and control. Something very much at stake here is preparing the Sisters to know how to work in teams, to welcome the opinions of others and learn from them. It is also important to offer all employees a solid Christian formation, when possible, and Vincentian values always. The works of the Company must be able to accomplish the apostolic purpose for which they were started, we are responsible for them. Do we remain vigilant to ensure that the works are consistent with the charism? *Do we check that the way we serve and our criteria for action remain the clear expression of the charism?*

The Inter-Assemblies Document also invites us to “*intensify our networking in the Company, the Vincentian family and the Church.*”⁴⁷ It is important to study how to improve and develop networking in order to share and encourage projects. This is a systematic work of collaboration and of complementarity in order to foster projects in common, with the whole picture in mind. That demands efforts of coordination, sharing of experiences, information, etc. All that requires a broader view that goes beyond local and provincial actions, opening ourselves up to act in accordance with more universal criteria. I note with joy the growth among us of true collaboration at the international level, to respond to urgent needs, as well as generous sharing of personnel and resources...the missions in Kenya, in Tanzania, the Fiji Islands, the annual Vincentian missions in Chili, Paraguay, Argentina, the services in Ukraine, in Siberia...

47. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 11.

A continuous Pentecost implies that we “deepen our sense of belonging to the Company and take responsibility for the ‘Company of the future.’” (cf. C. 59)⁴⁸

Deepen our sense of belonging to the Company

This fourth appeal of the Inter-Assemblies Document plunges us into the heart of our Vocation and our mission and calls us to our responsibility to live and to preserve the charism, the treasure of the Company. Future vocations will receive the legacy that we leave them.

The sense of belonging reflects the vitality of a vocation and is shown by the way our life is consistent with the Constitutions and Statutes. Clear expressions of belonging include availability, mobility, joyful acceptance of the guidelines of the Company, co-responsible participation in the common mission, an interest in all that affects the Company, etc.

Formation, whose goal is to strengthen the motivations and the dynamism of the vocation,⁴⁹ helps to deepen communion with the entire body of the Company as well as the sense of belonging. I am sure that you have this concern and that you do work to strengthen in the Sisters, beginning with initial Formation, the appropriation of the values of the Company as the basis of belonging.

Revitalize the missionary vocation

The Inter-Assemblies Document strongly urges us to “revitalize the missionary vocation of the Company, beginning with initial formation and continuing throughout our lives.”⁵⁰

Do we do everything possible to keep alive the flame of the missionary spirit that our Founders lit in the Company? They did not hesitate to send the Sisters, on the highways of the world, even in the midst of

48. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 7.

49. Cf. C. 49.

50. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 11.

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great difficulties. Their words strongly resonate in our hearts and call out to us: *“That’s how you must act in order to be good Daughters of Charity, and to go wherever God wants: if to Africa, then to Africa... you’re Daughters of Charity, you must go.”*⁵¹

The new evangelization to which the Church presses us is a challenge which requires new evangelizers. We must broaden our outlook beyond our Province in order to foster and stimulate the sending of Sisters to new implantations or to reinforce others in difficulty.

As you know, the concept of mission ad gentes has been broadened and goes further than an understanding which is merely geographical and territorial. We are called, in some cases, to leave our regular ministries to go to people far and near: the entire world and the heart of each person are missionary ground. What efforts do we make in our Provinces to give a new missionary impetus?⁵²

To give impetus to ministry with young people and vocations

It is within the framework of faith that vocational ministry is lived. It is the Lord who calls those he wants, when he wants, and how he wants. For our part, we must act with enthusiasm and perseverance and accompany and encourage the Sisters chosen especially for this particular ministry.

It is important to prepare the local Communities to welcome young people, to help the young to grow in their faith and discern their vocation. I would like to encourage you to redouble your efforts in each Province and in each local Community to respond to these challenges. Are the Sisters attentive to the diocesan guidelines? How do they cooperate with the diocesan plan and with the parishes? Do they invite young people to know the beauty of the charism by offering them the opportunity to visit the poor, to commit themselves to the most deprived⁵³ and to reread such experiences with the help of the Word of God?

51. Saint Vincent de Paul, conf. October 18th 1655; CCD X, page. 105.

52. Cf. Inter-Assemblies 2009, page 7.

53. Cf. Inter-Assemblies Document 2009, page 11.

IV. IN THE LIGHT OF PENTECOST, THE COMPANY LOOKS TO THE FUTURE WITH HOPE

*“If you wish to be alive with the Holy Spirit, hold on to charity, love truth, long for unity...”*⁵⁴. In the last General Assembly, the Company welcomed the call to live a continuous Pentecost and has traced a clear path: letting ourselves be transformed by the Holy Spirit.

Under the impulse of Pentecost

The light of Pentecost enlightens the Company of today and shines on the future which is unknown to us.

As we recall hearing from Father Cantalamesa in this same hall, three years ago, Pentecost evokes unity and communion; the confusion and chaos of Babel disappears to give place to a universal language of love which everyone understands, without distinction of race, ethnicity or culture. The Holy Spirit creates newness, inspires and animates the mission, makes us capable of proclaiming the wonders of God and being a witness of his love.

Pentecost means transformation, union of hearts, irresistible newness... and so our fears disappear, our human respect is overcome; they are replaced by prophetic audacity.

The transforming action of the Holy Spirit prepares our hearts to welcome the signs of God present in new realities in humanity, the Church and the Company; it pushes us to face the challenges of our time with joyful serenity, a vision of faith, it invites us to live a paschal experience, to die to be born to a new life. *“We hope for a new Pentecost that will free us from fatigue, disillusionment, and conformity to the environment; a coming of the Spirit who renews our joy and our hope. Hence, it will become imperative that there be warm spaces of community prayer to feed the fire of an irrepressible zeal and make possible an attractive testimony of unity so “that the world may believe” (Jn. 17:21).”*⁵⁵

54. Saint Augustine, Sermon 267, 4.

55. Document Aparecida 2007, n. 362.

With the capacity for renovation and change

The Company has known how to constantly adapt its structures to the needs of the mission. St. Vincent saw this dynamism of the Company and changes that would come with the passage of time: *“And that, Sisters, was the beginning of your Company. As it was not then what it is now, there is reason to believe that it is still not what it will be when God has perfected it as He wants it.”*⁵⁶

The current situation of the Company requires a clear and calm analysis to see how we live the charism, what seeds of life we need to strengthen the weak points that make us stumble. During these days, you have had the opportunity to study the statistics of the Company as calculated at the end of 2011. Let us interpret them in the light of what the Spirit wants for the Company.

As at other stages in the history of the Company, some changes in the organization at the General and Provincial level are necessary. Several have taken place, some will come, others are in seed form. I can witness that they are inspired by a creative fidelity to the charism and a desire to be more in accord with the reality that we perceive.

I would like to invite you to take a look at the history of the Company and at the little booklet on the Origins which briefly traces the geographical expansion and the diverse changes. Here are some examples of the evolution of the number of Provinces and General Councillors.

In 1997: 72 Provinces; 4 Vice-Provinces; 7 Regions.

In 2012: 70 Provinces and 1 region. The number of Councillors has evolved since the beginning of the Company: There were 3 until 1956⁵⁷ (the Assistant, the Treasurer and the Purchaser); 6 from 1956 to 1968; 8 from 1968 to 1997; 10 since 1997...

56. Saint Vincent, February 13, 1646, “Love of Vocation and Assistance to the Poor,” CCD IX, Conf. 24.

57. History of the Daughters of Charity Matthieu Bréjon de Lavergnée, Fayard, page 256.

These changes include abandoning certain securities, discarding what has no future and it forces us to cast off the mooring ropes holding us back at the dock. Changes sometimes involve suffering, but are growth factors, when properly prepared for and developed with the participation of all the Sisters. The changes have some positive aspects if we live them in faith, with joy, openness, trust and humility; if we live them as a grace, as the passage of the Lord. From new horizons, new opportunities open, new challenges, new calls. *Will we be able to accept changes to start out on new paths?*

We have a great history of responsibility. Our strength is not in the number of our Sisters, nor in the number and the quality of our ministries, nor in being recognized by society; it is in *“The charity of Jesus Christ crucified, which animates the heart of the Daughter of Charity and sets it on fire, urges her to hasten to the relief of every type of human misery.”*⁵⁸ Our responsibility is first of all at this level: to maintain this flame in ourselves and in our Sisters, to convince ourselves that service nourishes our contemplation *and gives meaning to our community life, continually revitalizes our apostolic commitment.*⁵⁹ So the Sisters, convinced of the relevance of the Vincentian charism, are profoundly grateful to God for the gift of their vocation; they are proud of belonging to the Company; they are fully committed and enthusiastic in their service where they are placed; their life is their vocation.

This is the time to broaden our vision towards new horizons, to discern where the Spirit is leading us at the stage and in the circumstances we find ourselves. This is the time to unite our strengths and multiply our energies to accomplish the objective of the Company.

With courage and creativity

*“This is a time when the Spirit is breaking forth, opening up new possibilities (...) The future of consecrated life is therefore entrusted to the dynamism of the author and donor of ecclesial charisms.”*⁶⁰

58. Constitutions, page 15.

59. Cf. Constitution 16b.

60. Starting Afresh from Christ, n. 10

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The future is in the newness of God, the imagination of the Spirit. Creativity enables one to use different methods in facing challenges. The Company, throughout its long history, has shown wonderful creativity. The creativity of charity has meant that the Company is present in so many countries where men and women continue to need material bread and the bread of faith. We seek together how we can go further, Sudan, Uganda, Benin, Gabon.

With confidence in Providence

Our Founders taught us to discover the hand of Providence which protects us and leads us, and is in charge of all events, for “*I don’t know what good a Daughter of Charity is if she doesn’t have this trust,*”⁶¹ said Saint Vincent.

Louise’s life was profoundly anchored in Providence, so much so that she saw trust in Providence and the union of Community as the two pillars which supported the early days of the Company.⁶² “*Oh! Blessed be God! There’s reason to hope that the Company will do a great deal of good, provided it relies on Providence and doesn’t interfere with its guidance.*”⁶³

So let us follow the guidance of the Spirit. The Inter-Assemblies Document invites us to do this and gives us the way: a search for interiority, a need for authenticity and a new sense of solidarity. The young, or not so young, who present themselves to the Company aspire to this, and they want us to live it.

Strengthened by Mary’s motherly love, by her docility to the Spirit, we resume our journey to new horizons, with full confidence that where the Holy Spirit is, everything is possible, everything is recreated, everything is reborn.

Sister Evelyne FRANC
Superioress General

61. Saint Vincent de Paul, conf. of June 9th 1658, Trust in Divine Providence, CCD X, page 405-406.

62. Cf. Saint Louise de Marillac, SW, A. 75, page 768-769.

63. Saint Vincent de Paul, conf. of June 9, 1658, Trust in Divine Providence, CCD X, pages 409.

The Relational Aspect of the Mission of the Visitatrix

St. Francis’s custom was to greet those he met by wishing them peace and goodness (Pax et Bonum).

To each one of you, at the beginning of this sharing of some convictions or questions regarding the mission of the Visitatrix, I offer you the same wish: that the Lord may give you **Peace and all that is Good**, especially in the accompaniment of others.

Here I want to repeat the introduction to my presentation last year during the session of the Sisters who were newly designated for this responsibility.

I am well aware of two major drawbacks:

The first being my lack of experience, since I have been in charge of the government of the Congregation for only four years and I am still today something of a novice, always having to discover and learn how to live in fidelity to what the General Chapter has entrusted to me.

The second being that I am Franciscan! I am well aware that I belong to a different family from yours, of not having absorbed your vocabulary, and your sources, Constitutions, Statutes, Guide for the Visitatrix, are still unfamiliar to me, even if I have been able to consult them. This drawback is made worse by the difference in the size of our Congregations.

So it is as a “Sister” of Saint Francis that I propose some reflections on the relational aspect of the mission of the Visitatrix. I will do this more in the form of testimony or community sharing than by presenting great theological or psycho-sociological developments in interpersonal relationships or as models of governance.

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Finally, the last caveat. Don't expect from me some miraculous solutions to all the relational problems which never fail to come up in the animation of a Province or Local Community. We all dream of them, but there are no manuals on this subject, there are only paths, each one unique, and they must be discovered or thought up each time.

By way of introduction, may I just point out how much I noticed last year, in reading the Guide for the Visitatrix, the frequency of the terms **bonds, communication and relationships**.

The biblical tradition is that one's name signifies one's vocation. St. Francis wanted his brothers to be called "minor," the persons in charge of the local community to be called "guardians" and the superiors "ministers." The name chosen had within itself an orientation, certain specifications.

It's the same for you. You are Visitatrixes, that is, at the heart of your mission there is a **visit**, an **encounter**, a **visitation**. The visit of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth, both of them servants of the will of God, is one of the most beautiful biblical expressions of what it means to be community, to be together, to be gathered around a promise, thus confirming what is happening in the midst of us, the coming of the Kingdom.

So, you are Visitatrixes with all that that implies, of approaching the other, of openness and welcome, of mutual listening, of communion in the welcoming of a common promise, in the recognition of a common mission.

The expectations of the Sisters and the Local Communities are great and we feel inadequate and powerless. They expect us to have certain competencies or multiple qualities, sometimes technical, organizational, but especially spiritual and relational ones.

I remember a pre-Chapter Council during which we listed the qualities desired in the future Superioress General and the Councillors. This kind of exercise can be depressing. No one has all the qualities and fortunately so... We tend to demand that our leaders be compassionate,

caring and stimulating guides, skilled business women who can interact with civil organizations. In an international Congregation, we add the ability to inculturate, and the gift of tongues.

On the other hand, what people look for or expect vis-a-vis the leaders is sometimes contradictory. There are the cultural differences, country, age, but also differences in personality. Your group is particularly representative of this cultural diversity and it is obvious that the way this kind of relationship which comes into play between the Sisters and the Visitatrix, varies in different geographical areas. For my own part, certainly on a smaller scale, I notice how the title "Mother" is seen differently in France, in Italy, or in West Africa.

Some groups of Sisters desire a strong relationship only with the one in charge, which brings the risk of childish submission. They expect firm governance and clear guidelines or directions.

The Second Vatican Council recalled the need to show great respect for the dignity and freedom of people, through wide consultation and participation in the government and by encouraging responsible obedience capable of discernment. For some, this was liberating, for others it was unusual and agonizing. In some cultures, for example, the young Sisters find it difficult to express themselves when they are with older Sisters or with a person in a position of authority.

In extreme cases, some push collegiality to such a limit that the person elected cannot decide anything if the group has not reached a consensus. And the Sister in charge of the governance must show clear qualities as a negotiator....

In the face of these multiple and sometimes contradictory expectations, how can one help but become overwhelmed sometimes by fear and by the intense perception of one's own poverty and unworthiness?

This feeling of helplessness comes also from what we expect of ourselves:

- Hoping to succeed at pleasing everyone...and we

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exhaust ourselves making such or such adjustment, such or such arrangement in order to satisfy this one and that one, to avoid conflicts or dissatisfaction or criticism.

- Hoping to be competent and have the right solution to all problems, and control all situations of conflict.

The Bible is full of people who, having a profound sense of their own inability, didn't want to take on themselves the responsibility of command, to mention only Moses, Jeremiah or Paul. "*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*" *Then the Lord gave him his word.*" "*I will be with you.*" Ex 3: 1-13.

Jeremiah is another Biblical person who felt his own weakness in the face of God's call. "*Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am too young.'* But the Lord said to me, '*Do not say, 'I am too young'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.*'" (Jer 1:4-8) The Lord truly says: in your confusion, in the fear that you feel faced with your inability, *know that I am with you.*

Paul was also well aware of his incompetence: "*...even considering the exceptional character of the revelations... Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'* So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me....for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." 2 Cor. 12:7-10

It is therefore in the light of grace, which the Lord gives to those whom He sends, that I suggest you reread the mission of the Visitatrix as an undertaking that is eminently a relational one and a Paschal journey.

I. THE RELATIONAL ASPECT OF THE MISSION OF VISITATRIX

Your Constitutions define your role in these words, "*The Visitatrix receives from the Company the mission to promote the spiritual and apostolic vitality of the Province.*" The service of animation and government of the Province having as its end the service of Christ in those who are poor.

1. A SERVICE OF THE CHARISM

The service of Christ in those who are poor: this mission is understood as a shared commitment, in a spirit of participation and shared responsibility and, therefore, enters into **a spirituality of communion.**

I understand your role to be **a service of animation**, and, therefore, one of listening to the needs and sufferings of those who are poor, to the calls of the Church, discerning the different apostolic activities, often in the tension between the calls which present themselves and the cultural and social demographic realities of the Province. It is a question of keeping alive the memory of the "founding grace" as a permanent source of your identity.

You are to help the institute and its members live more and more the founding grace with greater vigor, with more fervor. In living out this role, the path can wind through very diverse situations and vicissitudes; there are times that are very calm, a calm in which one clearly sees the path; there are periods of enthusiasm which is both personal and collective and very vibrant. But there are other times when it seems that the path is going through a desert that is implacable, immense and unending, while all the road signs seem to indicate that there is no way through, and we feel our strength and resources dry up.

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“The function of government is to accompany, to heal, to encourage and always to give hope. A hope that is firm, founded on the promise and the faithfulness of God, this hope which “does not fail” (Rom. 5: 5), The function of government is to help us experience God’s fidelity, to which He has committed Himself in the “founding grace” or original charism. It is a hope which is based on and incarnated in history. This is why to govern is also to suggest, to propose, to stimulate, even to provoke, to open new paths and to shape projects in which the grace of the origin becomes gradually incarnate.”¹

God continues to create. Sensitivity and discernment are necessary if we are to detect and interpret the signs of the times. In the diverse and changing circumstances of human history, it’s a matter of bringing it to life today, with wisdom and confidence in your talent. On this first point, I find it difficult to go further, having absolutely no competence, in the double sense of that word in French, without knowledge of your charism and not being one of you.

2. A SERVICE OF COMMUNION

Our position of responsibility or ministry summons us to be at the crossroads of many encounters: in the heart of the Company, diverse times: councils, community meetings, meetings with Sisters individually, with ecclesial, religious, and civil collaborators, and associations. One of the essential characteristics of our mission is to be relational and help create communion. It’s more a matter of relationships than of accumulating information.

Even if the institutes, in their apostolic works, must have a significant degree of professionalism and insights into business affairs, we must never, above all, let go of a sense of community, the sense of being “at home” which characterises the relationships among us. The responsibility of government calls us to be mediators: to represent to each member the presence of the entire community and vice versa and to lead to an ever deepened experience of “us”, of team spirit.

1. Fr. Urbano Valero, S.J., “Authority and Mediation. A service of charismatic government” UISG n°135 2007 p.52

Government is organized in function of the whole body, a body formed of living persons, who participate, each in her own way, in the charism, in the founding grace, as a particular gift of God to everyone and to each individual. Bonded with the General Council, with those responsible for the works, salaried, associations, works under our control, with the local Communities of the Province and the Sister Servants, the Visitatrix is invited to experience and nourish the union between the two aspects, respecting the principles of government: unity in diversity, participation and subsidiarity.

This communion is expressed also in the implementing of co-responsibility. It requires attention and conversion if we are to respect each one’s area of responsibility, in order to resist the temptation to do everything oneself or to think that it is useless to foster participation, it’s a waste of time. It invites communication and the sharing of information among these different members.

“Those in authority are responsible for making decisions, after dialogue and discernment in order to know the will of God. They should keep close to the Sisters in order to understand them, be well acquainted with their lives and, with them, be attentive to the needs of persons who are poor; as they seek ways to meet those needs with the audacity and prudence of the Founders”.²

These processes of discernment carried out in the communities are based on

- Seeking together the will of God, and listening to the mediations which are given to us.
- Dialogue and listening, openness to new perspectives.
- *“openness to recognize in each brother or sister the ability to discover the truth, even if partial, and consequently to welcome his or her opinions as mediation for discovering together the will of God — an openness to the point of knowing how to recognize the ideas of others as better than one’s own.”³*

2. C. 62 b

3. The Service of Authority and Obedience

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- Firm decision to maintain unity in all circumstances, whatever be the final decision.
- Recognition of interdependence, between Communities, between Provinces and the seeking of the common good.

We also experience intermingling of ages, social backgrounds, cultures, nationalities or ethnic groups. The diversity of countries, cultures and age is a gift that is given but is still to be implemented. "From different countries they were all of one heart."

"Persons in authority are called to serve with a spirit of communion even these composite communities, helping them to offer, in a world noted for many divisions, the witness that it is possible to live together and to love one another even if different. It must then firmly maintain some theoretical-practical principles:

- to remember that in the spirit of the Gospel, a conflict of ideas never becomes a conflict of persons;
- to recall that a plurality of perspectives fosters a deepened understanding of issues;
- to promote communication so that the free exchange of ideas makes the positions clear and causes the positive contribution of each one to emerge;
- to help free oneself from *egocentrism* and *ethnocentrism*, which tend to place the causes of trouble on to others, in order to come to mutual understanding;
- to understand that the ideal is not that of having a community without conflicts but instead a community that is willing to confront its own tensions in order to resolve them positively, looking for solutions that ignore none of the values that must be taken into account."⁴

3. SERVING THE VOCATION OF EACH SISTER

A service that will enable the Sisters to live with joy their religious consecration, whatever their age or their difficulties, and help them to participate in the life of all the members.

4. The Service of Authority and Obedience

Indeed, "*we are all baptized into one body.*" 1 Cor. 12:13. All the members of the congregation are called, insofar as they are able, and according to their position and their functions, in line with the grace given and their human, spiritual, and vocational history, are called to become Living Stones and are to be accompanied in their participation in the common plan.

The sisters need from their leaders personal interest, and for them to be people with whom they can enter into a mature relationship of mutual respect.

Be attentive to them, comfort them, encourage them, giving also the service of loving correction, and accompany them with care. I could even speak of pastoral interest, in the sense of the shepherd's concern for his sheep. "*Religious government must be 'personal' and 'spiritual', that is to say made in and by the Spirit and following the path he outlines for each person.*"⁵

"The Visitatrix is attentive to her Sisters and demonstrates her sincere affection for them. She strives to maintain an attitude of listening and respect. She takes interest in their lives and their service of poor people. At various times, she encourages them to live their vocation joyfully and wholeheartedly." (Guide for the Visitatrix p. 16-17)

It's clear that the relational aspect of her role is essential. "*The Visitatrix cultivates within herself a welcoming disposition and an attitude of openness and listening to the Lord, her Sisters, the poor, and each person she encounters.*" (Guide...p. 16)

Listening

This attention is shown by listening. This is, without doubt, one of the deepest needs that we can have: to be listened to.

To listen, to make oneself available for the other, says that this other person can speak of her suffering or her aspirations, and listen to what the Spirit is saying in her.

5. Fr. Urbano Valero, art,cit p. 54

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To listen is to give undivided attention to one person. “*She knows how to listen*”, we say of a Sister who has this happy capacity to be “all things to all people,” to be able to leave her work or her institutional concerns to give you her kind and exclusive attention.

It is a difficult art, sometimes a very difficult one, especially when we are inundated with requests from all sides and urgent matters. Listening is difficult because sometimes we do not want to hear what we are hearing.

But visitations to the local Communities or personal encounters must offer our Sisters this space and this hospitality, above all those who are most alone or who need attention, especially those who have difficulty in communicating, in particular because of age or illness.

“... *attentive listening allows one to better coordinate the energy and gifts that the Spirit gives to the community and also, when making decisions, to keep in mind the limitations and the difficulties of some members. Time spent in listening is never time wasted, and listening can often prevent crises and difficult times both on the individual and community levels.*”⁶

The exercise of authority requires, of necessity, respect for persons, mutual acceptance, discretion, and in certain cases confidentiality. (*Guide for the Visitatrix* p.22))

Accompanying, giving hope and courage in difficulties, supporting and encouraging.

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Gal 6: 2)

At different stages in life we can experience periods of aridity, of apathy, of emotional isolation, of apostolic tepidity

6. The Service of Authority and Obedience

The life path of our Sisters, like our own, can be strewn with difficulties and dark nights when the presence of the Lord seems far away, when the service of Christ in the poor becomes difficult or distressing.

It is important to show our concern and sisterly affection, to support one another in our struggles and help one another carry our frailties with patience and humility. The loving attention paid to the other person is the heart of a spirituality of visitation and hospitality.

We are frequently confronted with the weaknesses of the Sisters. We also know our own. But sometimes, the plurality of frailties in communities can crush us: physical, frailty associated with aging, emotional or psychological fragility.

Because of our own temperament, we can be more sympathetic to a particular fragility and sometimes, we must admit, more intolerant of or irritated by another.

We will always be called to go out of ourselves in order to listen to the other in her particular difficulty, and to support her in it. Especially at times of change, or events that make Sisters especially vulnerable: mid-life crisis, displacement of a Community, closing of houses, termination of employment.

No doubt you have had the opportunity to meditate this year on the Lenten letter of Pope Benedict XVI. While reading it, I thought often of the theme of this day and what I could share with you. “*Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,*” (Heb. 10:24).

This could be a mandate for our ministry. Benedict XVI calls us “*to look at others, first of all at Jesus, to be concerned for one another, and not to remain isolated and indifferent to the fate of our brothers and sisters. Even today God asks us to be “guardians” of our brothers and sisters (Gen 4:9), to establish relationships based on mutual consideration and attentiveness to the well-being, the integral well-being of others. The great commandment of love for one another demands that we acknowledge our responsibility towards those who,*

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like ourselves, are creatures and children of God. Being brothers and sisters in humanity and, in many cases, also in the faith, should help us to recognize in others a true alter ego, infinitely loved by the Lord. If we cultivate this way of seeing others as our brothers and sisters, solidarity, justice, mercy and compassion will naturally well up in our hearts.”

4. MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

The picture we have presented is the ideal. We know very well that the reality is more complex. Our local Communities are affected by sin, violence, or indifference, because they are made up of human beings who are fragile and limited.

The exercise of authority puts us in contact with a reality that is sometimes painful or sad, that of the Company, that of the local Communities, and our own.

In many situations, it will be possible to have a dialogue, a sharing of perspectives and ideas, points of convergence and of divergence, difficulties and lack of understanding in order to suggest some “remedies.” At the same time we know that there are neither miraculous solutions, nor ready-made recipes.

That pre-supposes that we ourselves have:

- Increasing self-knowledge, born of experience and questioning ourselves, reflected, for example, in values, and motivations, the acceptance of gifts and limitations.

- The ability, or search, to maintain the creative tension between our gifts and our limitations; between our values, dreams, hopes, desires, and our shortcomings and ineptitudes; between my ideal self, what I desire to be, and the real me, what I am now. This is not done in tranquility. Most of the time, confronted with the tension, the distance between the ideal and the reality, creates a sense of agitation and anxiety. The attitude that we assume faced with this agitation and anxiety is crucial for a healthy relationship with myself, others and with God.

- The ability to bear anxiety and tension, without being ravaged by it. Tension perhaps is a resource for encouraging and maintaining growth. It seems that in Chinese, the character for crisis (weiji) is composed of two elements. The top part means danger, the lower part, opportunity. Chinese wisdom teaches that every crisis is, at the same time, an occasion for opportunity, or for danger. The deciding factor lies in the attitude we have with regard to the crisis.

- Understanding the profound rootedness of this responsibility: I was “sent” to fulfill the ministry of authority, I am not here for myself.

- The fundamental requirement is the contemplation of Christ and the desire to follow him on the Paschal journey.

II. RESPONSIBILITY AS A PASCHAL JOURNEY

The exercise of government plunges us into a Paschal experience. *Like all authority in the Church, authority in the Company is exercised as a service, following the example of Christ the Servant, who so loved His own as to give His life for them.*⁷

Having prepared this presentation during Holy Week, I was guided to the second part of it by a few “Easter encounters,” those of Holy Thursday, those of Good Friday, those of Holy Saturday. Let these Biblical figures be for us “navigators” who accompany us on our path of responsibility.

HOLY THURSDAY

“Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end...Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, ‘Lord, are you going to wash my feet?’ Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” Jn 13: 1.4.6

7. C. 62a

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Peter has a sense of hierarchy. There are people at the top and people below. He knows very well that a master does not wash the feet of his disciples. And yet here is Jesus on his knees like a slave. The Word, the Light of the world, on his knees. A gesture which said that the human person, according to the plan of God, is the servant of his or her brother or sister. A gesture that is to forever shatter our ideas of hierarchy and dignity. This is the supreme dignity: to be sufficiently detached from concern for self and one's ego in order to take the risk of kneeling.

“*Later you will understand.*” Later, Peter will understand that Christ was inaugurating a new form of service of authority. The authority of the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep, an authority which transforms the pyramid structure into the Body, in which each person is different and important, in which all the members are in communion.

Perhaps Peter will also understand that the washing of the feet is also the only response of Jesus to betrayal and renunciation. The gesture of washing the feet is immediately preceded and followed by mentioning the betrayal of Judas.

The fraternal union of Holy Thursday is one of a servant, kneeling. It is also a union of love and of fidelity “even to the end, to the limit.”

The Gospel of John gives us here a ninth beatitude “*Happy will you be if you do it.*” (John 13:17)

Be patient in dealing with others, do not be shaken by the rupture of community life; love, serve always and in spite of everything, there may then arise real joy and peace, peace and joy that come from being aware of our radical poverty, our reality before God, “*such is a man before God, as he is, and nothing more*” Francis used to say to his brothers, but especially attachment to the poor Christ. “*He came unto His own and His own did not receive him.*” (John 1:11) The high point of Christ's love is not the miracles, the prophecies. Everything comes to a climax when, abandoned by all, rejected, denied and condemned to death by the very people to whom he gives life, the Son of God continues to love anyway.

This is the path of poverty and deprivation. What must we give up, from what pedestal must we descend to be a servant at the feet of our brothers and sisters?

In difficult situations in community, in our encounter with the other, with any other person, dare we believe that a path of growth and salvation is possible?

What resentment must we let go of like dead skin to find a love free from vanity?

From what power must we fast so as to have no dominating power over any Sister?

GOOD FRIDAY

The exercise of authority is sometimes a difficult task. Sometimes there are misunderstandings. We hurt each other with answers that are too hasty and clumsy and with ill-advised decisions. Because of a lack of experience, expectations are too high or too narrow, with apparent indifference to suffering. We do cause suffering by not taking into consideration certain gifts, by holding third party negative conversations, by sometimes wielding autocratic authority. We hurt each other, sometimes more out of ignorance or lack of competence, than by negligence or malice – but this does not lessen the pain that is caused.

We are also obliged to make decisions like missioning Sisters or closing houses and that causes pain. The decisions we must make do not always please everyone and sometimes that causes animosity toward us.

At times we also have to face situations with regard to specially difficult persons.⁸ Their local Community can no longer support them and we are torn between a Sister and a group, in a conflict of values.

8. Jeffrey Mickler *How to Cope with a Difficult Religious Character, Vies consacrées* 83, 2011-1 p. 75-80

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The Community is a wounded Community, sometimes disfigured if it has experienced in its history the trial of mockery, of injustice, of betrayal, of cowardice, of misunderstanding. A Community that is poor and fragile, affected by sin, is also a community which is open to mercy and compassion.

In a letter addressed to a Provincial Minister, Francis invited him to pardon and to show compassion.

“Here is how I will know that you love the Lord, and you love me, me, his servant and yours: If any brother in the world, having sinned as much as it is possible to sin, can meet your look, ask your forgiveness, and leave you forgiven. If he does not ask for forgiveness, ask him yourself if he wants to be forgiven. And afterwards, even if he would have sinned against you a thousand times, love him more than you love me, and bring him to the Lord. Always pity these unfortunates.”

To learn from God who is merciful even while denouncing evil and injustice, to witness to mercy while recalling the requirements of our way of life, in sometimes going so far as to impose canonical forms of sanction.

To invite communication to be part of this dynamic of mercy while recognizing that situations exist which require a Sister to leave.

To be willing to stay close to a Sister in situations that are often without satisfactory solutions and in which we experience our powerlessness, “being taken over” or “of not shirking difficulties in our own family,” even if we no longer know what to do; it is a passage, a Passover which entails loss, that of the illusion of being all powerful, a Passover that purifies and makes one more humble, more poor.

This crossing over is also accompanied by discouragement and disenchantment: faced with resistance from some people or Communities, faced with certain issues that seem impossible to solve.

HOLY SATURDAY

Men and women in silence, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, Mary

“After these things, Joseph of Arimathea...asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus...Nicodemus, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths...and because the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.” Jn 19:38-42

Then follows the silence, the deep silence of Saturday, the Sabbath, the seventh day, the weekly day of rest. Saturday is a strange liturgical day, between the drama of death and the joy of the resurrection. Holy Saturday, empty though it may be, does not mean it is time wasted. It is time of hope. It is the time when we wait for reawakening. Christ descends into our human hell where he brings his merciful presence.

The community of Holy Saturday is the one that lets Christ act in invisible faith. It acknowledges its weakness but in hope it awaits grace. It watches and waits with confidence for signs of life. It knows that peace and salvation come, not from our own strength or our ability to handle problems or difficult situations, but from Christ, the conqueror of evil and death.

This waiting is not inactive. After his death, Christ receives signs of human compassion: Nicodemus brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes, women prepare spices and perfumes. The body of Christ enters into the darkness of the tomb with the spices and perfumes, gestures of compassion by those close to him. When he descends into the depths of darkness, he is wrapped in a gesture of gentleness, respect and hope.

This Holy Saturday is the time, par excellence, of silence, the patient waiting for what is to come. The silence of expectation is not the silence of despair. The admirable strength of this patience is experienced as the willingness not to give in to evil or to disbelief in his ultimate triumph. In hope we can wrap others in prayerful concern and anoint them with respect and trust.

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The book of Revelation gives us another beatitude. “*Happy are those who keep watch*” (Rev. 16:15). The Lord invites us to imitate the steadfast patience of the watchmen. This is a beatitude which prepares for an encounter with God through the face of a brother or sister. It is watching for love even, and especially, when we believe it is dead. It is watching to see the dawn rise.

How can we remain patient for what is to come? How much time of silence, of solitude, of prayer do we give resolutely, to allow the Spirit of the Lord to keep us watching, watching for the steps of The One who comes?

Government is not possible, thinkable, tenable without the grace of God, the grace of one’s state which is perhaps not given in the way we learned in the past; a spurt of endurance which comes when I cannot seem to bear any more or do anything more, the courage to act in the face of fear or opposition, as the surprising words come out of my mouth in a complex situation, like the strength to hold fast in the death of the Paschal Mystery with the hope of the Resurrection.

SIGNS OF RESURRECTION

We certainly know that there is no magic formula, there are no manuals for being a good major superior. There is only the kind presence of the living God, who can make himself known in the confusion of our life and the darkness of our troubled world.

The signs of resurrection are legion, and we have the duty to read them, to interpret them, to share them and to give thanks.

In the lives that our Sisters share with us quite simply, we are the privileged witnesses of courageous growth, fidelity to prayer, simple generosity, the will to remain in dialogue in times of conflict, the beauty and the depth that is revealed in conversations, the witness of long lives of service of Christ in the poor, the fidelity, the moments of intuition, the risks taken and accepted, all those little gestures of kindness, the struggle to understand what this life of faith means in cultural and religious turbulence, the suffering borne with gentleness

and in peace, the courage in the midst of a dark night; each Sister, each history, each grace of which we are witness, is blessing.

We are then able to cooperate with God, through our daily actions, our difficult decisions, moving our communities toward the future that is promised but as yet unknown.

May it be given to each one of you, to welcome these blessing large and small, to give all glory to God and to become:

- Women who know what it means to be thrown into the burning fire of the design of God, to be formed and molded there by unexpected activities and events.
- Women whose familiarity with unexpected visits of God increases their ability to analyze the present situation and to imagine alternative ways of Community and of responding to the mission.
- Women whose spiritual reading of the life of the Province or the Local Communities encourages the Community in its conviction that God is at work in the most surprising places and in the most subtle of His movements.

Sister Elisabeth ROBERT
*Superioress General of the Institute of Sisters
of Saint Francis of Assisi*

Co-Responsibility for the Patrimony of the Poor

May, 23, 2012

This talk, which was illustrated with slides, has been abridged because it is going to be published. The plan that was given to the Sisters participating contains references to the Constitutions and the Guide for Treasurers. Some topics were presented in the form of questions to be studied in depth with members of the Provincial Council while other questions were addressed to the Visitatrixes themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Having to speak about *the administration of goods* in front of an audience that comes from the 5 continents and living in such diverse situations, made me try to find an approach that enables each of you to feel involved in what I am saying.

I have chosen as a starting point, *three common features of our identity*, whatever our geographical and cultural origins, or our current place of mission.

We are Daughters of Charity by the grace of God, “called and assembled” ... “given to God for the Service of those who are poor.” It is on this basis that we are invited to reflect today on our co-responsibility for the administration of goods.

We are Daughters of the Church, daughters of a Church that has to confront numerous critics from within her ranks or from outside, but which, in this present ordeal of purification, remains a guiding beacon and whose clear teachings enlighten “people of good will.” Peter’s Barque has weathered many storms in the course of its history but, as

Jesus promised Peter, “*the forces of death shall not prevail against it.*” (Matt. 16:18) With Louise de Marillac, we recognize that “*we have the twofold happiness of being daughters of the Holy Church.*” (Louise de Marillac, Spiritual Writings, June 21, 1647)

We are citizens of the world, called by vocation to serve Christ in his suffering members. “*God loves this world and invites us also to love it deeply, to see the world as God sees it; (...) The charity of Christ urges us to see the world through the eyes of our Founders, recognizing the most vulnerable persons as priority*” Inter-Assemblish Document, p.7

You are aware of *the many crises* facing our world and primarily affecting the poorest people.

The collapse of *the financial system* in 2008, had painful repercussions all over the world! “The great ones of this world” and are still faced with enormous challenges: regulation of financial markets, massive debt, increasing poverty of their people, social movements caused by injustice, unemployment and exclusion, etc.

The dysfunction of the dominant economic growth model, which seeks profit at any cost has increased over the past 20 years; there are inequalities within societies and between countries, while there is an overall increase of wealth in our world!

World governance does not respect *the common good*, and too many corrupt political regimes do harm to their people.

Trade in drugs and weapons fuels wars...the powerful network of human trafficking, etc.

The ecological crisis, is manifested by numerous so-called catastrophes, although these result in large part from reckless human activity and irresponsible behavior: large-scale deforestation, over exploitation of natural resources, industrial pollution, exporting of toxic waste, etc.)

I. DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY IN TODAY’S WORLD; A VOCATION OF URGENT RELEVANCE TODAY...

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“We thirst to respond with creative charity to the needs of those who are poor. We want to renew our response to the challenges of new forms of poverty exacerbated by the global crisis and dare to take prophetic positions in the face of injustice.” (IAD p.7)

A French proverb, says that “*money is a good servant but a bad master.*” For us, Daughters of Charity, it is a *means*—an indispensable means certainly – but only a means--at the service of the mission. Money is at the center of all the distress caused by human activities which are not according to the plan of God.

Benedict XVI, notably in the Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, affirms that without the guidance of “love in truth” this global force can be fatal for the human family. He invites us to reflect deeply on the meaning of the economy and the ethical values we need to reinstate.

As Daughters of Charity who live close to the poor in this world, you are in a good position to take such initiatives, knowing that through the Company and different NGOs you find the necessary financial aid to improve their living conditions. It is obvious that you already do this, but we can always be even more committed.

In the letter of our Superior General to the members of the Vincentian Family for Lent 2012, we find such an impetus:

- To foster works that promote systemic change in society, develop local self-government, formation of mutual aid groups and indigenous micro-credit programs;
- To provide legal aid to defend the poor and promote justice;
- To create programs that counter human trafficking and promote life, access to universal health care, social assistance, care for the environment, the dignity of women and children, the rights of migrants, and participation in civil society.

In dealing with our specific vow (C. 24) our Constitutions have more to say about the way we should serve Christ in the person of the poor, and Statutes 8 and 9 give very specific guidelines which are taken up again in the Inter-Assemblies Document p. 7-13 on working with those

who are poor, to build a better world...yes, if love does wonders, unity gives strength.

II. THE ADMINISTRATION OF GOODS IN THE COMPANY

1. Administering goods ...in accordance with a particular spirit

Our identity as Daughters of Charity must permeate our whole being, all our actions and also must be shown by the way we manage material goods! “*The Company having as its aim, the service of Christ in persons who are poor makes use of material goods to carry out that mission.*” C. 88.

I will mention the sources that can help you; Sacred Scripture, the Church’s social teaching, the texts of Episcopal Conferences, the writings of our Founders, the Constitutions and Statutes, the various Guides, letters from Superiors, etc.

These Biblical and doctrinal bases should shed light on our *life style and the way we manage material goods*

2. The management of financial resources, a place of mission

a) *Our personal evangelization-conversion*

Contact with the poor, our masters, evangelizes us. In our management of material goods, also, we have to ***let ourselves be evangelized*** – and remain vigilant- so that money - “***good servant of the mission, does not become a bad master!***” All the Sisters who manage money must be aware that they are not its owners, so they need to have a *spirit of detachment* and all the other qualities that go with good management.

The management of resources is put into our hands and it cannot be disassociated from our *vows*; it is linked not only to *poverty*, which seems evident, but also to *obedience*, since we must respect the laws of the Church, the Proper Law of the Company, and the legislation of the State; and also to *chastity*, which frees the heart, “for an unconditional gift and total availability in the service of those who are poor.”

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C.29 From these reminders flow some practical consequences, like the pooling of donations received for the Poor and their use in local communities, how to resist corruption, etc ...

b) *With regard to the prophetic aspect,*

As consecrated persons, we are called to show clearly that our commitment to those who are poor is *the visible part of our self-giving to God*. “*Love for mankind, and most of all for the poor in whom we see the person of Christ, is especially evident in the promotion of justice. It is not simply a question of giving what we can spare but helping people to join the circle of economically and humanly developing countries from which they are excluded.*” John Paul II (CA58)

The social teaching of the Church, has a twofold function; announcing and denouncing: proclamation of a particular way of seeing humanity; denunciation in the face of sin, injustice and violence which run through our society.

Faced with “*structures of sin which destroy living together and solidarity,*” we can “*be a sign*” by the quality of our community life, by the witness of detachment and of dependence in the use of goods, by sharing, by the multiple actions accomplished in the service of those who are poor which are designed to “promote every person in all the aspects of their being” etc, (cf C. 24 e.)

III. ADMINISTRATION: A SERVICE GIVEN WITH OTHERS IN SHARED RESPONSIBILITY (C 30 c –C 90 –S 72)

1. General level

Those who work with the Treasurer General are at the service of the whole Company. In the different works that they do, Sisters and lay people, in co-ordination with the Treasurer General, deal with the flow of funds, accountancy and correspondence concerning these, legacies and donations, as well as social security records of Sisters in Provinces outside France. (CAVIMAC and EMI),

Communication between the General Treasurer’s Office and the Provinces takes place on a daily basis, mostly with the Provincial Treasurers.

For the Company, as for the Provinces administrative accounts deal with Income and Expenditure.

a) *Income*

Constitution 90 reminds us that *goods are held in common and that the General Curia co-ordinates interprovincial aid*. (GPT p.22). While the General Treasurer’s Office registers the financial movement of funds, decisions regarding the distribution of these are made by the Superioress General with her Council.

The General Curia has two sources of income to finance the ordinary expenses of the “Quasi Province”; the general tax, which brings in from \$5 - \$30 per Sister, according to country, and the voluntary contributions made by the Visitatrixes with their Council for the functioning of the Curia. These sums of money cover the cost of running the Mother House where there are about 145 Sisters working for the Company and for pilgrims. Interprovincial Sharing is the indispensable resource which allows the Superioress General, with her Council, to respond to requests for aid coming from different Provinces.

b) *Expenditure*

Receipts for the International Sharing show that some Provinces receive aid for maintenance of the works and the formation of Sisters, the service of the poor, and building works (Works and Communities). The amount of money sent varies and is also augmented by “dedicated funds” (for example funds sent for catastrophes, DREAM, etc.) and the IPS projects. Mention must be made, too, of numerous donations for the poor made by individuals and associations by way of the missions service.

2. At Provincial level

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Even though situations in the Provinces vary, two “principles” can guide the way we relate to one another; co-responsibility and collaboration.

a) *Relations between the Visitatrix and the Treasurer General*

Each has been designated to offer a particular service. The Gospel and the Constitutions trace out the path for doing this and the guides are mechanisms we should get to know well so that they are easily accessible reference sources. A good understanding of each one’s role will avoid conflicts!

Role and mission of the Treasurer

The Treasurer is responsible for financial administration within the Province in accordance with Canon Law (CDC; can. 634-640) and in conformity with the charism of the Founders and our Proper Law.

This administration allows her to provide for all the needs of the members of the Province, to support the apostolic program in fidelity to the charism and to practice sharing and helping others. The missionary objective is therefore an essential part of good administration

- In the matter of **relationships**, the Guide for Visitatrixes explains on p.7: that these are based on respect, trust and dialogue and are carried out in a spirit of faith and union. “This requires a clear understanding of the responsibilities of both persons, as well as subsidiarity and accountability.”

b) *Formation of the Sisters*

It is important to give Sisters formation in financial matters and the management of money. In the Provinces, formation plans contain guidelines for initial and ongoing formation of the Sisters with regard to poverty practiced in fidelity to the charism. What place is given to *the management of material goods* and the qualifications in accountancy and administration needed by the Sisters who will be dealing with finances? Some aspects of this matter can be dealt with by the Provincial Director while the Provincial Treasurer has an important

part to play in the formation of Sister Servants and local treasurers to enable them to exercise their responsibility with regard to financial matters; accounts, budget, purchasing etc.

The Sister Servant is responsible, with the Sisters, for “*the temporal goods of the local community, according to the Constitutions and Statutes, she abides by the Provincial guidelines.*” Good management must be carried out in co-responsibility since the goods are held in common.

The qualities required for good management are honesty, transparency, accuracy, a sense of responsibility, accountability. We manage our temporal goods in a spirit of co-responsibility, (C90), subsidiarity (C91b), and solidarity (S72). A Sister must never act as “though she owned the goods” either at community level or with regard to any work.

The principles regarding the administration of goods have been handed down to us by Saint Vincent and Saint Louise (cf. C88, 89, 90). From the earliest days of the Company there have been Rules, registers, budgets for the works, and documents which have been lovingly preserved. Louise de Marillac formed her Daughters, not only on the spiritual level but also in *strict honesty in management*, or accountability.

The concrete ways in which we express our vow of poverty and service of the poor oblige us “*to choose a lifestyle that is modest and simple; the Sisters often make a personal and community review in which they discern their real needs, their use of material goods and of the earth’s resources, their lifestyle and their duties of justice and charity. This is a means of preserving the spirit and practice of poverty.*” (S 16a).

Finally, there is a golden rule with regard to management and that is to “look ahead.” Management cannot be improvised, it is something that is learned and which gets better with experience. So it is important to discern which Sisters can give formation in *accounting and management*. “Looking forward” means preparing today the Sisters who can be given the responsibility of management, of works and communities, for the continuity of the mission and community works.

“The goods of the Company are administered with responsibility, competence, prudence, justice, and trust in Providence. They make possible the service of persons who are poor and the support of the Sisters.” C.89. It is important that we “keep our feet on the ground,” the particular circumstances of our country and our Province, and to bear in mind factors that are not quantifiable but essential, such as human resources, that is to say, the age of the Sisters in the Province, significant number of young Sisters or elderly Sisters.

Conclusion

As Daughters of Charity we live out our vocation within the Church in fidelity to her teaching and through the witness of a life given to God, nourished by the Gospel and in conformity with our particular identity (C. 24; S. 8). We have to manage our spiritual inheritance and make it our own. We then have to express this by the way we manage material goods in a spirit of humility, simplicity and charity. Our practice of poverty will be specifically expressed by our simple and modest lifestyle, by service of and closeness to our masters the Poor, and by sharing our resources.

May Our Lady of the Missions be with us on the steep path of evangelical discernment so that the Kingdom of God may come in our times.

May we, together with our Sisters, be for the Poor “signs of prophecy and hope, now and everywhere.

Sister Pia HUMBEL
Treasurer General

Presentation of the Meeting of Provincial Directors

May 23, 2012

Sisters, I am sure you all know that there will be a meeting of the Provincial Directors of the Daughters of Charity in Paris this summer—in fact in another 6 weeks. The intention is to plan one of these meetings about every ten years as is suggested in the “Directory of the Provincial Directors of the Daughters of Charity” (p. 14). And so, Fr. Gregory has decided to bring together all the Directors from July 1-14; with the support of Sr. Evelyne and her Council and the Sisters of the Motherhouse, that meeting will take place right here.

Fr. Gregory has prepared a cover letter for this meeting, and I will quote a little of it since it gives you an idea of what will be happening at the gathering. He writes to the Directors:

I believe you know how important our ministry to the Daughters of Charity is for me, as I am sure it is for you. This service was very close to the heart of St. Vincent. Clearly, the work which he did for the poor of France and the world, could not have been accomplished without the support of St. Louise de Marillac and those first Daughters of Charity. It is still true today. We unite with our Sisters in the living expression of our common charism. Your work as Provincial Directors is particularly significant in that regard.

My intention for this gathering is that we take time to come to know each other and share our collective wisdom. Some of us will be new to the role of Provincial Director; others of us will have faithfully served in this work for many years. Some of what will be said will be new information for some of us; much of it will be familiar to others. All the information and discussion will be filtered through the lens of our

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different cultures and situations. That is the nature of the worldwide Church and our worldwide communities, and it is a blessing for which I am particularly grateful.

Please take the opportunity here to teach and to learn from one another. I intend to do so. That will be the work of the Spirit in our midst.

One of the guidelines given by Father Gregory was that we should encourage dialogue and sharing among the participants about specific problems, and share our collective wisdom. He wanted most of the solutions and orientations to come from the group and not from the people who have come from outside to give the talks. Here is a brief presentation of how we will be developing the theme; **The Provincial Director's role in animating, accompanying the Daughters of Charity, and in their formation.** Of course, the Provincial Director is not the only person to carry out these three functions: we need to mention collaboration. The Provincial Director **collaborates** with the Visitatrix and Sisters of the Province in the important work of animation, accompaniment and formation.

The meeting will start with a morning of recollection so that we can pray and meditate on our call as Vincentians to “preach the gospel to the poor” and the way that this ministry is carried out in our work with the Daughters of Charity. In the afternoon, Sister Evelyne will talk about the Company and two Sisters from the General Council will tell us something about the Visitatrixes' Encounter.

Next day the talks will be about our holy Founders, Vincent and Louise, with particular emphasis on the special identity of the Daughters of Charity and their spirituality. We must continually talk about these family matters in order to remind ourselves of our roots and try to find ways of adding to our numbers. We will gain new insights from different voices speaking on this subject.

On the following day we will be reflecting on the Church and on Church documents, especially those that will be of most use to the Directors. In the afternoon, a Franciscan Sister, Sylvie Robert, will talk about our call to the vocation of serving the Church and some factors that work against that call.

On the fourth day we will deal with the subject of the identity of the Daughters of Charity as this is expressed in the Constitutions and the Vows. The unique character of the Daughters of Charity needs to be well understood by the Directors.

On the fifth day the Provincial Directors will study the Directory and discuss possible amendments that could be made to the next edition in the light of our experiences and the way our work is developing at present. Father Javier who helped to draw up this document will lead our reflection and the debate.

On the sixth day we will be reflecting on the importance of “animating” and emphasizing the action of the Holy Spirit in helping the Director to do this work. In the afternoon we will discuss the organization of retreats and days of recollection.

On Monday of the second week, we will be speaking about “accompaniment”; what this means, its importance and accompaniment within the framework of pastoral visitations. Confreres from different regions will share their experiences.

On Tuesday we will deal with “formation”; firstly initial formation and then ongoing formation for the personal development of the Sisters and the service of the poor.

On Wednesday, Father Vernaschi will guide us in our reflection on questions dealing with Canon Law. In the afternoon we will hear about the challenges of ministering to elderly Sisters.

On Thursday we will study the relationship among the Director, the Provincial Council and the Provincial Assembly after sharing our experiences and then we will discuss how to accompany Sisters with problems.

On Friday, Father Gregory will lead a forum dealing with questions concerning the Provincial Director, and the joys that come with this ministry to the Sisters.

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Next day, after the summing up and evaluation, we will end the meeting with a Eucharistic celebration.

Conclusion

During the two weeks of the meeting, Fr. Gregory and I will make ourselves available to speak to the confreres on whatever issues seem important to them as Provincial Director. Sister Evelyne and the General Council are invited to attend the sessions and will contribute to some of the areas of discussion from the experience and perspective of women and Daughters of Charity.

Father Patrick GRIFFIN
Director General

Closing of the Encounter

May 27, 2012

We are coming to the end of our Encounter on this great day of Pentecost, which calls to mind wind and light, boldness and prophecy, union of hearts and communion, creativity and hope, openness, availability, mission...

The presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the burgeoning Church and its transforming force, caused at that time, and continues to cause today, amazement and admiration. *They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and those who had come to see what had happened, astounded and surprised, heard them speaking in their own language.*¹

Certainly, the action and manifestations of the Spirit are surprising. The coming of the Holy Spirit brings the community to birth; the fears of the disciples vanish, their sadness gives way to joy and enthusiasm for proclaiming the good news of salvation; socio-cultural barriers tumble down and give place to a common, universal language.

Where the Spirit is found, there is life, newness, vigor. With the strength of the Spirit, everything is possible. Haven't we experienced this these past few weeks? I don't know if you came to this meeting "*in very low spirits,*"² as Saint Louise felt at the beginning of the novena in preparation for Pentecost, but I know that we are concluding these weeks of prayer, reflection, and sharing, in joy and with trust in Providence.

Let us give thanks to God!

1. Cf. Acts 2:4.

2. SW, p. 1

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I would also like to express my gratitude to Fr. Patrick, to the members of the Animation Commission: Sr. Rosa Maria, Sr. Françoise, Sr. Micheline, Sr. Miguelina, Sr. Angèle, and Sr. Christo Kumari, to Sister Zofia, to the Sisters in the control room and Secretariat and, of course, to the valiant team of translators, not forgetting the Sisters of the Motherhouse and their very cordial welcome.

Today, on this feast of Pentecost 2012, we are gathered here in the Cenacle of the Company, like the disciples, together with Mary, and we are grateful for the gift of the Spirit. At the end of this Inter-Assemblies Encounter, I am sure that you sense the urgency of giving new life to the charism of charity, of rekindling the flame of the missionary spirit of the Company, and of increasing our receptiveness to the surprising action of the Holy Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit who has guided us throughout this Encounter and who shows us the way to follow now. **In the light of the Spirit**, we will be able to read the signs of the times and to reflect on the reality we are living, so as to discover what is pleasing to God, what builds up and fosters communion and what gives an impetus to mission. **With the strength of the Spirit**, we will be able to commit ourselves enthusiastically on new paths, and face with generous availability the changes involved in the new situations arising in this time of reorganization for the revitalization of the charism. **With the peace and joy that comes from the Spirit**, we will share with our Sisters, with persons living in poverty, and with our collaborators, the hope that causes us to live in the certainty that the Spirit is able to change hearts, that we cannot resign ourselves to situations of corruption, violence, misery, and to contempt for life and for the dignity of the human person, nor can we resign ourselves to tranquil agnosticism, nor to any of the expressions of religious intolerance in the societies in which we live.

I would like to recall the words of Saint Vincent on October 18, 1655, a few months after the official recognition of the Company on August 8, of that same year. These words reverberate today as a new call to help us to realize that we are responsible for the vitality of the Company and for its fidelity:

"We don't know whether you'll live long enough to see if God will give new ministries to the Company, but we do know very well that... if you do well, as I hope you're going to begin to do, God will bless your work more and more and will preserve you; but to become worthy of this you have to be faithful to Him."³

These words have a strong resonance today and are a renewed call to us to feel responsible for the fidelity and vitality of the Company.

God will bless your works and will preserve you, but you must be faithful in order to be worthy of this.

You can be a great help to the Sisters of your Provinces during this time of reorganization and revitalization. Revitalization goes much deeper than planning and the management of new apostolic projects; it demands energy and the inspiration of the Spirit.

In fact, for all of us in the Company, it is a question of being deeply rooted in Jesus Christ, of paying great attention to our life in community, and of recommitting ourselves to live a simple lifestyle in conformity with our being as servants of those who are poor.

Now is the time to deepen our trust in Providence, a time for courage and boldness in face of certain things we have to give up, fears, and weariness. It is the time for renewed energy in our vocation. These are times that call for openness toward more universal apostolic horizons, that demand a solid work of Christian and Vincentian formation for ourselves and for the lay collaborators who participate in the mission of the Company.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses.⁴ (cf Ac, 1,8).

3. Saint Vincent de Paul, Conf. of October 18th, 1655. On the purpose of the Company. CCD X, page 103-104.

4. Cf. Acts 1: 8.

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In fact, the Holy Spirit is bursting into our lives and moving us to regain our first fervor, to keep alive the flame of the charism, to act with a keener perception of the universality of the Company, feeling responsible for its vitality and growth. The Spirit is awakening in us the enthusiasm and boldness that moved the first Sisters to go out on to the highways of the world, to live in inventive and audacious charity, to be available to serve persons living in poverty, coming and going, seeking out the most abandoned and the most destitute, in the footsteps of our Founders.

Pentecost, according to the wishes of Saint Louise, is the great feast day of the Company. With her, we ask to be so filled with the Holy Spirit *“that we may neither say nor do anything except for His glory and His holy Love.”*⁵ Today, let us sing with the Psalmist the marvels of the Lord and give Him thanks because His love and mercy are from age to age.⁶ How beautiful are Your works, O Lord, You have done them with wisdom! Glory to the Lord forever, may He rejoice in His works!⁷

The Lord has helped us to have a Pentecost experience during our Inter-Assemblies Encounter, and He promises us more for the future, if we abandon ourselves to His Providence, for *“those who trust in the Lord renew their strength...they run without growing weary and walk without growing tired.”*⁸

With the whole Church, we are invited to go through the door that will lead us into the Year of Faith, and the Synod on Evangelization: a strong challenge for us, Daughters of Charity, called to proclaim Jesus Christ through the diakonia of charity, by the witness of our lives, and whenever possible, by our words.⁹

5. Cf Saint Louise de Marillac, SW, L. 345, To Sister Jeanne Lepintre. May 19, (1651).

6. Cf. Psalms 135.

7. Cf. Psalms 103, 24, 31.

8. Isaiah 40:31.

9. Cf. C. 24b.

Let us remain united in prayer, open to what the Holy Spirit wants to accomplish in us. The Virgin Mary, docile to the action of the Holy Spirit, is with us each day and, in a very special way, is with us today, when we ask for the entire Company the gift of living a continuous Pentecost. Together with Saint Louise, let us be transformed by the Spirit in order to *“carry out the plan of the Father and give witness to the Son, risen from the dead.”*¹⁰

I wish each of you a safe journey as you return to your Provinces, and a joyous feast of the Visitation. The Councillors and I assure you of our grateful affection and our prayers. At the end of this Encounter, we are all being sent on mission to be witnesses of what we have experienced and what we have seen and heard.¹¹

The Charity of Christ urges us!

Sister Evelyne FRANC
Daughter of Charity

10. C. 17c.

11. Cf. 1 John 1:3; Acts 4:19-20.

**On the days that followed the Lord's resurrection,
the Apostles stayed together,
comforted by the presence of Mary,
and after the Ascension
they persevered in waiting, with her, for Pentecost
in an atmosphere of prayer.**

**Mary was for them a Mother and a teacher,
a role that she continues to have for
Christians of all times.**

**Popular tradition has devoted the month of May,
which usually falls between Easter and Pentecost,
to Mary.**

**So during this month it would be good to rediscover
the motherly role she has in our lives
so that we may always be willing disciples
and courageous witnesses to the Risen Lord.**

Benedict XVI, Angelus, April 30, 2006

