

*E*choes *of the Company*



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Spiritual life

Letter of August 15, 2012.....376
Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General

“An Undivided Heart”: Silence, Listening and Meditation.....380
Father Patrick Griffin, C.M., Director General

With Mary, We Sing the Magnificat.....391
Sister Anne Prévost, Daughter of Charity

Today’s Challenges

Province of Santo Domingo.....403
Our Service in the Shanty Towns and Rural Areas of Quisqueya
The Sisters of Quisqueya

News from the Provinces

Appointments

Nomination of Visitatrices and Appointment of.....408
Provincial Directors

Sisters’ Testimonies

Province of Saint Louise, USA.....410
El Paso: Serving Undocumented Immigrants
Sister Louise Gallahue, Daughter of Charity

Province of Slovakia.....412
Testimony from Omsk, Russia
Sister Damiana Pagocova, Daughter of Charity

History of the Company

Sources and updates

In Saint Vincent’s Days and in Our Own Times.....414
The Spirituality of Saint Vincent de Paul
Father Jean Morin, CM

Letter of August 15, 2012

Dear Sisters,

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us forever! *Today the Virgin Mother of God was assumed into heaven as the perfect image of the Church to come; she symbolizes the dawning of the Church triumphant and guides and supports its pilgrim people.*¹

With these words from the Preface for the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, I wish you a happy feast of August 15th and am deeply grateful for your good wishes for the feast and your prayers which witness to your love of the Company.

Your letters and various messages have faithfully reached me from the four corners of the world. You give me news of your services with the sick, young people, and with all those who are deprived of bread, freedom, dignity or affection. I see once again how close the Company is to those who are poor. You also speak of the negative effects of the economic and moral crisis which is affecting every continent.

Confronting so many forms of poverty is a challenge which seems well beyond our strength. To *“live out wholeheartedly”*² the appeals of our Inter-Assemblies Document, using the proposed responses,³ is the humble path which the Company gives us. It requires a renewed

1. Preface of the Mass of the Solemnity of the Assumption.
2. Cf. I.A.D., p. 18.
3. Cf. I.A.D., p. 19-27.

rootedness in Jesus Christ, a deepening of our “living together,” creative and audacious ministries in order to manifest the love of God for those who are poor and it is lived within the framework of our belonging to the Company. Truly, it is a humble and difficult path to let ourselves be open to the transforming Spirit, who wants *“to renew the very depths of our hearts and heal our wounds and those of all humanity.”*⁴

Together, let us keep our eyes on the Virgin Mary in the glory of heaven, our guide on this path. Indeed, her life has been filled by the presence of the Spirit of God. After her death,⁵ she was taken up from this earthly life in order to enter immediately into life in God. She is invoked in the Church, under the titles of advocate, helper, and mediatrix. Let us confide to her today, as Saint Vincent and Saint Louise so often did, the Company on its path forward.

At the Motherhouse, as is the case with several other sanctuaries dedicated to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, pilgrims come daily to fervently present their petitions to Mary. With the same confidence, let us put before her the needs of our local Communities and of our Provinces. Let us ask, through her intercession, for the grace to be open to the transforming Spirit.

*“Souls that are truly poor and desirous of serving God should place their trust in the coming of the Holy Spirit within them believing that, finding no resistance in them, He will give them the disposition necessary to accomplish the holy will of God which should be their only preoccupation.”*⁶

This August 15th letter gives me the opportunity to share some news of the Company with you:

• INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS AND FORMATION

4. I.A.D., p. 8.
5. Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 963- 975
6. Saint Louise, SW, A. 25, p. 802.



Spiritual
Life

The Inter-Assemblies Encounter of the Visitatrix in May was an excellent time to pause, to share, and to start our journey toward the General Assembly of 2015. I know that your Visitatrix have shared with you some news of our work; throughout the coming months you will receive more communications.

Within the framework of the Year of Faith, the General Council will organize, in 2013 and 2014, several international sessions of spiritual and Vincentian revitalization. Another important work of formation being undertaken in the Provinces is the study of the Guide for the Sister Servant.

• CELEBRATIONS

Since the beginning of this year, I have had the joy of participating in some celebrations...in April, the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Sisters in Guatemala, in June 300 years of the Province of Poland, and in July 150 years of the presence of the Daughters of Charity in the Philippines. These were occasions for giving thanks for the audacity of those who have gone before us and of prayer, shared with all our collaborators and with the Vincentian Family, for fidelity to the Vincentian charism.

This year the Church in Cuba celebrates the 400th anniversary of the “Virgin of Charity.” I was able to return to the Province for this occasion and I was deeply touched by the tenacity of the Sisters, who serve those who are poor corporally and spiritually against a background which is often extremely delicate.

• PROVINCES THAT ARE SUFFERING

The five countries of the Province of the Near East, Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, the Holy Land, are at risk from regional extremists, threatening their stability. In a special way, the Sisters living in Syria need our prayers. They are now all in Damascus at the school on rue Bab Touma and at Saint Louis Hospital; they share the anguish and the deprivations of the Syrian people, and they give witness by their charity and their prayers. Among the other Provinces suffering, I would like to

mention Nigeria where the interreligious conflicts are endemic in the north; and also the Philippines, often struck by natural disasters. At the present time there are terrible floods which have driven very many people from their homes in Manila and claimed victims. Some works of the Sisters have also been affected.

“The trials of life, while helping us to understand the mystery of the Cross and to participate in the sufferings of Christ (cf. Col. 1:24) are a prelude to the joy and hope to which faith leads: ‘when I am weak, then I am strong’” (2 Cor. 12:10).⁷

• A NEW IMPLANTATION

Last June 15th, feast of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, five Daughters of Charity from the Provinces of Central Africa and of Eritrea began a mission in the Central African Republic (a country north of Congo, east of Cameroon, south of Chad and west of Sudan). Several branches of the Vincentian Family are already present in this country and have joyfully welcomed our Sisters, who are going to serve in Safa, in the diocese of Mbaiki and have ministries in education, health care and pastoral services. So the Company is now present in 94 countries.

Let us turn our gaze once more towards Mary. Three times each day, when we pray the Angelus, we ask her to *“pray for us and make us worthy of the promises of Christ.”*

This prayer gives rhythm to our day; we gather in love and confidence which we bring to the Virgin Mary. She reminds us of our condition as servants and the mystery of the Incarnation, the center of the Vincentian charism. *“This is a prayer, Sisters, that’s said to thank God for coming into the world to become incarnate to save us.”⁸*

Be assured of my prayer for each of you and of my devoted affection,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

⁷. Porta Fidei, n. 15.

⁸. Saint Vincent, Conference of October 6th, 1658, CCD X, p. 458.

“An Undivided Heart” Silence, Listening and Meditation

The undivided heart needs a place of calm and quiet in which to center itself and be attentive to the promptings of the Spirit. In the life of the consecrated person, there must be a space for silence and listening and meditation. Our *Constitutions* remind us:

“To respect each Sister’s intimacy with God and to allow all of them the recollection they need, times of silence are necessary. This stillness in the presence of God, accepted by mutual agreement, fosters the richest of spiritual experiences.” (C. 21c)

One of the most well-known religious figures of the American Church in the last century was a Catholic bishop: Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. When I was a boy, he had one of those really early shows on television. And when Bishop Sheen was on television, all the streets were empty. It wasn’t just Catholics who watched him, people from every religious background found him a compelling and interesting speaker. When he came on television, he would set his penetrating gaze on the viewer. As he spoke easily, he would finger his pectoral cross and in a very easy and almost conversational manner, he would explain some truth of the Catholic faith.

As it happened, his secretary was a Vincentian priest from my province. That got us some privileges when I was in the Seminary. On one occasion, Bishop Sheen was invited to speak at the Chapel at Princeton University. Tickets were hard to get, but the seminary managed to obtain a number and I was one of the lucky seminarians who was selected to attend the presentation. I remember it very well. The University Chapel was packed. Everyone wanted to hear this iconic speaker in person. Finally, he appears. He makes his way to the raised pulpit and stands

there for a long time. And then he says nothing. All the nervous buzzing and all the uneasy movement in the church slowly stopped. For some time, there was no movement and no sound. And only then did he begin to speak. It was a *tour de force*. Not many people would be able to do that. When he began speaking everyone was listening, and the silence had opened people’s hearts.

I don’t know if I have ever listened as hard again. I am embarrassed to say that. On the other hand, I have not experienced anyone listening to me that attentively either. I think that it can be difficult to listen really well, yet it is an important discipline to cultivate. For our reflection today, I suggest that we consider the undivided heart and its need for growth in the soil of silence and for nourishment through listening and meditation.

I. THE PSALMS AND THE INVITATION TO APPROACH GOD IN SILENCE

I do not have to tell you how difficult it can be for some of us to find silence in some parts of our world. A constant amount of background noise can impose itself on our consciousness and make it difficult for us to focus. Yet, it is possible to search for silence and find it. The more difficult form of silence to find, however, is that interior silence which disposes us to listen. So much can be going on in our lives that our minds and hearts can be racing and distracted by one responsibility or another. Yet, we need to find a silent place, a quiet place, a still place in which to rest with the Lord. Without that, it is very difficult to be a listener. We can hear the magisterial summons of Psalm 46:10: *Be still and know that I am God.*

This command calls us to stop all our other actions and simply recognize the presence of the Lord. In that moment, we are ready to listen. Or we can call ourselves to attention through the reflective self-knowledge of Psalm 131:

*Yahweh, my heart has no lofty ambitions, my eyes do not look too high.
I am not concerned with great affairs
Or marvels beyond my scope.
Enough for me to keep my soul tranquil and quiet*

“An Undivided Heart” Silence, Listening, and Meditation

*Like a child in its mother’s arms,
As content as a child that has been weaned.
Israel, rely on Yahweh,
now and for ever.*

With this attitude, we recognize that we are the Lord’s, and we rest in the Lord’s presence like a cared-for child. We are attentive to how the Lord chooses to reveal the divine self to us and we listen with appropriate humility and awareness. The Psalms offer many words of encouragement to use this approach:

*In God alone there is rest for my soul,
From Him comes my safety;
With him alone for my rock, my safety,
My fortress, I can never fail.
Rest in God alone, my soul!
He is the source of my hope;
With him alone for my rock, my safety
My fortress, I can never fail;
Rest in God, my safety and glory.
The rock of my strength.
In God I find shelter; rely on him,
People, at all times; unburden your hearts to him,
God is a shelter for us.
Pour out your hearts to God our refuge! (Ps 62:6-9)*

In trust, we not only listen in stillness and expectation, but we feel the urge to pour out our heart before the Lord.

The Lord is eager to hear what we have to say and listens to us with great openness and readiness. In the great silence of the Lord’s presence, we desire him to listen to us as we pray. One can find a wonderful description of this divine silence in the writing of the German theologian Karl Rahner. I have read it to myself for years. Let us listen to this man’s prayer about God’s silence in prayer:

“Today I should like to speak to you about my prayer, O Lord. And though it often seems to me that You pay little heed to what I try to say to You in my prayers, please listen to me carefully now.

O Lord God, I don’t wonder that my prayers fall so far short of You—even I myself fail to pay the least bit of attention to what I am praying about. So often I consider my prayer as just a job I have to do, a duty to be performed. I get it out of the way and then relax, glad to have it behind me. When I’m at prayer, I am at my duty, instead of being with you.

Yes, that’s my prayer, I admit it. And yet, my God, I find it hard to be sorry for praying so poorly. How can a man hope to speak to You? You are so distant and so mysterious. When I pray, it’s as if my words have disappeared down some deep, dark well, from which no echo ever comes back to reassure me that they have struck the ground of Your heart.

Lord, to pray my whole life long without ever hearing an answer, isn’t that too much to ask? You see how much I need to be answered. And yet, my words never receive a word of reply. Why are You so silent? Why do You tell me to speak to You, when You don’t pay any attention to me? Isn’t Your silence a sure sign that You’re not listening?

Or do You really listen quite attentively, do You perhaps listen my whole life long, until I have told You everything, until I have spoken out my entire self to You? Do You remain so silent precisely because You are waiting until I have really finished, so that You can then speak Your word to me, the word of Your eternity? Are You silent so that You can one day bring to a close the lifelong monologue of a poor human being, burdened by the darkness of this world, by speaking the luminous word of eternal life, in which You will express Your very Self in the depths of my heart?” (Karl Rahner, “God of My Prayer”, Encounters with Silence)

The suggestion that God is silent because God is listening intently and waiting for me to finish my prayer is a wonderful one. I like it. Do you ever think of God as listening, really listening with his ear turned intently towards us and our prayer? Such intense attention to what we have to say could literally draw the words out of our mouth. It can make us thoughtful about what we want to tell our God and how we want to say it. There can be no attempt to craft our words in such a way that we sound clever or give a particular spin to our actions. God knows our hearts. To speak with absolute honesty and simplicity before the God who listens in this way offers an extraordinary freedom as well as

“An Undivided Heart” Silence, Listening, and Meditation

a fearful awareness of our inadequacy. Someone who listens to such a degree enables a speaker to rely upon the good judgment as well as the compassion of the listener. Viewing God in that way can make our prayer easier as well as more challenging. We can imagine it coming from the depths of our undivided heart.

II. ELIJAH AND ENCOUNTERING THE GOD OF SILENCE

When Elijah insists on travelling to Horeb to have his conversation with God, there is this interesting and instructive sequence. You know how it goes; listen to it again:

There he went into the cave and spent the night in it. Then the word of Yahweh came to him saying, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ He answered: ‘I am filled with jealous zeal for Yahweh Sabaoth, because the sons of Israel have deserted you, broken down your altars and put your prophets to the sword. I am the only one left, and they want to kill me. Then he was told, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before Yahweh.’ Then Yahweh himself went by. There came a mighty wind, so strong it tore the mountains and shattered the rocks before Yahweh. But Yahweh was not in the wind. And after the wind came an earthquake. But Yahweh was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire but Yahweh was not in the fire. And after the fire came the sound of a gentle breeze. And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance to the cave. Then a voice came to him which said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ He replied, ‘I am filled with jealous zeal for Yahweh Sabaoth because the sons of Israel have deserted you, broken down your altars and put your prophets to the sword. I am the only one left and they want to kill me.’” (1 Kgs 19:9-14)

Elijah’s experience up to this point has not been pleasant. He seeks to know the presence of God and he expects that presence to be manifested in the powerful ways in which God has shown himself in the past to the people of Israel. Elijah wants the Lord to act powerfully and aggressively, and he seeks that presence.

In the experience on the mountaintop, however, God is not present in

the strong wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire—eruptive ways in which God had demonstrated the divine presence in the history of Israel before. No, God is present in the “light silent sound.” God is present in the quiet and Elijah needs to learn to listen for him in this way. It is into this silent, listening presence, that Elijah must make his complaint. He hides his face in his cloak as he approaches the God who listens. God hears and God asks the prophet the same question before and after the revelation: “Why are you here, Elijah?” Communication with the Lord must begin with his question and it is the important question for the prophet to answer. God does not simply command and demand; God wants the prophet to pour out his soul into the listening presence of God. God wants the prophet to say what is on his mind and in his heart, and God will not interrupt but rather surround him with the profound silence of one who hears and knows the heart.

In speaking with simplicity and passion, the one who prays to the God who listens, unburdens his heart and comes to know the will of God. And that one is sent forth for action.

The same experience of encountering the Lord and being invited to listen also happens in the Gospel, and also takes place on a mountaintop, and also involves an appearance by Elijah. It is the story of the Transfiguration. Once again, God is revealed in the divine wonder in the glorified presence of Jesus. Once again, the former ways in which God has revealed the divine presence in the Law and the Prophets is made evident in the persons of Moses and Elijah. And once again, a voice speaks from the heavens and offers a summons to pay attention: “*This is my beloved son, listen to him*” (Mk 9:7). God is present in the word which he has spoken which is Jesus, and the community must listen to him. And once again, the disciples cannot stay on the mountain but go out with Jesus to proclaim the Gospel. Listening leads to action.

At the conclusion of the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, when the Rich Man asks that Lazarus be sent to his brothers to give them further advice on how they should be living their lives faithfully, Abraham responds simply: “*They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them*” (Lk 16:29). What people need is not more instruction, but the willingness to pay attention to the instruction which they have received. The same is true for us. We do not need more books; what we need is

“An Undivided Heart” Silence, Listening, and Meditation

the openness of heart to pay attention to the words and lessons which we have already been given.

In our *Inter-Assemblies Document*, there is an awareness of the need for silence and the value which it brings to a person’s life. We yearn to “Rediscover silence that fosters attentive listening to God and one another” (IAD 19). There are lots of places in which we can discover that silence. With too much noise, our heart is scattered in all kinds of directions. Our undivided heart longs for the silence in which one can listen and create and be re-created. In this place, one can speak and be heard. The Liturgy offers a particularly powerful setting for these events to take place.

III. THE LITURGY AND SILENCE

The documents of the Second Vatican Council emphasize the importance of silence at liturgy, and this theme is recognized in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal.

Sacred silence also, as part of the celebration, is to be observed at the designated times. Its nature, however, depends on the moment when it occurs in the different parts of the celebration. For in the Penitential Act and again after the invitation to pray, individuals recollect themselves; whereas after a reading or after the Homily, all meditate briefly on what they have heard; then after Communion, they praise God in their hearts and pray to him. Even before the celebration itself, it is a praiseworthy practice for silence to be observed in the church, in the sacristy, in the vestry, and in adjacent areas, so that all may dispose themselves to carry out the sacred celebration in a devout and fitting manner. (Number 45 of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, Third and Emended Typical Edition, 2008).

Note that there are four different characteristic ways of observing silence in our celebration of the Eucharist:

a) Preparing for the celebration beforehand with some quiet time to bring our minds and hearts into the present moment. We want to begin our celebration of the Eucharist focused on what we are doing and into whose presence we are entering.

b) Promoting recollection before the penitential rite and the prayers. This time of silence invites us to humbly admit to our sinfulness and to speak our own prayer before the prayer of the community is “collected” or “gathered together” by the celebrant.

c) Meditating on the readings and homily. In the quiet of our hearts, we can meditate on the word of God which has been proclaimed in our midst and which has been addressed to us. This reverent listening and meditation can only take place in the stillness of a heart eager to be instructed.

d) Giving praise and thanks to God after communion. Nourished by the gift of God’s Word and the sacrament of the altar, we are given the opportunity to proclaim an inner psalm of praise and thanks to the one who has called us and strengthened us with his loving presence.

Pope Benedict has written some encouraging words regarding the importance of maintaining and observing a fitting quietness in our Eucharistic celebrations:

“We are realizing more and more clearly that silence is part of the liturgy. We respond, by singing and praying, to the God who addresses us, but the greater mystery, surpassing all words, summons us to silence. It must, of course, be a silence with content, not just the absence of speech and action. We should expect the liturgy to give us a positive stillness that will restore us.” (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, The Spirit of the Liturgy. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000. P. 209)

It is in silence that we can most effectively listen to the Word of God. The Church, in the document *Verbum Domini*, holds out to us the example of Mary in this regard:

*“Only in silence can the word of God find a home in us, as it did in Mary, woman of the word and, inseparably, woman of silence. Our liturgies must facilitate this attitude of authentic listening: Verbo crescente, verba deficiunt.” (Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, September 30, 2010, Para. 66)*

The Latin phrase here may be loosely translated: “When the Word appears, all other words disappear.” Nothing substitutes for listening to God’s Word and allowing it to flourish within us. That can only

“An Undivided Heart” Silence, Listening, and Meditation

happen through the gift of silence and the listening of an undivided heart. Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers a wonderful reflection on this truth:

The silence in the sanctuary building is the sign of the sacred presence of God in His Word. We are silent before hearing the Word because our thoughts are already directed to the Word, as a child is quiet when he enters his father’s room. We are silent after hearing the Word because the Word is still speaking and dwelling within us. We are silent at the beginning of the day because God should have the first word, and we are silent before going to sleep because the last word also belongs to God.

Silence is nothing else but waiting for God’s Word and coming away from this with a blessing. But everybody knows that this is something that needs to be practiced and learned, in our days when talkativeness prevails. The silence we observe before hearing the Word of God will have its effect on our whole day, it will teach us to show moderation in our words. (Life Together)

IV. SILENCE AND MEDITATION

One of the blessings which can emerge from silence is the gift of meditation. This happens, of course, not just in the Eucharist but in all our attempts to really think about what we are doing. Paul offers some guidance as to the subject of our meditations:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Phil 4:8)

Once again, Paul offers great advice. The typical Jewish practice of using seven as a number of completeness is seen here. Paul holds out seven categories which point to the Christian’s need to lead a reflective life. To really understand something, we need to think about it, and in fact we want to think about it. So, we want to reflect on what is true and we want to know what is honorable, and we want to do what is just and so on. The invitation is for us to be people who think about our lives and our way of living and enter into them more deeply. We do not want to waste our time pondering on what is pointless.

Vincent and Louise certainly put this silence into practice. Vincent’s conferences are all focused on calling the Company and the Community to deeper reflection on what is most important for our lives. And Louise is wonderful in the way she expresses some ideas that capture her imagination:

“I have no doubt, my dear Sister, that the good thoughts that God has given you and dear Sister Laurence have led to good strong resolutions for the future. If so, they will, with the help of God’s grace, enable you to become great saints.” (LdM, Spiritual Writings, L. 473. p. 504)

“Monsieur, My heart is still overflowing with joy on account of the understanding which, I believe, our good God has given me of the words, “God is my God,” and the awareness I had of the glory which the blessed render to Him as a consequence of this truth.” (LdM, Spiritual Writings, L. 369. p. 341)

And she gives this advice:

“While reflecting on the divine gentleness during your periods of meditation, speak to Our Lord with great simplicity and innocent familiarity.” (LdM, Spiritual Writings, L. 40. p. 679)

Vincent’s confidence in the power of prayer and meditation turn into eloquence as he exhorts his followers to be people of prayer. One can feel the dynamic force of his words as he calls us to be pray-ers:

“Let all of us really devote ourselves to this practice of meditation, since through it all good things come to us. If we persevere in our vocation, it’s thanks to meditation; if we succeed in our works, it’s thanks to meditation; if we don’t fall into sin, it’s thanks to meditation; if we remain in charity, if we’re saved, all that is thanks to God and to meditation. Just as God refuses nothing in meditation, so he grants almost nothing without meditation: Rogate Dominum messis [Ask the Lord of the harvest]; no, nothing; not even the spread of his Gospel and what concerns His glory the most. Rogate Dominum messis.... No matter! Rogate Dominum messis. So then, let’s ask God very humbly to help us to adopt this practice.” (VdP, CCD 11 #168, p. 361)

“An Undivided Heart” Silence, Listening, and Meditation

It is difficult to imagine him speaking any more clearly. Prayer and meditation are the means which we use to stay in touch with the Lord and through which God responds to our needs. It is by silent reflection, which leads to prayer, that we come to know ourselves and our mission and ministry. Through these we form our undivided heart.

CONCLUSION:

In silence, the undivided heart flourishes. *Vita Consecrata* powerfully captures this truth [my underlining]:

The call to holiness is accepted and can be cultivated only in the silence of adoration before the infinite transcendence of God: “We must confess that we all have need of this silence, filled with the presence of him who is adored: in theology, so as to exploit fully its own sapiential and spiritual soul; in prayer, so that we may never forget that seeing God means coming down the mountain with a face so radiant that we are obliged to cover it with a veil (cf. Ex 34:33); in commitment, so that we will refuse to be locked in a struggle without love and forgiveness. All, believers and non-believers alike, need to learn a silence that allows the Other to speak when and how he wishes, and allows us to understand his words”. In practice this involves great fidelity to liturgical and personal prayer, to periods devoted to mental prayer and contemplation, to Eucharistic adoration, to monthly retreats and to spiritual exercises. (VC 38)

To conclude, we can look to the prophet Isaiah and the words which he offers encouraging us to be people who allow silence and waiting to direct our undivided hearts and to provide the space for us to come to our God and for him to come to us:

*For thus says the Lord Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel,
Your salvation lay in conversion and tranquility,
your strength, in complete trust.
(Isa 30:15)*

Father Patrick GRIFFIN, C.M.
Director General

With Mary, We Sing the Magnificat

INTRODUCTION

“The Magnificat is a Scripture poem that sings, a poem full of life and action. It is a canticle; it is prayer; it is adoration; it is exultation and enthusiasm; it is thanksgiving; it is a victory song-God’s victory in Jesus Christ. A cry of faith, it is full of theology. It is an inexhaustible meditation; it is contemplation. It is first of all through faith and prayer that we discover it, but also through all the resources of exegesis and theology because it requires the effort of our intelligence and humble listening to the Word of God that is expressed there. It is only by striving to make it our own throughout our life that we manage to discover its depths. It is not just a question of studying the Magnificat; we must inhabit it, live it and recreate it.”¹

The Latin American Bishops gathered at Puebla said, *“The Magnificat mirrors the soul of Mary. In that canticle, we find the culmination of the spirituality of Yahweh’s poor and lowly, and of the prophetic strain of the Old Testament. It is the opening proclamation of Christ’s new Gospel, the prelude to the Sermon on the Mount. Mary in this canticle gives herself to us as one who is empty of herself, putting all her trust in the mercy of the Father.”²*

I – THE CONTEXT OF THE MAGNIFICAT ³

We can only discover the fulness of the meaning of Mary’s canticle in relationship to other texts of the Sacred Scriptures. In Luke’s Gospel it is after the Annunciation, during her visit to Elizabeth, that Mary sings the Magnificat.

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1. Le Magnificat, R. Coste - (published by Nouvelle Cité)
 2. Building a Civilisation of Love, Final Document of the Puebla Conference (1979)
 3. Le Magnificat, C. M. Martini (published by Cerf)

This expression sends us back to the angel’s word and makes reference to “the sixth month,” (Luke 1:26) which is taken up again in verse 56: *“Mary stayed with her about three months,”* that is, until Elizabeth was ready to give birth. A few days before the Visitation, Mary learned that she was being asked to become the Mother of the Savior and had felt, no doubt, joy in collaborating in the action of God. She submitted to this joyfully: *“Let it be done to me according to your word.”* At the end of the account of the Annunciation, the angel gave her a sign: *“And know this, your kinswoman Elizabeth, has in her old age also conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month”*. Mary learned of this miraculous birth from the angel!

MARY’S PERPLEXITY

However, it is not difficult to imagine that the following day, being alone, she felt a certain fear: the announcement of the angel was a heavy secret to bear and to live with because she could not confide or explain this divine intervention to anyone. Such unbelievable and extraordinary events leave those who experience them in solitude. Such was the perplexity of Mary. We can even imagine that, like Jesus in the desert, Mary was tempted by the devil, trying to convince her that this was all an illusion.

Then the text says: ***“Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah.”***

So, something urges Mary to hurry. Mary undoubtedly felt the need to find confirmation of what she had been told, convinced that Elizabeth alone was capable of believing such an event because she herself was living through a similar experience.

MARY’S CHARITY

Usually Mary’s “haste” is explained by attributing it to her charity, and that’s right. She was driven by the desire to serve, to come to the aid of her elderly cousin. The Holy Spirit immediately led her on her way: swept away by the new life within her, Mary must carry the life

of God. The evangelist presents Mary as a loving and practical person who is not content with beautiful sentiments and one who is as a model of charity and service: yes, salvation unfolds in human relationships.

Mary, then, can both accept help and offer her own, hoping to be understood and understanding the need of the other. In this, we can discover two absolutely necessary dimensions for establishing the reciprocity needed for a true human relationship.

“Mary left and entered a town of Judah.”

The name of this town is not mentioned but, being near the mountain, it is undoubtedly Ain Karim, near Jerusalem. The words of the evangelist are simple, but the decision to start out was clearly not so easy. At that time, it was not without danger for a woman to leave on her own on a journey of three or four days through the mountains. But the Spirit gave her the freedom and the strength to go beyond herself and go where she felt called. Throughout this journey, Mary must have reflected on this astonishing news and tried to find the words to share it with Elizabeth.

We notice that, in Luke’s Gospel the theme of, journeying is important. Jesus is the divine “wanderer” who walks with us in our daily life. To be present to the other, we ourselves must often cross over the “mountains” of interior blockages and so many inner considerations which hinder us from encountering the other. Or again, there are the “mountains” of prejudices which stand between us and hinder us from an authentic encounter. To really encounter the other person we must always cross over “mountains.”

“Mary entered the house of Zachariah and greeted Elizabeth.”

We can understand that when she knocked on the door of Elizabeth, Mary was deeply moved. She respectfully greeted her cousin who was completely astonished. Carrying Jesus within her, this presence of God gave incredible force to Mary’s greeting: it is the *“God of Israel who visits and redeems his people.”* (Luke 1:68) The grace with which she was filled allowed her to enter into a relationship with great love, delicacy and sensitivity.

Magnificat

“When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Luke describes Elizabeth’s outburst of joy when she heard the greeting of Mary who was carrying Jesus within her, joy which caused the ‘leaping for joy’ of John the Baptist in his mother’s womb, and Elizabeth is filled with the fulness of the Spirit. So the Spirit with which John the Baptist was to be filled (Luke 1:15), was given to him thanks to Mary’s coming. For the evangelist, God, carried by Mary, makes his presence visible and felt: it is He who speaks when Mary greets Elizabeth.

At this moment, Elizabeth utters words that she had never said before: ***“Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”***

When she blesses Mary, Elizabeth welcomes ***“the mother of my Lord.”*** It is surprising to note the degree of understanding Elizabeth has from the moment of Mary’s greeting. Mary, “filled with grace,” is a sign for Elizabeth of the presence of God, of what he had done in her and through her. Elizabeth grasps the mystery, the secret of Mary: God is present in Mary; she carries him, and she brings him to others.

The two women become a blessing for one another: first Mary for Elizabeth, then Elizabeth for Mary. They understand each other and they give themselves to one another. All that Mary held hidden in her heart is freed and shared, understood and confirmed: what had happened to her is true, real. For us, as for Mary, the grace of being able to open oneself and share is important.

“Blessed is she who believed.”

Elizabeth understands that Mary’s pregnancy is the work of God: ***“Blessed is she who has believed in the salvation of God!”*** God needed Mary’s faith to accomplish in her what he promised: she is the prototype of faith, of trust in God.

“Blessed is she who believed.” Elizabeth’s praise puts the focus on Mary and it is she, now, who is given the words to interpret what has happened... Mary expresses openly what she held hidden deep within

herself: this marvellous mystery that she carries within her. Her canticle is completely centered on the mystery of the Incarnation.

II – THE STRUCTURE OF THE MAGNIFICAT

Introduction

The most obvious feature of the Canticle’s structure is its division into two main sections:

- In the first part (v. 46-50), there is **the story of Mary**, her song of praise, of gratitude.
- In the second part (v. 51-55), the praise of Mary takes in the **History of Salvation**. Verse 51 *“He has shown might with his arm”* is at the heart of what God accomplished in Mary and of what he has accomplished in the history of all humanity.

1 - MARY’S STORY, PROCLAMATION, REJOICING (v. 46-50)

The Magnificat expresses Mary’s jubilation, her proclamation, her faith perspective on the prodigious event that was accomplished in her during the Annunciation.

Literary origins of the Magnificat from the Canticle of Hannah.

Nourished by the Word of God from the Old Testament, Mary, to sing her joy to God, takes up the first words of the Canticle of Hannah: *“My heart exults in the Lord, my horn is exalted by my God. I have swallowed up my enemies; I rejoice in your victory.”* (1 Sam. 2:1) Hannah sang of being miraculously cured of sterility that caused her so much suffering. It is probable that Mary remembered the miracle enjoyed by Hannah, this woman so famous in the memory of her people, and she took up some of her words to express her own jubilation. However, we find a great difference in the tone of the way she expressed her most intimate feelings. Hannah, humiliated because of her sterility, can hold her head high after being cured, and she can put an end to gossip with a haughty attitude toward her “enemies”. Mary, on the contrary, only claims to be the humble servant of the Lord, and she does not consider anyone her enemy. With her, we are on a completely different level of depth: that of the spirituality of the Beatitudes.

Magnificat

“My soul proclaims... my spirit rejoices..”

These verses, expressed in the first person, allow us to contemplate the jubilation of this believer par excellence, the Virgin Mary. What lightness and at the same time what depth in Mary’s jubilation. It is the absolutely extraordinary joy of the young mother of the Messiah who expresses her gratitude and praise to God. Her joy comes from God; it is in Him that she finds her fundamental happiness. This is why, immediately after Mary’s two acts of jubilation, described above, proclamation and rejoicing, she forgets herself to turn everything to God alone. She doesn’t dream of exalting herself for such a privilege and redoubles her joyful confidence in God. Mary “rejoices” or “exults” with joy, she thrills and dances for joy. The same word is used for the child that leaps in the womb of Elizabeth (Lk. 1: 44).

To really understand the meaning of the verb “rejoice”, that is, “thrill for joy”, we must recall two Gospel texts:

JESUS’ CANTICLE OF PRAISE:

“At that very moment he rejoiced [in] the holy Spirit and said, “I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike.” (Lk. 10: 21) Mary’s praise has a parallel in Jesus’ praise, his thanksgiving to the Father for having hidden these things from the learned and having revealed them to the childlike, first of all, to his mother. In his Canticle of Praise, Jesus highlights the great difference between the learned and the humble; in the second part of the Canticle of Mary, the same opposites are found: powerful and humble, rich and hungry.

THE BEATITUDES, especially in Saint Luke’s version, can be put in parallel with the Magnificat: *“happy are the poor..., you who are hungry..., you who are weeping..., but woe to you who are rich..., you who are filled now..., you who laugh...”* (Lk. 6: 20-26) In the Magnificat, we understand what Mary thinks about God and how she anticipates the spirit of the Beatitudes.

“My soul proclaims the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Mary sings of her God and defines Him by these three terms: “Lord”, “God”, and “my Savior”.

* “*Lord*,” that is, the Lord, whose servant she is.

* “*God*,” that is, the God of history. Mary is speaking here as a member of the chosen people; her maternity is inscribed in God’s great plan of salvation for his people.

* “*My Savior*,” that is, the Savior of the people but also of me. The “my” allows us to enter into Mary’s faith conviction that all is grace and that what is happening in her is the work of God. The possessive adjective is not meant to be self-aggrandising but only expresses her personal experience of salvation.

“For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness”

After the first two verbs, “proclaim” and “rejoice”, which have Mary, as their subject, the other verbs used have God as their subject: *“He has looked upon... he has done great things...”* In her Canticle, Mary repeats the Fiat of the Annunciation: *“I am the handmaid of the Lord”* and expresses a double experience of salvation.

**God, the Almighty, has looked upon her in her lowliness* to make of her, in an unexpected way, the *mother of the Messiah*. Mary does not exalt herself; she knows that her greatness comes from God who looked upon her with love.

**God saved her by giving her peace of heart, joy and honor*, while the angel’s announcement made her pass through interior suffering: the fear of being humiliated, dishonored and rejected. Not only will Mary not be exposed to shame and repudiation by Joseph, but: *“all ages will call me blessed.”*

“Behold, from now on all ages will call me blessed.” (v. 48)

Echoing the words of Elizabeth, Mary prophesies her future glory. She is convinced that faith in the mystery of the Incarnation will make believers deeply grateful for God’s love for humanity. Mary does not claim any merit, any glory; this would be contrary to her humility that cannot overshadow the Lord’s glory.

Magnificat

“The Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name. His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him.” (v. 49-50)

These two verses reveal Mary’s capacity to read in her own experience real motives for praising God. Through the two events of the Annunciation and the Visitation, she sees the universal plan of God and gives thanks to the Almighty whose mercy is from age to age. Mary expresses her faith in God Almighty who has done “great things” for her. It is in the mystery of the Incarnation that the divine Almighty breaks forth. Faith in the all-powerfulness of God does not infringe on the freedom of his creation: Mary said yes to God but she attributes the power to God alone.

2– THE HISTORY OF SALVATION (v. 51-55)

After her praise, these are the most astonishing verses of the humble servant of the Lord. Mary’s perspective is widened beyond her own life to God’s action in history. She celebrates the surprising choices of God: the God who acts in her is also the God who has accomplished great things in history and who overturns the norms of this world, putting himself beside the weakest.

This second part is also divided into two parts:

- * Verses 51 to 53 concern salvation history as a reversal of situations: a reversal that “casts down” those who are “on high.”
- * verses 54 and 55 recall the fulfilment of the promise and its effect.

a. SITUATIONS ARE REVERSED

“He has shown might in the power of his arm, he has routed the proud of heart. He has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent empty away.” (v. 51-53)

Throughout the centuries, these verses resonate like a victory song: that of the poor over the rich and powerful who oppress and exploit them. The Magnificat inaugurates a new order for humanity. Mary celebrates God’s action in history and sums up what the poor have waited for and desired throughout history.

In the Bible, how does this reversal work? *“He has shown might with his arm.”* (v. 51) This evokes the powerful saving action of God who liberated his people as they left Egypt: at the Red Sea, God’s arm particularly demonstrated its might. *“Dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.”* Disperse is the opposite of bring together, which takes us back to the image of Babel: the arrogant wanted to build a tower to heaven to glorify themselves. God *“confused the speech of all the world. From there the LORD scattered them over all the earth...”*

The surprising words of Mary indicate that God’s way of acting is completely different from man’s way: while the latter aspires to prestige, power and wealth, God loves the weak and the poor. In the Bible, it is said that God’s ways are not our ways. The people of Israel witness to this by their history: lowly and poor, Israel had been oppressed by the great empires of Assyria or Babylonia.

Mary expresses the theological experience of her life. God revealed himself as the God of the poor by choosing her as the mother of his Son: a poor young woman, from an insignificant village, without noble ancestry or special qualities.

When we take into account Jewish customs, Mary could well have feared that after the Annunciation she would be humiliated and rejected by her family and her people who did not know the mysterious origin of the child she was bearing. Her situation is changed by Elizabeth’s words, which accord her the first place in history: *“From now on, all ages will call me blessed.”*

Now, this mystery begins to reveal itself: the mystery of the **Incarnation of the Son of God**: *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.”* (Jn. 3:16) This is the mystery celebrated in the Magnificat.

In the Gospel, God offers humanity a new life manifested in Jesus: *“The Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.”* (Lk. 19:10) For all people, He is the companion on the way, forgiveness, the perfect gift. He reverses human considerations.

The first example of reversal and opposition is found in **the account of the birth of Jesus**. This is constructed in a way that uses a deliberate

Magnificat

contrast between the pretensions of the Roman emperor who claims a universal empire, and the humility of God who makes himself a little child. Through this “*infant wrapped in swaddling clothes*” and laid in a manger, God descends to the lowest level and shares the condition of the poorest. At the same time, he is celebrated by angels: “Glory to God in the highest.” In the humility of this human birth, God gives himself to mankind.

At his baptism, when Jesus descends into the waters of the Jordan, submitting to the Baptist and sharing in solidarity with sinners, the voice of the Father elevates him as the Son of God

At the beginning of his public ministry, in the synagogue of Nazareth, invited to read the prophet Isaiah, Jesus chooses the passage where it is written that the Spirit sends him to announce the Good News to the poor. (Lk. 4: 16-22) This text sheds light on his entire mission. It presents him as the Messiah, the Savior announced by Isaiah.

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus continues in his actions and attitudes, the reversal of human norms. He pays attention to those who are poor, the insignificant, sinners: he lifts them up, elevates them, and makes them know their value before God: Zacchaeus, Bartholomew, the widow of Naim, the Samaritan woman, the sinful woman. These examples help us to understand the reversal expressed in the Magnificat: God gives importance to the humble, the poor, the hungry. He puts them back on their feet and lifts them up, but he leaves aside those who think themselves important, the powerful and the rich. The words of the Magnificat help us to understand the reversals presented to us in these Gospel texts.

Jesus’ parables present the same dynamic: the parables of the poor man Lazarus (Lk. 16: 39-41) or the rich farmer (Lk. 12: 15-21) denounce self-centered wealth, that of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk. 18: 9-14) chastises pride, that of those invited to the wedding feast advises those who look for the first place to put themselves in the last place so they will have the honor of being called to the first.

Jesus’ contemporaries didn’t recognize him as Messiah or his mission that reversed the established order in the society of his time. This lack

of understanding led to his death.

The cross is the great sign of contradiction (Lk. 2: 34-5): “*He loved his own in the world, and he loved them to the end.*” The law of lifting up the lowly and putting down the rulers becomes clear in Jesus’ crucifixion, death and resurrection. In his own flesh, Jesus lives that mysterious abasement at the hands of the powerful, and elevation by God’s hand: the culminating moment of the revelation of God’s action.

The reversal of values proposed by God is realized in the person and life of Christ. Mary, living by the new values that she articulates, anticipates the Gospel of reversal of human norms, giving value to those of God: humility, obedience... Her message is the same as that of Jesus. The Magnificat is the canticle of the Beatitudes.

b. – THE FULFILMENT OF THE PROMISE AND ITS EFFECT

“He has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy, according to his promise to our fathers, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” (v. 54-55)

These last verses are evidence that Mary thought of the mystery of the Son that she bore as the proof of God’s love for his people, as the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham, which will have repercussions on humanity and the Church.

As member of a people, Mary’s thinking goes beyond this and she defines herself in relationship to it. Mary understands herself with reference to the history of Israel, particularly to Abraham’s faith and his openness to God’s will. Her response to the angel, “*I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word*” (Lk. 1:38), evokes Abraham’s attitude and that of so many men and women through the centuries. “*Just as the patriarch is considered to be our father, all the more reason that Mary should be considered our mother in faith. It is she, descendant of Abraham and privileged heir of his faith, who obtains the fruit of the promise*”⁴. Like Abraham (Gen. 18:3), Mary enjoys exceptional divine favor (Lk. 1:30). Like him (Gen. 12:3, 18:18),

4. Angelus, John-Paul II (December 4th, 1983)

Magnificat

Mary is a source of grace for all nations and enjoys universal praise (Lk. 1:42-8). Like him yet again, (Gen. 15:6), she is celebrated for the strength of her faith in a promise whose content was a miraculous birth (Lk. 1:45).

Mary opens her spirit and her heart to the universality of salvation that will be accomplished by the Son who is given to her. Today, we are heirs in faith of “*the promise made to our fathers, to Abraham and his descendants forever,*” and linked to the People of Israel and all its history.

CONCLUSION

The goodness of God, manifested in the mystery of the Incarnation and the salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ, is the source of great joy for all the Church. When the Church sings the Magnificat, it is not first of all in honor of Mary (although it is also this) but, above all, in honor of God the Redeemer, accomplishing in Jesus Christ humanity’s salvation. When the Church sings the Magnificat, it recalls the universality of the divine promise and commits itself to developing bonds with everyone. The Virgin of the Magnificat invites us to transform the world in the light of the Gospel, to see every human being as a brother or sister.

Sister Anne PRÉVOST
Daughter of Charity

Province of Santo Domingo

Our Service in the Shanty Towns and Rural Areas of Quisqueya

A Brief History

The island of Haiti comprises two countries: to the east, the Dominican Republic, and to the west, the Republic of Haiti. In the Dominican Republic, you find “bateys,” encampments where the sugar cane cutters live. These encampments have become shanty towns for Haitians who came to seek work and cut sugar cane. Their living conditions are very difficult.

In 1967, the Daughters of Charity arrived in the region of Quisqueya where there was a sugar cane refinery. It was one of the poorest areas of the country and a place of Haitian immigration where the church was not yet present.

In this region, the only source of income is sugar cane production: the people who make their living in this way are very poorly paid and are exploited. When they retire they receive a tiny pension. Today, the refinery no longer exists. In this situation, people try to survive and move to tourist areas or “free market zones,” a sort of fiscal paradise. Unfortunately, because of unemployment and lack of resources, they often resort to prostitution.

The Sisters’ ministry began with education, evangelization and the promotion of those who are poor; so the presence

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of the Church became more visible in their midst. After several years in teaching, the Sisters had to leave the school that had become a state school. They did not abandon the mission because they began to work in the area of health care.

In 1981, the Daughters of Charity began their health ministry in the shanty towns surrounding the former Quisqueya refinery in the San José de los Llanos region and other encampments of the San Pedro de Macoris region. The Sisters went out on foot, accompanied by volunteers from the parish. With a box balanced on their heads, they walked many kilometers to care for the sick who could not come to the clinic because of their state of health and their poverty. Then, the community began to reflect on how to better respond to this situation: a car was needed to be able to get around and extend their services including home visits, a mobile clinic and medical care. All this was possible thanks to financial support from charitable organizations.

The community developed its health aid project by working to create and organize teams of carers so that people who lived in the shanty towns could have health care infrastructure.

At present, the mobile clinic serves more than 35 shanty towns and villages in the departments of Quisqueya and San José de los Llanos. Financially supported by national and international organizations, it works with Christian and Vincentian perspectives and goals.

The mobile clinic has a doctor, nurses, pharmacy aides, Sisters, women who work for promotion programs, the coordinator and the driver. Each morning, the team goes out to the shanty towns indicated on a list. Each year, the team sees more than 10,000 people, about 900 a month. The roads that must be taken are dangerous and difficult to drive along. When the team arrives at a shanty town, the doctor sees those who are sick, for consultation, the nurses provide care, and in the waiting room, the sick can benefit from an educational presentation. During this time, the Sisters make home visits where they become aware of the circumstances and needs of the families, gathering information that will allow diagnosis, organization and decision making.

Every six months, the team goes to all the homes to distribute vitamins and antiparasite medicine. The person responsible for health in the village meets the mobile team as well as malnourished children and pregnant teenagers. The local health leaders have actively collaborated in the census of the shanty towns. When they find a difficult problem, they call on the doctor or the Sisters.

The team offers a human and Christian formation program for the local health leaders, chosen by the people of their village. With support, some have been able to gain a high school diploma and even a college degree.

Home Visits

Through home visits, we can respond to the most urgent needs of families living in poverty, denounce injustice and share the Word of God.

Education and teaching

Our objective is to support the education of children and the professional formation of adults. The formation team is made up of teachers and volunteers. Together, we work in collaboration with the Jesuit Center and the national education service. To cover the cost of studies, parents make a contribution despite their lack of resources, and some young people are awarded scholarships. The Jesuits, benefactors and city government also contribute.

Vegetable gardens

In the course of our visits, we saw abandoned land and malnourished children. So we brought families together and suggested that they plant and cultivate small vegetable gardens. They agreed. Together, we worked out a plan that we presented to an NGO, which agreed to fund it. A farming specialist directs the project and guides and gives the family advice about the work. Currently, 40 gardens produce vegetables for daily use and sale.

Today's Challenges

The undocumented

To resolve the difficult problem of the high number of people in the shanty towns without legal documents and who are therefore in the country illegally, we have formed links with the “Haitian Migrant Network” led by the Jesuits. These help to gather the necessary documents to regularize the people’s situation. The person responsible for human promotion in the shanty town is trained and goes through all the necessary procedures with the Jesuit Center and the Haitian Embassy. These procedures require much time but very often have a positive outcome.

The abandoned elderly

Faced with the situation of numerous elderly people who find themselves alone, abandoned, malnourished, and sick, we reflected and then requested from the Ministry of Agriculture one of the warehouses of the former refinery. We transformed it, and today it is a residence for the elderly, La Sira that houses 22 elderly Haitian men and women. A medical team, doctor, nurse, Sister and other staff, cares for them. For the Sister, who coordinates the service, this possibility of serving Christ in these elderly people is a special grace from God.

Conclusion: A Prophetic Ministry Full of Hope

This work has faced many challenges, but it stimulates us to be witnesses of prophecy and hope among people without hope, who are victims of injustice, exclusion and marginalization. We were able to go forward thanks to the generosity of NGOs, the Company and the Dominican government.

In order to respond to all these needs, our community hopes to educate people in welcoming and showing solidarity with Haitian migrants. We are convinced that “seeds of the Word” are present in the heart of each sick person for whom we care, each young person we accompany, and each family that we help. We were called and chosen for this mission. Each morning, the Spirit with his Love invites us to go out to them courageously, following the example of Mary who set out for Ain-Karem.

We feel that the situation of the migrant community urges us to live our relationship with God in greater depth, our community life with joy, and our daily ministry with zeal and creativity. We realize that ongoing formation is more necessary than ever and that we must be attentive to tracing new furrows in our particular circumstances and involve people in their own promotion. We must rely on collaboration to resolve numerous problems and introduce systemic change. The mission begun long ago still continues today

The Sisters of Quisqueya

**Nomination of Visitatrixes and
Appointment of Provincial Directors**

DESIGNATION OF VISITATRIX

PROVINCE OF SLOVAKIA: Sister Damiana PAGACOVA was designated Visitatrix, replacing Sister Alzbeta VOLOSINOVA, August 8, 2012.

PROVINCE OF CURITIBA: Sister Leonides SELHORST was designated Visitatrix, replacing Sister Paula Pereira ALVES, September 19, 2012.

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APPOINTMENT OF PROVINCIAL DIRECTORS

PROVINCE OF GRAZ-CENTRAL EUROPE: Father Alexander JERNEJ has been appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, October 2, 2011. Father Sandor SZOKE has been appointed Assistant Director of the Daughters of Charity of Hungary-Romania, October 2, 2011.

PROVINCE OF SEVILLE: Father MASIDE has been reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity until the erection of the new Province, March 14, 2012.

PROVINCE OF CUBA: Father Gilbert WALKER has been reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity until the reconfiguration of the Caribbean Provinces, March 23, 2012.

PROVINCE OF THE CANARY ISLANDS: Father Gregorio Ado TELLECHEA has been reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity until the erection of the new Province, May 7, 2012.

PROVINCE OF NORTH INDIA: Father Thomas KOTTIRY has been reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for a mandate of three years, May 7, 2012.

PROVINCE OF SOUTH INDIA: Father Devasia PUDUSSERY has been appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for a mandate of six years, May 12, 2012.

PROVINCE OF SARDINIA: Father Italo ZEDDE has been reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for a mandate of three years, May 31, 2012.

PROVINCE OF LOS ALTOS HILLS: Father Andrew BELLISARIO has been reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for a mandate of three years, May 31, 2012.

PROVINCE OF FRANCE-SOUTH: Father Bernard MASSARINI has been reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for a mandate of three years, September 19, 2012.

News
from the
Provinces

Province of St. Louise USA

**El Paso:
Serving Undocumented Immigrants**

In El Paso western Texas, a town that borders one of the most violent places in the Americas: Juarez, Mexico, where drug barons and cartels terrorize and murder the innocent in cold-blood. And so they flee, without papers and without any possessions to El Paso, Texas. It's just over the bridge, but it's another world.

El Paso is known as a Sanctuary City, where those lucky enough to cross the border can find relative safety. They can also find work, like selling handmade goods on the streets. But once the word goes out that the Border Patrol is coming, they run for cover in already crowded shelters and small lofts until the danger is over.

As the people wait for this to happen they are left without any income and that makes an already difficult lifestyle even worse, but it is better than being in the Detention Center and what usually follows: deportation back into the dangerous streets of Juarez.

There are six Daughters of Charity who serve these undocumented immigrants. They minister in the shelters for the homeless, legal advocacy centers, medical clinics, schools and the Detention Center. They work very hard with a population that is extremely grateful for the love and acceptance that they feel in the presence of these Daughters of Charity.

The stories that are told at the dinner table each evening when the Sisters return home, range from the simply unbelievable to the downright absurd; and once in awhile, there are miracles to tell. Their

experiences are a testimony to human misery and the greatness of God, the resilience of the human spirit, and the reality of the presence of God.

For the Sisters engaged in this service of migrants who are stateless and lack the means to provide for the basic needs of their families without help from charitable organizations, the most surprising aspect of their community life is that after an exhausting day serving these poorest of peoples, these Sisters continue to find deep in their hearts the courage and hope they need to start again the next day with the same generosity and commitment. That seems to be the true sign of the Spirit present in this ministry.

Sister Louise GALLAHUE
Daughter of Charity

Province of Slovakia

Testimony from Omsk, Russia

At the request of the Company, on April 20, 2011, the Province of Slovakia opened a new mission in Russia, at Omsk. Our Community of two Sisters, who until now were serving in this country in Nizny Tagil, welcomed a third Sister from Slovakia.

Omsk is a city in Western Siberia with more than a million inhabitants. Compared with other large cities in Siberia, in Omsk there is more poverty, mostly because of the great number of migrants, and lack of work, so life here seems to have lost its meaning.

Through our new mission, we want to express our devotion to Christ the Servant, in the spirit of our Founders. Our area of work is vast. Here are some examples of services through which we are able to witness to the tenderness of God: our mission is to

- the street people we meet in places near the railway station and in the hospital
- children of poor families with alcoholic parents, parents who are addicts, prostitutes
- those we meet in our pastoral service and retreat days, accompanying those who participate in these, etc.

In Omsk, we have found a very solidly based team of Caritas who give the best of themselves to help the world become more just and more caring. We are working in collaboration with this group of people to fight the causes of poverty and promote peace and respect for human life.

I would now like to share with you what we have experienced during this last year. It concerns the villagers around Omsk whose situation remains critical and has not seen any improvement over some years. People flee to the cities and the government is not able to solve this

412

distressing situation. The main problem is lack of work and consequent unemployment.

As Daughters of Charity, this situation requires us to be inventive and creative in the mission entrusted to us and to do this after the example of our Founders. Since we want to promote a better quality of life for the poor, for many families and especially the school children in rural communities, our primary objective is to help improve the income of families by developing domestic agriculture through the raising and breeding of cattle.

So what is our project about?

In collaboration with social workers, one of the Sisters has designated 10 families whose situation is most precarious, preference being given to large families. These families consist of 32 adults and 47 school children.

The objectives of this project are:

- to help the people become independent and responsible for their advancement and improvement of their social situation;
- to educate the children, based on the example of working parents;
- to improve the quality of nourishment for the children;
- to eliminate abuse of social aid;
- to continue with the animal breeding program even after the project comes to an end.

Thanks to the money received from "Sharing 2011," we have been able to buy 10 cows to be given to the 10 families. Each family is responsible for raising its cow, with one condition: they are to offer the first born calf to another family in need.

In this way, the families themselves are actively engaged in their own development.

We ask for your prayers for this mission, hoping that the Holy Spirit can do much more than we can imagine.

Sister Damiana PAGACOVA
Daughter of Charity

413

In Saint Vincent's days.....and in our own times

The Spirituality of Saint Vincent

(continued)

IN THE CHURCH

According to Saint Vincent, the Priest of the Mission is someone sent to follow the example of Jesus Christ in order to evangelize the poor.

We have observed how Saint Vincent saw Christ in poor people and then made them a priority in pastoral work. We have also seen how he became more aware of the benefits that the poor brought to him.

On a personal level, he knows he is indebted to the poor for bringing new meaning to his life and ministry, and for a decisive maturing of his faith. It is true that this comes from God but it often comes, too, through intermediaries like the poor. This experience which was repeated on several occasions became a life principle for him and for his followers.

We would need to be able to refer to the letters and conferences and see the passages in which Saint Vincent makes allusion to the life of poor people; their faith, courage, selflessness and the way they help each other: and all this is evidence of the reciprocity in Vincentian relationships where it is not clear who is bringing something to whom and enriching their lives. In any case, the poor person is a sign for Saint Vincent and that remains true for the rest of us.

This evangelization of the poor and this Vincentian relationship with poor people has to be lived, in the way that Saint Vincent wanted, within the Church. This is yet another feature of our vocation and identity; something we will now try to analyze.

In Saint Vincent's spiritual experience, the concept of Church developed in pace with events, and with regard to the poor, it only really took shape after 1617.

Before 1617, Saint Vincent seems to have viewed the Church primarily as institutional and hierarchical. Among his correspondence we find a letter which may have a certain biographical value. Dated March 5, 1659, it is addressed to a certain M. Dupont-Fournier, a lawyer at Laval. This gentleman was a "late vocation", in fact a very late vocation and Saint Vincent tried to reason with him in these terms:

"Monsieur, your son who is in Cahors, sent me a letter to be delivered to you; at the same time he asked me to support your plan to retire to a seminary. I would gladly do so, Monsieur, were it not for the difficulties I see in this;

1. Room and board must be paid everywhere, and this is expensive. I do not know anyone to whom I could turn who might be willing and able to contribute to paying yours, as I myself have already had the honor of writing to you.

2. Your advanced age does not allow you to discipline yourself to life under a Rule and to subject yourself to the exercises of a seminary.

3. For the same reason, I would consider it a matter of conscience to do anything to have you take Holy Orders, especially the priesthood, because it is a misfortune for those who enter it by the window of their own choice and not by the door of a legitimate vocation. Yet the number of the former is high because they consider the ecclesiastical state a soft way of life, in which they seek rest rather than work. This has been the source of the scandalous havoc we see in the Church, for the ignorance, sin and heresies that devastate it are attributed to priests. That is why St John Chrysostom has said that few priests will be saved. Why? Because God gives the graces needed to fulfill the obligations of this sacred state only to those whom His Goodness has called to it, and He never calls anyone in whom He does not see the requisite qualities or to whom He does not intend to give them. For everyone else, He

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The Spirituality of Saint Vincent

lets them act and, as a punishment for their temerity, permits them to do more evil than good, and ultimately they are lost." (CCD VII, 478-479).

It is fairly easy to spot the autobiographical aspects which were introduced more or less intentionally into certain parts of this letter.

At Clichy, in 1612, Vincent's horizons were broadened and he experienced there life among people; being with them seems to have strengthened his faith and given meaning to his ministry.

In the conference of July 27, 1653 (CCD IX, 505-517) on "The Practice of Asking Permissions," Saint Vincent gives an interesting testimony in which he sees a parallel between the priest among his people and the hierarchy whose ranks he still wished to enter one day.

This is what he said, *"I don't think the Pope himself is as happy as a Pastor in the midst of such good-hearted people. And one day, His Eminence, Cardinal de Retz, asked me, 'Eh bien, Father, how are you?' I said to him, 'Your Eminence, I cannot tell you how happy I am. Why? Because my people are so good, so obedient in everything I ask of them that neither the Holy Father nor you, Your Eminence, are as happy as I am."* (CCD IX, 507).

There can be no doubt that this contact Saint Vincent had with people, and his life among them, was a new and valuable experience of the Church- that Church which until now, Vincent himself must surely have addressed and envisaged in its institutional and hierarchical aspects.

So this was the great year of 1617, with the mission at Folleville and those that followed it, and finally the experience of parish work at Châtillon. All Saint Vincent's thinking and action focused on the evangelization of the poor. The Church came to be perceived and defined in the light of that passage from St Luke's gospel (IV,18). Saint Vincent understood that the Church, after the example of Jesus, and together with Jesus, had been consecrated and sent primarily to evangelize the poor.

The account we have of the mission at Marchais (CCD XI, 28-30), is a further marker in Saint Vincent's **ecclesial and pastoral thinking**. The Huguenot's objection concerning the Holy Spirit's guidance of the Church was based on the fact that this same Church had no interest in evangelizing the poor. A year later, this Protestant attended the mission at Marchais and he declared; *"Now I can see that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church of Rome since it is caring for the instruction and salvation of the poor country people."* And it is fitting that we remember the conclusion Saint Vincent drew from this; *"Oh! What a happiness for our missionaries,"* added Saint Vincent after giving this account, *"to confirm the guidance of the Holy Spirit on His Church by working, as we do, at the instruction and sanctification of poor persons."* (CCD XI, 29-30)

So for the Mission, in Saint Vincent's eyes, evangelization became a way of manifesting the Holy Spirit's guidance of the Church. The Mission is a special sign and it is to the extent that the Church moves towards the poor that it will prove that it is of God and is doing God's work.

From then on, Saint Vincent believes that the Church has clearly the greatest responsibility for evangelization and most particularly, the evangelization of the poor. That completely overturned Saint Vincent's previous concept of an institutional and hierarchical Church.

The Church becomes a sort of evangelizing enterprise in which priests, lay people, as well as men and women religious, are "workers", "evangelical workers."

So Saint Vincent could write to Claude Dufour, a confrere who was tempted to opt for the religious life; *"You need to consider how your life is in conformity with the life that Our Lord led while He was on earth; that is your vocation and the greatest need the Church has is for workers who will work to rescue most of its children from their state of ignorance and give it good pastors, which is what the Son of Man came to do in the world, and you will consider yourself blessed to have joined him in this holy task."* (CCD III, 173). Shortly after this, Saint Vincent explained further his thoughts on this subject and did so in a more terse and challenging way; *"Alas, the Church has more than*

The Spirituality of Saint Vincent

enough people working on their own, too many useless people and even more people who are tearing it apart; the Church's greatest need is for evangelical men who will strive to purge it, enlighten it and unite it to its Divine Spouse, and that, through His Goodness, is what you will do." (CCD III, 204).

Evangelical workers, workers who really do work, these are what Saint Vincent has in mind for the Church after 1617. He is so moved by the urgent need to evangelize the poor that he almost comes to question the usefulness of the contemplative life, or at least the life of many contemplatives of his day.

The times when he thought about an honorable retirement have long gone. The cries of the poor, their state of abandonment and their ignorance weigh heavily on him and lead him to regard with some distrust those states of life and vocations which are on the sidelines of mission and evangelization.

We have to recognize that in Saint Vincent's case we do not find long and documented reflections on the Mystical Body, on the living and life-giving relationship between the Trinity and the Church, except perhaps, by chance, in a passage about community life; but as you know, Saint Vincent was not a man of theories. He was constantly urged on by the expectations and appeals of the poor and was therefore hardly given to fundamental and abstract reflection even in the domain of Church matters. In Saint Vincent we find a simplicity that came from his contact with the Gospel and with real life; a simplicity that some people have regarded as simplistic.

However, what Saint Vincent lacks in the way of abstract thinking and reflection, he gains in dynamism and commitment. Could this perhaps be the charism of true mystics who, in the history of spirituality have sometimes taken disconcerting short cuts between their faith and their actions?

So, for Saint Vincent after the year 1617, the Church seems to be first of all "missionary" and, like Jesus Christ, in some sense is made responsible for mission: priority in this mission being given to the evangelization of the poor.

This leads us to three conclusions that bind together very well his practical understanding of the Church and our identity within it:

- No mission unless people are "sent" by the Church.
- No mission unless it is shared.
- No mission that is not universal.

We will be reflecting on these three points which form the basis of Vincentian practice and which are still very important for each of us today.

1. No MISSION unless people are "SENT" BY THE CHURCH

It is perhaps at this level that we can best judge Saint Vincent's understanding of the Church. This radical requirement of being commissioned or sent, is obviously rooted in his faith in Christ and in the way he perceived the mystery of salvation.

Only God has the power and the will to save humanity and the world. To do this He had to send His Son, so now it is clear; Jesus Christ is salvation. Christ entrusted this work of salvation to the apostles and made them responsible for preaching salvation even to the ends of the earth; so the Church is handed on this work by Christ. Every initiative regarding this work must therefore come from the apostles or their successors, that is to say, the Church; *"I've often been consoled and it consoles me even today, to see that God has granted us this grace, as He did for the apostles, of sending us out to preach His word throughout the world. Oh, Savior! We have the same mandate as the apostles!"* (CCD, XI, 237).

No doubt the great upheaval caused by Protestantism had something to do with this but in Saint Vincent's approach to the Church, what was known as "apostolicity" had become very important.

"After the example of Jesus Christ," "after the example of the apostles," these phrases were a recurring leitmotif in discussions and arguments about the Mission, and the Mission drew all its strength and forcefulness from apostolic continuity and imitating the gospel.

The Spirituality of Saint Vincent

It is easy to understand, then, the importance that Saint Vincent attached to the relationships that all his initiatives and foundations had with the bishops and with the Pope. He was more concerned about this than any other practical or institutional consideration. That is why, for example, he could never understand or accept the deep desire for autonomy and exemption from the bishops that some religious of his times had, and this thinking was not based on reasons of opportunism or usefulness.

The papal brief “Ex commisa nobis” of September 22, 1655, confirming and ratifying the simple vows taken in the Congregation, exempted the missionaries from the jurisdiction of the bishops in all matters except for external functions and this kept them officially within the ranks of the secular clergy; “*dicta congregatio non censeatur in numero Ordinum religioso sed sit de corpora cleri secularis*” (CCD XIIIa, 418).

When Saint Vincent received this approbation from Rome and the privilege of canonical exemption, Saint Vincent wrote to Etienne Blatiron, Superior at Genoa, “*As for dependence on the bishops, I can assure you that I didn’t contribute in any way to having him explain what was in the brief: I neither wrote nor spoke about it near or far, that was done by the official delegated by the Pope who judged it right to express their findings in that way. Now you know that God’s will cannot be better made known to us than through events when these happen without our intervention or in ways we did not look for. So the bishops still have full power over us with regard to our external activities as well as to the seminaries and ordination for the missions,*” (CCD V, 459).

This is the essential thing that Saint Vincent wanted to preserve at all cost, for the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. In September or October 1635, Saint Vincent wrote to Clément de Bonzi, bishop of Béziers. “*...we are entirely under the authority of the bishops to go to any place in their diocese they wish to send us to preach, catechize and hear the general confessions of the poor.*” (CCD I, 297).

We may notice in passing, his firmness concerning the aim of the Mission: it is not a matter of responding to just any call from the local Church. And Saint Vincent adds, “*In a word, we are like the servants*

of the centurion in the Gospel, with regard to the bishops, insofar as when they say to us; go, we are obliged to go; if they say come, we are obliged to come; do that, and we are obliged to do it.” (CCD I, 297).

Of course we are talking here about the earliest days of the Mission which by this time was scarcely ten years old, but right to the end Saint Vincent would remain as firm on the question of obedience to the bishops with regard to places and works, as he was to the aim of the Mission being strictly interpreted and applied. This means it was up to the bishop to say where the poor are calling us in his diocese and if it really is a question of evangelizing the poor, then the missionaries are obliged to go, to come, to do this or that, as the centurion put it.

There was no problem at all with regard to the confraternities because these were, and remained, parish structures under the authority of the parish priest.

For the Daughters of Charity there was the same conviction and the same continuity. Saint Vincent said they are daughters of the parish and to emphasize this he went on to explain, “*But, Monsieur, do you mean by this that I must obey the parish priest in the place where I go to serve the poor? Yes, sister, in what concerns the poor you must obey him as you would God. Take up this practice again when they say to you, ‘Sister, there is a sick person in such a place who should be visited’ say ‘Sir, I will go off at once and see him.’*” (CCD X, 312-315).

Saint Vincent reminded Jacques de la Fosse, one of the most outspoken but talented and dynamic members of the Community, about the situation with regard to the Daughters of Charity and his letter certainly contains the most clear explanation of what Saint Vincent wished their status to be: “*The Daughters of Charity are not nuns, but Sisters who come and go like seculars; they are parishioners under the guidance of the Pastors in the places where they are established. If we have the direction of the house in which they are formed, it is because the guidance of God has made use of us to bring their Little Company to birth, and you know that the same means God uses to give being to things, He also uses to preserve them.*” (CCD VIII, 277).

We don’t need to multiply quotations and references with regard to

The Spirituality of Saint Vincent

this. It has to be admitted that Saint Vincent had to connect up and authenticate all his enterprises and foundations with reference to the Church, and more particularly, the local Church. Nothing would be further from his mind than activities which people wanted to be autonomous and not within the framework of the Church.

It is good for us to think back on this with regard to our own situation and status within the Church and especially to what we call our “secularity”, a word used by Saint Vincent who used the term “secular clergy” and he was adamant that we belong to this group. Going against a strong current of ideas in the Community, Saint Vincent wanted the priests and brothers of the Mission to take vows. Some of them complied but others refused right to the end. In 1650 Saint Vincent said, “*I have never made any difference between those who took vows and those who didn’t and we must not put a burden on others to spare the rest.*” (CCD IV, 56). Perhaps you know that Saint Vincent appointed as Provincial Visitor, one of his confreres who refused to take vows.

Saint Vincent persisted in thinking that vows should be taken in the Community without, however, obliging anyone at all to do this. But what also cannot be denied is that he never wanted and never would accept our separation from what he called “the clergy of St. Peter.” We have evidence to prove that at one time he would have preferred to abandon the idea of taking vows rather than give up the concept of belonging to the secular clergy.

Why was Saint Vincent so firm in this conviction? I can find several reasons for this.

First of all, let us not forget that we were founded to be secular priests and that for more than seven years, from 1617-1625, the first missions were directed and preached by secular priests; Vincent de Paul, Antoine Portail, and others who helped from time to time. That situation continued for several years. So for a number of years the Mission was a secular institution and enterprise. That is an historical fact: all Saint Vincent’s works were defined within a secular framework.

There were other pastoral reasons for this. Saint Vincent envisaged all his foundations and works as being in continuity with and as a natural extension of pastoral responsibility; doubtless an echo of Clichy and Châtillon. The Mission, that “pastoral work done by outsiders” as the clergy of Paris described it in their official protest of December 4, 1630 (CCD XIII, 253-257), was seen by Saint Vincent, on the contrary, as being very close to the normal responsibilities of a “resident pastor” and complementing these. Unlike some religious of his day, Saint Vincent was spontaneously drawn to working with the resident clergy and not separately from them or taking over from them. Moreover, experience had taught him that this was the only way to carry out evangelization and the service of the poor effectively. In a pastoral context, any intervention from outside, from missionaries, would seem to him to be dangerous and ineffective. He also took great care to safeguard the status and most important role of the parish priest. He did this, too, with regard to the missions, the work of the confraternities and the services offered by the Daughters of Charity.

Finally, there were other more profound reasons for Saint Vincent’s concern for preserving our secular character; his perception of the Church and his anxiety to continue the mission of the apostles. I could suggest to you several passages from “*Lumen Gentium*” or “*Christus Dominus*” but it is enough for me to say that in my opinion, a Priest of the Mission has every reason to feel completely in step with Vatican II on this point as on many others.

So there can be no mission without being sent by the Church, without doing this work from within the Church and without close links with the bishop and the parish

2. No MISSION unless it is SHARED

This is another of Saint Vincent’s convictions about the Church. To his way of thinking the mission was never work done by outsiders on a temporary basis. On the contrary, it was always a common enterprise which mobilized for one same goal; lay people, the resident clergy and even members of religious orders who were on hand and were willing to help. (Cf CCD, 1, 175; III, 249; IV, 74; VII, 33, 100, 320, 324, 518.....)

The Spirituality of Saint Vincent

Mission, for Saint Vincent, was a genuine experience of Church, an experience of the People of God, during which the people of a parish, rediscovering their Christian identity, agreed to reach out to the poor and be committed to helping them. In the strategy and proceedings of the Mission, the confraternities, the equivalent of Catholic Action in those days, had to continue to be a sign that “confirmed the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church.”

The place that Saint Vincent gave to lay people was amazing and prophetic. There are some texts about this which open up wide horizons: for example, in relation to the Eucharist, and these show an extraordinary assimilation of the teaching of the Council of Trent and anticipation of Vatican II. *“When a priest says Mass, we have to know and believe that Jesus Christ is the principal and sovereign Priest who is offering the sacrifice; the priest is only the minister of Our Lord who makes use of him to do this action externally. Well, do the acolyte who helps the priest and those who are hearing Mass, participate with the priest in the sacrifice he is offering and they are offering with him? Of course they are participating and even more so than he is if they are more charitable than the priest. The action is personal; it is not the status of the priest or religious that makes the action pleasing to God and more meritorious, but rather charity, if they are more charitable than we are.”* (CCD XII, 375-376)

Saint Vincent had a clear and broad perception of the place of lay people in the Eucharistic community and in the work of evangelization. Here again, if he didn't take the time or trouble to leave us a summary of his theology of the Church, he has, on the other hand, tried to put this into action in his life and to understand the Church as an experience of the People of God, journeying towards salvation together with the poor.

3. No MISSION unless it is UNIVERSAL, that is to say, universal like the Church itself.

This is the third consequence of Saint Vincent's faith in the Church of Jesus Christ. From missionary experience to missionary experience; from Marseilles to Algiers and from Barbary to Madagascar, Saint Vincent, a practical and focused man, a man of experience, finally discovered the Church in its true dimensions; an evangelical Church

that is called and sent to the very ends of the earth.

If you had the time to read the letters and conferences of Saint Vincent from 1645 to 1652 or 1653, you would find that 1648 stands out in marking the progress of his thinking and his vocational journey – 1648; the year of Madagascar! There is no doubt at all that this was a great year, as was 1617, as was 1624-25, encounter with Louise de Marillac, or 1630-1632, that crucial encounter with Marguerite Naseau and the start of a new enterprise.

The year 1648 was, if you will excuse the word, a turning point. Saint Vincent's charity and the Mission seemed now to have found their true dimensions, that of the Church and of the world. After 1648 Saint Vincent would never be the same again. Strange to say, that far off mission in Madagascar which was almost inaccessible, was to become the mission figurehead and missionaries in that country would be the men often evoked to rekindle the flame of missionary zeal in the communities in France. Saint Vincent would use all his ingenuity to spread throughout all the Congregation of the Mission, as well as the Company of the Daughters of Charity, the spirit of Madagascar.

The Vincentian concept of the Church was already very deep and prophetic but it lacked, at least in specific application, this sense of the universal and being drawn to the most remote countries. This was remedied after 1648 and in Saint Vincent's eyes the papacy rediscovered its missionary role, its significance and true responsibility, that of evangelization.

In the moving repetition of prayer that took place on August 30, 1657, in which Saint Vincent announced the tragic news about the mission at Genoa and that of Madagascar, he recalled the history of the mission in Madagascar and emphasized that the first missionaries went there in response to an appeal made by the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith: *“The Congregation that has authority to send men to these missions, for the Pope, in whom alone resides power to send missionaries throughout the whole world, has given it power to do so. Bishops have jurisdiction only over the territory and within the confines of their archbishoprics or bishoprics, but this Congregation has authority from the Pope to send missionaries throughout the world,*

The Spirituality of Saint Vincent

and it is sending us.” (CCD XI, 373).

From then on, for Saint Vincent, the Mission had rediscovered the apostolic perspective and impetus to “go to the ends of the earth” and for him the Church shared the same perspective as the Mission.

Once again we have taken an overview of this question rather than analyzing and studying it in depth. But the broad outlines of development have emerged and we could continue our reflections by asking ourselves about our own fidelity to the Church. As followers of Saint Vincent, we see this as being faithful, first of all, to the missionary Church that Christ made responsible for the evangelization and salvation of the poor; fidelity to a Church of global dimensions and one that is particularly drawn to the most far off countries.

As Saint Vincent said, we have the same mandate of being sent as the apostles had, after the example of Jesus Christ. Let us ask ourselves how faithful we are to this commissioning.

IN COMMUNITY

Following the example of Jesus Christ, the Father’s Missionary, to evangelize the poor in the Church, in community.

This is the theme we will use to end our retreat. Saint Vincent’s thinking on Community is a subject of paramount importance and one that is essential for us today.

Of course, this last named feature of our identity, community, is not quite on the same plane as other features mentioned earlier. Saint Vincent regarded community as a means of evangelization but there can be no doubt at all that it was a very important means.

In the Congregation’s founding contract, April 17, 1625, it was already stipulated that “*The said ecclesiastics will live in common with the said Sieur de Paul.*” (CCD XIIIa, 223-224). The Act of Association of the first four missionaries, September 4, 1626, stated that these four priests, “*Come together and unite, in order to work for the salvation of poor people*” and it stated explicitly that they were to live together, *in the*

426

manner of a Congregation, Company or Confraternity.” (CCD XIIIa, 240-277).

In order to gain some idea of what Saint Vincent envisaged as Community and what he wanted this to be for us Lazarists, we must once again recall Saint Vincent’s experiences of community life.

Before the Mission, that is to say until the year 1625, various events occurred which influenced to a greater or lesser degree, this concept of community. First of all, there was Saint Vincent’s experience of being part of a family, which in some way was an experience of life in common. We have already noted how Saint Vincent often used words connected with the family when speaking about community life and relationships.

There was also Vincent’s experience of living with the Oratorians at the end of 1611, something that Abelly tells us about, and this would certainly have influenced Saint Vincent’s thinking on community. This form of life was envisaged, primarily, as a means of seeking priestly perfection and as a place where men strove after holiness. “*The same God,*” explained Bérulle, “*who in our days has revived in several religious communities the spirit of fervor that marked their original institution, seems also to want to spread this same grace and favor to the priesthood, and renew the search for holiness in this priestly state. It is with the aim of receiving that grace that we are assembled in this place and live this way of life which is just beginning to take shape.*” (Migne, 1270).

For some time this was Saint Vincent’s idea of community life, too. It is curious to note that finding six elderly priests living a life of debauchery, “*Monsieur Vincent brought about a remarkable change both in their conduct and customs by bringing them to live together in common.*” (CCD XIIIa, 50; account given by Charles Démia on Saint Vincent’s time at Châtillon-les-Dombes). Life in community after the pattern of the Oratorians, seemed now to be a good idea; living in community for one’s personal sanctification.

Then came the experience of the Confraternities. This was the first Vincentian foundation, the one that left the deepest impression and had

427

The Spirituality of Saint Vincent

the greatest influence on Saint Vincent de Paul, pointing him towards the future. This time it was a case of people coming together **for** a specific activity, **for** service. The first charter of the Confraternity at Châtillon stated in its opening lines, “*the Ladies named below have come together in the Charity In ORDER to assist the poor sick*” (CCD XIIIb, 3) they work together to help the poor. We will find this idea repeated constantly, with regard both to the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

The introduction to the Regulations at Châtillon (CCD XIIIb, 8) states explicitly the reasons for having such a Confraternity, explaining that the community structure is the means of ensuring order and sustainability in the works; “*The poor have often suffered a lot, more from a want of order (organization) than from a lack of charitable persons (generosity).*”

On the question of sustainability, it was written, “*Since it is to be feared that having begun this good work, it may disappear after a short while, if there is not union and spiritual liaison to maintain it, they desire to come together as a body.*” (CCD XIIIb, 8).

Organization and sustainability of the works are typically Vincentian reasons for working in common. For the moment, there was the “Oratorian” experience where men came together so that they could better seek after holiness, and there was the experience of the Confraternities where people came together in order to give better service.

During the years 1618-1625, Saint Vincent used to go from village to village preaching missions. This was a decisive experience. We would need to have the time to study the testimonies that Saint Vincent himself has left about these. (CCD XI, 4-5; 170-171; XII, 7-8). In them we see the idea of community emerging from the demands made by the Mission and the specific circumstances of missionary work. First of all there was the call for help that Saint Vincent made to the Jesuits at Amiens because, as he said, he was “so overburdened “ with work. In this we can already see that he recognized the need for several people to work together giving missions, a perception which evidently came from the conditions under which he was working. Then, from this

occasional and repeated assistance, there was a progressive movement towards the idea of a more stable team where the members of it would be more specialized and totally available. It was at this time that Father Antoine Portail was contacted and he began to join Monsieur Vincent in giving missions.

Then followed the move to the College des Bons Enfants, in March 1624, and the foundation contract of the Congregation of the Mission, April 17, 1625. The text of this document reflects the conclusions reached about preaching missions after that of Folleville and now it was a question of constituting a “*small community of six or so ecclesiastics who would live in the foundation.*” (CCD XIIIa, 215).

This community was clearly apostolic in nature. Over and over again it was repeated that this was a community for the Mission and where great emphasis was put on being available for the mission. The ecclesiastics there had to apply themselves, “*totally and exclusively to working for the salvation of poor people.*” In this we can see an echo of the difficulties and shortcomings encountered during the previous eight years when Saint Vincent could only call on occasional help from volunteers.

This contract also explicitly addresses the question of the durability and stability of the works undertaken by the Mission. To guarantee these, the contract foresaw that the missionaries would be required to renounce all other responsibilities, benefices and honors though it was stated that priests could, if absolutely necessary, take up some pastoral benefice “*after serving eight or ten years in the Mission.*”

As for life in common, this was to be programmed in line with the rhythm of work in the countryside; from October to June the priests would be giving missions and from June to October the missionaries would help parish priests who asked for assistance and they would also spend time studying “*so as to be better able to serve their neighbor.*” In short, eight months going from village to village, with a short break after each month of giving missions, and four months in residence.

With reference to the community’s finances, there was a clearly established principle that no payment would be made for missionary

The Spirituality of Saint Vincent

work and Saint Vincent held firmly to this. So the missionaries' living expenses would be covered by the foundation's revenue. At that time the community's income did not derive from putting in common all that they gained from their work, but it comprised, on the one hand, renouncing personal revenues, and on the other hand, it was established that everyone should be provided for out of the common fund supplemented by the foundation's revenue.

At this stage it was, without any possible doubt, a question of community for the Mission, a typically apostolic institution where everything was envisaged and organized with a view to better ensuring the work of the Mission. This was the case until 1632.

First there was the community of three: Saint Vincent, Antoine Portail and the priest who was paid 50 écus a year. Then they progressed to a community comprising the first four priests of the Mission: Saint Vincent, Antoine Portail, François du Coudray and Jean de la Salle in September 1626, and finally, on August 1, 1628 there were nine members of the community, those previously mentioned and then Jean Bécu who was born at Branches in the region of the Somme on April 24, 1592, Louis Callon, a doctor of the Sorbonne who died in 1647, Jean Dehorgny from Estrées-Saint Denis in the Oise district, Jean-Joseph Brunet who was born at Riom in 1597 and Antoine Lucas who was born in Paris on January 20, 1600.

In the first phase of organizing the Community, the priests spent a long time in residence between working on the missions. During this time the life of the missionaries more or less followed the rhythm and customs of the religious life; this was clearly accentuated when they moved to the Priory of Saint-Lazare in 1632: this place whose previous history and general layout favored this change. But the time spent in residence here was not the typical or normal situation of the Mission. The typical situation of the Mission would be when the priests were at work, going from village to village to give missions. Also, as the letters written by Saint Vincent testify, this time in residence was often cut short in favor of the work. In one of Saint Vincent's letters, dated September 12, 1631, we even find this slightly nostalgic comment; *"In Paris we are leading a life that is almost as solitary as that of the Carthusians. Since we are neither preaching, catechizing nor hearing confessions in the*

city, hardly anyone has anything to do with us nor we with them. This solitude makes us long for work in the country." (CCD I, 12).

I can't talk for longer about this period in the Mission's history but it is obvious that Saint Vincent already had in mind that the Congregation of the Mission should be an apostolic community. It developed from the demands of the Mission and was envisaged and structured with a view to mission. Both chronologically and logically the Mission preceded the community. At the time of Folleville, Saint Vincent realized that he couldn't do this type of work on his own. The occasional help he received from others led him to desire and to envisage something more stable, like a team of men who would give themselves "entirely and exclusively" to the Mission. So community was really born of the Mission, its demands and the way it was structured. Even the times spent living together was, to a great extent, monopolized by the Mission: during these times the missionaries practiced the art of controversy, preaching and catechizing. While they were here they devoted time to study "in order to make themselves better fitted to serve their neighbor" as Saint Vincent put it. So it was first and foremost a Community of work and a Community of sharing.

This statement is most interesting for evaluating the way we think of living Community today, at local, Provincial or General level.

Above all else, we have to remember that the reason why we are together and live together, is the mission of evangelization. It is by taking this conviction as our starting point that we must build, or perhaps rebuild, the Community. What would seem to be disastrous for us would be to establish or accept a dichotomy, a sort of divorce between the ideal of community life and the needs of our works. It would be just as dangerous and maybe fatal to establish or accept a modification in our scale of values which would make the Community more important than the works. This would lead us to choose missionary works that fit in with community requirements and to organize the work in accordance with the rhythm of community life. With regard to the poor, Saint Vincent's criteria for choosing options can only be the evangelization of the poor.

The Spirituality of Saint Vincent

We know how attached Saint Vincent was to the Community. However, from 1618 onwards, when the poor came to be “Lords and Masters”, it was these who would take over and so structures had to become flexible and adaptable. When it came to the poor, Saint Vincent was never selective; he never restricted himself to serving only those that missionaries could care for without disturbing community life. To act in this way would have been for him a fundamental contradiction.

On some occasions, both for the Priests and Brothers of the Mission, as well as the Daughters of Charity, when demands made by the service of the poor proved incompatible with community life, Saint Vincent opted for the first but he was also concerned about keeping “those working on their own” as we would say today, in a living and permanent relationship with the Community.

In this Saint Vincent was completely logical; the means had to be adapted to the end, and not the end to the means. It is true that the conditions of missionary work today urge and oblige us to rediscover this flexibility, but like Saint Vincent, we must never be resigned to loosening our bonds with the community. Of course it is not a question of sacrificing Community to Mission, but as Saint Vincent never ceased to do, we have to be constantly adapting community to present day and specific circumstances. No doubt this calls for us to be inventive; it will also require great fidelity and perseverance in weaving and continually reweaving the threads of our links with the community today.

For Saint Vincent, therefore, Community is based on the Mission; community is only a means but nevertheless it is a very important means used in the Mission. This depends on the community being genuinely a mission where there is sharing; sharing of work, sharing of prayer, and sharing of material goods, in line with the wishes and thinking of Saint Vincent, and as our Constitutions remind us.

When we read Saint Vincent’s letters, conferences and repetitions of prayer we cannot fail to be impressed by the number of occasions when this sharing took place in these Vincentian communities, by the diversity of situations in which they occurred and the spontaneity of this sharing. This was true for the Congregation of the Mission and even more so for the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Saint Vincent had already organized his first working groups, we might say his first communities, the Confraternities, and in this he showed a real sense of collegiality and co-responsibility. That might be surprising in a man of his temperament. It is to a group, a team, that he is entrusting the work or the mission. Of course there were always people in charge and these were always elected by the group and this was for a relatively short period of time to allow different officers to be elected. But these leaders were always accountable to the group or team and the most important decisions were taken on the basis of a majority vote. These structures which could be described as “democratic”, are surprising in the context of the 17th century and sanctioned by someone with Saint Vincent’s personality. With some adaptations we find here that “collegial” spirit in the concept of community, in the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

With regard to the relationship between authority and obedience, for example, I have to admit that I was surprised after reading Saint Vincent, at the rigid and severe manner in which this has been presented. Of course we find in Saint Vincent the classic and traditional teaching on this subject and it is true that Saint Vincent often showed great firmness. But in the last analysis, he describes the person in charge more as an animator than as a superior. There are some very piquant passages about superiors who are self-opinionated and impose their will on others. So, on May 5, 1658, he wrote to Benjamin Huguier, a Priest of the Mission at Marseilles,

“I would not dare to think you are saying that you would like to be a Superior. Alas! That is no way to be happy: those who have the duty groan under its weight because they do not feel strong enough to bear it and think they are incapable of guiding others. Otherwise, if someone were to presume the contrary he would make his subjects groan because he would lack humility and the other graces necessary to be a consolation and good example to them.” (CCD VII, 159).

Moreover, for Saint Vincent, the test of a good Superior was that this person should not think they were irreplaceable in this role in the community. There was something more than anecdotal in this because Saint Vincent wanted authority to be well integrated into the community. He wrote to Antoine Durand who was appointed Superior

The Spirituality of Saint Vincent

of the Seminary at Agde, “Above all, don’t think you have to be seen to be the Superior or the master. I don’t agree with the person who said to me a few days ago that in order to govern well and maintain your authority you must make it clear that you are the superior. Oh! Mon Dieu! Our Lord Jesus Christ didn’t talk like that; He taught us just the opposite by word and example, telling us that He himself had come, not to be served but to serve others, and that whoever wanted to be the master must be the servant of all. So, then, adopt that holy maxim, acting towards those with whom you are going to live ‘quasi unus ex illis’, telling them from the outset that you haven’t come to lord it over them but rather to serve them; do that inside and outside of the house, and you’ll do well.” (CCD XI, 313).

Even more surprising is this advice to Antoine Portail, superior of the Mission at Cévennes:

“I hope that the Lord’s goodness will bestow much fruit on the community if there is union, cordiality and support between the two of you. In God’s name, Monsieur, let this be your main concern, and since you are the eldest, the second in the Company and the Superior, bear with everything from good Monsieur Lucas; I repeat bear with everything, putting aside your position as superior adapt yourself to him in charity. This is the means Our Lord used to win over and direct the Apostles and it is the only way that you will get through to Monsieur Lucas. So humor him and never contradict him on the spot but later on advise him cordially and humbly. Above all, let there be no rift between you. You are there in a place where one act of bitterness could ruin everything. I hope that you will act in such a way that God will make use of the countless acts of virtue you will practice in doing this, as the basis and foundation of the good you must do in that region.” (CCD I, 110).

We haven’t time to discuss further Saint Vincent’s thoughts about the relationship between authority and obedience in the community but this subject is dealt with in many other texts and we see that in Saint Vincent’s eyes, the Superior should first and foremost be the animator of an apostolic team.

This was certainly Saint Vincent’s role in his communities, initiating

434

and animating in a remarkable way, the community sharings and discussions.

We would also have to study his group dynamics; for example, the way he animated the Daughters of Charity and the method he used to help each sister express herself, (cf CCD XIIIb, 240-377), on the way he gave everyone the same chance to speak and the way he listened to the less educated sisters who couldn’t read or write. In all this there was much more than a technique; there was also a concept, almost a theology of community where everyone can and should take part on an equal footing with others, in the work of all, the prayer of all, the life of the community.

What I have just said with regard to the Daughters of Charity is seen even more clearly in the way that Saint Vincent related to the Coadjutor Brothers in the communities of the Mission. The Common Rules speak rather awkwardly about “their participation in the Mission by their prayers, their tears and their sacrifices” but alongside these perhaps tactless words, we have to think of the responsible assignments that Saint Vincent gave to men like Bertrand Ducourneau, Louis Robineau, Jean Parre, Mathieu Regnard, Alexandre Véronne and so many others. There was also their participation in the prayer life of the community, in repetition of prayer, for example.

It is interesting to note, in passing, that repetition of prayer was a form of sharing invented and spearheaded by Saint Vincent himself; some people even thought he was rather proud of this:

“....Repetition of Prayer, something that was as yet unheard of in the Church of God, but which has since been introduced into several well-regulated Communities where it is now practiced successfully. How did the thought of it occur to us? I have no idea. How did the thought of all the other exercises and ministries of the Community occur to us? Again, I haven’t the slightest idea. That happened gradually, almost on its own, one thing after another.” (CCD XII, 8-9).

And later, “Today, Messieurs, we’re not going to have Repetition but we will talk about something else that’s very useful for the Company (the establishment of a Seminary at Saint Lazare) and we agreed about

435

The Spirituality of Saint Vincent

that among ourselves; so then, we will postpone to another time, Repetition of Prayer, which, as you know, is one of the most necessary means we have for exciting one another to devotion. We have good reason to thank God for giving this grace to the Company and we can say that no other Community has ever had this practice except our own.” (CCD, XII, 234).

That happened of its own accord and gradually, like so many things in Saint Vincent’s life. From praying together they moved imperceptibly to sharing their prayer. If we are to rediscover repetition of prayer as sharing of prayer, we may perhaps need to discard ways of practicing this exercise which are too formal. But when we read in CCD, the accounts of repetition of prayer that have been preserved, we realize that this Vincentian invention was, most often, a genuine sharing of prayer and a form of reviewing one’s life. It is obviously a key time in the life of a Vincentian community. At this level of sharing it was often the coadjutor brothers more than anyone else, who most impressed Saint Vincent. Which one of us, the senior brethren, has not had a similar experience at some time or other?

Saint Vincent told the Daughters of Charity

“It is into hearts without worldly knowledge, who seek God in Himself, that He is pleased to pour forth the most excellent lights and the greatest graces. I believe that knowledge does not help and that a theologian, however learned he may be, is not helped by this to make his prayer well. God usually communicates more with simple, uneducated people of good will than with those who are learned. We have seen many examples of this. In our houses the Brothers often give a better account of their prayer than we priests do (CCD IX, 174-175) Saint Vincent added,” I think I have already told you about this twice and I will say it again; we have repetitions of prayer sometimes every second day, sometimes every third, as Providence permits. Now, by God’s grace, the priests do it well, the clerics also do well, some better, some worse, as God grants it to them but as for our poor brothers, oh! The promise God made of revealing Himself to the humble and the little ones is verified in them for we are astonished at the lights God gives them. It may be a poor shoemaker, a poor baker, a poor carter, and nevertheless they fill us with astonishment. We sometimes talk

about it among ourselves. We say to one another, ‘Think of that poor brother; did you not observe the good and beautiful thoughts that God has given him? Is it not wonderful? For he said what he has repeated, not because he had previously known it; it is since he began to pray that he learned it.’ (CCD IX, 331).

And Saint Vincent, being Saint Vincent, declared, *“I assure you, I cannot tell how much good that does. It is hard to believe that God might leave my prayer dry and unprofitable. My hope is that I would learn from some good brother some lights that he has had and that these would benefit me. This is what I hope from God and He hardly ever fails me.” (CCD XII, 666).* This, then, is what sharing of prayer is about and Saint Vincent realized this ; he fostered and supported it.

We can see or surmise, that repetition of prayer was closer to what we call today gospel sharing or review of life rather than what we remember about spiritual exercises in days gone by, even though the repetition of prayer given by a Brother Guerre, a Brother Vandaele or a Brother Puyo were precious to the ears and heart of the Lord.

However; that may be, a truly Vincentian community which shares its work, cannot fail to share its prayer; to share this first of all in the Eucharist, something I would have liked to talk more about sharing too in trying to rediscover the simplicity, spontaneity and openness that Saint Vincent aroused and which helped him in his own prayer.

I would like to end with one word that Saint Vincent used to sum up all his thinking on community; this word is **mutuality**. This word embraces sharing of work, the concept of co-responsibility and the need for us to communicate with one another. Rather than analyzing it and speaking at length about it, I would prefer to read you this passage in which Saint Vincent gives us this word;

“Father, it’s now time to talk to the sisters about how they should act towards one another. Does your charity not think it is fitting that they should spend some time together each day, perhaps half an hour, to tell each other what they have been doing during the day; the difficulties they encountered, and decide together what they should do? ‘Oh!, Mon Dieu, yes’ said our Most Honored Father. “That should be

The Spirituality of Saint Vincent

done. There should be good communication with one another and they should tell each other everything. Nothing could be more necessary. That unites hearts and God blesses any advice given; in this way things work out better. Every day at recreation you could say, 'Sister, what happened to you today? Today, such and such a thing happened to me; what do you think about that? You can't imagine how much this makes for pleasant conversation. On the other hand, when a sister does her own thing and says nothing about it, that is intolerable. There is a servant in the Company and she is like that and causes unbelievable pain to her sisters. For my part, I find that in our Mission, if there is a Superior who does his own thing, that makes people close their hearts to him and people will not dare to approach him. So, my Daughters, nothing should happen, nothing should be said or done that is not known to all of you. There has to be this **mutuality**.' (CCD XIIIb, 301).

Father Jean Morin, CM

**Outstanding among the saints is Mary,
Mother of the Lord, and mirror of all holiness.**

"My soul glorifies the Lord."

In these words Mary expresses her entire life's program;

not setting herself at the center

but leaving space for God

who is encountered both in prayer and in the service

of the neighbor.

Mary's greatness consists in the fact

that she wants to magnify God, not herself.

She is lowly;

her only desire is to be the handmaid of the Lord.

She knows that she will only contribute to the salvation

of the world

if, rather than carrying out her own projects,

she places herself completely

at the disposal of God's initiatives.

Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 41

