

Animating the Daughters of Charity

A Role of the Director of the Daughters of Charity

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“For his part, the Director has the mission of collaboration with the Visitatrix and her council in the animation, accompaniment and formation of the Sisters of the Province (cf. CDC 75a-b)” (DPD 16, p. 21).

The theme of our Meeting calls together the three roles which the Provincial Director can carry out in a Province of the Daughters of Charity: animation, accompaniment, and formation. When I think of these three elements, I confess that I group them in relation to the Trinity: formation being the work of the Father in creation and sustaining; accompaniment being the work of the Son in the incarnation and communication; and animation being the work of the Holy Spirit in enlivening and guiding. Clearly, one cannot separate these roles so absolutely, but it offers me categories which help to organize my thinking and my imagery. In my presentation, I am focusing upon “animation” and thus the action of the Holy Spirit. This action takes place in both our Christian and Vincentian orientation. I begin by making four introductory points.

Introduction

My first point, and a fundamental one, in carrying out our role as Directors of the Daughters is this: we need to love our Sisters. It is essential that we love those whom we serve. If we do not love them, then our service has no meaning and becomes simply a job for which we are responsible. Few Christians have felt the call to animate Christian communities with the force of St. Paul. In 1 Corinthians 13, he describes the Christian relationship as characterized by love in his powerful and compelling poetic analysis.

Secondly, most people approach these kinds of talks from the position of their strengths. If you had the opportunity to read the presentation of Augustín Martínez from the last international meeting of the Provincial Directors in 2001, you would see that he entitled his talk: “The Provincial Director: ‘Animator’ of the Daughters of Charity”.

His fine presentation focused on an historical Vincentian heritage approach to the question of animation. I recommend it highly. My strength is in the study and analysis of the Scriptures. From this point-of-view, I approach most topics and it will not be different this morning. I will speak about animation beginning from the imagery and perspective of the Scriptures. In this way, I will share with you how I see myself and us in relation to this important role of service which we provide to our Sisters.

A third point which I will make in relation to this role is this: the responsibility of Animation for a Director of the Daughters of Charity is carrying out the ministry of the Holy Spirit. I have suggested this in my opening words today as well as the recollection morning which began our time together. We are not the only ones who carry out this ministry in the Company. It is attributed to everyone from the (DC) Superior General through the Visitatrices to the Sister Servants. I, however, will focus on the responsibility of the Director. Clearly we recognize the presence of the word “anima” in the word “animation” and we know that this refers to the “soul” or the “spirit”. We hear it as not simply talking about the “spiritual life” of the Company or individual Sisters, but the enlivening of the presence of the Holy Spirit in every aspect of the person and Company-prayer, community and apostolate. It captures both the Christian and Vincentian aspects. (One can see the helpful way in which these points are developed for the Sister Servant in the significant article by Fr. Fernando Quintano: “The Sister Servant as Animator: What is she to animate and how can she do this?”, *Echoes*, Dec. 2000 #12, pp. 567-582).

And my final introductory point is this: both Louise and Vincent were excellent at animating their communities. That is no surprise; we only need to look at the various means of communication which they used to stay in touch to find regular examples of animation through their attention, illustrations, corrections, encouragements, and focus on that which is most important. We can ask ourselves: “How can I energize this Sister or this community of Sisters?”. Reading a letter of Louise or a conference of Vincent can offer inspired direction.

When I assumed the role of the Director General of the Daughters of Charity, I must tell you that my first thought was not how much I have to offer but how much I have to learn. That realization has taken deeper hold of me after more than eighteen months in this role. It has been something that I have seen little by little as I grow older, and I presume that it is one of the insights that would be put in the “wisdom” category. When I worked with seminarians and talked to them about becoming good priests, I learned to ask myself what it meant for me to be a good priest and how was I doing in the concrete. When I spoke about homiletics to priests and about the time and effort required to create a good homily, I asked myself how much time and

effort that I gave to this enterprise. When I dealt with University students, I focused on what they would need to know in order to live faithfully in a world of many competing values, and I asked myself how I was doing in that competition. When I was honest with myself, I grew a lot in my own priesthood and Christian response through my ministries.

That is clearly true as we consider our ministry with the Daughters of Charity. To take on this role of animation is to commit ourselves to a deeper involvement in our own spirituality, in our own understanding of the Vincentian charism, in our own dedication to the Congregation and its mission. The Daughters of Charity are committed to their own spirituality, to their charism, to their service of the poor, and to living together in love and respect. Sometimes, they are not perfect in realizing that purpose, but they have a goal. In order to work with them effectively, it has to be our goal as well. We are not outsiders who offer advice but companions on the journey. When we carry out our responsibility as Directors, we take our turn to listen as well as to speak. We learn to be better animators as we learn about ourselves and from one another.

Let me illustrate our responsibility to be animators with three points, each of which recognizes our role of mediating and channeling the Holy Spirit. First, using the imagery of prophecy, I will describe how we can breathe life in the Spirit into individuals and communities through dynamic proclamation; second, using the image of fire, I will describe how we can set hearts ablaze through the urgings to put love into practice; and third, using the imagery of indwelling, I will describe how we can make a home for the Spirit through reflection in the depths of our hearts. Thus, we will treat animation through living, animation through action, and animation through deepened spirituality.

I.

ANIMATING THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT

1. **Breathing Life into the Company: Individuals, Community, Mission**

An exciting passage in the book of the prophet Ezekiel stands out in my mind as capturing the concept of animation. I have reflected on it several times in this regard during the past year. Perhaps it is important in this regard for you as well. It is the story of Ezekiel and the dry bones. I love this vibrant and colorful story:

“The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he led me out in the spirit of the LORD and set me in the center of the broad valley. It was filled with bones. He made me walk among them in every direction.

So many lay on the surface of the valley! How dry they were! He asked me: Son of man, can these bones come back to life? 'Lord GOD', I answered, 'you alone know that'. Then he said to me: Prophecy over these bones, and say to them: Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Listen! I will make breath enter you so you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow over you, cover you with skin, and put breath into you so you may come to life. Then you shall know that I am the LORD. I prophesied as I had been commanded. A sound started up, as I was prophesying, rattling like thunder. The bones came together, bone joining to bone. As I watched, sinews appeared on them, flesh grew over them, skin covered them on top, but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me: Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man! Say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: From the four winds come, O breath, and breathe into these slain that they may come to life. I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath entered them; they came to life and stood on their feet, a vast army. He said to me: Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel! They are saying, 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off'. Therefore, prophesy and say to them: Thus says the Lord GOD: Look! I am going to open your graves; I will make you come up out of your graves, my people, and bring you back to the land of Israel. You shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and make you come up out of them, my people! I will put my spirit in you that you may come to life, and I will settle you in your land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD. I have spoken; I will do it-oracle of the LORD" (Ezek 37:1-14).

Feel the evocative power of the passage! It is about the gathering of the people Israel after the Babylonian Captivity. From scattered bones comes forth bodies, and from the bodies comes forth a living community, and from the living community comes forth a people with a purpose. The Lord promises not only to gather them together once again, but to give them his spirit-his life. All this happens through the word of the prophet. It is the work of animation literally, and on so many levels.

Notice that the prophet is invited to prophesy three times: once to gather the bones together into bodies, once to fill these bodies with life as a vast army – a community –, and once to set them on a mission as God's people. And all this happens through the invocation of the Spirit!

Does this imagery help us – you and me – to imagine our responsibility of animation in the Company? We prophesy to integrate the individuals so as to help bring the pieces of life and meaning together. We prophesy to form living communities and to deepen the understanding and acceptance of the charism; this gives the direction.

We prophesy to send the community forth dynamically active; this is the mission in the practical order in the world. All this happens through the action of the Holy Spirit. We are called to animate the Vincentian – both spiritual and apostolic – dimension of our Sisters and the Company. We are called to breathe life into our communities by the Word of the Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is an exciting and powerful ministry, and it gives life to them as to us. It is the role of the Spirit-driven prophet. Our Directory offers some guidance in that regard and we will discuss some of those ways in the days ahead in terms of retreats, days of recollection, pastoral visits, support for Sisters dealing with different issues, and other possibilities.

To prophesy in this context means to speak a powerful and colorful Gospel message which captures the realities of our world and the needs of people. When done well, it lifts and challenges. This proclamation is directed towards those who are called to respond. The ability to speak these compelling words – to prophesy – arises from our careful reflection upon the Word of God and its meaning for our community in the modern world. It emerges from our ability to read the writings and guidance of our Holy Founders, and to hear the way in which they sensed the presence of the Spirit in their time and place. We then are challenged to speak that message with power and clarity to our time and place. It derives from our attention to the promptings of the Church which call us to respond in a particular way and with a certain emphasis. The call to prophesy – to speak powerfully – is in keeping with the ideas suggested in our opening conference as we feel the urging of the Spirit to proclaim the Gospel to those who are poor and for those who are poor. We do that with the animation of our Sisters.

Notice that the role of the prophet – our role – is not simply to bring life to the individual Sisters but to the community as a whole. The Spirit is at work in the community as well as in the individual. And this leads to mission. What no individual can do alone, a community of dedicated women open to the transforming Spirit can do together over time and over distance. We are part of that life-giving, that animating, force.

Vincent speaks to his Sisters about the need to understand their spirit:

“When God created the Company of the Daughters of Charity, He gave it a spirit of its own. It’s the spirit that animates the body. It’s important for Daughters of Charity to know in what this spirit consists, just as it’s important for a person setting out on a journey to know the route to the place where she wants to go. If Daughters of Charity didn’t know their spirit, to what could they devote themselves in a particular way” (VdP. CCD 9, #50 – The Spirit of the Company, February 2, 1653, p. 457).

The mention of the Spirit animating the body puts us in mind of the passage from Ezekiel. It is that Spirit which we are encouraged to animate in our Sisters and in their communities.

This breathing of the Spirit of life into the Company picks up the imagery of Creation where the breath of God calls all good things into being. It picks up the imagery of the Wisdom literature where God's spirit is poured out on the human community in learning how to choose and act wisely. It picks up the imagery of the Annunciation in which Mary's "yes" enables the power of the Spirit to be expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus. The first dimension of animation to which we contribute is a creative one which breathes life into a person and a community and a mission by powerful proclamation and witness. It is a role of animation in line with that of the spirit-filled prophet.

Setting the Company on Fire: Love for God, for the poor and for one another

At Pentecost, one of the ways in which the Holy Spirit is portrayed is as tongues of fire. How easy is it to imagine the role of the Holy Spirit in animation using the imagery of fire which consumes and purifies as it enlightens and warms! It sounds like a description of the writings of both Louise and Vincent. Listen to the Pentecost story again:

"When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim" (Acts 2:1-4).

The thrill of being filled with the Holy Spirit can figuratively set one on fire with the desire to proclaim the Gospel and the message of Jesus. Animated by the Spirit, the first Christian Community at Pentecost feels driven to make the Gospel known and to begin to offer public witness to the Christian life. From those who had been fearful to be identified with Jesus emerges a courageous and focused community of believers who will dare anything for the spread of the Gospel and its values. This is the message and the story of the Acts of the Apostles. The community was defined by their devotion to: *"The teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers"* (Acts 2:42) which sounds like our communities. The Spirit which animates this Church is most forcefully recognized in the care and concern which the community exercises on behalf of one another.

“The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them all. There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need” (Acts 4:32-35).

And this community is zealous for the proclamation of the Christian message. Jesus speaks about this in the Gospel of Luke: *“I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!”* (Lk 12:49). Vincent captures this sentiment in his familiar statement: *“If the love of God is a fire, then zeal is its flame”*. The message of Jesus is not tame but exciting and meant to engage people in such a way that they want to grasp it and proclaim it and live it. This happens through the action of the Spirit and it brings animation and energy to a community.

Vincent speaks to the confreres passionately in these terms:

“So, our vocation is to go, not just to one parish, not just to one diocese, but all over the world; and to do what? To set people’s hearts on fire, to do what the Son of God did. He came to set the world on fire in order to inflame it with His love. What do we have to desire but that it may burn and consume everything. My dear confreres, let’s reflect on that, please. It’s true then, that I’m sent not only to love God but to make him loved. It’s not enough for me to love God, if my neighbor does not love him...”

Now, if we’re really called to take the love of God far and near, if we must set nations on fire with it, if our vocation is to go throughout the world to spread this divine fire, if that’s the case, I say, if that’s the case, brothers, how I must burn with this divine fire! How I must be afire with loving those with whom I live and with edifying my own confreres by the exercise of love, and inspiring my dear confreres to practice the acts that proceed from it!” (VdP. CCD 12, #207 – Charity, May 30, 1650, p. 215).

It requires little imagination to see how these words which animate the Congregation of the Mission could have as easily been directed to the Company of the Daughters of Charity-and, in fact, they are in other words and presentations.

Vincent gives three consecutive conferences on the spirit of the Company on February 2, 9, and 24 in 1653 in which he reflects with the Sisters on the nature and exercise of their spirit. A counsel which he offers to the Sisters is that *“you take only the advice of persons capa-*

ble of giving it to you and to whom God has communicated your spirit” (VdP. CCD 9, #50 – The Spirit of the Company, February 2, 1653, p. 460). The clear reference is to the priests of the Congregation of the Mission, to us. He tells the Sisters:

“Whoever sees the life of Jesus Christ would see far and away the similarity in the life of a Daughter of Charity... What is the spirit of the Daughters of Charity? It’s the love of Our Lord, Sisters... you should know that it operates in two different ways, one affective; the other effective. Affective love is the tender element of love. You must love Our Lord tenderly and affectionately... Affective love must pass to effective love, which is to be engaged in the works of the Charity and the service of poor persons, undertaken with joy, courage, fidelity, and love” (VdP. CCD 9, #51 – The Spirit of the Company, February 9, 1653, p. 466).

Later in the same conference, he summarizes his ideas:

“I repeat once again, Sisters, that the spirit of the Company consists in the love of Our Lord, love of the persons who are poor, love of one another, humility and simplicity” (VdP. CCD 9, #51 – The Spirit of the Company, February 9, 1653, p. 468).

For Vincent, the spirit of the Company lies in this love which is practiced on so many different levels and spread in so many different ways. It is the life of the Sister:

“Where is the charity of a Sister who has no humility or simplicity, and who doesn’t serve the poor with kindness and love? She’s dead. But if she has these virtues, she’s alive, for that’s the life of her spirit” (VdP. CCD 9, #51 – The Spirit of the Company, February 9, 1653, p. 468).

Again we hear the echo of Ezekiel and the power to call forth life as one animates our Sisters to be filled with the Spirit in responding to their call. Our summons is to faithfulness.

Vincent really comes to eloquence when he speaks to the Sisters of their spirit consisting in this love, listen to him. It is hard to imagine the Sisters not being moved to tears and resolution as they listened:

“In serving person who are poor, we serve Christ. How true, Sisters! You are serving Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as that we are here. A Sister will go ten times a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day she’ll find God there... Go to visit a chain gang, you’ll find God there. Look after those little children, you’ll find God there. How delightful, Sisters! You go into poor homes, but you find God there. Again, Sisters, how delightful! He accepts the services you

do for those sick persons and, as you have said, considers them as done to himself..

God has promised an eternal reward to those who give a cup of water to a poor person; nothing is more true, we can't doubt it; and that's a great source of confidence, for you, Sisters, for if God confers a blessed eternity on those who have given them only a cup of water, what will He not give to a Daughter of Charity who has left everything and makes the gift of herself to serve them all the days of her life? What will He give to her? We can't even imagine! She has reasons to hope that she'll be among those to whom He'll say: 'Come, blessed of my Father, possess the Kingdom which has been prepared for you'".

"...the poor persons assisted by her will be her intercessors before God; they'll come in a crowd ahead of her and say to God: 'My God, this is the Sister who helped us for love of You; my God, this is the Sister who taught us to know You'... 'My God', they'll say, 'this is the Sister who taught me to hope that there was one God in three Persons; I didn't know that. My God, this is the Sister who taught me to hope in You; this is the Sister who taught me Your goodness through her own'. In short, Sisters, that's what the service of the poor will earn for you" (VdP. CCD 9, #24 – Love of Vocation and Assistance to the Poor, February 13, 1646, pp. 199-200).

The animation of this Spirit of love and the salvation of our Sisters is at the heart of our ministry as Provincial Directors. We can hardly hear these words without becoming excited ourselves and eager to get to work. It is that spirit which we communicate to our willing and eager Sisters.

We are invited to set and tend that fire in our responding to the grace of the Holy Spirit. Love is at the heart of the ministry which we exercise and we know how it is so often caught up with the imagery of fire. The motto of the Company draws our attention to the love of Christ which drives the Sisters to service and action. The seal of the Company brings these elements together in a very visual form as it portrays to us a heart which is consumed with fire. Paul, of course, offers the clearest expression of the meaning of love and how it gets played out in the Christian community. He speaks about it as the greatest of the spiritual gifts given by the Spirit:

If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love

is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails (1 Cor 13:1-8).

Notice always that love is how the Christian life is lived in the practical order. It is the expression of a life which is lived faithfully in following Jesus. The Holy Spirit is that gift which is expressed in the midst of the community by love. In a Trinitarian theology, one can speak of the Holy Spirit as the love which unites Father and Son.

When we consider our role of animation, we can think of the way in which we promote the expression of love in the Company beginning with the call to love God, and then our Sisters, the poor whom we serve and ourselves. In all these ways, we animate and support the efforts in the Company.

2. Embracing the Indwelling Spirit: Seeking wisdom and spiritual depth

The Holy Spirit is often portrayed in the Old Testament as being the bearer of wisdom. In the New Testament, Jesus tells his disciples at the Last Supper.

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you... The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name – he will teach you everything and remind you of all that (I) told you” (Jn 14:16-17, 26).

The Spirit dwells within the Christian and remains with him and her. She gives support and wisdom to each person; part of our responsibility and privilege is to seek this wisdom and to promote it. This animation which we bring to a community adds depth to ministry and charism.

Our ministry of animation to our Sisters is not confined to encouraging them to active service of the poor – although that is central and their defining characteristic – nor to a lively participation in a personal and communal prayer experience – although this, too, is essential and the source of strengthening for mission. We are particularly invited to help them to seek the depths of their relationship with the Lord. This is achieved through meditation and contemplation. The effort is a significant challenge for us because it requires us to know the

depths ourselves. Abelly speaks about Vincent's encouragement in this regard:

"In this connection Monsieur Vincent said several times, 'The life of a Missionary ought to be the life of a Carthusian in the house, and an apostle in the countryside. The more he cares for his own interior development the more his labors for the spiritual good of others will prosper'" (Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, 2:24).

Last year at the Seminarium for the Sisters involved in formation, I spoke about this concept which connects the Holy Spirit and seeking the depth in spiritual formation. As a starting point, I used the Gospel of the great catch of fish which, obviously, was not an original connection (Pope John Paul II, for example, made the connection in his apostolic letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* [2000]). We read in Luke's Gospel:

While the crowd was pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God, he was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret. He saw two boats there alongside the lake; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, he asked him to put out a short distance from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch" (Lk 5:1-4).

And the disciples do catch a great number of fish to the points of the nets bursting. This "putting out into the deep" is an invitation to examine our faith with greater intensity, to work on experiencing the Lord more profoundly and less on learning more. The Gospel says that after they put out into the deep and make the great catch, they leave everything to follow Jesus. What could be a better goal or achievement! We are invited to "put out into the deep", to move out of the shallow water where we can stay without effort or change, and move into the fertile but challenging depths. And we are called to help others to make that same transition. It is a journey which our Holy Founders made willingly and confidently. It is a journey which one makes with the help of the Holy Spirit. God has much to teach us; God asks us to recognize our own limitations and reluctance; God wants us to give everything in the service of our ministry for and to him.

The call to preach retreats and organize conferences in which we invite people to find that presence of God deep within them is a life-giving experience both for them and for us. Listen to the powerful way in which Vincent challenges his missionaries to this ministry to give life:

“If you say to a poor lax Missioner, ‘Monsieur, would you please guide this man during his retreat?’. that request will be a torture to him; and if he does not beg off, he’ll simply drag his feet, as they say; he’ll be so anxious to satisfy himself, and will find it so hard to give up a half hour of his recreation after dinner and as long after supper, that this time will be intolerable for him, even though it’s given for the salvation of a soul and will be the best spent hour of his entire day. Others will grumble about this ministry, under the pretext that it’s very burdensome and demands a lot of energy. So, the Priests of the Mission, who would formerly have given life to the dead, will no longer have anything but the name and appearance of what they once were. They’ll be only corpses and not true Missioners; they’ll be the carcasses of Saint Lazarus, not the resurrected Lazarus, and, even less, men who bring others back to life” (SVdP, CCD 11, #9 – Retreat Ministry, p. 14).

Beneath the not-so-gentle correction, we can hear the ways in which we are invited to animate our Sisters – as ourselves – in the privilege of preaching retreats, recollection, and other homilies. Does the passage from Ezekiel come to mind once again?

In their *Constitutions*, the Daughters emphasize the significance of prayer and particularly meditation:

“The apostolic action of the Daughters of Charity draws its strength from contemplation, following the example of the Son of God who, while remaining intimately united with His Father, often went aside to pray” (C. 21a).

Vincent speaks to the Sisters of the importance of mental prayer. He writes:

“Mental prayer is made in two ways: one by understanding and the other by the will. Prayer of understanding occurs when, after hearing the reading, the mind is reawakened in the presence of God... This is ordinarily called meditation... The other type of prayer is called contemplation. In this the soul, in the presence of God, does nothing but receive what he gives... Now, in both these ways God imparts many excellent inspirations to His servants. In prayer He enlightens their understanding of many truths incomprehensible to everyone else but those who devote themselves to prayer; it’s there that He inflames the will; lastly, it’s in prayer that He takes possession of hearts and souls” (SVdP. CCD 9, #37 – Mental Prayer, May 31, 1648, p. 330).

When Vincent speaks to the confreres on this topic, he says: *“The interior life is essential; it has to be our aim; if we lack that, we lack everything” (VdP. CCD 12, #198 – “Seeking the Kingdom of God”,*

February 21, 1659. p. 111). The opportunity to collaborate in being forces of animation for the spiritual life of our Sisters is part of our calling. We accompany them as we “put out into the deep” and we are rewarded with the “great catch of fish” which the Lord provides. In drawing closer and closer to the Lord, we become better prepared to leave all and follow him.

II. CONTEXT FOR ANIMATION

Animation can be carried out at all levels. We can be attentive to individual Sisters and their need to respond to the promptings of the Spirit in their particular ministry. We can extend this invitation to the local community and recognize its creative ability to respond to the possibility of life and service together. Sometimes a summons to welcome the Spirit needs to be highlighted. A ministry of animation to the Sister Servants can multiply our efforts as we collaborate with them in carrying out their responsibilities. It can also encompass the Province with the Visitatrix and Council. Attention to the areas of initial and ongoing formation is a ripe concern for the animation of a Province. The summons to be open to the movement of the Spirit and the new ways of accepting those promptings are gifts and blessings.

We can animate our Sisters by our preaching as we take advantage of those privileged moments to share a reflection on God’s Word. This can be extended in our opportunities to preach Days of Recollection and Retreats. We can animate by our writings. Carefully crafted circular letters or conferences shared with our Sisters can offer invitations to respond to the Spirit in new and compelling ways. We can animate by our presence. Pastoral visits and just friendly visits to local communities offer opportunities for informal and formal sharing which makes way for the presence of the Spirit and the realization of animation.

Animation can take place in special ways as we are attentive to the liturgical seasons and the manner in which these times of the year offer special opportunities for hope, for rejoicing and for repentance. The feasts of the year, and particularly of our Vincentian Family, offer wondrous prospects for us to be open to the Spirit and to learn once again who we are and why we do what we do. The yearly retreats are blessed times for our Sisters and they offer the occasion to be renewed in the Spirit and once again energized – that is to say “animated” – for ministry.

We prepare ourselves for carrying out this role of animation by our reflection on the word of God, by our study of the writings of our Holy Founders, by our attention to the writings of the Church, but also by

our attentiveness in ministry towards those who are poor and whom we serve in various ways. What is clear – as has been repeatedly mentioned – is that the call to prepare ourselves for the animation of our Sisters flows from our own growth in the Spirit. In preparing ourselves to be useful to them, we are doing ourselves the most wonderful of favors. We should be grateful for the call to serve our Sisters because it summons us to be more faithful.

Conclusion

At the end of one of his conferences on the spirit of the Company, Vincent prayed for the Sisters, and himself, in this way:

“O Saviour of our souls, Light of the World... You who have formed for Yourself a Company of poor women who serve You in the manner You have taught them. Make them Your instruments, my God, and give them and me, wretched sinner that I am, the grace to carry out all our actions through charity, humility, and simplicity in the assistance of the neighbor” (VdP. CCD 9, #51 – The Spirit of the Company, February 9, 1653, pp. 469-470).

Moved by this sentiment and his conference, Louise asks Vincent:

“Father, I beg you to offer us to God so that we may enter fully into this spirit, and ask Him to forgive us the faults we’ve committed against this same spirit” (VdP. CCD 9, #51 – The Spirit of the Company, February 9, 1653, p. 470).

Both of these good people, whom the Church will recognize for their holiness, acknowledged the need to bring their situation to prayer. That points out to us one of the last items (but which should be first in our list of priorities) which I can mention in our call to animate our Sisters and that is our responsibility to pray for them. Just as we might be the way in which God chooses to answer some of their prayers, they are certainly an answer to some of ours. In praying, we ask that God might enable them (and us) to be filled with the Spirit and animated to live the charism with which we have been blessed.