

The Joys and Blessings of Being a Provincial Director of the Daughters of Charity

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It is a privilege to speak to you today. I have been Director of the Daughters of Charity in Britain for eleven years and am very happy, to say a few words to you at this international gathering of Directors. In the year 2001 there was a similar gathering here in the Rue du Bac. Directors from all over the world gathered to share thoughts, prayers and experiences. The Director General, Fr. Quintano and the Mother General, Sister Juana D.C., were here. Father Bob Maloney, our Superior General at that time, addressed us.

My predecessor as Director Fr. Michael McCullagh, gave a talk at that gathering and said in part:

“In Britain we have a constitutional monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. Her husband and consort is Prince Philip. He has no power under the unwritten constitution of Great Britain. He accompanies the Queen on her visits both at home and abroad. Those of us who live, or have lived in Britain, will remember the televised State Opening of Parliament when the Queen, in the full regalia of a monarch – robes, rings, tiara and so forth, gives a speech outlining the plans for legislation for the coming session of the current government. She sits on the throne; on a somewhat smaller and lower throne sits her husband – her consort – Prince Philip. He says nothing – he does nothing – he is present. It is said that sometimes he gives a discreet cough or on other occasions discreetly directs the Queen – with a little elbow pressure – away from pitfalls. He is not a ‘pussycat’ i.e. a wimp – a cipher – a nothing! Media reporters who assume he is a ‘nobody’ have found to their cost, how wrong they were. He can be very forthright. But he is not the monarch. He accepts that that is the position. Maybe the analogy of the Director vis-a-vis the Visitatrice and that of Prince Philip and Queen Elizabeth is not entirely inappropriate... maybe a little helpful”.

Paul the apostle does not whine about the job that God asks him to do. This is it! This is it! I did not ask God to make me a Director of the Daughters of Charity. This is what I am now. I have accepted and

enjoyed the “powerless” position for the past eleven years. I have grown to like being Prince Phillip!

In the old Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission – written presumably by St. Vincent – we are told that our first obligation in life is to save our souls. It is not to be a priest or a Vincentian or an Irishman, but to save our souls – personal perfection is No. 1. During our lives, we forget this, as we strive to be a really good teacher/preacher/administrator/director or bursar. However, No. 1 is to save our souls – to be on the inward journey to the centre of our being where Christ is. This is a great challenge but one that can bring me great joy.

In preparing these few words I turned first of all to the current edition of the Constitutions & Statutes of the Daughters of Charity. May I remind you: (page 147 Constitution 75a, b) state:

The Provincial Director is a priest of the Congregation of the Mission, who provides for a Province of the Daughters of Charity a service of Vincentian animation and accompaniment in collaboration with the Visitatrice and her Council.

He is appointed by the Superior General and represents him in the exercise of the functions that the proper law of the Company recognises, in particular:

- to promote in the Province, with the Visitatrice and her Council, the Vincentian spirit;
- to be attentive to the formation of the Sisters, most especially of the Sister Servants;
- to participate in the Provincial Council and the Provincial Assembly;
- to visit the local communities;
- to be available to the Sisters who have full liberty to speak with him;
- to grant poverty permissions related to personal goods of the Sisters. As you know,

Statute 56 a, b, and c state:

- a) “The Superior General appoints the Provincial Director for six years after consulting the Visitatrice and her Council and, if necessary, the Sisters of the Province. The Provincial Director may be reappointed, but his term of office may not exceed twelve years – other than in exceptional circumstances”.
- b) “If the needs of the Province require it, the Superior General may, in agreement with the Provincial Director, the Visitatrice and her Council, appoint a Sub-Director”.

- c) "During Council meetings, the Director gives his opinion. This opinion is required for:
- acceptance of a candidate to Postulancy;
 - admission of a postulant to the Seminary;
 - sending on mission of a Seminary Sister;
 - acceptance of a Sister for Vows for the first time;
 - delay for the renewal of vows, whether requested or imposed, and authorisation to renew them after a delay;
 - authorisation for a Sister to live outside a house of the Company;
 - dismissal or readmission of a Sister;
 - use of goods of the Province in important matters".
- d) "The visitations of the Director to the local communities focus specifically on the spiritual and Vincentian aspects of the Sisters' lives. After the visit he makes a report to the Visitatrice and her Council, while safeguarding confidentiality. These visitations are made at least every five years".
- e) "He encourages the Sisters' participation in the pastoral mission of the Church, according to their proper identity".
- f) "The Director and the formation Commission give special attention to Church documents and their appropriate application".

The Provincial Director is in attendance at Provincial Council meetings. He does not vote – even though he participates in discussions. He is passive but not inactive – he is diplomatic but not inert. He coughs occasionally to warn of a perceived danger and he candidly points out possible pitfalls to the Visitatrice and her Council.

That is how I have tried to act over the past eleven years. I am not the Chief Executive Office (C.E.O.) of the British Province of the Daughters of Charity. I am an adviser. I am in a long tradition of Directors which may go back to the 17th century and the time of those three remarkable people – Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac and Anton Portail.

Is it true or is it just part of our received oral tradition? It is said that in the 1620's Vincent sent word that he was seeking priestly volunteers to help him preach parish missions to the poor country people. The response was a resounding zero – ZERO – nothing! How depressed and downhearted he must have felt – no one wanted to join him in a work, he considered important.

And then one evening there was a knock on Vincent's door and outside was a little priest. Vincent already knew Anton Portail and invited him into his house. Anton said he wanted to join Vincent in this project but the problem was that he, Anton, was pathologically shy

and could not preach – he could not climb into a pulpit without perspiring, shivering and shaking. Now if I were Vincent de Paul I think I would have said: “Thank you, Fr. Anton – I will be in touch with you. Don’t call us. We will call you”. And in my mind that would be that.

But as we know, that is not what happened. Vincent told Anton that he had another project with Mademoiselle de Gras – to form poor country girls into servants of the sick poor and he – Vincent – thought that Fr. Anton Portail would be ideal to help Louise. And that is what happened. Anton Portail became the first Director of what was to become the Daughters of Charity. God can use the least obvious characters. He can use Anton, He can use Fergus, He can use you and He does use us. I find that a very consoling thought when I feel inadequate.

It was mid winter in Britain as I prepared this talk, and I decided to do something different. My emphasis will not be on what I say but on your reaction and reflection and prayer today, tonight, or tomorrow. It is often said that we live our lives forward – but understand them backwards! I would like to do a little backward looking and hopefully help each of us to find meaning, healing and a possible way forward.

I have lived all my life in Northern Europe. It is a part of the world where one becomes conscious of the seasons and particularly of the season of winter. For a few minutes I want to pretend that it is in winter in Scotland where I spent some years working with deaf people. But I am not just thinking of the physical winter, but also the personal winter experience – the emotional winter – the spiritual winter.

Winter is not the end as it is often presented, but a part of the cycle of life and an important one at that. Winter is not something that is chosen – it happens to us. Holidays, sabbatical breaks, are all part of our planning – Winter is not. It can vary greatly from year to year, but we still have to live through it. Generally it is a negative experience, and one that we like to pass over. Sometimes the winter will be mild, or very long, very cold, wet and windy and from a vegetative point of view – in the short term it is a full stop – life seems to stop, growth is arrested. Trees shed their leaves, branches dry out, and the life and energy of the tree is drawn down into the heart of the tree and when the tree is felled we can see the dark winter rings and the pale soft summer rings. The tree just stands there and waits for the winter to come and pass. The same holds true for the animals and the birds and even humans.

It is said of a Dutch Communist imprisoned in the Soviet Union Gulags in the 1950's that he was bitter, resentful and constantly angry. He could not understand why he – a model communist – was imprisoned. His fellow prisoners, the Russians, by and large accepted their fate – it was like winter – it happens – ranting and raving would change nothing – don’t argue with the weather. Winter is not the end – it is

part of the cycle of life. It is as essential as summer, but less pleasant, and generally more difficult. But the place where the sun always shines is in the desert!

The Gospel variety of all this may be said to be the Vine dresser pruning the Vine

The Word became Flesh in order to lead us into communion with God – to bridge the gap which separates us, weak and sinful humans, from God. He came to dwell in the womb of Mary, and to dwell in each one of us, and also to act through us and so to give life to others. We are called to participate in the creative and loving activity of God. We have to grow into one another – us and Christ. *“I am the vine; you are the branches...”*. Jesus is one with us. All life flows from Him and through Him, and then to us as the sap gives life to the branches. *“Those who abide in me bear much fruit, because cut off from me you can do nothing...”*. The fruit is the life we are called upon to give to others.

But it is not just we who give life, nor is it just Jesus: it is we and Jesus; Jesus in us and us in Jesus. We cannot distinguish what is of God and what is of us. It is the life of the Spirit flowing through each of us, coloured by our own particular gifts, by who we are and our particular mission. Although working side by side, and in the same ministry, no two of us will leave the same footprints. No two directors of the Daughters of Charity are the same. The munificence of God is giving life in and through us. We give the life of God to each other, and we receive this life from one another. The dwelling of God in us is living and active, as Jesus said to the Samaritan women: *“Whoever drinks from the water of life which Jesus gives will become a source, a spring of living water – of divine life – for others”* (John 4:14).

To be this source of life for others, we need to be cleaned and/or pruned. Our words and gestures must come no longer from our compulsions and our personal needs. We can no longer just live out *our* agenda. We must not allow our lives to be directed by our fears – our need for false praise. Instead our thoughts and actions must flow from the Trinity dwelling in us. Jesus speaks to us of a need for a deep cleansing – a winter experience (?). If we embrace this ‘winter’ the Father will prune all the branches that bear fruit so that they become even more fruitful.

Frequently, it is only when those who are powerful, experience failure, sickness, weakness or loneliness that they discover they are not self-sufficient and all powerful, but learn that they need God and others. Out of their poverty and weakness they then can cry out to God in a new way, and come to discover and know God in a new way – as the God of love and tenderness, full of compassion and goodness.

So much of our work with the poor, the sick, disabled, is not just about “doing good” for them – it is about being healed and changed; perhaps even “**saved**” by those we are serving. They call us to love, to be compassionate, and to learn to trust in God, not in ourselves. Can we communicate that message to the Daughters of Charity whom we serve? It was when Vincent de Paul realised and accepted his own inner poverty that he came to be a really effective servant of the poor. If we will not/cannot take the risk of being poor then I believe we will never be able to walk with those who serve the poor, the Daughters of Charity whom we are called to serve. We will give them *things* but not ourselves.

Accidents, sickness, failures, loss – the death of someone we greatly loved and needed – all sorts of unexpected events – winter – can hurt and wound us and leave us in a state of grief and desolation. We feel empty. Life no longer flows through us – we have lost our energy and enthusiasm, sometimes even all our desires. Like the wounded vine whose branches have been cut off – we have to wait for the new life to flow in us. We are pruned for something new. Before the pruning we were perhaps too taken up with “things to be done” – maybe good things – but we were too busy and had no time for God. Maybe we were like the people in Luke Chapter 14; i.e. they refused the invitation to the wedding feast because they were too occupied.

When we are pruned in this way, we may have feelings of anguish and emptiness. This emptiness can bring forth anger and depression. Sometimes this anger is directed against ourselves rather than at others.

As an aside, may I say that I have in my ministry, come across great anger among religious people, some even wishing to end their lives. For some, life has no meaning or value any more. The pruning is sometimes sudden and unexpected – sometimes it is slow as we get older, less mobile, more forgetful, less busy, the telephone does not ring as often and emails are not as frequent. “I may as well take the bus to Switzerland and finish it all in some euthanasia clinic”.

But Jesus talks also of a more violent pruning – the cutting off of the branches that produce no fruit – they are cut off, gathered up and thrown on to the fire. All that is in me which refuses to follow Jesus and his command of love, and which is all locked up in my selfishness will be cut off and burned. This final burning takes place after our death – and only then are we transformed into God. “*Whoever does not abide in me*”, says Jesus, “*is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned*” (Jn. 15:6).

Of course the important thing is not to wait until our death, but to walk with God today. Walking with God I will try to accept the loss, the grief and the pruning. I will try to live through my winters, so that I can begin to abide with God today. Jesus says: “*If you abide in me,*

and my words abide in you, ask My Father whatever you wish and it will be done for you. By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (Jn. 15:7-8).

The glory of human beings, of Vincentians and of Daughters of Charity is not to go on doing and producing things; not to build churches or hospitals, or write beautiful books, or create new ideas or give interesting talks – all of which will pass. It is to communicate life – to bring compassion to the suffering – and with Jesus, to transform others – to help them move from inner death and darkness to inner peace, joy and fullness of life.

St. Vincent de Paul had a great love for the blessed apostle – Saul of Tarsus. Paul/Saul spoke of the winter in his Apostleship. In 2 Corinthians 11:24 he speaks of all he had suffered in the name of Jesus. Comparing himself with the false prophets he has met, Paul insists that he is:

“...Better than they with my numerous labours. Better than they in the time spent in prison. The beatings I have received are beyond comparison. How many times have I found myself in danger of death. Five times the Jews sentenced me to thirty nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with a rod, once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked and once I spent a night and a day adrift on the high seas. I have been continually in hazard when travelling, because of rivers, because of bandits, because of my fellow Jews, or because of the Pagans; in danger in the city, in the open country, at sea, in danger from false brothers. I have worked and often laboured without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty and starving, cold and without shelter.

Lest I become proud, after so many extraordinary revelations, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a true messenger of Satan, to slap me in the face. Three times I prayed to the Lord that it leave me, but he answered me: ‘My grace is sufficient for you; for my strength is made perfect in weakness’. Most gladly then would I glory in my infirmities, humiliations, want, persecution: all for Christ. For when I am weak than I am strong” (2 Cor. 11:22-31.)

We must pay attention to the story of Paul when in Galatians 6:14 he says: *“For me I do not wish to take pride in anything, except the cross of Jesus Christ Our Lord. Through him the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world”.*

The Irish poet Brendan Kennelly wrote:

*“Though we live in a world that dreams of ending
That always seems about to give in,
Something that will not acknowledge conclusion
Insists that we forever begin”.*

In some degree, we can all relate to some of the feelings and trials described by Paul – but none of us in total. But I like to think that this is not just describing an individual experience, but also something collective – as a religious congregation, or even as a local church.

I hope that in our time here in Paris – while we will consider our personal “winter experiences”, we will be able also to consider that which has been collective as Directors of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul from all over the world.

Winter is a part of life – part of our life cycle – a part of being fruitful, just as the pruning which Jesus alludes to is essential to the eventual production of a harvest to good fruit and sweet wine.

What is your personal winter?

- Failure in a ministry?
- A serious debilitating illness?
- Bouts of depression?
- A feeling of having been betrayed?
- A memory of unfinished business?
- A sadness because of the death of a loved one?
- A feeling of having been misunderstood?
- Sadness/shame of academic failure or not having been given academic opportunity?
- Sexual problems?
- Family problems – addiction, suicide, marriage breakdown, rejection?
- A crisis of faith – doing “holy things” but struggling sometimes to believe in the truth of what I am doing?

What is your sense of a Community winter?

- Houses closed?
- Ministries abandoned?
- Feelings of being used to plug gaps?
- Lack of emotional support – no one to really listen to me at a deep level?
- Feelings of being labelled – previous history?

What is your sense of a winter in the Daughters of Charity?

- There are fewer and fewer D.Cs. in Northern Europe?
- The mean average age grows each year?
- Vocations are few if at all?
- Our sense of direction is sometimes unclear?
- Do we have a future in Britain?

- How can we live with the scandals in the community?
- Lack of voice in our secular society – are we irrelevant?
- As members of the Church we have fewer and fewer young people?

I have been blessed in my years as Director of the DC's. I have laughed and cried. I have sat at the bedside of a ninety eight year old DC. She was in a coma. I said the rosary and when I finished I said "Goodbye Sister keep the faith!". Suddenly she opened her eyes looked directly at me and said "**You** keep the faith..." and then she died. I have sung at jubilees and danced at provincial assemblies. It has been a great eleven years. I am so grateful to God for these years.

We are Vincentians. Vincent lived at a time of great confusion both in church and state. Vincent went into and embraced the winter in the Catholic Church in 17 century France. He did not build sand castles in the air – he lived in the reality of life. He embraced his own personal winter. If we do the same we can see something of how we can be His and how through us He may produce the new Life He wishes to give to all.

If we do that, we will be true Vincentians and good Directors of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. Mother Teresa of Calcutta was once asked by one of her sisters who had been appointed a superior of a local community what she, the new superior, should do in the new position she was in. Mother Teresa is said to have replied "enjoy it... that is all". That is what I intend to do as Director of the Daughters of Charity in Britain for whatever time I have left – "to enjoy it".

Thank you for listening and as Fr. Michael McCullagh, C.M., would say... "keep it country"!