

# The Sisters of Charity of St. Jeanne-Antide Thouret

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Short presentation on the Congregation

- its identity
- its relationships with other groups in the Vincentian Family
- the challenges which we perceive as the most important at this time and
- the most encouraging signs for the future.

## 1. Identity

The Sisters of Charity of St. Jeanne-Antide Thouret make up a religious congregation of apostolic life, approved by Pope Pius VII on 23 July 1819.

The congregation was founded by St. Jeanne-Antide Thouret in Besançon, France, on 11 April 1799 in response to representatives of that diocese gathered in Switzerland:

*You will take young girls and form them as you have yourself been formed and you will establish yourselves at Besançon, for the instruction of young people and to give help to the sick poor in their homes (MSR).*

Preparing the constitutions for her institute, Jeanne-Antide wrote, in the Primary Discourse of 1802:

*We have taken these Constitutions and these Rules for the greater part from what we observed as practised among the Daughters of Charity. We believe this usage to have been established by St. Vincent de Paul. That is why you will, with good reason, look upon this great servant of God as your founder, your special protector and your father.*

From the beginning, the Sisters of Charity made four vows: poverty, chastity, obedience and spiritual and temporal service of the poor. They live in fraternal community, whose superior, following the Vincentian tradition, is known as 'Sister Servant.' Their style of life has charity, humility and simplicity as its characteristics.

Today, in the Rule of Life approved by the Church on 11 April 1981, following the revision required by Vatican Council II, the charism of the sisters is expressed thus:

*To love Christ Jesus, to love and serve the poor who are his members, to show them the love of the Father, is the grace and mission that St. Vincent de Paul and St. Jeanne-Antide received from God.*

*Called by God into the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity, we participate in that charism and we are the ones responsible for it today (Rules 1.1.1).*

*Our charity seeks to be universal, but our mission keeps us, by a special vow and in various ways, for the service of the poor, the 'little ones', the weak, according to the Vincentian tradition as lived out by St. Jeanne-Antide (Rules 1.1.2).*

Our vocation is to live each day as part of the Church, in fraternal community, at the heart of a living tradition:

*Jesus Christ, who is our life, serves the poor through us and, in them, we serve Jesus Christ, who identified himself with the 'littlest ones' and those most scorned. (Rules 5.1.2)*

## **2. Relationships with other groups in the Vincentian Family**

In general, wherever there are communities of the Priests of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, or groups of lay Vincentians, the Sisters of Charity have good relationships with them, which can be considered under three headings:

\* **Ordinary life:** on a daily or occasional basis, participation in the Eucharist, times of prayer and festive occasions serve to build up fraternity and mutual understanding; e.g., the feasts of St. Vincent and St. Jeanne-Antide, the 50th celebrations of the canonisations of St. Louise de Marillac or St. Jeanne-Antide (1984). In Algiers, the one Sister of Charity there finds welcome and recreation in the house of the Daughters of Charity.

\* **Service of the Poor:** in this area, collaboration is very varied.

- welcoming, listening to people or families in difficulty and looking for ways to help them
- home visiting, participation in works and initiatives in favour of the poor
- pastoral care in a rural area
- preparation and animation of popular missions.

\* **Formation**

- participation in GAV in Italy, in Vincentian sessions and in courses organised by the Priests of the Mission
- being part of a Vincentian Cultural Centre (Northern Italy and Sardinia)

- choosing Priests of the Mission as retreat directors, facilitators for sessions about the Vincentian charism or spirit
- meetings of the Provincial Councils of the Sisters and Daughters of Charity
- regular meetings between the two noviciates in Rome: on formation, prayer and getting to know one another
- this year, a young Indonesian Vincentian has helped one of our sisters to prepare the translation of our Rule of Life into Indonesian

More and more, links are forming between the Sisters of Charity and other groups. We feel ourselves to be more and more part of the same family, called to evangelise the poor today and together.

### 3. The most important challenges for us at this time

\* To evangelise/serve the poor of today, with the strengths we have, given our rising average age, the lack of vocations in Europe and the USA, which all means:

- to learn, and relearn, how to speak of God today, where we are, taking account of the culture, the generation gap, the universe and the conditions of the poor
- to redefine in today's world the principle priorities at the heart of those established on the occasion of the General Chapter of 1980
- to think 'new' and not along old lines

\* To rediscover the radicality of the Vincentian 'lifestyle' which is sober, simple, poor, open to welcoming others, the poor, sharing that life with them, and with the little ones in a way that is friendly and respectful

\* A fraternity that is lived out internationally in a world that builds barriers to protect itself

### 4. The most encouraging signs for our future

\* The gift of **vocations** in countries that are poor, in difficulties, or where Muslims are in the majority: Asia, Central Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, Romania

\* the **calls** which come to us in favour of the poor

\* the **requests of numerous lay people** who want to live according to our spirit.

(Translated by Eugene Curran, CM)