

Federation of the Sisters of Charity of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

by Sr. Theresa Capria, S.C.

I am honored to be here with you this week and am grateful for the invitation from Fr. Robert Maloney. I am a Sister of Charity of New York and am here to represent the Sisters of Charity Federation in the United States and Canada.

The initial foundation of the American Sisters of Charity was made by St. Elizabeth Seton at Emmitsburg, Maryland in 1809. In the following year Bishop Flaget brought from France a copy of the rule given to the first Daughters of Charity by St. Vincent de Paul in 1647. When Elizabeth Seton read the rule, she immediately identified with it. And so in 1812, with minor adaptations, the rule of St. Vincent was adopted by the new community. In time the Emmitsburg foundation spread to New York, Cincinnati, Halifax, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. In these places the Sisters engaged in child care, health care, education and a variety of social services.

In 1947 these six communities, which had become independent congregations, came together to form the Conference of Mother Seton's Daughters. They had two goals: to strengthen the union among them and to advance the cause of Mother Seton. The Federation continued after Mother Seton was canonized by efforts to celebrate their common heritage and broaden their understanding of their shared charism. In 1989 the Federation expanded to include other congregations which followed the rule of St. Vincent. Today thirteen groups are members of the Federation numbering about 7,000.

Our vision statement expresses our identity:

Claiming our future as women of faith, we are bonded by the charism of charity; impelled to respond to the needs of our day, especially among the poor; committed to collaboration.

The actions which flow from this vision include joint sponsorship of programs and experiences to strengthen networking and bonding, opportunities to deepen our common heritage rooted in Vincent, Louise and Elizabeth and efforts to use our corporate power for advocacy, witness and systemic change. The most recent example of this is our new NGO status with the United Nations. Five of the member groups are part of a Collaborative Novitiate; all groups participate in the gatherings of Company of Charity Formation Personnel; the Associates of each group come together as Charity Associates.

More recently we have joined local gatherings of the larger Vincentian Family. In New York we gathered for the first time at St. John's University on April 19, 1997.

Our theme was: Love—Inventive To Infinity. This year on October 3 we will have our second gathering around the theme: Vincentian Love in Action. We will be part of a nationwide celebration scheduled for September 23, 2000.

As we move into the future most of our members have chosen to focus their attention on being risk-takers for the poor, on addressing the needs of women and making real efforts to reverence the earth and all of God's creation. The insights of the new cosmology make it very clear that we are connected and that the fate of the tiniest part of God's creation affects all the others. Among the challenges we face are the need to find new ways of relating and networking with like-minded people; more holistic approaches to the complex problems generated by money-driven society; and the great challenge — to be faithful to the charism of love — to the face of LOVE incarnated in us today.

As I was packing I found a quote I would like to share. I do not know the author. But it could have been spoken by Vincent or Louise or Elizabeth or Frederick.

Humility accepts new directions with grace, simplicity acts promptly upon them and charity leavens the whole. Humility can risk new ventures because it does not fear failure; simplicity keeps the effort straightforward and self-forgetting; charity urges us to embrace the whole world.