

# The Daughters of Charity in the Church

At the time of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the origin  
of their charism

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## 1. A charism rooted in the experience of Châtillon

Vincent was convinced of the fact that our Charism flowed from the experience at Châtillon. That charism flowed from an inspiration of grace that touched the hearts of sensitive men and women. It was also a response that expressed people's solidarity with their more needy brothers and sisters and, therefore, the charism was rooted in a response to an urgent need. Those three elements were present in the response to the events that occurred during the time of August 1617, events that gave origin to the establishment of the charism as expressed in service on behalf of Christ present in the person of the poor. On 13 February 1646, Vincent spoke about this in a conference that he gave to the Sisters: *I'll tell you, then, that while I was living in a small town near Lyons, where Providence had called me to be the Pastor, I was vesting to celebrate Holy Mass one Sunday when I was told that in an isolated house a quarter of a league away everyone was ill. None of them was able to help the others, and they were all in indescribable need. **That touched me** to the heart. During the sermon, I made sure to commend them zealously to the congregation, and God, **touching the hearts** of those who heard me, **moved them with compassion** for those poor afflicted people.*<sup>1</sup>

In the beginning there was a movement of compassion that was rooted in the Spirit, the source of the true charity that touched the hearts of people and made them compassionate: *That touched me to the heart. During the sermon, I made sure to commend them zealously to the congregation, and God, touching the hearts of those who heard me, moved them with compassion for those poor afflicted people* (CCD:IX:192).

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<sup>1</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jaqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, C.M.; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume IX, p. 192; future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD:IX:192.

We recall here the details surrounding that event. On Sunday, 20 August, Françoise Baschet and Mademoiselle de Chassigne<sup>2</sup> entered the sacristy to tell Vincent that in the area outside the village there was a poor family in extreme need: all the members of the family were ill and they had no food or medicine. There was no one to help them. This news touched the heart of the good priest and he was filled with compassion. In his sermon he explained with great ardor and zeal the situation of that poor family and he touched the hearts of those who listened to him. Vincent's compassion was contagious in as much as the hearts of the parishioners were moved. In the afternoon Vincent, accompanied by an upright citizen of the town, went to visit that family. He was surprised to find a multitude of persons on the road who were coming and going to visit that family and to provide them with some food. It seemed as though he was observing a pilgrimage. Vincent arrived at the house and saw for himself the extreme need of that family. He administered the sacraments to the seriously ill members of the family. He also saw the great amount of food that the parishioners had given and he thought: *this poor sick family will be overwhelmed with so much in such a short time, most of which will spoil. Afterward they will be no better off than before.*<sup>3</sup> There was a need to organize this charitable activity.

Three days later, Wednesday, 23 August, Vincent put his plan in motion. He gathered together a group of pious women from the village, among whom were: Françoise Baschet, Mademoiselle de Chassigne, Charlotte de Brie, and Madame Denise Beynier (the wife of M. Claude Bouchour). Those women were moved by compassion and Vincent encouraged them to create an association in order to provide for the sick poor of that area (cf., CCD:XIIIb:3-5). The following day those women committed themselves to begin that good work, each one taking a turn to serve those persons whom they decided together to be in need of their help.

The proposed Rule brought together some essential elements:

- The Rule gave an organizational structure to the service that was to be offered, that is, caring for the sick poor in their homes;

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<sup>2</sup> Mademoiselle de Chassigne was the sister of the famous poet and mathematician, Claude Gaspar Bachet de Méziriac, one of the 40 members who formed part of the initial group that was inducted into the French Academy, cf. GEORGES GOYAU, *Les dames de la Charité de Monsieur Vincent (1617-1660)* [The Ladies of Charity of M. Vincent (1617-1660)], Editorial Art Catholique, 6 Place Saint-Sulpice, Paris, 1918, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul: Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, 3 volumes, edited by John E. Rybolt, C.M., translated by William Quinn, FSC, notes by Edward R. Udovic, C.M. and John E. Rybolt, C.M., introduction by Stafford Poole, C.M., New City Press, New Rochelle, New York, 1993.

- It outlined an evangelical spirituality based on the Beatitudes: humility, simplicity and charity;
- It highlighted professional competency as the members engaged in service with tenderness, responsibility and attentiveness;
- All of this was done under the watchful eye and the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary: *And because, when the Mother of God has been invoked and taken as patroness in important matters, everything can only go well and accrue to the glory of Jesus her Son, the Ladies took her for patroness and protector of the work* (CCD:XIIIb:3).

On 24 August 1617, the feast of Saint Bartholomew, the first Confraternity of Charity began to function in Châtillon. Thus was born the charism of organized charity that was intended to serve the poor in the various parishes.

## 2. From the Confraternities to the Daughters of Charity

From that same event arose the establishment of the Company of the Daughters of Charity (29 November 1633). Vincent himself was convinced of that reality. During the 13 February 1646 conference to the Sisters on the love of their vocation and assistance to the poor, Vincent described the origins of the Company as flowing from the establishment of the Confraternity at Châtillon and later in Villepreux and other parishes in Paris. In that same conference he reminded the Sisters about the life, mission, and death of Marguerite Naseau and stated: *And that, Sisters, was the beginning of your Company. As it wasn't then what it is now, there's reason to believe that it's still not what it will be when God has perfected it as He wants it; for, Sisters, don't think that Communities are formed all at once ... your institution is not the work of human persons, you may therefore boldly declare, Sisters, that it's the work of God* (CCD:IX:194).

Several events seemed to come together and ultimately led to the establishment of the Company:

- Louise's Pentecost experience (1623);
- The need to care for the sick poor and to instruct young girls in the rural villages;
- The weaknesses in the organizational structure of the Confraternities and the resulting decrease in the quality of service that those women offered to the poor;
- The presence of young women who desired to commit themselves totally to God in order to serve the poor.

As a result of her Pentecost experience Louise heard God's call to form a small community of women. Everything with regard to this

idea, however, was not clear; there were lights and shadows. She did not know what form such a group would have: would the members commit themselves totally through the profession of vows; would they live a common life; would they be involved in the mission of serving the poor? Little by little, with the help of Vincent de Paul and through the inspiration of the Spirit, Louise's mission became clear. At the same time there arose in the Confraternities certain irregularities with regard to the service that the women provided to the sick poor (for example, a weakening of their organizational structure). Vincent recognized the fact that all was not well and also perceived that God wanted to raise up in the midst of his Church the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Vincent sent Louise, a good organizer, to the various Confraternities to help them reorganize and focus on their mission. During those visits Louise met young women who wanted to give their life to God in order to serve the poor and Louise welcomed these young women into her home where she formed them and accompanied them.

In the midst of all those comings and goings the presence of Marguerite Naseau seemed to illuminate the path. Her death (February 1633) opened new paths that led to further discernment on the part of the Founders. In 1642 Vincent stated that Marguerite had no other teacher but God and that she opened the way for other young women. She was a *spirit-filled evangelizer*, that is, she was a woman who possessed all the qualities that Pope Francis speaks about when referring to spirit-filled evangelizers. When speaking about Marguerite Naseau, Vincent stated: *It's clear that God was powerfully at work there* (CCD:IX:193) and as a result Marguerite *attracted to this other girls, whom she had helped to detach themselves from all superficial things and to embrace a devout life* (CCD:IX:66). After Marguerite other young women came forward and *they began to meet and come together almost imperceptibly* (CCD:IX:166).

In light of that experience one is able to understand the meaning of the ministries of the Daughters of Charity and their openness to every poor person and every form of poverty. According to Saint Vincent the Company was born with four important characteristics that accompanied the charism of charity:

- God acted with his power (CCD:IX:166-167) and sent forth the Daughters in order to console those who were poor. On 31 July 1643 Vincent affirmed that reality when he said: *God has made you to be their consolers* (CCD:IX:5).

- The Company is a community in which each Sister lives out her vocation with an attitude of total surrender to God in order to fulfill a mission, namely, the mission of caring for the sick poor in their homes, instructing young girls in small schools and providing for other poor persons who are in need: *you have a vocation obliging you to help equally*

*all sorts of persons: men, women, children, and in general every poor person who needs your assistance, as you're doing, by the grace of God (CCD:X:363).*

- The Sisters viewed themselves as women who continued the mission of Jesus Christ through the practice of humility, simplicity, and charity and those other virtues proper to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience and also to that vow proper to the Company, the vow of serving Christ in the poor: *Whoever sees the life of Jesus Christ would see far and away the similarity in the life of a Daughter of Charity. And what did He come to do? He came to teach and to enlighten. That's what you're doing. You're continuing what he began (CCD:IX:466).*

- The Sisters live and serve with an attitude of total availability: *You have to teach persons who are poor wherever you find occasion to do so – not only the children in your schools, but all poor persons, whom you assist without distinction (CCD:X:118).*

### **3. The charism lived with an attitude of personal availability and through a diversity of ministries**

Since the very beginning of the Company there has been a willingness on the part of the Daughters to come and go to those places where the poor cry out for them and to those places where their Superiors have sent them. This characteristic has led the Sisters to exercise their ministry in many distinct places and that reality should be remembered as we approach the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the origin of our charism. Vincent himself realized that fact as he interpreted history and everyday events. On 18 October 1655, Vincent described that reality as he explained the purpose of the Company to the Sisters:

*You, dear Sisters, have given yourselves to God principally to live as good Christian women, to be good Daughters of Charity, to work at the virtues proper to your end, and **to assist the sick poor**, not in one house only, like those in the Hotel-Dieu, but **everywhere**, as Our Lord used to do, for He made no exceptions; He assisted everyone who came to Him for help. That's what our Sisters began to do with the sick, assisting them with such care; and when God saw how well they were doing it, seeking out the poor in their own homes as Our Lord most often did, He said, "These Sisters please me; they've done so well in this ministry that I'm going to give them a second one." That referred to those poor **abandoned children**, Sisters, who had no one to care for them, and Our Lord willed to use the Company to look after them, for which I thank His Goodness.*

*So then, when He saw that you had taken that on with so much charity, He said, "I also want to give them another ministry." Yes,*

*Sisters, it's God who gave it to you, without your ever thinking of it, nor did Mlle Le Gras – no more than I did – for that's how God's works are accomplished, without human persons thinking of them.*

*When a work has no author, we have to say that it's God who has done it. But what is this ministry? It's assisting poor criminals or convicts. Ah! Sisters, what a happiness to serve those **poor convicts abandoned** into the hands of persons who have no pity for them! I've seen those poor men treated like animals; that caused God to be moved with compassion. They inspired pity in Him; as a result, His Goodness did two things on their behalf: first, He had a house bought for them; second, He willed to arrange matters in such a way as to have them served by His own daughters, because to say a Daughter of Charity is to say a daughter of God.*

*He also willed to give those Sisters another ministry, namely, **the care of the sick poor, the poor elderly people** in the Nom-de-Jesus Hospice, **and those poor persons who have lost their minds**. Yes, Sisters, it's God himself who willed to make use of the Daughters of Charity to look after those poor mental patients. What a happiness for all of you! But, what a great grace for those Sisters engaged in this work to have such a beautiful means of rendering service to God and to His Son Our Lord! (CCD:X:102-103).*

In a clear and simple manner Vincent has described for us the origin and the meaning of the diverse ministries of the Daughters of Charity. In this regard the power of the charism was most important and was revealed as:

- **A gift of the Spirit** that was alive in the heart of Marguerite Naseau: *it is clear that God was powerfully at work there (CCD:IX:193).*

- **A power that led** one to renounce everything, especially honors and greatness on a human level. Marie Denyse and Barbe Angiboust gave witness to that renunciation and Vincent admired that power of the Spirit: *What do you think of that, Mademoiselle? Are you not delighted to see the strength of the spirit of God in those two poor young women and the contempt that He has given them for the world and its greatness? You could not believe the ardor that this has given me for the Charity (CCD:I:323).*

- **A grace that configures one to Christ:** *To be true Daughters of Charity you must do what the Son of God did when he was on earth... He worked constantly for His neighbor, visiting and healing the sick and instructing the ignorant for their salvation (CCD:IX:14).*

That gift, power, and grace, which is given to us with the charism of our vocation, configures us with Jesus Christ: adorer of the Father, servant of his loving plan, and evangelizer of those who are poor and, at the same time, leads us to provide for those who are in need

and enables us to be creative as we engage in a wide diversity of ministries:

*So, the goal at which you must aim is to honor Our Lord Jesus Christ, serving Him in those who are poor, in children to honor His Infancy, in needy poor persons, such as the ones at the Nom-de-Jesus, and in those poor people you assisted when they came seeking refuge in Paris because of the wars. You see how you must be ready to serve persons who are poor, wherever you're sent: with the army, as you did when called there, with poor criminals and, generally speaking, wherever you can assist poor persons, since that is your purpose (CCD:X:104).*

**This diversity in the ministry of the Daughters enabled them to serve the poor in a more effective manner and also enabled them to reveal God's love to them.** Those poor men and women are God's chosen people and therefore, during the time of Vincent as well as in later years, people have been excluded from our ministry precisely because they were not poor.

From the time of its origin the Daughters of Charity have attempted **to influence each specific historical situation in order to transform it** in accord with the loving plan of God. Through various activities the Sisters have proclaimed God's option for the poor. We recall here Barbe Angiboust, DC, defending the galley slaves who were mistreated and Jeanne Dalmagne, DC, denouncing to the authorities the injustices that were inflicted upon the poor in the village of Nanteuil. Such efforts to transform the reality has led the Sisters to be bold and creative in their service on behalf of the poor. They have grown as an international community, a process that was initiated during the time of our Founders when the Sisters were sent to Poland (1652).

#### **4. The charism has been adapted to the changing needs of time**

In the conferences that Vincent gave to the first Sisters, he placed before them an image that was a call to engage in a process of adaptation that was demanded of them by the passing of time. It was 1655 and the Company was growing. Every part of France and many places outside of France (for example, Poland) were calling for the services of the Sisters. In his conference on the Rule, Vincent stated:

*In the beginning it was a little snowball, and that Little Company has grown so much and made itself so pleasing to God that we can certainly say that **it's the finger of God that has produced this work** because it's spreading everywhere. Yes, Sisters, your name is extending to so many places that it has reached even Madagascar, where they're asking for you. Our priests there tell us it would be very desirable to have Sisters from your Company to win over more easily the souls of*

*those poor Negroes. Ah, Dieu! Sisters, God is blessing your Company and, provided you're faithful to Him, He will continue to bless it (CCD:X:82-83).*

Vincent utilized the powerful image of a snowball that rolls down the side of the mountain and grows in size because it gathers into itself the snow that is in its path. It seems to me that this is a call to adaptation. The snowball adapts and mixes with the snow that it finds in its path. In this manner new paths are opened and there is growth. That is what the Company has done throughout history and continues to do today.

The adaptation of the charism to the changing situation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was carried out by the Superior General, Jean Bonnet (1711-1735), as well as by the Superioresses General who guided the Company during the time of Bonnet's term of office. The Company had grown and it became necessary to broaden the proper rule that had been given to the Sisters by the Founders. In order to strengthen the charism and provide adaptations that were necessary for their service, the Daughters established Provinces in France: in 1712, there were 14 provinces and, in 1718, 19 provinces. The international expansion had not begun and the number of provinces that has been cited refers to the provinces in France and in Poland (a country to which the Founders sent the Sisters).

Father Bonnet established guidelines for canonical and for regular visitation of the houses, for the convocation of the General Assembly every six years, Rules for the various roles of leadership in the Company (Superioress General, Director, Assistant, Treasurer, Steward, and Secretary). He outlined the themes that the Sisters were to use during the time of their annual and monthly retreats, developed a formation program for the Seminary Sisters and the young Sisters (a program based on the gospels and the life of Christ, the catechism of the Catholic Church, the biographies and the teachings of the Founders).

It was hoped that these adaptations would provide the Sisters with a solid formation, which would enable them to continue the mission of Jesus Christ, the servant and evangelizer of the poor, and which would also enable them to do what Jesus had done:

- To care for the infirm in their homes;
- To teach and to educate the children in the rural areas;
- To care for the sick in hospitals;
- To provide for and educate abandoned and orphaned children;
- To care for the galley slaves in prisons and hospitals;
- To provide for beggars;
- To care for the insane.

Various manuals were developed for those different ministries which in turn were intended to enable the Sisters to adapt themselves to distinct realities. What did Father Bonnet hope to achieve with this process of adaptation? In the Spanish translation of those manuals that are preserved in the Archives of the Daughters on the Canary Islands (the Daughters arrived there in 1829) two objectives are clearly stated:

(1) to maintain with renewed enthusiasm our fidelity to the charism of charitable service on behalf of the poor and

(2) to create an international dimension to the Company and to carry out ministry on behalf of the poor in these various places but to do so with common methods, methods that were experimented in France and that produced good results.

In May 1790, near the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Assistant General of the Company, Sister Jeanne David and a group of five Sisters from Spain who had been formed in Paris during a period of eight years, established the Company in Spain. This involved confronting many difficulties and misunderstandings. As a result of the firmness of the Sisters' convictions, the commitment of Sister David and the Sisters' fidelity to their charism, the Company in Spain began to grow and was focused on serving the more needy members of society.

The French Revolution had begun in France and that event would change the course of French history, bringing to an end the *ancien regime*. Through an order of the Revolutionary Government the Company was suppressed in 1792, but in those circumstances Sister Marie-Antoinette Deleau, the Superioress General, wrote a letter to the Sisters which reminded them about the power of their charism and called them to remain faithful to the aims of the Company: *Do not abandon service on behalf of the poor if you are not obliged to do so. Let us utilize all our resources in order to mitigate the misery that is so prevalent during these unfortunate days... Ask the civil administrators to pay for your first dress if they demand that you remove your habit. Since that is simply a civil law, we can obey it, but use simple and modest clothing that is becoming to Christian women... In a word, in order to continue to serve the poor, do everything that is demanded of you in the present circumstances as long as there is nothing that is contrary to religion, the church, and/or one's conscience.*<sup>4</sup>

Those words echo the words of Vincent who on 22 January 1645 stated: *Sisters, the service of the poor must be preferred to everything else* (CCD:IX:171). That is a principle that, throughout their history, has

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<sup>4</sup> *Génesis de la Compañía*, Hijas de Caridad, Casa Madre, Paris, 1968, Spanish edition, p. 40 [This booklet exists in English too].

guided the vocation and the mission of the Daughters of Charity in every part of the world. That same principle also justifies the various adaptations that were necessary in order to serve the poor.

The *Anales* of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Daughters of Charity has reported the heroic actions of many Sisters during the time of the French Revolution. About 4000 Sisters were dispersed and yet they found new ways to provide for the sick poor even though they were not dressed in their traditional habit and were unable to live together in community (many lived with some members of their family or in a hospital as a nurse). Many were persecuted and some were martyred (the Daughters in Arras and Angers and Blessed Sister Marguerite Rutan).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, in Spain, the Company became established and consolidated through heroic gestures of service during the time of the French invasion (1808-1814), the yellow fever epidemic (1821), the cholera epidemics (1834, 1855, and 1885), and the three Carlist Wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the midst of those situations of great need, when the lives of many people were in danger, the Sisters were more than willing to go to the many places where the infirm were to be found. In order to do this they adapted their order of day, their style of community life, and many other aspects of their life as Daughters of Charity.

This same witness was repeated as the Sisters cared for those who were wounded during the Crimean War and as they traveled in ambulances where they treated countless soldiers, who were wounded during the wars in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A wonderful example of the adaptation of the charism in order to serve the poor effectively is revealed in the life of Blessed Sister Rosalie Rendu. She is one of the many Sisters whose heart was enflamed by a charity that enabled her to be bold as she provided for those who were in need. Her life echoed the words of Vincent: *we are to run to the spiritual needs of our neighbor as if we were running to a fire* (CCD:XI:25). Sister Rosalie did this in the midst of an institutional context that did not promote adaptation. During the time of Father Jean-Baptiste Étienne (1843-1874), uniformity became sacred and any attempt with regard to adaptation was viewed as an attack on fidelity to the charism. That reality created certain conflicts between the Superior General and some Missionaries and Provincial Superiors in various countries, one of which was Spain.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> PONCIANO NIETO, C.M., *Historia de las Hijas de la Caridad*, 2 volumes, Imprenta Regina, Madrid, 1932, pp. 151-154.

<sup>6</sup> This theme has been researched and studied by EDWARD R. UDOVIC, C.M. in his work, *Jean-Baptiste Étienne and the Vincentian Revival*, Vincentian Studies Institute, 2001.

We must be mindful of the fact that throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalism slowly penetrated the Church and also the Company. The Circular Letters of the Superioress General that were addressed to the Daughters at the beginning of each new year warned the Sisters about certain practices that were weakening the charism: a lack of poverty, unnecessary travel, a worldly spirit, reading for relaxation and distraction, visiting women and other persons who are not poor, lack of fraternal charity, lack of dedication and commitment with regard to serving the poor. In many ways there seemed to be an environment of general laxity.

These same warnings appear in the message that the Blessed Virgin expressed to Saint Catherine Labouré when she was gifted with the Miraculous Medal (1830). The direct intervention of the Blessed Mother and the powerful authority of the Superior General, Father Étienne, put an end to that relaxed attitude. The year 1830 marked a return of the Company to its primitive spirit. Marian devotion through the Miraculous Medal, the renewal of service on behalf of the poor, the availability of all the Sisters for said service, and fidelity in obedience and fidelity to the norms established by Father Étienne resulted in a flourishing of vocations and a great missionary expansion throughout the world.

The central government of the Daughters outlined a path of renewal that involved a solid formation that was focused on fidelity to the charism. At the time that the *Anales* began to be published in France, Saint Vincent's conferences were edited and immediately translated into Spanish (1943). The Superiors General were insistent in their call to conversion as well as in their call to carry out their ministry in accord with the various Manuals that were developed in the Motherhouse, in other words, to minister in conformity with the manner that was done in France.<sup>7</sup> All of this resulted in a strong current of uniformity and all the local communities were expected in act in said manner. This reality maintained and provided the Company with a high level of missionary expansion and apostolic vitality that was based on caring for the poor, fidelity to the spiritual life, and the observance of the Rule. That situation continued until the time of the Second Vatican Council, a time when the Company had reached its numerical high point: more than 45,000 members.

In contrast to the sacred position in which uniformity was held from the time of Father Étienne until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have the person

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<sup>7</sup> Father Jean-Baptiste Étienne together with the Superioress General revised, adapted, and completed the Rules for the various roles of leadership in the Company, the *Manuals* for the different forms of ministry that the Sisters were engaged in and the Constitutions of the Company. This work of renewal produced many fruits.

of Most Honored Mother, Suzanne Guillemin (1962-1968), who was Mother General for only six years but who, nevertheless, put the Company on the path of conversion as she encouraged the members to make the necessary adaptations that were being demanded by the Council. In 1966, she warned: *Let us beware of becoming mediocre, established in this world and of this world, unconsciously unfaithful souls.*<sup>8</sup> In her Circular Letter of 1967 she affirmed: *We are now at the hour when all that lives in the Church must renew itself or die.*<sup>9</sup> In light of that principle and in accord with the demands that the Council has placed upon Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*), the Company sought to engage in a process of adaptation and attempted to return to her roots.

Fifty years have passed since the closing of the Second Vatican Council. The world has changed rapidly and the humanist mentality has been replaced by individualism, indifference, and a cult of efficiency and technology. These attitudes have penetrated the Church and the Company as a "spiritual worldliness."<sup>10</sup> The number of vocations has declined rapidly and membership in the Company continues to decrease. Once again we are called to conversion and to a renewed hope as expressed in the theme of our recent General Assembly: *The boldness of charity for a new missionary momentum.* This is a call to live in a state of conversion and to adapt the charism to the present time.

## 5. Significant elements of the charism

We return to Châtillon in order to recall the significant elements that defined the charism of the first Confraternity of Charity, the Confraternities that were established in subsequent years, and that then came to define the charism of the Daughters of Charity. In Châtillon, there was a **movement of compassion**, fruit of the Holy Spirit, that moved hearts. At the beginning of the Company, there was a **movement of compassion** determined by the shortcomings of the Confraternities of Charity and the needs of the poor. That movement touched the heart of Marguerite Naseau, which in turn set in motion a process of formation, a movement of apostolic action, and a willingness to serve the sick poor and to lay down one's life as a martyr of charity (CCD:IX:64-66).

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<sup>8</sup> Circular Letters (1966-1968) of Most Honored Mother S. Guillemin [Translator's Note: I received a copy of this work from the Archivist of the Daughters of Charity. It is not dated and no publisher is listed]. The above-referenced text is taken from the Circular Letter of 1 January 1966 and is found on p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> This text is taken from the Circular Letter of 1 January 1967 and is found on p. 36 of the book cited in footnote # 8.

<sup>10</sup> Pope FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, ## 93-97.

The same movement of compassion touched the heart of Vincent, who sent Louise de Marillac to visit the Confraternities in order to help the members provide better service to those in need and who also proposed that Marguerite Naseau be sent from Villepreux to Paris so that Louise could supervise her ministry on behalf of the poor (CCD:IX:194).

Moved by compassion, Louise began to visit the Confraternities and establish schools to instruct the young girls in the various towns and villages. For many years she continued to visit the Confraternities and during that time organized the service that was provided to those persons in need and also formed new servants of the poor. Moved by compassion, Louise felt that the time had come to gather together in community the servants of the poor and, thus, founded the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Another significant element of the charism is a **spirituality** that enables one to be faithful to one's baptismal commitment and also enables one to follow Jesus Christ through the cultivation of the virtues of humility, simplicity, and charity. Those three virtues are a synthesis of the Beatitudes, the gospel program presented by Jesus Christ that enables men and women to follow in his footsteps and make the Kingdom of God present in their midst. That element was made clear in the Rule of the Confraternity in Châtillon:

*They will take care in practicing humility, simplicity, and charity, each deferring to her companion and to others, performing all their actions for the charitable intention of persons who are poor and with no human respect (CCD:XIIIb:19).*

With the same force, but with greater urgency, that same element was transferred to the Company:

*As long as charity, humility, and simplicity exist among you, one may say, "The Company of Charity is still alive"... the day when charity, humility, and simplicity are no longer seen in the Company, the poor Company of Charity will be dead; yes, it will be dead (CCD:IX:467-468).*

Another key element of the charism of charity is the **responsible and committed organization** of the members of the Confraternity with regard to their service on behalf of the poor.<sup>11</sup> Thus Vincent wrote various Rules for the different types of Confraternities which he established. When the responsibility and the commitment of the laity began to weaken, the Holy Spirit inspired the establishment of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Vincent was firm about the purpose of

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<sup>11</sup> JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, translated by Sr. Joyce Howard, DC, Melisende, London, 1999, pp. 448, 571 ff.

that institution, namely, the service of Christ in the person of those men and women who are poor. At the same time Vincent was very flexible with regard to the manner in which those persons would be served. Vincent applied different solutions and wrote different Rules in order to satisfy the various needs of the poor. This was true with regard to both the Confraternities and the Daughters.

There is a fourth significant element with regard to the charism: **warmth and the quality of service that is offered** (cf. CCD:X:390-402 and the many other references to cordiality). Warmth means reaching out to others, putting a smile on one's face, being kind and sensitive, being zealous and observant. All of these qualities are mentioned at different times in the Rules for the members of the Confraternities and for the Daughters of Charity (for example, the Rules provide many details with regard to the respect, cordiality, and the necessary competency in ministering to the poor). This is a key element in the charism of serving the poor. Throughout history we have had a high regard for this element because it is only in this way that we can discover the presence of Christ in the person of the poor and the destitute. The Sisters have been challenged to acquire the necessary competency in order to carry out their service on behalf of the poor with warmth and in a qualitative manner.

The historian, José María Roman, C.M., described and commented on the establishment of the Confraternities of Charities and stated: *it was thanks to the charities that the Church could be mother to the destitute.*<sup>12</sup> The Founder was convinced that **God was the only originator of the Confraternities and of the Company**. Vincent was equally convinced of the fact that **his charism was a gift for the Church and a great benefit for the poor**. He frequently repeated those words because he wanted those ideas to become firmly rooted in the heart of his disciples and followers (CCD:IX:358, 471, 536).

## 6. The challenges that our Vincentian heritage presents to us today

The same spirit that anointed Jesus as he was sent forth to proclaim good news to the poor led his disciples to continue that saving work among the most abandoned members of society. From the perspective of that fundamental conviction of Vincent de Paul, certain challenges are placed before us. We live in a world that lacks spirituality but where selfishness and individualism abound. In light of this situation the Vincentian heritage challenges us to intensify our efforts at developing our spirituality and also challenges us to reaffirm the Christian and Vincentian identity of true servants of the poor.

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<sup>12</sup> ROMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 445.

A Daughter of Charity cannot be defined by the ministries that she exercises in some school or hospital or residence or social agency. Daughters of Charity can be defined only in terms of who they are: women of faith who follow Jesus Christ: Adorer of the Father, Servant of his loving plan, Evangelizer of those who are poor. The Daughters, through the total surrender of their lives, have an undivided love for Jesus and serve him in the person of the poor. This defining difference with regard to their identity has to be rooted in the faith and in the joy with which they live out their vocation.

In the midst of a world of superficiality, individualism, and the search for efficiency, in the midst of the absence of God and an over-all indifference, the Daughters are called to be witnesses of God's mercy and tenderness, especially as they reach out to and serve those men and women who are poor. In 1830 the members of the Company renewed themselves as a result of the rediscovery of the spirituality that had been handed down to them by their Founders. This renewal brought about a unity and a willingness to serve that was made manifest in a twofold manner: obedience and going forth to serve those persons in need (even when that involved going out beyond one's own country of origin). We have in our hands the same resources that continue to be valid in the present era and that continue to provide us with the boldness of charity for a new missionary momentum.

The challenges that we must respond to can be stated in the following manner:

- To live a **Trinitarian** spirituality that is rooted in God's mercy and that, in turn, allows us to live a common life in service of the mission.

- To deepen our faith so that it reflects an **incarnational** spirituality that is centered on the person and enables us to approach people with the tenderness of Christ.

- To continue to develop a **transformational** spirituality that sends us forth to the peripheries, places us beside the poor and puts us in a position that enables us to oppose the causes of poverty.

- To deepen a spirituality of **grace** that enables us to carry out our service as a vocation and as a gift.

- To develop a spirituality of **communion** that enables us to accept the laity as a gift while at the same time promoting their formation and their participation in the charism so that they might serve the poor in a more effective manner and so that they might also respond to the call to go out to the peripheries.

- To enter into a process of personal and community **discernment** so that in light of the gospel and the charism we might make options that can better the life of those who are poor.

– To cultivate a **paschal** sense of our vocation that provides us with the strength and hope to confront our own suffering and the suffering of our brothers and sisters, especially the suffering of the poor and the more needy members of society.

– To view the **Eucharist** as the center of our life and mission so that we might continue to serve our sisters and brothers who are poor.

To express the **tenderness** of the divine mercy in a way that enables us to value “the little ones” and the more vulnerable members of our society.

In this way we respond to the Spirit who calls us today to be credible witnesses of the infinite mercy of Jesus. Yes, we are to give such witness to those who are poor and we are to do so from the perspective of the joy of the gospel and from the perspective of evangelical poverty that leads us to share all that we are and all that we have with those who are most in need.

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