

Federation of the Congregations Coming Out of Strasbourg

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Preamble

The birth of the Federation of the Vincentian Congregations (the Congregations coming out of Strasbourg) is rooted in the land of Alsace.

In the 18th century, the Bishop of Strasbourg, Cardinal Armand Gaston de Rohan, took the initiative to send young women of his diocese to the Sisters of Saint Paul of Chartres, to form them in the religious life, with a view to founding a congregation for the service of the poor and the sick in his diocese. Thus were founded, in 1734, the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg.

In the first Rule of Life reported from Chartres, many are the references that might be called Vincentian. Indeed, 1737 being the year of the canonization of Vincent de Paul, the fervor for his life and work developed widely. The first ecclesiastical superior of the Congregation, Canon Jean, made this great saint of charity known to the Sisters. He managed to get them excited about his spirituality and encouraged them to live according to his example. Therefore, Vincent de Paul became the spiritual patron of the Congregation and the protector of the works at the service of the poor, the sick, and the orphans. This identification was such that the new congregation was called: Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul.

In the 19th century, the Congregation of Strasbourg was called to form young girls for foundations in Germany and Austria. Little by little, these foundations became autonomous congregations.

Vatican Council II

The intuition to bring together these autonomous congregations in a Federation grew in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Let us hear from a witness of that time:

“...through the invitation of Mother Marie Ange in 1956, the desire of going back to the source pushed us to meet at the Motherhouse of Strasbourg. ‘We’ are all members of Congregations coming out of Strasbourg. In 1966, it was clear that the links created throughout common reflection led us on a way of renewal of our Congregations, as requested by Vatican Council II. This approach would involve a

union of our forces for a common purpose and could be considered in a resolute way” (Superior Mack).

As for many things in the Church today that have become natural for us, the Federation is like a “daughter” of the Second Vatican Council. It is based on two texts: *Perfectae Caritatis* and a text of Canon Law:

1. *“The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time” (PC, 2).*

2. *“Independent institutes and monasteries should, when opportune and the Holy See permits, form federations if they can be considered as belonging to the same religious family. Others who have practically identical constitutions and rules and a common spirit should unite, particularly when they have too few members...” (PC, 22).*

As in many ecclesial places, in our Congregations also, the meaning and purpose of the texts were well lived before the publication of these decrees. Many aspired to a reform, many others sought for a renewal of religious life in its external and internal form. This research allowed a return to the sources, to the spirit of the origins and we found ourselves on this way of renewal. All were able to join this process of “returning to the essentials.”

The development of the Federation

Through the decrees of 15 April and 13 November 1971, the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes in Rome erected the Federation of Congregations arising directly or indirectly from the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg. While respecting the freedom and independence of each Congregation, the Federation seeks to constitute a large, unique family whose members share the same spirit of Saint Vincent, in order to have the people of God benefit better from the specific gifts and values of each.

At its beginning, the Federation had approximately 10,000 Sisters.

Very quickly, the collaboration bore fruit:

- A joint quarterly magazine was published: *Heute [Today]*;
- Common times during initial formation were organized: novitiate, preparation for perpetual vows, and, later on, meeting of the junioristes at the places of origin of the Congregations;
- Proposal of meditation courses and ongoing formation;
- Reflection and work for a rule of common life, which became effective in 1985;
- Sabbatical months for older religious.

The common missionary adventure began in India in 1973. The Motherhouses of Fribourg in Brisgau and of Fulda, Heppenheim, and Paderborn were active members of this foundation. On 29 September 1994, this foundation was erected as an autonomous Congregation and became a member of the Federation.

The Province of Korea, coming from the Congregation of Paderborn, also became an autonomous Congregation on 21 June 1990 and has been a part of the Federation since 30 January 2004.

The year 1994 marked the affiliation of the Federation with the International Vincentian Family. The ceremony took place in the Chapel of the Motherhouse of Strasbourg.

In July 2015, the Federation counted 14 Congregations: in France (Strasbourg), in Germany (Augsburg, Fulda, Fribourg, Heppenheim, Hildesheim, Munich, Paderborn, Untermarchtal), in Austria (Innsbruck, Vienna, Zams), in India (Mananthavady) and in Korea (Suwon). The Congregations of Untermarchtal and Innsbruck have a Region in Tanzania; those of Hildesheim and Zams are present in Peru. The Congregation of Vienna has a Province in the Czech Republic; Innsbruck has two Provinces in Italy. The Sisters of Korea are sent on mission to Bangladesh and Myanmar. Sisters of the Congregation of India live in the United States and take care of Mexican refugees. Today the Federation has 2840 Sisters.

Our life with regard to the heritage of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac

The history of our beginnings means that our Congregations are strongly impregnated by the charism and spirituality of Vincent de Paul. The person and the spirituality of Louise de Marillac appeared much later. The German-language Congregations owe a lot to the commitment of Sister Alfonsa Richartz, Daughter of Charity of Cologne, who promoted the discovery and knowledge of Louise de Marillac, as well as access to her writings.

It is thus that we try to live the spirituality of these two great saints of charity and to adapt their charism in the daily life of our Congregations and in concrete actions in the service of the poor people and the sick who are entrusted to us.

Our European realities are strongly marked by the ageing of the members of the Congregations and the lack of vocations. The Congregations at the service for the poor, the sick, and troubled children often manage large institutions and are at the head of huge buildings. With increasing frequency, the vital forces of our European Congregations are no longer sufficient and the people, who can take responsibility in the management of institutions, are becoming more and more rare. New ways, therefore, must open, new collaboration must be invented.

The two Congregations having young sisters, in India and Korea, just as the communities in Africa, are in a process of development and expansion. The number of aspirants, who are knocking at the door of these communities, is such that it allows for new foundations (in Ethiopia for example).

We would like to present to you here, as an example, three challenges, which push us, in Europe, to grasp the future. The transmission of the charism and collaboration with the laity. Due to the above-mentioned situation, that is to say, the ageing of European congregations, it turns out that over the past 25 years approximately, the management of health-related and social works can no longer be ensured by the Sisters themselves. The health sector, in particular, is evolving a lot in legal and legislative ways and requires very specific management profiles. Little by little, lay collaborators are hired for positions of governance in the congregational works.

Actually, even for the Congregations, this question often arises: What responsibilities, in terms of the management of the Congregations, can we entrust to the laity? (Treasurer's office, for example).

Within our Federation, we try to consider these issues with clarity and to recognize therein a sign of the times. It is there that Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac can be valuable witnesses for us. Did they not, from the beginning, collaborate with lay people, stimulate networks, and have various socio-professional categories and different states of life? Our concern is for the transmission of the charism of Vincent de Paul to the laity: how to bring this charism up to date in order to allow our collaborators to make it their own, to live it, and to have it lived in their way? How do we pass on the fire that animated Vincent, to all these people, so that it continues to burn in the hearts of each one?

In 2003, we began a reflection on the transmission of the works: what are our needs? How can we help and support one another? How can we benefit from the experiences of each other? What are the possibilities of collaboration for us within the Federation?

Our first approach is to define a common base of values from the spirituality of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. This base allows us to restrict our field of action. In order to reach as many collaborators as possible, we have organized three reflection groups that will gather over two years. The first group is composed of Superiors General of the different Congregations. The purpose is to strengthen them in their role as leader, to support them in the transmission of the Vincen-tian values to lay collaborators, and to teach them to guide this process of transmission. A second group consists of Sisters called "Reduction Agents." Their role is to reflect on the ground how concretely to transmit these values and thus be an effective support for the Superiors General.

Finally, the third group is one of people in a position of governance, who bear the responsibility of values. This group has as a goal to be a venue for formation and support.

From these modules of formation, arose, in 2010, a “forum of values.” This group meets once a year, to share experiences, to discuss topical social and ethical questions, and to draw up general policy options.

Therefore, we experience what may be a reflection on “a Vincentian network”: an enriching collaboration, opening up many opportunities, and also opening the realms of the possible, which help to find answers to common concerns.

Common elements in Formation

Initial formation within our Congregations is the second area that we want to present. With regard to the decreasing number of young women wishing to commit themselves in our Congregations, the unitary phenomenon (one young woman per congregation) is much more pronounced. In addition, there is the financial question of having quality speakers give a talk for the formation of a very small number. These two givens (the single individual in our novitiates, the price of speakers) led the formators of the various congregations, to reflect, in 2011, on a common project for the European Congregations. This program is spread over three years and comprises common modules of formation for postulants and novices.

During the modules of variable durations (from one to three weeks), basic topics are addressed: human development, consecrated life, spiritual life, as well as Vincentian spirituality. All is jointly prepared with everyone responsible for formation. These meetings allow the young sisters to be confronted with other young women of the same age, to experience life in a group with people who are at the same stage of formation: experiences that cannot, in general, be had in the respective Congregations. Moreover, the size of the group allows for calling upon outside speakers on specific topics to complement the expertise of the formators. The Federation supports this initiative by placing qualified sisters at its service and also gives financial support for the program.

All of the formation modules have been held at the “House of origin,” house of welcome of the Congregation of Strasbourg, which is the foundation site of this Congregation. More and more, this house is becoming a place of revitalization for the Federation.

Between the different modules, the formators work in a coordinated way, in their Congregations, so that a total process established over three years can occur. The experiences of the first rollout of three years are positive on the side of the formators. They feel supported and stimulated in their mission through the networking process. The Sisters

in formation also describe these meeting times as moments of enrichment, enabling encounters and sharing of experiences with people living in the same context. These meetings especially permit the young Sisters to realize that they are not alone on the way of consecrated life. The reciprocal exchange becomes support on the vocational journey.

Internationality

The brief overview, at the beginning of our remarks, showed that internationality is a reality of the Federation.

The 2011 talk of Sister Evelyn Franc, Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity, invited to Strasbourg for the annual Council of the Federation, was decisive in this regard. *“We still recognize today the need to deepen the spirit of ‘Communion,’ the dimension of internationality, and the importance of resisting the temptation to isolate ourselves on behalf of our own charism. This would be rigidity, contrary to the essence of consecrated life. Complementarity and diversity are inseparable. Complementarity is not the sum of the different realities, but the meeting of the realities that enrich themselves.”*

A working group was set up, with the challenge to develop viable reflection axes from the masterful talk. Sister Christa Bauer, General Councillor of the Daughters of Charity in Paris, lent a helping hand to this research.

The work of reflection is far from complete. However, the working group has made some concrete progress:

- The position of “Federation advisor,” established in 2010 to support concretely all the projects of the Federation and thus allow continuity in the work, will be filled by a Federation Sister, fluent in at least two languages, German and English, to enable efficient communication with the Congregations of Asia and Africa.

- The awareness of the theme “Missionary Purpose” has been promoted at all levels of the Federation: the Superiors General, annual assembly, magazine *Heute [Today]*.

- MEGVIS, the Central European Group of Vincentian Studies, has existed for 40 years. Since 2010, three sisters from various Congregations of the Federation participate in the preparatory group and bring dynamism and skills to it. (The Vincentian Family is represented in this group from the Netherlands to Hungary).

- Taking into account the non-European Congregations in the development of the Federation is a major concern for the Federation Council. The proof of this is that during the 2015 annual council the issue of migrants was discussed. The countries most affected are Germany and Austria. Ideas and concrete actions were pooled.

- Innovative avenues making meetings possible are always welcome within the Federation. Any initiative encouraging meetings is received favorably within the Federation, which remains a laboratory of ideas. A meeting of the Sisters under 65 years of age is already planned; the theme is: “Dream,” the Federation in the year 2030.

Being part of the International Vincentian Family, FAMVIN, has very positive effects on the development of the Federation of Congregations coming out of Strasbourg. Systematic access to the communications of FAMVIN and our participation in international meetings oblige us to consider in an evermore-conscious way the international dimension of our Federation.

Prospects for the future

By its nature, our Federation is a collection of autonomous Congregations. Gradually, following the appeals of Vatican Council II, in dialogue and with attention to the signs of the times, a sense of belonging inexorably grew. For the past 25 years, this belonging to a large Vincentian Family has become increasingly obvious. Our participation, since 1998, at the meeting of FAMVIN contributes strongly to it. The same goes for the relations with the Motherhouse in Paris, which, over the years have become more and more fraternal and personal. All these meetings give a concrete face to this affiliation.

We are even more pleased to note that the networking, this collaboration with the branches of the Vincentian Family are a lived reality for our Congregations in Korea and India.

In Europe, it seems important and vital to us to respond to the signs of the times and to develop, with our lay collaborators, a spirituality network in the spirit of Saint Vincent. To them also, we are trying to pass on the joyful consciousness of belonging to this international movement that is the FAMVIN.

We are trying and hoping that our relations with the German-language Daughters of Charity remain quite alive. Did not the origins of the communities of Salzburg and Graz have their founding roots in Strasbourg?

This hope is also true for our relations with the Priests of the Mission. Beginning in 2016, a Vincentian will be a “spiritual advisor” of our Federation. The MEGVIS meeting remains a gift for the various participants in the discovery of the spirit of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac.

We live in the great joy of the heritage entrusted to us by our two spiritual patrons. We are trying to put it in harmony and resonance with the particular history of each of our Congregations, which today constitute our Federation. We try to make this heritage alive in the

contexts that are ours and find a suitable response to the needs of men and women today.

Let us ask Saint Vincent and Saint Louise to intercede for us so that we might be worthy of being their disciples and that we might put into practice their founding principles: *“The fifth teaching is zeal, consisting in a pure desire to become pleasing to God and helpful to our neighbor: zeal to spread the kingdom of God and zeal to procure the salvation of our neighbor. Is there anything in the world more perfect? If love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its ray. Zeal is unconditional in the love of God”* (CCD XII, 250, Conference of August 22, 1659, “The Five Characteristic Virtues”).

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