

# The Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg

by Marguerite and Blandine  
*Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg*



...for cloister the streets of the city...

can truly boast of belonging to the **Vincentian Family**, certainly it must be the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg. Since 1753, they have adopted St. Vincent de Paul as their patron, and seek to serve the poor according to his charism.

Who can tell a group's story better than the members of that group themselves? In this article, the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg themselves recount their history, and explain to us the charism which inspires their lives, and what changes they have made in their work, by creating the Vincent de Paul Foundation, in order to ensure the services they provide to poor people.

In the course of their two-and-a-half centuries of history, we can observe a unique and dynamic type of "branching-out" (see the diagram of the "Föderation Vinzentinische Gemeinschaften" [Federation of Vincentian Congregations]).

Finally, if there is a [religious] institute which

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What an amazing adventure this small group of young women had, who set out from Saverne at the request of the Bishop of Strasbourg, to become Sisters of Charity!

What an amazing adventure has been the history of this congregation, rooted in the soil of Alsace, but which, bit by bit, has spread throughout Europe and around the world — for Charity has no boundaries!

Throughout this adventure, there has been one unifying thread:

*“The Spirit of the Lord has sent us out, to bring the Good News to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted (Luke 4:18), to express something of the tenderness of God, through our humble human acts and by our prayer.”*

And now, a few “flashbacks” from this journey of life and joy. The story begins in 1734 and, despite all obstacles, it continues today throughout Europe and, through our Federation, in countries the whole world over.

We realize that apostolic religious life is, in certain countries of the world, undergoing a time of crisis and fragility. One guiding vision is vanishing, while another is in the process of being born.

Carried along by the wind of the Holy Spirit, in this third millennium, we seek once more, as St. Vincent de Paul says: “Not to stand in the way of Providence but, where Providence opens up a path, to follow it with giant steps” (COSTE, AB 145).

In the face of the challenges raised by our modern world, are we not especially summoned to a new burst of energy? As religious women living an apostolic life, we seek to be with others — to be signs of hope in the heart of God’s people, and in the heart of a world of suffering people.

Through our sincere quest for God, and through our service of our fellow men and women, we are contributing to the work of the new evangelization. What an amazing and exciting adventure!

## **Our Charism**

God’s works begin modestly and in such an unnoticeable way that we sometimes have the impression that they occur almost on their own, as St. Vincent de Paul already noted.

As Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg, we live out our own particular charism, which has two principal roots:

- A foundational event;
- A prophetic message.

### 1734: A Foundational Event

There was no extraordinary event at the origins of our Congregation; there was no angelic apparition, and no mysterious dream. And yet the spring sprang up quietly, by means of:

- the needs of the hospital of Saverne and the suffering people of the city;
- the openness of several young women of Alsace to the call they received, to follow Christ in a radical way;
- the friendship of Strasbourg's bishop, Cardinal Armand Gaston de Rohan, with the bishop of Chartres and the Sisters of St. Paul.

It was by means of these concrete needs, this friendship and this dynamic that our Sisters recognized the call of God, to consecrate themselves to Him by serving the sick, and thus received the founding grace [of the community].

We recognize the foundational event of 1734 in the initiatives taken by the cardinal, in the self-giving of these young Alsatian women, and in the assistance of the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres.

### 1755: A Prophetic Message

Twenty years later, that foundational event was further enriched by a message: guided and urged by the Holy Spirit, Canon Jeanjean, the Superior of the Congregation, affirmed, on July 19, 1755: *"You are called, first and foremost, to promote the salvation of souls. You are called — like those women of the past whom St. Paul praises — to collaborate in the evangelization of the world, by serving the poor and the sick, according to the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul"* (*Rule of Life*, # 1).

This message found an echo among our Sisters, expressing what they were already living out, and what they felt called to live. And so we participate in Christ's own mission: to make visible the tenderness of God for our poor and sick brothers and sisters, according to the spiritual influence of St. Vincent.

## The Fervour of the Early Years

### 1732-1753

In 1732, Cardinal de Rohan, the bishop of Strasbourg, became aware of the terrible situation of the many hospices and hospitals in his diocese. As Grand Chaplain of France (since 1713), he was not only responsible for organizing the religious ceremonies of the royal

court, but also for inspecting the Kingdom's many hospitals. It was thus that he extended his oversight, and discovered the dedication and efficacy of the Daughters of Charity. Why did he not summon them to Alsace itself? It was impossible — they would be unable to speak to the common folk, who understood only Alsatian. And so it would be necessary to seek out young women from that area. One day in 1732, the Cardinal made a decision whose consequences he could not have entirely foreseen: he summoned some young women from Alsace, in order to entrust this task to them. But where would they be trained? They could not be trained in Alsace, since the majority of nuns lived a cloistered life. And so he sent them to the community of the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres.

Five young women, who had been called together by the parish priest of Saverne, set out on the road to Chartres. Four of them remained there for two years of formation. On Monday, June 21, 1734, they set out for Saverne once more. In their luggage, they carried the initial sketch of a community rule. It would become the Rule of Life of the new congregation.

## **Trials and Contradictions**

### **1753-1804**

In 1753, the first Superior's return to God [i.e., her death] was a great loss for them. The young Congregation, only twenty-three years old, was in danger of losing its soul on account of a number of factors, notably difficulties within the community and their relations with authorities. It was thanks to Canon Jeanjean that the Congregation was able to climb up this steep slope, return to its sources and find the "salt" of its origins once more. Ten years after the Church had proclaimed the holiness of Vincent de Paul, this young priest knew how to kindle the enthusiasm of the Sisters with the life and work of him who was to become their patron saint.

The years from 1760 to 1790 were marked by a return to the original sources, by consolidation, growth and an extension of the Congregation, which set down solid roots in various places in the region of Alsace and Lorraine.

In Saverne, however, the revolutionary torments were beginning. All the Sisters were scattered. After 60 years of work, everything seemed to be crumbling — but this was only how things *appeared* at the time. *"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit"* (John 12:24). A small village in the Rhine Valley was to be the site where the scattered Sisters found each other once more, where they worked and prepared for the future. It was Cardinal de Rohan

(the 4<sup>th</sup> by that name), who himself had sought refuge in a part of his diocese on the far side of the Rhine, who invited the Sisters to gather together with him. They lived there in poverty, and busied themselves with teaching the children of emigrants; they were also given responsibility for two hospitals which the Cardinal had opened for the many wounded and sick soldiers. Many of those Sisters died there, of exhaustion or old age. After the signing of the Concordat in 1801, it was possible to begin thinking of a return to Alsace. Sister Vincent Lamy travelled to Saverne to lay the groundwork. The Sisters were to return to the sites of their mission, from which they had been chased. The trial of the Revolution had not destroyed the little congregation. On the contrary: it merely served to battle-harden and strengthen those who, in the following decades, would be the shapers of an extraordinary development of the Congregation.

## **The Time of Expansion 1804-1854**

After their return to Alsace in 1804, the community experienced a rapid growth, and the Sisters were called upon to care for the sick in many institutions in Alsace and Lorraine.

On November 13, 1810, Napoleon signed the decree which conferred legal existence on the various communities of the Congregation.

On June 13, 1813, Sister Vincent Sulzer was elected Superior-General of the Congregation. She was only 35 years old, and would remain at the head of the Congregation for 55 years.

Under her leadership, and that of the ecclesiastical Superior, Canon Spitz, the Congregation purchased the present Motherhouse, on Rue de la Toussaint (in 1854). This marked the beginning of a flourishing period. Young women from various dioceses in Germany were welcomed and formed. They returned to their country, accompanied by two more experienced sisters, to establish each new foundation.

In addition to their primary commitment to these hospitals, the Sisters of Charity were also creating private initiatives. Over the course of time, the form of these undertakings — serving children, the sick and the elderly — changed, and underwent numerous modifications. They evolved internally as well, often independently of each other.

## The Present, the Promise of the Future

In our era, which is (as Pope John Paul II said) “*both dramatic and fascinating,*” we must still make choices about our mission, choices which can bring together the modern world and the life-giving energies of the Gospel. Our socio-economic context, with all of its precariousness and poverty, urges us to put this mission into action. Today, as yesterday, there are people who fall by the wayside and are ignored. St. Vincent de Paul sketched out a prophetic path. Like him, we seek to believe in the profound dignity of every human being, since “*each human being is a sacred story; each human being is in the image of God.*” In the name of this ideal, Sisters and lay people have been journeying together for many years, respecting each other’s differences and life-choices. They walk that road together in a shared mission of serving others: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts” (*Gaudium et Spes*, # 1).

The path we have walked in these last few decades has been marked by profound changes in the medical-social world, by a return to the sources of our Vincentian inspiration, and by our seeking the specific character of the Congregation’s work. Bit by bit, these transformations have sparked a desire to work in common, which has been further affirmed by the growing solidarity between institutions.

## The Vincent de Paul Foundation

And so it is that, since our origins, the history of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg has undergone times of *founding* and *re-founding*. It is in keeping with this direction, as an act of faith, and out of our concern to respond to a strongly-felt common desire among our Sisters and our co-workers, that the **Vincent de Paul Foundation** was born in the Jubilee Year 2000.

A community of Sisters of Charity is discreetly present in each institution. Several Sisters take part in various aspects of the **Vincent de Paul Foundation**: in its Administrative Council, its Ethics and Research Board, and its Coordinating Council.

They support new projects, particularly those serving new forms of poverty. For example: in the Social Residence, 33 temporary apartments can welcome 1 to 4 people each. The CADA (Welcome Centre for Asylum-Seekers) has 7 apartments within Greater

Strasbourg, which welcome those who are waiting for their documents to be processed. At the request of the State, the Foundation opened a CEF (Closed Educational Centre) which welcomes 12- to 16-year-olds who have criminal histories. The “St. Vincent Stopover” in Strasbourg welcomes and cares for marginalized people who require medical care.

This year (2007), the Vincent de Paul Foundation is serving four key areas of mission:

- children and young people with social and educational difficulties (roughly 250 beds and places);
- elderly people, cared for in 4 nursing homes, with roughly 400 bed and 30 places for temporary accommodation and day programs;
- the sick, who are cared for in the St. Vincent Hospital Group, with 550 beds, and a Training Institute for Nursing Care, with 350 students;
- people who are in dangerous personal situations.

In today’s difficult and complex environment, the Foundation finds itself overseeing 1700 paid employees and roughly 350 volunteers, in an exciting dynamism on behalf of those who suffer.

## **Convictions at the heart of the Congregation and the Foundation**

The meaning of being human:

We believe in the profound dignity of every human being. For us, dignity is not just a concept, but a way of acting and struggling. We seek to participate in promoting, training and defending human beings, wherever they are at risk of hardship.

One of the priorities lived out within the Congregation itself is a particular attentiveness to the welfare and the mission of our elderly Sisters.

The dynamism of the Gospel:

In keeping with the particular intuition of St. Vincent, we seek to put the Gospel into action. We wish to show forth its results as signs of the Good News: *“I was hungry and you gave me food; I was ill and you visited me.... Each time you did it to one of these little ones who are my brothers and sisters, you did it to me”* (Matthew 25:35-36).

## The International Dimension of the Congregation

Since 1971, a Federation called the *Federation of Vincentian Congregations* has united the 12 congregations which originally came from Strasbourg. These communities have a network of connections in several countries of Europe, Asia, Africa and South America.

In 1994, these Congregations affiliated themselves to the Vincentian family, united with the Congregation of Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

Together with all the members of the Vincentian family, and all the Vincentian organizations in the world, the Foundation and the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg are conscious of the interdependence of the problems of poverty and the various crises which afflict our world. In faithfulness to the Gospel message, and to St. Vincent de Paul, they are engaged with the poor, in acting together against all forms of exploitation and degradation of human beings. They continue to deepen and develop their bonds as a spiritual family, collaborating with others in serving the poor, promoting human development, justice and peace.

(Translation: Father MURRAY WATSON)



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