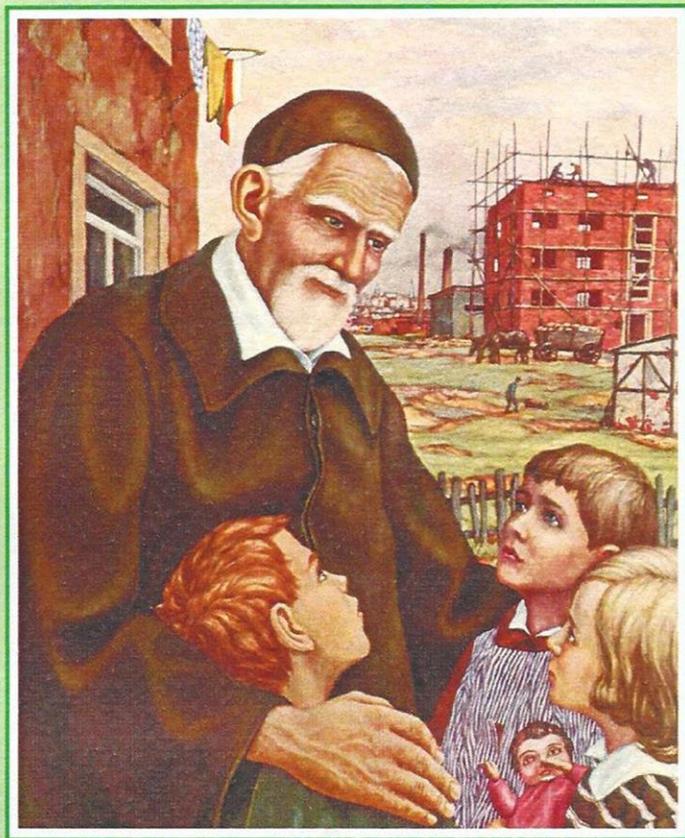


# VINCENTIANA

51<sup>th</sup> YEAR - N. 6      NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2007



## The Larger Vincentian Family

CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION  
GENERAL CURIA

# GENERAL CURIA

Advent 2007

*To the members of the Congregation of the Mission*

Dear Brothers,

*May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!*

## **A Christmas Story for Advent Reflection in 2007**

As in previous years I would like to begin the Advent Reflection with a story from my past history as a missionary. Reflection on this story has helped me to grasp more fully the understanding of Advent as the great mystery which leads us to the celebration of the Incarnation of Christ at Christmas. One of our Panamanian confreres along with two lay collaborators in our parish in Puerto Armuelles developed a program, called Anni, for children that was celebrated annually on Christmas day. I had the opportunity to be involved in the planning, the preparation and the execution of the Christmas Program one year when I returned to this parish in Puerto Armuelles as part of my on-going formation as Director of the Internal Seminary. Let me explain.

After my first three years in mission work in Panama serving in the parish in Puerto Armuelles, which was comprised of 25 villages and the main city of San Vicente, I was later called by my superiors to participate in formation which I did for two years in our philosophy residence and for two years in our theology residence. Then I was called to be the Director of the internal seminary after participating in a program of on-going formation for a period of four months. Returning from that program, my superiors asked what more I might like to do to prepare myself for this role. I had approximately seven months to do that.

I thought and prayed and discerned and I felt that the best way to prepare myself to work in the internal seminary was to return to the missions. So I volunteered to return to the parish where I had my beginnings as a missionary in Panama. It was there that I was given the opportunity to serve once more the people for a period of seven

months. Towards the end of that time of preparation was the participation in the celebration of Anni. Anni was conceived by its founders as the opportunity for children to gather to celebrate with joy as only children can, the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day.

There was a large gathering of children from the area called St. Vincent's. The events of the day included playing games, singing songs, running and laughing and being free. We began the day by asking the children to reflect that Jesus had been born and it was reason to be joyful because it was a sign that God has brought his love to us, a love and a joy that we are called to share one with another. At the end of the day a brown paper bag of goodies was given to the children that included fruits and nutritional bars. A healthy day was concluded by giving a healthy treat.

I like to reflect on this Anni experience first and foremost as an alternative way of celebrating Christmas, very different from other ways that I have experienced in my past. In a simple way, I learned that Christmas is not about what I get but, in part, it is about what I can do to help others appreciate and celebrate with joy God's goodness towards us which is best expressed in God coming among us in the person of His Son Jesus Christ on the day that we now celebrate in many parts of the world on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December or the 6<sup>th</sup> of January. The focus is not so much on things but on attitudes and being able to celebrate those attitudes.

Another thing that struck me with the program Anni was the seriousness with which the team members worked on the program as well as the involvement of other people from the area who wanted to contribute so that the day would be successful. How clearly adults have a desire to help children who normally would not have much opportunity to celebrate. They want to bring a bit of joy into their lives.

In the event, there was joy in seeing all the energy, the joyfulness being expressed by the children. This was a way of touching the hearts of us adults who were accompanying them, the opportunity perhaps, for us to get in touch with the child within that oftentimes is not able to celebrate life. It gets smothered by the seriousness with which we are called to carry out our responsibilities and duties which when done on a continual basis has a tendency to dry up our spontaneity, our child-likeness, our joyful expressions, and yes, our playful attitudes. At the end of the day I remember feeling that it is good to be a child again.

As we reflect on Advent, the joyfulness of children and alternative ways of celebrating Christmas, I am wondering how we might help others live Christmas in an alternative way, especially those who seem not to have alternatives. I am thinking of the people to whom you minister: migrants, prisoners, people enslaved by drugs,

young people who have alternative ways of living shoved in their faces and yet these alternatives drain life rather than give it. What can we do to celebrate with them God's life and love among us? How can we bring the joyfulness, the playfulness of children to them so they too can celebrate the new life that is Jesus, come to live among us at Christmas.

Perhaps we can do this by seeking alternatives with and for the poor whom we serve. Might our doing this also move us into a deeper way of relating with those whom we are called to serve as well as those with whom we share and live our lives? As we work together with our local community or with the Vincentian Family we may break our own chains of stagnation in doing the same thing each year and so renew within ourselves the spirit of Christmas as we help to renew that spirit in those to whom and with whom we minister.

In our local communities, associations or with the Vincentian Family, we might reflect at the same time on how we work in teams as we prepare not only for Christmas, but in our ministry, our service of the poor throughout the year. Is our ministry done in an attitude of what we get out of it or of what we are able to do for others in order that they might know God's love more fully? In other words, what can we do for others to celebrate with them God's life and love among us. Within the local community, association or Vincentian Family, what do we do to help keep our inner child alive and joyful and happy? How do we play together in order to be recreated and renewed in God's love? Certainly we can learn something from children about how to do that. Christmas is not all about children. But it is all about joy and new life and celebrating that new life among us, the new life that is Jesus Christ continually present to us.

Advent is upon us. A time preparing us for the incarnation of Christ which we celebrate at Christmas in our local communities, or in the different associations of the Vincentian Family. How do we live this Christmas experience? Maybe Advent can be a time when we look for alternative ways of celebrating, ways different from what we are accustomed to, ways that may help us to get deeper in touch with the reality of what Christmas is all about. It can be a time of joy in knowing that God loves us and that God is among us. And that joy becomes more complete when we share it one with another.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "G. Gregory Gay, C.M." The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned centrally below the typed name.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.  
Superior General

# Reflections on My Trip to China

(31 October - 15 November 2007)

by G. Gregory Gay, C.M.

*Superior General*

As I travel around the world, one of the most common questions asked of me is one having to do with the status of the church in China and the situation of our confreres and Daughters there. I am glad to have had the opportunity to visit them personally, and with this first-hand experience share openly their situation in my visits to the Vincentian Family. In what follows, obviously I am not able to say everything that I experienced considering the delicate situation of the church in China. There are great signs of progress and openness, as well as hope for more opportunities to support the church of China in the future.

From 31 October until 15 November I visited the Province of China spending part of the time in Taiwan and the remaining time on the mainland. I was able to visit the confreres and a number of the works in which they are involved, as well as the Daughters of Charity and other members of the Vincentian Family. I had the privilege of being the main celebrant of the Eucharist when one of our Chinese confreres pronounced vows and was incorporated into the Congregation of the Mission. In mainland China, I also visited confreres and Daughters of Charity young and old.

China is probably the most international Province in the Congregation. Its membership includes not only Taiwanese and Chinese but Korean, Filipino, Indian, Indonesian, American, Vietnamese, Polish and Dutch confreres. There are presently two seminarians, one from California, the other from Korea. They are in the process of discernment and language study.

We have four foreign confreres in mainland China. One is Tom Sendlein who has a very active and worthwhile ministry with English-speaking people in Beijing, helping them to become conscious of the reality of the poor in China and their duties towards serving them. Another is Father Pawel who also helps with the English-speaking people and is very active in other ways. The third is Father Joseph Loftus who works for a charity group in ShiJia

Zhuang and spends part of his time in Beijing. Some of his work involves the formation of the clergy. The fourth one is Father Henk who is teaching French in the university at WuHan, HuBei Province.

As we know from the writing of Pope Benedict XVI regarding China, the church's desire is to promote the reality of one universal church. The situation in China certainly is complicated. There still exists two parts although members of the underground church are encouraged to surface and become part of the official church. Processes are needed in order to help that become a reality because in any delicate long-term situation like this, there is obviously the need for consciousness raising as well as healing.

Perhaps one of the greatest needs in the church is the improvement of its priestly formation. I visited the Bishop of Beijing and his staff together with the Visitor John Wang and Father Thomas Sendlein. I specifically asked the Bishop how the Vincentians can serve the church of Beijing. I mentioned how important China is to the Congregation of the Mission considering our long tradition of presence there and the number of our people having within their hearts a desire to continue to support the church in its role of evangelization.

Among other things, the Bishop invited us to give workshops in the seminary from one week to four weeks on various subjects in the program of seminary formation. He also asked that the possibility of formation for formators be made available through scholarships in the Provinces that might be able to provide such a service.

At present, only diocesan priests minister to the Chinese in direct priestly ministry. Yet in a number of ways we are continuing our program of formation for the Congregation of the Mission.

I met a number of our younger Chinese confreres as well as a good number of our older Chinese confreres. The older confreres live, for the most part, in homes of their families or are cared for by friends with financial backing from the Province of China. I wish to speak of four visits in particular to the older confreres.

I visited the only Brother of the Province of China. He is 87 years old and lives in a nursing home run by the Diocese of Beijing. The room is just big enough for two beds, a desk, a place to store clothing, a small refrigerator, and a bathroom which also seemed to double as a kitchen. The Brother is cared for by a lay man who has been at his service for a good number of years. He knows Brother's history very well and shares it freely. At this time in life, Brother gets forgetful and cannot quite remember things as well as when he was younger.

Another confrere who visited me had spent 23 years in prison during his lifetime, being imprisoned when he was a seminarian in

philosophy. Once he was freed, and because of the shortage of priests, he was immediately ordained, having received his theological studies from the Jesuits who were with him in jail at the same time. Father's demeanor impressed me tremendously. He is a gentle man, showing no signs of bitterness or anger whatsoever. In utter simplicity he continues to live his life as a member of the Congregation of the Mission in a quiet fashion.

Another visit was with a confrere, 90 years old, who had been a pastor of a parish for 64 years. At this time he is living in the same parish with a young diocesan priest who is now the pastor. I had a delightful time with him and the staff of the parish as we shared lunch together. Afterwards he took us to the church which had been rebuilt any number of times for different reasons.

The last visit was with a confrere, 92 years old. After his release from prison he returned to his home village where he began to celebrate the Eucharist in his family's home. He did so for many, many years without any difficulty, for the most part, from the government. We arrived at the village, in the middle of farmland,



Church of the CM in Taiwan

quite a distance from the city. At the entrance of the house there were benches set up and the altar in the foreground in an open courtyard. We encountered a bit of difficulty because although the confrere was present, he was locked in the house. His nephew, who takes care of him, works during the day, so he locks him in for his own safety. The confrere is unable to walk. As we looked in the window, we could see him lying in his bed praying the rosary. I insisted that we had to enter. So one of the young Chinese confreres got a screwdriver and we removed the door handle around which the chain hung. We freed the door and entered. As the Visitor, John Wang, explained to the confrere who I was, he said, full of emotion, "Who am I to have the Superior General in my presence?" which he repeated over and over again. I thought to myself, "Who am I to be in the presence of this man who has given so many years of his life in the priesthood under some difficult situations?" It certainly was an honor to be in his presence as it was with the confrere of 90 years who has served 64 years in the parish. I asked them both for their blessings and spoke to them of the great gifts their perseverance and their commitment to follow Jesus Christ evangelizing and serving the poor are to the Congregation and to the entire Vincentian Family.

I also visited the Daughters of Charity. Three of the Sisters are elderly and cared for in a nursing home by other Sisters, a Seminary Sister, a number of postulants and an aspirant. Their cheerfulness and joy in serving was amazing, even though they cannot do it openly as Daughters of Charity. They are in a parish where the pastor is a member of the official church. Unknown to many, he is a Vincentian. One of the older Sisters gave me rosaries for myself and the staff at our CM Curia. I will cherish this gift for the rest of my life.

Leaving the Sisters I visited another group of women who live the rule of the Daughters of Charity. They were founded by a Vincentian Bishop who has since died, and belong to the official church of China. They dress in the full habit of the Daughters of Charity using even the SV pin. The priest administrator of the diocese, who cares a great deal for the Sisters, hopes that they might have greater international recognition in order to maintain the Vincentian charism that has been rooted in them. The Sisters receive support in various ways from the Daughters of Charity of the Province of China for which they are most grateful.

In concluding this sharing I want to speak about the opportunity I had to celebrate the Eucharist with the confreres in a private ceremony where one of the priest confreres made his good purposes. There are a number of diocesan priests who have expressed an interest in joining the Congregation. We have shown an openness towards them, at the same time encouraging them to be faithful to the orientation given by Pope Benedict XVI.

I ask for your prayers for these men and women who are part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church as they grow in their efforts to be faithful to Jesus Christ following the inspiration of our founders and the examples of our Vincentian and Daughter of Charity martyrs in China. Our history in China has been long with more than 1000 members in the Congregation of the Mission, 400 of them of Chinese origin. There have been about that many Daughters of Charity, Chinese and foreign, as well. And although it has been interrupted any number of times because of the political situations, the Vincentian presence in the church continues to be desired. I hope and pray that many in the Congregation and the entire Vincentian Family nurture the desire to be part of this new and exciting work of evangelization in a fuller way when Divine Providence permits us to do so.

Rome, 24 December 2007

*To the members of the Congregation of the Mission*

Dear Brothers,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

Merry Christmas!

I want to take this opportunity to thank each and every one of you for your prayers and expressions of solidarity through Christmas cards and e-mails with the message about this holy time. I would like to be able to respond personally to each of the greetings that I have received, but I will make use of this modern means of communication<sup>1</sup> to extend to you in my name and in the name of all the members of the Curia here in Rome, our hopes for a most blessed Christmas and a new year filled with peace, happiness and love for all. I ask especially that the Lord fill all of you with his grace so that you might help to extend that peace, happiness and love among yourselves and most especially with the poor.

Just yesterday, 23 December, I returned from a ten-day visit to the Middle East. I was struck by the contrasts between the hopes for creating an environment of peace with all the decorations, nativity scenes and the like that have been set up in public places by the Christians, and the awareness of the instability in the government of Lebanon as representative of the instability in many of the places where we are called to serve as Vincentians.

One particular scene expresses it clearly. Not far from the Provincial Houses of the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission in Lebanon there is a square where the nativity scene was set up. In front of the nativity scene there was a military tank and on the corners around the square a heavy presence of military vigilance.

In visiting the holy lands I want you all to know that in each of the holy places that we visited a prayer was said for you, for us. Among the places that we visited I had the opportunity to celebrate the Eucharist together with other members of the family at the Lake of Tiberius, where Jesus asked Peter the question three times "Do you love me?" and established his primacy as head of the Church. At that time I prayed for each of us who are members of this Church

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<sup>1</sup> The letter was sent by e-mail and published at <http://cmglobal.org>

that we might be given the grace to establish a true community of faith, hope and love.

I also celebrated the Eucharist in the place of the Annunciation where Mary said her “Yes” to God and I prayed that we all might continually say “yes” to God, recalling the first fervor with which we gave ourselves to the Company, to the Congregation or to our Association. Later the following day I celebrated the Eucharist in the Tomb of Our Lord Jesus Christ and there I prayed that all of us might live deeply that new life, that the resurrection made possible for us all and that we share that life continually among ourselves and for the poor.

The day before I left we celebrated the Eucharist in the occupied territory of Bethlehem, at the wall in the city of Bethlehem in the very spot in which “the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us.” And I prayed especially that all of us as a Vincentian Family may continually worship God as he came into our lives as man in the person of Jesus Christ and to honor him by living the values of the gospel as he has taught us and to do so above all for and with the poor and from their reality that we all together might be ever loving builders of peace, offering hope in a world where many live without hope.

*Merry Christmas!*

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "G. Gregory Gay, C.M." The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.  
Superior General

Rome, 31 December 2007

*To the members of the Congregation of the Mission*

***Tempo Forte (3-7 December 2007) Circular***

“Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by encouragement we might have hope” (Rom 15:4).

Dear Brothers,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

The following is a summary of some of the points that we discussed in our most recent *tempo forte* meeting 3-7 December 2007.

1. We began our session with on-going formation. A guest speaker, a Divine Word Father, Willie Mueller, who worked many years in China, shared with us the **situation of the church in China today**.

2. We finalized some points regarding the new **Task Force** that has been formed on **On-Going Formation** whose members are Father Dan Borlik, coordinator, Father Manny Ginete, Secretary and Father Francis Solás. The Task Force will meet in the *tempo forte* meeting of March.

3. Believe it or not, we are already in the planning stages for our up-coming **General Assembly of 2010**. We have done a preliminary selection of the members of the preparatory commission who will be contacted by the Superior General to confirm their participation. Within the next couple of weeks the Visitors will receive a questionnaire so that they might recommend topics for discussion in the General Assembly.

4. In 2010 we will be celebrating the **350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St. Vincent de Paul**. We did some brainstorming on possible ideas. We will also consult the Visitors regarding this matter, and other selected groups of confreres on ideas regarding how we might celebrate this memorable event. A commission for the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary will be selected taking into consideration other members of the Vincentian family. This matter will be discussed further in the meeting of the Vincentian family representatives January 31 - February 2.

5. The commission for **renovating the archives and the library of the General Curia** gave a report. We will be doing a major renovation of the lower basement of the Curia in order that archives might be consolidated there and the library restructured with the creation of an office for the librarian and a section on reserved Vincentian books.

6. **Brother L'ubomír Žemla** requested from the Superior General the termination of his service in the Curia, completing the five years agreement that was made between the previous administration and the Province of Slovakia. The Superior General and council are grateful for the services that L'ubo has provided and will begin a search for a new Brother candidate.

7. We reviewed a report from Father Suescun of the Office of Communications/Publications. He informs us that the **new e-mail mailboxes** are prepared. All Visitors, Economes and Secretaries will be receiving a mailbox direction which we hope to have implemented at the beginning of the new year.

8. We treated **economic matters**. As part of a new process, a summary of each of the Provincial financial reports was presented and discussed. The Superior General will write to all the Provinces taking into consideration the suggestions of the council. It was also recommended by the Econome General to simplify the process for the Mission Distribution Fund. He and the assistant for missions, Father Jose Ubillús, will be contacting the recipients of this fund with the modified formulas.

9. We reviewed a report from the **commission for promotion of systemic change**. Two proposals were made: 1) that over the next two years, 2008-2009, workshops on systemic change will be done regionally; 2) a donation of start-up money for projects for the poor promoted by the Vincentian family.

10. We discussed the 9 projects that were presented for the **Systemic Change Award**. Four projects were selected. The Econome General will be informing those provinces as well as others that have participated, to either consider sending their projects for the mission award in July and/or maturing their projects to be presented at a future date.

11. We received the quarterly report from the **Vincentian Solidarity Office**. Since the last *tempo forte* meeting two new VSO projects were received and three micro project grants were given. The Superior General and his council approved a request for a special project in the Vice-Province of Saints Cyril and Methodius. All confreres are encouraged to check out the site of the Vincentian Solidarity Office, which is [www.FamVin.org/vso](http://www.FamVin.org/vso)

12. We received a report from the **web master of famvin**, Father John Freund. For the English webpage, you are encouraged to check out the phenomenon of youtube in which short videos are recognized as a major tool of ministry today. Two have been inaugurated on famvin: <http://youtube.com/famvin2007> and <http://youtube.com/group/famvin>

13. Father Ginete, **Vincentian Family delegate**, presented the report. Several suggestions were made: that the Vincentian office send materials to other branches of the Vincentian family beyond those traditional groups, particularly the annual letter of the Vincentian Family international heads; investigate the possibility of doing on-going formation for male communities of the Vincentian family. The Superior General will contact the Directors of CIF to explore new possibilities or to invite these groups to participate in some of the existing programs. We also reviewed the proposed agenda for the annual meeting of the Vincentian Family heads soliciting input from the General Council.

Father Ginete also reported that he had addressed the student confreres from the Leonine College on the theme of the Leadership Role of the Congregation of the Mission in the Vincentian Family: Implications for On-Going Formation.

14. We received the quarterly report from the **Vincentian representative before the United Nations**. Among the highlights of his report were a reminder that on 10 December the United Nations celebrated the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This year also marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Populorum Progressio. One of the events that Father Foley participated in was the Interreligious and Intercultural Dialog for Tolerance, Understanding and Peace. One of the documents, entitled, "A Common Word Between Us," is a Muslim invitation to Christian leaders for a Christian-Muslim dialog. This document is available from Father Foley ([jpfcm@verizon.net](mailto:jpfcm@verizon.net)). It may be of particular interest to those confreres serving in areas where the Christian-Muslim relationship is significant. Father Joe also reported that he has been in dialog with the Brothers of Charity in order to explore the possibility of further collaboration.

15. We received a report from Father José Antonio Ubillús, the liason with the **CIF program**. As many know, we have a new member on the team, Father José Carlos Fonsatti, who will assume the responsibility in place of Juan Julián Catalán who finishes his service in September 2008.

The **Vincentian Heritage Session** on 15 April - 12 May, was evaluated. 18 confreres participated. Future sessions will include not only English and Spanish but Portuguese and French when required.

The **Mini CIF program** that was established for those who work in universities, was presented 24 June - 28 July, but had only five participants each of whom rated the program highly. The most recent **On-going Formation session** 9 September - 7 December had nineteen confreres from Africa and Asia and one Colombian.

**Formation programs for 2008** After their session in Rome 9-15 January, the new Visitors are encouraged to participate in a program established especially for them. SIEV will have its session from 4-15 February hosted in the CIF facilities. The next Heritage Session will be 13 April - 10 May in English, Spanish and Portuguese. The leadership workshop will be offered from 22 June - 19 July. Participants in this program will be the Visitors and/or a member of their councils. The On-going Formation session will be 8 September - 7 December. **Once again, I encourage all Visitors as well as all members of the Congregation of the Mission to take seriously their on-going formation. We are our greatest resource and being continually renewed is a matter of justice to those we are called to serve.**

16. Report from the Assistant for Missions. Two confreres, one from Ecuador and the other from Brazil participated on an **on-going formation session for missionaries** here in Rome. Their evaluation is forthcoming. Father Ubillus announced that scholarships for this program will be available in the future.

17. **Conferences of Visitors.** Of particular interest was the concluding document of a CLAPVI meeting that was held in Santo Domingo for **Brothers of the Congregation of the Mission.** We discussed different ways we might continue to promote the vocation of Brothers in the Congregation of the Mission, recalling the words of St. Vincent, "When one has a good brother in a community, one has a lasting treasure."

We have received word that the **new Executive Secretary of COVIAM** is Joseph Epok of the Region of Cameroon, Province of Paris. This recommendation has been confirmed by the Visitor of Paris. Many thanks to Emmanuel Typamm for his role as previous Executive Secretary. Our prayers are for Joseph as he accompanies the Visitors of COVIAM as they work to develop the mission of the Provinces, Vice-provinces and missions in Africa.

18. We reviewed reports from our international mission in **El Alto** as well as in **Papua New Guinea.**

19. We studied the requests of **five responses of the most recent Mission Appeal letter** of the Superior General. We encourage other confreres, if they feel a passion for any of the possible mission sites that were presented in the October Mission

Appeal letter, to continue to mature their reflection and to write to the Superior General. We know that the harvest is great and the laborers are few; so we pray continually that the Lord might send laborers into his harvest.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "G. Gregory Gay, C.M." The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "G" and a flourish at the end.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.  
Superior General

# FEATURE:

## *The Larger Vincentian Family*

### Presentation

by Julio Suescun Olcoz, C.M.

*Editor of "Vincentiana"*

In the last few years we have talked a lot about the Vincentian Family. What is included in that expression is not so precise. What are the limits of the Family? Who should be considered its members? It seems clear, and increasingly more evident, that charism of the founders cannot be limited to the fidelity of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. The old references to the "Double Family" are no longer used because the Vincentian Family is not double, but rather more numerous.

In 1995, in number 4-5 of **Vincentiana**, corresponding to the months of June-October, Fr. José Maria Roman wrote an article entitled *The Vincentian Family: An Unceasing Renewal*. He began the article with the same questions with which I began this presentation. Despite abundant studies and meetings to think about planning for action in the last thirteen years, the precise limits of this reality have yet to be marked out. Surely the works of God do not fit into the strict categories of our minds and the Vincentian Family continues to be in state of Unceasing Renewal

The above-mentioned number of **Vincentiana**, completely dedicated to the Vincentian laity, gave a presentation of the branches which Roman highlighted as belonging to the Vincentian Family in the strict sense, that is, *Congregations or Associations which either owe their birth to the direct initiative of St. Vincent or one of his successors or which have explicitly declared themselves as spiritual descendents of St. Vincent* (**Vincentiana** 4-5, 1995).

On July 3 1995 a meeting of the leaders of the four principal branches of the Vincentian Family was held at Rome. A fruit of that meeting and to promote a desire for mutual understanding and unity, the four branches committed themselves to writing a short presentation about themselves. This was published as a supplement to **Vincentiana** already in three languages. The Vincentian Marian Youth and the Miraculous Medal Association were excluded from this supplement because they were not present at the meeting in Rome.

The General Assembly of 1998, convoked with the motto *With the Vincentian Family we confront the challenges for the Mission on the threshold of the new milenium*, the Congregation of the Mission, in tune with the calls of the Church, felt the need to express its desire for communion in living of the charism and action for the Mission with the larger Vincentian Family. *Our General Assembly*, wrote Father Maloney, the superior general, in the introduction to the final document of the Assembly, *gathered many representatives from the larger Vincentian Family with a view to renew and concretize our commitment to follow Christ as Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor*.

In note 2 of the final document from the General Assembly of 1998, it says: *The expression, Vincentian Family, which will appear repeatedly in this document, should not be taken in a juridical-canonical sense, but rather as a pastoral term. By Vincentian Family we mean to refer to the group of congregations, organisms, movements, associations, groups or persons who, directly or indirectly, prolong the Vincentian charism in time, either founded directly by St. Vincent de Paul or find in him the source of their inspiration and dedication to the service of the poor. The Congregation of the Mission considers itself a part of this Family.* The concept of the Vincentian Family has widened then.

Responding to this desire for a broadened vision, **Vincentiana**, which already in number 4 of 2006, contained, as the Superior General, Fr. G. Gregory Gay, affirmed: *updated information on the different branches of the Vincentian Family... in order to give value to the peculiarity of each one, foment unity in the Vincentian Family and develop common projects for the poor*, wishes to present some of these other congregations which might be included in this **Larger Vincentian Family**.

(Translation: JOHN PATRICK PRAGER, C.M.)

# Vincentian Congregation of the Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala (India)

by Joseph Pampackal, V.C.

*Vincentian Vidyabhavan*

## **The Popular Mission of the Vincentian Congregation**

The Popular Mission is one of the distinctive and specific works of the Vincentian Congregation. The Vincentian Congregation of the Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala was founded in 1904, exactly on the model of the Congregation of the Mission and it adopted the same Common Rules and activities of the Congregation of the Mission as its own. Therefore the popular mission too was its specific work. St. Vincent de Paul founded the Congregation of the Mission with the exclusive purpose of preaching the Word of God to the poor especially the village people and therefore he chose "to preach the Gospel to the poor" as the motto of the Congregation.

Of course in the early existence of the Vincentian Congregation, as the members were very few, this program could not be effectively carried out. As the members grew, individual priests took up preaching the Word as one of their main works of apostolate. Archbishop Mar Augustine Kandathil, the then Archbishop of Ernakulam, encouraged the members to conduct the parish mission. He wanted to raise a fund for conducting the parish missions free of cost, and he himself contributed 1000 Rupees towards the fund.

As the number of members increased, they began to take up parish missions in large scale; and it was in 1952 that a parish mission was conducted under the title of Popular Mission. Fr. Fernando Ibilcieta C.M. (a Spanish missionary from the Cuttack Mission) was the Master of Novices of the Vincentian Congregation at that time. The superiors were very eager to learn from him how a popular mission could be conducted. He obliged and a big popular mission was conducted at Angamaly under his expert direction. The novices were engaged in the groundwork; they visited each and every house and made the people aware of the advent of the mission. Under their leadership, the children held rallies throughout the streets, proclaiming the coming of the mission, impressing the people that a

great event was about to occur in the parish and that no one should miss it. The priests and the deacons, who were to preach, were given training in conducting the mission. The first mission was very successful. How enthusiastic the people there were to participate in all the programs of the popular mission. It was a memorable event in the history of the Angamaly Forane Church as well as in the history of the Vincentian Congregation.

For some years they could not conduct the popular mission in large numbers, though individuals conducted retreats singly. From 1961 onwards more popular missions were conducted, yet it was only one or two in a year until 1978. The year 1978 was the Episcopal jubilee year of His Eminence Joseph Cardinal Parecattil, the then Archbishop of Ernakulam. He had a great appreciation of the popular mission and he wanted it to be conducted in as many parishes as possible during the jubilee year. Hence all the parish priests took interest.

Though the Vincentians could not do much, they had 22 missions, mainly in very large parishes. Not only that, some of the parish priests also joined in preaching the missions. From then onwards there were more missions every year. The popular missions were conducted in alternate weeks. In 1990 the Congregation was divided into provinces; and though they take up the missions every other week, since there are three provinces the mission preaching has increased almost threefold. Thanks be to God.

It is worth mentioning that each province conducts more or less twenty popular missions a year. During the rainy season it is not convenient to have the popular mission. Now they are able to conduct popular missions in various parts of India. The St. Thomas province conducts the mission successfully in Madhya Pradesh. Those missionaries working in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra and also those who work in the African countries of Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, conduct this mission in parishes fruitfully. Thus in short, this way of preaching the Word, the popular mission, is very much appreciated by the people, the priests and the bishops, as it is very effective in making real, lasting conversion and renewal.

Wherever the Vincentians preached, the whole Catholic community took part in the mission. Since everybody in the parish — children, youth and elderly, men and women — all took part in it, the renewal was total. So many disputes and rivalries are solved during the mission. Forgiveness and reconciliation are effected. Peace and harmony among the people are the visible effects. One thing to be specially remarked here is that not only Catholics but also the non-Catholics and non-Christians attend the programs, if not in the center then from their own homes, as the centers are very near

and microphones are used. A Muslim stated: "Father, you are preaching good things that are useful to every one irrespective of caste and creed."

### **The Structure of the Popular Mission**

The popular mission is conducted in one parish alone or in more than one, including the adjacent parish or parishes together. In any case, there will be several centers for preaching the mission. Each center may have 150 to 200 families. The centers are arranged in such a way that the people can reach the center within ten minutes from their homes. In every center invariably there will be two priests and one singer to conduct the mission.

### **Preparations**

When an application for conducting a popular mission is received, the director sends a form to the parish priest requesting him to furnish the details of the parish: area, number of families, manner of living, their faith and morality and other relevant matters. After getting the details, the director arranges a meeting with the parish priest and the leaders of the parish and discusses the plan and method of conducting the mission in the parish. Together they make decisions about the number and location of the centers, and the volunteers and leaders who will be in charge of matters at the centers. The director personally goes, in company with the parish priest and leaders, to fix the location of the centers and gives further directions. In every center a platform with a canopy will be built and arrangements for the celebration of Holy Mass and other functions will be made.

The Mission begins on Sunday evening and ends on Friday evening. On Sunday, before the commencement of the mission, the director (and, if needed, the assistant director too) goes to the parish where the mission is arranged and announces during the Holy Mass (homily) the coming of the mission, explaining its importance and benefits. He exhorts everyone to take part in all parts of the mission, without exception. They should in no way evade it. He instructs the people to pray for the success of the mission. This announcement is made at every Mass and in every substation where there is Sunday Mass.

After that, the director, together with the parish priest and the leaders, visits each center and evaluates the preparations made and gives necessary directions. The leaders have to supply the notices regarding the mission as well as the prayer cards to each and every house. They fix the corners where the people should gather together to proceed to the center in procession singing, praying the rosary and

shouting slogans. There is a distinctive songbook which also includes the slogans to be used.

Papal Flags are hoisted in front of every house, as a sign of the coming of the popular mission. The youth and children are encouraged to write Bible quotations on placards or hardboard and exhibit them along the roads and streets. Those who have written and exhibited the maximum number of verses in each center will be awarded prizes, sponsored by generous people.

The people come to the center in the morning and evening only in jathas (processions), not singly. For each jatha, there will be a leader who will carry a big papal flag in the front. When the jatha reaches the center, the flag is kept in a prominent place and noting the number of the flags the director can ascertain whether all the groups have come or not. The jatha has a great influence in bringing the people to the center. Once a mission was conducted in a big parish. One man was away for a few days and he had no knowledge of the mission. The first day at about midnight he returned home and went to sleep. At about 4 a.m. he heard the sound of cannons and firecrackers, and knowing not what it meant and being curious, he got up and watched what was happening. He wanted to know where the people were going in procession and so he followed the jatha. Following them he reached the church and he found something special about the whole process, which led him to attend the mission in full; and he was very much thrilled with joy and peace. Afterwards he said that the jathas should be kept, at any cost, in the popular mission and should never be abandoned.



Popular Mission in Kerala

## **The Inaugural Session**

Formerly the inaugural session was conducted in the main center (the parish church) alone; but now, for the sake of convenience, it is usually done in each center. If the inaugural session is in the main center, all people from every center come in jathas to that place. It is a big show and expression of faith and unity. The inauguration is done with a concelebrated Mass with all the preachers taking part in it. After the Holy Mass, the parish priest welcomes the preachers with a few words. Then the preachers kneel down before the parish priest and receive his blessing as a mark of obedience and submission. After that, the director or the person designated gives the inaugural sermon. Before the inaugural sermon there will be praise and worship for some time. If the inauguration is in the main center there is a huge crowd, because almost all the people of the parish gather there. Also, at the end of the inaugural session, there will be a prayer service and practice of songs. The leaders take care that the papal flags are taken back to be used in the centers. The programs and the timetable of the mission will be again announced and the people are reminded to take care to arrange their occupations in advance so that they may conveniently attend the mission.

## **Daily Routine**

Every day, morning and evening, the people come to the centers in jathas singing songs, praying the rosary and shouting the slogans. At the beginning for a few minutes there will be song practice, especially in the evening.

**The Morning session** usually begins at 5 a.m. and ends at 7 a.m. so that the workers may be able to go to their daily work. **In the evening** the program begins at about 6 p.m. so that the daily workers may be able to attend the program after their daily work. This session may last until about 9:30 or 10 p.m. This timetable is kept in all centers without any change. Because of this arrangement, all the workers, without missing their work, are able to attend the mission. In the morning there is Holy Mass, homily and one sermon. In the evening there are two sermons, and prayer service or adoration. In every session songs, in keeping with the theme, are sung. The singer leads it and the whole congregation joins him.

The preachers, after the morning session and after breakfast, go to visit the families of the parish and meet the family members there, talking with them. A guide will show the way. All the Catholic families are visited. If someone of another community requests a visit to his/her home, it is done, according to the circumstances. The preacher helps them get their problems or disputes settled. The

preacher will be very cautious and prudent in dealing with such matters. The preacher will spend a few minutes praying with the family members. The sick people are given more attention during these visits and the priests pray over them for healing. The preachers have their lunch after the house visits, often late, after which they take a little rest. Then they prepare for the evening session. All the missionaries take care to be faithful to their daily prayers, especially the canonical hours and, if convenient, to have them in common.

**The themes for the sermons** include: love of God, love of neighbor, sin, faith, forgiveness, repentance and penance, suffering, married life, parents and children, confession, Eucharist, Word of God, etc.

**In the evenings, besides the sermons, there are special prayer services:**

**Monday:** After the sermons, a general prayer of praise and worship is conducted for a short time.

**Tuesday:** Death experience, i.e., a suggestive meditation on death. The people are asked to sit in an easy and comfortable manner and close their eyes. The lights are put out. Suggestions start from the beginning of one's sickness, and spread all through one's ailments, hospitalization, treatments and reaches the death point. A description of the death and funeral service is given. After that he is led to the glory of the triumphant resurrection and the happiness of the eternal heaven.

**Wednesday:** This is a penitential day, a day of repentance and confession, a day of fasting and penance. This day everybody is exhorted to make a genuine general confession, to reconcile with those who have offended them or whom they have offended, to forget and forgive. The whole day the most Holy Sacrament is exposed for adoration and the people before and after confession will spend a few hours in the presence of our Eucharistic Lord. In the evening after the sermons, during the adoration, the renewal of the baptismal vows takes place. Then a prayer service for inner healing is conducted. It is followed by a ceremony of lighting the candles reminding the people that Christ is the light of the world and we too shall shine as his lamps remembering the words of Jesus "you are the light of the world." Usually the people carry the lighted candles to their homes.

**Thursday:** There will be, in the evening, adoration and prayer for the healing of physical ailments.

**Friday:** Today, in the morning, during the Holy Mass, at the time of the offertory, the people will offer edible things and

cash at the altar. After the celebration of the Holy Mass the renewal of the vows of marriage takes place. It is conducted in a special manner. The couples present are asked to line up in pairs and the celebrant gives them a short exhortation and asks them to review their married life and examine their behaviour towards each other. Then the wives are asked to kneel down before their husbands and beg pardon for their shortcomings. They do it very sincerely. Then the husbands laying their hands on the heads of their wives pray for them and pardon them. After that, the wives stand up and the husbands kneel down before their wives and in turn ask pardon for all their ill behaviors to them. The women in turn put their hands on the heads of their husbands and pray for them a while and pardon them. Then they renew the marriage vows using the same formula as in the celebration of the marriage with necessary changes. After this ceremony, the whole congregation congratulates the senior most and junior most couples of the group giving them bouquets. Then there is the agape of which all partake. Coffee is prepared by the youth; the breakfast items are the edible things presented at the altar during the Mass. Thus the morning program ends.

In the evening all gather at the center as usual. From there they proceed to the main center in procession. Everybody carries a small wooden cross. The concluding ceremonies take place in the main center. For this concluding session all the people of the parish and many from the neighbouring parishes gather together. There will be singing for an hour and then adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on everybody attending the ceremony. The person designated will give the concluding sermon. Usually the bishop of the place gives the sermon. The parish priest then says a word of thanks to the preachers, as well as to the volunteers and leaders and to the faithful for their wholehearted cooperation and earnest participation.

It is worth mentioning that the people who have once participated in the popular mission carry the memories of it even after many years.

The expenses of the arrangements in each center will be met by the generous offerings at the Mass of the last day and by the contribution of generous people. If there is any deficit the parish meets it. Only food and lodging are received by the preachers and no remuneration in cash or kind or by way of presents is accepted. The province concerned meets the travelling expenses and personal expenses of the preachers and the team. The remuneration for the preachers is the satisfaction of seeing that the efforts of so many

priests and people have produced good effects and that the people of the parish are renewed to a great extent, enjoying reconciliation with God and men and peace of mind and health of body.

### Further Developments

From many sources there were requests that for the popular mission results to be lasting there should be some kind of ongoing follow-up or renewal programs. We conducted renewal programs in some places but then there was thought of beginning a center for them and in 1980 the **Popular Mission Center at Potta** began. Here those who wished to spend a few days in prayer and meditation were given the opportunity and once in a while a three-day program of enrichment and renewal was arranged. People came in large numbers. Then the popular mission director began a program of preaching the Word of God and of praying for healing. Some miracles of cure occurred and people began to rush to the place. The daily preaching of the Word took the form of a systematic retreat. After some time arrangements were made for closed retreats and about 500 people make the retreats every other week, living in the **Popular Mission Center** there. Still the daily preaching of the Word of God is being continued under a director specifically appointed for that and people from far off places and of all denominations come for it. Mention must be made that *in the whole world, only in Potta Vincentian Ashram, is there a full-day preaching of the Word of God, throughout the year.* It has become an internationally known retreat center. Every year a National Bible Convention is held in Potta and a great number of people flock there to hear the Word of God, and many miraculous healings take place on such occasions.

After a few years, the venue of Potta became insufficient in space to hold the increasing number of resident retreatants. So in 1990 **Muringoor Divine Retreat Center** was established. With gratitude, mention is made here of the support and encouragement given to the Divine Retreat Center by the Bishops in Kerala. Since the beginning of this retreat center, every week thousands of people make a five-day long retreat there. Some weeks there were more than ten thousand people. On some occasions, especially during holidays, the number may be even more. People from all over India, speaking different languages, began to flock there. At first they were given translations of the speeches. As a further development, different halls for language groups were arranged. Retreat is now given in five languages: Malayalam, English, Tamil, Telugu, and Hindi. The preaching of the Word of God is done not only by the priests, but also by laypersons. The lay ministry fostered by the Divine Retreat Center is praiseworthy. The program of the retreat includes, besides the preaching of the Word, daily adoration of the Blessed Sacrament,

healing services, and prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Tuesdays are confession days and people are sent, group-by-group, to the confession hall. For hearing confessions sufficient numbers of priests are brought from even far off places. Counselling also is given to those who want it, mainly on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Priests, sisters and laymen give the counselling. There is always a big crowd before the rooms of the famous preachers endowed with the gifts of wisdom, prophesy, vision and healing. The success of the retreats is attributed to the continuous intercessory prayer that is going on at all times in various sections of the Divine Center. Every Saturday there is the night vigil for which people come in special private buses from far off places.

There are many charitable services in connection with the Divine Retreat Center, such as the children's home, for poor and orphan children, boys and girls; home for the HIV patients, men and women; DePaul Care Centre for the mentally sick, men and women. Rehabilitation of these people also is provided and they are employed in various jobs in the kitchen or bakery or press and are given remuneration too, according to their work.

About 2000 men and women are at the service of the Divine Retreat Center. They are like "deacons." They are there not for any monetary gain, though they are given a sum monthly as pocket money. Their service there is a thanksgiving to God for his blessings, which they have received in the retreats they have made. They are grouped under leaders who direct them. The leaders have to take care of their spiritual and other needs. They have, at intervals, special gatherings, retreats and other spiritual helps. They attend Mass daily and receive Holy Communion. As there are several Holy Masses for different groups at different times, they can attend Holy Mass conveniently without any disturbance to their duties.

Some of the priests and laymen at the Divine Retreat Center are engaged also in out-reach ministry; i.e., in preaching the Word of God in parishes or at conventions. They go in teams with a choir. Bible conventions are held regularly in big parishes in big cities in which thousands of people take part. In all the conventions conducted by the Vincentian priests and from Potta Ashram or Muringoor Divine Retreat Center, the number of participants is very large. The people want the Potta team or Muringoor team to lead or conduct these conventions. They are very enthusiastic to publicize the program and make arrangements for carrying it out. The Vincentian Fathers from the Divine Retreat Center go abroad, often to Europe, Sri Lanka, China, Singapore, Australia and America, to spread the message of salvation. There are plans and preparations under way to establish prayer or retreat centers in Europe and America.

In the propagation of the Word of God, all possible communication media are used. Since 1980 there has been a popular mission magazine, now known as the *Vachanolsavam*. It is published in several languages, mainly Malayalam, English, Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu. It has more than two hundred fifty thousand subscribers and is published from Potta by the Vincentian Generalate. Another magazine, *The Divine Voice*, is published from the Divine Retreat Center. The Divine Press and The Divine Publications at Muringoor publish the Holy Bible and other religious books, which are made available inexpensively to those who come there for retreat. Also, the process has begun for a Divine Television Channel to diffuse the Word of God and thus bring the Good News to everyone and to every place. Until then, there is a program "Divine Vision" in the Jeevan T.V. channel every day, early morning and at noon.

Besides the Potta Popular Mission Center and the Divine Retreat Center, there are several other retreat centers. The main ones are the Parithrana Retreat Center at Adichira near Kottayam, Logos Retreat Center in Bangalore, Arulayam Retreat Center and Divine Mercy Retreat Center in Madras, Tabore Divine Retreat Ashram in Kamba in Kalyan Diocese (Bombay), Divine Retreat Ashram in Faridabad near Delhi, Sinai Divine Dyanashram, Premagiri in Andhra Pradesh and Kovai Divine Dhyana Illam in Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu, Jubilee Retreat Center in Puthuppady in Calicut and the Vincentian Prayer House in Nairobi in Africa.

Mention should be made that in every province and region of the Vincentian Congregation, popular mission directors are appointed and under their leadership a few priests are set apart as popular mission teams, so that this program may be carried on regularly and without fail.

### **The Preparation of the Future Preachers**

The Vincentian seminarians studying theology are given special coaching to equip themselves for the preaching of the word. First of all they are given guidelines for preparing sermons; then they are asked to write sermons. They have to preach the same in the presence of veteran preachers, who will give them the necessary corrections and directions. Once they are found fit, they will be given chances to go with the expert preachers and attend the sermons in the popular mission. Once a year the students of theology will conduct a "De Paul Mission," very similar to the popular mission. One priest in each center will guide them. Further, the theology students conduct Jesus Mission (children's retreat) during the midsummer vacations, which too is a remote preparation for the popular mission.

## **Evaluation and Enrichment**

After the missions, the preachers gather together and evaluate the performance and find out ways and means to overcome the shortcomings that might have occurred. Also they discuss how to better the performance in the future. Every year the Superior General arranges a seminar of the team members wherein there are open discussions for improving the Mission. Some updating programs, with the help of experts in fields of theology, social problems, psychology and counselling, etc., are also arranged for the preachers occasionally.

### **Note:**

In the Vincentian Congregation there are 2 Bishops; 373 Priests; 3 Brothers; 186 Major Seminarians; 42 Novices; 203 Minor Seminarians. They have 92 houses, in 3 provinces and 2 regions. There are centers for formation of their own candidates, centers for Popular Missions, Retreat Centres, Prayer Centres; Colleges and Schools (24); Homes for the Sick and the Aged (2); Care Centres for the Sick (2), Orphanages (13), Rehabilitation & Vocational Training Centres (10), Vincentian Social Welfare Societies (11), Vincentian Publishing Societies (2), Printing Press (2), Public Library and Reading Room (2), Book Stalls (11).

# The Sisters of Charity Federation and the Vincentian Charism in North America

Extending the Reach of Charity

by Regina Bechtle, S.C., Mary Ann Daly, S.C.  
and Mary McCormick, S.C.

*Sisters of Charity*

## **PART I:**

### **The Vincentian Charism of Charity Takes Root in the New World**



St Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton

In the closing decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup>, a series of events occurred that would dramatically change the course of Catholicism in the United States, allowing it to take root and flourish. Indeed, in time, the history of the new republic would become inextricably intertwined not only with the American Church, but with the American expression of a congregation of Charity founded in France centuries before.

The beginnings, however, were slow. The new republic itself was formed in 1783 in the aftermath of a long and bloody revolution. The United

States was conceived by its founders as an experiment in a radical new way of being: democracy, with “liberty and justice for all.” But flaws in its original design led to serious consequences that persist to our day.

For many groups, including Catholics, Jews, atheists, and even some Protestant sects, religious liberty was not guaranteed as a fundamental right until it was incorporated into the Bill of Rights in 1791. Even then, individual states had Established churches until the 1820s.

Though freedom of religion provided for the separation of Church and State, this assurance did not necessarily make it easy for the Catholic minority to practice its faith. Intolerance, discrimination, and bigotry — often subtle, sometimes violent — abounded. But the young church was served well by visionary leaders whose presence, courage, and extraordinary skills enabled it to flourish and grow.

Without a doubt the greatest of these early clerics was John Carroll, ordained the first Bishop, later Archbishop, of the United States. When he was consecrated bishop in 1789, Carroll became head of a diocese encompassing the whole country. He had 22 clergy, many from Europe; few churches or church-owned property; and no active communities of religious women to assist in the work of tending to the spiritual and material needs of the largely immigrant, largely poor Catholic population.

Of his immediate concerns, the first was the establishment of a seminary to train American men for the priesthood. He asked the French Sulpicians for help; when they arrived in 1791 they began what would become St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore. They would also be an important factor in the formation of the first American community of women religious in the United States. In Carroll's far-sighted view, the education of young women was key to the survival of Catholicism in an often-hostile environment. As wives and mothers, women constituted the moral and spiritual bedrock of their families. A community of religious whose ministries included education among other works of charity was essential to Carroll's vision.

The founding of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's, Emmitsburg, in 1809 launched an amazing — though not always easy — collaboration between clergy and religious that formed the nucleus of the parochial school system in the United States. Other works, including health care, and the care of orphans and the elderly, soon followed. In some places, the care of orphans preceded the establishment of a local parochial school.

The catalyst for this enterprise was a young widowed convert, Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton. Her story is well known. Born in New York in 1774, her parents were Dr. Richard Bayley, a prominent physician, and Catherine Charlton Bayley, who died when Elizabeth was three.

Elizabeth married William Magee Seton in 1794; together they had five children. By 1801 Seton's health had deteriorated —

tuberculosis was the “Seton disease” — and his considerable shipping business went bankrupt, due in part to piracy on the high seas and the effects of the British embargo during the Napoleonic wars. He, Elizabeth, and their young daughter sailed to Italy, in an attempt to restore his health. However, after spending thirty days in quarantine in the lazaretto at Livorno, William died on December 27, 1803.

The new widow stayed with her husband’s friends, the Filicchis, for an extended period of time, and was introduced by them to the Catholic faith. On her return to the United States, and after a year-long period of discernment, she was received into St. Peter’s Catholic Church, Barclay Street, on March 14, 1805.

Her decision to leave the Episcopalian church turned her into a virtual outsider among many of her family and friends. Hard pressed to earn a living to support her children, she counted on the unfailing help of the Filicchis, and new friends, lay and clerical, among the Catholic community. In his meetings with her supporters and herself, Bishop Carroll recognized in Mrs. Seton the talents and skills, spiritual and intellectual, that were needed to carry out his vision of an American sisterhood dedicated to the service of the poor. In a way that can only be described as the workings of providence, this vision resonated in Elizabeth’s heart as well, and though she had no experience of religious life, she had a deep and abiding trust that the will of God would bring her to a place she could call home.

Elizabeth moved her young family to Baltimore and started her first school in a little house on Paca Street. She was soon joined by a number of women who with her would form the beginnings of the first American sisterhood, and in 1808 moved with the fledgling community and a few students to Emmitsburg, fifty miles west of Baltimore. Samuel Cooper, a well-to-do convert and seminarian, gave money to buy the property and start the foundations of what would become the first Motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity. The Sulpicians took on the task of directing the new community, a circumstance that Archbishop Carroll was not entirely satisfied with. However, strapped as he was for clergy, he acquiesced when presented with the *fait accompli*.

The new community was modeled after the Daughters of Charity, founded in 1633 by Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Careful to distinguish their radical departure from the cloister, the only norm of religious life available at the time, the founders had crafted the Rule, the vows, their common prayer, as well as their dress and apostolic outreach in such a way as to ensure that the Daughters would never become an enclosed order of nuns. The Sulpician émigrés to the United States had worked with the Daughters in France, were familiar with their rule and its spirit, and were convinced that, with some modifications, it would fit the needs

of the American church and its people. In 1810, Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget was able to procure a copy of the rule and carried it with him across the Atlantic. Elizabeth Seton translated it into English, and with some modifications to suit the American situation, the Sisters, who had lived its spirit, were now able to abide by its spirit-filled words as well.

From the beginning there were differences of opinion about the relationship between the American community and its French counterpart. Many of the Sulpicians were convinced that there should be a union with the Daughters in Paris, and were indeed eager to hand over the responsibilities for directing the community to others. Bishop Carroll and other clergy believed that the community should remain as it was, a separate, thoroughly American community. These differences would later come back in full force to change the original foundation and cause a three-way split in the congregation. By 1850, the Emmitsburg community had become a province of the Daughters of Charity of France. Prior to this union, an independent community had emerged in New York in 1846, and in 1852 a second one in Cincinnati.

Each community, under the leadership of women who had been companions of Elizabeth Seton from the beginning, felt strongly that the actions they undertook for the sake of the mission they had embraced was the right, indeed the only way of being faithful to the legacy of the founders, and their spiritual mother.

Eventually, five provinces of Daughters of Charity were established in the United States. And from the two offshoots of the original foundation, New York and Cincinnati, still other groups emerged, flourished, and grew to maturity. Local ordinaries, desperate for women religious to help with the needs of the increasing numbers of immigrant Catholics flocking to their dioceses, persuaded the leadership of the already established communities to send Sisters to replicate the works of charity for which these communities were already well noted.

In 1849, at the invitation of Bishop William Walsh, three New York Sisters traveled to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and formed a community that within a short period of time become international, with provinces in Canada and the United States. Another group of women religious, the Sisters of St. Martha, were started as an auxiliary order of the Sisters of Charity, and in 1894 accepted women from Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Their ministry would be to serve the domestic needs of the local seminary. In 1900, at the urging of the bishop of Antigonish, fifteen of these Sisters formed an independent community, retaining the name of the community they had joined, but formulating their own constitutions and rules.

In 1859, persuaded by Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley of Newark, nephew of Elizabeth Seton, the New York community also provided Sisters who, along with a small number of women formed in the novitiate in Cincinnati, began the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, Convent Station, New Jersey.

The Cincinnati congregation also sent Sisters to Greensburg, Pennsylvania, in 1870, to start the community known as the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill. One of the first postulants of the newly-independent Cincinnati community, Sister Aloysia Lowe, became the first Mother of the Seton Hill community.

Thus, from the original community located in the rolling hills of Maryland, five additional congregations emerged, faithful to the spirit of the original charism, yet true originals in themselves, with a unique perspective on what it meant to be Charity.

But the Charity expression of religious life in the United States and Canada is larger than that of the foundations who trace their lineage to Mother Seton. It is interesting to note that for the most part the rule used by these other congregations was the one Elizabeth Seton had translated and adapted to fit the needs of the American experience.

As early as 1812, other such foundations sprang up. In that year Mother Catharine Spalding and her companions began the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky, under the impetus and direction of Father Jean Baptiste David, Sulpician and second superior of the Emmitsburg community, who had gone "west" with Bishop Flaget. Although there was talk of a merger with Emmitsburg, the community retained its independence. The Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas, were founded in 1851 by a member of the Nazareth community, Mother Xavier Ross, to serve the needs of the people in Kansas, Montana, and other western states.

In 1829, Bishop John England of Charleston, South Carolina, appealed to Emmitsburg for a copy of the rule, and encouraged four women, including Theresa Barry, to start a community with education and the care of orphans as their main focus. Always a small community, the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy, Charleston, were unique in one respect: they operated in an arena that was for the most part suspicious of and hostile to the Catholic Church. Through their educational and child care outreach to all, they were able to allay the fears of their Protestant neighbors and win support for their works.

Bishop Thomas Connolly of Saint John, New Brunswick, journeyed to New York on several occasions in the 1850s to ask for help in overcoming the perennial problems of recently arrived, mostly Irish immigrants, including devastating bouts of cholera. In 1854, at a time when the numbers of Sisters at her disposal had been

reduced by half of what they had been before the separation from Emmitsburg, Mother Jerome Ely asked for volunteers from the New York novitiate to go with Bishop Connolly and form a new community. Thus the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception became one of the early communities of women to serve the needs of English-speaking Canadians. In 1924, a number of their French-speaking Sisters created a community of their own, *Les Religieuses de Notre-Dame-du-Sacré-Cœur*, with a motherhouse in Moncton, New Brunswick. Their purpose was to establish a French-speaking novitiate to serve Acadian women who were seeking to enter the community; the enculturation of the charism to meet the needs of the people was once again evident.

In 1902, the Vincentian Sisters of Charity, a European community formed in the Vincentian spirit, came as missionaries to Slovak immigrants in the mining area of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Their story would add another chapter to the story of Charity in North America.

## **PART II: History of the Federation**

In the mid-twentieth century, the historical period of expansion and separation gave way to one of gradual cooperation. In 1947, the apostolic delegate to the United States, Amleto Giovanni Cardinal Cicognani, suggested that the superiors of those congregations who claimed to be daughters of Elizabeth Seton work together toward the cause of her canonization. To this end the first meeting of the Conference of Mother Seton's Daughters was held in Emmitsburg, Maryland, on October 28-29, 1947. Sister Isabel Toohey, D.C., Visitatrix of the Emmitsburg Province, served as hostess for the meeting. Representatives of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul of New York; Sisters of Charity of St. Elizabeth, Convent Station; Sisters of Charity of Mt. St. Joseph, Cincinnati; Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Greensburg; and Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Halifax were joined at the first meeting by a representative of the St. Louis Province of the Daughters and the auxiliary bishop of Baltimore. Some of the memories of the early breaks and the pain associated with them needed to be healed. Each congregation shared its founding story and historical roots, and the group began to work together toward the canonization of Elizabeth Seton. In addition to the General Superior of each congregation, members of the council as well as the vice-postulators of the cause attended subsequent meetings.

At these meetings concrete plans and strategies were developed to promote the cause. Each congregation committed its members to

special prayers and sacrifices on a different day of the week. They each worked diligently to foster devotion to Elizabeth Seton among their students, colleagues and patients. An official portrait was selected; plays and pageants were produced in her honor. In the process of these very focused endeavors, the Conference members became true collaborators.

Later, in response to the call of Vatican II, the focus widened. The decree on the renewal of religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, directed congregations with the same or similar charisms to unite or federate. In 1965 the name of the Conference was changed to the Federation of the Daughters of Blessed (later Saint) Elizabeth Ann Seton. Their stated purpose now included mutual support and development. What had previously been a by-product of their work together was now one of the reasons for the existence of the Federation. In 1966 the directors (mistresses) of initial formation were convened. They too sought support from each other and practical assistance in developing ways to form new members in the charism.

With the canonization of Elizabeth Ann Seton on September 14, 1975, the initial reason for the convening of the congregations had been accomplished. The members now could spend their energy on projects related to their common charism and heritage and in an effort to work together to alleviate injustice. They began to explore new venues for collaboration, and new insights into what it meant to be a Sister of Charity in the twentieth century.

They also began to revise their by-laws and structure. This re-examining of who they were and what they were about was encouraged by a series of requests from other religious congregations to join the group. The Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception of New Brunswick, Canada, sought admission to the Federation in 1979. They shared the spirit of the charism and were linked to the other congregations by their foundress, who had left the novitiate of the Sisters of Charity of New York to begin the Canadian congregation. It took the Federation three years to revise its bylaws and write a handbook, so the New Brunswick community was not admitted until 1982. Les Religieuses de Notre-Dame-du-Sacr -C ur followed suit in 1986.

In 1989 the Federation received an application from a congregation whose history was radically different from the other members. This was not a congregation with North American origins, and did not trace its heritage in any way to Elizabeth Seton and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Americanization of the rule of the Daughters of Charity. The Vincentian Sisters of Charity of Pittsburgh, originally founded in Austria-Hungary, came to the United States in 1902. The Vincentian spirit was evident not only in their name, but in their lives and

documents. They were accepted as members of the Federation in 1989. Their acceptance was quickly followed by a request from the Vincentian Sisters of Charity of Bedford, Ohio. Some Sisters from the Pittsburgh congregation had moved to Ohio in 1928, at the invitation of the local Bishop, to serve the immigrant poor; they formed an independent congregation in 1939. They too were accepted. A new era had begun in the life of Elizabeth Seton's Federation.

Meanwhile the Formation Directors were meeting and planning a shared program called "Roots." In this program novices spent two weeks of intensive study on the charism together. Joining them for this program were the Formation Directors of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth and the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth. Neither of these congregations was in the Federation yet. But during their time together, novices and directors experienced the value of sharing their experience of the charism with others in the same tradition.

In 1991 the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth joined the Federation. Begun in 1812, this congregation had followed the same rule that Elizabeth Seton adapted from the Daughters of Charity, and further adjusted it to fit pioneer life in Kentucky. They were followed into the Federation in 1994 by the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy. This congregation, begun in Charleston, South Carolina, had also received the American adaptation of the rule. While never having had a "sister" from Elizabeth Seton's congregation, they wore her black habit and widow's cap.

In 1995 the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas, joined the Federation. They had sprung from the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, and carried the same Vincentian spirit and tradition as well as the pioneering influence of their Nazareth foremothers.

Even as the Federation was expanding in numbers of member congregations, it was also providing programs for grassroots members to assist them in deepening their experience of the charism and the common vision among the congregations. Between 1988 and 1995, over 500 sisters took part in *Charity: a Shared Vision*, a week-long program for sharing and spiritual growth for sisters. Between 1992 and 2000 the Federation sponsored Seton Legacy, scholarly forums on the contribution of Elizabeth Seton to church and society. For its golden jubilee in 1997, the Federation commissioned the writing of a history. *A Vision of Service* by Sr. Geraldine Anthony, S.C. The resulting publication, traces not only the history of the Federation, but the legacy of the individual congregations who compose it.

Also in 1997, the Federation changed its name to the Sisters of Charity Federation in the Vincentian/Setonian tradition. The new name better described the composition of the membership.

The Federation was then incorporated as a non-profit organization in New York State. This incorporation was necessary for the Federation to receive NGO (non-governmental organization) status at the United Nations. The members had long desired to have a voice for the poor and oppressed not only in North America, but on the world stage. Members had missions in Central and South America, the Caribbean Islands, Asia and Africa. With a Federation NGO representative at the UN, the congregations would be able to express their concerns and to work together for justice and an end to poverty. The international dimension of the Federation members was a reality that was becoming more and more apparent to the members. It was indeed a new time for the congregations.

The criteria for membership in the Federation were clarified in 1996. Any congregation seeking membership would need to either trace their characteristic spirit and charism to the tradition of Charity of Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac and Elizabeth Seton, and/or trace the influence of the Vincentian Rule (Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity) in their documents and in their lifestyle. The new criteria were used in welcoming the newest member, the Congregation of St. Martha, in 2004. This congregation, originally formed by the Sisters of Charity of Halifax, had separated to form a new congregation in Antigonish. The charism of charity had always been obvious in their lives and ministry.

Also in 2004, the Vincentian Sisters of Charity of Bedford, Ohio, merged with the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, bringing with them new insights into ways the charism of charity can be expressed. Increasingly, that charism was becoming the source of the Federation's unity.

### **PART III:**

#### **The Federation Members Today**

What is the lived reality of the Sisters of Charity Federation today? The spirit of Charity continues strong and vibrant in the thirteen member congregations. Approximately 4,000 vowed members and 700 lay associates/affiliates serve coast to coast in the United States and Canada, and in more than 30 other countries as well.

Like most women's congregations in North America, Federation members experience the challenge of keeping focused on mission for the future while resources of membership and finances diminish. Yet energy for the mission is evident as new ministry ventures emerge, ongoing ministries find creative ways to flourish, and gifted, generous women follow the Spirit's call to serve the poor as Sisters or Daughters of Charity.

Though strongly enculturated in the North American reality, with all its gifts and challenges, a number of Federation congregations have spread internationally. Some maintain a small but significant presence in Central and Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. Others claim an extensive and long-standing presence in Korea (Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Pennsylvania), and in India and Belize (Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky). All experience the richness of being evangelized by the poor of many different cultures.

One of the Federation's goals is "to further understanding and expression of our common heritage rooted in Vincent, Louise and Elizabeth as expressed in the tradition of the various member congregations." This happens in many ways.

On their "Way of Elizabeth" tour of New York, Baltimore and Emmitsburg in St. Elizabeth Seton's footsteps, seminary sisters and novices learn about their common Vincentian roots, the stories of each other's communities, and current ministries. Women who entered a Federation congregation in the past 30 years find support and inspiration in the "70's and Beyond" gathering. Those responsible for initial and ongoing formation of vowed members and lay associates share ideas and programs at the annual spirit-filled gatherings of the Company of Charity Formation Personnel (CCFP).

The Federation began a major project in 1996 when it authorized a group of scholars to work on collecting and publishing the writings of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. Sisters Regina Bechtle, S.C. (New York), and Judith Metz, S.C. (Cincinnati), were appointed co-editors; Ellin M. Kelly, Ph.D., served as manuscript editor. Federation archivists and their staffs, especially Sister Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., archivist of the Emmitsburg province, provided invaluable assistance. Federation representatives comprised an advisory editorial committee for the four-volume work, Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings (New City Press, 2000-2006). The volumes are marketed and distributed by the Vincentian Studies Institute at DePaul University, Chicago.

Member congregations, in their ongoing formation efforts, regularly sponsor retreats on the charism of Charity. Often they invite members of other Federation communities as speakers and retreat directors. Several members in the northeast United States have piloted a unique type of "Vincentian" directed retreat format that includes group spiritual direction and reflection on ministry with the poor.

Over time an awareness of the extended Vincentian Family has evolved along with the Federation's desire to strengthen intercongregational networking and collaboration. This desire echoes the commitment of the 39<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission (1998) "to collaborate with the other members of the

Vincentian Family.” Federation members forged links with the Ladies of Charity of the United States (LCUSA) by appointing (1969) Sister Mathilde Comstock, D.C., to serve on the LCUSA national board. Currently Sister Mary Ann Daly, S.C. (New York), holds this position as the Executive Director of the Federation. Sister Theresa Capria, S.C. (New York), represented the Federation at the 1998 General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission in Rome at the invitation of then-Superior General Robert Maloney. Federation members have been active as presenters, planners, and participants at Vincentian Family Gatherings held in Belleville, Illinois (2005), Princeton, New Jersey (2006), and San Francisco, California (2007).

Members also serve as docents at the Seton Shrine in Emmitsburg. A special prayer service marks Federation Day, celebrated annually on March 15, feast of St. Louise. Since 1988, representatives from various Federation congregations have met as the Charity Connections group to share reflections and to write occasional essays on the charism. A first volume was published in booklet format as *Living the Charity Charism*; all the essays are posted on the Federation’s website, [www.sisters-of-charity.org/](http://www.sisters-of-charity.org/), via the “Charism Reflections” link.

2009 will mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Sisters of Charity in the United States. To honor the planting of the charism of Charity in North America by St. Elizabeth Seton, celebrations will take place both in Emmitsburg and wherever Sisters and Daughters serve. Commemorations of this milestone for the North American church will be planned collaboratively wherever possible.

Other celebrations are on the horizon. The bicentennial of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky in 2012, and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas (2008) and the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, Convent Station, New Jersey (2009) will provide additional opportunities to spread the story of a shared heritage.

Another Federation goal is to “work collaboratively, sharing our traditions and gifts for the good of the Gospel.” The Vincentian spirit of “inventiveness to infinity” in mission takes flesh in numerous creative ways.

In one of the poorest counties in rural Pennsylvania, three Federation groups work together to serve the poor. Rendu Services provides a food pantry, after-school programs at nearby housing projects, a mobile health outreach, and numerous other services. At the invitation of the Northeast Province of the Daughters of Charity, who began the ministry in 2000, the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill and the Vincentian Sisters of Charity have collaboratively sponsored Rendu Services since November, 2006.

In August, 2007, vocation directors from seven SC Federation groups accompanied 23 young volunteers to the Gulf Coast to clean, scrub, and paint housing abandoned in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. This collaborative service project expanded on the group's first trip in January, 2007.

The Federation's newly-adopted structure fosters rapid communication to support solidarity in mission. Its status as an NGO at the United Nations allows members to bring to a global forum their sense of the plight of the poor around the world. Sister Carol-jean Willie, S.C. (Cincinnati), currently serves as the Federation's NGO representative, a role which Sister Marie Elena Dio, S.C. (Halifax), pioneered and developed.

Members can also quickly circulate updates about natural disasters such as the 2004 tsunami in southeast Asia, the 2006 hurricanes in New Orleans and the Caribbean, or the 2007 earthquake in Peru, their impact on the poor, and concrete ways to help. Reports evoke a ready response of money, supplies, and abundant prayer.

In many of the SC Federation communities, lay associate programs are growing and thriving. Whether they are known as associates, associates in mission or volunteer ministry, Seton associates, the Seton family, or affiliates, over 700 women and men embody the Vincentian-Charity spirit and live the mission in their own lifestyles. The spirituality, enthusiasm, and commitment of these dedicated lay persons enrich the vowed members and act as leaven in the Church. Charity Associates have sponsored charism retreats in Emmitsburg and have been active in national conferences of lay associates.

Many SC Federation congregations sponsor or co-sponsor institutions that provide health care, social and family services, education, and spiritual development. In these places of ministry, mission integration is a major focus. Programs for employees at every level, from support services to senior management, seek to foster a sense that employees are our colleagues and partners in mission. They serve the mission by the way they nurture the Vincentian fire of Charity, and they share responsibility for spreading that flame.

Historically, communities tended to focus on one or more of the time-honored Vincentian ministries of health care, education, and social services. Today, members serve in a variety of ministries that give new meaning to providing "every service in their power." A quick look at each congregation's website (accessible through the Federation's website, [www.sisters-of-charity.org/](http://www.sisters-of-charity.org/), via the "Members" link) will demonstrate this reality more fully than this brief essay can document.

The current Direction Statement of the Sisters of Charity Federation calls its members to:

“Embrace the international reality of our lives  
both in context of membership and our mission.

And in solidarity with the poor,  
[to] intentionally use our corporate energy  
as Federation  
for witness, advocacy and systemic change  
on a global and local level.”

As a Federation rooted in the heritage of Vincent, Louise, Elizabeth Seton, Frederic Ozanam, Rosalie Rendu and our other Vincentian pioneers, we look forward to a future full of hope, abounding in new ways to embody the spirit of Charity in our church and our world.

\* \* \*

**Note:** For a thorough treatment of the history of the Sisters of Charity Federation and its Vincentian and Setonian roots, the authors recommend the article by Sister Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., originally published in The New Catholic Encyclopedia (Catholic University of America Press and The Gale Group, 2002) and available online at [www.sisters-of-charity.org/](http://www.sisters-of-charity.org/), “History.”

# The Life Experience of St Joan Antide Thouret

“Vincent de Paul: Father, Model, Special Protector”<sup>1</sup>

by María Clara Rogatti, SdC



St Joan Antide Thouret

Joan Antide Thouret was born in the little village of Sancey, in the diocese of Besançon, in Franche-Comté, on 27 November 1765, into a deeply Christian family. At a very early age *“she felt a strong attraction to the stricter religious life and at the same time to the service of the poor.”*<sup>2</sup> She was directed towards the Daughters of Charity, and to join them she *“was ready for everything, even to go to the end of the earth.”*<sup>3</sup> During her time as a postulant in Langres, not far from her native village, she had her first “encounter” with St Vincent de Paul, the start of her daughter-like relationship with him, whom

she will always consider as her “father,” and her sure reference-point. She will defend her daughterhood relationship with the saint at special times in her personal story, and in the story of her congregation, all through the “seasons” of her life.

In **1825**, one year before her death, she still recalled that she had been part of the community founded by Vincent de Paul:

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<sup>1</sup> JOAN ANTIDE to Pope Pius VII, LD 268.

<sup>2</sup> Sr ROSALIE THOURET, *Manuscript*, LD 484.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, LD 487.

*"On 1 November 1778, aged 22, I entered the community of the Daughters of Charity in Paris."*<sup>4</sup>

In the prayer which she addressed to the saint when she was ill as a young novice, the names which she used many times during her life, were already in place: Vincent for her is **Father, Superior, model.**

*"Great saint, be a **Father** to me; I want to be one of your daughters, get me cured. You are my first **superior** and my **model**, I want to imitate your virtues."*<sup>5</sup>

The historical events precipitated by the French Revolution, which among other things suppressed religious communities, brought her far from the community; but Joan Antide remained faithful to a spirit which she had made her own, and to the advice which the Mother General at the time gave to the Daughters before the great dispersal:

*"Don't abandon the service of the poor, don't let yourselves be pushed down and don't lose courage; no matter what happens, let **nothing** divert you from loyalty to **Christ and the Church.**"*<sup>6</sup>

While waiting for *"the return to normality continue to attend to the obligations of your own vocation. You will be given the opportunity to make yourselves useful to the sick and the instruction of youth."*<sup>7</sup>

It was only when there came a period of calm that she accepted that there was no further need for her work and decided to follow the invitation of Père Receveur, the founder of a community, La Retraite Chrétienne, which had opted to go into exile rather than be dispersed.

*"He had written to me several times, urging me to join his Company where I would have continued my **first vocation**, taking care of the sick."*<sup>8</sup>

In frightful conditions during two years of wandering La Retraite Chrétienne got to Germany. The Founder frequently and at length asserted that Joan Antide was thwarted in the care of the sick; many died through lack of basic care. She decided to leave this community because:

<sup>4</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Memorie di pure verità*, LD 462.

<sup>5</sup> Sr ROSALIE THOURET, *Manuscript*, LD 490.

<sup>6</sup> Mère DELEAU, in the official album of the fourth centenary.

<sup>7</sup> Sr ROSALIE THOURET, *Manuscript*, LD 517.

<sup>8</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Memorie di pure verità*, LD 464.

*“She cannot accept the stupidity of those persons who do not want to understand that **the service of God and his love are inseparable from those of the neighbor....**”*<sup>9</sup>

After a sixty-four day journey on her own she arrived in Einsiedeln in Switzerland, near the sanctuary of the Madonna of the Hermits. She had the idea of staying on there permanently, as a poor, unknown person, but she “wanted to know the will of God.” For this reason she consulted a hermit who told her:

*“My daughter, here’s God’s will: He wants you in France. The abandoned ignorant young people are waiting for you; go, therefore, **as a generous daughter of St Vincent de Paul and evangelize the poor.**”*<sup>10</sup>

### I NEVER THOUGHT OF FOUNDING A CONGREGATION

The vicars general of her home diocese were also in exile in Switzerland, and she met them in Landeron in 1797. This meeting will pinpoint her mission:

*“Take some young women with you and **form them in the way you received formation.**”*<sup>11</sup>

Joan Antide was surprised:

*“I never thought, nor developed the idea, of founding a congregation, nor did I ever invite anyone. The Good God and the ecclesiastical superiors ordered me to do so.”*<sup>12</sup>

On **11 April 1799**, when she was at last able to begin the work she had been asked to do, she said:

*“Whilst I was forming my daughters for the active life I formed them for the contemplative life to support and sanctify the active one. Right from the start I had laid down a little rule, **for every day, every week, every month, every year.**”*<sup>13</sup>

Obviously she had never forgotten the specific points made by St Vincent when he was presenting, and commenting on, the Rules for the first Daughters of Charity. In the novitiate in Paris she had certainly heard the Founder’s conferences being read out:

<sup>9</sup> Sr ROSALIE THOURET, *Manuscript*, LD 531.

<sup>10</sup> Sr ROSALIE THOURET, *Manuscript*, LD 540.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, LD 543.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, LD 602.

<sup>13</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Memorie di pure verità*, LD 741.

*“Let’s see now, my dear daughters, how you should go through the twenty-four hours which make up the day, how the days make up the months, the months the years which will lead you on to eternity.”*<sup>14</sup>

The little rule to which Joan Antide refers is the one which was given to the first Sisters of Charity after the retreat which they had made in October **1800**. The retreat master said:

*“The superioress mentioned that she was going to give them the **Rule of St Vincent de Paul**, the main provisions of which she had written down from memory, as it was not possible to procure the book. The sisters then asked if it would be possible for them to listen to the reading while remaining on their knees.”*<sup>15</sup>

In the text of the Rule which Joan Antide submitted to the archbishop in **1802** for his approval she had no problem

*“with admitting that, with regard to the greater part of the regulations adopted by us in these constitutions, we saw them being lived out in various houses of the Daughters of Charity, where we made our novitiate for the religious life.”*<sup>16</sup>

### WE LIVE ACCORDING TO HIS RULE

In **1805** the necessary approval of the Statutes by the Minister of Religious Affairs seemed blocked by objections made against the Foundress. Among these was the charge of usurping the name of the Sisters of Charity of Paris. Joan Antide defended herself:

*“We never intended to create a rivalry [...] with the Sisters of Charity nor did we ever appropriate their title from the moment when they were no longer called the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul, but Sisters of Charity [...]. We were given the title **Sisters of St Vincent** because we were living according to his Rule.”*<sup>17</sup>

In **1806** she again had need to clarify matters:

*“It is believed that I arrogated to myself the title of Superior General of the Daughters of Charity of the Institute of St Vincent de Paul. Providence made use of me to form a society of*

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<sup>14</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, the first conference to the Daughters of Charity, 31 July 1634.

<sup>15</sup> Diario-giornale di Bacoffe - ASCB.

<sup>16</sup> The Rule of 1802, the opening chapter.

<sup>17</sup> JOAN ANTIDE to M. Debry, Prefect of the department of Doubs, LD 103.

good young women **according to the Rule of St Vincent de Paul**. We never claimed that we were taking for ourselves the name of Daughters of Charity. We limited ourselves to taking the name of Daughters of St Vincent, or Sisters of St Vincent, in so far as **we were following his Rule and we took him as our protector and model**. All the Sisters of our society recognize as their superior the sister who received and formed them **according to the Rule of St Vincent**.<sup>18</sup>

The matter eventually arrived at a meeting, convoked in Paris in 1807 under the presidency of Napoleon's mother, of all superiors of institutes dedicated to works of charity. Joan Antide, on this occasion also, spelled out in writing the motives she had for taking this name. It was not inappropriate, because:

*"When we came together as a community we had several reasons for taking the name of **Daughters of St Vincent de Paul**. Our works were similar to those which this saint wanted to spread. His rule, which I knew sufficiently well to have written it out from memory, was the only one which seemed suitable."*<sup>19</sup>

*"It also seemed that the diocese of Besançon needed a **reminder of him**, because no other group except ours had been established there."*<sup>20</sup>

She was not afraid to repeat in public the same reasons, though in order *"not to offend the Mother Superior in Paris she decided it was more than mere justice to renounce the name; this would not hinder her from cultivating devotion to St Vincent de Paul and retaining him as **our model and protector**."* And she will accept the new title which was suggested: Sisters of Charity of Besançon.<sup>21</sup>

Still in **1807** the text of the rule was printed, it was submitted to the archbishop for approval, and it contained a "Preliminary Discourse" in which she returned to the link with St Vincent:

*"You must respect these constitutions and Rules. We have not drawn them from our own ideas, but gathered them, for the most part, from what we saw in practice with the Daughters of Charity with whom we stayed for a long time. We believe that such practices were, for the most part, put in place by **St Vincent de Paul**. For this reason, rightly regard this great*

<sup>18</sup> JOAN ANTIDE to M. Seguin, an official of the Besançon city council, LD 112.

<sup>19</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Memoriale 1807*, LD 119.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Sr ROSALIE THOURET, *Manuscript*, LD 602-603.

*servant of God as your **Founder, special protector and Father.***<sup>22</sup>

A certain number of years pass. Other experiences marked her life, among them the first foundation in Italy, in the Kingdom of Naples, in **1810**. It seemed to her that she had a duty to make contact with the Superior of the Congregation of the Mission, who lived in Naples. She introduced herself:

*“As an unworthy daughter of your own Founder, I have been in this holy vocation for thirty years. The Revolution dissolved St Vincent’s congregation. By God’s grace I have always remained faithful to **the practices and spirit of that Company.** I have copied out the Rule word for word, by the light of God alone. I had no access to any manuscript or printed version of this Rule. It, however, turned out to be in conformity with **the customs and primitive spirit laid down by St Vincent de Paul.** I have made him **Institutor, Founder, Father, Patron, Protector, Model,** of our community. Young people of this country may truly assimilate **the spirit of St Vincent de Paul.**”*<sup>23</sup>

In **1818** “in order to guarantee existence and cohesion to the community which the good God had entrusted to her,” Joan Antide, when she requested from Pope Pius VII approval of the community and the Rule, stated clearly:

*“We were given the name of Sisters of Charity of Besançon. Nevertheless we are daughters of St Vincent de Paul, because we honor him as our **Founder, Father, Model and special Protector.**”*<sup>24</sup>

The approval will be granted on 23 July **1819**. Some small modifications of the Rule were called for by reason of the expansion of the community beyond the diocese of Besançon. Among others was the alteration of the name to “The Daughters of Charity under the protection of St Vincent de Paul.” This was not a problem for the Foundress. She pointed out that the change was for one sole reason: to avoid confusion with the Sisters in Paris. It became a problem for the archbishop of Besançon, Mgr de Presigny: he was no longer considered to be “the Superior General of the Congregation,” because the community will be under the jurisdiction of local bishops. His reaction became clear in an interdict issued on 31 August

<sup>22</sup> Preliminary Discourse in the Rule, LD 5.

<sup>23</sup> JOAN ANTIDE to Sig. Fulgoro, LD 237.

<sup>24</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Petition to the Holy Father*, LD 267.

1821 which “forbids the superiors of the houses of the Sisters of Charity of Besançon to receive Sister Joan Antide.”<sup>25</sup>

The imposed division of her own community was a huge sorrow for the mother’s heart.

### FIDELITY WHICH TRANSCENDS MEMORY FIDELITY TO THE CUSTOMS

Joan Antide had lived all of them, her life organized according to them for more than five years in the mother-house in Paris, and in the other houses in which she had lived. From the first moment in the morning, usually four o’clock, till nine at night the whole day was focussed on “the glory of the most holy name of the Lord.”<sup>26</sup>

*“The first thing you must do, when you’ve risen and have begun to dress, is to kneel down and adore God, to acknowledge that He is your Creator and Sovereign Lord. When you’ve finished dressing, and have made your bed, you’ll begin your mental prayer. Begin all prayers by placing yourselves in the presence of God. Go to Mass every day. The carrying out of your vocation consists in frequently recalling the presence of the Lord, and to facilitate this make use of the reminder which the striking of the clock gives. Before the meal recall the resolutions made during prayer. Maintain silence from the evening examination of conscience until after morning prayer, so that exterior recollection helps your union with God. Use well the time you have free from the service of the poor: never be idle. Set about learning to read to make yourselves suitable for being sent to a place where you will be able to teach.”<sup>27</sup>*

Joan Antide forgot nothing of all this. She also asked of her daughters, as the first act of the day, a prayer of adoration of God which at the same time expresses the will to consecrate oneself to His service. Next they will go to the place where the community comes together for prayer. Each prayer starts with the reminder to place oneself in the presence of God who wants to be adored in spirit and in truth.<sup>28</sup>

*“Vocal and mental prayer were practiced from the first days, as well as examinations of conscience, reading, rosary, ejaculatory prayer, silence, a monthly day of recollection, weekly*

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<sup>25</sup> Mgr DE PRESSIGNY, Archbishop of Besançon, LD 326.

<sup>26</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, first conference to the Daughters of Charity.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *The 1820 Rule*, p. 50.

*confession, Holy Communion, daily Mass, repetition of prayer, recalling the presence of God when the clock strikes, invitation to learn Christian teaching, being encouraged to read, to write, to keep accounts, and manual labor.*"<sup>29</sup>

### FIDELITY TO A SINGLE SPIRIT

It is easy enough to repeat acts which have been learned, especially when their sense and value are understood. In order for a spirit to be revived there is need of a fundamental harmony within the tension in order to achieve conformity to a model or to a mystery which is desired. Harmony of that sort is already a sign of the presence of a charism, a gift of the Spirit himself. There will, of course, be other elements of nature and grace to give effect to it, to develop it.

Joan Antide's fidelity to the spirit of St Vincent was grounded in a similar passion: love of God and love of the poor. She found in the Gospel the privileged spaces of Jesus' mission: the poor, children, the marginalized. She had assurance from the Gospel that "anything done to one of these little ones was done to Him." The mission entrusted to the community was felt by them to be a sharing in the mission of Christ the Saviour.

*"To be real Daughters of Charity, St Vincent says, means doing what the Son of God came on earth to do. Every time, for the last twenty years, that I read the text of chapter 58 of Isaiah I am deeply disturbed; the Spirit of the Lord is on me, the Spirit of the Lord has consecrated me. He sends me to announce a joyful message to the poor."*<sup>30</sup>

Joan Antide, right from the first pages of the preliminary discourse to the Rules, in order to point out the motivations which should support us "in the exercise" of charity, recalls the same realities:

*"To teach the poor to know, love, serve the Lord, is to do, in some way, what the Saviour of the World came on earth to do, to work for the establishment of the Kingdom of God, to cooperate in the saving of souls" and she also sends them back to the same quotation from Isaiah, quoted in chapter 4 of Luke.*

In order to enter completely into this mission, which is proclamation through service, the Daughter of Charity, according to

<sup>29</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Memorie di pure verità*, LD 471.

<sup>30</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference in March 1659.

St Vincent's teaching, must be totally given to God: "**Given to God for the service of the poor,**" and for Joan Antide each Sister, therefore, called to "**live God's commandments and the main gospel counsels, to assist the poor in their temporal and spiritual needs must belong only to God, in order to fulfill perfectly his precepts.**"<sup>31</sup>

She also says that the Congregation was founded so that the Sisters "**would be able to go and face up to so many needs and problems and involve themselves only in serving and teaching the poor.**"<sup>32</sup>

To go to the poor in the way that Jesus Christ did, to do what He did, but also to **go to the poor as if to Christ Himself**, believing Him to be present in them, are the rules which governed St Vincent's activity.

*"God has called you into the Company to honor Jesus Christ, source and model of all charity, **servng him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor.***

***In serving the poor you are serving Jesus Christ. A Sister will go ten times to serve a poor person; ten times she will find Jesus Christ. You serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor, and that is as true as it is true that we are here.***"<sup>33</sup>

Joan Antide, in presenting the Rule and the benefits which derive from following it, immediately points out that:

*"The poor, **these members of the suffering Jesus Christ,** will be helped and comforted in all their temporal and spiritual miseries."*<sup>34</sup>

She gave a piece of advice to young Sisters preparing for vows:

***"See Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. Always serve them as if you were serving Jesus Christ Himself."***<sup>35</sup>

*"It is necessary to serve the poor with respect, **seeing in their person the person of Jesus Christ** who, although sovereign and Lord of everything has wanted to accept as done to Himself all the good that will be done in his name to the least among men (Mt 25:40)."*<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Preliminary Discourse*, LD 4-8.

<sup>32</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Rule of 1820*, 55.

<sup>33</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference 24.

<sup>34</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Preliminary Discourse to the Rule*, LD 6.

<sup>35</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Instruction on the Vows*, LD 27.

<sup>36</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Rule of 1820*, 257.

The motivation behind the respect due to the poor is founded on these realities of faith, and gives rise to the attitudes which mark our being for them:

- **Cordiality**, shown in balanced good humour.
- **Compassion**, which listens kindly to their complaints (like a good mother, St Vincent adds), shares their worries and finds means of consoling them in their troubles.
- **Charity and patience**, which put up with their weaknesses, their reproaches and their insults: “Never use hard words to them: they already have enough of that to put up with” (St Vincent recalls).
- **Disinterestedness**, which does not accept anything from them under some pretext or other, and does not try to have oneself personally looked up to; never accept gifts from the poor, and take great care never to think that the poor have obligations towards you; on the contrary, you owe something to them, the saint warns.<sup>37</sup>

If Christ is present in the poor, there are other immediate consequences:

*“Service of the poor must be preferred to everything else; we must not be slack when confronted with their needs.”*<sup>38</sup>

Joan Antide, who never hesitated to **“run immediately”** as soon as she heard of the need for some service, even when to show herself in public could mean risking her life, reminded her daughters that **“at the first groan of the sick poor they must fly to their aid.”**<sup>39</sup> The service they must render to the poor takes precedence over all the rules. According to St Vincent:

*“Charity is a great lady. It is necessary to obey whatever she orders. This is called **leaving God for God.***

*You do not lose anything in leaving prayer and Mass for the service of the poor, since to serve them is going to God, that God whom you must see in poor persons.”*<sup>40</sup>

Joan Antide’s Rule is not afraid to state that:

*“The Sisters of Charity will generously prefer **service of the poor** to private devotions, **even exercises prescribed by the***

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference 21.

<sup>39</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Rule of 1820*, 189.

<sup>40</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference 1.

**Rules** when these **unavoidably** coincide with the **urgent service** of the poor.”<sup>41</sup>

“The spiritual exercises will be done in common. However, if some Sister has been unable to take part because at that time she was serving the poor she will make up for this in private, if possible.”<sup>42</sup>

“The monthly retreat will be made privately, one after the other, because if all were to do it together **the poor would lose too much.**”<sup>43</sup>

In this faith-inspired point of view they also sensed what Joan Antide had relinquished in her life, and what she demanded. It is necessary to leave family, a way of life and comforts:

“In order to consider ourselves not only as no longer having anything of our own, but as if **we no longer belong to ourselves.**”<sup>44</sup>

“Nothing will have been done,” according to St Vincent, “if everything has been given up, but not ourselves.”<sup>45</sup>

It is only someone who lives in this freedom who can love and serve unconditionally, without delay, with respect, with patience, and absolutely gratuitously.

“This renunciation of self is not necessary for persons **totally given to God and the service of the poor** who are bound by their state to make difficult sacrifices which cost so much to nature, without seeking themselves in a purely natural manner, without hope of enjoying human acknowledgement nor receive any recompense other than that which comes from God alone. Such perfection for the souls who **for enclosure have only obedience, for a cell a common room, the streets of the city, the wards of a hospital, for a grille the fear of God, for veil, holy modesty, but nonetheless have to live in the midst of the world as if they were not there, preserve angelic purity, spread the good odor of Jesus Christ everywhere, and practice the sublime virtues of the cloister in the midst of dissipation and scandal.**”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Rule of 1820*, 259.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>44</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Preliminary Discourse to the Rule*, LD 7.

<sup>45</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference 2.

<sup>46</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Rule of 1820*, 270.

In this text, as in others, Joan Antide hands on her personal experience, re-lives it. From way back at the time of discerning her vocation, through the contemplative life and life in the service of the poor, from the years passed during the Revolution, up to her journeying through the streets of Paris carrying hidden in a backpack the vestments needed for the secret celebration of Mass, or on the paths through the woodlands of Sancey, to her time in a hospital as a Daughter of Charity, she hears again the words St Vincent used to repeat to his Daughters: she had recorded it in her soul.

*“Your monastery is the house of the sick, your cell is your rented room, your chapel the parish church, your enclosure is obedience, the grille is the fear of God, the veil holy modesty.”*<sup>47</sup>

This detachment allows the Sister of Charity to live her own consecrated identity in freedom, to feel herself ready **“to go across the sea, to go to the roof of the world.”**<sup>48</sup>

*“I will go beyond the seas? Oh, I know, my Daughters, that you would be ready to do so. Even if you know that there is no possibility of coming back, you would not delay your departure by one minute.”*<sup>49</sup>

It allows her be able to say:

*“I no longer belong to a place, to another person, but to every place to which God will be pleased to send me. I belong to God alone.”*<sup>50</sup>

*“Without any reflection — be it near or far — we used to think: there where God is, is enough for us.”*<sup>51</sup>

*“We have heard the voice of our neighbour who is everywhere; we have heard the voice of the poor who are members of Jesus Christ and are our brothers; **in whatever country they are found they must be equally dear to us.**”*<sup>52</sup>

Joan Antide did not, in the literal sense, “cross the seas,” but she did travel far afield, imagining the difficulties she would have encountered in “a foreign country, where an unknown language was spoken, where she had to welcome and form foreign young women.”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>47</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference 111.

<sup>48</sup> JOAN ANTIDE, *Suprema testimonianza*, LD 632.

<sup>49</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference 48.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, Conference 1.

<sup>51</sup> JOAN ANTIDE to Mgr Lecoq, LD 225.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, *Circular 1812*, LD 73.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, *Circular 1811*, LD 60.

Far from her homeland, with gratitude in her heart for the approval she received from the Church for her community, but torn by the separation from her daughters, **she died in Naples on 24 August 1826**. After more than one hundred years the link was re-established.

In her the Church recognized Jesus Christ announcing the Good News to the poor, welcoming and serving the small and the humble, and beatified her on **23 May 1926** and canonised her on **14 January 1934**. The statue of this humble daughter of St Vincent is in place in St Peter's, among those of founders. Her sisters are spread **throughout the world in twenty-seven different countries**.

### **K E Y**

#### **to quoted texts relating to the Sisters of Charity**

- **The Rule of 1820, (approved by Pope Pius VII)**
- **LD: Lettere e documenti, Santa Giovanna Antida Thouret, Fondatrice delle Suore della Carità, 1765-1826** (a collection of the correspondence, factual memoirs, the memoirs of St Joan Antide Thouret, the manuscript of Sr Rosalie Thouret, niece and secretary of St Joan Antide)
- **ASCB: Archivio delle Suore della Carità di Besançon** (Journal-diary of Bacoffe)

(Translation: THOMAS DAVITT, C.M.)

# 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

CLAUDE LAUTISSIER, C.M.

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.

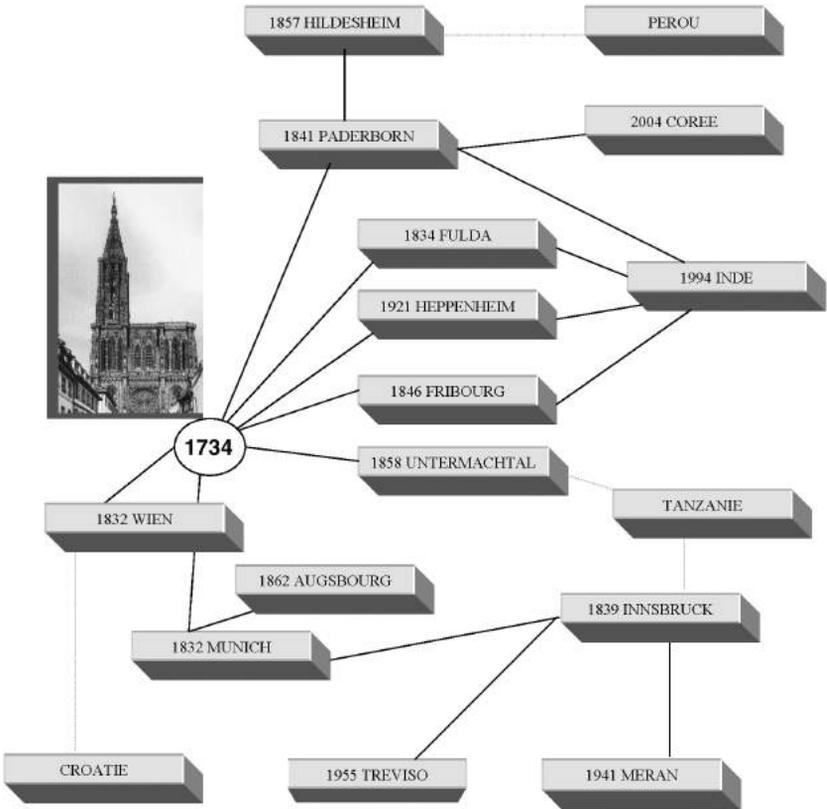
Together with all the members of the Vincentian family, and all the Vincentian organizations in the world, the Foundation and the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg are conscious of the interdependence of the problems of poverty and the various crises which afflict our world. In faithfulness 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)



Motherhouse  
and Chapel  
of Tousain  
Street





**Expansion in the world**

NB: Peru, Tanzania and Croazia are Provinces of the same Congregation

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# Servants of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Poor

by Clara Estela Sánchez Olivas

*Servant of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Poor*

***“Let us speak about Saints to forge Saints”.***

SAN JOSÉ MARÍA DE YERMO Y PARRÉS



St Jose Maria de Yermo y Parres

San Jose Maria Yermo Parres knew how to live his life. He understood that Holiness is a life long task. The saints teach us that it is possible to live the Gospel fully, and that the message of Jesus is current and demanding today. Father Yermo, a Mexican priest, forged his holiness in the service of the poor under the charism of St. Vincent De Paul.

The spirit of Vincent entered Jose Maria's soul as a young child. The priests of the Congregation of the Mission, known as "paules" served in the parish of St. John of God, near the house where Jose Maria was born. Fr. Vincent

Andrade was a good friend of Jose Maria's family. Fr. Andrade writes: "I remember quite well around the year 1860 when many times I saw Dr. Manuel de Yermo, Jose Marias's father, his aunt Carmen, and little Jose attend daily the early Eucharist which was celebrated in St. John of God parish."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Testimony of Canon Vicente de P. Andrade, Mexico, November 30, 1904, APY, Doc. 4848/61, cit. in *Posito Super Virtutibus*, Vol. I, p. 118.

Jose Maria probably learned about St. Vincent from these good priests. Undoubtedly very early on in his life he saw the image of Vincent with a tender and compassionate heart, who not only was moved by the poor, but also saw in them the face of Christ. That image penetrated his heart and, as soft rain, grew in him a love for the poor and a desire to become a priest.

St. Vincent was there, the foundation of everything that Jose Maria de Yermo y Parres did in his service to the poor during his whole life. When Fr. Jose Maria died Fr. Javier de Irazabal said about him in a letter: "Tomorrow we come to the end of nine days of mourning for all of us who knew the distinguished gentleman, wise and heroic present-day Vincent de Paul, the presbyter Don Jose Maria de Yermo y Parres."<sup>2</sup>

### **Who is Jose Maria de Yermo y Parres?**

He was born November 1, 1851 in Jalmolonga, the State of Mexico, the son of Dr. Manuel de Yermo y Parres, and Mrs. Josefa Parres de Yermo. The Yermos trace their roots to the Mountains of Burgos in Spain. They came to the new world in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century preserving their noble lineage.

Josefa, his mother, died just fifty days after he was born. His father returned to Mexico City and asked his sister Carmen to take care of little Jose Maria. Despite being an orphan, he received all the tenderness and discipline which characterized the Yermo family.

Jose Maria learned from his aunt Carmen, from his father, and from his grandmother what it means to be a committed Christian without fanaticism. It was in the family where those two great loves of his were grounded and which would last his whole life: his great love for God, and the service of the poor.

His first education came from private teachers and later on in private schools. In 1864 he received from Emperor Maximilian a medal of honor as a distinguished alumni. During these early educational years he became a friend of Juan de Dios Peza, the distinguished Mexican poet. They were friends all their lives. When Jose Maria died, Peza wrote: "We were intimate friends since we were twelve years old and our friendship lasted for forty years without any interruption."

He entered the Congregation of the Mission when he was fifteen years old. His contemporaries in the community speak about his virtues.

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<sup>2</sup> Letter of Javier de Irazabal, Atlixco, September 28, 1940, APY, Doc. 2858/33, cit. in *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Vol. II, p. 1599.

One of them, Carlos Jesus de Mejia, Bishop of Tehuantepec, says about him "The time we lived in the house of La Valenciana, Guanajuato, Yermo was the youngest of the novices, and despite his physical weakness he was very observant of the rule. He would get up every day at four o'clock in the morning for morning prayers and the Eucharist, always prayerful and devoted. Besides his natural talents, he had a great dedication to the study of the Scriptures. All the teachers loved him, because in him one could see those virtues and education which he received from his parents. His demeanor was elegant, but at the same time simple and kind which always inspired trust and love.... He was a friend to everybody and always ready to serve all....

There was always somebody who would try to mortify him as often happens with those who stand up. On one occasion he gave us a great example of humility and obedience. There was a novice who had a very bad character. He was given the task by the Master of Novices to assign jobs to the other novices. One day he asked Jose Maria to carry several heavy water jars for a number of hours. When he thought he had finished his job, Jose Maria let it be known that he was tired. The novice in charge, knowing that Yermo had a weak constitution and could not do much physical work, ordered him to carry the water jars all over again saying: 'Now you will get your body used to mortification.' All of us who witnessed that felt angry and we wanted to help Yermo, but he would not allow it saying: 'No, I am glad, because this is what the Lord is asking me to do, and I want to do His will no matter how much it costs.'<sup>3</sup>

Yermo came to the Congregation of the Mission in 1867, the same year that Maximilian ordered the execution of Benito Juarez on Las Campanas hill, in Queretaro. These were hard days for Mexico. The Reform Laws were strictly implemented. These circumstances were not favorable to any religious congregation. The Vincentians, as many other religious orders, suffered persecutions, expropriations, and exile of many of its members.

Yermo professed vows in the chapel of the Our Lady of Carmel in Toluca, November 10, 1869 at eighteen years of age.

After his profession, the superiors, knowing that he had qualities for further study, sent him to the Mother House in Paris where he would continue his studies. In the little time he was there, all saw in him a virtuous, pious, religious and very studious person. When he returned to Mexico in 1870 he participated with great enthusiasm in the Vincentian missions of the province. Father Vicente Andrade says

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<sup>3</sup> Testimony of Bishop Carlos de Jesus Mejía, APY, Doc. 4807/61, cit. in *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Vol. I, p. 116.

of him: "I was privileged to go on missions with young Yermo, then in Minor Orders. We all admired his great work in catechesis and preaching. We knew that his health was not good, to the point that many of us thought that he would not live long."<sup>4</sup>

Added to his poor health, he suffered at that time a vocational crisis. He decided to return to his family home, when he realized that this was not his vocation. It was with great pain he decided to leave the Congregation of the Mission. Undoubtedly, the difficult situation in Mexico at that time influenced his decision. Yermo separated himself from the Congregation of the Mission, but he was never separated from the spirit of Vincent. In his heart the flame of being a priest in the service of the poor burned constantly.

With the advice of a good friend, Father Miguel Arizmendi, and with the approval of the Bishop, Jose Maria Diez de Sollano y Dávalos who was his uncle, he entered the seminary of Leon, Guanajuato. There he continued his priestly formation and was ordained a priest in the Guanajuato cathedral in August 1879.

He was given several important positions in the Chancery. He was seen by many with a very promising ecclesiastical career.

After Bishop Diez de Sollano died, the new Bishop showed a certain animosity towards the chancery work of Yermo, and asked him to serve as chaplain to a couple of chapels nearby. At the beginning Yermo resisted this sudden and unjust change in his ministry; but in prayer soon discovered God's will and a new pathway in the service of the poor.

One day, crossing the river on his way to the El Calvario chapel, he saw several pigs eating the remains of two little babies.

He was shocked and deeply affected. Before his eyes he saw clearly the terrible situation which Mexico was going through: illiteracy, misery, marginalization, ignorance, the exploitation of women. He felt in his heart that he needed to do something.

### **The Birth of the Congregation of the Servants of the Sacred Heart and of the Poor**

Near the chapel of El Calvario a retreat house was being constructed. Yermo, knowing that God was calling him to do something special to serve the poor, asked that this retreat house be converted into an asylum for the poor. And so, on December 13, 1885, with the help of four enthusiastic young women, the asylum

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<sup>4</sup> Testimony of Canon Vicente de P. Andrade, Mexico City, November 30, 1904, APY, Doc. 4848/61, cit. in *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Vol. I, p. 118.

was opened. The first poor to come presented a difficult situation since they were men and women, young and old. The building was very simple, but Father Yermo did his best to make of the building a dignified place for the poor.

These four women, and other women who later joined them, desired to be called sisters, and to wear a habit. Little by little Father Yermo realized that a new religious congregation was emerging.

In 1888 they asked him to found another asylum for seniors in Puebla. Then he realized that this new emerging religious community needed structures. He named Mother Conception G. Quevedo, Superior General, and he thought about giving the community a name. Everybody agreed on *Servants of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Poor*. This name would define the mission of the congregation.

The same year the city of Guanajuato suffered a great flood which reached even to the lands of Bajío. Father Yermo was present there helping people. In the words of the local newspaper: "Last night, during the height of the flood, and with water to his waist, Father Yermo went to all the places where there was danger. It looked as if he were multiplying himself.... He and others tried to sandbag the Garita river, but because of the force of the water, they had to abandon their work."<sup>5</sup> On this occasion Yermo showed his love and courage for all those who suffered so much during the flood. Because of it, the Governor of the State of Guanajuato, General Manuel Gonzalez, praised him as "Giant of Charity." After his death, somebody said that Father Yermo was a giant in all the aspects of his life.

### **Puebla the Home of his Work**

In 1889, due to the religious persecutions which were going on in Leon, he decided to move the seat of the congregation to Puebla, to the asylum where the seniors and other sisters lived. In 1891 he asked permission to be incardinated in the diocese of Puebla. His work grew with other foundations, not only in the State of Puebla but also in other parts of Mexico.

Father Yermo's objective was the evangelization and promotion of the poor, especially women. He knew that a well formed woman was the foundation of a just and Christian society. For this reason he required that in the schools and orphanages there should be an

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<sup>5</sup> Chronicle Letter of Leon, *El Tiempo*, Mexico, July 1, 1888, APY, Doc. 4973/87D, cit. in *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Vol. I, p. 374.

integral education which would cover the whole person in all its aspects, from its transcendent aspects to its most rudimentary and material, such things as domestic labor. He had a special love for the arts, and he enjoyed listening to the young girls play their musical instruments.

He did not neglect other sectors of society which were not protected:

“Charity will make you find in the poor the brother who has cried and suffered much, and you must know that those tears which you dried up with love, Christ Himself keeps as precious pearls of your crown. The Servants of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Poor shall not seek any recompense on this earth, but their treasure will be in heaven. For this reason they will find joy in the scorns, ingratitude, and reproaches they will receive from the poor seniors, because if everything you do will be pleasant, one may fear that your recompense will remain here on earth.”<sup>6</sup>

Father Yermo lived well the teachings of Vincent: “We must not judge the poor for their physical appearance, the way they dress, nor because of their personal qualities, because frequently they are rude and uneducated.... if you see the poor with the eyes of faith, you will realize that they represent the Son of God who also wanted to be poor.”

In 1894 in Puebla he opened the center, Christian Mercy, to house women who were falling into prostitution. In this house he built schools and workshops for orphan girls. He was able to accomplish all this because of his trust in God, and his wonderful disposition which attracted the generosity of many people in Puebla.

His apostolic zeal also included work with his brother priests. In 1886 he established a newspaper dedicated to the priests. He says: “I am glad to communicate to you that because of a lot of people who know me, I have already one thousand subscribers to the paper. I am the only writer and founder of the paper, *The Ecclesiastic Mexican Review*, which the Bishop entrusted to my care.”<sup>7</sup>

In July of the same year, he inaugurated in the house of Christian Mercy a printing press that he brought from Europe. He

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<sup>6</sup> JOSÉ MARÍA DE YERMO Y PARRES, *Conference on Charity for the Seniors*, Puebla (1890), APY, Doc. 4369, cit. in *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Vol. I, pp. 490-492.

<sup>7</sup> Letter of Father Yermo to Father José María Bueno Pando, Puebla, August 10, 1896, APY, Doc. 211/30, cit. in *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Vol. II, p. 902.

published a magazine dedicated to various topics. His objective with the printing press was to get young people acquainted with technology so that they could become productive members of society and also help the institution.

His missionary spirit brought him to team up with the Jesuits. When they took up the Tarahumara missions, he wanted his own religious daughters to be engaged in this work. He entrusted this work to the intercession of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to St. Joseph. In January 1904, with great humility and trust, he was able to establish the first mission in the village of Carichi, in the State of Chihuahua. He himself went there with the sisters for the first mission.

Having given his whole life to God and to the building of his kingdom on this earth, on the morning of September 20, 1904, after he asked the sisters to sing the Ave Maris Stella, he died. Many people in Puebla mourned his death since all recognized him as the Giant of The Poor. José María de Yermo y Parres never left us. His presence continues today in the works he left behind which have transcended time and space: That mustard seed, that I do not know how it came to my hands, was born and grew, and today it holds in its branches a great number of poor people.

This congregation is a work of God put in the hands of Father Yermo for the purpose of giving the love and mercy of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to all, but with a preferential option for the poor. It was born December 13, 1888 in the city of Leon, Mexico. From there it moved to Puebla and, strengthened by the love of its founder, it has extended to several places in Mexico. Before Father Yermo's death, there were several foundations in Merida, Yucatan; Teziutlan, Puebla; Tulancingo, Hidalgo, Cordoba, Veracruz; Ocotlan, Tlaxcala; Guadalajara, Jalisco; Irapuato, Guanajuato; Chihuahua, Chihuahua, and the first mission house in Tarahumara. After Father Yermo's death it continues to grow in other places in Mexico and other countries: United States, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Colombia, Venezuela, Chile, Italy and Kenya.

In all these places its members strive to live the charism of the Sacred Heart of Jesus through the intercession of Saint Jose Maria de Yermo y Parres. The mission of the Servants is to show the love and mercy of Christ in all their works: schools, orphanages, hospitals, mission fields and all their other ministries. In some places this service to the poor is especially visible in parish work. Father Yermo left the congregation the following motto: "God will Provide," and the experience of the Providence of God is constant in all its works.

Father Yermo is buried in Puebla de Los Angeles in the Central House of the congregation. There is also a museum in this house.

The Superior General is: **Sister Magdalena Sofia Juarez Nieto**

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(Translation: PRUDENCIO RODRIGUEZ DE YURRE, C.M.)

# Brothers of Charity

by René Stockman, F.C.

*Superior General*



Superior General of the Brothers of Charity  
with Cardinal Bertone, Secretary of State

## 200 Years

*On 28 December 1807, the canon from Ghent, Peter Joseph Triest founded the Hospital Brothers of Saint Vincent, later called the Brothers of Charity. The Congregation celebrates this joyous occasion during the jubilee, which will be opened on 28 December 2006 and closed on 28 December 2007. On that day, the two-hundred-year anniversary will be a reality.*

*There are many reasons to be grateful, but above all, our gratitude goes to God who wanted this Congregation and who*

*has blessed it with his mercy for the past 200 years. Therefore, this jubilee is an opportunity to express this gratitude by renewing our loyalty to our charism even more so than before.*

*Even after 200 years, the Brothers of Charity are still moved by charity from their motto: Deus Caritas est – God is love.*

## A simple start

Peter Joseph Triest was a priest from Brussels, where he was born in 1760. After about five years of living as a priest in hiding in Ronse, he was transferred to the parish of Lovendegem in 1803, where he founded his first congregation on 4 November of the same year, namely, the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary. His goal was to relieve the local distress together with this group of sisters: taking

care of neglected children and, afterwards, attending to the sick. This initiative did not remain unnoticed by the Church and civil authorities, and so Triest and his sisters were asked to take up the care of the incurably ill in the old Terhagen Abbey, where he arrived on 30 July 1805. The dedicated priest was rapidly becoming a well-known figure in Ghent, and, in 1807, he was granted the title of Canon of Saint Bavo and he became a member of the Commission of Civil Hospices and the Poor Relief Committee. On 12 December of the same year, he was offered the administration of the twelve "Small Hospices," where the poor elderly of Ghent were hospitalized. Through this function, he came in contact with the old men's home in the Byloke, where he found the standard of care to be absolutely disgraceful. In order to change this situation, he suggested to the Commission on 24 December that the administration should be put in the hands of a few dedicated young men. The proposition was accepted and, on 28 December 1807, he brought three young men to the Byloke: Joseph de Caster from Drongen, who was Father Triest's manservant and gardener in Lovendegem, Peter De Neve and Alexander Struyvelt, who were both from Lovendegem and weavers by profession. These three simple young men were assigned to clean up the retirement home and bring in a good spirit. On 2 January 1808, a fourth candidate came, Anthony Bleton from Etikhove, and the tasks were shared. For the group, which had 13 members already by the end of 1808 and which he called "Hospital Brothers of Saint Vincent," Triest wrote a simple religious rule, which he largely based on the rule of the Brothers of Sunday School from Courtrai, who were founded in 1761 by Father Van Dale and were also called Brothers of Charity. Triest gave his brothers the specific task to take care of the old and sick men and to do other charitable work in service of the poor and those in distress; for that reason they were called to religious life, and therefore they should strive for meekness, kindness, patience, moderation, obedience, purity, love for the poor and above all, love for God, in imitation of Saint Vincent de Paul.

Perhaps Triest was a bit hasty with his foundation and did not spend enough time on the formation of his first brothers, because after a year, the tide of the group's enthusiasm was turning. After the brothers took over the care for the mentally ill in the Alexian monastery in Ghent, which ended in complete failure, one brother after another left the group, so in May 1809, there were only two brothers left, who were more in doubt than they were certain. When Peter Truyens from Boutersem came, he made the tide turn again, until he abandoned the group a year later. It was not until Simon Jan De Noter came, a 61-year-old man who had been working with the Sisters at the Byloke hospital, that the Congregation would finally take off and that a novitiate period was introduced. On 21 November 1810, Simon De Noter received the habit as Brother Bernard, and so

did six other candidates. After a year of novitiate, on 26 November 1811, six brothers took their vows and Brother Bernard was elected superior of the group. Four years had gone by before a solid group of brothers could be formed. Canon Triest immediately gave the superior, Father Bernard, many responsibilities. Therefore, he can be considered the co-founder of the Congregation. When the brothers took over the care for the mentally ill in the crypts of Gerard the Devil's Castle in Ghent, there were 15 brothers already, and when Father Bernard died in 1832, he left a group of 69 brothers, who were active in Ghent, Froidmont, Bruges, Antwerp and Louvain. When the Founder, Canon Triest, died on 24 June 1836, the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary and the Hospital Brothers, who had changed their name to the Brothers of Charity, as well as the Brothers of Saint John of God and the Sisters of the Childhood of Jesus were his religious heirs. Their task as sisters and as brothers was to further develop the exceptional charism of this inspiring priest. Four different stories were born, all starting from *caritas*.

### **A steady growth**

The intention not to be bound to Ghent alone, even without the formal approbation as a Congregation, was proven when Triest sent a small group of brothers to Froidmont in the province of Hainaut to work in the existing psychiatric hospital of Saint Charles. Besides health care for the elderly and the mentally ill, the brothers had also started a teaching program in the Byloke in 1814, which slowly grew into a well-functioning school that already had 400 students in 1820. In 1821, Triest set out to found a school for deaf-mute boys, as an equivalent of the girls' school, which was started up by the Sisters of Charity in 1820. After a number of brothers received their training for this special education, the school for deaf boys was opened in Ghent in March of 1825. So, in no less than 18 years, the ground-work was laid for the different apostolic works of the Brothers of Charity: care for the elderly and the mentally ill, education for working-class children, and education and training for disabled children. With these three large apostolic fields, the Brothers of Charity would continue to develop themselves: health care, education and disability care.

After the rough start, Triest continuously emphasized the importance of a good formation, both religious and professional. For the religious formation, it was primarily thanks to Father Bernard that the brothers became truly religious, based on the monastic tradition and with a strong Cistercian influence. The combination of Bernard's contemplative approach and Vincent's *caritas* was ideal for Triest to lead a religious life, as it was intended to be after the French Revolution. That which he specifically gave as a rule to the

Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary, namely that they should link contemplation to action, he let his co-founder, Bernard, work out for the Brothers of Charity. But besides that, he attached great importance to the professional formation of his sisters as well as his brothers. He was not afraid of sending them to France or the Netherlands to undergo further training in special education for the deaf and the blind. For the care of the mentally ill, he called upon a young physician, Joseph Guislain, who became the first Belgian psychiatrist and who organized internal courses for the brothers and sisters in the psychiatric institutions in Ghent. When the act for the care of the insane was issued in 1850, these were the most advanced institutions in Belgium and therefore they were set as an example.

The approbation of the Congregation remained a large concern for Father Triest. The Sisters of Charity owed their approbation to a decree of Napoleon, who recognized them as hospital sisters. In 1816, they received pontifical approbation. For the Brothers of Charity, this was much more difficult. They could only count on a policy of tolerance by the local authority of Ghent. Approbation was not possible, not for the French government, nor for the Dutch government. It was not until Belgium became an independent country, and freedom of religion and association were entered in the constitution, that the Congregation could officially be recognized. In June 1831, all brothers made their profession in public and every impediment for further growth disappeared.

After Father Bernard died, he was succeeded by Father Aloysius, who was the headmaster of the school for the deaf in Ghent. When Father Triest died, Benoit De Decker became the General Director, who would run the Congregation along with the Father Superior. Canon De Decker was a wise man; he left the practical aspects of the administration to the Father Superior. However, this changed when Theodore De Cock came in 1859 and succeeded Canon De Decker, and demanded the everyday management. This was all the doing of Monsignor Delebecque, the Bishop of Ghent. It caused tension, which in the end led to the fact that Father Aloysius gave way to Father Gregory. The relationship with Father De Cock was ruined nonetheless, and that is why the bishop thought it would be advisable to reinstate Canon De Decker as Director. After three years, Father Aloysius was the Superior General again, until 1871, when he resigned because of his age. Meanwhile, it was peaceful again, but the brothers thought it was time to look for pontifical approbation, all the more because the brothers went to Canada in 1865 to work in a shelter for marginalized people in Montreal. There was a great interest in going abroad; this was reflected by the fact that, of a total of 223 brothers, there were 88 volunteers to make the crossing. In the end, four brothers were chosen and they left on 6 February 1865. During the first few years, they had to live in a very painful situation.

But their perseverance was rewarded when, in September 1867, the first Canadian brother made his vows. These brothers were under the authority of the Bishop of Ghent, which was not that appreciated in Canada, so from there, as well, there was pressure to strive for pontifical approbation. This would not come any time soon, because when the Bishop of Ghent was asked, he strongly protested.

The following Superior General, Father Nicholas, who succeeded Father Aloysius in 1871 and who had been the headmaster of the Byloke school in Ghent until then, had to deal with some internal issues first, one being the poor financial policy. He tried to reorganize with great effort, and, at the same time, he started accepting young people who wanted to prepare for brotherhood. After only five years of leading the Congregation, this dedicated superior died. The young brother, Amedeus Stockmans, 32 years of age and the local superior in Froidmont, was his successor. He would lead the congregation from 1876 until 1922 as a peerless superior.

Thanks to his policy, the Congregation would develop on an international level. It received pontifical approbation and the number of brothers grew to over 1000. For the recruitment and the formation of the brothers, Father Amedeus developed the *juvenates*. The teachers' training college in Mol became the centre of education for the brothers. Because of the resistance from the Bishop of Ghent, Father Amedeus had to prepare the documents for the pontifical approbation secretly, but thanks to the nuncio's support, he managed to get the documents approved in Rome. Consequently, the Congregation was recognized as a pontifical congregation on 20 March 1888. The decree of approbation came on 22 April 1899, so the Congregation could enter the new century as an institute of pontifical rite.

In addition to the religious rule came the extensive "Practices and Customs," in which the more practical regulations for convent life were stated.

When the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Congregation was celebrated, the Superior General went to Rome, where he was received in audience by Pope Pius X. He was able to make a very positive report on the Congregation: approximately 1000 members, taking care of 7000 sick people, 1000 children and disabled people, and teaching 10,000 students.

Since 1882, there were also brothers in the United Kingdom, since 1894 in the Netherlands, and, in 1911, it was decided to send the first brother missionaries to the former Belgian Congo. Brother Gabriel Vermeersch remains fixed in our memory as a pioneer, a very talented brother who not only gave shape to the profile of the brother missionary, he truly lived it, as well.

Father Amedeus died on 15 September 1922. He was responsible for no less than 46 new foundations. His successor, Father Philemon, lacked the fatherly warmth of Amedeus, yet he quickly revealed himself as a true religious manager. He put a lot of energy in the formation of the brothers and in the modernization of the apostolic works. From 1925, new foundations were rapidly set up in Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Indonesia, South Africa and India. Even China was on the list, but it could not be realized due to certain circumstances. The years of the war were rough years for the Congregation, as well. The multitude of difficulties, faced mainly by our large institutions, was followed with great care by the aging Father Philemon. At the same time, he repeatedly expressed his concern about the way of life of the brothers, who could not always follow the rule strictly because of the war situation. On 24 December 1945, he died and was succeeded by the headmaster of the Teachers' Training College in Zwijnaarde, Brother Warner De Beuckelaer. This gentle man was faced with the huge task of rebuilding the Congregation and restoring religious observance. A lot of attention went into guiding the brothers personally, stimulating their life of prayer, and recruiting new members. At the end of his second mandate, he was completely overstrained, which is why the Dutchman Brother Conrad Reichgelt was elected during the chapter of 1958. It was a quiet chapter and no one was expecting any major changes in the near future. Father Conrad, however, was a man of clear vision and there was no one who could understand the signs of time like he could. When the Church announced the Council, Father Conrad understood that this would be of great importance for the Congregation.

During the chapter of 1964, also known as the renewal chapter, the choice was made to create clarity as an apostolic Congregation with regard to the many conventual customs, and several substantial adjustments were put forward. The "Practices and Customs," which set the lines of conduct for almost 100 years, were abandoned and replaced by an adapted Constitution and Directorium. A wind of change was blowing through the Congregation and, as is often the case, some thought it was not happening fast enough, while others mourned what was lost. Steering all this in the right direction was very demanding for the Superior General, even too much so. It meant that also this brother had to resign early due to ill health. In 1967, he was succeeded by Brother Agnel Degadt, who was the first Superior General to leave Belgium and take up residence in Rome. Again, this reflected clearly that the Brothers of Charity were growing into a true international group. Brother Agnel, who remained the Superior General for nine years, started with enthusiasm and continued Brother Conrad's work with insight and determination, but after a few years, he found that a part of the vision of unity had been lost.

In 1976, he was succeeded by his Vicar-General Brother Waldebert Devestel, who was in charge of the Congregation for no less than 24 years. During this period, he saw the Congregation halved, especially because there were no vocations in the West; but on the other hand, he reached the South and the East with new foundations, mainly in Asia. Letting the Congregation's charism grow in these countries was a very bold venture. His chief occupation, however, became rewriting the Constitutions in the spirit of Vatican II. The result was a contemporary document, where the Brother of Charity could discover its singularity again, and all this was expressed in current terms. On 24 June 1986, these Constitutions were ratified, which was a true confirmation of the ever-optimistic Superior General Brother Waldebert. At the same time, he was able to start a thought process among the brothers to fathom the charism of the Congregation.

In the year 2000, he was succeeded by Brother René Stockman, the former provincial superior of Belgium. He continued the internationalization policy, with much attention to the formation of the young people and the development of new apostolic works in the South and in the East. He also opened the beatification process of the Founder, Peter Joseph Triest. In 2002, he received, from the Vatican, the ratification for the approbation of the Associate Members of the Brothers of Charity.

### **Brothers of Charity today**

Today, the Brothers of Charity are represented in 25 countries on four continents. What began as a little seed in Ghent, blossomed into a tree with many branches. The Brothers of Charity try to live their charism everywhere in the Church and in the world by bearing witness to God's love and by spreading this culture of love, preferably in places where love is not very evident. The charism of the Congregation can best be summarized by means of both our names: Hospital Brothers of Saint Vincent and Brothers of Charity, and results from our motto: God is love.

First and foremost, we are brothers who want to live our brotherhood as a personal vocation. In a time where individualism, impersonal hierarchic structures and discrimination based on race, religion and origin separate people from each other, we just try to emphasize and live this closeness as brothers. By living this brotherhood among one another and by extending this brotherhood consistently in all our relationships, we try to set an example and, at the same time, be an invitation to help build a solid society, in which love, respect and solidarity are the most important values. We are Brothers of Charity who want to immerse ourselves in the evangelical

reality: God is love. The love for each other and for all without exception, with special attention to those who do not experience love or in whose life love has diminished, is the reflection of this divine love to which we want to open ourselves every day as Brothers of Charity. It is a love that will express itself through compassion in effective works of mercy. In our care for the poor, the sick, the disabled and the youth, we want to convert this love into professional care, guidance and education. So, in this way, we want to give new hope to everyone who is in our care and, to use the words of our Founder, open the perspective of resurrection in their lives. Hospitality is very closely linked to love; it is a consequence of love. Hospitality means that we open our hearts and our houses to those who are looking for someone who listens, someone who encourages, someone who cares. The family atmosphere in our facilities and homes reflects this attitude.

Our Founder gave us Saint Vincent de Paul as our patron saint, as a reminder that our care and our effort should preferably go out to the poorest, the less privileged, the marginalized and the neglected. Vincent is rightly called the patron of charity, and developed a whole new vision and praxis towards relief for the poor. He stated that respect for the poor person should always be primary, that we should serve the poor in love, and that we should see and love the person of Jesus himself in the poor. Today, it remains quite a task to concretize this vision in the many situations where the Brothers of Charity are involved in the care for the poor. In Europe (Belgium, the Netherlands, England, Ireland, Romania and Ukraine), in Africa (Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa), in Asia (India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan), as well as in America (Canada, USA, Brazil and Peru), the Brothers of Charity take care of the disabled, the mentally ill, other people in distress (persons with AIDS, drug addiction, or difficulties in coping with life, etc.), and the education of young people. From a fundamentally loving and professional attitude, they join forces with many co-workers to give appropriate answers to specific emergency situations. Many initiatives in the South were made possible thanks to a vibrant solidarity within the Congregation, which reveals itself through shared manpower as well as the sharing of financial resources that are placed at our disposal. Also the formation of the young people is one of our priorities in order to ensure quality care and guidance into the future. With about 600 brothers and novices, about 70 associate members and more than 15,000 co-workers worldwide, the Brothers of Charity try to continue the charisma of their Founder in the service of the poorest, thereby proclaiming the joy of the resurrection to them. To express it in the words of the general mission statement: "In this way, we want to improve the quality of life and contribute to a more humane

society where there is room for the poor and the weak. By this unconditional commitment, we hope that all whom we meet on our way may see a reflection of God in us and may experience the joy of the resurrection in their life.”

### Some inspiring texts

*“As a result of this privileged choice, you are called to follow the Lord in his difficult and painful life, in his zeal for the glory of his Heavenly Father and the salvation of souls; as also to imitate his affability, his compassion for those who are in need, every type of sick and infirm who came or were brought to Him and whom He cured, if they or those who brought them to Him had faith in Him”* (Father Triest when he presented his original rule to the brothers in 1809).

*“My third duty, besides teaching and setting the example, is my service: I must offer you my watching, my care, my work, my repose, not just once but always, night and day. Call me as you please, and do not spare me nor fear to disturb me as I feel happy when, after the example of Jesus Christ, my Lord, I can give you my repose, my health and even my life”* (Sermon by Father Triest, delivered in Ronse in January 1803).

*“We shall nurse the sick humbly and respectfully, seeing them as though they were the suffering Christ himself. If certain diseases repel you, then you must rely on your strong faith, and see Jesus in the person before you. With the eyes of faith we shall serve the sick zealously and fervently. It is true that people have a natural aversion to the fulfillment of this task. But love should take nature’s place. Love should give us the strength to banish all those feelings of sadness and revulsion. Love gives one strength that nature cannot give”* (Father Triest).

*“It rather seems that Christ lived for the poor only: He was always among them. So, in all humility, you are another Christ when you go out to the needy, the needy in body, in intelligence or in heart, the needy in spirit. You are another Christ when you nurture them with bread, with knowledge or goodness, when you help them open up to God’s grace”* (Father Triest).

*“I do not think that it is exaggerated to quote the Holy Scripture and say: ‘You are Gods on earth!’ For, indeed, you do as God’s providence does, since you feed the poor of Jesus Christ, you make manna descend on the hungry, you give drink to the thirsty. You are aware of the sad state of the unlucky, the poor, and ill people who never get to enjoy a day of pleasure, for whom, one is inclined to say, the sun never seems to shine. The earth seems to produce flowers for the rich alone, and only thistles and thorns for the poor. Unlucky are they who are deprived of everything, who resemble the dead more than they do*

*the living. To provide clothes for these people, which they can use to cover themselves, to prepare medication by means of which you can, if not cure them, at least ease their suffering, to offer them a bed and to fluff their pillow so that they might lay down their hurt and ill body, to cleanse and bandage their dirty and smelly wounds in order to invigorate them, is that not to make the sun shine for them, to create a new earth? Is that not to raise them from the dead?"* (Letter of Father Triest to the Sisters of Charity, 1828).

*"The particular community you have chosen is the Congregation of the Brothers of Charity. This association does not exist for itself, for God directs it towards men. Their lives are filled with joy and suffering. Sometimes this suffering is very painful, inexplicable and hard to bear. As a Brother of Charity, you are filled with sympathy for men touched and disfigured by suffering"* (Rule of life, number 13).

*"You believe in the intrinsic value of every human being, even of the most abandoned and afflicted one, so often deprived of joy and hope. By your compassion for the poor and the suffering, you discover the very secret of your vocation as a Brother of Charity. It is only in the acceptance and sharing of suffering, in other words, by love, that you enter the Kingdom of Heaven which is close at hand, in our midst"* (Rule of life, number 16).

*"Your time, your talents, the riches of your heart, your engaging goodness, all belong to those who are bereft of such gifts. The man who is deprived of love finds it in you, the less endowed share in your knowledge, the sick and the infirm are sustained by your health and physical strength. Youth will respond to your simplicity and readiness to serve others, which coupled with your detachment, will inspire them in turn to work for the needy. Your poverty for Christ offers the less gifted a new chance of life; he becomes even more your brother. Your face radiates the goodness of the Father"* (Rule of life, number 30).

*"As a Brother of Charity you are concerned about the values of the Gospel, there especially where the dignity of man is disregarded"* (Rule of life, number 36).

*"Brother, called as you are to the exclusive service of the Lord, Holy Church has conferred on you the special mission of fostering charity. This charity so absorbs you that it gives your community a particular spirit, a spirit which characterizes the work for the afflicted, as well as for the education of youth"* (Rule of life, number 43).

*"In the degree that your community is truly authentic, so will it be open to receive other members of society. The visitor to the community should be welcome and feel that he is accepted with consideration and mutual love, fruits of the Spirit. This communion of fellow-religious may be seen as a sign of brotherly unity. Thus the spirit of love existing*

*in your community will introduce the Lord to the neighbour, enabling him to believe the truth of God's message of peace" (Rule of life, number 47).*

*"Your prayer as a Brother of Charity has a distinctive character. You beseech God to heal the injuries of a disfigured world. You pray with the care of all those who themselves are unable to pray. You cannot separate your prayer from your apostolate" (Rule of life, number 57).*

*"God is love and in this love we are constantly renewed. Your disposition is one of intimacy and love. In company with the poor you experience the joys of a renewal which has already begun. Full of joy and hope, in spite of crosses and afflictions, you walk together with God's people towards the promised fulfilment. God who calls you is faithful and He will accomplish it" (Rule of life, number 80).*

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