

# STUDY

“MARTYR OF CHARITY”

## Blessed Sr. Rosalie (1786-1856)



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*“A martyr of Charity!”* The phrase comes from St. Vincent. He spoke one day to the Daughters of Charity of Sr. Marie-Joseph from Etampes, one of the first sisters, and said of her: *“This good daughter may be called a martyr of charity. Do you think that the only martyrs are those who spill their blood for the faith? For example, those daughters who went to find the queen, that is a martyrdom; for, while they did not die, they were exposed to the danger of death, and they did that willingly for the love of God; like so many good Daughters who have given their*

*lives in the service of the poor, that is a martyrdom.”*<sup>1</sup>

Sr Rosalie was of that kind. By her life, her works, her spirituality, she embodied this vision painted by the saint of charity; you could say that she was the perfect realisation of what he taught: *“Whoever gives her life for God may be deemed a martyr. And it is certain that your lives*

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<sup>1</sup> COSTE X, 510.

*are shortened by the work which you do; and, as such, you are martyrs.*"<sup>2</sup> Even apart from the imperfect clichés which we have of her, a trained eye sees on her face the marks which indicate tenacity and strength: the set lips and the piercing eyes. How could one not think of the phrase of St. Luke: *Jesus resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem?*<sup>3</sup> This was an audacious woman who offered herself willingly. She is right at the heart of the "Vincentian 'do more.'"

Who is she?

What did she do?

What is the relevance of her message?

These are the questions we must consider.

### I. A soul that was out of the ordinary

Jeanne-Marie Rendu was born on 9 November 1786 in the village of Confort, in the Jura. She was the eldest of four daughters of whom one, Jeanne-Françoise, died young. The parents, owners of mountain land and of simple life, enjoyed a certain ease and were held in esteem in the area. They were a family of farmers living in a splendid house dominating the Jura foothills and the Valserine valley. Jeanne-Marie was baptised on the day of her birth in the parochial church of Lancrans. Her godfather by proxy was Jacques Emery, a friend of the family and a future Superior General of the Sulpicians in Paris. Her mother was a model of faith and charity; she raised her children after the premature death of M. Rendu in 1796. The child was seen to be lively, believing, good and mischievous, teasing, even capricious. She loved the poor.

The French Revolution, with the years of the Terror, was felt even in the little village of Confort. An uncle was shot in Gex. The priests, who refused to take the Constitutional Oath, had to hide themselves or emigrate to escape prison and the scaffold. Many were guillotined. The Rendu house welcomed those who fled. Once, it was the Bishop of Geneva, Msgr. Marie-Joseph Paget, who came seeking asylum. He served as the gardener and was known as Pierre. Jeanne-Marie was intrigued, since it seemed to her that this worker was not treated like the others. And so it was that she discovered that this gardener celebrated Mass. She did not dare to speak of what she had discovered. But one day, after an argument with one of her sisters, when her mother was about to punish her, she cried out: "If you punish me, I will tell everyone that Pierre is not Pierre." Mme. Rendu held back, conscious of the danger. If her daughter were to talk, the house would

<sup>2</sup> COSTE IX, 460.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 9:51.

be commandeered, the family and the hiding priests arrested and shot. I like what Sr. Elisabeth Charpy, who has presented the blessed on different occasions, has said on this subject: *With a tenderness touched with firmness, Mme. Rendu explained the situation to her little seven-year-old daughter. Though young, Jeanne-Marie was to share the family secrets. She would learn what she could and could not say. Her personality was forged during these rough years. Her Christian formation, received in the course of this difficult time, was solid. Jeanne-Marie was to remember her First Communion received at night during a Mass celebrated in the cellar.* In April 1793, the Bishop was able to return to Piedmont, to the house of the Vincentians in Turin. One was already 'part of the family.'

When the Terror was over, and minds began to calm down little by little, life resumed its normal course. Mme. Rendu, mindful of the education of her eldest daughter, sent her to the former Ursuline Sisters in Gex, on the recommendation of Sr. Suzanne, superior of the Daughters of Charity of the hospital there and a friend of Mme. Rendu. Jeanne-Marie remained in this boarding school for one year, then was moved to a boarding school for young ladies set up by the clergy of Carouge, near Geneva. She developed intellectually, without ever being an intellectual.

But she had one desire only, to join the hospital where the Daughters of Charity of Gex took care of the sick. An idea arose; to spend six months with the sisters in order to take care of the sick. It was a first turning point and then an event is going to hasten her decision. Jeanne-Marie learned that Armande Jacquinot, a young girl from Lancrans, a village near Comfort, was about to leave for Paris to become a Daughter of Charity. She now had only one desire: to join her there. Jeanne-Marie jumped at the occasion and begged her mother to let her leave. Even the habit of the sisters attracted her! Having questioned the parish priest, Dean of Gex, Mme. Rendu, happy but very moved at the vocation of her daughter, agreed to her request. She left her home and her countryside of Gex forever, with no particular state of mind, happy to be already on her way.

Presented by her godfather, M. Emery, the friend of her grandfather, who lived as a layman on the Rue St. Jacques, she met with Mother Deleau, Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity; on 25 May 1802, she entered the novitiate of the Motherhouse, still at Rue du Vieux Colombier in Paris.<sup>4</sup> She was about to turn 16.

The restoration of the sisters to their full rights led to a tightening of the Rule. A lot was expected of each person; in face of the dispersion

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<sup>4</sup> 11 Rue du Vieux Colombier, is today a station of the Paris Fire Brigade, near the church of St. Sulpice. The chapel had just been opened and the body of St. Louise had been brought there on 4 May of that year.

of the Priests of the Mission, M. Emery helped in the resurgence. He was Providence himself for his goddaughter: “*I regarded him as an oracle,*” she wrote. And he taught her this phrase, which has become memorable: *My child, a priest or a Sister of Charity must be **like a milestone** at the corner of the street on which all those who pass can rest themselves and lay down the burdens that they carry.*

The strong determination of the young novice to answer the demands of her new life and the lack of physical exercise took its toll on her health. She was extremely sensitive, physically and morally.<sup>5</sup> In this she was like the foundress of her congregation, Louise de Marillac. The doctor they consulted prescribed a change of air. Her godfather, M. Emery, suggested that they allow her some activity among the poor. They would be the ones to restore her balance. Her generous nature would find strength there; she would be “*completely given to God in the service of the Poor.*” So, Jeanne-Marie was sent to the house of the Daughters of Charity in the Rue des Francs Bourgeois. There she would have, as superior, an intelligent and understanding woman, Sr. Marie-Madeleine Tardy. As for herself, she received the name of Sr. Rosalie.

From then on, she was going to live and work in a neighbourhood, marked by extreme poverty. One needs to reread the work of Claude Dinnat which describes the famous Mouffetard neighbourhood. There were workers who were deprived of the freedom to work, at everyone's beck and call; unemployment was rife, insecurity total. It was the Paris of hunger. It was commonly considered that the population was savage, barbarous, nomadic, “*a people horrible to look at; haggard, jaundiced, weather-beaten.*”<sup>6</sup> To that could be added the cabarets, sources of drunkenness and fights, prostitution, theft and robbery. A high-risk neighbourhood, we would say today. Sr. Rosalie went to live in these backwaters, which is now the fifth arrondissement of Paris.<sup>7</sup>

She began by teaching, even if she herself had only rudimentary knowledge! She was able to teach the children of the poor to read and write and also visit the poor in their homes. This was her paradise. However, a trial awaited her: she was asked to help a priest who was considered mad, indeed, possessed. As soon as he approached her, she fled! It was a healthy reflex; almost at the same time, her obedience

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<sup>5</sup> She experienced palpitations and always had a slight fever but never surrendered her involvement with the poor. That is what saved her.

<sup>6</sup> LOUIS CHEVALIER, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses*, Paris, 1958.

<sup>7</sup> The territory reserved to Blessed Rosalie was, at that time, the 46<sup>th</sup> neighbourhood of Paris, the second of the 12<sup>th</sup> arrondissement (Faubourg St. Médard or St. Marcel or St. Marceau). The name, Mouffetard neighbourhood, comes from the old Roman road which goes towards Italy, via Fontainebleau and Lyons.

was tested. The Sister Assistant called her to the Motherhouse; she stayed there ten days, happy and devoted, but suddenly she was sent back whence she came by the Superioress General.

Dressed in a black cape — the habit had not yet been restored — young Rosalie, with emotion and profound joy, surrounded by the sisters of her community, committed herself for the first time by vows to the service of God and of the poor in 1807 at the age of 21. Witnesses were to speak of what seemed to emanate from her: fervour, courage, energy, dedication, which were all in conformity with her own nature, now transformed by grace. Sr. Rosalie was to work in the Mouffetard neighbourhood until her death in 1856, 54 years later.

## II. The period of work

She carried on regardless of the whims of the Emperor with regard to the accompaniment of the Daughters of Charity by the Superior General of the Priests of the Mission, M. Hanon. For her part, she took care, most of all, that the poor were served; these were “our lords and masters.” The rest was upheavals of history which was, in any case, heading for collapse. Of the Napoleonic era, she knew the downside especially.

After a brief interim with Sr. Tardy, she became superior while the community moved in the neighbourhood to the rue de l'Épée de Bois in 1817. The premises were bigger.

She had found her true vocation, to be a sister of the streets! She excelled at it and became a model.

She surrounded herself with devoted and efficient collaborators. She gathered together money, a great deal of money, to be used in the service of the poor.

She set up a real social services office which provided food, clothes and money. Her first collaborators were the Ladies of Charity.

The sick became her first priority; for example, in 1848, in a report sent to M. Étienne, Bursar of the Vincentians, she noted 475 visits to the sick. It was a sacred duty for her and her immediate companions.

She responded, tirelessly, to all the miseries of that time, and they were many. Misery had become a common place in the Paris of Louis-Philippe. The history of France records the revolts of 1830, of 1848.... She was above all the conflicts, a pacifying element. The terrible cholera epidemic of 1832, which ravaged those neighbourhoods, made her one of the most representative embodiments of Christian charity. Her famous “*parlour*” allowed her to exercise a real “*Ministry of Charity*.” Those who came grew daily more numerous, the priest in search of advice rubbed shoulders with the vagabond looking for help, the bishop there met the tramp, the Marshal of France came across

the fruit and vegetable merchant. Charles X, Queen Amélie, General Cavaignac, Napoleon III and the Empress Eugénie frequented her office. Many important people supported her undertakings, like Lamennais with whom she had frequent discussions. Later still, she no longer managed to dialogue with him; a mystery of souls which cross each other's path.

She did not criticize anyone's influence. What did it matter, as long as the poor benefited. In this, she was the exact copy of the life and works of St. Vincent and St. Louise.

To come to the aid of all those who suffered, and of the different forms of poverty, sister opened a dispensary, a pharmacy, a school (221 students and two sisters as teachers), an orphanage, a day nursery, a workshop for young girls and poor women, a youth club for young working women, and a home for the indigent elderly. Soon, an entire network of charitable works was combatting a misery which was constantly renewing itself.

She even came to the aid of several congregations: the Society of St. François Régis, poor priests, the Daughters of Our Lady of Loreto, the Augustinian Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary, young people seeking a vocation or direction, and many clerics who came to find her to listen to her advice, notably several sick, dismissed or despairing priests....

By the time of the revolution of July 1830, when she was 44, her outreach was immense. But she wanted to do yet more. King Charles X was headstrong and launched his famously unpopular ordinances which set off three days of rioting. An antireligious wave arose and some congregations were specifically aimed at: the Vincentians, the Missionaries de France, the Mission Étrangères and the Spiritans (Holy Ghost Fathers). One could say that the renown of the Daughters of Charity and their impact on society saved them all. Sr. Rosalie's house did not suffer from this murderous flame but it received the wounded and the dying, a real "ambulance"! It is said of Blessed Rosalie: "*Sister Rosalie did not leave the barricades.*" She was a white cornette in the middle of the fighting. She hid the revolutionaries; she took care of the wounded from both sides. But the years which followed the three glorious days were bad years; cholera appeared and took 18,000 dead, of whom 12,733 died in the month of April 1832. Even Casimir Perier, President of the Council, died in this epidemic. Especially in the years 1842 and 1846, the devotion and the risks taken by our blessed and her sisters fired the imagination. She was seen herself gathering the abandoned bodies in the streets. Furthermore, her fame quickly went beyond her own neighbourhood and reached the whole capital and even the provinces.

Under the July Monarchy, things got worse. The condition of the workers worsened; but new ideas were rising, the embryos of Catholic social action...

It was to be in the Mouffetard neighbourhood that she was to meet with a team of young men, including Emmanuel Bailly and Frederick Ozanam, two of the founders of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. They hoped to dedicate themselves to helping the poor, the workers and the sick. She would be for them a teacher who was most effective since she, a daughter of "Monsieur Vincent," was filled with the spirit of the founder. She indicated what families to visit, giving them, at least at the beginning, some money and good bread, offering them, without preaching or exhortation, practical and concrete advice. The influence of this sister was determinative in the development of the spiritual, charitable and social vocation of this newborn little Society of St. Vincent de Paul. This is not the place to go into the whole development but we can say, with the French National President of the Society, Jean Cherville, that she was, truly, the co-foundress: "*It was Sr. Rosalie, and no one else, who gave to the intellectual, to the thinker, to the man of prayer, Frederick, the practical dimension which he lacked.... In this sense then, yes, Blessed Rosalie Rendu has the right to the title of Co-Foundress of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.*"<sup>8</sup>

For the moment, she founded the day nursery St. Marcel, following an idea thrown out by a certain Marbeau, in order to take care of the new-borns of the workingwomen of the area. Today, it is clear that, for her time, this was a major innovation. And she remained working on all fronts.

For example, the Superior of Bon Sauveur at Caen sent her numerous persons to help. She herself sent sick people to Caen: 115 letters were addressed to this woman. They concern priests, "lost" religious, people lacking work. She knew every file, every case and indicated both treatment and the cost of lodging for them. Exactitude and organisation were her mistresses and queens. She never allowed herself to be overwhelmed by the enormous task. She knew how to surround herself with ever more numerous devoted and efficient co-workers. Gifts flowed in for the rich could not resist this persuasive woman.

She was now approaching 50 and her health changed, giving her constant colds and fevers which hampered her work. Sometimes exhausted, she never gave in. This woman was made of iron.

Then, 1848 erupted and the proclamation of the Republic overthrew the July monarchy. "*Paris is a volcano,*" Rosalie noted. Enthusiasm was all and one thought of a velvet revolution since there seemed to be such consensus between the Church and the State but one soon became disenchanted. On 15 May, it all collapsed and it was the end of a republic built on fraternity. On 22 June, the national workshops, considered a school of fanaticism and sedition, were

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<sup>8</sup> Les Cahiers Ozanam, No. 162-4/2003, page 6.



suppressed. The attack on the barricades by the forces of order was horrific, notably at the famous barricade of St. Antoine.

The cost was heavy: a thousand dead among the victors, several thousand among the insurgents and 11,000 deported or imprisoned. The height of the horror was the death of Msgr. Affre, struck by a bullet on the barricade of St. Antoine on 25 May. Sr. Rosalie was doing everything for everyone, once again. To those who berated her for her actions, she replied: *"I serve God."*

The most significant episode is represented by an engraving which is like "an image of Épinal"; she stops the revolutionaries who are seeking to kill an officer of the Civil Guard at her house: *"We do not kill here."* On bended knees, she wins grace for the man. And her home becomes a place of succour for the insurgents and the wounded; obviously she is always on the side of the weak, in the manner of St. Vincent.



She was even to resist General Cavaignac who would become President of the Council after the riots. And she was present, powerless but firm in condemning the method, at the departure of the insurgents (almost 4,000 of them) for Algeria and the Marqueses Islands, an action blessed, alas, by the clergy. Order reigned but injustice remained: *"Silence the poor,"* Lamennais stated. The year 1848 ended with the election, on 10 December, of the President of the Republic, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte. The Second Republic had only two years to live.

True to form, Sr. Rosalie stayed at her post and fought again against cholera. It ravaged all around.<sup>9</sup> After such events, she needed to tend to the orphans and take charge of the house at the orphanage on the Rue Pascal, opened by Mme. Jules Mallet and transferred to Ménilmontant: there were 79 children there. She helped too in the setting up of youth clubs (both for boys and girls) with the cooperation

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<sup>9</sup> At the Motherhouse of the sisters, coffins followed each other as many as three at a time; 52 Daughters of Charity died, while all the sisters of the Rue de l'Épée survived, bar one and she was the only one who did not have contact with the sick!



of the newborn Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the Brothers of Christian Schools. For girls who could not pursue their studies, she created workshops. Apart from the day nurseries, of which we have already spoken, she set up old people's homes, retirement homes before the term became popular. M. Dinnat seems to sum it all up in this pithy description: *There was nothing which existed in the area of charity, or of popular catechesis, of which this humble Daughter of Charity was not either the initiator or a much sought-after and ardent collaborator.*<sup>10</sup>

So we see what she had done with her community of eight or 12 sisters and the support of 42 sisters, passing trainees, whose names we know, since many postulants were confided to her. The years passed. Napoleon III decided in 1852 to give her the Légion d'Honneur: she was ready to refuse this personal honour but M. Étienne, Superior General of the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, obliged her to accept it.

We are now in 1854. Her health changed. She had to rein in her activities. She was practically blind, due to a cataract which would seem benign today. Operations were undertaken, but in vain. On 4 February, she was gripped by the fierce cold; the doctor diagnosed pleurisy... several hours of suffering followed and, at six in the evening, she received the Last Rites. The following day, 7 February, she passed away in her sleep.

Consternation was widespread. The entire neighbourhood came to the glowing chapel and the press announced it in headlines. The funeral took place on 9 February. An immense crowd thronged, emotional, recollected, as though paralysed, following the cross carried through the streets of Paris, what a symbol! as far as the Montparnasse Cemetery. Only one Vincentian followed the cortege.... There is a lot for us to consider in this official ostracism.... Her body was placed in the sisters' plot and some months later, in the face of fruitless searches by the public, they erected a tomb near the principal entrance; it is always visited and decked in flowers. Like God, the people know by instinct! On this absolutely simple grave, surmounted by a large cross, are engraved the words: *"To Sr. Rosalie, from her grateful friends, the rich and the poor."*

Always outside time, the Church takes her own time. The diocesan process lasted from 20 January until 10 February 1953. The Roman process opened on 24 November 1953 and on 9 November 2003, John Paul II proclaimed Sr Rosalie blessed.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> CLAUDE DINNAT, *Sœur Rosalie Rendu ou l'Amour à l'œuvre dans le Paris du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 189.

<sup>11</sup> News of this event can be found in the November 2003 issue of *Nuntia*, on the occasion of the beatification (editor's note).

### III. A message for our time



What does she teach us today? A great deal. I will summarize in some lessons that which each of you may extend in your own meditation.

1. *Firstly, the relevance of the dedicated life.* One will only succeed in life to the degree that one is open to others. To live for the poorest is the summit of Christian and Vincentian life. She embraces the teaching of her master, Vincent de Paul: "Affective love must become effective love, which is the exercise of the works of charity, the service of the poor undertaken with joy, courage, constancy and love."<sup>12</sup> She loved to carry "the burden of the poor,"

calling them by name, loving them for themselves and Christ Jesus. She knew, without any theorising, that in them hid the Christ who is always suffering and always worthy of love and respect. She sends us back to this vision which brings our true blessing, as Abbé Pierre, who is only taking up her message when he urges us to get off our couches and sets before us this evangelical call: "*Maybe we can surrender some of our comfort in order to make a place for those who have no comfort at all. It does not mean that we will lose our own, but will make it more worthy.*"<sup>13</sup> She was "totally given to the service of the poor," even to excess and in that she is an icon of Jesus Christ, living love "to the very end."

2. *This woman* — and it is interesting today to insist on this noun: "*this woman*" — also teaches us to help others to take responsibility. With her involvement with the poor in the Mouffetard neighbourhood, it was a whole system that was put in place. Rich, poor, intellectuals, lowly people, women, men, everyone was pressed into service. The poor are the masters of all and oblige one another to equality. She also teaches us to work in a network. We know today that the most effective actions are those which are collective in nature. Associations prove this. By allowing the young in particular to gather together in order to give a meaning to their faith by the foundation of the Society of

<sup>12</sup> COSTE IX, 593.

<sup>13</sup> A new challenge on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Challenge of Winter '54.

St. Vincent de Paul, Sr. Rosalie becomes a witness and a leader for our times. And, towering above all is respect. Dignity precedes help. To the sisters in her community and to the young students from the Sorbonne who came to help her, she constantly explained: *“Remember that the poor person is more sensitive to proper treatment than help. One of the major means of helping him is the consideration one gives him. Even if you have something with which to reproach him, studiously avoid all hurtful and cutting words.”*

3. *She transmits a prophetic witness.* Rosalie lived in a world of death and violence and misery. But she consistently shared in the joys and sufferings of her time. She lived out what John Paul II, in his document on consecrated life, said: *“In our world, where it often seems that the signs of God’s presence have been lost from sight, a convincing prophetic witness on the part of consecrated persons is increasingly necessary.... Prophecy derives a particularly persuasive power from consistency between proclamation and life.”*<sup>14</sup>

4. *Rosalie calls us to be inventive.* It is possibly in this regard that she most resembles St. Vincent and St. Louise. These two saints, faithful to events and to the needs of the poor, always responded in ways which were pertinent to the needs of their times; and so to did the sister of the Mouffetard neighbourhood. She invented, originated, created, concretised; as soon as she saw a need, she came up with an appropriate response, ready to shake up, even annoy, officials and superiors. She recognised only the needs of the poor and she knew that “charity is above all rules.” In this, she is deeply Vincentian. Who could forget M. Vincent paying, by an exile of six months, for the truths he told to the Cardinal Prime Minister, or the thanks he was given by the Council of Conscience, or even his wrangles with the clergy of Paris? True charity is always disturbing and unsettling. The poor stop honest people from dozing off!

5. *Who could forget that Sr. Rosalie was a person of prayer and that she sends us to our knees in contemplation of Christ?* As a true Daughter of Charity, she immersed herself daily in prayer and willingly went to in the chapel, either for the community exercises or for daily Mass. She knew M. Vincent’s “*leave God for God*” but if an emergency presented itself, she hastened to say “*Let us begin our prayer!*” Many of the sisters spoke of her doggedness in prayer and, especially, of her teaching. She, who was also Sister Servant, and who had not had much formal training, well knew how to “*draw out the lesson*” and “*encourage others to virtue.*” And she set humility, charity and simplicity above all. She loved to say that you had to be Christian before you were a Daughter of Charity. Both in this and in community life, she was an excellent formator. She calls us to a renewal of our

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<sup>14</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, 85.

community life. It is important to serve, but we must do so together, as a cell of the Church, in order to please God whom we contemplate in his chosen friends, the poor!

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Charity was her battleground. She suffered and was martyred for it. She calls us to what is best in our vocation: laity, priests, those living consecrated lives, we are all called to imitate her. Every martyr is a prophet and every prophet draws us towards the heights. Sr. Rosalie invites us to excel in following Christ the Servant, raised up in glory!

If I might conclude with some words of Sr. Elisabeth Charpy, who has written some wonderfully life-enhancing words on her:

*The great charity of Sr. Rosalie, which was recognised by all, found its source, at one and the same time, in her faith in Christ incarnate and in the richness of his humanity. Her meetings with all classes of society, allowed many people to discover the reality of misery and poverty and the limitations of "traditional charity." Sr. Rosalie thus helped bring about the birth of Catholic social action which would denounce the conditions of the working classes as a new form of slavery and the reduction of the worker to the level of a machine.... Every social action is rooted in an evangelical mysticism.*

Here we see the very essence of her message for today: our Vincentian action can never be anything other than evangelical.

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### Short Bibliography

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A larger choice of books is to be found at the end of his work.*

(EUGENE CURRAN, C.M., translator)