

Company of the Daughters of Charity (DC)



MOTTO:

***THE CHARITY OF JESUS CRUCIFIED
URGES US***

The Company, founded in France in the 17th century by Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, is known in the Church by the name of Company of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, Servants of the Poor.

Its beginnings were at the same time simple and unexpected, as Saint Vincent acknowledged: *"Who would ever have thought that there would be Daughters of Charity?... I did not think of it... God thought of it for you."*

Attentive to following Divine Providence and responsive to the working of the Spirit, Vincent de Paul became conscious of the material and spiritual misery of his time, and devoted his life to the service and evangelization of poor persons, whom he called *"our Lords and Masters."*

Saint Vincent de Paul was the pastor at Châtillon-les-Dombes in the diocese of Lyon (France) when he encouraged an act of solidarity which had a very significant historical repercussion. One Sunday during the summer of 1617, as he was preparing to celebrate the Eucharist, several women arrived and told him about the miserable condition of a family infected by the plague. Moved to compassion by this story of suffering, he recounted it to his parishioners in his homily, to help them be aware of the need to aid this family which was in such a critical condition.

The response of the parishioners in this town was very positive. They united together and went to the family to offer their assistance. Saint Vincent felt the need to organize this united action and assist

in its continuation. With this purpose in mind, he founded the Confraternities of Charity (1617), which quickly extended into the parishes in the villages and countryside, involving many charitable persons who wished to help those in need. Providentially, he met Louise de Marillac (1591-1660), who collaborated closely with him in his charitable work as animator of the Confraternities of Charity by visiting, guiding and accompanying the groups that had been established in the villages and cities.

In 1630, the Confraternities of Charity began to be organized in parishes of Paris. Soon difficulties arose about how to continue to serve the sick poor in their homes, as there were certain menial tasks that the ladies of the confraternities were unable to assume.

It was then that a simple young woman from the country, Marguerite Naseau (1594-1633) presented herself to Saint Vincent. Before coming to Paris and placing herself at the service of Louise de Marillac, she had devoted her time to going from village to village instructing children and young people in improvised outdoor schools. Several months before the Company of the Daughters of Charity was founded, Marguerite died of the plague in Saint Louis Hospital in Paris. She had contracted the illness from a sick women whom she had brought into her room and cared for in her bed.

Her entire life was a witness of her commitment and solidarity and also the cause of her death. Inspired by true evangelical love, she became the servant of the most abandoned. Vincent de Paul would later say of her:

"Marguerite Naseau from Suresnes was the first Sister who had the happiness of showing others the way... although she had almost no other teacher or schoolmistress but God."

Her example was contagious. It was in this way that, imperceptibly, in the manner of things divine, the Company of the Daughters of Charity was born. On 29 November 1633, the first Sisters gathered around Louise de Marillac to live their ideal under her guidance in community.

At first they nursed the sick poor in their homes, in the towns and villages; as needs became known, they cared for the sick in hospitals, little girls in need of instruction, foundlings, galley convicts, wounded soldiers, refugees, the aged, persons with mental illness, and others.

The monastery of the new foundation would be the houses of the sick, their cloister the streets of the city, their cell a hired room, their enclosure obedience, their grill the fear of God and their veil holy modesty. Their commitment to serve God in persons who are poor is ratified by the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and a specific vow of service of those who are poor. The Sisters renew their

vows each year on the feast of the Annunciation; each Sister associates her own gift of self to the *Fiat* of the Virgin Mary.

Saint Vincent wanted the true profession of each Daughter of Charity to be confidence in Divine Providence. He frequently repeated this in his conferences to the first Sisters.

In 1652, convinced that the charity of Christ, which must urge the Company, knows no boundaries, the Founders sent the first group of Sisters to Poland. Thus, at the time of the death of the founders in 1660, there were 74 foundations at the service of poor persons with 330 Sisters, all of whom were in France except for the six Sisters who had been sent to Poland.

On 18 January 1655, the Company was approved by Cardinal de Retz, Archbishop of Paris, and on 8 June 1668, eight years after the deaths of the Founders, it received pontifical approval from Pope Clement IX.

As time has passed, healthcare, education and social service ministries have developed for the Daughters of Charity, incorporating a spirit of solidarity, which has served as a role model for all European governments, who have confided to the Daughters of Charity the management of charitable institutions, public as well as private.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the Sisters' service of solidarity and assistance was carried out in France and Poland. In 1790, at the end of the age of Enlightenment, the Daughters of Charity arrived in Spain. During the 19th century, their presence extended into almost all of the countries in Europe and Latin America, in North America and much of Asia, as well as in several places in Africa and Oceania. In the 20th century, the Company continued its expansion throughout the whole world.

The gestures and witnesses of solidarity multiplied as a result of wars and epidemics. The Sisters aroused particular attention in the events of Constantinople where they were called *Angels of Mercy* by the Turks. There, the Sisters cared for Muslims as well as Christians in health dispensaries as well as in hospitals, soup kitchens, orphanages and schools.

In 1888, the historian Gabriel Jogand Pagés, in his book *Popular History of the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul*, described the history of Nursing and the International Red Cross, recalling the presence and availability of the Sisters who assisted those who were ill or injured in wars and disasters.

Today, the Company is international and is currently present in 94 countries. The number of Sisters is 21,002, divided into 2,509 communities and 77 Canonical Provinces.

The diversity of services of the Daughters of Charity is as great as the diversity of poverty in the world. Wherever there is human suffering, situations of misery, injustice, lack of solidarity... that is where the Daughters of Charity want to be present.

In fidelity to the charism of its Founders, the Company casts its gaze into the future, attentively listening to the cry of those who are poor, with a heart open to the forms of poverty in the world today, in order to respond with courage in new ways, with "*creativity in charity*"¹ to the calls that come from "*here and there*."²

The Company wants to be a helping hand, ready to collaborate in the eradication of misery and injustice that disfigure the face of God in human beings. It is ready to respond and serve, following the example of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel, whose compassion moved him to act in the face of suffering and pain that strikes those who are poor. The Company wants to be the prophetic voice of one who announces something new and decisive: "The Reign of God is near and it is for those who are poor."

Today as in the past, the Company knows that it is sent into the world to continue the mission of Jesus Christ, since "*at the school of the Son of God, the Daughters of Charity learn that no type of distress should be foreign to them*."³ Thus, the Daughters of Charity are present in all five continents at the service of their needy brothers and sisters, in multiple ways:

In education, according to the reality of each country, assuming responsibility for learning centers, parish animation, or forming parts of education teams in primary and secondary schools.

In social ministries, inserted into marginalized neighborhoods, villages and remote areas, fulfilling different services, in contact with real needs: home visiting, collaboration with the local Church, the Vincentian Family and other organizations, in social action programs with a view to promote the integral development of the person. They pay particular attention to the situations of street children, women in difficulty, people who are immigrants or refugees.

In health care services, serving in residences for elderly persons, geriatric centers, attentive to persons with disabilities or mental illness. They provide services to those with HIV/AIDS, leprosy and malnutrition, as well as manage and promote health centers, contribute to the formation of

¹ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 50.

² Lines of Action of the Daughters of Charity 2004, p. 6

³ Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity, C. 11.

community health care agents, and support initiatives of WHO in favor of children.

In parish ministry, the Sisters are present and actively collaborate in parish and diocesan ministry. They are involved in animation of youth groups and as members of teams of popular missions with the Congregation of the Mission and the Vincentian Family. They accompany the organizations of AIC, AMM and JMV as spiritual advisors. The Sisters collaborate in pastoral ministry in hospitals, prisons and with marginalized persons, and as members of ethics committees.

The call heard by the first Sisters is ever the same. Throughout the world it continues to raise up and assemble Daughters of Charity, who strive to rediscover at the source the inspiration and intuitions of their Founders, so that they may respond with ever-renewed fidelity and availability to the needs of their time.

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