

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 Blaton 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 groundwork 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 100th 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).

Bibliography

- *In liefde bewogen*, leefregel van de Broeders van Liefde, Gent, 1986, 166 pages.
- STOCKMAN, Brother RENÉ, *De goede mijnheer Triest. Een biografie van Kanunnik Petrus Jozef Triest*, Broeders van Liefde, Gent, 1998, 128 pages.
- STOCKMAN, Brother RENÉ, *Bidden met Vader Triest*, Gent, 1992, 83 pages.
- STOCKMAN, Brother RENÉ and VAN DEN ABEELE, ANDRIES, *Liefde in actie*, Tweehonderd jaar Broeders van Liefde, Davidsfonds, Leuven, 2006.