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## St. Vincent's First Foundation: The Ladies of Charity\*

*Colette Padberg and Sister Daniel Hannefin, D.C.*

The year 1617 was a turning-point in the life of St. Vincent de Paul, paving the way for two of his foundations of charity. In both of these, a woman played a decisive role.

Françoise-Marguerite de Silly, Madame de Gondi, was deeply moved when a dying man told her he would have been damned if M. Vincent had not urged him to make a general confession. She asked Vincent to preach to all the people at Folleville about general confessions. This sermon, given January 25, 1617, was so effective that Vincent later referred to that day as "the first mission." It was Madame de Gondi who provided the financial support that made possible the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission eight years later.

In August of 1617 Vincent turned away from the De Gondi household to become parish priest of Chatillon-les-Dombes. After his first sermon there, Françoise Bachet, wife of the lord of the manor of La Chassigne, and her friend Charlotte de Brie renounced worldly amusements and resolved to devote their time to good works.<sup>1</sup>

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\*On December 8, 1982 The Association of Ladies of Charity in the United States will be 125 years old. Mrs. Mary McNeil, National President, will commemorate this anniversary at the biennial meeting of ALCUS to be held in Detroit October 5-8, 1982.

<sup>1</sup>Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de*

It was Françoise Bachet who, a few weeks later, discovered a family so ill that none could care for the others, and reported their needs to Vincent as he was vesting for Sunday Mass.<sup>2</sup> His heartfelt sermon on the charity led to an afternoon meeting in her home, followed by such a spontaneous outpouring of charity that the family was overwhelmed with food and visitors that day.

M. Vincent realized that it is not enough for charity to be generous and personal; it must also be organized. On Wednesday, August 23, he called a meeting of the women. They agreed to form an association in which each would take her turn in serving the sick poor corporally and spiritually. The turns were to begin the next day, in this order: the Chatelaine (Françoise Bachet), Charlotte de Brie, Philiberte Mulger, Benoîte Prost, Denise Beynier, one of the daughters of Lady Perra, Lady Colette, and Mlle. de Chassaigne (Florence Gomard).<sup>3</sup>

On November 24, 1617, the Rules of the Confraternity were approved by the Archbishop of Lyons, and on December 8 the Confraternity was officially erected by M. Vincent, with Françoise Bachet as its first "abbess." Two weeks later Vincent was on his way back to the De Gondi household, as chaplain to the De Gondi estates. But thirty years later one of his converts from Calvinism could write to him: "You will be pleased when I tell you that the association of Charity of the servants of the poor in Chatillon is as vigorous as ever."<sup>4</sup>

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*Paul*, 3 vols., Translated by Joseph Leonard, C.M. (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1952), Vol. I, p. 79. Coste consistently spells her name "Baschet," though on the documents she signs herself "Francoise Bachet."

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup>Pierre Coste, *Saint Vincent de Paul, Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents* (Paris: Gablada, 1922), Vol. XIV, p. 125 n.

<sup>4</sup>Coste, *Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Vol. I, p. 81.

The pattern for the renewal of the Church in the countryside was set: a mission, climaxed by the establishment of a Confraternity of Charity, which would continue to build Christian community in the parish. During the next years Vincent established Charities in every village where he gave missions: Villepreux, Montmirail, Folleville, Paillart, Sereviller, Joigny, Macon. Later he would direct his priests to establish and supervise Charities wherever they preached so that the fruits of the mission would endure.<sup>5</sup>

Rules of the Charities varied from place to place, with some modifications and improvements, but the essentials were the same as at Chatillon:

The "servants of the poor" were to be twenty virtuous women, married or single, with the consent of their families. They met one Sunday a month, visited and cared for the sick poor by turns, were faithful to prayer and the sacraments. Jesus Christ Himself was their Patron — their Model in charity and the One they served in the person of the poor. There were three officers: the prioress, who admitted and dismissed the sick poor; the wardrobe-keeper, who cared for and lent the movable goods of the Confraternity, such as furniture, bedding, and linens; and the treasurer, who paid bills and kept records, assisted by a man known as procurator. The registers of the Confraternity contained: copies of the regulations, the formal act of establishment, a list of members with dates of reception and death, audits of accounts, lists of those helped, and the history of the confraternity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Philip E. Dion, C.M., *St. Vincent de Paul: His Philosophy of Health and Social Service* (Chicago: St. Joseph Hospital, 1975), p. 48. Fr. Vinatier counts 840 missions given by Vincentians in Vincent's lifetime. ("How Solemn Communion Originated," *Echoes of the Company*, 4 [June, 1980], 162.)

<sup>6</sup>Coste, *Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Vol. I, pp. 105-107.

At Folleville, Paillart and Sereviller there was also a Charity for men. While the women cared for the sick and prisoners, the men helped those who were destitute and trained poor boys in a trade. At Joigny and Montmirail the men and women were combined into one group, but there were problems there which caused Vincent to abandon the idea of mixed Charities.<sup>7</sup>

Expenses of the Charities included nourishment for the sick, medicines, linen, furniture, Mass stipends, payments to doctors or nurses. Sources of income were gifts, bequests, alms-boxes in churches and inns and taverns, begging in church and from door to door. In some places cows and sheep were kept to provide wool, milk and meat. Sometimes magistrates assigned certain fines or taxes to the Charity for the care of the poor.

By 1629 the Charities were so numerous that help in supervising them was needed. Vincent sent Louise de Marillac in the wake of the Missioners, with instructions how to establish, visit and organize the Charities. Traveling at her own expense in the most frugal ways, she visited Charities in the diocese of Paris, Beauvais, Senlis, Meaux, Soissons, Chalons and Chartres.<sup>8</sup> She instructed and inspired the ladies, recruited and trained new members, taught the children, visited the poor in their homes, nursed the sick, trained schoolmistresses, and gave the example of all that a servant of the poor should be. Through these visits she completed the work of organization that Vincent had begun.

The first Charity in Paris was in the parish of Saint-Sauveur in 1629. The following year Louise organized one in her own parish of Saint Nicholas-du-Chardonnet and was chosen to lead it. Four more parishes

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. also Coste, *St. Vincent de Paul*, IV, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

followed in 1631; soon after, almost every parish in Paris and the suburbs had its own Confraternity of Charity. The ladies in some of these parishes were not accustomed to cooking and doing their own work; but still Vincent insisted on personal service to the poor.

It was to help in these parish Confraternities that the first Daughters of Charity were formed. Members of the Charities were still being referred to as "the Sisters" at this time; the girls were to be the servants of the Charity, doing the harder work to which the ladies of Paris were not accustomed or suited.

On November 29, 1633, Louise de Marillac took some of these girls into her home for deeper spiritual formation in the service of the poor, and the third of Vincent's organizations of charity was begun, also with a woman's collaboration. The triangle of service was complete: Confraternities of Charity, 1617; Priests and Brothers of the Mission, 1625; Daughters of Charity, 1633.

### The Ladies of Charity of the Hotel Dieu

Up to this time, all of the Confraternities of Charity were parochial — drawing members from one parish and serving the poor of that parish, under the direction of the pastor.

But in 1634 Genevieve Fayette, Madame Goussault, who had been active in the Charity of her own parish and also in visiting those of the countryside, approached Vincent to suggest a new kind of Confraternity. She had been visiting the sick of the Hotel Dieu and was appalled at the neglect of their spiritual needs. Vincent did not want to interfere in what was the apostolate of the Canons of Notre Dame. But the determined Madame Goussault took her observations to the Archbishop of Paris, who responded

by ordering Vincent to establish a Charity for the Hotel Dieu. Vincent accepted the command as God's Will and called a meeting at the home of Mme. Goussault early in 1634. The ladies present decided to undertake the work. Describing the meeting and its results to Louise, Vincent added, "They will need you and the girls."<sup>9</sup>

"Of all the Confraternities of Charity," Coste says, "that of the Hotel-Dieu was, without question, the most important both from the social position of its members, the extent of its field of action, and the amount of aid received and distributed."<sup>10</sup> The association drew its members from all over Paris. Although it included members of the titled nobility, even queens and princesses, as well as the wives of merchants and artisans, much of the real leadership stemmed from the families of magistrates and members of Parlement.<sup>11</sup> Mme. Goussault, its president until her death in 1639, was the widow of the President of the Chambre des Comptes (Tax Court).

Besides the spiritual ministry to patients at the Hotel Dieu (to which they gained entry by serving them a daily collation), this group (which came to be known as "Ladies of Charity") took on the care of the foundlings, the galley slaves, the refugees from the war-torn provinces of France, and missions in Barbary and Madagascar. The work of the Association spread to Italy in 1634 and to Poland in 1652. It continued to expand in France until the Revolution, in which many of its aristocratic members were guillotined. The men's groups seem to have died out before the Revolution. In the reorganization, brought to fulfillment

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<sup>9</sup>Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M., *Louise de Marillac* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 123. The Hotel Dieu was a large, overcrowded hospital where patients were often assigned four to a bed.

<sup>10</sup>Coste, *Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Vol. I, p. 278.

<sup>11</sup>Sister Lucy Archer, D.C., *The Streets of the City* (Darlington: Carmelite Convent, n.d.), p. 91.

under Fr. Etienne in 1840,<sup>12</sup> the term "Association of Ladies of Charity" designated parish Charities as well as metropolitan groups. At this time Sister Rosalie Rendu initiated the Louisettes, a junior group for young girls. It was she also who aided Frederic Ozanam in founding the St. Vincent de Paul Society, which again brought laymen together for charity in the Vincentian spirit.

### Foundation in the United States

The first American Lady of Charity was a 23-year-old wife and mother named Catherine Harkins. Born in Ireland, Catherine was brought to New York by her parents. The family soon moved to Pottsville, Pennsylvania, where Catherine received her education. (At this time the Sisters of Charity from Emmitsburg were conducting St. Ann's School in Pottsville.)<sup>13</sup> The family moved again to Paris, Kentucky, where, at the age of 19, Catherine married Captain Hugh Harkins, a Mississippi steamboat owner whom she had met in St. Louis. The couple took up residence in St. Louis in 1857,<sup>14</sup> settling in St. Vincent de Paul Parish.

Shortly after their move to St. Louis, Mrs. Harkins had a vivid dream of St. Vincent walking through snow-covered streets and gathering neglected children under his cloak. He spoke to the dreamer and directed her to assist the poor too. When the dream had been repeated three times,

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<sup>12</sup> "Association des Dames de la Charité de Saint Vincent de Paul," a brochure in French (Paris: 95 Rue de Sevres, 1938).

<sup>13</sup> Sister John Mary Crumlish, D.C., *1809-1959* (Emmitsburg: St. Joseph's Central House, 1959), p. 26. The Sisters operated this school in Pottsville from 1836 to about 1845.

<sup>14</sup> "Funeral of Steamboat Owner's Widow, Charity Worker, To Be Thursday," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Wednesday, October 11, 1911.



she decided to mention it in confession. The priest told her it was more than a dream; it was more like a vision. He directed her to return home and pray for enlightenment, and to come back to the same confessional the next day.

She did as directed, but found a different priest in the confessional — Fr. Urban Gagnepain, C.M. He encouraged her to repeat her story, listened with interest, and promised to offer the Holy Sacrifice for guidance, while directing her to continue her prayers. He later directed her to gather some assistants to form a society for the care of the poor, adding that, if the inspiration was not from God, the work would not progress.

The association was formed December 8, 1857 and called Ladies of Charity. The twelve members were Mrs. Catherine Harkins, Mrs. Beckwith, Mrs. Judge Meeny, Mrs. Soulard, Mrs. Tillman, Dr. Levy's mother, Miss Levy, Mrs. Tighe, Father Hickey's mother, and three others whose names have not come down to us. Catherine Harkins was elected the first president.<sup>15</sup>

The Panic of 1857, caused by unsound banks and depressed prices for farm products, caused a depression that was to continue until the outbreak of the Civil War. There were many hungry poor in St. Louis, and the new association found its services to be much in demand. In order to raise funds, the Ladies asked the Strackosh Opera Troupe to give a benefit matinee performance, the first of its kind in St. Louis, at Mercantile Hall.<sup>16</sup>

Besides visiting the poor sick in their homes, the Ladies

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<sup>15</sup> Souvenir Booklet of the Centennial Celebration of the Ladies of Charity in the United States (St. Louis, 1957) under the heading "Mrs. Harkins' Dream — 1857." The first Ladies of Charity came from noted families in St. Louis. Dr. Levy was Chief of Staff at City Hospital; Mrs. Soulard and Mrs. Mullanphy Tighe were related to pioneer St. Louis families; Fr. John Hickey, whose mother is mentioned, was a Vincentian.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

of Charity of St. Vincent's Parish assisted the Daughters of Charity, who came to the parish in 1859 to staff the House of the Guardian Angel for orphan girls.

In 1859, Fr. Gagnepain was missioned to New Orleans. He continued to direct the Ladies by mail, sending letters and instruction full of tenderness and wise Vincentian guidance. In a letter, dated January 13, 1860, to Mrs. Harkins, he describes his success in forming a second group of Ladies of Charity in St. Joseph Parish, New Orleans:

On the fifteenth of last December, Octave of the Im. Conception of our good Mother, about fifteen ladies met and with the blessing of God and his holy Mother, a branch of the afforesaid [*sic*] Society was formed. Since that time we had two meetings and now the Society is beginning to work *right* . . . . At present it numbers about 22 members and 10 subscribers. Meetings, twice a month. Were you here you would have a rich field for your labour in the relief of the body and more so in the salvation of Poor Souls. Pray, my dear child, that God may bless the work if it be *his*; if not, that it may fall. If *when together* we found objects of charity — for soul and body, now we would find ten to one and even more, at least for the souls . . . .<sup>17</sup>

### Beginnings in Other Cities

Several of the early organizations of Ladies of Charity were the pioneers of works later entrusted to the Daughters of Charity.

In Austin, Texas, a German-American Ladies Aid Society active in the 1880's evolved into a group called "St. Vincent's Aid" in the early '90's. Behind the change

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<sup>17</sup>Fr. Urban Gagnepain, C.M. to Mrs. Catherine Harkins, New Orleans, January 13, 1860. The original is preserved in Marillac Provincial House Archives.

was a newcomer to Austin, an enthusiastic St. Vincent de Paul man named John Pope. The ladies did the visiting at City Hospital; some generous men backed them financially. Seeing the need for a Catholic hospital in Austin, this group appealed for Daughters of Charity to staff it and spearheaded the drive for funds. The result was the opening of Seton Hospital in May, 1902. Sister Mary Bernard became the devoted moderator of the Ladies of Charity.

Other apostolates of the Austin Ladies of Charity included funding a church for the Mexicans of Austin, staffing a soup kitchen in 1915, caring for flu victims and their families in 1918, and volunteering in the hospital. In 1921 Mrs. Hamilton Reilly conceived the idea of a home for abandoned babies. A house was purchased by the Association, a widow hired as matron, and the home opened September 8, 1921. When the first matron left and the second threatened to leave, the Ladies moved in and cared for the babies themselves. A nurse was sent from the hospital, donations came in, and the home was given a name: Home of the Holy Infancy. In 1932 the Daughters of Charity assumed the operation of the home. The Ladies who had operated it for eleven years continued to support the agency (now known as Marywood).<sup>18</sup>

A similar situation occurred in Kansas City, Missouri, where a group of ladies led by Mrs. Richard Keith opened an orphanage for boys, and then in 1897 secured Daughters of Charity to operate it. In 1899 the same group initiated a baby home and conducted it for ten years before obtaining Daughters of Charity to staff it in 1909.

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<sup>18</sup>Mrs. J. R. Reilly, "History of the Ladies of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Austin, Texas." (Austin, 1939). A copy of this unpublished account is in the ALCUS Archives, which are kept at the ALCUS Service Center, 7806 Natural Bridge Road, P.O. Box 5730, St. Louis, MO. 63121.

From this early group of charitable women, the Ladies of Charity of Kansas City, now a large metropolitan group, evolved.<sup>19</sup>

In Evansville, Indiana, an association of Ladies of Charity was formed in 1917. Many mothers were working because of the war, and there was need for a day nursery. Here too the Ladies began the work, and later turned it over to the Daughters of Charity, whom they continue to assist in service as well as financial support.<sup>20</sup>

Beginnings in Baltimore were similar to those in Chatillon and St. Louis: collaboration between a priest and a charitable parishioner. The priest, Rt. Rev. Hugh J. Monahan, was assistant pastor at Saints Philip and James Parish in Baltimore. His collaborator was Mrs. Gertrude Horigan. Vincentian presence was provided by two Daughters of Charity of St. Joseph's Industrial School (now known as Seton High). The ladies visited the sick, the poor, the aged, and those who had left the Church. Working closely with the St. Vincent de Paul Society, they dispensed food, money and clothing, and established a volunteer-staffed day nursery. Begun in 1914, the group was affiliated with the worldwide Ladies of Charity in 1920. In 1924 Archbishop Curley delegated Mrs. Horigan to approach every pastor with the goal of organizing parish units of the Ladies of Charity. In the next twelve years Mrs. Horigan spearheaded expansion in many parishes of Baltimore and the neighboring counties, as well as in Washington, D.C.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Information gleaned from the histories of these missions in the Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Marillac Provincial House, St. Louis.

<sup>20</sup>"Ladies of Charity of Evansville," *The Vincentian*, January, 1935.

<sup>21</sup>"Historical Synopsis of the Ladies of Charity, Archdiocese of Baltimore." Based on no longer extant papers of Mrs. Horigan, but truth of details certified by Alice R. May, long time member who had access to those papers.

Some Vincentian pastors, true to the wish of their Founder, have been actively involved in establishing Charities. Some examples are the association in St. Patrick's Parish, La Salle, Illinois, founded September 9, 1913 by Fr. William Kelley, C.M., and that of Perryville, Missouri, begun by Fr. William Barnwell, C.M. in 1903, four years before the arrival of the first band of Daughters of Charity in Perryville. (This group was reorganized in 1936). A more recent example is the association at St. Catherine Labouré Parish, St. Louis, organized by Fr. Morgan Barr, C.M. and Margaret Godar, a generous parishioner.

Other groups were organized by Daughters of Charity or in connection with Daughter-of-Charity institutions: St. Joseph Orphanage, Richmond, Virginia; St. Thomas Hospital, Nashville, Tennessee; St. Vincent's Orphanage, Detroit; St. Vincent Hospital, Birmingham; Providence Hospital, Waco, and Hotel Dieu, El Paso, both in Texas. The Pittsburgh group of Ladies of Charity was associated with the Roselia Foundling Asylum, operated by the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill. Twice this group became inactive, but, through the efforts of Grace Eckhardt and the cooperation of the Bishop, there are now 60 parish units in Pittsburgh.

Two Daughters of Charity collaborated with a Vincentian and a laywoman in the Los Angeles foundation in 1948. Beginning with 40 members, the roll had increased to 400 by the 1960's. The collaboration begun by Fr. William Ward, C.M., Sisters Euphemia and Alphonsine, D.C., and Mrs. Edward L. Doheny has continued among other Vincentians, Daughters, and Ladies of Charity.

The women of New York City formed a charitable association March 25, 1902, under the title "Association of Catholic Charities." These enthusiastic volunteers

operated seven day nurseries in 1902, began classes in English and religion for Syrian immigrants in 1903, took on services to prisoners by procuring Sunday Mass for them and making 2950 visits to their homes and families in 1903-4, and formed a committee to work with the courts in child welfare cases.

The association had many members and many apostolates, but no spiritual benefits beyond personal merit. In 1912, Msgr. Denis J. McMahon and Vice-President Geraldyn McRedmond visited France and sought affiliation with the Ladies of Charity in Paris. The patent was granted, and, on April 4, 1913, in impressive ceremonies in the Cathedral, 548 women became members of the Ladies of Charity. The designation "Ladies of Charity" was added as a subtitle to their original name. When the Catholic Charities of New York was formed, the ladies gave up the name and were incorporated as "Ladies of Charity of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York, Inc." To their original works were added hospital visitation, fifty parish centers, work with the blind, and the operation of McMahon Memorial Shelter for Infants and Children.<sup>22</sup>

Even with Bishops giving their support to the organization, the need for reorganization and revitalization is a chronic problem. Enthusiastic pioneers age, become ill, die, or move away. Institutions close, neighborhoods change, apostolates are taken over by professionals or funded groups. To endure, an organization needs a variety of service options, active recruitment of new members, and strong spiritual motivation nourished by dynamic leaders: Bishops, spiritual advisers, Sister- moderators, Ladies of Charity. Without strong leadership, fervor soon dies out.

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<sup>22</sup>Teresa R. O'Donohue, "A Short History of the Ladies of Charity of New York" (unpublished, 1925). Copies of this and other histories cited are in the ALCUS Archives in St. Louis.

An example of this is the case of the Springfield, Illinois diocese. When Most Reverend James Griffin was consecrated Bishop in 1924, he enlisted the help of Miss Elizabeth Kuhlmann, a member of the St. Louis Ladies of Charity, to organize Catholic women as volunteers for social service. With the title of diocesan social worker, she was authorized to approach pastors and parishioners for their support in forming charitable groups for social action. By 1927 almost every parish in Springfield had an organization of Ladies of Charity. By 1930 there was a group in Auburn, Illinois, and the Ladies of Charity of Buffalo, Illinois had furnished a chapel and procured weekly Mass for the patients at Sangamon County Poor Farm. In 1932 a group was formed in Quincy, Illinois, at the western end of the diocese.

But the associations, for the most part, did not survive their organizers. Today, while there are active St. Vincent de Paul units in Springfield, there is no evidence of any vital group of Ladies of Charity except in Quincy, and, at the opposite end of the diocese, a newly formed group in Robinson, Illinois. The persistent vitality of the Quincy group, without the presence of Vincentians or Daughters of Charity, gives evidence of strong lay leadership. It also points up the value of a Junior Ladies of Charity group as a means of replenishing the supply of dedicated workers.<sup>23</sup>

### Changing Patterns of Service

A review of annual reports over the years shows how services change to meet changing needs. The depression years show records of coal deliveries, jobs procured, rent

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<sup>23</sup>The above analysis is based on annual reports preserved in the ALCUS Archives in St. Louis.

paid, visits to sick and families (in Baltimore in 1928 members made 1197 visits!). Sewing and clothing orphans are frequently reported, with individual stories interspersed. Another stated, "members tutored a child who had lived in the country and had never been to school, got medical care for a woman who had lost her arm" (St. Stephen's, New Orleans, 1926).

Then came the war years, with jobs more plentiful. Food and coal orders were less frequent, and the ladies reached farther afield. Such notations as "Negro and Indian Missions," "War relief" appear. The Keokuk ladies refer to St. Vincent's Orphanage in Davenport, the Lee County Home. Health needs are not neglected. "\$5 a month to needy man to provide surgical dressings" appears on the 1951 report of the St. Vincent Hospital, Indianapolis; "four pairs of eye glasses purchased for \$34.64" is noted in the 1949 report from Hotel Dieu, New Orleans. Birmingham Ladies of Charity solicited blood donors and paid for 71 prescriptions for medicine in 1952. The same year the Perryville Ladies procured a wheelchair for an invalid and paid a monthly insulin bill for a needy woman.

Evidences that service was spiritual as well as material are plentiful: "three fallen away Catholics visited, returned to sacraments" (Quincy, 1951); "two marriages rectified, 11 baptisms, 1 return to sacraments, 7 instructed for confirmation" (Hotel Dieu, New Orleans, 1948). The group in Evansville gave a missal and a handmade altar cloth to Bl. Martin de Porres Mission; Perryville Ladies gave a sick call set to the local hospital and a cope for the chapel at the state penitentiary.

The personal touch in averting family tragedies is also evident. In Montgomery, in 1949, the Ladies returned two runaway girls to their school in Virginia (at a cost of \$33-\$29 for tickets, \$4 for food). Junior Ladies of Charity



were taking the old and crippled to church and instructing invalids at home in Detroit, and feeding helpless patients at a hospital in LaSalle. The Perryville Ladies "helped reunite a family and establish a home" (1952), while Brooklyn in that same year provided family vacation days for an entire family, financed by the Ladies of Charity.

Nashville, in 1951, had a foster home committee through which the Ladies of Charity paid room, board, medical care and hospitalization for ten unwed mothers. They also supplied temporary room and board to three girls leaving the penitentiary, and followed up by assistance in rehabilitating them and securing employment for them.

"Personal visitation to the poor is your express purpose for existing," Fr. John J. Cronin, C.M. reminded the Ladies at their annual meeting in 1930 (Marillac Provincial House, St. Louis). Los Angeles, in 1952, reported 7423 visits to the general hospital, the poor farm, Golden State Hospital, private homes, and the jail. The Detroit Ladies visited 1179 patients in the county poorhouse. St. Vincent's Hospital group in Indianapolis reported weekly visits to Sunnyside TB sanitarium and the central hospital for the insane, and monthly visits to Julietta, the county poor home. To make the visits more meaningful, the Quincy group sponsored a Red Cross home nursing course in 1938, and the Keokuk ladies paid a nurse instructor to teach home nursing in the high school in 1952.

Visitation is still the core of service in most Ladies of Charity groups. Reports include refugee resettlement, help with Cuban and Mexican immigrants, dispensaries where emergency packets of food are given out, and clothing outlets which serve a dual purpose: clothing the poor in such a way that they can keep their dignity (by paying a minimal sum for a garment) and giving the Ladies initial contact with families who may need follow-up help. The

Ladies in Los Angeles reach over the border to help fill the needs of a home for the aged staffed by Daughters of Charity in Ensenada, Baja California. Those in El Paso find ways to help the poor in Juarez, Mexico. Many former social activities such as home placements and caring for transients have been taken over by Catholic Charities or funded agencies. But the Ladies respond to present needs. The St. Paul the Apostle Parish Group in St. Louis prepares meals each Monday for the soup kitchen sponsored by the Catholic Workers. Ladies from the other St. Louis organizations help with the soup kitchen at St. Vincent's Parish or the Caritas Center in Normandy.

Spiritual ministry is not forgotten. In some places Ladies of Charity are serving as Eucharistic Ministers for nursing homes in their parishes; others take leadership roles in the parish, teach CCD, serve as lectors, and help with youth ministries in the parish. Where possible, spiritual and corporal service are combined. In Cincinnati the Ladies of Charity take advantage of the downtown location of St. Peter in Chains Cathedral to make it a center of emergency food and clothing distribution.<sup>24</sup> Ministries and needs change, but Catholic volunteers will always be needed to give witness to the charity of Christ.

### Movements towards Unity

Many American associations of Ladies of Charity were begun without knowledge of the existence of other units or of a worldwide organization. As groups learned of the International Association of Ladies of Charity, they began to apply for patents of affiliation. Early patents issued

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<sup>24</sup>“Ladies of Charity Mark Decade of Personal Service to Needy,” by Shannon Flynn, *Catholic Telegraph*, Friday, October 2, 1981, p. 3.

from the canonical center at the Motherhouse of the Priests of the Mission in Paris were to the following groups: St. Louis and Nashville, 1910; Birmingham, Mobile, San Jose and New York, 1911; La Salle, Chicago and Manhattan, 1913; Keokuk, 1914; Montgomery, Austin, Detroit, Jackson, 1915; Norfolk and Washington, D.C., 1916; El Paso, Richmond, Evansville and Emmitsburg, 1917. Many more followed.

Union with Paris made possible union with one another. From a list of affiliated organizations procured from Paris, the Ladies of Charity in St. Louis learned of other groups in the United States. Beginning in 1921, representatives of each organization were invited to an annual meeting in St. Louis, held at Marillac Seminary on the second Sunday after Easter, feast of the Translation of the Relics of St. Vincent de Paul.

It is significant that the initiative again came from St. Louis, particularly so since the President of the Ladies of Charity in 1921 (and until her death about 1948) was Miss Marie Harkins, granddaughter of the first American Lady of Charity.<sup>25</sup> During all these years, Miss Harkins issued the invitations, hosted the meeting, solicited annual reports to be read at the meeting, even from associations not able to send delegates. The reports gave statistics on membership and service during the year. Records of these annual meetings continue until 1952.

Other steps towards unity taken at this time were affiliation with the National Conference of Catholic Charities and the National Council of Catholic Women, both in 1921.

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<sup>25</sup> Catherine Harkins had often expressed the wish that there would always be some members of her family among the Ladies of Charity in St. Louis. At this time there were three: her daughter Marie Victorine, and two of her granddaughters, Marie and Mrs. Catherine McDowell, Mrs. McDowell's three daughters joined the organization, but did not continue in it.

### Formation of National Association

Although communication and exchanges were growing through the annual meetings, there was no National Association of Ladies of Charity in the United States. With the approach of the centennial (in 1957), members of the first American Association, the St. Vincent de Paul Parish group working at Guardian Angel Settlement, St. Louis, decided to invite all Ladies of Charity Associations in the United States to send representatives to the celebration. From an updated list of patents issued, and from listings in the Catholic Directory, the group compiled a roster of organizations all over the United States. Rosalie Sertl and Sister Margaret Mary Bruns, secretary and moderator of the association, sent invitations to all these groups, and to their moderators and spiritual advisers. As a result of their efforts, the centennial celebration on September 28-29, 1957 was attended by 350 Ladies of Charity from 22 states, 50 Daughters of Charity, and 20 Vincentians.

The celebration had a dual purpose: to thank God for all the graces given to Ladies of Charity for their mission to the poor; and to build a deeper understanding of the spirit of charity, humility and simplicity that characterizes a Lady of Charity. Twelve seminars were conducted by the Vincentian Fathers, in which those present shared their ideas and ideals as well as their problems.

Some of the recommendations growing out of this meeting were:

- 1) greater adherence to and more familiarity with the Ladies of Charity Manual. Each organization should be affiliated with the canonical center so that members will be eligible to receive the indulgences granted to Ladies of Charity. (These are the same as those available to Daughters of Charity, making the Association of Ladies of Charity the most richly

indulged lay organization in the Church.)

2) Greater unity among the associations in the United States, to be achieved by:

a) some uniformity in fees, membership requirements, mode of conducting meetings, certificates of membership, report forms, etc.

b) a central service bureau which would be a source for Manuals, crucifixes, forms, brochures, certificates, etc., as well as a clearing-house for information, direction, idea exchanges.

3) realization that personal visits to the poor and sick are the first and essential duty of a Lady of Charity. If all members cannot do this, a large percentage should. The names of families and their affairs should not be discussed, but reports made and records kept available to the officers of the organization. Meetings should be directed primarily to the affairs of the poor and the spiritual work of the association rather than fund-raising, which can be delegated to committees.

4) Certain qualities are to be developed in the Lady of Charity herself: an earnest striving for sanctification, honoring Jesus as the Source of charity in her life by frequent prayer and Communion, and as Model by treating the poor with compassion, humility, generosity, respect and love. Charity among members of the association should be outstanding to build the corporate charity of the association.

5) Members should be aware that being a Lady of Charity is a special vocation, a way of life. It is a call through which God has shown special love for each and His definite designs upon each. A member's salvation may depend on how she has fulfilled her

obligations, because we will be judged, according to Our Lord's words, on what we have done or not done for the poor.<sup>26</sup>

At the end of the centennial seminars, the Ladies voted unanimously to form a more lasting bond through a national organization. A planning committee was appointed, consisting of five Ladies of Charity, two Vincentians, and four Daughters of Charity. This committee worked for three years drafting a constitution and bylaws and preparing a national assembly.

This national assembly, which met in New York in September, 1960, was presided over by Mrs. Ray Moon of Keokuk, chairman of the planning committee.<sup>27</sup> At this assembly the Constitution and Bylaws were adopted and the Association of Ladies of Charity of the United States, familiarly known as ALCUS, came into being.

An election of officers and board of directors was held, with the following results:

President: Miss Diane Ruth Downey, Los Angeles, California;

1st Vice President: Mrs. Edward Ryan, New York;

2nd Vice President: Mrs. Charles B. Cushwa, Jr., Youngstown, Ohio;

3rd Vice President: Mrs. J. R. McIlwaine, Nashville, Tennessee;

4th Vice President: Mrs. William Morgan, Indianapolis, Indiana;

<sup>26</sup> Correspondence, proceedings, addresses and souvenir booklets of the centennial celebration are in the ALCUS Archives.

<sup>27</sup> Other members of the Planning Committee were Mrs. Ruth Block, New Orleans; Sister Catherine Sullivan, St. Louis; Sister Isabelle Toohey, Emmitsburg; Miss Eileen Jeffers, Pasadena; Sister Margaret Mary Bruns, St. Louis; Fr. Eugene McCarthy, C.M., New Orleans; Fr. William McClimont, C.M., Brooklyn; Mrs. Oscar Reuter, Milwaukee; Mrs. Edward Ryan, New York City; Sister Rose Marie, Farmington, Michigan.

5th Vice President: Miss Rosemary Donohue,  
San Francisco, Calif;

Treasurer: Mrs. Ray L. Moon, Iowa City, Iowa;

Secretary: Miss Eileen Jeffers, Pasadena, California;

and the twelve members of the Board of Directors:

Mrs. Ruth Block, New Orleans; M

Miss Nellie Cantwell, Beverly Hills;

Miss Mary Fitzgerald, Rochester;

Mrs. Amedeo Giordano, New York;

Mrs. Clare Higgins, New Orleans;

Mrs. J.S. Kavanagh, Memphis;

Mrs. John Kessler, Detroit;

Mrs. Harry Lindauer, Baltimore;

Mrs. Clara Lapp, Washington, D.C.;

Mrs. Edward Okonski, Pittsburgh;

Mrs. Oscar P. Reuter, Milwaukee;

Miss Helen Sullivan, Buffalo.

As a means of communication and mutual sharing, a publication called *The Servicette* was commenced. Now in its 24th year, *The Servicette* is edited by Mrs. Anita Fleming of Memphis, Tennessee.<sup>28</sup>

Although some groups did not join the national association, there are now more than 60 groups affiliated with ALCUS in Alabama, Arizona, California, District of Columbia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Wisconsin.

<sup>28</sup> Subscriptions to the ALCUS *Servicette* are available from Mrs. Partee Fleming, P.O. Box 17126, Memphis, TN 38117 for \$3.00 per year.

### The International Association of Charities (AIC)

By 1938 there were Ladies of Charity in France, England, Belgium, Poland, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Denmark, Turkey, Iran, Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Algeria, India, China, the Philippines, the United States, Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Panama, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Chile, Venezuela, Uruguay, and British Guiana. The Laides of Charity numbered 450,000 in the world, with an additional 15,000 Louise de Marillacs (as Junior Ladies of Charity are commonly called).<sup>29</sup>

The first International Congress of Ladies of Charity was held in Paris in 1930, and an international bulletin was inaugurated in order to form closer bonds of unity between national associations and the canonical center. The second congress was held in Budapest in 1935. The third, scheduled for Warsaw in 1940, was cancelled because of the war. After the war congresses resumed: Paris in 1953, Brussels in 1958.

Three representatives of the International Association were invited by Fr. James Richardson, C.M., Superior General, to attend the Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission to explain the situation of the Charities throughout the world. The delegates were asked to set up statutes for the International Association. In 1971 the Vincentians handed over the direction of the Association to the presidents, on all levels, but retained the role of spiritual advisers. In October of 1971, delegates from twenty-two countries met to vote on the statutes, elect an

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<sup>29</sup> "Association des Dames de la Charité de Saint Vincent de Paul," brochure cited above. (Paris: 95 Rue de Sevres, 1938).



Executive Board and an International President, and to set the direction for future renewal of the Association. The name AIC was adopted, and the international secretariate transferred from Paris to Brussels.<sup>30</sup> Subsequent meetings in Rome (1973), Brussels (1975) and Mexico (1976) studied the questions of poverty and volunteerism, and paved the way for the AIC Declaration, promulgated in 1977, 360th anniversary of the founding of the Charities. In 1980 the AIC Basic Document, "Against All Forms of Poverty — Acting Together" was published and distributed.<sup>31</sup>

The Basic Document is an official document of the AIC, a response to the call of the Church for self-study and realization as a means of renewal. It collects into one document the awareness of the needs of the suffering, oppressed poor; the challenge of the Gospel; the calls of Vatican II; the prophetic intuition of St. Vincent de Paul; and the concerns and action of members of the AIC, individually and collectively, in response to these needs, challenges and calls. For members of the Association it is a basis for action and reflection, a call and inspiration to live their commitment, and a sign of the unity of the Associations throughout the world. At the present time this Basic Document is being studied, discussed, put into action at all levels of the Association — local, national, and international. More flexible than a Constitution or

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<sup>30</sup>"Against All Forms of Poverty — Acting Together." Basic Document of the AIC. (Brussels: Rue d'Alsace Lorraine 38, 1980). AIC stands for "Association Internationale des Charities de St. Vincent de Paul." The term "Ladies" was dropped by the French and International Associations in 1963, though still retained in America.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.* Copies of this document are available from Association Internationale des Charities, rue d'Alsace Lorraine 38, B1050 Brussels, Belgium.

Statutes, it allows each locality to develop its own style of service and commitment according to this basic pattern of Vincentian charity.

The first American to serve on the AIC Executive Board is Gay Nell (Mrs. Dow) King of Austin, Texas, who was elected to the Board in 1976 and reelected in 1982. Also serving on the Board currently is Miss Romilda Berling of Cincinnati, Treasurer of ALCUS, called to the Executive Board by special request because of her expertise in financial matters.

### Collaboration with the Double Family

The AIC collaborates with many organizations on all levels, but there is a special bond with members of St. Vincent's other two foundations: the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity. At the international level, the Superior General and Superioress General are members of the AIC Council and have appointed a Priest and a Sister as liaison between the AIC and the General Councils of both Communities. The International President (at present Miss Claire Delva of Brussels) has been invited to General Assemblies — of the Daughters of Charity in 1979, of the Congregation of the Mission in 1980.<sup>32</sup>

In many countries Vincentians serve as spiritual advisers, and Daughters of Charity as moderators, on the national and local levels, wherever this relationship is feasible. In the United States at the present time, Sister Virginia Kingsbury, D.C. of Evansville serves as National

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<sup>32</sup>*International Encounter* (Madrid: May 25-June 4, 1981), program and content booklet of the international seminar, p. 108.

Moderator, and Vincentians and Daughters of Charity serve with many of the local groups. Members of the Charities depend on this close collaboration for the spiritual animation that keeps the organization Vincentian in character.



*You see a great deal of distress that you are unable to relieve. God sees it also. Bear the pains of the poor together with them, doing all you can to give them whatever help you can, and remain in peace.*

ST. LOUISE de MARILLAC