

Summer 1996

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Miguel P. Flores C.M.

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Recommended Citation

Flores, Miguel P. C.M. (1996) "Father Richardson and the Daughters of Charity," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 17: Iss. 2, Article 7.
Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol17/iss2/7>

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Father Richardson and the Daughters of Charity

BY

MIGUEL PÉREZ FLORES, C.M.

It is not my purpose to do an exhaustive study of what Father Richardson thought, said, and left in writing concerning the Daughters of Charity from the doctrinal, spiritual, or canonical point of view. Neither do I intend to highlight what he did in the government of the Company of the Daughters of Charity while he was its superior general. I propose to relate memories, anecdotes really, which, to my mind, show the interest that Father Richardson had in the Company of the Daughters of Charity, its institutions, its works and, above all, the sisters. What I narrate is like vignettes that adorn the work and the dedication of Father Richardson to the service of the sisters. I find myself obliged, by reason of the demands and limits of the work that has been asked of me, to make a selection of everything that comes to my memory. I want this simple work to be my tribute—sincere, full of feeling, of respect, and veneration—to Father Richardson. I had the enormous good fortune of dealing with him with great frequency since we met in the far off general assembly of 1963 until he finished being superior general in 1980.

The Identity of the Daughters of Charity

The defense of the identity of the Company of the Daughters of Charity as a non-religious community was one of Father Richardson's great concerns. The concern was well founded because of the tendency of the Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes to view the Daughters of Charity canonically as religious and to apply to them many norms laid down for religious. This tendency went back many years, since the promulgation of the revised code of canon law in 1917. The constitutions of the Daughters of Charity of 1954 are a clear exemplification of this tendency.

Another reason was that at that time there was no clear idea of what was going to happen with communities like the Daughters of Charity or where they were going to be located in the new code of

canon law. Were the codifiers going to respect their proper identity, locating them in their own place or were they going to be introduced into inappropriate normative schemes? The determinations of the Second Vatican Council opened the way to defending their special identity according to the desire and spirit of the founders, but there were no concrete canonical determinations that would give security to this orientation of the council. In fact, there was a widespread difference of opinions among canonists. Father Richardson's attitude, and that of other superiors general, on this point brought about the creation of a commission to orient the revisers of the new code so that the identity of societies known until then as "communities of common life without vows" would be respected. Father Richardson was president of that commission for some time. Then he appointed Father Cecil Parres, who knew well the common law and the individual law of Vincentian institutions, to another commission. We know how Father Parres worked to maintain Father Richardson's idea. The outcome was that in the new code there would be a place in which to locate adequately the societies of apostolic life (canons 731-746), among which is numbered the Company of the Daughters of Charity. The outcome was, beyond doubt, successful.

The question of identity was linked to that of the nature of the vows. For Father Richardson to preserve the special nature of the vows of the Daughters of Charity was another very important theme and one to which he devoted great attention.

The organizing committee of the general assembly of the Daughters of Charity asked me to speak to the members of the assembly about the vows taken in the Company of the Daughters of Charity. My presentation was oriented toward freeing the vows of the sisters from an excessive canonical weight, for the purpose of reinforcing theological and Vincentian values. Before giving my presentation to the assembly I gave it to Father Richardson. He had no difficulty in approving it. However, a member of the assembly, I do not know who, did not understand me and felt an obligation to advise the Congregation of Religious that a servant was creating a certain confusion among the sisters with regard to the vows. This reaction was not surprising, in view of the fact that my presentation avoided an overly religious conception of the vows of the Daughters of Charity. The Congregation of Religious notified Father Richardson. Father Richardson went to my defense and asked me only to assure him that in the approbation of the Company by Cardinal Vendôme, legate of Pope Clement IX,

the vows were not mentioned. For me it was easy to assure Father Richardson. It was enough to give him a copy of the approbation and he himself read it. I do not know what Father Richardson did. I only know that on the following day he said to me more or less the following. "You can continue the same line with regard to what refers to the vows that the Daughters of Charity take."

**The Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission,
Superior General of the Company of the Daughters of Charity**

We know that through the wish of Saint Louise de Marillac and in agreement with that wish, given by Saint Vincent de Paul, the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission is at the same time the superior general of the Daughters of Charity. The idea was original and historically has turned out advantageous for the Company of the Daughters of Charity. In general it has been a decision accepted peacefully, but from time to time dissenting opinions have arisen. This is not the time to go back over past history. My concern is the generalate of Father Richardson. Once he told me, almost confidentially, that a cardinal of the Church told him, "Now is the time to do away with that norm by which the Company of the Daughters of Charity have the same superior as the Congregation of the Mission." I was not a witness to Father Richardson's reaction, but I am sure that without being discourteous he must have been firm and, as he recounted it to me, would tell him, "Your Eminence, it is a question that the sisters themselves should decide. Neither Your Eminence nor I are the persons to change a determination that originated with the founders themselves."

However, the cardinal was not the only one who thought in that way. In some provinces, for distinct reasons, this question was discussed in provincial assemblies, and it was dealt with, as is obvious, in the general assembly. The outcome was to retain what Saint Louise wanted and Saint Vincent did, that is, that the superior general of the Congregation would continue being the superior general of the Daughters of Charity.

Father Richardson had an interest in this question. He was very happy with the studies that had already been made, like the thesis of Father Roger Meyer, defended at the faculty of canon law in the Angelicum in Rome. This thesis was adapted and translated into Spanish with the title *Una institución singular: el superior general de la*

Congregación de la Misión y de las Hijas de la Caridad ["A Singular Institution: the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Daughters of Charity"]. Another study of the same matters was made for the general assembly of 1968-1969. It was an historical summary of the duties of the superior general of the Daughters of Charity. The title of the study was *Relations entre les prêtres de la Mission et les Filles de la Charité* ["Relations between the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity"]. In 1968 Father Alberto Vernaschi published his thesis *Una istituzione originale: le Figlie della Carità di san Vincenzo de' Paoli* ["An Original Institution: the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul"]. I myself wrote another article that was published in *Vincentian Heritage* with the title "The Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity" [vol. 5, no. 2, 1-41]. Father Richardson took all the means at his disposal to see that these studies were known by the priests and also by the Daughters.

The General Assemblies of the Daughters of Charity

I had the good fortune of being at Father Richardson's side during the celebration of the general assemblies of the Daughters of Charity, from the first one of his generalate until the last. Our mutual fondness for canonical themes, both of the common law and of the proper law of Vincentian institutions, both in the process of revision, allowed us to converse often about the postulata that the sisters presented for discussion in their assemblies. They were, in general, postulata coming from the provinces or the general council or Father Richardson's own ideas. The work that Father Richardson imposed on himself during the assemblies was enormous. I stood in admiration of how he would copy everything in typical student notebooks, traced with his characteristic hand. I do not know if all those notebooks have been preserved. They would be a living and irrefutable testimony of his work, of his eagerness and interest to inform himself of what the sisters were presenting. Not everything he heard was to his approval, but he was always respectful toward the opinions of others, without failing to defend his own ideas with the tenacity that was characteristic of him.

One of the topics on which he consulted me was how to create a procedure for the election of the mother general, especially in the preliminary stages, that is, how to set up some appropriate and effec-

tive channels for choosing possible candidates, without taking away the sisters' freedom to choose in the assembly the one they wanted. It was not easy, especially beginning with a favorite idea of Father Richardson's, that is, that some sisters who had been in the previous assembly should take a part. Certainly some sisters had more knowledge of the visitatrixes and delegates. Among them, undoubtedly, were sisters who could carry out very well the duty of mother general. Finally, a method was devised that did not fail to have its risks and that obliged the father general to choose persons in whom he had full confidence to tabulate faithfully the responses of those consulted.

Respect for what was proper to the Daughters of Charity

Father Richardson was very careful not to confuse the areas proper to the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission. They are two communities closely united in origin and history, sharing in the same spirituality, complementary in the Vincentian idea of fully evangelizing the poor, but independent. The similarities should not blur the boundaries. The Company of the Daughters of Charity does not depend on the Congregation of the Mission. That is certain and beyond question. Once I dared to say to Father Richardson that this had not always been the opinion, and I cited for him the work of an Italian Vincentian who, at the end of the last century, defended the opposite. He refused to believe me until I showed him the book, which was among the books reserved for the use of the father general, kept in his own room. The title of the book was *La direzione delle Figlie di Carità* [The Direction of the Daughters of Charity] (Savona, 1897). Father Richardson never imagined what was defended in that little book.

The author attempted to prove that the Company of the Daughters of Charity is not only under the jurisdiction of the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission but that of the Congregation of the Mission itself. Naturally, the said father's thesis did not absolutely convince Father Richardson. We continued our dialogue and I said to him, "Certainly the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity are at the present time two independent communities, but it was equally beyond question that there was a certain dependence in the origins and the crossover into the Company of the Daughters of Charity, almost by osmosis, with great naturalness, of many canonical elements proper to the Congre-

gation of the Mission. I gave him two examples: the dispensation of vows and the understanding of the Daughters' vow of poverty, copied from that of the missionaries. Father Richardson did not deny the crossover of the canonical elements indicated, but he stood firm that the Daughters of Charity were a community independent of the Congregation of the Mission and added, "this does not do away with the pastoral responsibilities of the Congregation of the Mission toward the Daughters of Charity."

After finishing his mission as superior general and before leaving for Africa, he spent some days in Rome. I had been named vicar general. One day he came to me with a sly smile and asked me, "Now that you are vicar general, Father Flores, what obligations do you think you have toward the sisters?" I guessed his intention and as one crafty person to another I replied, "as vicar general of the Congregation I have at the present time no obligation, but as a Vincentian missionary I feel that I am a debtor and servant of the sisters as before." He smiled again with the same slyness, but he realized that I had guessed his intention. I am sure that behind that innocent question was his idea of respecting to the utmost the respective limits of the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission as two congregations totally independent, but very close, hinting at the same time that I should not go beyond my powers as vicar general of the Congregation of the Mission.

In regard to the pastoral aspect of the Congregation of the Mission toward the Daughters of Charity, the father general took a great interest in the directors of the sisters and in the missionary sisters who did not have an acceptable spiritual assistance. Once when I passed through Rome, he called me and told me about the situation of some of the provinces of sisters in mission countries: how they lacked good spiritual care and how difficult it was to secure it. I asked myself why the father general made known to me his concern for the sisters whom he considered to be without good spiritual care. Was he simply giving vent or was there something else that he did not tell me explicitly? I went to speak to the vicar general about what had happened. The vicar general told me, "The matter is clear. Father Richardson has made known to you his uneasiness in order to find out if you would volunteer to offer that service." I was flabbergasted and wondered if what the vicar general told me was a joke. The truth is that it never even occurred to me that that could have been the motive.

"CM Assisting DC"

Impelled by his desire that the fathers serve the sisters in a good pastoral way, Father Richardson had the idea of publishing a bulletin. The title of the bulletin was "CM Assisting DC." What Father Richardson was seeking to create was a medium of communication among the directors of the sisters and the superior general and with the other missionaries who habitually lent their priestly services to the Daughters of Charity. That is what Father Richardson himself indicated in the prologue to the first issue, dated 15 August 1973.

The contents of the bulletin were in accord with the end that was sought. In it were explanations of the documents of the Holy See and the superior general that could be of interest to the directors and the missionaries, for example, the revision of the rules of the director and the *Monita ad confessarios FC*. Other writings were noted, for example, Father Pierre Coste's unpublished study of the vows of the Daughters of Charity. In the same way a bibliography was published that could be of service to the directors and missionaries in their apostolic work in favor of the sisters.

I have not been able to ascertain how many issues were published. I venture to affirm that there were no more than three (15 August 1973; 2 February 1976; and 27 September 1976). It seems that the cooperation that Father Richardson asked for in the prologue to the first issue was not forthcoming. In the third issue of the bulletin he made the following observation, "The first bulletin to the directors of the Daughters of Charity, two and a half years after its appearance, is almost forgotten." Father Richardson kept up his hope that the bulletin would survive. He dealt with the bulletin in the meeting that he had with the South American directors in Bogota. He kept his good resolutions and desires, but the bulletin did not succeed in surviving very long.

He was also interested in the quarterly visits that the missionaries ordinarily made with the Daughters of Charity. In the second issue of "CM Assisting DC," he made known the work edited by Father Bonjean, director of the province of Lyons, *Le visite trimestrielle*, published in 1976. He decided to distribute it among the various directors with the request that they have it translated into their respective languages, complementing Father Bonjean's essay with notes about how the quarterly visits were made in their provinces.



Father Richardson in the early years of his priesthood.

Concern for the Sisters who left the Community

We all know the vocational crisis that arose in the Church, and also in the Company of the Daughters of Charity, during Father Richardson's generalate. One day I received a letter that surprised me. In it he told me to be attentive, as much as I could, to the sisters who had left the Community and that he personally was ready to study the case of any sisters deciding to return. He had probably been informed that at that time I was seeking help for a sister who found herself in difficult circumstances. He not only encouraged me to continue helping these sisters, but he also sent me, by way of information, a project for help that the director of the sisters in Marseilles, Father Pierre Glenadel, had been implementing. It was a clear sign of his concern for those who left the Community. I learned from Father Glenadel's project that Father Julien Vandenterghem was also doing something similar. Father Richardson had the gospel sensitivity to give tactful and prudent care not only to those who stayed within the fold but also to the sheep who had left it.

Respect for the Sisters

To conclude my contribution to the homage that Father Richardson deserves for his work as superior general in favor of the Daughters of Charity, I am going to relate two other recollections. One happened in a general assembly of the Congregation of the Mission. I think it was the one in 1974. In it, with the mother general present, one of the assembly members asked something that sounded a bit indiscreet, more because of how the question was translated than because of its content. Father Richardson reacted quickly and ordered the missionary to sit down. The missionary did not expect such a reaction from the superior general and complied. Later the matter was clarified. The incident demonstrated, as I see it, how Father Richardson did not permit anything indiscreet to be said in his presence about the sisters. It was a way of showing his appreciation for them and for the government of the Community.

Another case was different. Father Richardson came to Spain to discuss with the provincials some points regarding the recently erected provinces. In the course of an extended conversation it occurred to me to tell him that some sisters did not have much confidence in the importance attached to consultations that were made in connection

with appointments to offices. Father Richardson reacted quickly and said to me more or less the following. "When you speak to those sisters, tell them for me that the father general has great respect for the results of the consultations and what they may think, if those who complain about how the father general proceeds act responsibly." I did not know what to say. It was another sign of what I always saw in Father Richardson: his courage and uprightness, and, in addition, his humility whenever he realized that he had made a mistake.

I can cite many other recollections of Father Richardson which show his interest in serving the sisters from his position as superior general. I understand that what I have related is only details of a more complete picture, sparks from a living fire. One would have to go through all the issues of the *Echo of the Company* in order to know the teaching that he periodically imparted to the sisters. One would have to go through all the acts of the general assemblies and of the sisters' councils in order to know how much prudence and solicitude he showed for the progress of the Company in those far from easy times. It was proverbial in the curia how he arranged all his commitments in order to go to Paris and be present at the sisters' councils. From his solicitude emerged not only his pastoral charity toward the community but also his pleasure on seeing the immense good that the sisters were doing for the poor everywhere in the world. If the sisters caused him work, as is obvious, they also gave his pleasure and happiness that he had never imagined before becoming superior general.