SAINT
VINCENT DE PAUL

CONFERENCES
TO THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

VOLUME IX
The original of this painting by Simon François has been lost.
SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL

CORRESPONDENCE
CONFERENCES, DOCUMENTS
II

CONFERENCES

VOLUME IX

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Vicar General, Archdiocese of Baltimore

August 30, 2004
To

Our faithful collaborator and friend

SISTER JULIA DENTON, D.C.

who personifies so well
the virtues
of
a "true Daughter of Charity"
according to the teachings Saint Vincent gives
in these conferences
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INTRODUCTION TO THE FRENCH EDITION

If ever a book was worthy of being recommended to the Daughters of Charity, it is the collection of talks given them by their holy Founder. Reading these substantial pages will give them a greater love for their vocation, a deeper understanding of its spirit, and fuller knowledge of the obligations it entails.

In these pages we see the complete picture of Saint Vincent de Paul, whom we can never admire enough. His language is warm and lively, simple and conversational, convincing and shrewd, instructive and practical. He appeals in turn to logic, to the heart, and to the will, with words that often attain lofty eloquence. Whether he is raising his heart to God in inspired prayers, or abasing himself through humility to a place lower than that of demons, we realize that he is not doing so for oratorical effect but that this is the spontaneous outpouring of an upright, sincere soul, giving expression to his true sentiments.

Not all his talks or “conferences” to the Daughters of Charity have come down to us. The first two are missing; the third one, given on July 31, 1634, is followed by a hiatus of six years. The Founder met with the Daughters of Charity in the Motherhouse sometimes on Sundays, sometimes during the week. His audience was composed of the Sisters living at the Motherhouse and those who were able to come from Paris and its environs. On July 31, 1634, only twelve of them were present; later their number would fluctuate between eighty and one hundred.

Saint Vincent urged the Sisters to be faithful to these meetings. “Sisters,” he said, “never miss them, not even to go to hear a sermon; for, even though listening to sermons may be a very good thing, you should still prefer these gatherings, which are held simply to teach you what you are obliged to do; and everything that’s

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1 At the time, the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity was outside the city walls of Paris.
said here is for all of you and each one of you in particular—which can't be said of sermons. I'm not saying that you shouldn't listen to them when you can, but only that you should prefer to come here on meeting days.”

Saint Vincent would arrive, accompanied by Fr. Portail or, in his absence, by another Priest of the Mission. When something unforeseen arose that kept him at home or called him elsewhere, he had one of them replace him.

His instructions centered mainly on the vocation of the Daughters of Charity, their ministry with poor persons, the sick, or the foundlings; on the daily schedule, rising, and prayer; on the Common and Particular Rules; Christian virtues and those that make up the spirit of the Company: simplicity, charity, humility, mortification, and love of work; and on frequenting the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. He also gave some excellent conferences on scandal, temptations, envy, admonitions, and the Jubilee. Several talks were devoted to the virtues of Sisters who had died. Sisters who were being sent to the Provinces rarely left without receiving his advice. The election of officers was another opportunity for him to say a few words.

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3 Antoine Portail, born in Beaucaire (Gard) on November 22, 1590, came to Paris to study at the Sorbonne. He met Saint Vincent there around 1612 and became devoted to him. From the time of his ordination (1622) until his death in 1660, he was the Saint's auxiliary. Saint Vincent received him as the first member of his new Congregation, initiated him into the ministry of the missions and the work of the ordinands, assigned him to the service of the galley convicts, chose him as First Assistant in 1642, and entrusted him to the direction of the Daughters of Charity. In 1646 Portail left Paris to make visitations of the houses of the Congregation. He began in the west of France, then went south, crossed into Italy, and did not return to Saint-Lazare until September 1649. Except for a fairly long absence in 1655, he hardly ever left the Motherhouse again and died on February 14, 1660, after an illness of nine days. (Cf. Notices sur les prêtres, clercs et frères défunt de la Congrégation de la Mission [10 vols. in two series, Paris: Dumoulin, 1881-1911], vol. I, I-94.)
As for the choice of topics, Saint Vincent took his cue from events, the needs of the Company, and the suggestions of Saint Louise de Marillac. 4

A notice sent to the various houses in Paris and in the suburbs informed the Sisters of the topic and points of the conference, the day, and the time. We still have one of the notes distributed before the conference of July 3, 1660, stating that “the topic for the conference concerns the late Mlle Le Gras. First point: The reasons why Daughters of Charity should discuss the virtues of their Sisters who have gone to God, especially the virtues of their very dear Mother, the late Mlle Le Gras. Second point: What are the virtues that each Sister noted in her? Third point: What are the virtues that impressed them the most and that they want to imitate with the help of God? For Saturday at two o’clock.”

4Saint Louise de Marillac [Mlle Le Gras], Foundress, with Saint Vincent, of the Daughters of Charity, was born in Paris on August 12, 1591. Her father was Louis de Marillac, brother of Michel de Marillac, Keeper of the Seals (1616-30), and half-brother of another Louis, Maréchal de France, renowned for his misfortunes and tragic death. Louise married Antoine Le Gras, secretary of Queen Marie de Médicis, on February 5, 1613, and they had one son, Michel. Antoine Le Gras died on December 21, 1625. The devout widow had implicit confidence in her spiritual director, Vincent de Paul, who employed her in his charitable works, eventually making her his collaborator in the creation and organization of the Confraternities of Charity. The life of Saint Louise, whom the Church beatified on May 9, 1920, was written by Gobillon (1676), the Comtesse de Richemont (1883), Comte de Lambel (n.d.), Monsignor Baumard (1898), and Emmanuel de Broglie (1911). Her letters and other writings were copied and published in part in the work entitled: Louise de Marillac, veuve de M. Le Gras. Sa vie, ses vertus, son esprit (4 vols., Bruges, 1886). Saint Louise was canonized on March 11, 1934, and on February 10, 1960, was named patroness of all who devote themselves to Christian social work. Therefore, in this English edition of the letters of Saint Vincent, “Saint” has been added to her name in titles of letters and in the footnotes. To the above bibliography should be added some of her more recent biographers: Alice, Lady Lovat, Life of the Venerable Louise de Marillac (Mademoiselle Le Gras) (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1917); Monsignor Jean Calvet, Louise de Marillac, a Portrait, translated by G. F. Pullen (1959); Joseph F. Durvin, Louise de Marillac (1970); the compilation by Sister Anne Regnault, D.C., editor: Louise de Marillac, ses écrits (1961), of which the section containing the letters was translated by Sister Helen Marie Law, D.C.: Letters of St. Louise de Marillac (1972); and the revised edition of Sister Regnault’s work entitled: Sainte Louise de Marillac, écrits spirituels (Tours: Mame, 1983), ed. Sister Elisabeth Charpy, D.C., trans. by Sister Louise Sullivan, D.C., Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac, Correspondence and Thoughts (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991). Hereafter this work will be cited as Spiritual Writings followed by the appropriate letter and number, e.g., A. 2 or L. 350. Finally, Sister Elisabeth Charpy, D.C., ed., La Compagnie des Filles de la Charité aux Origines. Documents (Tours: Mame, 1989), which will be cited as Documents D.C.

5Cf. X, Conf. 118.
Saint Vincent would begin the conference with the prayer *Veni, Sancte Spiritus* (Come, Holy Spirit). The “conference” truly mer­ited this name because it was not simply a monologue. The Sisters would ask questions, make observations, and humble themselves for their faults. Sometimes there were touching group manifesta­tions of good will, which the Saint prompted by his questions.

At the meeting of April 26, 1643, the Founder introduced a new method. “In the preceding conferences,” he said to the Sisters, “I noticed that you needed some help in finding motives or reasons for what had been suggested to you. That’s why I felt it would be better to change the method in order to make it easier for you to under­stand what you will be taught, and this will be a big help to you in making your prayer. I’ll ask you questions, as is done for catechism lessons.” And to encourage the more timid and uneducated, he added, “If anyone can’t give an answer, please don’t worry about it because persons who say little sometimes do better, and those who catch on quickly and have no trouble discussing what is proposed to them sometimes don’t do as well, although there are some who speak and do so well. Those who speak well, Sisters, should humble themselves profoundly—this is a gift for which they should express their gratitude to God—and those who have a hard time understanding what is suggested, or have difficulty expressing their thoughts, should put themselves in God’s hands and make renewed resolu­tions to do good.”

Then he began to question them: “Tell me, Sister, what reasons do we have for desiring that disunion should never arise in the Com­pany?” “And you, Sister?” “And how about you, Sister, who come after her, can you tell us some reason?” When a Sister had answered well, the Saint expressed his approval or even congratulated her: “Right you are, Sister!” or “That was well said, Sister!” or “Blessed be God, Sister!”

He was delighted with this experiment. “Blessed be God, Sisters! I assure you that I’m deeply edified by this type of conference. I can’t tell you how much it consoles me, in the hope that it will be

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6 Cf. IX, Conf. 14. All the quotes that follow here are from this conference.
helpful to you, and that you'll learn by this means to discover the motives for doing or saying the things that will be proposed to us.”

Another day, he said, “The last conference I attended greatly consoled me; each Sister shared her thoughts sincerely, and it seemed to me that they were like sparks igniting a huge fire—like one candle that was lighting the others.”

Everyone shared the edification Saint Vincent felt, but did any Sisters have other sentiments as well? Among these simple, timid young women—most of whom were from the country and were unaccustomed to speaking in public—some trembled at the thought of being asked for an explanation. If they were questioned, they became nervous, forgot what they had prepared so painstakingly, and contented themselves with repeating what others before them had said. To avoid this difficulty, Saint Vincent advised them to write down their thoughts and to read from the notes they had prepared. Unfortunately, the Sisters who felt most embarrassed were the ones who didn’t know how to write, but he did his best to help them.

Many Sisters used to read their notes aloud, even those who were educated, among them Saint Louise herself, who nevertheless always answered with ease and proficiency, and Saint Vincent questioned her frequently. If her name does not appear in the conferences for which she took the notes, it is because, through modesty, she didn’t name herself. When Saint Vincent addressed her, it was always in a more respectful tone of voice; his words of praise were also more frequent: “What was said before is good, but this is even better.”

This method of holding a conference added charm and liveliness to the meetings. Sometimes Saint Vincent added other questions to his initial one, asking for details and fuller explanations. At times, he addressed all the Sisters together, and everyone would answer him as one.

They didn’t always wait for an invitation to express collectively their desire to do good. On July 31, 1634, at the end of the confer-

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7Cf. IX, Conf. 23.
8Cf. IX, Conf. 59.
ence, all the Sisters promised spontaneously to observe the Regulations. At the beginning of the conference of January 25, 1643, they knelt down, humbled themselves for not having sufficiently profited by the Saint’s previous instructions, and entreated him to ask God’s forgiveness for them.

Sometimes his eloquence gave rise to touching scenes. During the conference of April 26, 1643, on the harmful results of disunion, a Sister asked to speak and said, “Would you allow me, Monsieur, to ask pardon right now of my Sisters for having complained because I thought that some of them had snubbed me in the street, and also to ask pardon of those to whom I complained?” When permission was granted, the Sister knelt down, and so did all the others; she then asked pardon with great humility, naming each Sister in turn.

On March 15, 1648, a Sister who was speaking about the good use of corrections added, “Recently, I was so proud that, when admonished of a fault by one of my Sisters, whom I myself had asked the charity to remind me, I showed that I didn’t like it. I most humbly ask your pardon for this, and I ask pardon of you, Sister, who did me that act of charity.” On hearing this, the other Sister knelt down and said, “Sister, I’m the one who asks your pardon. I didn’t admonish you as I should have done because there were other people present.” “Isn’t that wonderful!” cried Saint Vincent, edified by this, “One accuses herself for not having taken the reproof well, and the other for not having given it properly; in this way, each tries to put the blame on herself.” These good examples added weight to the lessons given during the conferences.

At the end of the conference, Saint Vincent would give his blessing to his Daughters—although reluctantly, because of his “unworthiness.” On May 30, 1647, the remembrance of his own faults made him exclaim, “I’ll ask Our Lord Jesus Christ to give you himself His holy blessing, and I won’t say the words of it today because

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9Cf. IX, Conf. 1.
10Cf. IX, Conf. 13.
11Cf. IX, Conf. 14.
12Cf. IX, Conf. 35.
the faults I've committed in your regard make me unworthy of it. I ask Our Lord to be the one to do it." 13 Thereupon, he kissed the floor, recited the usual prayer, Sancta Maria, etc., and got up to leave. But Saint Louise and the Sisters, who were unwilling to accept this deprivation, insisted so strongly that he finished by giving in to them.

When the conference was over, the Sisters would hasten to write it down as faithfully as possible. Those who had been questioned would bring their notes. Saint Vincent himself lent them his outline—at least Saint Louise ventured to ask him for it. "I hope," she wrote to him on January 25, 1643, "that our Sisters will make good use of the instruction Your Charity 14 gave us today. Their hearts are filled with the desire to do this and they would really like to remember it forever. This causes me to entreat you most humbly to send us the little memorandum of the points you had in it. It seems to me that this would help me to recall a large part of what our good God said to us through your mouth." 15

The written conference was sometimes, if not always, given to him to indicate any corrections to be made. We have proof of this in the following words he wrote on August 25, 1646, to Saint Louise, who was absent: "Enclosed is a summary of the conference of our dear Sisters, written out by dear Sister Hellot. 16 I just read part of it, and must confess that I shed a few tears in two or three places. If you are not coming soon, send it back to us after you have read it." 17

More than half of the notebooks of the conferences written down by the first Sisters have been lost; only fifty-four are extant. In twenty of them, we recognize the handwriting of Saint Louise; in

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13Cf. IX, Conf. 30.
14Saint Louise often referred to Saint Vincent as "Your Charity," by analogy with "Your Majesty," "Your Excellency," etc.
15Cf. II, 392.
16Elisabeth Hellot, a native of Paris, entered the Daughters of Charity in 1645. Until her death in late 1650, she was secretary to Saint Louise. Her duties included drafting the letters of the Foundress and taking notes during the conferences of Saint Vincent, which she immediately transcribed and verified.
17Cf. III, 28.
sixteen, that of Élisabeth Hellot; two are by Julienne Loret,¹⁸ and sixteen others by Mathurine Guérin.¹⁹ The other conferences are known to us from copies made at a later date.

The editing of the conferences varies according to the Sister who was doing the writing. Each has her own way of presenting what took place at the meeting, just as each has her particular style. They tried, no doubt, to give an exact rendition of the thinking and even of the words of the Founder; however, since it was impossible to recall verbatim what he had said, they inevitably put some of themselves into what they gave as coming from Saint Vincent.

Saint Louise guarded these manuscripts jealously. Mathurine Guérin testified to this in a report given in 1660 or 1661 to Margue-

¹⁸Julienne Loret was born in Paris on October 7, 1622, and baptized the same day. Orphaned at an early age, she was raised by the parents of Jacques de la Fosse, who later became a Priest of the Mission. In a conference after her death it was said that “She had a tiny body that enclosed a great soul.” (Cf. Recueil des principales circulaires des supérieurs généraux de la Congrégation de la Mission [3 vols., Paris: Georges Chamerot, 1877-80], vol. II, 524). Julienne entered the Daughters of Charity on June 9, 1644, and took her vows on December 25, 1649. Her merit and virtue were so remarkable that, on October 30, 1647, scarcely three years after her own admission to the Community, she was entrusted with the formation of the new Sisters. At the same time, she became Saint Louise’s Assistant: “It was she who directed the whole Community,” Sister Mathurine Guérin would later say, “because Mademoiselle was in no state to come to any exercise.” (Cf. Recueil, vol. II, 530.) Julienne also carried out the duties of Secretary and was responsible for taking down Saint Vincent’s talks, to which she listened pen in hand. In 1651, she was sent to Chars to settle a very delicate situation: the new Pastor had Jansenistic ideas and was attempting to impose these practices upon the Sisters. Returning to Paris in 1653, after two years of difficult trials, Julienne was appointed Sister Servant in Fontenay-aux-Roses (Haut-de-Seine), where she remained until 1655. Recalled to the Motherhouse, she was again named Assistant, remaining in office under Mother Marguerite Chétil, after the death of the Foundress, and again under Mother Nicole Haran. She died in Fontainebleau on August 9, 1699. Her manuscript life, by Antoine Durand, C.M., is in the Archives of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity.

¹⁹Mathurine Guérin was born in Moncontour (Brittany) on April 16, 1631. Despite the opposition of her parents, she entered the Daughters of Charity on September 12, 1648. After her formation period, she was sent to Saint-Jean-de-Grèves parish and then to Liancourt. Recalled to the Motherhouse in 1652, she became Seminary Directress and Saint Louise’s secretary. In 1655 she was made Treasurer, but in 1659 was sent to the hospital in La Fère (Aisne) to replace Sister Marie-Marthe Trumeau as Sister Servant. In July 1660 Saint Vincent sent her and two other Sisters to serve the prisoners and to teach poor girls on Belle-île-en-Mer (Morbihan), off the Breton coast (cf. Charpy, Documents, D.C., Doc. 483, 538). Since 1650 the island had belonged to Nicolas Fouquet, Minister of Finance, who had a fortress built there. She served a first six-year term as Superiors General in 1667 and again (1676-82, 1685-94), and died at the Motherhouse on October 18, 1704. A long sketch of her life and virtues is written in Circulaires des supérieurs généraux et des sœurs supérieures aux Filles de la Charité et Remarques ou Notices sur les sœurs défunte de la Communauté (Paris: Adrien Le C1ere, 1845), 556-68.
rite Chétif, Superioress of the Company, when she wrote, "One of the greatest treasures of our Company is the very accurate anthology she compiled and had others compile of the instructions of our late Most Honored Father. . . . She loved those poor manuscripts so much that she wouldn't hear of anyone recopying them, as a good priest from Saint-Lazare wanted to do, for fear that he might change what this blessed Father meant, for she preferred their simple, natural style to more polished language."21

The Superiores who succeeded Saint Louise inherited her reverence for the writings of her holy Director. Abelly, writing in 1664 about the Daughters of Charity, stated that "they have collected more than one hundred of these talks of their good Father, which they still read and reread every day in their Motherhouse in

20Marguerite Chétif, born in Paris, was baptized at Saint-Sulpice on September 8, 1621, and entered the company of the Daughters of Charity on May 1, 1649. She was first sent to Chars, and in May 1651 went to Serqueux. She took perpetual vows in Paris on April 4, 1655. When the Company was erected officially on August 8, 1655, she signed the Act of Establishment (cf. XIIIb, 225-28). In 1656 she went to Arras as Sister Servant and was there when Saint Louise died in Paris. Saint Vincent appointed Sister Marguerite Superioress General (1660-67); in 1667 she became Seminary Directress, and in 1670 Sister Servant in Angers. In 1674 she was named Treasurer General under Sister Nicole Haran; upon completion of her term of office (1677), she went as Sister Servant to the Nom-de-Jésus Hospice. She died at the Motherhouse on January 9, 1694. Two conferences given after her death are preserved in Circulaires des superieurs généraux, etc., 470-78.

21Louise de Marillac. Sa vie, ses vertus, son esprit, vol. 1, 250.

22Louis Abelly was born in Paris in 1604. From the earliest years of his priesthood he took part in Saint Vincent's apostolic labors. The Saint spoke so highly of him to François Fouquet, Bishop-elect of Bayonne, that he appointed him his Vicar-General, but his stay in Bayonne was not long. He accepted a simple village parish near Paris, and shortly afterward (1644) was given charge of Saint-Josse parish in the capital, where he formed an ecclesiastical community. He later became Director of the Sisters of the Cross (1650), chaplain of the General Hospital (1657), and Bishop of Rodez (1664). In 1666 he resigned his diocese for reasons of health and retired to Saint-Lazare, where he spent the last twenty-five years of his life in recollection and study. We have almost thirty of his books on devotion, history, and theology, among them La Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul (3 vols., Paris: Florentin Lambert, 1664; translated by William Quinn, FSC, under the title The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul, edited by John E. Rybolt, C.M. [3 vols., New Rochelle, NY [USA]: New City Press, 1993]). According to Coste, Abelly is not merely the sponsor of this work, as has been asserted, but is truly its author, although his task was greatly facilitated by Brother Bertrand Ducournau, C.M., who collected and classified the documents, and by Fr. François Fournier, C.M., considered by some scholars as its real author. Abelly made a donation to the Saint-Lazare house of some property he owned in Pantin, which became the country house of the students. He died October 4, 1691, and, according to his wish, was buried in the church of Saint-Lazare, under the Holy Angels chapel. (Cf. Pierre Collet, La vie de St Vincent de Paul, [2 vols. Nancy, A. Leseure, 1748], vol. 1, 5ff.)
order to be nourished by them. They are looking forward to the day when they will be in print so that the Sisters who live farther away may share the fruits of this excellent reading.”

Around 1670, Sister Mathurine Guérin, then at the head of the Company, had the first copy made. “We owe her a debt of gratitude,” writes the author of her obituary notice, “for four thick volumes of conferences of M. Vincent . . . which . . . Mlle Le Gras had collected but didn’t have time to edit.” The author of the notice adds, “In addition to these, she also recorded the conferences on the virtues of our Sisters who had died.”

From this it would seem that, in these four volumes, none of which has come down to us but must have served as a model for copies made later, Sister Mathurine Guérin did not make a slavish copy of Saint Louise’s text. Meanwhile, the Sisters living in the Provinces, like those at the Motherhouse, ardently desired to read the conferences of their holy Founder. Sister Suzanne Parent, Sister Servant at the Angers hospital, expressed this desire to Edme Jolly, Superior General. On January 20, 1677, he replied to her as follows: “The transcription of the conferences you would like to have is a major, long-term project, and will require time for its completion. Meanwhile, you have plenty of good books to provide you with the benefit you want to draw from reading them.”

Mother Marie Moreau, elected Superioress of the Company on June 4, 1691, took the matter to heart. She consulted Edme Jolly regarding her plan to enlist copyists from the outside; on December 30 of the same year she received the following reply from him: “You have to be absolutely certain of the reliability of the persons to whom you want to give M. Vincent’s conferences to copy, for a man who is in need might not scruple making two copies, and to sell them at a high price to certain curious persons.”

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24 Conférences spirituelles tenues pour les Filles de la Charité sur les vertus remarquées dans les soeurs défuntes (Paris: Demonville, 1826), 385.
25 Recueil de pièces relatives aux Filles de la Charité, MS, 66.
26 Ibid.
It was around this time that copies of the conferences began to circulate in various houses of the Company. Those that have survived the years enrich the manuscript collection preserved at the Motherhouse.

Given the large number of houses of the Daughters of Charity, it is amazing that these conferences were not printed before the nineteenth century. Were they afraid that copies might fall into the hands of persons outside the Community? This is probable.

The first printed edition is the work of Fr. Bournac, a priest of the Toulouse diocese. Entitled *Conferences de saint Vincent de Paul*, its two volumes contain forty-two conferences on the Rules. The displeasure the publication of this work caused among the children of Saint Vincent was also shown in a note Fr. [Pierre-François] Viguier wrote in the front of the copy preserved in the secretariat of the Congregation of the Mission: “This edition is repudiated by Fr. [Claude-Joseph] Brunet, Vicar-General of the Congregation of the Mission [1800-06], by his successor, Fr. [François-Florentin] Placiard [1806-07], and by Mother [Antoinette] Deleau [1790-1804]. The manuscripts from which it is taken are incorrect and unreliable. To regard it as the genuine work of Saint Vincent would be to fail him. Paris, September 30, 1803. Viguier, Priest of the Mission.”

This comment is not only severe, it is unjust. If Fr. Viguier had taken the trouble to compare Bournac’s text with that of the early collections, he would, on the contrary, have found it, on the whole, accurate.

In 1825, Charles Boujard, who, as Vicar-General [1819-27], was acting head of the two families of Saint Vincent, gave one of his

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27Paris, 1803.
28Pierre-François Viguier, Secretary General of the Congregation of the Mission in the period immediately following its reestablishment and that of the Company of the Daughters of Charity by Napoleon Bonaparte. Because of the continued upheavals in Europe and in the Church, the Congregation of the Mission was governed by Vicars-General both in France and in Italy, each claiming jurisdiction over the whole Community. This period of turmoil came to an end when on January 1, 1827, the Holy See appointed Pierre-Joseph Wailly Superior General. He died in October 1828, and the General Assembly of May 1829 elected Dominique Salhorgne as his successor.
priests the task of completing Bournac’s work by having printed fifty unpublished conferences contained in a manuscript collection from the beginning of the eighteenth century. It was very popular in the early nineteenth century, probably because the talks were classified by subject matter, preceded by a summary, and provided with a marginal synopsis of each paragraph. 29

Since most of these conferences—thirty-nine out of the fifty—are known to us from the original manuscripts, it is very easy to judge the value of this collection. Its author eliminated details that did not suit him or no longer corresponded with the customs of the Daughters of Charity, and even transposed to Saint Vincent’s time practices from a later period. Had he known where to draw the line, he might have been excused for touching up the primitive manuscripts. On the one hand, this text gives only an imperfect rendition of Saint Vincent’s talks and is in part the work of copyists. On the other hand, it is full of grammatical errors and all sorts of inaccuracies, and many of the sentences are incomplete. Obviously, Saint Vincent did not speak that way. The reading of a text corresponding in every point to that of the manuscripts would have been more fatiguing than interesting and instructive. Sister Mathurine Guérin had understood this; therefore, the first copy made by her, which was the source for later ones, was revised.

Editing a text, however, is not an easy job. The editor has to know how to limit himself or herself to the essential, that is, to respect the contents and, as far as form is concerned, to retain the words and phraseology of the manuscript whenever meaning, grammar, and the French language allow. The author of the manuscript used by the 1825 editor failed badly in that. True, he wasn’t

29 The work published during the Vicar-Generalate of Charles Boujard (1820-25) is entitled *Conférences spirituelles tenues pour les Filles de la Charité par saint Vincent de Paul, recueillies de mémoire par quelques sœurs présentes et revues par un prêtre de la Congrégation de la Mission* (Paris: Demonville, 1825). The manuscript from which this work was published is in the Archives of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity (SV 17). In 1802 it was lent to the Sisters in Bordeaux and doubtless to other Sisters as well. Lucien Philippe, Director of the Daughters of Charity (1802-09), wrote in his preface, “This precious notebook belongs to the principal Community of the Daughters of Charity in Paris and must be returned there as soon as possible. December 9, 1802.” It was still the preferred manuscript in 1825.
trying to produce an historical or critical work, but simply to prepare for the Sisters—and only for the Sisters—an edifying book, which, as a matter of fact, from the practical point of view, has many advantages.

Jean-Baptiste Étienne had scarcely been named Superior General [1843-74], when he asked Jean Grappin, Director of the Sisters, to prepare a new edition of the conferences. Unfortunately, Grappin had neither the competence nor the time needed to carry out well such a difficult and important work. Although his confrere, Jean-Marie Naudin, appointed to collaborate with him on it, had more time at his disposal, he was no better prepared for this type of work than Grappin. The latter republished, with no modifications, the fifty conferences that were in the 1825 edition. For the forty-three that he added, the text of the manuscripts was revised and corrected. "In this edition," he stated in the introduction, "by comparing different manuscripts, we were able to eliminate several inaccuracies and a few exaggerations. In each conference, wherever there were grounds for it, order was restored by transposing certain things, often by following what was set forth in the introduction. A few passages were deleted to avoid repetition. Perhaps more could have been done, but, in so doing, there would have been reason to fear diminishing the richness and even the effectiveness of these sorts of repetition."

Fr. Grappin emended more than he leads us to believe. Almost no sentence in his work is a faithful reproduction of what is written in the manuscript. Even the most correct phrases did not suit him; he changed things for no apparent reason, and what he writes is frequently no improvement on the original. The conferences explaining the Rules, which he revised meticulously, are, in fact, the ones that needed it the least, and there was generally no problem publishing them as they are in the manuscripts, which is what we ourselves

30Published in Paris by Adrien Le Clère in 1845, the title is the same as that of the 1825 edition. In the same year, again using Le Clère, Grappin published another edition: Supplément au premier volume de l'ancienne édition des Conferences de Saint Vincent de Paul. Besides the conferences published by Bournac, the Supplément contains those of May 22, 1657 (X, Conf. 80), and July 24, 1660 (X, Conf. 119).
will be doing. In addition, for the text of the Rules on which Saint Vincent had commented, he substituted a text from a later revision, with the result that there are discrepancies between the text and his commentary.

Grappin's work came out in 1845. It was his text that was adopted by subsequent editors, who were satisfied with simply adding to the number of conferences. To the ninety-three in 1845 and in 1863, thirty-two were added in 1881 and four more in 1902.

From this point of view, our edition will signal great progress because it contains one hundred twenty conferences. It has another advantage: that of giving the reader a more accurate text. Instead of republishing Grappin's work, whose shortcomings we have just noted, we have preferred to base our text directly on the originals and, when these manuscripts are not available, on the early collections formed from the copy made by Sister Mathurine Guérin. We are not claiming to have added anything to the perfume of edification given off by the conferences of Saint Vincent as we already know them; but we can show that his words are more accurately preserved here, and historical truth better respected.

Note: This English edition of the Conferences uses an informal, conversational style in order to preserve the spontaneity and simplicity of the exchanges between Saint Vincent and the first Sisters and to provide a translation that appeals to the modern reader. —Ed.

31Published in Paris by Jules Le Clere and Co. The title is the same as that of the 1825 and 1845 editions.
33Conférences de saint Vincent de Paul aux Filles de la Charité (Paris: Dumoulin, 1902).
34One more conference has since been found (IX, Conf. 49a), bringing the number in the English translation to one hundred twenty-one.
35The original notebooks give the text of fifty-four instructions. For forty conferences, nearly all on the Rules, we have followed manuscripts SV 3 and SV 4. Nine instructions to some Sisters sent to the provinces or to the houses in Paris and the short address delivered on August 27, 1660 (X, Conf. 120), come from the collection Procès-verbaux des Conseils tenus par saint Vincent et N.V. Mère Mademoiselle Le Gras. Three conferences on the deceased Sisters are taken from manuscripts Déf. 2 or Déf. 7; one is from Conférences spirituelles tenues pour les Filles de la Charité par plusieurs supérieurs et directeurs de la Compagnie, vol. III, 75ff. A dozen additional conferences come from MS. SV 9.
1. - EXPLANATION OF THE REGULATIONS

July 31, 1634

On the last day of July 1634, in a third and final conference, M. Vincent gave the Rules to the little Congregation of the Daughters of Charity, and an instruction on how to practice them. Following are the notes that were taken:

He knelt down, as did all the Sisters present, and after reciting the Veni, Sancte, began in this way, "Dear Sisters, when I was speaking to you the other day, I was saying that you've been residing together for some time now with the same purpose in view, but so far you haven't had any Regulations for your way of life. In this, Divine Providence has guided you, as God guided His people, who were without a code of laws for more than a thousand years after creation. Our Lord acted in the same way with the early Church; for, as long as He was on earth, there was no new written law; His Apos-

Conference 1. - Archives of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, 140 rue du Bac, Paris; the original is in Saint Louise's handwriting.

1In a series of conferences, beginning in October 1655 and found in vol. X of this series, Saint Vincent explained the Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity. These "Rules" had evolved from the "Regulations" that were gradually introduced to the Sisters from the origin of the Company, as can be learned from his first recorded conference on July 31, 1634. The Rules are probably the fruit of a collaborative effort between Saints Vincent and Louise. The latter, who lived and worked with the Sisters on a daily basis, was eminently qualified to suggest revisions or changes to the Rules as she saw them lived out in the Company. At times, Saint Vincent uses the terms "Rules" and "Regulations" interchangeably. (Cf. XIIIb, 147, for a history of the development of the Rules for the Daughters of Charity.)
ties were the ones who assembled His teachings and Commandments after He had gone.

"Providence seems to have brought the twelve of you together here with the intention of honoring His human life on earth. What a blessing to be a member of a Community because each individual shares in the good that is done by all! By this means you'll have more abundant grace. Our Lord promised us this, saying, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.' For even greater reason, when several of you have the same intention of serving God, 'my Father and I will come and dwell among them,' if they love us. It is for those who have the same spirit and who help one another in this same spirit to honor God that His Son prayed in the last prayer He offered before His Passion. 'Father,' He said, 'I pray that they may be one, even as we are one.' So, dear Sisters, let's see how you should spend the twenty-four hours that make up the day, as the days make up the months, and the months the years that will lead you to eternity.

"As far as possible, observe the prescribed times, for it will be a very great consolation to you on rising to think, 'All my other Sisters, wherever they may be, are rising now for the service of God.'

2Cf. Mt 18:20. (NAB) The Scriptural quotations in this volume are usually taken from the New American Bible (NAB), unless a passage cannot be found in that edition or a more suitable rendering of the phrase is found elsewhere. In such instances, the Douay-Rheims Bible (D-RB) has been used. Where there are variations in the numbering of the psalms in these two editions, both versions may be cited. In the conferences to the Daughters of Charity, Saint Vincent referred to Scripture at least 275 times; occasionally he gives an incorrect rendition or attributes the passage to the wrong person. This edition does not give references for all the quotations and allusions, many of which are already familiar to the reader. For further study of Saint Vincent's use of Scripture, see the following studies: Warren Dicharry, C.M., "Saint Vincent and Sacred Scripture," Vincentian Heritage, VII, no. 2, 1989, 137-49; Maurice Vansteenkiste, C.M., "Les Règles Communes et la Bible, Citations explicites, implicites, et réminiscences," CD-ROM Documents vincentiens, Ecris et Images, Claude Lautissier, C.M., Paris 2002; and François Garnier, "Enchiridion Spirituale Sancti Vincenti a Paulo IV: Textes Bibilques Cités par Saint Vincent," Vincentiana, 23 (1979): 214-19, among others.

3Cf. Jn 17:11. (NAB)
So, you’ll rise at five o’clock, whenever the work of the Charity\(^4\) allows you to go to bed at ten, for you must take care of yourselves for the service of those who are poor, and give your bodies their just due. Your first thought should be of God: thank Him for having preserved you during the night, consider briefly whether you’ve offended Him, and thank Him or ask His forgiveness for this; offer Him all your thoughts, the impulses of your heart, and your words and actions; resolve never to do anything to offend Him, and everything you do during the day will derive its strength from this first offering made to God. For you see, Sisters, if you fail to offer everything to God, you’ll lose the reward of your actions. Saint Paul tells you how much you lose when the first thoughts of your mind are filled with anything other than God. When you wake up, the devil does his best to inspire you with other thoughts. That’s why you must be imbued with this holy practice, as good Christian women and true Daughters of Charity.

“The first thing you should do when you’ve risen and have begun to dress is to kneel down and adore God. What do you think it means to adore God? It’s to render Him the honor that belongs to Him alone and to acknowledge that He is your Creator and Sovereign Lord. Next, you’ll ask for His holy blessing, bowing your head slightly in order to receive it with devotion and with the intention of making all your thoughts, words, and actions pleasing to His Divine Majesty and willing to do all of them for the glory of His most holy love.

“When you’ve finished dressing and have made your bed, you’ll begin your mental prayer. This is the heart of devotion, Sisters, and you really have to want to accustom yourselves to making it well. No, don’t be afraid that poor village girls—ignorant as you think you are—shouldn’t aspire to this holy exercise. God is so good, and

\(^4\)The Confraternity of Charity, often called simply “the Charity,” was an association founded for the purpose of helping sick and/or poor persons in the parishes (cf. V, 243, n. 4, for a fuller explanation). The Ladies, who were members of the confraternities, were also referred to as the “Sisters” and were assisted by volunteers, mostly young women from the country or servant girls, who were called simply les filles, hence the term Filles de la Charité or “Servant girls of the [Confraternity of] Charity.” When they became a separate entity, they became known as “Daughters of Charity.”
has already been so good in your regard as to call you to practice charity, so why do you think He'll deny you the grace you need to pray well? Don’t let such a thought enter your mind. I was deeply edified today in talking with a good young woman from the country, who is now one of the greatest souls I know!

“Always begin all your prayers by an act of the presence of God; otherwise, an action will sometimes fail to be pleasing to Him. You see, Sisters, even though we don’t see God, faith teaches us that His holy presence is everywhere, and this is one of the means we should propose to ourselves—I mean His presence in all places, permeating everything, even the very depths of our hearts. This is even more true than the thought that we’re all here present because our eyes may deceive us, but the truth that God is everywhere will never deceive us.

“Another means of placing ourselves in the presence of God is to imagine ourselves before the Most Blessed Sacrament of the altar. It’s there, dear Sisters, that we receive the most cherished testimonies of God’s love. Let’s love Him dearly and remember that, when He was on earth, speaking of His Father and the Holy Spirit, He said, ‘If anyone loves me, we will come to him,’ and souls will be guided by His holy Providence as a ship by its pilot.

“Take care to give an account of your prayer as soon as possible after making it. You can’t imagine how useful this will be. Tell one another quite simply the thoughts God has given you and, above all, be careful to remember the resolutions you took at meditation. Blessed Sister Marie de l’Incarnation used this means to make great progress in perfection. She used to give a careful account of her prayer to her maid. Yes, Sisters, you can’t imagine how much this will benefit you and the pleasure you’ll give to God by acting this way. Just think, dear Saint Mary Magdalen hid in her heart the

5Cf. Jn 14:23. (NAB)
6Born on February 1, 1566, in Paris, Barbe Avrillot married Pierre Acarie, Vicomte de Villemeur at the age of sixteen and became the mother of six children. After Henry IV exiled her husband, she took an active part in various religious endeavors, especially the introduction into France of the Discalced Carmelites (1604). Her three daughters entered Carmel. After the death of her husband, Mme Acarie entered the Discalced Carmelites as a lay Sister, taking the name of Marie de l’Incarnation. She died in Pontoise on April 18, 1618, renowned for her virtues and miracles, and was beatified in 1791.
good thoughts she gathered from Our Lord's words, and the same is said of the Blessed Virgin. The good thoughts God gives you in prayer are relics; gather them carefully in order to put them into practice, and you'll gladden the heart of God; then you'll be the joy of God, and all the saints will celebrate.

"Go to Holy Mass every day, but do so with deep devotion; conduct yourselves in church with great reserve and be an example of virtue to all who see you. I have to give as an example a dear lady named Mme Pavilion, who for many long years has been a source of admiration in her parish. She seems to walk and carry herself as if she's visibly in the presence of God, and appears to be almost unaffected by everything, sin excepted. She would allow herself to be trampled on rather than be diverted from the presence of God. That, Sisters, is how to behave reverently in church, especially during Holy Mass.

"What do you intend to do while you're there? It's not only the priest who offers the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass but also those who are present at it, and I'm sure that, when you've been well instructed, you'll be very devoted to it, for it's the center of devotion.

"Remember that when you leave meditation and Holy Mass to serve poor persons, you lose nothing, Sisters, because to serve those who are poor is to go to God, and you should see God in them. So then, be very careful to attend to all their needs, and be particularly alert to the assistance you can give them for their salvation; don't let them die without the sacraments. You're not there simply to care for their bodies, but to help them to be saved. Above all, motivate them to make general confessions; put up with their little fits of temper, and encourage them to suffer patiently for the love of God. Never get angry with them, and don't speak to them harshly; they have enough to put up with because of their illness. Imagine that you're their visible Guardian Angel, their father and mother, and don't contradict them except in those things that are bad for them, for in that case it would be cruelty to give them what they want. Weep with them; God has made you to be their consolers.

7According to a manuscript, Mme Pavilion's parish was in Grandchamp. No other information about her is available.
“You see, Sisters, what fidelity you owe to God. The practice of your vocation consists in the frequent remembrance of the presence of God. To make this easy for yourself, take advantage of the reminder given when the clock strikes, and make an act of adoration at that time. To make this act is to say in your heart, ‘My God, I adore You,’ or simply, ‘My God, You are my God,’ ‘My God, I love You with my whole heart,’ ‘I wish, O my God, that everyone might know and honor You in honor of the contempt You endured on earth.’ When you begin these acts, you may close your eyes to recollect yourselves.

“Before dinner, make the examination of conscience for the time of one or two Misereres on the resolutions you took at meditation. As far as possible, these resolutions should be on the practice of some particular virtue and, as a rule, should aim at combating the imperfection to which you’re most inclined; for you see, Sisters, even the most just person falls seven times a day; some Sisters are subject to vanity, others to unbecoming behavior. That’s what you have to work at: overcoming your bad habits. It’s essential to be very modest and recollected and to keep guard over your eyes. A glance destroyed David, who was such a good man. It’s nearly impossible for a person whose external behavior is improper to be truly unpretentious interiorly. And if you ask me how long you should keep the same resolution, my answer is: as long as you feel inclined toward the vice you’re trying to overcome. Be very careful about using language that is loose and risqué. A good means of being recollected is to reflect often that God sees you.

“Make good use of the free time you have after caring for the sick. Never be idle; apply yourself to learning how to read—not for your own advantage but to be in a position to be sent to places where you could teach. Do you know what Divine Providence wants to do with you? Be always ready to leave whenever holy obedience sends you.

“After the evening examination of conscience, keep silence until after meditation the next day so that this recollection, which will ap-

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8Ps 51. (NAB); Ps 50. (D-RB)
pear exteriorly, may foster the conversation of your hearts with God. Keep it especially after the act of adoration you offer to God before going to bed and after having received His holy blessing.

"Go to bed modestly and fall asleep with a good thought. This will be an easy way for you to remember God when you awake, and your mind will be better disposed to make your morning meditation.

"Go to Communion on Sundays, holy days, and certain other feast days, but always with your confessor's permission.

"Since obedience improves all our ministries, there must always be one among you who acts as the Superior. Sometimes it will be one Sister, sometimes another. That's what we do on the missions. Don't you think this is necessary? May God be pleased with your submission to her in honor of His Son's submission to Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin! Be sure, Sisters, that you always consider as the Blessed Virgin the one who holds the place of Superior—even see God in her—in this way you'll benefit more in one month than you'd otherwise do in a year. By being obedient you'll learn holy humility, and by governing through obedience you'll instruct others usefully. To prompt you to practice holy obedience, I'd like to tell you that, when God placed me in the house of the General's wife, 9 I decided to obey her as I would the Blessed Virgin, and God knows that it really helped me! Honor the Ladies of the Confraternity of Charity and always treat them with great respect; honor the sick as well and always look on them as your masters.

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9Françoise-Marquerite de Silly, wife of Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, General of the Galleys, was born in 1580, the daughter of Marie de Lamoy and Antoine de Silly, Comte de Rocheport, Baron de Montmirail, and Ambassador to Spain. Shortly after Saint Vincent came to live in her home as her children's tutor, she entrusted to him the direction of her soul. The Saint's influence was not long in making itself felt. The devout woman formed the habit of visiting and serving the sick and of distributing abundant alms to persons who were poor. She had missions given on her estates and joined the Confraternity of Charity in Montmirail. Mme de Gondi died on June 23, 1625, after having her saintly director named head of the Collègue des Bons-Enfants and providing him with the means of establishing the Congregation of the Mission by a gift of forty-five thousand livres.
“So now, Sister Marie of Saint-Sauveur, you’ll be the Superior of your Sister for the whole month; Michelle, the Superior of Barbe at Saint-Nicolas; Marguerite, of her Sisters at Saint-Paul; and you, Sister, at Saint-Benoît, your Guardian Angel will be your guide. For the Hôtel-Dieu, it will be Mlle Le Gras. Be very cordial with one another, and let the Sisters in the other parishes come here from time to time to be aided in putting your Regulations into practice.

“I still have to tell you the good results you’ll have from this way of life. The first is that you must believe that if anyone should hope for paradise, it’s the Sisters who are faithful to it. And why? Be-

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10 Marie Joly, one of the first Daughters of Charity, was presented by Mme Goussault around 1632. She served poor persons in the parishes of Saint-Paul and Saint-Germain in Paris and at the Hôtel-Dieu. In 1641 she was chosen for the new mission in Sedan, where she remained until 1654. During that time she experienced successively pillages, devastation, famine, and massacres, which caused great suffering for the poor. In 1654 Saint Louise asked her to return to Paris, but she refused until Saint Vincent intervened. When she did return, she became discouraged and ran away from the Motherhouse. Overcome by remorse, she went back, was readmitted at her own request, and made up for her momentary weakness by exemplary conduct.

She signed the Act of Establishment of the Company on August 8, 1655 (cf. XIIIb, 225-28), and in 1672, while Sister Servant at Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas, she signed the text of the Common and Particular Rules approved by René Alméras, Superior General. Marie Joly died on April 3, 1675.

11 Very little biographical information on Sister Michelle is available. As mentioned here, she was named Sister Servant of the community at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet (1634). Saint Louise mentions her death around 1642 in a letter to Barbe Angiboust. (Cf. Sullivan, Spiritual Writings, L. 127, p. 82.)

12 Barbe Angiboust, who holds an important place in the first twenty-five years of the history of the Daughters of Charity, entered the Company on July 1, 1634, at the age of twenty-nine, and was admitted to vows on March 25, 1642. She was put in charge of the foundations of Saint-Germain-en-Laye (1638), Richelieu (1638), Saint-Denis (1645), Fontainebleau (1646), Brienne (1652), Bernuy (1655), and Châteaudun (1657) where she died on December 27, 1658. In 1641 she was responsible for the Sisters who were serving the galley convicts. The conference on her virtues, held in the Motherhouse on April 27, 1659, is very edifying (cf. X, Conf. 109).

13 As seen here, and also in his letters, Saint Vincent often designates the Daughters of Charity by their first name only. To avoid confusion, he sometimes adds the name of the place or parish where they are. From this distance in time, it would be difficult to give the corresponding family names, either because we cannot find them in his letters or in those of Saint Louise, or because several Sisters had the same first name.

14 Hospital located near Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. In the ninth century a monastery was transformed into a hospice for poor persons; by 1006 it was a dependency of the Cathedral Chapter of Notre-Dame. In the middle of the twelfth century, it began accepting the sick people of Paris. The Parlement of Paris deprived the Cathedral Canons in 1505 of the temporal administration of the hospital and entrusted it to eight townsmen, who in turn brought in Augustinian nuns to staff it. In 1634 Saint Vincent doubled the religious staff by introducing the Ladies of Charity and the Daughters of Charity. (Cf. The New Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. 7, 173.)
cause God has promised this. By observing it, you're assured that you'll be doing God's most holy Will. Saint Clement felt this way; he used to say that anyone who had lived in a Community and observed its Rule had nothing to fear.

"In the second place, it's the beginning of a very great blessing that will perhaps last forever. Yes, Sisters, if you begin to observe your Regulations with the intention of doing God's most holy Will, there's great reason to hope that your little Community will survive and grow. However, you should also fear that, if you neglect them and don't live by them, the Community will disappear entirely. Watch out for that! What a disordered state! It's a question of nothing less than the abandonment of a good work that God has perhaps planned from all eternity and for which He has chosen you! What a happiness if you do it according to His Will! Your Community will last, not only for a time but, when you die, it will be cause for augmenting your glory in heaven.

"In the third place, perhaps the lives of ten thousand persons depend on your fidelity. How many husbands are back with their wives once again, and how many parents with their children! Maybe you'll be the reason why many persons who might otherwise be lost, will be saved.

"But how is it that God has chosen you for such a great blessing? It's God's Will to choose simple people. He chose the Apostles to triumph over idolatry and to convert the whole world. Remember, Sisters, that God began the Church with poor people, and say, 'Because I am nothing, God has chosen me to render Him a great service. God has so willed it. From my lowly condition I will never forget Him and will always adore His great mercy to me.'

"Fourth, consider what a great misfortune it would be if, after God had chosen you for this holy ministry, you should fail Him through your own fault. At the hour of death, God would reproach you, saying, 'Go away, you wretched creature; because you didn't obey your Regulations and didn't assist the sick poor, you've been

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15Saint Louise must have misunderstood Saint Vincent because he was probably referring to Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605), who has not been canonized. Vincent, however, considered him a saintly Pope and even said as much.
the cause of the premature death of many persons and of the disappearance of your Little Company.' Now, because it's a good thing and fitting that it should survive, here are some means:

'The first is to ask God for the grace to live in conformity with the little Regulations that have been proposed to you.

'The second is to take the trouble to do so and make up your mind right now to observe them, saying in your hearts, 'Yes, my God, I'm determined to begin to practice those good things you taught us. I know I'm weak, but with Your grace I can do all things, and I feel confident that You'll help me. I implore you by the love that prompts You to teach us Your holy Will, and I beg you to give us the strength and courage to live them.'

'The third means of observing your Regulations is to live in great cordiality and charity with one another. Persons chosen for the same ministry must also be united in everything. These Sisters have been chosen for the fulfillment of a plan, but the building won't last if you don't cherish one another, and this bond will prevent its destruction. Our Lord said to His Apostles, 'If you, my Apostles, want to carry out the plan I have had from all eternity, then have great love for one another.' It's true, Sisters, that you're weak, but put up with one another's imperfections. If you don't, the building will collapse, and others will be put in your place. And because there may be antipathies, it would be well if you were changed, with the permission of Superiors and the consent of the Ladies in charge. Saint Peter, Saint Paul, and Saint Barnabas certainly had differences among themselves, so it shouldn't be surprising if poor, weak young women have them. You have to be ready to go wherever you're told to go, and even to request this, saying, 'I belong neither here nor there, but wherever God wants me to be.' Don't act like the sons of Zebedee who secretly had places sought for themselves, which God, for their own good, didn't give them. You are chosen to be at the disposition of Divine Providence and, should you be unwilling to submit yourselves entirely to it, you'd lose a great deal.

'Another means is perfect detachment from father, mother, relatives, and friends so as to belong to God alone. Now, to have this
great blessing, you must divest yourselves of all things and have nothing of your own. The Apostles had such detachment. For one écu, you'll have a hundred, and as many mothers as there are Ladies of Charity; Providence will never fail you, Sisters. Shouldn't you have the courage to give yourselves to God, who thinks so highly of you? Don't try to reserve anything for your own support; always rely on Providence. Rich people can become needy through the accidents that often happen, but those who are willing to depend completely on Providence will never be poor. Isn't it good to live like that, Sisters? What's there to fear? God has promised that those who take care of persons who are poor will never want for anything. Don't you prefer God's promises to the deceits of the world, Sisters? God has committed himself to provide for all your needs.

"The sixth [sic] means is for you to make an annual retreat in order to renew your good resolutions, and each of you will make it at the time and place judged appropriate and wherever obedience sends you. It may well be in this place.

"Another means to preserve the Company in the exact observance of the Regulations is for each of you to give a monthly account to the person who has the general charge of all of you, and for a brief talk to be given in this house on the blessing of your way of life in order to encourage you. As far as possible, I'll be the one to do this—or one of our priests.

"For the coming week, Sisters, make the subject of your mental prayer a reflection on the graces you've received from God—even from your childhood—and the dangers about which your parents warned you and from which you've been rescued by Divine Providence. In order to do this, divide your life into several periods: your Baptism, the other sacraments, and especially your vocation, and say, 'When I wasn't even considering it, God was thinking of leading me to a Community that would be a means of salvation for me.' How many graces He wants to grant you in carrying out your minis-

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16 Throughout this edition the various denominations of French money have been left in French since no adequate, unchanging value in American dollars can be assigned. At the time, one écu equaled three livres. One thousand livres could support two priests and a Brother for one year on the missions (cf. VIII, 18, n. 2).
try! I know someone who was deeply touched by the love of God at the thought of a grace she had received by her birth, without which she might never perhaps have been baptized. You can’t imagine how much she has benefited from this. You should say, Sisters, ‘Quoi! from all eternity God thought of doing good for me, even at the time when I hadn’t begun to have sentiments of gratitude and thanks!’ Reflect in your hearts on what resolution you should choose, and resolve to spend your entire life in observing your Regulations of service to the sick. Continue to do this for a week; then, for the rest of the month, use the meditations in the Introduction, and please don’t grow weary of this.

“But, Sisters, all our resolutions are nothing without grace. That’s why we really have to ask God to give us strength and set to work courageously. Give yourself to God and to the Blessed Virgin for that intention, and ask the intercession of Saint Louis and the other saints who were so happy to serve God in the way you do.

“Well now, Sisters, think about God’s mercy in choosing you to be the first persons for this foundation. When Solomon wanted to build God’s temple, he placed precious stones in the foundation to show the excellence of what He was trying to do. May God in His goodness grant you, the foundation stones of this Company, the grace of being eminent in virtue! For, by failing to be virtuous, you would do harm to all those who come after you, if God is pleased to bless this beginning. Just as trees bear fruit only according to their seed, those who come after you will probably not aspire to greater virtues than the ones you’ve practiced.”

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17Introduction to the Devout Life by Saint Francis de Sales. Trans. John K. Ryan. New York: Doubleday, 1982. This holy man, who honored Saint Vincent with his friendship, was born in Thorens, near Annecy on August 21, 1567, and died in Lyons on December 28, 1622. “Many times I have had the honor of enjoying the close friendship of Francis de Sales,” declared Saint Vincent at the beatification process of his illustrious friend on April 17, 1628. He always spoke of the Bishop of Geneva with great admiration, often referring to him as “our blessed Father” or “the blessed Bishop of Geneva,” and considered him worthy of the honors reserved to the saints. According to Jean Coqueret, a Doctor of the Sorbonne, Saint Francis, on his part, used to say that “he did not know a more worthy or more saintly priest than M. Vincent.” (Postulatory letter from the Bishop of Tulle, March 21, 1706.) When it came to appointing a Superior for the Visitation convent in Paris, Francis de Sales chose Vincent de Paul.

18Louis IX or Saint Louis (1214-70), King of France (1226-70), canonized in 1297.
All the Sisters then declared that they wanted to follow the advice they had heard and to live according to the Regulations given them. Everyone knelt down, and M. Vincent added, "May God in His goodness imprint upon your hearts what I, a wretched sinner, have just told you on His behalf, so that you may be able to remember it well in order to put it into practice, and that you may be truly Daughters of Charity. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

2. - THE VOCATION OF A DAUGHTER OF CHARITY

July 5, 1640

"The subject of this conference is the happiness of Daughters of Charity: in what it consists, and what you must do to be good, true Daughters of Charity.

"The happiness of Christians consists in remaining always in the state that makes them most pleasing to God so that there’s nothing that can displease Him.

"Two sorts of persons in the world may be in this state: some are in their own homes and attend only to the care of their families and the observance of the Commandments; the others are those whom God calls to the state of perfection, such as religious in every Order and even those He places in Communities, such as the Daughters of Charity who, although they don’t have vows to sustain them for the present, are, nevertheless, in that state of perfection, if they’re true Daughters of Charity.

"Now, to be true Daughters of Charity, it’s necessary to have left everything: father, mother, possessions, and the hope of establishing a household. This is what the Son of God teaches in the Gospel. We also have to renounce ourselves; for, if we leave all things, but retain our own wills and don’t renounce ourselves, nothing has been done. To be Daughters of Charity is to be daughters of God,

Conférence 2. - Archives of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity; the original is in Saint Louise’s handwriting.
daughters belonging entirely to God; for whoever is in charity is in God and God in her. We must do God’s Will in its entirety by observing God’s Commandments and those of Holy Church, obeying our Superiors, observing our Regulations, and preserving uniformity. Yes, Sisters, we have to work at that with all our might.

“Urgent business has kept me until now from helping you, but the remorse of conscience I often feel about this has made me take the resolution to speak to you every two weeks on this subject. So, we have to review your Regulations and make sure that, although you may be in different places, your spiritual exercises, meditation, and prayers before meals will still take place at the same time.

“Let’s go on to the means of being good Daughters of Charity. You should often ask God for this in all your prayers, and offer all your actions to God for this intention; for, of yourselves, you can’t have this great blessing. You, simple country women, swineherds as I was, we should never presume on our own strength.

“A second means is to have the will to be true Daughters of Charity. Don’t all of you desire this? Aren’t you determined right now to be so?”

After M. Vincent had the consent of all present he added, “Make an act of this right now; all of you, and say in your hearts, ‘Yes, my God, I desire with all my heart and I resolve to be a true Daughter of Charity with the help of Your holy grace.’ That’s how interior acts, like those of faith, hope, and charity, are made.

“To be true Daughters of Charity you must do what the Son of God did when He was on earth. And what did He do mainly? After submitting His Will and obeying the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph, He worked constantly for His neighbor, visiting and healing the sick and instructing the ignorant for their salvation. How fortunate you are, Sisters, to be called to a state of life so pleasing to God! In addition, however, you must take great care not to abuse this and strive to become more perfect in this holy state of life. You, poor village girls and daughters of workmen, have the happiness of being among the first women called to this holy ministry. Since the time of the women who served the Son of God and the Apostles, no Community has been established in God’s Church for this purpose.
Humble yourselves profoundly and make up your minds to strive to be perfect and holy, for you shouldn’t hope that those who come after you to follow your example will be better than you because, as a rule, like produces like. So don’t demean your state of life—or rather, don’t dishonor it; don’t, by your example, be the reason that unsatisfactory young women are entrusted with such a noble ministry.”

Since, in the course of time, the Sisters had developed habits injurious to their perfection, two questions were asked, the first one being whether they offended God by complaining of one another. M. Vincent replied that nothing destroyed union and charity more than this fault, and that, in the olden days, in a certain Community of men, when the religious used to visit one other, their first words were, “Brother, tell me something edifying.” “In like manner,” added Most Honored Father, “when you visit each other, be careful to say nothing that may cause scandal. If you’re Daughters of Charity, you must first of all have charity among yourselves. Isn’t this what you’d want?” And, asking this of all those present, he had them promise to excuse one other.

He was then asked if, when they’re discontented either with their Superiors, their ministry with the sick, or at home, or when they experience temptation and sadness, or their troubles make them think of leaving the Charity, it’s all right for the Sisters to console one another; and if, when the Superior or Superioress has been told of their failings, they may state their suspicions about certain Sisters, become angry, and speak ill of them.

Regarding the first point, our Most Honored Superior M. Vincent led us to see that venting one’s feelings in this way is contagious, and Sisters who seek relief in this manner infect others and perhaps wound them mortally. If the latter murmur and leave the Charity, those who have offended them by their bad example will answer before God for all the glory the others might have given Him, for all the assistance they might have rendered to poor persons, and for all the good they might have done in the Company. In this we saw the magnitude of this evil, and how carefully it had to be avoided.
As to being reminded of one’s failings, M. Vincent said, “Sisters, not only should you not be angry when you know one of your actions has been reported to your Superiors, but you should desire it. How do you think all religious Orders and Communities act in this matter? Without this benefit they couldn’t survive. How could a Superior guide his men without this help, if they’re more or less a hundred leagues away? How could we, in our houses and parishes, guide you without these admonitions? You can rest assured that this is absolutely necessary and one of the best practices in Communities! A Superior or Superioress with a great deal to do couldn’t know what goes on in the house without this means. So then, Sisters, don’t you think it’s necessary?” They all admitted that it was, and promised not to complain or find fault with it in future nor vent their feelings to others.

“Well now, Sisters, may God be blessed for the good resolutions you’ve just taken to serve Him! They’ll help you to grow more exemplary in the vocation to which He has called you. I beg the Divine Goodness to give you the graces necessary to keep them and to unite yourselves ever more perfectly in His holy love. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

3. - THE VOCATION OF DAUGHTER OF CHARITY

July 19, 1640

On Thursday, July 19, 1640, M. Vincent gave us the second conference on the vocation of the Daughters of Charity and began as follows: “Well now, here we are, Sisters, gathered together again to talk about the excellence of your vocation and to help you to understand it well, to make up for the faults into which constant business has caused me to fall, by putting off too long instructing you on what you should know on this matter. Perhaps, dear Sisters, the jus-
tice of God will punish me for it in purgatory, but I do have one consolation, namely, that for the ten to twelve years that your Company has been in existence, you’ve honored the way the Son of God acted in establishing His Church, for He spent thirty years of His life without appearing in public, ministering for only three years, and left nothing in writing to His Apostles. You’ve been guided by tradition in everything you’ve done these past years, Sisters, but, with the help of God, for the future you’ll have your little Rules. So, the object of this talk will be to help you to know God’s plan in establishing the Daughters of Charity, for all the workers in the world have some plan in their works. God himself has never done anything without a plan. His design in establishing the Capuchins was to form men who would teach penance by their example. He raised up the Carthusians to honor His solitude and to sing His praises, the Jesuits to lead an apostolic life, and so on for the others. We have to look, therefore, at God’s plan in establishing you. You, women wearing your poor headdress, aren’t you deeply consoled and amazed at the same time at such a great grace from God? You don’t realize this yet, but some day you will. So, have great respect for the plan God has had for you from all eternity in this regard, and, although it may seem insignificant to you at this time—almost nothing—know that it’s a very important one, since it’s to love, serve, and honor the life of His Son on earth.

“But perhaps, Sisters, you don’t know how one can love God above all things. I’m going to tell you how: it’s to love Him more than anything else—more than father, mother, relatives, friends, or any creature whomsoever; it’s to love Him more than ourselves for, if something were to arise contrary to His glory and Will, or were it necessary to die for Him, it would be far better to die than to act contrary to His glory and His pure love.

“See what a great plan God has for you, Sisters, and what a grace He gives you in allowing you already to serve so many poor people in so many different places! That requires different kinds of Regulations. The Sisters in Angers have theirs; one kind will be needed for those ministering with poor little children, another for those who care for the poor persons at the Hôtel-Dieu, another for the Sis-
ters who serve the poor in the parishes, another for those with the poor convicts, and still another for those who remain at home, whom you should look upon and love as your own family. And all these Rules should be based on the general Rule, about which I'd like to speak with you.

'Providence has permitted that the very first words of your Rule read as follows: 'The Company of the Daughters of Charity is established to love and serve God, and to honor Our Lord their Patron and the Blessed Virgin.' And how will you honor Him? Your Rule tells you, for it goes on to make known to you God's plan in establishing your Company: 'To serve the sick poor corporally by supplying them with all they need; and spiritually by seeing that they live and die in a good state.' So you see, Sisters, you may do all the good you like, but if you don't do it well, it will profit you nothing. Saint Paul taught us this: give all your goods to the poor, but if you don't have charity, you're doing nothing; no, not even should you give your lives. We must imitate the Son of God, dear Sisters, who did nothing except from the motive of the love He had for God His Father. So, your intention in coming to the Charity should be to come here purely for the love and pleasure of God; and, as long as you remain in it, all your actions should tend to that same love.

'The first and surest means of acquiring this love is to ask God for it and to have a strong desire to obtain it. What use would it be to carry soup or medicines to poor persons if the motive for such an action wasn't love? That was the motive of all the actions of the Blessed Virgin, of the good women who ministered to poor persons under the guidance of our holy [Mother] and the Apostles, like Saint Magdalen, Saint Martha, Saint Mary, Salome, Susanna, and Saint Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, of whom you're so fortunate as to be the successors.

'You also honor the Son of God by seeing that the sick poor are always in a good state, that is, in the grace of God. What an honor and consolation for you, Sisters—who of yourselves could never hope to perform great acts of charity nor be able to assist in the salvation of souls—that God has given you such an easy means to serve their bodies! To do this for the love of God wouldn't suffice
for you, among those whom you may serve, there will be many who are God’s enemies because of the sins they have been committing for such a long time and the ones they will perhaps want to commit after their illness, if you don’t try to change them from being God’s enemies to being His friends by true penance. That’s why it’s essential, Sisters, for you to be aware that, from all eternity, God’s plan for your establishment has been that you honor Him by doing your utmost in the service of souls to make them friends of God, that is, by taking great care to dispose them to receive the sacraments, doing so even before concerning yourselves with their physical care. You should speak to them with such charity and kindness that they see that only God’s glory and their own salvation prompt you to talk to them on such matters. Point out to them the importance of receiving the sacraments in dispositions that may benefit their souls and, when they have been reconciled with God, tell them that there won’t be a single moment of their lives, nor a single suffering, that God won’t accept and reward, even should they not die for another fifty years.

“While they’re ill, take great care to prepare them for death, and to take resolutions to lead a good life if God allows them to recover. In that way, Sisters, from being enemies of God, as they were, they will become God’s friends. What a consolation for you in paradise, if you’re so fortunate to see there those souls who, by their presence, will increase the glory with which God will reward you!

“And that’s not all. God has another plan, dear Sisters: that of your own perfection; for what good will it do you, Sisters, to win all souls for God if you lose your own? On the other hand, how can you strive for your own perfection when you have so much to do? Your Rule will teach you how, since the second article tells you to love one another like sisters whom Jesus Christ has united by the bond of His love. Isn’t that a very compelling motive? Sisters, it would be a great deal to say, ‘Love one another like sisters,’ but it would clutch you by the heart completely to say to you ‘Like sisters whom Jesus Christ has united by the bond of His love.’ See how obligated you are to love one another, dear Sisters, if you don’t want to run the risk
of spurning the great grace God has bestowed on you in giving you
the vocation of His dearest friends!

"This holy love, dear Sisters, couldn’t allow you to harbor any
bitterness of heart toward one another. So, should it happen that you
have any of this bitterness or give bad example to one another, ask
each other’s forgiveness immediately—a forgiveness that comes
from a loving heart that is anxious to please God, to love Him, to
love one another for love of Him, and to bear with one another in
your little difficulties and natural shortcomings.

"Another means to improve yourselves is mortification of the
senses. What a great secret Saint Paul reveals to us in one of his
Epistles when, speaking to the people he had instructed, he says,
‘My very dear brothers, I have to speak to you of very lowly, humili­
ating things, but you must mortify your members so that, just as
they have served iniquity, they may now serve justice.’ I say the
same to you, dear Sisters: mortify your senses and you’ll soon find a
change in yourselves and great facility in doing good. We have five
exterior and three interior senses. The exterior ones are sight, smell,
hearing, taste, and touch. They are so many windows by which the
world, the flesh, and the devil may gain entrance into your hearts.

"That’s why you should begin with sight: accustom yourselves
to keep your eyes moderately cast down, for, since you’ll be serving
laypersons, your reserved attitude should not be so severe as to
scare them off. That might hinder you from doing the good that
moderate cheerfulness could accomplish. Simply abstain from star­
ing too long and too fixedly into the eyes of men or women, and
from certain provocative glances that are highly dangerous and
whose damage is not immediately perceived. You can also mortify
this sense in church, in the streets, and on many occasions when
your curiosity is aroused, by averting your gaze from all these ob­
jects for love of God.

"Our sense of smell also needs to be mortified, either by will­
ingly enduring offensive odors when they present themselves,
without being squeamish, especially when you’re with your sick

\[1\text{Cf. Rom 6:19. (NAB)}\]
poor, and also by refraining from pleasant odors when you are able to smell some; but this shouldn't be obvious."

M. Vincent was asked if there was any merit in refraining from putting fragrance on one’s linen or dresses. Since he couldn’t even conceive of anyone having such very vain ideas, he showed great surprise, and this amazement was almost his only reply. Nevertheless, he added that it would be a very great fault for a Daughter of Charity even to entertain such an idea.

“We can also mortify our sense of taste very frequently, even if only by taking the piece of bread we least fancy; by going to meals without manifesting the keen appetite we may sometimes have; by not eating between meals; and by not taking what is most pleasing to our taste, or taking only part of what we’re allowed to eat.

“The sense of hearing is another dangerous window by which what is said to us sometimes takes such a strong hold on our hearts that countless disorders ensue. Watch out for that, Sisters. Charity is often greatly endangered because of the senses. That’s why you should mortify them as far as possible. Don’t willingly listen to slander, but turn adroitly away from spiteful words and anything that might unnecessarily wound your hearts or even your senses.

“The fifth is the sense of touch. We mortify it by refraining from touching our neighbor and not allowing others to touch us for sensual pleasure—not merely our hands, but any other part of our body.

The practice of such mortification, Sisters, will be a great help to you in becoming perfect and fulfilling God’s plan in establishing your Community. Strongly encourage one another in this. Another benefit resulting from it is that you’ll give others good example; for, although it’s a great thing to teach by words, dear Sisters, example has quite another power over hearts. Saint Francis 2 was well aware of this. One day he said to one of his Brothers, ‘Let’s go and preach,’ and then he simply walked through the town with him. When, as they were heading back home, the Brother said to him, ‘But you didn’t preach,’ the Saint replied, ‘Oh yes, Brother, our demeanor

\footnote{Saint Francis of Assisi.}
and recollection were a sermon for those people.' So then, Sisters, please be recollected and work earnestly at your perfection. Don't be content with doing good, but do it in the way God wants, that is, as perfectly as you can, thereby becoming worthy servants of the poor.

"I was deeply consoled a few days ago, dear Sisters, and I really must share this with you! I heard the vow formula of the Hospitaler Monks of Italy read aloud; it ran as follows: 'I . . . vow and promise to God to observe all my life poverty, chastity, and obedience, and to serve our lords the poor.' Just imagine how pleasing it is to God, Sisters, to honor His dear members the poor in this way."

The fervor with which M. Vincent read the words of these vows prompted some Sisters to express their feelings. Referring to the happiness of those good religious, who gave themselves entirely to God in that way, they asked whether, in our Company, some Sisters might be allowed to make a similar act.

"Yes, indeed, Sisters," His Charity replied, "but with this difference: since the vows of those good religious are solemn, not even the Pope can dispense them from them; but the ones you might make could be dispensed by the Bishop. Still, it would be better not to make them at all than to have the intention of obtaining a dispensation whenever you wished."

To the question, "Would it be well for Sisters to make them privately and from devotion?" His Charity answered that we should be very careful about that, but if anyone wished to do so, she should mention it to her Superiors and, after that, remain at peace, whether they permit or refuse it.

Moved with great fervor, M. Vincent began to raise his heart and eyes to heaven and said the following words, "O my God, we give ourselves entirely to you. Grant us the grace to live and die in the perfect observance of true poverty. I ask you this for all our Sisters absent and present. Don't you want to do so, Sisters? 'Grant us also the grace to live and die chastely. I ask this favor for all the Daughters of Charity and for myself as well, and that of living in the perfect observance of obedience. We likewise give ourselves to you, my God, to honor and serve our lords the poor all our lives, and we
ask this grace of you through your holy love.' Don't you also desire this, dear Sisters?"

All our Sisters gave their consent very willingly and devoutly, and went on their knees. M. Vincent gave us his customary blessing, asking God to grant us the grace of fully accomplishing His plan. Blessed be God!

4. - FIDELITY TO RISING AND MENTAL PRAYER

August 2, 1640

At the meeting held on Thursday, August 2, 1640, when M. Vincent noticed that some Sisters had absented themselves without a good excuse, he began by pointing out to us the importance of persevering in the vocation to which God has called us.

“You see, Sisters, we must be very careful not to lose any opportunity of perfecting ourselves. You've seen that God’s plan in calling you to the Daughters of Charity is to sanctify you in order to honor God's Will and that of His Son, who spent thirty years working on earth before instructing and healing the sick poor. So, dear Sisters, you should work seriously. It’s not enough to bear the name of Daughters of Charity—that is, daughters of God—you must also seize the opportunities to learn the means of improving yourselves, such as the conferences, which are all aimed at that. God so earnestly desires you to follow and carry out the vocation to which He’s calling you that, as one great saint has said, if your father and mother were to throw themselves across the threshold to prevent your departure, step over them. ‘But they’re my parents,’ you’ll say. Never mind, step over them. With even greater reason, dear Sisters, do you have to overcome any difficulty that may arise to prevent you from becoming perfect Daughters of Charity. ‘But it’s the Superioress of my parish.’ Even should it be your confessor, you must still go ahead.

Conference 4. - Archives of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity; the original is in Saint Louise’s handwriting.
"We’ll begin this conference, Sisters, by speaking of the necessity of putting everything in order. You see that God’s order is manifested both in nature and in grace; you see how all the seasons never fail to follow one another, how day follows night, how birds have their winter and summer migrations; how plants bring forth flowers and fruits in due season. Lastly, dear Sisters, if we don’t follow our Rules, we won’t do anything worthwhile, for disorder is the road to perdition. It’s said of hell, which is the place of perdition, that there’s no order there, but only everlasting horror and disorder.

“You will rise punctually at five o’clock. The entire daily schedule depends on this first action. Be courageous in forming this habit; it isn’t very difficult to do provided you’re healthy and have had sufficient sleep during the night, which should be seven hours. If some weakness prevents this, then we should make up in the morning the time we haven’t slept during the night.”

M. Vincent was then asked whether a Sister may stay in bed in the morning if she has been kept awake at night by some slight pain or other disturbance or if, through her own fault, she didn’t get to bed on time, or if, being slightly infirm, she usually doesn’t fall asleep until morning.

“Sisters,” replied M. Vincent, “it’s not reasonable that Sisters should rise late if they haven’t had a good night’s rest through their own fault; that would be a continual disorder and a departure from the order in which God wants us to be. They have to be careful to conform to the hours prescribed by the Rule. Furthermore, there would be reason to fear that nature would grow accustomed to this morning sleep—which it would infallibly do.

“I’ll tell you quite simply what I do. Often I don’t sleep at night but, unless fever obliges me to provoke a sweat, I always rise at four o’clock, which is the time fixed for the community, for I know from experience that I’d easily grow accustomed to getting up later. That’s why, dear Sisters, you have to do a little violence to yourselves; then you’ll find it very easy because our bodies are donkeys; when they’re used to one road, they always take it. And to make this habit easy, go to bed regularly at the same time.”
When someone pointed out to M. Vincent that Sisters working in parishes are liable to receive visitors, sometimes poor persons and at other times neighbors, who interfere with their spiritual exercises and are the reason why they can’t always get to bed on time, he replied, “Look, Sisters, you must be generous in seeking perfection through the exact observance of your Rules. Tell the people who come to see you at the times when you should be at some community exercise, ‘This is our meal time,’ or ‘This is the time we go to bed.’ If you say this in a gracious manner, you won’t vex them; on the contrary, you’ll edify them. God will be glorified by it because you’ll be faithful to Him in this matter, and you’ll derive great advantage from it for your perfection.

“So, having risen at five o’clock, adore God on your knees, offer yourselves to His goodness, thank Him for all His graces, and ask Him for His holy blessing. Then get dressed, make your beds, and at half-past five begin your meditation. Have a deep love for this holy exercise of mental prayer, Sisters, and go to it with the greatest care, for it’s the seed bed of all devotion.

“In this respect, I must tell you how edified I was recently by a President, who made his retreat with us about a year ago. Speaking to me about the little examination of conscience he had made on his rule of life, he said that, by the grace of God, he thought he had failed to make his meditation only twice. ‘But do you know, Monsieur, how I make my meditation? I foresee what I’ll have to do during the day and take my resolutions accordingly. I’ll go to the Courts of Justice; I’ll have to plead such and such a case; perhaps I’ll meet some person of rank who may, by his advice, try to corrupt me. With the help of God’s grace, I’ll be very much on my guard against that. Perhaps someone will offer me a present which I’d very much like to have; I won’t take it! If I feel inclined to rebuff somebody, I’ll speak to him kindly and graciously.’

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1President of the Parlement of Paris. ‘Parlement’ refers to the French judicial system. At the time of Saint Vincent, France had eight Parlements, each with its own legal jurisdiction, chief of which was the Parlement of Paris. They registered or gave sanction to the King’s edicts, ordinances, and declarations, and supervised their implementation.
“Well, Sisters, what do you think of that sort of prayer? Aren’t you deeply edified by the perseverance of that good President, who could excuse himself on account of his many business affairs and yet does not because of his desire to be faithful in keeping his resolutions? And you, dear Sisters, aren’t you courageous enough to try to follow God’s plan to perfect you by the practice of your Rule? You can make your prayer in this way, which is the best way; for you shouldn’t make it in order to have exalted ideas, ecstasies, and raptures—which are more harmful than useful—but only to perfect yourselves and make you truly good Daughters of Charity.

So, your resolutions should be something like this, ‘I’m going to serve some poor persons; I’ll try to go to them with a simple, cheerful attitude to comfort and edify them; I’ll speak to them as if they were my lords. There are some persons who seldom speak to me; I’ll put up with it; I have the habit of saddening a Sister on such and such an occasion; I won’t do it. She sometimes displeases me; I’ll bear with it. One Lady scolds me, another finds fault with me; I’ll try not to fail in my duty and will show them the honor and respect I owe them. When I’m with a certain person, it’s nearly always harmful to my perfection; as far as possible, I’ll avoid that situation.’ I think that’s how you should make your meditation, Sisters. Don’t you think this method is helpful and easy?” All the Sisters thought so, and Most Honored Father added, “Well then, dear Sisters, please practice it in this way.”

When some pointed out the difficulty they experienced in making their prayer, he replied, “For a long time, a lady I knew ² had the practice in all her meditations of contemplating a picture of the Blessed Virgin. First, she would look at her eyes and then say in her

²Saint Jane Frances de Chantal. Jeanne-Françoise Frémiot was born in Dijon on January 23, 1572. She and Baron de Chantal her husband had four children. Widowed at a very young age, she placed herself under the guidance of Saint Francis de Sales, and with him established the Order of the Visitation. The foundation of the First Monastery in Paris drew her to that city where she remained from 1619 to 1622. There she became acquainted with Saint Vincent, whom she requested of Jean-François de Gondi, Archbishop of Paris, as Superior of her daughters. Until her death in Moulins on December 13, 1641, as she was returning to Annecy from a trip to Paris, she kept in close contact with M. Vincent, whom she consulted for spiritual direction and the business affairs of her Community. (Cf. Henri de Maupas du Tour, La Vie de la Vénérable Mère Jeanne-Françoise Frémiot, fondatrice, première Mère et Religieuse de l’Ordre de la Visitation de Sainte-Marie [new ed., Paris: Siméon Piget, 1653].)
own mind, 'O beautiful eyes, how pure you are! You never did anything but glorify God. What purity is apparent in your holy eyes! Now different from mine, by which I've so often offended my God! I don't want to give them so much liberty any longer but, on the contrary, I'll accustom them to modesty.'"

"Another time, she'd look at her mouth and say, 'O holy mouth, how often you opened yourself to give praise to God and to teach and edify your neighbor! You never did it to commit sin. How different from mine, which has always done the opposite! Holy Virgin, by God's grace and your charity I am trying to watch more closely over my words and especially to avoid certain speech that gives bad example and saddens my neighbor.' In this way, point by point, that lady contemplated the Blessed Virgin, and it served her for many years as a subject for mental prayer."

M. Vincent's attention was called to the fact that sometimes the two Sisters who ministered in a parish didn't know how to read, and he was asked if it would be well for them to confine themselves to the principal mysteries of the life and Passion of Our Lord, which they had heard about more often. "That would be excellent, Sisters," he replied, "but on feast days it would be well for you to meditate on the Gospels that are read at that time. And you can learn these Gospels by spending a long time in this house, for Sisters should love the place where they're formed to be capable of working for the sanctification of others and in the service of the poor. I've known persons who could neither read nor write, yet made their prayer perfectly well. To be truly learned, dear Sisters, it suffices for you to love God.

"But some Sisters will say to me that books and knowledge are a great help. If that's what you think, you're deceiving yourselves. One day a Franciscan Brother said to Saint Bonaventure, 'How fortunate you are, Father, to be so learned and to make your prayer so well! What a help that must be to you!' 'Brother,' he replied, 'to make our prayer well we don't need knowledge; it's enough to love God well. The poorest old woman and the most ignorant Brother, if they love God, make their meditation better than I do.' This so de-
lighted the good Brother that he leaped for joy and said, 'So, let us ignorant folk love God well, and we will make our meditation well.'

"When someone else asked Saint Thomas in what books he found his lofty, beautiful concepts of God, he received this reply, 'If I may, Monsieur, I'll take you to my library,' and Saint Thomas brought him before his crucifix, telling him that it was the only thing he studied.

"Dear Sisters, those of you who don't know how to read would do well, until you've learned the Gospels of the feast days of the year, to dwell on the Passion of our Lord. The Franciscan Friars never have any other subject for their mental prayer. It has occurred to me that using pictures would be very helpful to you. You saw how useful that was to the lady I mentioned. Get some fairly large pictures of the principal mysteries of the life and Passion of Our Lord; and in the evening after the examination of conscience, instead of reading something, the Superior should show one of these pictures to her Sister and say, 'Sister, we'll make this the subject of our meditation tomorrow.' Then she should put it in the room where they're to meet the following morning. If thoughts fail you, look at the picture and use the method of that good lady. In addition, don't forget the President's method for your resolutions, which should be the principal point of your meditation."

A few Sisters then complained about forgetting their resolutions or about something else, but M. Vincent said to them, "Sisters, I also knew another very virtuous lady living in the world who used to carry a little picture in her sleeve. She would take it out, without anyone noticing, look at it, say a little prayer, and quietly replace it. This practice kept her strongly attached to the presence of God. I ask you, too, to accustom yourselves to this holy presence, which is extremely necessary for you. You'll find in it a great aid for your perfection. There are different ways of practicing it: you can see God in the heavens and reflect that He's everywhere, or in each creature you see, or even in your own heart."

Some Sisters stated that it was difficult for them to make their meditation before going out to take medicine to the sick, especially in summer because of the heat. "Dear Sisters," said M. Vincent, "al-
ways do whatever you can so that, prayer being your first occupation, your mind may be filled with God for the rest of the day. It’s true that you must prefer the service of the poor to this in case of necessity, but, if you’re careful, you’ll find plenty of time for both. The sick are rarely purged during extremely hot weather. The devil does all he can to keep us from making meditation because he’s well aware that, if he’s the first to fill our mind with frivolous thoughts, he’ll be the master of it all day long. So I urge you as strongly as I can, Sisters, to make your prayer before going out and to make it together. If, however, you’re legitimately prevented, you can make it later in church, but this should be as rarely as possible. Please be exact about this holy exercise; share with one another how you’ve spent your prayer time, and especially your resolutions, which you should mention quite simply.”

After listening to some Sisters who complained about sleeping during mental prayer, M. Vincent added, “You must be really on your guard against this temptation because it’s a common one. True, sleeping at prayer may be the result of a bad night or too much work the previous day, but that’s the exception. If sleeping during prayer should become habitual, then, to break the habit, stand up, or kiss the floor, or bring back your attention from time to time because, if we don’t find a cure for it, it will recur daily. Are you aware that there’s a devil whose job it is to put people to sleep when they’re at prayer? He stirs up bodily humors in such a way that they send vapors to the head that put people to sleep.

“Well now, Sisters, I ask God to sanctify you by the practice of your Rules, to grant you the grace to imitate His Son, who willed to work for thirty years before going to teach His neighbor, and to give you His holy blessing for this purpose. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.”
5. - FIDELITY TO RISING AND MENTAL PRAYER

August 16, 1640

On Thursday, August 16, 1640, feast of Saint Roch, M. Vincent said, "Sisters, although I'm the most contemptible sinner in the world, it has pleased God in His goodness that I should come to speak to you on His behalf, and I ask Him that it may be for His glory and your edification. I had promised myself that I'd give you your little Regulations today, but some business has prevented me from doing so. I was nearly unable to come at all today because I had to go far into the city; therefore, I won't have much time to talk to you."

The oldest Sister reminded him that at the end of the last meeting it was stated that, since the subject concerned our practices, it would be well to begin by a review. So, M. Vincent went back once again to the points, beginning with rising at five o'clock, and questioned the Sisters one after the other. By the grace of God no one was failing in this matter.

"Blessed be God, Sisters! Keep it up because to begin is nothing. And mental prayer? If possible, you should never miss it. Do you remember that good President's method?" Some Sisters said they had practiced it. "That doesn't mean, Sisters, that we should spend all our prayer time looking ahead at what we have to do and how to do it well. But the subject for meditation must be considered; converse with God about it, and do so for His love, which I'm sure you'll always cherish deeply. Direct your resolutions toward the day's activities, especially those that will help you tend to perfection and the fulfilment of your Rule, the better to honor God in your vocation.

Conference 5. - Archives of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity; the original is in Saint Louise's handwriting.

1Saint Roch, born in the thirteenth century in Montpellier (France), was invoked for protection against the plague and contagious diseases.

2Saint Louise.
“Eh bien! Sisters, we said at the last meeting that one means of leading a well-regulated life is to be diligent in what you have to do outside the house, not lingering anywhere, and sending away persons—no matter what their social class—who come to your house at the times prescribed for your spiritual exercises. Are you doing this?” Since this was a very difficult point, M. Vincent added, “Please don’t fail in this, dear Sisters, because on it depends the practice of your Regulations. Sometimes, out of timidity, a Sister won’t dare to say to her companion, ‘Sister, it’s time for us to leave.’ This is the way you should act: there are two of you; imitate the conduct of soldiers in wartime. One is usually more submissive than the other. The one who is less so sees to what has to be done. In the same way, those among you who, either by character or by virtue, are more decisive, should take charge of putting a stop to the hindrances arising from conversations outside the house, but you should do so gently and charitably. Above all, the other Sister mustn’t offer any resistance to this, even if she’s better acquainted than her companion with the persons who have to be sent away.”

In reply to the question of whether the Daughters of Charity could receive women friends in their rooms and even invite them to sleep there, M. Vincent said, “Sisters, be careful never to invite anyone into your rooms under any pretext whatsoever; that would be very dangerous.”

“Monsieur,” said a Sister, “please tell us how we can practice the devotion of that lady Your Charity mentioned the last time—the one who kept a picture of the Blessed Virgin in her sleeve.”

“You can do it this way: at the beginning of any action or conversation, and from time to time throughout the day, touch the rosary that hangs on your belt, or the medal or crucifix attached to it. Raise your heart to God and say to Him, ‘My God, may I speak this word or do this action for your glory and love.’ ”

Most Honored Father wanted to know if the Sisters remembered this action of the lady. Some said they did and had begun to practice it. Marguerite Lauraine, the young Sister who was serving poor persons in Saint-Laurent parish at that time, told us how, when she was passing through the square where silly tricks and games were being
played during the fair, she wanted to go back to watch some of them, but, instead of yielding to this, she held the crucifix of her rosary and said, "O my God, it's much better to look at you than at the follies of the world."

"God bless you, Sister! That's what should be done. Do you think, dear Sisters, that this good Sister did little or nothing by acting like that? Oh, she did something great! And what did she do? She pierced the heavens and sent a dart of love into the heart of God. God himself tells us so, 'A short, fervent prayer pierces the clouds.' Those darts of love are very pleasing to God and, consequently, are highly recommended by the holy Fathers, who realized their importance. That's why I urge you, Sisters, to accustom yourselves to make them and to think often of your obligation to work at your perfection in your way of life. You don't realize its grandeur. I can't tell you enough, Sisters, that it's one of the greatest in the Church, after that of the Nuns of the Hôtel-Dieu, of whom I'll speak to you some day. Isn't your heart touched when you think, 'Quoi! God has chosen me, a poor country woman, for such a holy ministry! He passed by my mother, all my relatives, and so many others in my village, and cast His eyes on Geneviève, Jeanne, Marie, etc., to be the first! What a great grace of God! O guidance of Divine Providence, you will be forever blessed!' This thought, dear Sisters, will surely give you the desire for great perfection.

"I think we spoke at the last meeting of how gracious you should be with one another. I recommended that you not allow in your hearts anything that might displease your companions, and never give bad example to one another. Remember, dear Sisters, that this is the bond of your union, which is so necessary for you. Be faithful to this practice and you'll see what great good will result from it. It will, in particular, prevent many complaints that often occur if we're not very careful about this. No one displeases God more than a grumbler. What does a murderer do? He kills the body of a person...

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3No information is available on Marguerite Lauraine. Saint-Lazare Priory, as a seigneurie, had rights over the Saint-Laurent fair, which was held just opposite the priory, on the other side of rue du Faubourg-Saint-Denis (cf. X111a, 305, n. 1).
4Cf. Sir 35:17. (NAB)
5The Augustinian Nuns.
whose soul is perhaps happy in heaven. But, I ask you, what does a grumbler do? Far worse! He doesn’t kill the body, but with a single word he may perhaps kill many souls. Yes, Sisters, a Sister who would tell another of the annoyance caused her by the Superior or her Superiorress, or who would complain of being kept in a place she doesn’t like, or who might feel tempted to leave and would say so, criticizing those who may have been the cause of her discouragement; yes, Sisters, I tell you that such a person would be worse than a murderer. The poor Sisters who listen to her will be dismayed by all those complaints and will start to grumble more themselves, grow weary of their situation and, in the end, will abandon their vocation, by which God intended to save and sanctify them. Isn’t that poor Sister, who was the first to complain, the cause of the loss of all the rest? And what could she do to restore to those poor souls the life she’s taken from them? Don’t you see that such a Sister, if—God forbid!—there were any, would be worse than a murderess, since the life of the body is nothing in comparison with that of the soul.

‘But,’ you’ll say to me, ‘what will such a poor discontented Sister do?’ Do you know what she should do, Sisters? She should come to see me—me or your Superiorress—to tell either one of us her troubles; and, instead of listening to her, her companion should say, ‘In God’s name, Sister, let’s remember that we’re Daughters of Charity; as such, we shouldn’t complain of anything and should love our Sisters cordially.’

“Well then, Sisters, since you’ve been chosen to imitate the holy life of the crucified Jesus on earth, may He be pleased to obtain for you from God His Father all the graces you need to be true Daughters of Charity! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”
"Here we are, dear Sisters, meeting once again by God's grace. I should have brought you together long ago but was prevented mainly by my own wretchedness and my business affairs. Well, Sisters, I hope that God's goodness itself has made up for what I should have done for you. That same goodness is allowing us to meet on the feast of Saint Roch, one of the saints to whom you should have great devotion because he spent his life in the practice of charity, to the point of contracting a contagious disease from the plague-stricken whom he was nursing for the love of God. How fortunate you are, Sisters, that God has called you to such a holy ministry! Some among you care for the sick poor so fervently that they gladly expose themselves to the same danger as good Saint Roch. Our dear Sisters in Angers went into the tainted atmosphere of the hospital, and even ministered to patients who had the plague with as much ease as they attended to other patients. It seemed as if they were immune to the plague, for they nursed everyone without exception.

"Oh, Blessed be God! Blessed be God! Blessed be God, dear Sisters! That is indeed the charity the Holy Spirit teaches us when the Spirit says that there's no greater love than to lose one's soul—that is, one's life—for love of the neighbor. How holy is our state of life, dear Sisters! For isn't it true that our greatest happiness is to be loved by God? Nothing can give you greater assurance of this than the practice of what is required by your state of life, and that's what you're doing, dear Sisters, for there can be no greater charity than to risk one's life for the neighbor. And isn't that what you do every day by your ministry? How fortunate you are!

"Be very grateful for this grace and take great pains to preserve it; and, in order to do so, be faithful in the exact observance of your little Regulations, whether you're inside or outside the house. How risky it is, Sisters, to put yourself in danger of losing it! Avoid every
occasion of doing so, in order to escape the misfortune into which those souls fall who spurn their vocation and abandon God's service. Do you know what happens to them? Abandoned by God, they commit the most serious faults and are at the mercy of their senses. I can't explain this state better to you than by telling you what happens to a wretched priest, who, because he's made himself unworthy of his sacred character by notorious misdeeds, has incurred the penalty of being defrocked. Look at what the Bishop does; he removes the chalice from his hands with words of execration; then the stole, while reproaching him for his unworthiness; next, the maniple and the other priestly vestments, continuing all the while with similar execrations. Finally, he hands him over to the secular authority. Something like this happens, Sisters, to persons who, by their inconstancy, lose their vocation. Little by little God withdraws His graces and ends by abandoning them entirely. Let us fear this just punishment and do all in our power to preserve this precious treasure.

"One means of preserving your vocation is to have a high regard for it and to reflect often on the grace God has given you in taking you from your native place, your home, and your friends to place you in such a holy state of life. I had intended to have your Regulations and the holy practices of the house read aloud, but I'm pressed for time; however, I won't fail to do so.

"Please tell me if the Daughters of Charity should rise at five o'clock and make their prayer afterward." The Sisters' replies showed that none of them failed to do so, except that, for meditation, those who didn't know how to read and those who, because of the large number of patients couldn't make their prayer at home, did so during Holy Mass.

One of the Sisters asked if it was better to make one's prayer or to go to Holy Mass. "That's a good question, Sisters," said M. Vincent. "As far as possible, you should hear Mass every day, but if you are needed in the house or have to attend to poor persons, you should have no qualms about omitting it. I'll tell you what an Abbot of the Order of Saint Bernard said to me on this topic. In his day, there were only three or four priests and a number of other religious
in the house, who went off to work immediately after making their meditation. A nobleman who had observed this said to the Abbot one day, 'Father, how is it that your religious don't go to daily Mass?' 'If they did, Monsieur, it would be very detrimental to the needs of the household.' 'Tell me, please, how much you'd lose each year?' They calculated the amount of money that would be lost if they each assisted at Mass and found that it came to forty écus, which was a large sum of money at the time. The nobleman gave them that sum of money and, with it, the convenience of hearing Mass.

"From this example, Sisters, you see that, in those cases of necessity to which I've referred, you shouldn't worry if you can't get to Mass every day. As to knowing which you should prefer, meditation or Mass, when you have a free half-hour, I tell you that you shouldn't omit either. Go to church and, after making the preparation with the priest, say the Confiteor, so that, your sins being forgiven, your prayers will be more pleasing to God. Then begin to make your meditation on the subject, which you'll read in the book, as you read it the previous evening. But as far as possible, Sisters, get in the habit of making your mental prayer at home, as your Rule and the custom of the house prescribe.

"After Mass, you should work at learning how to read in order to be able to teach little girls. Apply yourselves seriously to this, dear Sisters, because it's one of the two aims for which you give yourselves to God: the service of the sick poor and the education of youth, especially in country places. The city is almost fully furnished with Sisters, so it's only right that you should go to minister in the country. Aren't all of you disposed to do so, dear Sisters, with no further thought of where you may be sent, of your friends, or whether to places that are near or far?" With cheerful countenances, all the Sisters replied that they intended to go wherever obedience might send them.

"As for your examination of conscience before dinner, be faithful to that, Sisters. You know it's to be made on the resolution taken at morning meditation, and to thank God if, by His grace, you've put it into practice, or to ask His forgiveness if, through negligence,
you’ve failed to do so.” Most of the Sisters promised not to omit the
examination of conscience.

“And, dear Sisters, do you think of God frequently?” Some Sis­
ters said they raised their hearts to God several times an hour; oth­
ers, whenever there were slight annoyances. Most said they did so
every hour; a few said almost never.

“Sisters, the custom of reading a chapter of our blessed Father’s
*Introduction*¹ has been very helpful to you. Don’t neglect this
means. As for reconciliation, when there’s any little disagreement
between you, do you kneel before one another to ask each other’s
forgiveness? That’s a very necessary practice, as also that of chari­
tably admonishing one another when you see your Sister commit a
fault. But do you know how to do this? If a Sister notices that one of
her companions has committed a fault in private, she should remind
her of it once or twice in order to practice fraternal correction. If the
warning proves useless, she should tell either the Directress or me,
whichever is more convenient. You see, Sisters, this is a divine
command, since God himself said He will demand an account of
our brother’s soul from each of us. We’re responsible for one an­
other. As for me, M. Dehorgny² has the duty of reminding me of the
faults I commit. You should do the same for one another. I recom­
end this practice; it’s a great blessing for those who comply with
it.” By asking questions, M. Vincent saw that it was practiced only
by some Sisters, and very rarely by others.

“Let’s be faithful to God, Sisters, and fear His judgments, espe­
cially since we’ll have to give Him an account of how we lived our
vocation. I myself have great reason to fear them.

¹Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*.
²Jean Dehorgny, from Estrées-Saint-Denis (Oise), entered the Congregation of the Mission in
August 1627 and was ordained a priest on April 22, 1628. When Saint Vincent made the move to
Saint-Lazare in 1632, Dehorgny took over the direction of the Collège des Bons-Enfants, which
he retained until 1635, then took up again (1638–43, 1654–59). He was Assistant to the Superior
General (1642–44, 1654–67), Superior of the house in Rome (1644–47, 1651–53), and Director of
the Daughters of Charity (1659–60). In 1660, 1641, 1643, 1644, 1659, and 1660, he made the
visitation of several houses of the Company, reestablishing good order wherever necessary. His
sympathy for Jansenistic ideas merited for us two beautiful letters from Saint Vincent, who had
the joy of seeing him return to sounder beliefs. Dehorgny died on July 7, 1667. We still have
twenty-three of his conferences to the Daughters of Charity and several letters.
"I'm pressed for time; we'll have to stop here and take up this point again two weeks from now. Please come without any further notification. May God be pleased to be glorified by what we've said, Sisters, and to grant us the grace of imitating the charity of the great Saint Roch so that, fearing nothing, we may practice charity purely for the love of God! I ask Him with all my heart to bless you. In the name of the Father, etc."

7. - THE JUBILEE

October 15, 1641

"Dear Sisters, this meeting has no other purpose than to instruct you on the Jubilee so that, knowing what it is, you may have an even greater desire to gain it. I'll explain the Jubilee, why we have it, and the means of gaining it.

"The word 'Jubilee' comes to us from the Old Law. A Jubilee year used to occur only once every hundred years and brought great privileges to those who were living at the time; but it was only for temporal benefits: those who had sold property could recover it and those who had any debts were released from them. The year was called the year of joy or jubilation; from that comes the word 'Jubilee.'

"Now, under the law of grace, dear Sisters, the joy of the Jubilee is quite different for Christians. Holy Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, grants a Jubilee regularly every twenty-five years; consequently, we'll have one nine years from now. In virtue of the power given by Jesus Christ to Saint Peter, the Holy Father may grant an exceptional Jubilee because of certain great needs, as we see this year—not in the same way as under the Old Law, but rather by giving us the means to recover God's grace, which we've lost by sin, to

Conference 7. - Archives of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity; the original is in Saint Louise's handwriting.

1The term "Jubilee" has been used in Catholicism since 1300 in connection with the Holy Year, in which the Pope grants special spiritual benefits for those who perform certain religious acts.
recoup our strength, and to compensate for the good we should have done but didn’t. The reason the Jubilee has been established, dear Sisters, is the universal need that is obvious throughout Christendom. Furthermore, the Holy Father has extended it not only to France, Italy, Spain, and the Indies, but also to the Antipodes, to implore God to pardon our sins.

“And do you know what the grace of the Jubilee is? The Holy Father, who holds the key of the treasures of the Church and the power to dispense them to the faithful, does so liberally. Do you know what makes up these treasures? First, the merits of the life, death, and Passion of Jesus Christ, those of the Blessed Virgin, of the holy martyrs, and of all the saints, the value of which is derived from the merits of the Son of God.

“Are you aware, dear Sisters, of the advantage our souls will derive from the Jubilee, if we make it well? When people offend God, they turn away from Him and turn toward creatures; that is, they turn their backs on God and their faces toward creatures. Isn’t acting in this way, dear Sisters, a great affront to God, who is so good and so worthy of being loved? Now, Sisters, you should know that the sinner’s turning away from God merits hell for him, and his turning toward creatures earns him punishment, sickness, and other afflictions, as you often see happen to persons on earth, or as happens in purgatory, when they haven’t made satisfaction in this life. However, dear Sisters, we mustn’t conclude that everyone who is afflicted in this life is afflicted because of the punishment due to their sins. God sometimes acts that way for other reasons—to test their love and fidelity, for instance, as in the case of Job and Tobias, both of whom were His friends. But, when there’s generalized affliction of all peoples, there’s reason to believe that God wills to punish us for our sins. That’s why, dear Sisters, we should all strive to gain this Jubilee.

“I told you that sin has two effects: a turning away from God and a turning toward creatures. By our ordinary confessions we efface sin, which causes us to deserve hell. By trials, sickness, and afflictions, the turning toward creatures is remedied and, by gaining the
Jubilee, the punishments our sins deserve are entirely remitted. So you see how it profits us to gain this holy Jubilee, Sisters.

"Let's reflect carefully on what we have done when we have offended God. Quoi! Sisters, if a courtier, in the apartment of his Prince, were to turn his back on him, wouldn't he do him a great dishonor? How much greater if this were done in order to turn toward another creature! To take pleasure in offending God and in seeking our own satisfactions instead of pleasing Him! How despicable we are when we behave like that, Sisters! During this holy period, let's strive to satisfy the justice of God. Perhaps this may be the last Jubilee we'll see during our lifetime. Let's not lose the opportunity of participating in this year of joy—not the joy of repossessing our temporal goods, but of avoiding the punishments we'd infallibly have to suffer if we hadn't made satisfaction for our sins. That's the order that was given us by God from the beginning of the world when, in pardoning Adam, He imposed on him the punishment due to his sin, and when He told David that the son of the mother who had sinned with him would die to satisfy the punishment due to his sensuality.

"Let's now see, dear Sisters, the means of gaining the Jubilee. They're the ones laid down in the Holy Father's Bull. The first is to return to God with all your heart by a good, complete confession. Yes, Sisters, this penance has such great power that God has said, 'If I told the sinner that he would be damned, and he does penance, I will not damn him.' 2 So, dispose yourselves to make a good confession, Sisters, and if all of you haven't made general confessions, then think about doing so. What a benefit that will be for you, Sisters; for not only will your sins be forgiven, but amends will be made for your acts of negligence! Examine yourselves carefully, particularly on the Commandments of God and the observance of your Regulations—which is no slight matter, since your vocation is one of the greatest and holiest in the Church. How necessary it is for you to be very virtuous if you're to persevere, Sisters! You're called not only to care for the bodies of the sick poor, but also to instruct

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2Cf. Ez 33:14-15. (NAB)
them in whatever way you can. That’s why it’s important that you lose no opportunity of being well instructed yourselves. And since one of the principal components of Penance is a firm purpose of amendment, you must be very careful to make it before going to confession.

“Another condition laid down by the Bull for gaining the Jubilee is to fast once or three times during the week chosen to gain it. Persons who have never made a general confession and who might have serious—even reserved—sins, should fast on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday; and everyone else on Friday only. All confessors approved by the Archbishop of Paris, 3 Sisters, have the same power of absolution as the Pope himself, but only for the period of the Jubilee.

“Another condition is to visit certain churches. Many have been designated, but it suffices to visit one or several of them. We have to pray in them for the intentions of the Church, which are the ones for which the Holy Father has opened its treasures to us, namely, for the sanctification and exaltation of Holy Church, peace among Christian Princes, and, in general, the conversion of sinners.

“You should also have the intention, Sisters, of becoming truly good Daughters of Charity, for it’s not enough to be Daughters of Charity in name; you must be so genuinely. It was of little avail for the five virgins mentioned in the Gospel to be virgins and to be called to the wedding of the spouse, since they didn’t go in to it. They had no oil for their lamps, that is, they didn’t have charity, and hadn’t been exact in the observance of their Rules. So, dear Sisters, it’s not our state in life, it’s not our qualifications that make us pleasing to God and save us, but it’s how we use the qualifications we have. Our Lord himself has said so. To all those who will say, ‘Lord, have we not driven out devils in your name and done many other good deeds?’ He will reply, ‘I do not know you.’ 4 And why is that? Because they haven’t performed those deeds in charity. That, Sisters, is why you must be very exact in the observance of your Rules. In that way you’ll become more perfect, and will make your-

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3Jean-François de Gondi (1622-54).
4Cf. Mt 7:22-23. (NAB)
self pleasing to your Spouse, who will accept the services you render Him in the person of His sick poor. Look, Sisters, examine yourselves: are you better now than when you came to the Charity? A great saint has said that a person who doesn’t advance in the spiritual life, falls back. Haven’t you lost a great deal if, for the last four, seven, or eight years, you haven’t advanced in the spiritual life, the correction of your faults, and the mortification of your senses?”

One of the Sisters protested that she had a very hard time making her meditation and had no attraction to it. “I’m really glad that you’ve raised this objection, Sister. It’s true that those who can make use of the methods given to make mental prayer—especially the one given in the Introduction to the Devout Life—do very well, but everyone can’t do this; however, each individual can stand at the foot of the Cross, in the presence of God and, if she has nothing to say to Him, she’ll wait for Him to speak to her. If He leaves her there, she’ll remain willingly, awaiting from His goodness the grace either of listening to Him or of speaking to Him. For twenty years Saint Teresa\(5\) persevered in waiting for God to grant her the gift of prayer, and she received it so fully that her writings are admired by the greatest Doctors. So don’t be discouraged, dear Sisters, if you think you’re wasting your time at meditation; it’s enough for you to do God’s Will by obeying your Regulations. Aren’t all of you willing to do this, dear Sisters?”

The Sisters showed that this was their intention. And because the care of the sick often prevents Sisters in the parishes from making their mental prayer, M. Vincent, with his usual charity, proposed changing the hours of rising and retiring. All the Sisters willingly accepted this, even though they said it would be difficult for them. Then M. Vincent encouraged us once again not to omit anything in order to gain the Jubilee. “So now, Sisters, think about preparing yourselves for this holy time. If you like, I’ll help you in this; yes, Sisters, I’ll give you a day or two during the week to hear your confessions.”

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\(5\) Saint Teresa of Avila, Carmelite reformer and mystic (1515-82), named first woman Doctor of the Church by Paul VI in 1970.
His charity was obvious in his usual magnanimity. He made no further reference to the Sisters’ failings, but rather simply encouraged them to do better, and he listened very patiently to many proposals that seemed useless. A few Sisters made excuses for not observing the Regulations, some, because they were in the habit of visiting the Ladies to obtain alms for needy poor persons and, in return, to do little services for them in order to please them; others, because at times they stayed up very late to do spinning in order to have enough to live on and support themselves.

“I’m so glad you’ve raised those objections, Sisters,” replied M. Vincent. “You see, those visits that keep you from observing your Regulations must be curtailed. The first time the Ladies send for you, go to them in God’s name and say, ‘Madame, in order to come to you, I’ve missed my mental prayer or some other spiritual exercise; I very humbly ask you not to take it amiss if I don’t come on another occasion.’ You can be sure, Sisters, that the Ladies won’t take it badly at all, but on the contrary will love you all the more. As for your work, Sisters, you have enough to live on. One of your Sisters has no more than you; yet, about a year ago, she sent me fifty francs from what she had saved. I’m not advising you to be idle, but your primary concern has to be the service of poor persons and the practice of your Regulations.

“Well now, my very dear Sisters, I ask God, who has inspired our Holy Father with the thought of opening for us the treasures of God’s mercy, to be pleased to dispose your souls to receive them. May His love, which has called you to such a holy practice, grant you the grace to gain this holy Jubilee and give you renewed strength in observing your Regulations! In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”
8. - FAULTS AND FAILINGS OF THE PAST YEAR

January 6, 1642

"My very dear Sisters, we’re meeting today, at the start of this new year, to see how you’ve spent the past year and how you can try to spend this year better. You should attach great importance to the name you bear. It was not human persons who gave it to you; and that’s very clear evidence that it comes to you from God himself. At the beginning of Christianity, the Fathers of the Church held it for certain that those writings whose authors couldn’t be discovered after careful research were composed by the Apostles. That’s a great source of consolation for you, Sisters, for no one ever thought of giving you a name. But, in the course of time, when people saw you totally devoted to the service of poor persons and other good works, they called you familiarly ‘Daughters of Charity.’ Have great respect for this Holy Name, Sisters, and act in such a way as always to show that you’re worthy of bearing it. What do you think is the meaning of this beautiful title of ‘Daughters of Charity,’ Sisters? Nothing else than ‘daughters of God,’ since whoever is in charity is in God and God is in him.\(^1\) So then, you must be very kind and gracious and a school of every virtue.

"In the first place, there must be close union among yourselves and, if it were possible, it should be like the union of the three Persons of the Most Blessed Trinity; for how, dear Sisters, could you practice charity and gentleness with persons who are poor, if you didn’t practice those virtues among yourselves?

"So, we’ll begin with a sort of stocktaking of the shortcomings of the past year. I’m going to mention seven that I myself noticed or of which I’ve been informed. This will be a good means for your self-improvement. I’m sorry, Sisters, that I couldn’t hold this conference sooner; it should be held at the end of every year. That’s the custom in many Communities, including our own. Didn’t a great

\(^1\) Cf. 1 Jn 4:16. (NAB)
prophet say that he reflected in the bitterness of his soul on his sins of the past?

"The first fault is a lack of tolerance toward one another. Nothing is more necessary than this mutual support, dear Sisters, because minor personality clashes are normal. Don't you see that we ourselves have mood changes so often that we become unbearable to ourselves? That's what led Job to cry out, 'My God, how is it that you've made me feel so burdensome to myself?' And don't you see that even our inner organs, apparently so united, are sometimes not in harmony? That's why we have to be strongly committed to the practice of mutual support, Sisters.

"If the senior Sisters bear with the shortcomings of the young, see in them God's call to His service, and encourage them by word and example, they will honor the perfect age of Our Lord and His forbearance with the very imperfect men around Him. The Son of God taught His followers much more by example than by word. Imitate Him, dear Sisters. The senior Sisters must be very exact to all the customs; do what they tell others to do; choose the worst, put up with the minor failings of newcomers, encourage them by their words, and console them at times in their little troubles, telling them that they themselves experienced similar ones—because all of you have had them, Sisters, and it's good to have them, provided they are disclosed honestly to Superiors, and to them alone. The senior Sisters have to encourage the newcomers, show them respect, praise their little efforts, accept what they say and do and, above all, take care not to talk to them and treat them like strangers or make fun of the way they speak and the cut of their clothes. When they meet them, they should always say a good word to them, as, for instance, 'Well, Sister, are you very fervent? Do you really love meditation and all the practices of our little Regulations? Keep at it! How are you getting on? Are you beginning to get used to our way of living?'

It was pointed out to M. Vincent that several Sisters were scandalized by the departure of Sisters who were leaving the Company.
especially of those who had been in it for eight to ten years; they were murmuring and becoming discouraged. Others find it hard that people often ask them what they’re earning, tell them they’re wasting their time, or treat them like idlers, and claim that they’re staying to lead an easy life.

“Sisters,” M. Vincent replied, “no one should be surprised regarding Sisters who have left. You’re well aware of how patient we’ve been with them; sometimes they were changed to another house, sometimes their companions were changed because we thought they might get on better with certain Sisters than with others; we even sent them to the country to try, by every means, to help them to persevere in their vocation. If, after all that, they haven’t been able to master themselves, would you want us to keep them at the risk of harming the whole Community? That would be unreasonable, dear Sisters. You can be sure that nothing is done without weighing it carefully. A short time ago I had some complaints from a person of quality, in whose house one of those women was working. ‘Monsieur,’ he said to me, ‘if my wife doesn’t send that woman away soon, I think I’ll have to leave home because she’s such a dangerous person.’

“One day I was giving the Archbishop of Paris a report of the visitation of a monastery, which I had made on his orders. I told him I found nothing amiss in that house, except that most of the nuns complained that the Mother Superior accepted everyone who presented themselves, and none of them ever left. ‘Oh!’ he replied, ‘What poor government! What greed!’ This shows how important it is that nuns rid themselves of persons who might do harm to the others. That’s why, dear Sisters, you should never be surprised when some leave because, you see, you’re putting yourselves in danger of criticizing your Superiors, which would be a great fault—worse than that committed by a murderer. You see, if the body of a man who had been killed was in your house, the murderer would have done less harm that the faultfinder; for he killed only a body, but the person who finds fault puts herself in danger of killing many souls. Be very careful about that, dear Sisters, because when you grumble among yourselves, or speak ill of the poor Sister who has left, or
criticize the conduct of your Superiors, these are faults that God will surely punish.

"One day Noah, who wasn’t thinking clearly because he had drunk a little too much wine, lay completely naked. Some of his children made fun of him, but one of them, knowing the respect due to his father, turned his back so as not to see him, and covered him with his cloak. Do you know what happened? The sons who had criticized their father were cursed by God, as were all their descendants as well; but the respectful son was blessed, along with all his posterity.°

"When people ask you what you’re earning and claim that you’re wasting your time, dear Sisters, fortify yourselves against all such attacks and reply that you consider yourself quite fortunate that God should want to make use of you in this state of life. Don’t be afraid; if they see you so determined, they’ll say no more to you about it. And to those who call you servants and criticize you for earning your living easily, just say, ‘We’d be willing to serve God and poor persons at our own expense, and if I had the means, I’d gladly do so; to show the love and honor we owe to poor persons, I’d very willingly make myself poor to serve them.’ Say this, dear Sisters, but on condition that you feel it in your hearts.

"People may also object to you that the Company may do well during your lifetime, but after you the whole thing will collapse. In reply to that, dear Sisters, I can tell you that this never happens to the works of God. You’d have poor support if you had only that of a weak creature. Your strength is Divine Providence, which initiated your Company; for who has chosen you, I ask you; who has made you what you are if not God? I can’t repeat this to you often enough. We, for our part, never planned it. On what foundation do you think Our Lord established His Church? There were many who followed Him, but at the end of His days only twelve remained, all of whom were put to death. How little do God’s works resemble those of human beings! Wasn’t the same said of the Oratorian Fathers at the

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time Fr. de Bérulle ś died, and of Saint Francis? But what am I saying, despicable sinner that I am? There's no comparison. No, Sisters, fear not, God will never fail you, if you're faithful to Him. Work hard, then, to perfect yourselves by serving persons who are poor.

“We'll meet again in a month’s time and discuss what should be done at the beginning of this new year. I beg the Divine Goodness to bless you by giving you the gentle graciousness of true Daughters of Charity, mutual support in your weaknesses, and the grace of reconciliation with one another should any little difficulties arise among you. Lastly, Sisters, I beg the Divine Goodness to bless you by filling you with absolute confidence in His Divine Providence to accomplish eternally the most holy Will of God and to bless you forever by the gift of all the qualities of true Daughters of Charity, according to His plan. In the name of the Father, etc.”

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Pierre de Bérulle was born in the Château de Cérilly (Yonne) on February 4, 1575. Ordained a priest in 1599, he was appointed chaplain to King Henry IV shortly afterward. His skill in controversy enabled him to bring several important persons back to the Church, among others the Comte de Laval, the Baron de Salignac, and a judge of the Parlement of Paris. He established the Carmelites in France in 1603 with the support of Mme Acarie and Michel de Marillac, Keeper of the Seals. In 1611 he founded the Congregation of the Oratory, of which he was the first Superior. King Louis XIII entrusted him with the honorable mission of conducting to England Henriette of France, daughter of Henry IV, who was to marry (May 11, 1625) the Prince of Wales, the future Charles I. He greatly influenced the clergy and gathered around himself the most virtuous and eminent priests of Paris. As soon as Vincent arrived in the city, he sought the assistance and advice of Bérulle. Abelly claimed that the Saint lived “about two years” under his roof (op. cit., bk. 1, chap. VI, p. 24), but apparently that time should be reduced to four or five months at the most. The intervention of Bérulle is evident in Vincent’s acceptance of the parish of Clichy, his entrance as tutor into the de Gondi family, his withdrawal to Châlignon-les-Dombes, and his return to the General of the Galleys. We would like to be able to state that their relationship always remained the same. However, Bérulle did not approve of the nascent Congregation of the Mission and even tried to prevent its approval by Rome, as one of his letters to Fr. Pierre Bertin indicated. In 1628, referring to the new Congregation, he wrote: “The plans that you tell me belong to those who are soliciting the affair of the missions by various and, in my opinion, devious ways, should make it suspect and oblige us to put aside the reserve and simplicity with which I consider the affairs of God should be conducted.” (Cf. Archives of the Mission, according to Arch. Nat., M 216, second packet, folio of Fr. Bertin, p. 26, in which this excerpt is no longer found.) At the time, Pierre de Bérulle had been a Cardinal for a year. He died on October 2, 1629, and his life was written by Fr. Cluyseault. Father Ingold published this manuscript in 1880.
9. - CARE OF THE SICK

March 9 [1642]¹

On March 9, because of urgent business, M. Vincent was unable to be present at the beginning of the conference. His Charity had intended to give us on the manner of serving the sick poor, namely, how to help them to make good use of their illnesses in accordance with God’s plan for them, to prepare them for death if their illness is terminal, and, if not, to exhort them to take the firm resolution to spend the rest of their days in the service of God better than they had ever done, and to reflect more seriously on their salvation.

M. Portail began the conference and questioned several Sisters, whose thoughts will be given in the report of the previous conference on this subject, God willing. I’ll simply state here that, when one Sister said she felt it necessary to prepare the sick to make a general confession, M. Portail added that this was very important indeed and that God was blessing this practice, since He had made use of it to inspire the wife ² of the General of the Galleys to establish the Priests of the Mission. The following is an account of how that happened:

In one of her visits to a man eighty years old, the said lady advised him to make a general confession. After this confession, which was heard by M. Vincent, when the old man was again visited by the General’s wife, he said to her several times, “Madame, without that confession I would have been lost; yes, Madame, I was damned; I had sins I had never dared to confess, and I never would have confessed them were it not for that confession.” From that moment the lady decided to found the Mission.

¹Conference 9. - Archives of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity; the original is in Saint Louise’s handwriting.

²Mme de Gondi.
M. Vincent arrived around five o’clock, and after listening to what some of our Sisters had said, His Charity continued, “Sisters, it’s getting very late; I can’t tell you how consoled I’ve been by the little I’ve heard, and I think I would have been even more consoled had I heard all those who spoke and those who haven’t yet been questioned, but we have to postpone the discussion until next Sunday, God willing, because this is a matter of great importance, Sisters; it’s the reason God has called you. Meditate again on the same points, and add another which I forgot to mention—or to which we didn’t give much attention—namely, the motives or reasons we have for serving the poor well, not only corporally but spiritually. We wouldn’t, in fact, be doing enough for God and the neighbor if we only gave the sick poor food and medicine and if we didn’t assist them, in accord with God’s plan, by the spiritual service we owe them. When you serve poor persons in this way, you’ll be true Daughters of Charity, that is to say, daughters of God, and you’ll be imitating Jesus Christ. For how did He serve persons who were poor, Sisters? He served them corporally and spiritually; He went from place to place, healing the sick, giving them what money He had, and instructing them about their salvation. What a happiness, Sisters, that God has chosen you to continue the ministry of His Son on earth! Make your meditation Sunday morning on this topic and reflect before God on the motives or reasons why we should serve poor persons corporally and spiritually, one of the chief motives being to honor the holy humanity of Our Lord by imitating His actions in this respect. What a happiness, Sisters, to do what a God did when He was on earth!”

This very dear Father wanted to add another motive, but refrained, saying, “Oh no, Sisters! You should be left free for the rest, and I’ll be content to do as mothers do who, when they’re obliged to wean their babies before they can eat properly, chew up a little bread for them at first—not much, otherwise they would extract all the substance from it. So I have to do the same, and in God’s presence you’ll see and learn the other reasons from Him.

“Well now, Sisters, I implore God, the Source of charity, to grant you the grace to learn how to serve the sick poor corporally and spir-
itually in His Spirit, in perfect imitation of the Spirit of His Son, and also to bless you. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

10. - CARE OF THE SICK

[March 16, 1642] ¹

This is a continuation of the conference on the motives we have to serve the sick poor corporally and spiritually and to teach them how to make good use of their illnesses, to prepare them for death, and to take firm resolutions to lead a better life if they’re cured. This conference was held on the [second] Sunday of Lent, and M. Vincent did us the honor of being present from the beginning. After announcing the topic, His Charity asked the Sisters to share their thoughts.

First, the motives: “The first motive,” said a Sister, “is that poor persons have the honor of representing the members of Jesus Christ, who considers the services rendered to them as done to himself. The second is that the souls of poor persons have the image of God imprinted upon them, and therefore we’re bound to honor the Blessed Trinity in them. The third is that the Son of God has recommended this service to us by word and example. To show the disciples of Saint John that He was the Messiah, He told them that the poor had the Gospel preached to them and the sick were healed. The fourth is that to assist a soul to save itself is to cooperate in the perfect fulfillment of God’s plan in the death of Jesus Christ.”

“One powerful motive,” another Sister said, “is that, by serving poor persons, we honor what the Son of God did while on earth in His holy humanity.” (Several Sisters thought of this motive.) “Another is our obligation to help our neighbor as we would wish to be

Conference 10. - Archives of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity; the original is in Saint Louise’s handwriting.

¹The subject of this conference corresponds to what was discussed on March 16, 1642, the second Sunday of Lent.
aided if we were in need of assistance. Since God has not permitted us to have any wealth so as to give great alms, we must at least devote to the service of the poor what little strength and ability He gives us.”

Another Sister remarked that those who are poor are abandoned by everyone, have many needs, lack consolation in their sufferings, don’t always know who God is, and sometimes have not even thought about their salvation. This Sister, as well as most of the others, was deeply humbled at the thought of the grace God had given her in calling her to such a holy vocation; she resolved to have greater respect for it and to be more faithful to God in it.

Another Sister’s motives: She’s happy to belong to a Company bearing the name of Daughters of Charity and feels she should honor the poor in it, look upon the little foundlings as such, and care for them as if she were caring for the Son of God himself, as long as she’s employed in this apostolate, as He himself asks. Since the principal aim of the Daughters of Charity is to imitate the life of Jesus Christ on earth, she wants to devote her own life to the service of poor persons because the Son of God died on the Cross for them as well as for us. In this way we will be true Daughters of Charity in deed and not simply in name. The last motive is to render the poor all possible service for love of God and because of her desire to see Him one day in His glory.

Several Sisters gave as a motive gratitude for the great grace God has granted them in calling them to a vocation like that of the Son of God on earth; they humbled themselves for their negligence in it until now, and formed new resolutions of greater fidelity to God.

The thought that poor persons are the members of Our Lord was for all the Sisters a strong motive for serving them with greater care and charity than ever before.

Another Sister said that, since she possesses nothing and that almsgiving is, nevertheless, very pleasing to God, she wants to give herself completely to the poor to honor the life of the Son of God, who died for them.

Another Sister stated that, since she has been called by God to the Company of the Daughters of Charity, she must serve poor per-
sons spiritually, that is, to assist them to know God and take the means of saving themselves; and corporally, that is, to administer food and remedies to them with great care and kindness.

"Since God wants us to serve Him in the person of the poor," remarked another Sister, "I will look upon them in Jesus Christ and serve them for love of Him."

Another Sister said that we should consider God in the person of those who are poor and, with the intention of imitating Him, call to mind the gentleness, humility, and charity Jesus Christ practiced on earth in serving them, making no exception of persons and treating all equally according to their need.

Another Sister noted that God is very pleased with the service rendered to poor persons for love of Him. She acknowledges that she's unworthy of her vocation and believes that everyone else would do better than she would. Nevertheless, she submits to the order of Divine Providence, which has called her to the Company, and promises to visit the poor with the thought that she's honoring the holy life of Jesus Christ.

Here follow the means of encouraging the sick poor to make good use of the illness sent them by God, as reported by the Daughters of Charity in the aforesaid conference:

After greeting the sick in a moderately cheerful manner, finding out the state of their illness, sympathizing with them in their sufferings, and telling them that God is sending you to serve and comfort them to the best of your ability, enquire into the state of their souls. Explain to them that they should accept their sickness from the hand of God for their own greater good and that in His eternal love He permits that illness in order to bring them back to Him because often, when we're well, we think only of working for the life of the body and don't trouble ourselves at all about our salvation. After that, suggest that they make an act of faith in all the articles of our religion in general and an act of conformity to God's Will, especially in what concerns the acceptance of sickness. Teach them that God sometimes afflicts us because of our sins and at other times to give us the opportunity of showing Him our love. Speak to them kindly, saying, for example, "My dear brother or sister, in your..."
great sufferings think of those of the Son of God, ask Him to unite yours to His and to offer them to His Father for your sins.”

Say to them sometimes, “My dear patient, reflect that, since Jesus Christ has suffered so much for you, you should suffer patiently for love of Him, and that it’s not reasonable for the servant to take a different path than that of his master. Consider also that God has allowed your body to be ill in order to cure your soul, which should be very important to you, since it was created for paradise, where you’ll be with God forever. To help you to be patient, often ask God for it, and have the Holy Name of Jesus often on your lips.

“I’m well aware, my good friend, that your poverty will increase your troubles because of the inconvenience to your wife and children; but, to soften these thoughts, think of the poverty of the Son of God, and of His Holy Mother who didn’t even have a place to stay when He came into the world. He himself said that He had nowhere to lay His sacred head. O my brother, what a great consolation!

“One thing that should console you in your illness, brother, is that, even though it may be very serious, it’s nothing in comparison with what Our Lord suffered for you on the Cross. If you endure it patiently and for love of God, He’ll increase the glory you’ll have in heaven. This sickness will pass, but the consolation of having suffered for love of God and for having submitted to the Will of God will remain, and He will love you more!

“You see, brother, this illness God has sent you will perhaps help you to avoid the pains of hell, which will last for all eternity. Rest assured that it will greatly diminish those you might have to endure in purgatory for your sins—but on one condition, namely, that you make good use of it and bear it for love of God. On the contrary, if you grow impatient during your illness, you’ll lose a great deal. I don’t mean if you moan, for moaning isn’t impatience.”

One Sister commented that, on entering the patients’ rooms, it was a good thing to see in them Our Lord on the Cross and to tell them that their bed should represent for them Our Lord’s Cross, on which they are suffering with Him.

Reflections of another Sister: “If the sick person shows a little annoyance, tell him that when we’re ill it’s by God’s permission
and that, in this state, we should ask ourselves what we’d wish, at the moment of death, to have done during our lifetime. During this illness we should also try to make amends for all our sins by conformity to God’s Will, patient endurance of the poverty and pains we experience, and the union of our sufferings with those of Jesus on the Cross."

Another Sister said, “Encourage the sick person to make good use of his illness by pointing out to him that his sickness is permitted by God his Creator, whom he must adore and love, and to whom he must submit. This Sister expressed deep gratitude to God because, by His grace, He had chosen her to make Him known and loved, and thus to imitate what His Son did on earth.”

Most of the Sisters said that, as soon as they begin to nurse the sick poor, they must help them to profit from their condition and, for this purpose, point out to them that if we’re in mortal sin, nothing we do or endure will be pleasing to God, we will lose many merits, and all our sufferings and pains become useless. Next, they should find out the time of their last confession and Communion and explain how the grace of God is the life of the soul, just as food is the life of the body, and, if we were to remain long without eating, our bodies would cease to be alive.

11. - OBEDIENCE

June [20] 1642

“My very dear Sisters, our conference today will be on one of the topics that’s most important for your perfection, namely, most holy obedience, a virtue so pleasing to God that the Holy Spirit has said through the Fathers of the Church that obedience is better than sacr-
rifice, and that it was God’s Will that His Son practice it for thirty years on earth, until His death. Yes, Jesus Christ preferred holy obedience to life itself. Didn’t He say to Saint Peter, who tried to prevent the Jews from arresting Him, ‘Do you not want me to do the Will of God my Father, which is to obey the soldiers, Pilate, and the executioners? And were it not for the accomplishment of this most holy Will, would not legions of angels come to deliver me?’ 2 O holy virtue! You’ll be pleasing to God, Sisters, only to the extent that you’re obedient.

“But do you know how this virtue should be practiced? In many different ways because we owe obedience to the Holy Father, Bishops, Pastors, our confessors, Directors, and Superiors, as well as to the King and Magistrates. And all those who hold the position of Superiors are also obliged to be obedient. I myself, worthless as I am, am bound to obey, so much so that, if those who can command me were to send me to the ends of the earth, I would be obliged to go. What is more, by God’s mercy, I’d prefer to die rather than fail in this. We are also bound to obey our Rules and Divine Providence, and you, the Ladies who are officers of the Charity.

“Sisters, if you only knew how necessary obedience is for the Daughters of Charity! Yes, I tell you, it’s more necessary for you than for any other Community. What can keep you in the service of God and your holy vocation if not obedience? Do you know what obedience is for you? It serves you as a ship does for those at sea. The ship encloses everyone on it and takes them to port. If it is shipwrecked and breaks up in the open sea, they all die. The same is true for you, dear Sisters. As long as you remain in exact obedience to your Superiors, your Rule, and Divine Providence, you’ll go straight to God; but if you stray from it, you’ll certainly be shipwrecked. You don’t have occasion to obey the Holy Father, the Bishops, or Magistrates, but you have plenty of opportunities to obey your Superiors. Let’s now see the way to obey, and what true obedience is.

2Cf. Mt 26:52-54. (NAB)
"You must obey willingly, punctually, cheerfully, promptly, with discernment, and, above all, for the good pleasure of God. You owe entire obedience to your Director. And since God has entrusted me in some way with your guidance, unworthy as I am, you're obliged to obey my orders. To those of you whom I know (and there are many), I've recommended that they be satisfied in ordinary confessions with accusing themselves of three sins because, by God's mercy, I daresay that none of those whose confessions I've heard is guilty of mortal sin; in which case, confessing the three venial sins that cause you the greatest shame suffices. You'll find it easier to recall them, and it will also be easier for you to make an act of contrition or attrition for each of them and to take the resolution to amend. If you accused yourself of a great number of sins, how could you manage to detest and renounce them all? You couldn't do it, Sisters! So, practice obedience on this point, and this act will earn you God's mercy to make amends for the sins which, out of obedience, you don't confess.

"Some time ago I was deeply consoled on this point. One of the greatest servants of God I know said to me about our Sisters in Angers, 'Monsieur, I don't know any persons who make their confessions better than your good Sisters at the hospital. They confess without delay and seemingly from a truly penitent heart. They accuse themselves so contritely and promptly that it's obvious that they're seeking nothing but the grace of God.' He gave them the

3Probably Guy Lasnier, Abbé de Vaux, one of the most remarkable priests of Anjou during the seventeenth century. For a long time his sole ambition was to satisfy his vanity and his passion for hunting and other worldly amusements. In February 1627, he was appointed to Saint-Étienne de Vaux Abbey in Saintonge, and was named Vicar-General of Angers in 1628, then Canon of Notre-Dame de Paris. In spite of the obligations imposed on him by these dignities, he continued to lead a very worldly life. In 1632, like many others, he was curious as to what was going on in the convent of the Ursulines of Loudun. It was rumored that some of the nuns were possessed; Richelieu ordered their exorcism and the execution of the Pastor, Urbain Grandier, for the practice of witchcraft. Abbé de Vaux had cause to rue the day. It is alleged that, to his great confusion, one of the nuns, penetrating his interior life, revealed faults that he had never mentioned to anyone. From then on, he was a new man. In 1635 he made a retreat at Saint-Lazare, where he met Saint Vincent, with whom he remained in contact. He also had dealings with Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, Jean-Jacques Olier, and Baron de Renty. In his city, Angers, he established a Visitation convent, richly endowed the seminary, and founded the ecclesiastical conferences in his diocese. He was a prudent counselor and devoted protector of the Daughters of Charity of the Angers hospital and gave hospitality to Saint Vincent, Saint Louise, and Jean-Jacques Olier. De Vaux died on April 29, 1681, at the age of seventy-nine.
same practice as has been given to you, Sisters. Please be obedient on this point.

"You're bound to obey your confessors in what concerns confession, such as doing the penances and using the means to keep you from offending God, but not in anything that might be wrong. They should be careful not to order you to do anything of that sort or advise you to do anything contrary to your Rules because in that case you wouldn't be obliged to obey them.

"You're also obliged to obey your Sister Superiors. That reminds me, Sisters, to tell you that recently I happened to be in a monastery of nuns—of the Annonciades, I think it was. I noticed that their Mother Superior was called Ancelle, and that made me think of you. The word ancelle, dear Sisters, comes from the word ancilla which means 'servant,' and that's what the Blessed Virgin called herself when she gave her consent to the angel that God's Will be fulfilled in the mystery of His Son's Incarnation. This has led me to think, dear Sisters, that, in future, instead of calling the Sister in charge by the title of 'Superior,' we should use the expression 'Sister Servant.'

"What do you think?" said our very dear Father to some of the Sisters. And his proposal was accepted. "That's the title the Holy Father gives himself," he added, "and all his communications begin, 'Urban, Servant of the servants of Jesus Christ.' When the Sister Superiors of the Company of the Hôtel-Dieu were first established there, they also took that title. That was the wish of dear Mme Goussault, the President's wife. 5

"So then, my very dear Sisters, you owe obedience to whichever one of you will have this duty, in all that concerns the service of the

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4The Annonciades des Dix Vertus, or Sisters of the Annunciation of the Ten Virtues, founded by Saint Jeanne de France (1464-1505). At that time their motherhouse was located in Paris on rue du Sèvres, not far from the present motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, 140 rue du Bac.

5Mme Goussault, née Geneviève Fayet, was the widow of Antoine Goussault, Seigneur de Souvigny, Councillor of the King, and president of the Chambres des Comptes in Paris. Five children were born of this marriage. Widowed in 1631, she dedicated herself untiringly to works of charity. She was the first to have the idea of an association of Ladies for the relief of the sick at the Hôtel-Dieu and was the first Superior of the group. It was thanks to her that the Daughters of Charity were called to the hospital in Angers. Mme Goussault was also the aunt of René Alméras, second Superior of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Daughters of Charity. She died on September 20, 1639, in the exercise of charity.
poor and the practice of your Rules. You also owe obedience to the
guidance of Divine Providence, accepting and receiving from the
hand of God whatever you're ordered to do. But let's see, Sisters,
what reasons we have for obeying. The first is that obedience is so
pleasing to God that He told us by the holy Fathers of the Church
that obedience is better than sacrifice. Now, you know the grandeur
of sacrifice, dear Sisters, because from the beginning of time God
has had sacrifice offered to Him to appease the Divine Justice,
justly incensed against man on account of his sins. Since God tells
us by the voice of the Church that obedience is worth much more,
you see what respect you must have for it.

"Another reason is that the Son of God willed to subject himself
to it and practiced it perfectly for thirty years; and the Blessed Vir­
gin did so all her life with Saint Joseph. It's also said of the Son of
God that He was obedient even to death on the Cross. What more
powerful motive would you want to love and practice holy obedi­
ence, Sisters?

"Another motive for loving obedience is that, as a rule, we de­
ceive ourselves and allow ourselves to be blinded by our passions,
so we need guidance in order to do good. Believe me, dear Sisters,
obedience must be your principal virtue. But how should you obey,
Sisters? Promptly, cheerfully, with discernment, and, above all, to
please God. When you obey, you should reflect, 'I'm pleasing
God,' or what comes to the same thing, 'I give pleasure to God.'
Sisters, isn't the thought that we're pleasing God a means to help us
to overcome the reluctance we might have in obeying?

"Obedience must be prompt, Sisters, because to delay and to go
about things lethargically greatly lessens the merit of this virtue,
gives bad example to your peers, and saddens Superiors, and the re­
sult may be that the person who told you to do something would
rather do it herself and, as a matter of fact, she sometimes does it. So
then, dear Sisters, be very prompt in obeying. The example of the
Blessed Virgin going to Bethlehem and fleeing into Egypt should
serve you as an example. Your obedience must also be given will­
ingly, and not through constraint or fear of causing displeasure or of
being reprimanded. And if you experience a little reluctance in it,
which may happen—yes, Sisters, that can happen—you must overcome such reluctance courageously; otherwise your obedience would be without merit.

"Obedience must also be accompanied by submission of your judgment. What's the meaning of 'submission of your judgment,' Sisters? It means doing what you've been instructed to do in the belief that it will be for the best, even though it may seem to you that what you're being told to do isn't as good as what you think. And it will be better, because holy obedience is pleasing to God. Often, Sisters, our judgment is blind, and the knowledge of what is best is concealed from us, just as the rays of the sun are sometimes hidden by a passing cloud; yet the rays are there, even though they're not seen for a time. So it may happen that the knowledge of what is best is concealed from us because we're preoccupied by some passion—which shows us clearly that the safest path to follow is that of obedience.

"The principal aim of your obedience, dear Sisters, should be to please God. What happiness for a poor, worthless creature to be able to please God! Isn't that a great happiness? Anything you do through obedience is very pleasing to God, since it's in compliance with His Will, which is the activity of the blessed. On the contrary, if you listen to your own will, even in the very best things of the world, then you run the risk of following the will of the devil who, transforming himself into an angel of light, urges us to do good in order to lead us to something evil. So then, dear Sisters, love to please God through your obedience.

"Your practices of obedience usually have to do with the Sister who is with you in the parish. Don't consider, dear Sisters, whether you like this Sister or not. Sometimes temptation and your own will may suggest that if it were some other Sister, you'd gladly obey her; 'but this one' you'll say, 'is so sullen and speaks to me so rudely that I find it very hard to obey her.' Be very careful, dear Sisters, not to allow your mind to dwell on such a thought. Reflect that Jesus Christ himself, or the Blessed Virgin, wants you to remember what I've said to you, namely, that by obeying your Sister you please God, and this submission and obedience that was so hard for you
will assuredly become easy. The thought may also occur to you, ‘She’s so moody that what she tells me to do one day, she no longer wants me to do another day.’ Don’t be surprised at that, Sisters. If Job complained to God that he often felt at war with himself, to such an extent that what he longed for in the morning was hateful to him in the evening, why shouldn’t you, whose temperaments are so different, have the same problem? But do you know what arranges everything? A little forbearance. Take care, dear Sisters, lest your reluctance when a Sister orders you to do something might prompt you to reply, ‘Do it yourself.’ My dear Sisters, what an expression! ‘Do it yourself!’ It’s an expression from hell, an expression of disorder and disunion! It’s an accursed expression! ‘Do it yourself!’ Such an utterance should never come from the mouth of a Daughter of Charity.” M. Vincent put so much stress on this expression that he made us see clearly how dangerous a meaning it had.

“The obedience due to your Rules is also very important. You must obey them from the day you enter the Company because you were not admitted unless you stated that you were willing to do this. Usually, you’re given sufficient time to reflect on that; nothing about it is concealed from you. That’s why you should be extremely punctual, dear Sisters, pay attention to all you’re told to do, and go at the appointed time to wherever the bell summons you for your spiritual exercises because to miss one exercise is to fail in all, just as to sin against one Commandment is to sin against all of them. And be careful, for if today you neglect the practice of one point of your Rules, tomorrow you’ll neglect two, then three, and in the end God will withdraw His grace, and that’s why lukewarmness and weariness in one’s vocation often follow. In the end, God disdains being concerned with us, and we certainly deserve that. God doesn’t want us to satisfy others to the prejudice of the love we owe Him, just as earthly husbands don’t want their wives to make eyes at anyone other than themselves. He teaches us this truth, saying that He’s a jealous God. Yes, Sisters, He is a jealous God, and the Spouse of our souls. It’s not good to irritate Him.”

A Sister asked if it was better to obey the Ladies who are officers of the Charity when they want something the Sister doesn’t want.
"In that situation, Sisters, don't put yourselves in danger of annoying those good Ladies, because it's clear that you should do what the Sister at the Motherhouse tells you to do. Provide for all the needs of your patients and go where obedience calls you, without discussing it with them. As for coming to the meetings, never miss them, not even to go to hear a sermon; for, even though it may be a very good thing to listen to sermons, you should still prefer these gatherings, which are held simply to teach you what you're obliged to do; and everything that's said at them is for all of you and for each one of you in particular—which can't be said of sermons. I'm not saying that you shouldn't listen to them when you can, but only that you must prefer to come here on meeting days.

"Do you know how you must practice obedience to Divine Providence? When you have to change from one house to another, dear Sisters, be very prompt in doing so, reflecting that Divine Providence orders this, and never say, 'Such and such a Sister, such and such an event has been the cause of my leaving that place.' On the contrary, believe that it's Divine Providence looking after you."

I'm not sure if it was at this conference and on this topic that M. Vincent said to us, "Sisters, you should have such deep devotion to Divine Providence and such great love for and confidence in it that if Providence itself had not given you the beautiful name of Daughters of Charity—which you must never change—you should be called Daughters of Providence, for it is Providence that has brought you into being.

"You must also practice obedience to Divine Providence in the difficulties you encounter and in the changes I mentioned to you, convinced that Providence is allowing those challenges for your own greater good. In this way you will love them and not be upset by any difficulties you may experience. If each of you examines her conscience to see how she has failed in the practice of obedience, you'll discover many faults in yourselves. These are very important practices, Sisters, and you should apply yourselves more earnestly to them than you've done in the past. Before this conference I spoke to three Sisters, who told me they had failed badly in this matter and wanted to humble themselves for it in presence of the Community."
M. Vincent called each of them in turn, and they asked pardon of God and of the Company for the faults they had committed, of which people were aware and were dismayed by them, and they promised with God's grace to correct themselves.

"Sisters," continued, M. Vincent, "other serious faults have been noted in the Company, and you're not working hard enough to correct them. Most of you have acknowledged that your sins were the cause of the collapse of your ceiling—and my sins along with yours, I who am the worst sinner of all—and all of you have acknowledged particularly that the greatest fault among you is a lack of unity. A body can't be perfect if it's not completely unified. Isn't it essential, Sisters, that in a human body the head should carry out its own function and the arms and legs theirs? If the arms wanted to walk and the other members of the body to perform a function other than their own, it would be an abnormal body without order or harmony. It's the same when two Sisters aren't closely united, Sisters. Don't you see that if the head is sick, the other members bear with it? That's how it should be with you; bear with one another's failings, reflecting that if today you've put up with one of your Sisters, either in her bodily infirmities or in her bad mood, tomorrow she or some other Sister will have to bear with you in like manner.

"Another great fault is that, when you have some difficulty or other, instead of telling us or the Sister at the house about it, you go and complain to one of your Sisters who will perhaps be as dissatisfied as you are, or who is unable to console you." There were also some other faults, which I don't remember now.

"Well now, dear Sisters," M. Vincent went on to say, "don't you admit that most of you have fallen into these faults?" We then knelt down; some Sisters acknowledged their faults, and we promised to be more exact in future. M. Vincent then asked this grace of God for the Company adding, "Sisters, M. Portail reminded me of something that I think will be very helpful and agreeable to you, namely, to hold a conference on your Sisters who have died since the Com-

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6 On the eve of Pentecost, June 7, 1642, about fifteen minutes after the Sisters had left a common assembly room, the ceiling collapsed. Saint Louise was deeply affected by this accident. (Cf. Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac, L. 102, p. 75, and L. 120, p. 128.)
pany began. That will be the first item for our next meeting two weeks from now, God willing. I ask you to prepare for it by making your meditation twice on it; first, tomorrow morning, while it's still fresh in your mind; and second, at your house, on the morning of the day of the meeting, of which you'll be notified.

"The subject is this: First point, the advantage to be gained by the Company from a conference on the virtues of the said Sisters, both in their lives and in their deaths; second point, to call to mind and share the virtues they manifested and in which they excelled; third point, to strive to practice those virtues, in imitation of our Sisters, for the love of God.

"Blessed be God, dear Sisters! I beg the Divine Goodness to grant all of you the grace to love holy obedience and to practice it in imitation of His Son, with regard to your Superiors, your Rules, and Holy Providence, and to grant you for this purpose the blessing of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

12. - THE VIRTUES OF MARGUERITE NASEAU

[July 1642]

This is the report of what was said at the conference M. Vincent had someone give in his presence to the Daughters of Charity on the first eight Sisters who had died. The first point is found in the original.

Second point: consideration of the virtues each of us has noted in our Sisters who have gone to God.


1Marguerite Naseau (1594-c. 1633) was born in Suresnes, a small town not far from Paris. She met Saint Vincent during a mission and volunteered to work in the Confraternities of Charity. Although she died at Saint-Louis Hospital some nine months before the foundation of the Daughters of Charity, she, together with Saint Louise, figures in the origin of the Company. Saint Vincent considered her the ideal Daughter of Charity, often speaking of her in the course of the conferences (cf. Conf. 12, 20, 24, 34, 52, 69).

2Since it was announced at the preceding conference, held on June 20, that this one on the first eight deceased Sisters would take place in two weeks, the date of July 4 or 5 can be assigned to it.
Sister Marguerite Naseau was the first Sister who came to serve the sick poor in the parish of Saint-Sauveur, where the Confraternity of Charity was established in the year 1630. Marguerite Naseau from Suresnes was the first Sister who had the happiness of showing others the way, both to teach young girls and to nurse the sick poor, although she had almost no other teacher or schoolmistress but God. She was just a poor, uneducated cowherd. Moved by a powerful inspiration from heaven, the idea came to her to teach young people so she bought a primer and, since she was unable to go to school for instruction, went and asked the Pastor or the Assistant to tell her the first four letters of the alphabet.

On another occasion, she asked about the next four, and so on for the rest. Afterward, while minding the cows, she would study her lesson. If she saw a passerby who looked like he knew how to read, she would ask, “Monsieur, how is this word pronounced?” In this way, she gradually learned to read, then taught other girls in her village. Next, she decided to go from village to village to teach the young people, accompanied by two or three other young women she had instructed. One would go to one village, and the other to another. The amazing thing is that she undertook all this with no money or any other assistance except Divine Providence. She often fasted for entire days and stayed in places where only the walls were left standing. Sometimes she worked day and night teaching not only little girls but even the older ones, doing so with no motive of vanity or self-interest and no other intention than the glory of God, who provided for all her major needs, without her even thinking about them. She herself told Mlle Le Gras that one time, when she hadn’t had any bread for several days but hadn’t told anyone of her distress, she found, on her return from Mass, enough food to last her for quite a long time.

The harder she worked at teaching the children, the more the village folk ridiculed and calumniated her, but her zeal grew only more ardent. She was so detached that she gave away all she had, depriving herself even of necessities. She provided for the education of a few young men who had no means of their own, frequently supplied them with food, and encouraged them to serve God. Those
young men are now good priests. Eventually, as soon as she heard
that there was a Confraternity of Charity in Paris for the sick poor,
off she went, driven by the desire to be involved in this ministry,
and, although she really wanted to continue to teach young people,
nevertheless she gave up that practice of charity to take up the other,
which she felt was more perfect and necessary. And that was how
God wanted it, so that she might be the first Daughter of Charity and
Servant of the Sick Poor in the city of Paris. She attracted to this
other girls, whom she had helped to detach themselves from all super-
perificial things and to embrace a devout life.

She was very humble and submissive, and so little attached to
anything that she willingly changed parishes three times in a short
period, and everyone missed her greatly when she left. In the par-
ishes, she was just as charitable as she had been in the country, giv-
ing away anything she might have, whenever the opportunity
presented itself. She could never refuse anything, and would have
been willing to take everyone home with her. It should be noted that
at this time no Community had yet been formed, nor any Rule that
might order her to do otherwise. She was very patient and never
complained. Everyone loved her because there was nothing in her
that was not lovable. Her charity was so great that she died from
sharing her bed with a poor plague-stricken girl. Attacked by this
illness herself, she said good-bye to the Sister who was with her, as
if she had foreseen that she was going to die, and went off to Saint
Louis [Hospital], her heart filled with joy and conformity to God’s
Will.

13. - IMITATING THE VIRTUES OF VILLAGE GIRLS

January 25, 1643

All the Sisters knelt down, entreated M. Vincent to ask God to
forgive them for the poor use they had made of the grace of their vo-

Conference 13. - Archives of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity; the original is in
Saint Louise’s handwriting.
cation and of all the instructions they had been so fortunate to receive from His Charity, and promised to behave better in future. This kind Father, in his goodness, immediately asked God's forgiveness, as well as the grace needed by all his daughters.

"I had planned, Sisters, to speak to you on the feast of Saint Genevieve¹ and, since this great saint was a poor woman from the country, it seemed most fitting that I should say something to you about her virtues and those of true village girls, since the Divine Goodness has been pleased to call women from the country, first and foremost, to be members of your Company. And although I was unable to speak to you on that day because of something that prevented me, I thought it advisable not to change my plan, seeing that it's very logical for this great saint now in heaven, who was honored by Kings and all kinds of people on earth, to show us how she made herself pleasing to God by practicing the virtues of true village girls, which she did so perfectly.

"First of all, Sisters, keep in mind that, when I speak to you about village girls I don't intend to speak of all of them, but only of those who have the virtues of true country women. Likewise, when I am speaking of women from the country, I don't mean to exclude all city women, for I know there are some living in the towns who have the virtues of those in the country, and we have reason to believe that there are some of these even in your Company, and it really consoles me to see it. Blessed be God for this, Sisters! Blessed be God! But it's also true that in villages there are some—and only too many—who have the spirit of city women, especially those who live near the towns. It would seem as if the city air is contaminated and that contact with the others spreads inclinations to evil.

"It will be very easy for me to speak to you about the virtues of good village girls because I know them by experience and by nature, since I'm the son of a humble tiller of the soil, and lived in the country until I was fifteen. In addition, for many years now the Priests of the Mission have ministered among country folk, so no one knows them better than we do. There's nothing to equal persons

¹Patroness of Paris, whose feast is celebrated on January 3.
who really have the spirit of villagers; nowhere do you find deeper faith, greater recourse to God in time of need, nor greater gratitude to Him in times of prosperity.

"So I can tell you, dear Sisters, that the spirit of true village girls is extremely simple—no slyness, nor words of double meaning; they’re not opinionated nor obstinate because in their simplicity they believe quite simply what they’re told. Daughters of Charity should be like that, Sisters, and you’ll know that you’re really so if you’re truly simple, not attached to your own ideas, but accepting of those of others; if you’re candid in your speech, and if your hearts aren’t thinking one thing while your lips say another. I can well believe that of you, dear Sisters! Blessed be God! Blessed be God, Sisters!

"True country women are noted for their great humility; they don’t boast of what they have, don’t talk about their relatives, and don’t think they’re clever, but act in a straightforward manner. And even though some have more than others, they don’t put on airs but live just like everyone else. That’s not true of city women, who often boast even of things they don’t possess, and are always talking about their homes, their relatives, and their easy circumstances. Sisters, true Daughters of Charity are, and should be, far removed from such a spirit, and, by the grace of God, I think this is fairly obvious because, although there are women of every social class among you, everything is the same, and that’s how it should be. Sisters from the upper class should adopt the true spirit of good village girls and live as they do. I must tell you, dear Sisters, how consoled I am whenever I see those of you who really have this spirit—and there are some who do. May God be blessed for it! Yes, I repeat, Sisters, that when I meet you in the streets, with your basket on your back, I experience inexpressible joy. May God be blessed for it!

"The humility of good country women keeps them from being ambitious. I say ‘good ones,’ Sisters, for I’m well aware that not all of them are so virtuous, and that even in the country there are some who are just as ambitious as those in the towns; but I’m talking about the good ones who haven’t acquired the spirit of the city. They are the ones, dear Sisters, who want only what God has given
them; they don’t aspire after more greatness or riches than they have, and are satisfied with their food and clothing. Still less do they consider using fine words but are humble in their speech. If they’re praised, they don’t know what is meant, so they don’t listen to it. Their language is truly simple and sincere.

"Sisters, how we should love this holy virtue of humility, which causes us to be little concerned if we’re despised, and even prompts us to love contempt! The holy Apostles gloried in contempt, and Saint Paul says, ‘We have been and are considered apple peelings and the refuse of the world.’ That’s how Daughters of Charity should look upon themselves, dear Sisters. You’ll know that you’re true Daughters of Charity if you’re really humble, if you’re neither ambitious nor presumptuous, and if you don’t think you’re better than you are nor better than others, either in body or mind, family or possessions—or even in virtue, which would be the most dangerous form of ambition. Simply make use of God’s gifts; if you think you’ve done something good, attribute the glory to God, and imitate true country women who act openly and say frankly what they know, without being too concerned about what they say or do.

“A more certain sign that you’re true Daughters of Charity is if you love contempt, for perhaps you won’t lack the opportunity to receive some. And why should you not have any? The Son of God certainly did, and He said that His kingdom was not of this world. And should the kingdom of the Daughters of Charity be of this world? Oh no, Sisters! And may God be blessed that they’re very far from thinking so!

“Country women, my very dear Sisters, are very abstemious in what they eat. Most of them often make do with bread and soup, although they’re constantly engaged in hard work. That’s what you should do, Sisters, if you want to be true Daughters of Charity. Don’t be concerned about what’s given you, still less whether it’s well prepared, but eat only to live. And women from the towns who want to be Daughters of Charity must accept to live likewise. They’re not the only ones who live like that; in many places, people

\[2\text{Cf. 1 Cor 4:13. (NAB)}\]
seldom eat bread. In Limousin and other places, they live mainly on bread made from chestnuts. In that part of the country where I come from, dear Sisters, the people are fed on a little grain called millet, which is set to cook in a pot; at mealtime it’s poured into a dish, and the family gathers around it to take some for their meal and then go back to work.

“How necessary moderation is for the Daughters of Charity, Sisters! You’ll know that you’re truly abstemious if you maintain the sobriety of country women, especially those who were called from the beginning to serve the poor, for they lived very abstemiously. I’m not telling you to eat only a little bread. Oh no, dear Sisters! Saint Bernard says that enough bread should be eaten, but I’m saying that Daughters of Charity should be content with little for the rest. And may God be praised that you seem to be doing this already! Blessed be God for it! Keep it up, Sisters, if you want to have the spirit of true village girls, in which God called you to the service of the sick poor.

“Alas, Sisters! Don’t think you’re fed any worse than persons outside. At any given time, there are always some who are fed much worse than you are, and they have to work hard. A few days ago, Bro. Mathieu wrote to me from Lorraine, and his tear-stained letter informed me of that province’s misfortunes, especially the plight of more than six hundred nuns, “The sorrow in my heart is so immense, Monsieur, that I can’t express it to you without weeping because of the extreme poverty of these good nuns whom your charity is assisting. I can only depict the smallest part of it to you. Their

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3The Landes, in southwestern France.
4Mathieu Rénard was born in Brienne-le-Château, now Brienne-Napoléon (Aube) on July 26, 1592. He entered the Congregation of the Mission in October 1631, took his vows on October 28, 1644, and died on October 5, 1669. He was the principal distributor of Saint Vincent’s alms in Lorraine and during the troubles of the Fronde. His daring, composure, and savoir-faire made him invaluable to the Saint. Rénard made fifty-three trips to Lorraine, carrying sums of money varying between twenty thousand and fifty thousand livres. Bands of thieves, who had been alerted to his passage and knew what he was carrying, watched him closely, but he always arrived safely at his destination with his treasure. His company was considered a safeguard; the Comtesse de Montgomery, reluctant to journey from Metz to Verdun, decided to do so only after having procured Brother Mathieu as a traveling companion. Queen Anne of Austria used to enjoy listening to him tell of his adventures. Rénard’s biography is in vol. II of Notices, pp. 29-33.
habits are scarcely recognizable. They are patched all over with green, grey, red—in short, with anything they can get. They even had to wear wooden shoes!'

“They barely have enough bread to eat. These are all persons of gentle birth, who have been very wealthy. Wouldn’t it be disgraceful if Daughters of Charity, servants of the poor, loved to lead a comfortable existence while their masters are suffering in this way! Rest assured then that, if you want to be good, true Daughters of Charity—both those of you who are widows of the upper class and those who actually come from villages—you have to be abstemious and not be on the lookout for appetizing foods. There are no distinctions, no differences, Sisters, when one is a true Daughter of Charity. And do you know, dear Sisters, what the Blessed Virgin lived on when she was on earth, and on what Our Lord subsisted? It was bread. He entered the Pharisee’s house to eat bread, Holy Scripture tells us, and this is repeated in several other places. Only once is it stated that He ate meat, and that was when He ate the paschal lamb with His Apostles; on another occasion He ate broiled fish. Blessed be God!

“Country women like the great Saint Genevieve, dear Sisters, are also very chaste; they never remain alone with men, never look them in the face, never listen to their flattery. They don’t even know what it means to be flattered. If someone were to tell a good village girl that she was sweet and pretty, her modesty couldn’t tolerate it, and she wouldn’t even understand what was being said. So, Sisters, Daughters of Charity must never listen to such language, for to take pleasure in it would be a serious fault. They shouldn’t even reply by denying it, for all such talk is silly. Be careful about that.

“And if words are so dangerous, what about actions? Never remain alone with men, Sisters, not even with a priest! Never touch the hands of poor persons, unless it’s a necessity. Don’t even consider whether you’re pleasing or displeasing them, but don’t let it show and don’t offend them. In a word, Sisters, you’ll know that you’re true Daughters of Charity if, when you’re with men, your

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\[Cf. II, 391.\]
only concern is the service of the poor, having nothing else in view than to carry out your obligations for the love of God. Be very careful also not to try to attract men either with your eyes or your words. Furthermore, take care not to listen to anything that might be in the slightest way harmful to the purity you must have, in order to share in that of true village girls like Saint Genevieve, who should serve you as a great example. My very dear Sisters, may God be praised for having preserved you until now from all these dangers!

“Let me also add, Sisters, that true country women are very reserved in their demeanor; they keep their eyes cast down and are modest in their clothing, which is coarse and cheap. That’s how Daughters of Charity should be. They mustn’t go into the homes of the wealthy unless they are there for the service of the poor, and even then they should be discreet, taking no notice of what may be seen there, and speaking to everyone with great reserve and modesty. Recently I was profoundly edified. I had taken a good Brother to a place where we remained a long time. When I asked him about some detail he said, ‘I’m sorry, Monsieur, I don’t know; I didn’t notice anything; I couldn’t tell you what that is.’ This reserve touched me deeply.

“Blessed be God, Sisters! I mention this to encourage you to practice this virtue and to let you see that, if you want to be true Daughters of Charity, you should take the example of the Blessed Virgin. She was so chaste and discreet that, although greeted by an angel, who told her she was to be the Mother of God, nevertheless, her modesty was so great that, without even looking at him, she was disturbed. Such reserve, my very dear Sisters, should teach you never to do anything to seek to attract men. How dangerous that is, Sisters! Always mistrust yourselves and you’ll surely acquire this modesty that’s so necessary.

“Our dear Saint Genevieve, good village girl that she was, also had a great love for poverty, and all good Daughters of Charity should be attached to the practice of this virtue. I say the practice, Sisters, because it wouldn’t be sufficient to love the virtue in the abstract; you have to love the needs that may arise and not complain about what you don’t have. Wanting to have what you don’t pos-
sess, Sisters, isn't the poverty of true country women, who are content with what they have, both in food or clothing. As for their possessions, they never think about them and don't even take into account what they have, but are attached to poverty. They work as if they had nothing; and, Sisters, if you have no ambitions and are content with what has been given you by the grace of God, people will know that you're true Daughters of Charity. The first persons God called to your way of life have already done this. And what do you think the life of Our Lord and His Holy Mother was like, Sisters? A life of perfect poverty. Don't you remember that all those the Son of God has called to follow Him have learned from Him to practice poverty? 'If you wish to be perfect, leave all and follow me.'

Have you ever heard, dear Sisters, that anyone who trusted in God was ever disappointed? Oh no, Sisters! He's too good and His promises are genuine. Don't you know that He has promised those who leave all things for the love of God a hundredfold in this world and glory in the next? Isn't it true, dear Sisters, that most of you have experienced the truth of these promises? How many mothers and sisters have you not found for the ones you've left? Isn't that true?" All the Sisters said that it was.

"As for property, Sisters, I assure you that you’ve gained much more than you left, whatever poverty you may have observed. During the past few days, Sisters, an account was given of everything spent since the first Daughters of Charity came together. How much do you think it amounts to? Twenty thousand livres, Sisters. And where did all that come from if not from the Providence of God, as a result of His promises?

"Blessed be God, Sisters! And how good it is to put our trust in Him! So then, love holy poverty, which will lead you to place all your confidence in God and never worry about your food and clothing. He who provides for little children and the flowers of the field will never fail you. He has given His word, and His words are true. Have you ever seen people with greater confidence in God than good country folk? They sow their seed and then wait for God to

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6Cf. Mt 19:21. (NAB)
bless their harvest; and if God permits that it not be good, they still have confidence in Him for their food for the whole year. Should losses occur, their love of poverty, through submission to God, makes them say, 'God gave it to us; God has taken it away; blessed be His Holy Name!' And provided they have enough to live on—which they never lack—they don’t worry about the future. Now, Sisters, since your earliest Sisters were first and foremost chosen by God from among good village girls, and from those who had this spirit of poverty the most, don’t you have reason to know, by the way you practice this virtue, whether you’re true Daughters of Charity?

“You must also practice it on this point, namely, not to worry about the future; take care of your expenses throughout the year and, if anything is left over, bring it to the Motherhouse to help to form Sisters for the service of the poor. You have a right only to your food and clothing; the surplus belongs to the service of the poor. Sisters, have you ever heard it said that God chose poor persons to make them rich in faith? And what do you think of God’s choice of village girls for that? Until now, all the women called to God’s service have been of gentle birth and wealthy. I repeat, Sisters, how do you know whether, by calling you for His glory and the service of persons who are poor, God isn’t trying to test your fidelity in order to demonstrate the truth that God has chosen persons who are poor to make them rich in faith? For poor persons, faith is indeed a great possession, because a lively faith draws from God all we can reasonably hope for. If you’re truly poor, Sisters, you’re even more truly rich, for God is your all. Trust God, dear Sisters. Has anyone ever heard that those who trust in God’s promises have been deceived? That has never been seen and never will be. Yes, Sisters, God is faithful to His promises and trusting in Him is a very good thing. Furthermore, this confidence is the entire wealth of the Daughters of Charity and their guarantee. How happy you’ll be, Sisters, if you never lack this confidence, for then you’ll be true Daughters of Charity and will share in the spirit and good practices of true village girls, who should be your model, since God has made use of them, first and foremost, to begin your Company. Blessed be
God, Sisters, for having shown us in Saint Genevieve the goodness of true country women! How consoled I am, my very dear Sisters, when I meet some of you who, I know, have this spirit and some truly magnanimous virtues. Yes, Sisters, some among you are to be admired. Blessed be God, Sisters! When I see and meet on the roads women of quality who really have the spirit of good village girls, with a basket on their back, carrying burdens in the street, and walking with a reserve that inspires devotion, what a great consolation for me, Sisters! God be blessed for the graces He gives them!

“One of the chief virtues of women who have all the characteristics of country women is holy obedience. This virtue is as necessary—or more necessary—for you than any other, Sisters, because you have to do equally both difficult and easy things. You have to go to places you don’t like, as well as to those you do, and to do so without complaining, always thinking that it must be done because your Superiors order it and, consequently, it’s God’s Will. Be docile and receptive to the guidance of Divine Providence, as a horse is to its rider; go sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left, as you’re ordered. But the senses will say, ‘I was just beginning to get used to that parish, to that neighborhood, to those Ladies. No matter! obedience is taking me away from them; I must leave promptly and cheerfully.’ Don’t you know, Sisters, that you shouldn’t have any friendship in the world that can prejudice the love you must show God by your submission and obedience? There’s no greater obedience than that of true village girls. They come home from work, worn out and fatigued, wet through and covered in mud, to eat their meager lunch, and they’re barely there when, if the weather is suitable for work or if their father and mother tell them to go back to it, they do so at once, without paying too much attention to their weariness, or the mud, or how they look. That’s how true Daughters of Charity should behave. If they return at noon from serving the sick to have their lunch, and the doctor or another Sister says, ‘This medicine has to be taken to a patient,’ they shouldn’t think about the state they’re in, but forget themselves in order to obey, and prefer the convenience of the sick to their own. By this, my very dear Sis-
ters, you’ll know that you’re true Daughters of Charity. Blessed be God, Sisters! I think almost all of you are in this state of mind.

“But, Sisters, do you know how such acts of obedience should be carried out? Joyfully, graciously, and charitably, and not for form’s sake or negligently, but with such fervor as to show that you don’t want to spare your body in the service of God by serving His poor, and paying no attention to the places to which you’re sent or to the persons who give you orders, but being as prompt in going from one place as to another, whether it be to Paris or to the country, near or far away. In this way, dear Sisters, you’ll be true Daughters of Charity, and you’ll be imitating Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin in their obedience with regard to residences and changes of place, by the order and guidance of Divine Providence, which you must consider in all instances where you have to practice holy obedience.

“In the name of God, Sisters, be very mindful of your obligation to acquire virtue, if you want God to grant you the grace of becoming true Daughters of Charity. If you realized how obliged you are to work toward your perfection, Sisters, and what a misfortune it is to make yourself unworthy of so holy a vocation, you’d weep tears of blood! Yes, Sisters, I repeat, to be called by God for such a holy ministry and not to acknowledge this grace by fulfilling your obligations would merit tears of blood. This thought occurred to a pitiful person like me today, Sisters, when I saw myself as I am, in a state that should make me so perfect. We should all be very much afraid, Sisters! Think of this often and say, ‘Quoi! My God, you’ve chosen me, a poor, weak creature, and placed me in a state that you alone know (Yes, Sisters, God alone knows the perfection of your state), and shall I be so negligent as not to strive to have the prescribed conditions!’ What a misfortune it would be for you if through your own fault you were to lose your vocation, or if because of your laxity you didn’t take the trouble to acquire the perfection God wants in those who will serve Him in this state! Think about that, Sisters, reflect on it often and seriously, as a matter of the greatest importance. ‘Quoi! I’ve been elected and chosen for such a holy vocation, and I attach such little importance to it!’ If you realized what an act of infidelity this is, you’d be horrified. Therefore,
Sisters, take good, strong resolutions once again to treasure your vocation more than ever, and try to work with greater fidelity toward the perfection God is asking of you. All the Sisters manifested their readiness to do so.

"Blessed be God, Sisters! Blessed be God! I want you to know, Sisters, that, if I've ever said anything true and important to you, it's what you've just heard, namely, that you must strive to maintain yourselves in the spirit of good, true, country girls. You to whom God, by His grace, has given this spirit by nature should thank Him for it, and those of you who don't have it should strive to acquire the perfection I've just pointed out as being characteristic of true village girls. If women of gentle birth present themselves with the desire to enter your Company, Sisters, it must be in order to live, in body and spirit, like those who truly have the virtues of village girls, as our great Saint Genevieve did, so honored now for her simplicity, humility, austerity, modesty, obedience, and all the other virtues we have noted in good village girls. Blessed be God! But what am I saying, Sisters! Those are the virtues practiced by someone even greater—by the Son of God when He was on earth, and by His Holy Mother, whose life you should honor in a special way in all your actions.

"May the Holy Spirit pour into your hearts the insight you need to enkindle in them a great fervor and make you faithful and attached to the practice of all those virtues so that, for the glory of God, you will esteem your vocation at its true value, and love it in such a way that you may be able to persevere in it for the rest of your life, serving poor persons in the spirit of humility, obedience, suffering, and charity, and so you will be blessed. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."