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Religious Women in the World in Italy and France During the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

by Massimo Marcocchi

Translated and edited by John E. Rybolt, C.M.

[Introduction. To understand the social and religious world in which Saint Vincent and Saint Louise founded the Daughters of Charity, it is helpful to examine other attempts to found communities of religious women living and working in "the world". As the author of the following study shows, Vincent's initiative succeeded where others had failed. This paper was delivered as part of the International Vincentian Studies Colloquium in Paris, September 25-26, 1981. Apart from direct citations, the extensive footnotes of the original have not been translated for the sake of readability.]

I. The Company of Saint Ursula of Angela Merici

Among the forces which, in the fifteenth century and in the first decades of the sixteenth century, operated to bring about the reform of the church "in its head and in its members", communities of lay persons and clerics played an important role. They set out to develop a personal holiness centered in an experience of the Word of God (in particular the Gospels and Saint Paul), in the imitation of Christ, and in the exercise of charity. They did not question the doctrinal patrimony of the church nor did they intend to destroy ecclesiastical institutions corrupted by abuses. They wanted instead to bring about a conversion of hearts through a return to the Gospel and, in this way, to lay the foundation for church reform.

New developments in piety and apostolate developed from some of these men's communities which began after 1520: (Barnabites, Jesuits, Brothers of Saint John of God), and communities of priests (clerics) which lived according to a rule after the manner of religious. They practiced the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience and took on certain monastic customs, such as the choral recitation of the office, a special habit and stable residence in one house. But they differed from monks and even more from mendicants, since they lived in

the world and dedicated themselves to preaching, to spiritual direction, to the education of youth, to the aid of the sick, to the formation of the clergy, and to missions among the "pagans." Having arisen to respond to the needs of an age in profound transformation, they sought to reconcile a contemplative spirit with apostolic zeal and to combine personal holiness with the care of souls.

The brave initiatives taken on behalf of women by Angela Merici (c. 1474-1540), who lived and died in Brescia, are related to this movement. In 1531 she gathered around herself some young women who wanted to consecrate themselves to God, not within the walls of a cloister but within a family and in society. The Company of Saint Ursula (the name of a virgin in the early church, the [legendary] liberator of Cologne during a siege of the Huns) accepted women mostly of a modest social condition who observed the evangelical counsels but without vows. They did not dress in a special habit, nor practice the common life like nuns in monastic communities, but remained within their families and lived by their own work.

Although they did not practice common life, in some ways they lived in common. They gathered periodically to listen to "some sermons and exhortations" from a "person in charge",¹ and the first Friday of every month, they assisted at mass and received communion. The women in charge were to convoke, at least once a month, the government of the Company to examine their material and spiritual status and to take measures "according to what the Holy Spirit will inspire".²

The main purpose of the Ursulines was nuptial union with Christ, since "they have been chosen to be true and undefiled spouses of the Son of God," "true and chaste spouses of the Most High." Virginité became the expression of an exclusive and undivided love and, for that reason, was defined as the "sister of all the angels, victory over the appetites, queen of the virtues, and possessor of every good." Virginité demands poverty, understood as an interior detachment and not just as the absence of material goods ("effective poverty"), as well as obedience, which frees from "the devil's darkness" of one's own will and brings about confor-

¹T. Ledochowska, *Angèle Merici et la Compagnie de S.te Ursule a la lumière des documents*. Rome-Milan, 1967. Vol. I, pp. 258-303. Citations are from her *Testament*.

²Ledochowska, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 280.

mity to the will of God. Obedience is rendered to the law of God, to the commandments of the church, to the bishop, to the spiritual father, to the men and women in charge of the community, to parents, to civil authorities, and above all to the lights of the Holy Spirit:

. . . and above all to obey the commands and inspirations which the Holy Spirit continually puts in our hearts, whose voice we will hear more clearly than others, the more purified our consciences are. The Holy Spirit is, as Jesus says, "he who will teach us all truth."³

Its spiritual outlook, moving toward a simple life and the bare essentials, relied on an interior renovation (making "a new life" in the words of her seventh *Counsel*), just like the methods of evangelical reform then in vogue. The language of Angela Merici is foreign to prescriptive and juridical formulas, being profoundly rooted in the Bible and filled with religious feeling. The Company of Saint Ursula remained flexible on the institutional level, since, once approved in 1536 by Lorenzo Muzio, vicar general of the diocese of Brescia, it did not depend juridically on the bishop.

The initiative of Angela Merici, which placed consecrated women into the world, exhibits novel characteristics because it developed outside the monastery - that is, outside the structure in which religious life for women had developed for centuries. What had Angela Merici done that was so sensitive to the essential values of monastic life (prayer, silence, the evangelical counsels, contemplation) to keep the Ursulines from becoming isolated from the world or from becoming nuns? She perceived with a true sensitivity the profound crisis then taking place in the politics, society and economics of the Italian states in the stormy years of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This crisis developed after the intervention of the great foreign kingdoms and from the downfall of the balanced system established among the Italian princes after the Peace of Lodi in 1454. (Brescia itself, in February of 1512, was ruined by a terrible sack from which it was then trying to recover.)

She was also aware of the crisis in the church, since in her

³Ledochowska, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 298.

Counsels she speaks of "two kinds of evil persons," the "false religious" and "heretics" who are like "wolves and thieves," and in her grief she calls upon God "not to abandon his Church but to reform it as he wills." In addition, Angela Merici realized that monastic life no longer corresponded to the needs of her age. To make Christian witness real, she had to embrace apostolic activity in the world as well as in her own home. Consequently, she did not encourage flight from the world but presence in a society which had become worldly and corrupting. Angela spoke of the world as "miserable," "dark," "treacherous," "restless," of "times that were dangerous and deadly," and of "deadly times." The model to imitate is the life of the apostles and the virgins of the earliest church, Martha, Thecla, Ursula, Agnes, Cecilia, Catherine, who consecrated themselves to Christ but remained in the world. Angela Merici's prophetic dimension, as Paul Prodi has written, did not show itself in apocalyptic and millenarian forms as with Savonarola, nor in the itinerant preachers or hermits who, in the streets and squares of Italy, castigated corrupt civil and ecclesiastical society with biting speeches, but in attention to the signs of the times - that is, to the needs of an epoch undergoing profound transformation.⁴ This form of life was so new that immediately after her death (1540) people sought to nullify it by enclosing the Ursulines in a monastery. Both the ecclesiastical world and the nobility of Brescia obstructed the Company. They considered monasteries of women only as social institutions suitable to guarantee "stability and social stagnation" since they admitted women, often without any vocation, who were not destined for marriage. Gabriele Cozzano, Angela's faithful secretary and an observer above suspicion, witnessed this opposition, and in the years 1544-1546 he defended the new institution with a memorial ("Response against those who seek the cloister for the virgins of Saint Ursula"). He called the attempt to persuade the Ursulines to enter the monastery under the pretext of greater perfection a work of the devil. Cozzano speaks with respect for monastic life, but also defends the legitimacy of a new form of life and mentions the various ways to arrive at perfection:

⁴P. Prodi, "Vita religiosa e crisi sociale nei tempi di Angela Merici," *Humanitas*, 1974, pp. 307-318.

I say again that God does not save in only one way within the same state or grade of life. He does not lead forth this person and that person by one road. He does not use a single method for every nature but, however he wishes, knows how to improve on it. He calls and he inspires one person to one way of life and another person to another.

To the person who thought that the life of the Company was less perfect than the monastic life, Cozzano responds that it is the "form of life which Christ himself lived here below and which he wanted to live himself":

The church had lived in its first and golden age without cloisters, without convent enclosures. With the passage of time, the monasteries developed. Consequently, those who prefer the life of the cloister to every other disregard the perfection of that primitive and golden age of the Holy Church to which our form of life is similar.

The apostolic life of the first Christian communities became the model for later ones. It was not cloistered life that stood at the summit of the road to perfection but "the life of Saint Martha, Saint Thecla, and the other first flowers of the Holy Church." For Cozzano, the Company of Saint Ursula put into practice the providential plan of God which sought to correspond to the need of the times with new forms: "They were, in their own times, the best among all the others; but it pleased God, according to the needs of the times, to raise up and to plant in his Church this new rule of life, because these old forms really had to give way to this new one."

In disputes with the nobility of Brescia, who scorned the Company because of its lower-class membership, Cozzano recalled the example of Christ who "chose poor people for his apostles, was himself poor, and whose father and mother were artisans and poor."⁵

The attempts to reduce the Company of Saint Ursula to cloistered nuns marked the first skirmishes in a laborious pro-

⁵The texts of Cozzano are found in Ledochowska, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 332-359.

cess which would modify its original outlines, whether by introducing a special habit or by inaugurating common life, but, in any case, within the cloister.

In this regard, an important turn of events for the Company in Milan, (founded there in 1566) took place during the episcopate of [Saint] Charles Borromeo. In the rule of 1567, addressed to young women "who desire to serve God in the virginal state, remaining in the world, and through them, those who through poverty or because of other impediments are not able to enter monasteries," the community came under strict dependence on the bishop, who controlled it through a priest who represented him, the "Prior General." Priests ("particular priors") collaborated with him, and they directed the Companies which went out to various quarters of the city. In place of the "governors" and "colonies" of the primitive Company, therefore, secular priests became its guides. Every virgin who wanted to "become stable" in the Company had to be carefully examined and approved by the vicar of the archbishop. Besides, for every change in the rule, the approval of the diocesan bishop was necessary. The person of the confessor acquired great importance. Borromeo had not only placed the Company under the vigilant control of diocesan authority and thereby conferred on it a new structure, but through precise and detailed norms had regulated individual ways of acting, their religious life, and even ceremonies. In this way was affirmed a juridical point of view far removed from the basic ascetical and mystical inspiration of the original rule, which had been so little concerned about formalities and so much about internal renewal.

Some examples taken from comparing the two rules are worthwhile at this point. The motive of docility to the lights of the Holy Spirit disappears, and obedience to superiors is affirmed. Chapters on virginity and poverty, so rich in religious inspiration, as we have seen, became juridical norms in the rule of 1567. The primitive rule recommended devout participation in daily mass (Chapter 7) "because in holy mass are found all the merits of the passion of Our Lord Jesus." In the rule of 1567, mass was prescribed on holy days of obligation. If the virgins wanted to participate on other days, "they should consult with their confessors who will give them permission as it seems good

to them, considering first their work, the company which they will be able to have, and the place where they will be able to go, and other similar things." The biblical passages from which the primitive rule was composed, as well as its splendid prologue, disappear from the rule of 1567.⁶

The Ursulines of Brescia underwent the same process of change after the apostolic visitation of Charles Borromeo in 1580. The rule which the archbishop of Milan gave on this occasion and published in 1582, placed them in strict dependence on the diocesan bishop and put them within a scrupulously defined structure. It is enough to realize that Chapter 12 of the original rule, called "Governance," expanded to ten chapters (11-20) dedicated to offices. The spiritual father acquired a great importance, because he represented the bishop and totally controlled the life of the Company. The accent upon its institutional life is revealed vividly in the chapter on obedience, where docility to the work of the Holy Spirit falls behind the filter of the spiritual father. The shift from a prophetic and charismatic outlook to the counter-reformation outlook is evident when we examine two passages. They demonstrate an institutional hardening and a lack of confidence in internal inspirations.

Rule of Angela Merici:

. . . and above all to obey the commands and inspiration which the Holy Spirit continually puts in our heart, whose voice we will hear more clearly than others the more purified our consciences are. The Holy Spirit is, as Jesus says, "he who will teach us all truth."

Rule of 1582:

Besides, they will obey the internal inspirations which, with the judgment and approbation of the spiritual father, they will realize that the Holy Spirit had given them.⁷

In the same years, also, groups of Ursulines who lived in community were founded in Milan. Charles Borromeo prepared a rule for them, published February 21, 1585 by Bishop Giovanni

⁶*Regola della Compagnia di Santa Orsola . . .*, Milan, 1567.

⁷*Regola della Compagnia di S. Orsola di Brescia . . .*, Brescia, 1582.

Fontana, vicar general of the diocese of Milan since Charles Borromeo had died some months before.

II. The Angelic Sisters of Saint Paul of Ludovica Torelli

In the same years in which Angela Merici founded the Company of Saint Ursula, Countess Ludovica Torelli of Guastalla (1500-1569), under the influence of the Dominican priest, Battista da Crema and [Saint] Antonio Maria Zaccaria, founded at Milan the Congregation of the Angelic Sisters of Saint Paul (or Angelines), approved by Paul III on January 15, 1535. The papal bull granted to the religious women the faculty of following the rule of Saint Augustine, of dressing in the Dominican habit, and of living the common life in the monastery of Saint Paul at Milan, yet without the traditional bonds of cloister. Thus they were able to leave the monastery to meet the demands of the apostolate in the world (reforming convents of women, redeeming fallen women, helping orphans and the sick, and educating youth).

The first Barnabites (Clerks Regular of Saint Paul) and the first Angelines instituted between them bonds of apostolic collaboration and a deep spiritual relationship. The Angelines participated at the chapters of the Barnabites with full right to speak and to vote, and attended to the Church of Saint Barnabas for confession and spiritual direction. Some Barnabites, in turn, went to the monastery of Saint Paul to give advice to the Angelines. In the formula of profession, the first Barnabites promised obedience, chastity and poverty to God "and to you, father and mother" -- namely, to the superior (in this case Giacomo Antonio Morigia, successor of Antonio Maria Zaccaria in guiding the congregation and to the Angeline, Paola Antonia Negri.)⁸

Such a rule of life and apostolic activity which had developed without concern for promiscuity prompted opposition and contradictions, so much so that the Angelines were constrained to embrace the cloister in 1552. Countess Torelli did not accept the cloister and left Saint Paul's. She thereupon founded a college in Guastalla for educating noble girls, who however had no money to pay, as the rules of 1565 and 1569 had foreseen. The religious

⁸G. Cagni, "Alcuni orientamenti spirituali del Cinquecento barnabite," in *La nostra consecrazione a Dio*, Rome, 1979, pp. 73-92.

needs of the college were given over to a priest who would be governed according to the counsel and direction of the Jesuits; and the instruction and education of the girls was given over to women of virtuous life or widows or unmarried women removed from the bonds of cloister and in relationship to society. The patron was the King of Spain. As a result, the institution was removed from ecclesiastical authority. The college gave the girls a dowry whether they were to be married or wanted to enter a monastery. As a result, the goal of providing help became entwined with that of education. This combination of two goals can be explained by the condition of women in the sixteenth century, for whom there existed only two possibilities: become a nun or marry, and both states demanded a dowry.

III. Other Communities of Women in France and Italy

Communities of Ursulines who lived a common life developed rapidly in France but remained independent from one another, each with its own constitutions and superior. But either because of pressure from the bishops or out of belief that solemn vows would make their consecration more pleasing to God and stabilize the institute, these French Ursulines professed solemn vows and embraced the cloister. They received into their monasteries, as tuition-paying students, the daughters of the nobility and the upper class, but they also gave free external classes for poor girls. A strict separation prevailed between girls from an aristocratic background who frequented the internal classes, and those in the external classes, who were of a modest social condition.

The Ursulines from Dole (Society of Saint Ursula of the Blessed Virgin), founded in 1606 by [Venerable] Anne de Xainctonge, did not embrace the cloister (but the plan and its major outlines had been conceived in the last years of the sixteenth century), since Dole, along with all Franche-Comte, was under Spanish rule. The Ursulines of Dole offered free classes to the girls of the ordinary people, taught the rudiments of knowledge and women's work (cooking and sewing) and, on Sundays and feast days explained the catechism to women of every age. In order to dedicate themselves completely to the service of poor girls, they did

not accept students in their house.

In the Italian states, too, groups of Ursulines grew up who lived a common life but did not profess vows, professing obedience instead to the diocesan bishop. They dedicated themselves to helping women in hospitals, to educating girls, and to teaching catechism in parishes. They were often called the "Companies of the Humble," (*Dimesse*) because they dressed so simply. There was a multitude of autonomous communities who often had no relationship to one another. We should recall, for just one example, the Humble Sisters of Vicenza, founded in 1579 by the Franciscan, Antonio Pagani, and who lived in small communities ("there should not be more than eight or nine in each house").⁹ The Congregation of the Ursulines of the Sacred Heart grew up in Parma in 1575 at the initiative of Maddalena Molinari. The Congregation of the Ursulines of Mary Immaculate, began in Piacenza in 1649 at the instigation of [Venerable] Lady Bridget Morello (but calling themselves Ursulines). These congregations were not related to the Company of Angela Merici from which they differed essentially, since they received only noble girls, depended on lay authority as well as on the diocesan bishop, and took vows of chastity and perseverance.

Alongside the groups who lived a community life, there continued to be some Ursulines who remained with their families according to the more authentic formula of Saint Angela Merici.

Other communities dedicated themselves to instructing and educating girls, especially those who came from the nobility. They were the Congregation of Notre Dame, founded in 1597 in the Duchy of Lorraine by [Saint] Pierre Fourier and [Blessed] Alix LeClerc; the Company of Mary (Order of Notre Dame), founded in 1605 at Bordeaux by [Saint] Jeanne DeLestonnac and the Jesuit, Jean DeBordes; the College of the Virgins of Jesus which began in 1608 at Castiglione delle Stiviere through the initiative of the Cinzia princesses, Olimpia and Gridonia Gonzaga (nieces of Saint Aloysius); the College of the Blessed Virgin of Cremona (in Spanish Lombardy), founded in 1610 by Lucia Perotti and the Jesuit, Giovanni Mellini; the English Ladies [Institute of Mary] of Mary Ward and the Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus, founded by the Minim, Nicolas Barre. The Daughters of Saint Genevieve of Madame de Miramion, the Daughters of the Cross of Madame

⁹*Gli ordini della divota compagnia delle dimesse . . .* Venice, 1587.

de Villeneuve, and the Daughters of Providence of Madame de Pollalion dedicated themselves to educational and charitable activities (instruction of young girls, especially those coming from poor families; assistance of fallen girls and foundlings, the formation of teachers for country schools and retreats for women).

Several important features emerge from the outline that we have presented.

1) These communities tended to perfection through the practice of the evangelical counsels, common life, and the service of the neighbor. Thus they lived an experience made up of action and contemplation. To exercise apostolic activity in the world, they rejected the cloister. By doing so, however, they conflicted with the constitution *Circa Pastoralis* (May 29, 1566) of Pius V. Because he interpreted the decree of the Council of Trent restrictively, the pope had affirmed the unbreakable link between solemn profession of vows and cloister, which protected the vows, funneling women's religious life down the channel of the cloister, outside of which no new institutions could arise. To avoid narrow canonical prescriptions, women who were eager for profession in the world did not embrace religious life, strictly so-called, which involved the profession of solemn vows and cloister. They assumed instead the character of secular associations, and made private vows. Some of these groups ran into opposition from the Holy See and bishops; for example, Urban VIII suppressed the English Ladies in 1631. The Sisters of the Visitation of Francis de Sales adopted cloister because of the archbishop of Lyons, de Marquemont, and were approved as such by Paul V in 1618. The same fate overtook the French Ursulines. Yet, during the 1600s the severity of the constitution *Circa Pastoralis* was mitigated, owing to the behavior of some bishops who approved congregations with simple vows and by their tolerant rejection of formal approval of the institute allowed them to continue in operation.

2) Some of the congregations mentioned (the English Ladies, the Ursulines of Dole, the Ursulines of Parma and Piacenza, the College of the Blessed Virgin at Cremona, the College of Castiglione della Stiviere, the Company of Our Lady of Lestonnac) were born and developed under the guidance of the Jesuits who served as their confessors and directed or influenced the

writing of their rules. These laid out for young women the same educational plan that the Jesuits had formulated in their colleges for young men.

3) Some congregations (the English Ladies, the Ursulines of Parma and Piacenza, the College of the Blessed Virgin of Cremona, the College of Castiglione della Stiviere) admitted to profession only young women who belonged to the nobility. Even the young girls admitted into their educational institutions came from the nobility and paid tuition for their upkeep. Their educational activity concentrated on preparing young noblewomen to undertake with a Christian spirit, not the civil professions from which women in the 1500s and 1600s were excluded, but the duties of a wife and mother. Their activity was, nevertheless, destined to have some influence outside the confines of their families, because those who would direct society came from noble families.

4) Some congregations depended on secular authority (the College of Guastalla, the Ursulines of Parma and Piacenza), others on the supreme pontiff (the English Ladies) and the others on diocesan bishops. For the English Ladies, to depend directly on the pope in the same way as the Society of Jesus did, and not on a religious order or a diocesan bishop, meant more freedom to act. For the Ursulines of Parma and Piacenza, the protection granted by the Farnese family guaranteed economic security (especially in the institution's beginning phase), fiscal privileges and benefits of various kinds, and also, they brought with them introductions to secular authority. Dependence on the jurisdiction of the local bishop was the more common procedure.

5) For their mission they preferred religious and moral formation to education. The education program was worked out in modest circumstances and consisted generally in reading, writing, arithmetic and in women's work. At times, (for example, in the colleges of the English Ladies), the rudiments of knowledge were integrated with the study of music, Latin and foreign languages. Because women in the 1600s, if they did not enter monasteries, were destined to live within the confines of a family, their education tended toward moral and religious formation and toward preparation for running a household and administering its goods.

IV. The Visitation Nuns of Francis de Sales

The Visitation, founded at Annecy in 1610, had a special history. Francis de Sales intended the congregation to make possible the road toward perfection -- that is, "the exercise of divine love" -- for those women who were not in a position, or who did not wish, to support the austerities of an enclosed monastery, either because of advanced age or poor health. The Visitation also received temporarily women who wanted to assemble for prayer and prepare for confession. Besides, it permitted widows and mothers of families to leave the monastery from time to time to handle the temporal affairs of their children. Francis de Sales compared it to a "poor dovecote of innocent doves; whose care and employ is to meditate on the law of the Lord without being seen or understood in the world."¹⁰

For the "exercise of divine love," an absolute cloister was not necessary nor were solemn vows, a grill, physical penance, prolonged fasts, or recitation of the long offices (often painful for women whose health was weak, and too difficult for those who did not understand Latin). The accent was placed instead on interior penance, on the practice of humility, and on the struggle against self-love. The Visitation essentially was a contemplative institute, but it also had to consecrate a part from its activity to visiting the sick and the poor. Far from extinguishing the spirit of prayer, this life would enkindle it. The change in 1618 to a cloistered order, at the intervention of the archbishop of Lyons, Cardinal de Marquemont, does not seem to have constituted a radical break with the original concept. The prologue of the definitive constitutions of 1618 makes clear that "this congregation began so that no great austerity might keep the weak and the sick from coming here to work for the perfection of divine love."¹¹

It is interesting to observe that the Sisters of the Visitation in the two monasteries of Annecy came from the nobility and the upper class, not only for economic reasons (entry into the monastery entailed a sizable dowry) but also for social and cultural ones. Indeed, good families would not have consented for

¹⁰De Sales to de Marquemont, June 1615; in *Oeuvres de Saint Francois de Sales*, Annecy, 1892-1932, Vol. XVII, p. 17.

¹¹De Sales, *Oeuvres*, Vol. XXV, pp. 51-52.

their daughters to live in a monastery with young women of a modest social standing, since monastic life demanded either enough education to sing the office and to undertake spiritual reading, or the possession of good manners which could only be acquired in certain social surroundings.

V. The Daughters of Charity and the Service of the Poor

In 1633, when Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac assembled the first Daughters of Charity, no community of women existed in France which worked outside the walls of the cloister. The Ursulines, the Sisters of the Visitation, the congregations of Lestonnac and of LeClerc had embraced the cloister. Beginning with the Daughters of Charity, the engagement of women in the world assumed a radical stance unknown until that time.

They visited the sick in their homes and in hospitals; they assisted foundlings, orphans, the elderly in hospices, prisoners, galley slaves, the insane and war refugees. They cared for soldiers wounded on the battlefield, and taught catechism to children. But their availability extended to all forms of poverty and need wherever they appeared. The community arose to respond to the needs of an age tormented with wars, famine, and diseases which had spawned miseries especially among the poor in the French countryside. Vincent de Paul wanted a company endowed with great mobility, in a position "to go everywhere" in direct service of the neighbor. He upheld the incompatibility between the regime of the cloister and the purpose of the Company, and he opposed every attempt to transform the Daughters of Charity into true and proper religious. For this purpose, he avoided any term that might evoke religious life. He used house instead of monastery or convent; seminary instead of novitiate; Sister Servant instead of superior; confraternity or society instead of congregation. He excluded a special habit and a grill in the parlor. He did not change the name of the young women who entered the Company. Although he appreciated religious life, he put the Daughters of Charity on guard against frequenting religious women or men, out of fear that they might assimilate something of their spirit. As a result, the Daughters of Charity did not embrace religious life but remained secular, and yet pro-

nounced annual private vows.

The life of the Daughters of Charity revolved around the service of the poor. Because a poor person is the image of Jesus, the Daughters of Charity, as servants of the poor, are "servants of Jesus":

"Servants of the Poor," that is the same as saying "Servants of Jesus Christ," because He regards what is done to them as done to Himself for they are his members. And what did He do in this world but serve the poor? Ah, my dear daughters, hold fast to this qualification, for it is the most beautiful and the most advantageous you could possess.¹²

Because "to serve the poor is to go to God," the Daughter of Charity "will never lose anything by leaving prayer and mass for the service of the poor":

A Sister will go and visit the poor ten times a day, and ten times a day, she will find God there. . . . Go and look at the poor convicts in a chaingang, you will find God there; take care of the little children and you will find God there.¹³

In 1645 Vincent de Paul codified in his rules of the Daughters of Charity the motive of "leaving God for God":

They will remember, nevertheless, that they must always prefer, to their practices of devotion, the service of the poor and their duties when necessity or obedience calls them there. They will recall that when they do this, they leave God for God.¹⁴

This perspective created a profound unity with the spiritual life, because the love of God and the love of neighbor are in-

¹²Conference of May 30, 1647; from translation by Joseph Leonard, *The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to the Sisters of Charity*, London, 1938-1939, Vol. I, p. 289.

¹³Conference of 13 February 1646, Leonard, Vol. I, p. 223.

¹⁴Saint Vincent de Paul, *Correspondence, Entretiens, Documents*, ed. Pierre Coste. Paris, 1923. Vol. XIII, p. 556.

dissolubly linked. God is loved in his people, and his people are loved in God. The love of neighbor is not a secondary end, it is not something left over, but it is an "infallible mark of the true children of God."¹⁵

Since he was convinced that poor persons should be consecrated to the service of the poor, Vincent received in his Company only women of modest condition whether social or cultural; yet he did not exclude noblewomen, to keep the Company from becoming a refuge of forced vocations as happened in some women's monasteries. Rejecting a custom in force in monastic communities, he refused dowries to impede any motives of self-interest that might prevail. If some noblewoman entered the Daughters of Charity, she did not assume a privileged position but conformed herself to the poor style of the institute:

I say further, even if you were of noble birth, and some of you are, you should never presume on it, and you are just as much obliged as the rest to rid yourselves of all that sensitiveness and susceptibility which you acquired by nature in training. Was not the Son of God nobler than you, not only as God but also as man? Was He not of royal birth? And yet you see His self-abasement, His labours and continual mortifications, living in such great poverty that, like Saint Joseph, He had to earn His bread.¹⁶

Vincent de Paul was deeply aware of the newness of his institution and emphasized, with a kindly insistence, their difference from those of other women.

The Ursulines instructed girls who belonged normally to rich families, but the Daughters of Charity were to instruct the poor, and not only the young children who went to school but all the poor. The Carmelite Sisters practiced the prayer of quiet, "waiting for what God would be pleased to give them"; but the Daughters of Charity did not have to adopt that method of prayer; it was good for the Carmelites but not for them.¹⁷ There

¹⁵Saint Vincent de Paul, *Correspondence*, Vol. XIII, p. 423. The citation comes from the rules for the Confraternity of Charity at Châtillon-les-Dombes, 1617.

¹⁶Conference of December 11, 1644, Leonard, Vol. I, p. 153.

¹⁷Conference of November 18, 1657, Leonard, Vol. IV, p. 7.

are more precise traits that differentiate the Daughters of Charity from religious women who worked with the poor. The Augustinians served the sick in the hospital of the Hotel Dieu in Paris, and the hospital sisters of the Charity of Our Lady worked in the hospital of the Place Royale in Paris; but the Daughters of Charity went to search out in their homes, and assist those who would die without aid and would not even dare to ask for it.¹⁸ The Daughters of Charity in assisting the foundlings, the captives, the prisoners, the poor, the insane, the soldiers in their camps and the wounded on the battlefield, performed a service not given by any other religious community.¹⁹

From the viewpoint of a radical engagement with the world, Vincent de Paul formed his Daughters to a piety founded on solid virtue, rooted in reality, and placed no confidence in an asceticism distinguished by mystical languors or sublime aspirations (often producing illusions as well as disillusionment), or in the effusions and sighs which would demonstrate a weak temperament. Vincent often repeated that, because they were more exposed than nuns to occasions of sin, the Daughters of Charity ought to be more virtuous than they.²⁰

In a century which experienced women as enclosed behind the walls of a monastery or at home subordinate to their husbands (*aut maritus aut murus*, "either husband or wall"), it was unheard that women, and even more so consecrated women, should lower themselves to the worst plagues of society and should encounter the male world, overcoming their own diffidence and the criticisms of others. The primitive rules of the Visitation laid out a prudent and careful way by which visits to sick men should be conducted:

They should visit them only in grave and severe illness; and when improvement begins, they will cease visiting them. As far as possible, however, they will not leave them without providing them with further care, but will not come themselves. In the case of women, they will assist them as needed, but without all these other

¹⁸Conference of November 2, 1655, Leonard, Vol. III, p. 126.

¹⁹Conference of October 18, 1655, Leonard, Vol. III, p. 110.

²⁰Conference of August 24, 1659, Leonard, Vol. IV, p. 262.

issues.²¹

This contrasts with the experience of Barbe Angiboust, the Daughter of Charity who assisted the galley slaves of Paris and patiently supported their outbursts of ill humor:

She showed great patience in bearing with the annoyances that had to be encountered there on account of the bad temper of those men. For although they were sometimes so angry as to throw soup and meat on the ground, shouting at her whatever their impatience suggested, she bore it all without saying a word and gathered up what they had thrown down, looking just as pleased as if they had not said or done anything to her.²²

Vincent de Paul had discovered the fundamental role of women in the service of the poor, and he valued their energies in the hospitals, in prisons and on the battlefields. In this way, he contributed to freeing them, since he had liberated them from the narrow confinement of their lives: *aut maritus aut murus*.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, scholars realized that Christian perfection takes place both within the walls of the cloister as well as in the world, and that a life of prayer constitutes the foundation for acting effectively in serving the neighbor. The traditional monastic experience, founded on isolation from the world, lost its exclusive claim to be the summit of the "state of perfection." This new orientation would aid in the growth of the many congregations of women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which would dedicate themselves to the service of the neighbor and secure official ecclesiastical approval. In these congregations, women exercise apostolic activity in conformity with the demands of their own time and understand themselves better, both in the Church and in the world.

²¹DeSales, *Oeuvres*, Vol. XXV, p. 232.

²²Conference of April 27, 1659, Leonard, Vol. IV, pp. 249-250.