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“What About the Poor?” Nineteenth-Century Paris and the Revival of Vincentian Charity

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In Victor Hugo’s classic nineteenth-century novel, *Les Misérables*, the saintly bishop of the poor and remote diocese of Digne, Monseigneur Charles François-Bienvenu Myriel, undertakes the long journey to Paris to attend an episcopal synod together with 104 of his fellow bishops who were summoned there from throughout France and the French controlled regions of Italy. This unprecedented synod, which had been convoked by the Emperor Napoleon, met at the cathedral of Notre Dame in June and July of 1811 under the presidency of the emperor’s uncle, Cardinal Fesch, who was also the archbishop of Lyons.¹

According to Hugo’s fictional account; during the course of this synod the aged bishop of Digne

attended only one session and three or four private conferences. As the bishop of a mountain diocese, living so close to nature, in rustic conditions and privation, he seemed to bring to these eminent bishops ideas that changed the tone of the synod. He returned early to Digne. When asked about his sudden return, he answered, “I annoyed them. The mountain air came in with me. I had the effect of an open door. . . .” The fact is that he had offended them. Among other strange things, he had dropped the remark one evening when he happened to be at the house of one of his

¹Hugo incorrectly stated that ninety-five bishops were present for this synod. For more information on the struggles between Napoleon and Pius VII which were the reason for summoning this synod see Adrien Dansette, *Religious History of Modern France*, trans. John Dingle, 2 vols. (Freiburg:1961), vol. 1, *From the Revolution to the Third Republic*, 158-64.

highest ranking colleagues: "What fine clocks! What fine carpets! What fine liveries! It must all be very bothersome. How loath I would be to have all of these superfluities forever crying in my ears: There are people who are starving! There are people who are cold! What about the poor? What about the poor?"²

In 1862, in the introduction to his about-to-be-published novel, Hugo spoke of his own compelling motivation in writing *Les Misérables*.

So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation which, in the midst of civilization, artificially creates a hell on earth, and complicates with human fatality a destiny that is divine; so long as the three problems of the century—the degradation of man by the exploitation of his labor, the ruin of woman by starvation, and the atrophy of childhood by physical and spiritual night—are not solved; so long as, in certain regions, social asphyxia shall be possible; in other words, and from a still broader point of view, so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, there should be a need for books such as this.³

Hugo was absolutely right, there was a crying need for books just such as his in the literature of the nineteenth century. This literary exigency however grew out of an even greater need for charity and justice to emerge from the nineteenth-century world of injustice, destitution, and misery which Hugo and other like-minded writers of his day described so compellingly.⁴

The City of Paris and its Poor.

The Paris of Victor Hugo's lifetime (1802-85), was the Paris of Napoleon I, the Paris of the Bourbon Restoration of Louis XVIII, and of Charles X, the Paris of the bourgeois July Monarchy of Louis Philippe, the Paris of the short-lived Second Republic, the Paris of the Second Empire of Napoleon III and of Baron Hausmann, the Paris of the Revolutions of 1830, of 1848, of the Prussian siege of 1870, of the bloody Commune of 1871. It was also the burgeoning, impoverished, often violent Paris of the Industrial Revolution.⁵

²Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, (New York: Penguin Books, Signet Classics, 1987), 46.

³*Ibid.*, xix.

⁴For another example of this literary genre see Eugene Sue, *The Mysteries of Paris*, 3 vols. (New York: 1900).

⁵It should be noted that what is said about conditions in Paris and France during this era could largely be said about London and England or any of the other great urban industrialized sites and nations at the dawn of the triumph of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution.

During these years and in this Paris, *les misérables* were by definition the great masses of the urban poor who between 1801 and 1850 doubled the population of a city which was totally unprepared, unwilling, and unable, to provide for them.⁶ *La misère*, by the same contemporary understanding, was the word which came to express their collective experiences of marginalization, oppression, poverty, and suffering.⁷

This same Paris by the consensus of all contemporary statistical measures, and by the consensus of all contemporary reports and accounts, was acknowledged to be a city that had fallen dangerously ill. The pathologies which afflicted the city of Paris were the pathologies which afflicted its poor. Although there was disagreement as to the diagnosis of the exact nature of this illness everyone recognized its symptoms and their fatal consequences.⁸

To be born, to live, and to die among those who were considered by French society, and who indeed considered themselves as being *les misérables* meant synonymously not only that you were poor, not only that you were suffering, not only that you were an exploited member of the working classes, but also that it was assumed you were a member, either potentially or in actuality, of what were then commonly referred to as the “criminal” classes. This meant that you were considered to be a member, potentially or actually, of what was described with a palpable sense of dread and fear by “polite” bourgeois society as, the “barbarians and savages” of *les classes dangereuses*, the dangerous classes.⁹

What Made the Poor so Dangerous?

There can be little doubt that during this era, from the perspective of the ruling classes, the working class poor of Paris were correctly identified as being the “dangerous” poor. The question however must be asked; what was it exactly that made the Parisian poor so dangerous? For the ruling classes the measure of their own keenly felt sense of the

⁶Louis Chevalier, *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Frank Jellinek (New York: 1973), 181-84. Hereinafter cited as *Dangerous Classes*.

⁷For the contemporary evolution of the meaning of the terms *les misérables* and *la misère* see Chevalier, *Dangerous Classes*, 89-98.

⁸Chevalier notes that the first half of the nineteenth century witnessed an “outburst of statistics” behind which was a contemporary determination to “obtain figures for everything, to measure everything.” See *Dangerous Classes*, 41-53.

⁹*Ibid*, 359-372.

dangers posed to them and their comfortable world by the poor, was exactly the measure of the personal dangers that were keenly felt by the poor themselves as they lived in the midst of their uncomfortable world, a world that was created by the exigencies of the iron grip of the status-quo of a highly stratified French society. It was in this widening, seemingly unbridgeable chasm between the classes, that the class warfare which came to be one of the characteristics of the nineteenth century was born.

The Costs to the Poor.

The poor of Paris—its men and women, its elderly, its adolescents, its children, and its infants—all paid the comprehensive human costs of this industrialized and capitalistic “urban pathology.”¹⁰ They paid this cost in the following measurable and measured ways: in hunger, in sickness, in malnutrition, in the lack of education, in begging, in homelessness, in unemployment, in the exploited employment of women, in abusive child labor, in the general mortality of the great cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1849, in infant mortality, in infanticide, in infant abandonment, in orphans, in suicide, in prostitution, in insanity, in violence, in endemic crime, in class warfare, in riots, civil unrest, and in revolution. In short, the poor paid fully in every conceivable way.¹¹

It has been estimated that in this era *les misérables* always comprised at least one quarter of the constantly increasing population of Paris, and that in times of economic crisis the number increased bringing “hunger, sickness and death to nearly one half of the Paris population.”¹² As Louis Chevalier has pointed out, these statistics “project a vast structural poverty, a fundamental poverty . . . a monstrous and permanent poverty . . . onto the background of the history of Paris.”¹³

¹⁰Ibid., 267.

¹¹In the course of his work and in his notes Chevalier gives extensive evidence for the existence, causes, and consequences of all of these pathologies.

¹²Chevalier, *Dangerous Classes*, 353.

¹³Ibid.



A Nineteenth-Century View of the Needed Reconciliation
between Labor and Capital.

The Attitude of the French Government.

Throughout this era successive French governments denied any necessity for increasing public spending on behalf of the relief of the poor, whose very numbers and existence they consistently underestimated, discounted, or denied. As far as the government was concerned, true, unblameworthy poverty affected only a relatively small number of what were, in fact, an increasingly mythical class of those who had been described traditionally as being “a comfortable clientele of honest

artisans, old folk, widows, and nursing babes."¹⁴ These groups alone were considered to be the "industrious and deserving poor" who represented a population which it was assumed could be supported, easily and minimally, without any further bothersome increases in government expenditures or attention. For the government and its ruling classes, "the problem of poverty came to be related only to an infinitesimal number of persons and was thus stripped of all its gravity and horror."¹⁵

As far as the French government and ruling classes were concerned, then, what was considered to be *the* problem? This key question can be answered by paraphrasing the above quotation in the following way; "the problem of crime came to be related to an almost infinite number of persons and was thus invested with a tremendous sense of gravity and horror." The ever-increasing crime, violence, social problems, civil unrest, and strident socialist rhetoric which naturally accompanied *la misère* were not connected in the mind of the government or the ruling classes to any of the direct consequences of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution but rather with what they saw as the moral and criminal failings of the poor themselves whom they largely judged to be the "agents of their own misfortunes."¹⁶ As the contemporary social analyst Eugène Buret commented:

If you make your way into the old districts . . . into the crowded streets of the VIIIth, IXth, and XIIth arrondissements . . . into these accursed districts . . . wherever you go you will see men and women branded with the marks of vice and destitution, half-naked children rotting in filth and stifling in airless, lightless dens. Here in the very home of civilization, you will encounter thousands . . . reduced by sheer besottedness to a life of savagery; here you will perceive destitution in a guise so horrible . . . that it inspires disgust and horror, for it assails all the senses at once. . . . It will fill you with disgust rather than pity and you will be tempted to regard it as the fitting punishment for a crime.¹⁷

The almost sole focus of governmental activities in this era, with respect to the poor, was therefore not to control or regulate industry, or physically to improve the living conditions in the working class sections

¹⁴Ibid., 139.

¹⁵Ibid., 138.

¹⁶Paul Christophe, *Les pauvres et la pauvreté du XVI siècle à nos jours: IIème partie*, (Paris: 1987), 113.

¹⁷Eugène Buret, *La misère des classes laborieuses en France et en Angleterre*, cited in Chevalier, *Dangerous Classes*, 359-60.

of Paris, or even to minimize the wide ranging negative social effects of the Industrial Revolution on the working classes; rather it was to control, morally correct, and if necessary punish what were seen as the criminal, asocial, irreligious, and immoral lives of *les classes dangereuses*.¹⁸

Where Did the Catholic Church Stand?

After its legal re-establishment by the restrictive terms of the Napoleonic concordat of 1801, the French Church (modeled on the consistent attitudes, behavior, and teaching of the Holy See) remained a deeply traditionalist, and often-times reactionary, bulwark working for the complete restoration, defense, and the justification of the authority of the conservative established order whether it was in its political, economic, social, or religious manifestations.

On the basis of its own painful and terrifying experiences dating from the time of the French Revolution the Church beheld the disorder and changes of the so-called “modern world,” with its contemporary “liberal” principles of “liberty, equality, and progress,” with nothing but incomprehension, loathing, and fear.¹⁹ As far as the Church was concerned, time and time again, these revolutionary principles had proven in practice to be inherently anticlerical, irreligious, and mortally dangerous to the faith, morals, and salvation of the faithful. These principles were thus to be opposed systematically by the Church at all costs, and on every front.

During this era the Church simply did not understand that the Industrial Revolution had created a new economic world order, with new types of poverty, new types of wealth, and new types of social relations that were as revolutionary and as permanent as any of the great political changes which had been wrought by the revolutionary era and the destruction of the *Ancien Régime*.²⁰

¹⁸One area in which the French government was not unwilling to stint in expanding its expenditures for dealing with the poor was in the expansion and building of new prisons. One of the largest of these in Paris was located at Saint Lazare in the main buildings of the old motherhouse of the Lazarists which during this era became the largest prison for women in Europe. For more information see Léon Bizard and Jane Chapon, *Histoire de la prison de Saint-Lazare du moyen-âge à nos jours*, (Paris: 1955).

¹⁹Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 117.

²⁰It should be noted that the Holy See, which was immersed in the pre-industrialized, underdeveloped economy of the Italian peninsula, had little understanding or experience of the new complex of economic realities and social relationships being experienced in Northern Europe because of the Industrial Revolution. See Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 118.

For much too long Rome could not understand that these changes called for the formulation of new conceptions of Christian charity, justice, and social relations which were its responsibility to formulate, teach, and practice. The Church, at least for the moment because of its lack of understanding and mistrust of the modern world, steadfastly stood by its traditional view that a certain balance of social and economic inequalities came from the very nature of human existence as ordered by divine providence, and as such should not, and could not, be safely challenged or changed.

“The poor you will always have with you.”

Examples of these traditional views can be found throughout the sermons and pastoral letters of the era. For example, in his Lenten pastoral letter of 1849 the archbishop of Bourges, Cardinal Jacques Marie Celestin Du Pont, had this to say:

The plans of Providence are manifestly different for each individual. Each person must march along the path which is traced out for him, without aspiring to enter into a rank which is above them. There will always be inequalities of rank and fortune in society, or society itself would cease to exist. The contrary thesis, which is posed only by impudent dreamers and blind utopians, instead of inevitably contributing to the public well-being and general prosperity can only lead to ruins and a frightening chaos in society. . . . Destroy this mutual dependence and the entire edifice of society will crumble and dissolve. Everything will be in chaos. Barbarism will reign, and the state of civilization will be reduced to savagery. . . . Providentially, at the moment of his Passion the Lord himself formally declared to his disciples that there would always be poor among us. Consequently there will always be those with great needs and sufferings. This is one of the conditions of life in this world. It is only in the life to come that all of these sorrowful human conditions will disappear forever. Heaven alone is closed to the evils which reign upon the earth. . . . While some suffer deprivations others enjoy an abundance. This is so that all can equally share what they deserve. The unfortunate person who is without resources must confide themselves to the goodness of God who never abandons any of his creatures. To the extent that this person is then submissive and resigned he will find in the charitable readiness of his more affluent brothers all of the assistance and all of the care called for by his sad position. This is the advantage of riches and contentment; which thus have the power to prevent despair, minimize misfortune, calm anguish, and cause God to be blessed for thus relieving and consoling the suffering members of the family through other members of the family who are compassionate and generous!²¹

²¹Cardinal Du Pont, archévêque de Bourges, *Mandement pour le carême*, 2 février 1849, in J.P. Migne, *Orateurs sacrés*, 81:605-07, cited in Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 135.

Another contemporary example of the Church's attitude can be found in an excerpt from a sermon given in 1824 by the Abbé Robinot who was then a well-known pastor in the diocese of Nevers.

Of necessity society naturally presupposes an inequality of conditions and of fortunes. . . . If one were to imagine a society where all people were equal in riches, in grandeur, in power there would no longer anything that links them together; there would then be no more order, subordination, authority, or dependence. Society would then represent the ideal of a body whose members would be separated, divided, and having no other connection between them than that of equality, owing each other no help or assistance. It is thus necessary that there will be in the world princes and subjects, masters and servants, and consequently the rich and the poor. The law of the inequality of fortunes, which wounds the pride and cupidity of certain people, is thus in the interest of society, as much as it is God's will; because it is God who makes the poor, and who makes the rich; **God who takes down what he has raised; God who, without abandoning anything to chance, assigns to each the rank which he finds it good he will occupy, the place that he must have, the function that he must fulfill in the body of which he is a member.**²²

Thus these inequalities were seen, in the light of the ideals of traditional Catholic theology, as being not only as the God-given basis for human society but for salvation history itself since they provided the providential opportunities for the rich to contribute to their salvation through their freely given charity to the poor; while at the same time providing these same opportunities for the poor to contribute to their salvation by an obedient resignation to their assigned lot in the life of this world, in the faithful hope of a sure and greater reward in the heavenly life to come. As Cardinal Du Pont also noted in this regard, "the foundation of the right of the poor [to receive charity] is that it is the duty of the rich [to give charity]. However the poor cannot rightfully claim this assistance as being their due. The request of the poor [for charity] is a prayer by its nature, and thus can never be considered to be an injunction."²³

²²Migne, *Orateurs sacrés*, 76:946-47, cited in Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 119.

²³Cardinal Du Pont, archévêque de Bourges, *Mandement pour la carême*, 16 fevrier 1851; in Migne, *Orateurs sacrés*, 81:620-26, cited in Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 135.

The Challenge of Lammenais and the Early “Social Catholics.”

During this same era there arose a lonely, prophetic, voice within the Church which began to espouse a very different Christian perspective on these contemporary issues. This voice crying in the wilderness was that of the Abbé Félicité Lammenais. Lammenais rejected outright the traditional theological and philosophical justifications of inequality and instead affirmed that in the new world created by the Industrial Revolution it was primarily an unjust social and economic organization that was directly responsible for the misery of the poor, a misery which of itself was neither to be considered as being God’s will and thus inevitable, nor as being the poor’s own doing.

Lammenais was also an early supporter of what the Church then saw as the erroneous and dangerous ideal of the complete separation of Church and State. Based on the contemporary experiences of the Church in France, which was then tightly shackled to the state under the terms of the 1801 concordat, Lammenais believed that such a separation was alone capable of freeing the Church from its almost total subservience to the worldly interests of the conservative established order. Only this action would make it poor enough to allow it finally to identify with, serve, and defend the poor and their interests.²⁴ Lammenais and his supporters thus envisioned for the Church a “complete reversal which would make the Church, the Church of justice, the Church of the poor, and the Church of the persecuted; instead of its being the Church of the powerful, and the Church of the established order.”²⁵

Lammenais and his radical ideas were condemned decisively in 1834 by Gregory XVI as being “enormous in wickedness.”²⁶ Although Lammenais subsequently would leave the priesthood and the Church, his ideas helped to lay the groundwork in the 1830s and 1840s for the emergence of an elite of so-called “social Catholics” who even though they were only a “weak minority” in the French Church nevertheless were responsible for gradually developing a coherent Catholic protocritique of the social, political, religious, and economic consequences of “liberal individualism.”²⁷ This small group of bishops,

²⁴Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 122-26.

²⁵M.J. Le Guillou, *La condamnation de Lammenais* (Paris: 1982), 749.

²⁶Claudia Carlen, I.H.M., “Singulari Nos: Encyclical of Gregory XVI on the errors of Lammenais,” *The Papal Encyclicals: 1740-1878* (Raleigh: 1981), 251.

²⁷This protocritique would become the basis for Leo XIII’s groundbreaking encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and for modern Catholic social teaching.



Frederick Ozanam

priests, and laity were the first to understand that the contemporary “conditions of workers was a new reality which merited attention and protection.”²⁸

Included among this early group was one of the most popular and influential preachers of the day, the Dominican, Henri Dominique Lacordaire who in 1847 observed, “*la misère* does not come from God. *La misère* is not Christian. *La misère* is contrary to the will and the Providence of the One who nourishes even the birds of the sky. . . . It is necessary at all costs that humanity that the people of God work to see

²⁸Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 132.

that *la misère* disappears."²⁹

Another important member of this group was the layman Frederick Ozanam, the founder of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, who in 1836 observed:

The problem that divides society in our day is no longer a problem of political structure; it has to do with what is to be preferred, the spirit of self-interest or the spirit of sacrifice, whether society will be only a great exploitation to the profit of the strongest or a consecration of each individual for the good of all and especially for the protection of the weak. There are a great many people who have too much and who wish to have more; there are a great many others who do not have enough, who have nothing, and who are willing to take if someone gives to them. Between these two classes, a confrontation is coming, and this menacing confrontation will be terrible: on the one side, the power of gold, on the other the power of despair. We must cast ourselves between these two enemy armies, if not to prevent, at least to deaden the shock. And our youth and our mediocrity does not make our role of mediators easier than our title of Christian makes us responsible.³⁰

There can be no doubt that the Catholic Church in France was too closely allied with the authority and interests of the established economic and political order, especially after the frightening socialist revolutions of 1848. It can also be said that it did not yet fully understand the true nature and causes of contemporary working class poverty which were then only dawning on its most progressive members. The Church however did recognize human suffering and human need when it saw them. It felt compelled, in an authentic spirit of Christian charity, to do something concrete and systematic to relieve the immediate consequences of the suffering, poverty, immorality, and the irreligion that it knew first-hand to exist among the vast numbers of the working classes, especially in Paris and in the other industrialized cities and areas of northern Europe. In strong contrast to government inattention, inaction, and neglect the Church did recommit itself and its full resources to addressing these daunting tasks.³¹

²⁹Cited in Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 131.

³⁰Frederic Ozanam, *A Life in Letters*, trans. and ed. Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M. (St. Louis: 1986), 96-97. Hereinafter cited as Ozanam, *Letters*.

³¹One example of the French Church's efforts in this area is the literal explosion of new religious orders and charitable congregations (especially of women). In the period between 1796 and 1880 more than 400 new congregations were founded, attracting more than 200,000 vocations. These communities covered the map of Paris and of France with hospitals, schools, orphanages, asylums, settlement houses, and every other conceivable type of relief and charitable agency. See Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 120. See also Claude Langlois, *Le Catholicisme au féminin* (Paris: 1984). Hereinafter cited as Langlois, *Feminin*.

The Church's Mission: To Restore a Christian Order to Society.

The Church felt that its contemporary mission lay, at least in part, in restoring "order" to society by reconciling the poor and the rich. In its view it was both the poor and the rich who were together responsible for creating the dangerous, irreligious, chasm which had opened between the classes and which threatened the traditional foundations of both Church and state. In the Church's view this chasm could be healed, (under the influences of its teachings and guidance), only by the return of all classes of society to the practice of traditional Christian beliefs and values, especially in this case those of charity and justice. Thus, it was only by restoring the God-given order of Christian societal and hierarchical relationships that the Church felt that peace and order could ever be maintained in contemporary society.

In 1836 Frederick Ozanam succinctly described this reconciling mission as he saw it being applied to the work of the newly-formed Saint Vincent de Paul Society.

Let us work to increase and multiply, to become better, more tender and stronger; for just as days follow one another, evil is seen to add to evil and misery to misery, the disorder in society becomes more and more apparent; the social problems, the conflict between poverty and riches, between self-interest which wants to take and self-interest which wants to keep, succeeds political problems. And the confrontation between these two self-interests, the poor who have the force of numbers and the rich that of silver, will be terrible if charity does not interpose, become a mediator, if Christians do not dominate with all the force of love.³²

In the following year Ozanam wrote along similar lines:

Alas! we see each day the schism started in society become deeper: there are no longer political opinions dividing men, they are less opinions than interests, here the camp of riches, there the camp of the poor. In the one, self-interest which wishes to keep everything, in the other, self-interest which wishes to take everything from everybody; between the two an irreconcilable hatred, rumblings of a coming war which will be a war of extermination. One only means of salvation remains, that is, that in the name of charity Christians interpose themselves between the two camps, that they fly over them, going from one side to the other doing good, obtaining many alms from the rich and much resignation from the poor, bringing presents to the poor and words of gratitude to the rich, getting them used to looking upon one another as brothers, infusing them with

³²Ozanam, *Letters*, 88.

a bit of mutual charity; and this charity paralyzing, stifling the self-interest of both sides, lessening the antipathies day by day, the two camps will rise up and destroy the barriers of their prejudices, throw away their angry weapons, and march to meet each other, not to do battle, but to mingle, and become one sheepfold under one shepherd: *Unum ovile, unus pastor*.³³

The Vincentian Response

In seventeenth century Paris, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac had responded innovatively to the charitable and religious needs of the poor, and the tremendous poverty of their own age, with the foundation of widespread parish-based Confraternities of Charity, the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, and the Congregation of the Mission. All of these institutions and their works which flourished during the remainder of the *Ancien Régime* were left in almost total disarray and ruins by the effects of the French Revolution and the revolutionary era throughout Europe. In the early years of the nineteenth century these Vincentian institutions would all be refounded with the stated mission of attempting once again to recapture the charism of their founders and their "primitive spirit," and to do for their own century, for their Paris, their France, and their own world what Saint Vincent and Saint Louise had done for theirs.

Jean-Baptiste Étienne: The "Second Founder."

The Paris of Victor Hugo also happened to be the Paris of Jean-Baptiste Étienne, who arrived there from his hometown of Metz as a young nineteen year old seminarian in August of 1820, and who would remain there until his death in March of 1874. Étienne had traveled to Paris to join the Congregation of the Mission. The Congregation had been struggling for years with only limited success to reestablish itself legally and to heal its serious internal and nationalistic divisions which had emerged during the long years of revolutionary and Napoleonic chaos throughout Europe.³⁴

At the time, of course, no one could have known that this seminarian, who came knocking at the front gate of the new *Maison-mère* at 95 rue de Sèvres, would one day come to preside as superior general, from

³³*Ibid.*, 106.

³⁴For details of the history of the Congregation of the Mission in this period see Stafford Poole, C.M., *A History of the Congregation of the Mission: 1625-1843* (Santa Barbara: 1973), 347-414.



Very Reverend Jean-Baptiste Étienne, C.M.

1843 to 1874,³⁵ over the amazing rebirth and worldwide expansion of the Congregation of the Mission, the Company of the Daughters of Charity, and the Ladies of Charity.³⁶

³⁵From the time of his ordination in 1825 to assuming the generalate in 1843, Étienne successively held several important positions of authority in the governance of the Congregation, serving simultaneously both as the secretary general and procurator general (treasurer general) from 1827 to 1843.

³⁶For those unfamiliar with the unique juridical structure of the Daughters of Charity, it should be noted that since the time of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission also automatically serves as the superior general of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. The spirit, relationship, and cooperation between the two groups has always been so close that it is reflected in their traditional identification as the "Double Family" of Saint Vincent. For further information see Miguel Pérez Flores, C.M., "The Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity," *Vincentian Heritage* 5 (1984):1-42.

On 1 January 1870, at the beginning of the year in which he would celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his entrance into the Congregation, Étienne heard these words pronounced in his presence by Eugène Vicart, one of the assistants general, as the community at the Maison-mère in Paris gathered to give him its traditional New Year's greetings, "We are fond of considering you as being our second founder, and if in the future this title should ever be contested, if one day the Company should ever forget what you have done for it, the stones themselves will cry out to accuse us of ingratitude."³⁷

As a typical religious leader of his day this "second founder" of the Vincentians was single-minded to the point of obsession, as well as being characteristically traditionalistic, paternalistic, inflexible, and authoritarian. The comparison can be made for example, that Étienne was to the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity what Pius IX was contemporaneously to the Universal Church. It also cannot be denied, however, that it was under Étienne's firm hand and his zealous and devoted leadership that the "primitive spirit," the charitable mission, and the institutions of the Vincentian family were not only restored but were also reshaped to fit the commonly perceived needs of the age.³⁸ Under Étienne's leadership the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity experienced a stunning period of vitality, growth, and expansion, becoming for the first time a truly dynamic international community spread over the face of the globe.³⁹

Even a cursory study of Étienne's voluminous official writings during his years as superior general will reveal his clear but simple vision of the Vincentian mission in the nineteenth century, which he was to repeat over and over again until it was indelibly imprinted in the lives and in the works of the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity. This was a vision concerning the "mysterious design of providence" which destined the Vincentian spirit to create, through the labors of the Double Family, what Étienne himself liked to describe as a "net of

³⁷Amedée Allou, C.M., "Précis de l'histoire de la Congrégation de la Mission depuis sa fondation en 1625 jusqu'à la morte de M. Étienne en 1874," *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* 90 (1925):182.

³⁸An invaluable source for understanding the background and scope of the Vincentian revival in the nineteenth century is Étienne's own account published in 1870 and entitled *Notice sur le rétablissement de la Congrégation de la Mission après la révolution de 1789* (Paris: 1870).

³⁹For example, during Étienne's period as superior general the Congregation of the Mission saw the foundation of fourteen new provinces and over 120 new houses. The number of the Daughters of Charity went from 5,000 to more than 20,000. For more details on Étienne's life and work and the history of the Double Family under his leadership, see Edouard Rosset, C.M. *Vie de M. Jean-Baptiste Étienne* (Paris: 1881).

charity" which would meet the urgent contemporary challenges of poverty, ignorance, irreligion, and social unrest, not only in Paris, not only in Europe, but throughout the world.⁴⁰

Supported by the underlying triumphalistic ecclesiology of his day the imprint of Étienne's vision of the internal life, the governance, and the external ministries of the Vincentian family was so strong, so absolutely determinative, that it perdured largely unchanged, for better and for worse, until the time of the Second Vatican Council.⁴¹

Étienne's Vincentian Vision.

Étienne's underlying perspective on the contemporary world and salvation history was always a thoroughly Gallican and a Vincentian one. He was convinced that the "new world" which had arisen from the cold, lifeless ashes of the ruins of the *Ancien Régime* destroyed by the French Revolution was a world whose future destiny would continue to be shaped under the leadership of French ideas, values, and institutions.⁴²

According to Étienne's analysis it had taken the "genius" of Napoleon to realize first that for the sake of the future well-being and progress of society that the revolutionary, destructive, and irreligious errors which were found in the principles of 1789 needed to be replaced "with a firm hand" and given "a new direction" by a renewed alliance with the Church and the adoption of the principles inherent in religion, the most important of which were reason, charity, and obedience to authority.⁴³

This Napoleonic insight, according to Étienne, also necessarily and providentially included the legal restoration of the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission, for who, among all of the institutions of the French Catholic Church, were better equipped by reason of

⁴⁰See for example Étienne's circular letter to the Daughters of Charity dated 27 September 1855, DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives Saint Mary's Seminary, Perryville, Missouri (hereinafter cited as DRMA), I-B-1 Box 7, "Superior General: Circular Letters to the Daughters of Charity to 1949."

⁴¹Together with Étienne's Notice, perhaps no other source better summarizes his view of the Vincentian mission than a speech which he gave on 24 April 1864 at the dedication of the rebuilt birthplace of Vincent de Paul traditionally called the Berceau. This talk was later published under the title of *Discours prononcé par M. Étienne supérieur général des prêtres de la Mission et des Filles de la Charité à l'inauguration du monument érigé sur le lieu de la naissance de saint Vincent de Paul*. See Archives de la Congrégation de la Mission, Paris: Maison-mère (hereinafter cited as ACMP), "Étienne: Écrits et Documents," C 40, bas #3, Dossier A-8.

⁴²Étienne, *Notice*, 8, 11.

⁴³Étienne, *Discours*, 16.

the charitable charism of their founder and their history to provide democratic society with the example of the gospel insights which alone could address the two great challenges of the contemporary world, which he correctly defined as “the problems of authority and obedience, and of riches and poverty”⁴⁴

In Étienne’s mind there was an obvious connection between Vincent de Paul’s role in the healing the ills of seventeenth-century France and the providential role that his spiritual sons and daughters seemed destined to play in similar circumstances but on a world-wide level, 200 years later. As Étienne noted in describing France in the seventeenth century:

A new era had opened and society was suffering the birth of a new order which was then establishing itself on the ruins of the ancient order. As in all eras of social transformation disorder reigned throughout, and all kinds of calamities afflicted the people. . . . From where would help come to aid a dying country . . . to provide it with the elements of regeneration and salvation from all its ills . . . a powerful and salutary influence which would dissipate the shadows which enveloped it and which would give it strength and life, directing it safely towards its new destinies? . . . This would be Saint Vincent de Paul. He would be the restorer and the savior of France. . . [in establishing] a magnificent system of public charity which was the pride of France and the envy of other countries. A system which attended to all the miseries and all the misfortunes of humanity from the abandoned infant to the dying elderly. A system which had in its treasury help for all needs and relief for all sufferings.⁴⁵

Étienne then summarized his view of God’s providential plan for the Vincentian mission in the nineteenth century,

It is the fraternity of the gospel that you offer the world as the antidote to combat the poison of the fraternity of revolution! It is the charity of Vincent de Paul which will preside over the restoration of our country. It is this charity which will serve, from now on, as the basis for throne and altar. It will be the bond which unites divided spirits, the balm which calms the irritation of parties, the neutral ground where all can meet and all differences are overcome, the divine charm which reunites all hearts in devotion to religion and country.⁴⁶

For Étienne the answer to the “pride and selfishness which torment modern society” was the Vincentian mission of selfless charity.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Ibid., 26.

⁴⁵Ibid., 6-8.

⁴⁶Ibid., 15.

⁴⁷Ibid., 24.

The Vincentian Mission in Nineteenth-Century Paris

Étienne devoted his entire generalate to establishing his distinctive vision of the worldwide Vincentian charitable and evangelistic mission. The model for all of his efforts throughout the world can be seen concretely in the attention that he gave to reestablishing the Vincentian mission to serve, and to evangelize, the abandoned poor of the city of Paris.

The backbone of this mission to serve the poor of Paris, indeed the backbone of the entire worldwide Vincentian charitable mission, was the Company of the Daughters of Charity. In 1800, after the worst excesses of the French Revolution were over, the Daughters of Charity were the first group of sisters to be legally recognized, encouraged, and financially supported by the French state and this solely on the basis of the universal recognition of the indispensable utility to society of their traditional charitable works towards the poor, the sick, the elderly, and the uneducated.

As Claude Langlois has shown in his magisterial study of women's congregations in nineteenth-century France, the Daughters led, and even became the symbols for, a charitable revolution in religious life in the Church of France.⁴⁸ The number of French Daughters in this period increased from 1600 in 1808 to 9,100 in 1878. At its peak in 1865-1866 this brought more than 700 novices in one year to the motherhouse in Paris located then as now on the rue du Bac.⁴⁹

Without a moment's hesitation Jean-Baptiste Étienne used this explosion of vocations to cover the city of Paris, and especially its poorest arrondissements, with foundations of the Daughters of Charity in direct service to the poor.⁵⁰ There were many years when he could not

⁴⁸Langlois, *Feminin*, 151.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 523.

⁵⁰The *Catalogue Général des Établissements des Filles de la Charité* of 1 May 1857 lists the following establishments in the city of Paris alone. Hospices: des Enfants-Trouvés, d'Enghien, des Incurables (men), des Incurables (women), de la Rochefoucault, le Prince, des Ménages, Necker, Saint-Merry, Sainte-Eugénie, du Gros Gaillou (military), du Val de Grâce (military), the Hôtel des Invalides, the Infirmerie de Marie Thérèse, and the Maison Eugène Napoléon. The following parishes had foundations within their boundaries, Bonne Nouvelle, des Blancs Manteaux, de la Madeleine, des Missions, Notre-Dame, Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, Notre-Dame-de-l'Abbaye-aux-Bois, Saint-Ambroise, Saint-André-des-Arts, Saint-Augustin, Saint-Eugène, Sainte-Elizabeth, Saint-Étienne, Saint-Eustache, Saint-Germain-des-Près, Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, Saint-Gervais, Saint-Jacques, Saint-Laurent, Saint-Louis, Saint-Médard, Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs, Saint-Nicolas-du Chardonnet, Sainte-Marguerite, Saint-Paul, Saint-Philippe, Saint-Roch, Saint-Sacrement, Saint-Severin, Saint-Sulpice, and Saint-Thomas d'Aquin. In addition there were at this point more than 500 other houses spread throughout France outside of Paris.

open new institutions and houses fast enough, and large number of French sisters were sent annually to serve in other European countries, as well as in the extensive Vincentian foreign missions in Latin America, China, and the Levant. As Étienne noted in 1868:

Does not your Company appear at first as a little stream of charity, winding with difficulty among the brambles and thorns, and then, suddenly swollen by the abundant rains, after having inundated France and the whole of Europe, extends its benign influence even to the remotest regions of the universe. . . . This grain of mustard seed, planted by the hand of Saint Vincent, has indeed become a tree, sheltering under its branches the poor of our own country; but who would ever have thought that it would have attained its present magnificent proportions, and that its beneficent branches would have reached even to the extremities of the world!⁵¹

Although, relatively speaking, the Congregation of the Mission also expanded greatly during this era it certainly did not approach the scale of the expansion of the Daughters of Charity.⁵² Most of the attention of the Congregation in this era was focused on its extensive seminary, parish mission, and foreign mission apostolates. Therefore in terms of direct charitable service to the poor the roles of members of the Congregation was limited to the not inconsiderable task of providing governance and spiritual animation for their rapidly growing sister community, the Daughters of Charity.

On the subject of the contemporary relationships between the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity Monsieur Étienne had this to say in a circular letter of 1844 to the members of the Congregation:

We must conclude that to work for the prosperity of the community of the Daughters of Charity is to work for the prosperity of our own Company and to furnish our works a powerful element of their success. . . . The ideal state of our mutual relationship is to be the sole source of support for each other so that the Company of the Daughters of Charity receives its life from our direction while our works only exist in the shadow and under the protection of their works. Never before has this community found itself in conditions more favorable for receiving our zealous direction in

⁵¹See circular letter of Étienne to the Daughters of Charity, dated 1 May 1868, DRMA, I-B-1, box 7.

⁵²During this era the Congregation of the Mission was only one of five apostolic communities of men in France who were accorded legal recognition by the French government. Highly favored because of its unquestioned loyalty and its service to French interests at home and abroad, the Congregation prospered under this governmental protection.

the path of its vocation. It is united to our Congregation more closely than ever before. It has never before understood as clearly as it does today that its existence and success depends upon its relations with the Congregation, and that it is from us alone that it can receive the direction which will enable it to fulfill the important mission that has been confided to it by the Church. . . . It is a beautiful mission confided to the Congregation to exercise its zeal in favor of more than five thousand daughters of Saint Vincent spread throughout the world.⁵³

The Refounding of the Ladies of Charity.

There is much more to the story of the Vincentian revival of charity in Paris than just the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. In 1839 the vicomtesse Le Vavas seur made a pilgrimage to the birthplace of Vincent de Paul near Dax. She was struck by the thought that one of the most important foundations of Saint Vincent, that of the Ladies of Charity, still had not been refounded more than fifty years after the French Revolution at a time “when the needs of the poor seemed greater than ever, above all in the great city of Paris, where the population increases each day thus multiplying the number of its poor and the extent of their miseries.”⁵⁴

On her return to Paris Madame Le Vavas seur told Étienne of her idea to reestablish the Ladies of Charity, an idea he supported enthusiastically.⁵⁵ On 12 February 1840, with the permission and the initial financial support of Monseigneur Affre, the archbishop of Paris, Étienne presided over the reestablishment of the Ladies of Charity.⁵⁶ These first twelve ladies dedicated themselves to the mission of personally caring for and visiting “the abandoned poor sick of those quarters of the city where *la misère* was rampant in the most frightening manner.”⁵⁷

From the beginning of their work the Ladies of Charity in Paris were to labor as “auxiliaries” immediately under the direction of the

⁵³Jean-Baptiste Étienne, “Mission de la Congrégation et conduite des missionnaires à l’égard des filles de la Charité,” Circulaire VI: 26 May 1844 in *Recueil des Principales Circulaires des Supérieurs Généraux de la Congrégation de la Mission*, 3 vols. (Paris: 1880), 3:57.

⁵⁴“Rétablissement de la Compagnie des Dames de la Charité après la Révolution,” 1, ACMP, C 182, haut 2.

⁵⁵For more details on the refounding see also Rosset, *Étienne*, 237-49.

⁵⁶Under the title of L’Oeuvre des pauvres malades (the Work of the Poor-Sick). The first formal rule for the Work was adopted in 1844. The rule provided for the administrative structure of the Work, its fundraising, guidelines for the admission of members and for the adoption of new parishes, rules governing the distribution of alms, the monthly meetings of the Ladies, and the annual General Assemblies of those involved in the work. See “Règlement Chirographe de L’Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades,” ACMP, X 1092, C5.

⁵⁷“Règlement,” 3.

Daughters of Charity who were already working in the poorest parishes of the city and who knew the poor and their needs so well.⁵⁸ These first women began work immediately in the Faubourg Saint-Marceau in the parish of Saint-Médard, where it was commonly said that “the poor are poorer than anywhere else,” at the house on the rue d’Epée-des-Bois, under the direction of that icon of charity and service to the poor, Sister Rosalie Rendu.⁵⁹

The women were each assigned by the sisters to certain streets in the parish and they committed themselves to visiting personally there on a weekly basis, all the poor sick in their homes. They were to distribute only the amount and types of assistance that had been predetermined by the sister in charge. Their mission was to bring both corporal and spiritual assistance and was designed to extend not only to the sick person but to their entire family. Moreover, they were instructed to avoid telling those they visited ahead of time when they would be coming, or to make their visits at the same time each week. This precaution was designed to “foil the little ruses that some of the poor would invent to exaggerate the gravity of sicknesses that were really not very serious, in order to obtain the assistance destined for the truly needy.”⁶⁰ The women were to keep records of the poor they had visited each week, and the amount and kinds of assistance provided to each of the poor sick and their families.⁶¹

The women were also to pay very close attention to the religious needs of those they visited and do their best to bring the poor back to the practice of their religious duties.⁶² For example, at the beginning of Lent each Lady was to once again visit each of the families she had helped in the past year to see how they were doing and specifically encourage them to be sure to fulfill their Easter duty at their parishes.⁶³

⁵⁸Ibid., 3.

⁵⁹See Armand de Melun, *Life of Sister Rosalie, A Sister of Charity*, trans. Joseph D. Fallon (Norwood: 1915), 22. Hereinafter cited as *Rosalie*.

⁶⁰Ibid., 14.

⁶¹These carefully kept statistics were compiled on an annual basis and published as part of the Director’s annual review of the work of the Ladies. These records are an important source for the history of poor relief in Paris, and are available in the archives of the Congregation of the Mission at the Maison-mère in Paris.

⁶²For example, in his annual report for the year 1851 Étienne reported on the spiritual fruits of the work of the Ladies of Charity of Paris for that year: “16,641 sick have been visited. Among these sick 58 were baptized, 19 heretics abjured their errors, 170 sinners were converted, 52 received the sacrament of confirmation, 120 made their first communion, 1,227 received viaticum, 1,094 died with the most edifying dispositions, 177 illegitimate unions were sanctified by the sacrament of marriage.” “Rapport de M. Étienne sur les travaux de l’Oeuvre pendant l’année 1851,” ACMP, X 1092, C 6.

⁶³Ibid., 15.

Within an amazingly short period of time this work would spread not only throughout the parishes of Paris, but everywhere throughout the world where the Daughters of Charity served. For example, in 1857 the first group of Ladies of Charity in the United States was founded at Saint Vincent's parish in Saint Louis.⁶⁴

The Work of Sainte-Geneviève

During this era the explosive growth of the city of Paris was matched by the growth which took place in the broad belt of suburbs (the *banlieue*) which surrounded the city. What had originally been scattered small country towns some distance from the limits of the *Ancien Régime* city now had been transformed into densely populated working class areas which were the sites of many of the new industries and factories spawned by the Industrial Revolution.

The scattered parishes and the relatively few number of clergy who had served this area when it was the countryside proved grossly inadequate to meet the religious and corporal needs of the thousands of poor workers and their families who now crowded into these same areas. The government, which under the terms of the concordat, was in charge of establishing new parishes, building new churches, and paying for additional parish clergy as needed, consistently refused to provide adequate funding for expansion in the annual budgets appropriated for the Ministry of Cults. The Church too was slow at realizing fully what was at stake in this situation and taking action. The inevitable results of this neglect were described contemporarily in these terms: "No one can be ignorant of the deplorable religious state of the suburban parishes of Paris. Those living there entirely ignore their Christian religious duties, the sacraments are little used, the churches are deserted, and hardly anyone attends services. . . . This non-observance of the practices of the Christian religion has given risen to a continually increasing demoralization which has become a grave danger for society, and which has at the same time caused the eternal loss of those living there."⁶⁵

⁶⁴Colette Padberg and Sr. Daniel Hannefin, D.C., "St. Vincent's First Foundation: The Ladies of Charity," *Vincentian Heritage* 3 (1982), 111-13.

⁶⁵Printed flier promoting the work of "L'Oeuvre de Sainte-Geneviève en faveur des Paroisses de la Banlieue de Paris" c. 1851, ACMP, C 182.

In 1849 two of the noble Parisian Ladies of Charity who were greatly preoccupied with a concern for this situation came to see Étienne with a proposal to do something to begin to remedy this state of affairs.⁶⁶ By virtue of their own experiences as Ladies of Charity these women had been firsthand witnesses to the comprehensive nature of the charitable and evangelistic work done by the Daughters of Charity in the poorest parishes of Paris. It was apparent to them that as a first step,

the most efficacious means for addressing the problems of those who lived in the suburban areas of Paris would be to form in each of the parishes an establishment [of Daughters of Charity] which would be at the same time both religious and charitable and which would have the double end of providing a salutary influence on the indigent working families, by aid given to the sick, by visits, and other assistance wisely organized and administrated. . . . Everyone knows how successful this approach proved to be in the city. The same should prove to be even truer in these parishes.⁶⁷

Étienne was impressed with the possibilities of this idea but counseled that the work could be undertaken only after a sufficient amount of planning and preparation. The most important issue was how these new establishments were to be financed. Two years later in 1851 with the approval of the archbishop of Paris the work was finally founded with the funds that were to be raised annually by collections in the parishes of the city of Paris.⁶⁸

In the first year of its existence the organization founded four houses of the Daughters of Charity at Thernes, Lhay, La Chapelle Saint-Denis, and Bercy. Within only nine years thirty-one houses had been founded and were staffed by a total of 212 sisters.⁶⁹ In 1860 large areas of the former suburbs were annexed within the city limits of Paris. Twelve houses that had been founded in these areas now passed from

⁶⁶For more details on the foundation of this work see Rosset, *Étienne*, 327-40.

⁶⁷"L'Oeuvre," 1.

⁶⁸Rosset, *Étienne*, 330-31. The government also supplied some funds annually.

⁶⁹"Assemblée Générale de L'Oeuvre de Sainte Geneviève. Rapport par M. Étienne, 1861," *ACMP*, C 182. As in the case of the Ladies of Charity in Paris, extensive statistics were kept for the works in the suburbs under the patronage of Sainte Geneviève. For example, in 1861 in the thirty-one establishments sponsored by the Work the following were the statistics for that year: 2,845 children were sheltered, 4,384 children attended school, 748 young women were employed in workshops, 237 adults attended classes, 638 orphans were housed and taken care of, 15,247 families with a total of 51,440 family members were visited, 1,694 sick received the last rites, 892 people returned to the practice of their religion, 313 marriages were legitimized, 10,092 francs were distributed in direct assistance, 105,274 francs worth of material assistance was distributed. The total expenses for the year were 398,968 francs.

the care of the organization but they were quickly replaced by additional foundations in what remained of the old suburbs.

There were always close ties between the membership of the Ladies of Charity and those involved in the Work of Sainte Geneviève. Many of the young daughters of the Paris Ladies of Charity began their own charitable careers sponsoring the suburban foundations.⁷⁰ Generally speaking it appears that the membership in both of these organizations was almost exclusively recruited from women of the nobility, the upper classes, and the bourgeoisie who were responsible for much of the spirit of renewal and dynamism of the French Catholic Church in this era.

Conclusion: "What about the Poor?"

If one were to read the page after page of mind-numbing statistics which record the extent of the charitable and religious assistance offered by the Vincentian charities to the poor of Paris in this period, and while realizing that these were not the only charitable efforts that the contemporary Church provided, one is naturally prompted to ask if they accomplished all that they set out to accomplish.

In his contemporary biography of Soeur Rosalie Rendu, Armand de Melun assessed the results of her years of charitable efforts on behalf of the poor of the Saint-Marceau district of the XIIth arrondissement of Paris in this way:

Soon the Saint-Marceau District arose from its obscurity and destitution, visitors traversed its streets to get to Sister Rosalie and to make her acquaintance, to become acquainted with the wretchedness of her district; people pitied it and grieved over its lot. The wealthiest districts became accustomed to send it a little of their superabundance; collections were taken up for it in the churches, and in the drawing rooms of the Saint-Germain district; a great number of charitable people would divide among themselves, for purpose of relief, its streets, its houses, and sometimes even the stories of its houses; and often in those great buildings, full of poor, from cellar to attic, a Sister of Charity dresses a wound on the ground floor, a Sister of Poor Invalids reads to a dying man the prayers for the dying, whilst a young man from the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul brings consolation to a family just under the roof, brings to it bread for the week and teaches a child its catechism. Little by little, the condition of the district was changed; it still remained the most poverty-stricken district

⁷⁰In 1892 the two works would formally be united under the one banner of the Ladies of Charity.

in Paris, it was not within the power of any one to make it rich; but poverty was less extreme; . . . the people acquired more Christian habits; it showed itself resigned to its lot, submissive to law, devoted to labor and good order; . . . Sister Rosalie became the medium of reconciliation between society and the Saint-Marceau district.⁷¹

With its eyes, mind, heart, and hands looking backwards towards the values and realities of the political, economic, social, and religious world of the *Ancien Régime* the reconciling mission of the revival of the Church's works of charity in general, and those of the Vincentian families in particular, must be viewed in retrospect as being flawed.

While it cannot and should not be denied that these Herculean charitable efforts did improve the lives and living conditions of countless thousands of the poor in Paris and throughout the world it must be also be acknowledged that their larger purpose, that of reconciliation, ultimately failed. The Church's and the Vincentians' revival of charity presupposed an unchanged and unchanging standard of economic and social justice, a standard which had in fact changed. Because the Church was not itself reconciled to these changes, even its most loving and heroic charitable efforts could not in the end serve as a medium for the reconciliation of the poor and the rich, of labor and capital. For most of the working class poor in nineteenth-century Paris and elsewhere the doctrines of socialism and the words of Karl Marx ultimately spoke with greater authority and greater hope than those of the gospel with results that are still being felt today.

⁷¹De Melun, *Rosalie*, 110-11.