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Recommended Citation
Franc, Evelyne D.C. (2016) "Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul: Reflection on Hospitality," Vincentian Heritage Journal: Vol. 33 : Iss. 1 , Article 11. Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol33/iss1/11

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Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul: Reflection on Hospitality

EVELYNE FRANC, D.C.
Hospitality

For Daughters of Charity, the concept of hospitality is intrinsically understood in our name and in our deep-seated call to service. We find it emblazoned in our motto imprinted on the Seal of our Company: “The Charity of Jesus crucified urges us.”\(^1\) It is also clearly identified in our First Rule, which invites us to serve Christ “corporally and spiritually in poor persons....”\(^2\) Our manner of being with those who are poor, as well as collaborating with those who share a similar desire to serve, is indeed central to who we are. It is in this sacred practice, and to these people, that we strive to visibly reflect hospitality in our present times. We strive toward interactions that concretely demonstrate the specific behaviors encouraged by Saint Louise de Marillac, namely: compassion, mildness, cordiality, respect, and devotion to those whom we are encountering. In a letter to Sister Barbe Angiboust in 1655, St. Louise explained that “our vocation of servants of the poor calls us to practice the gentleness, humility and forbearance that we owe to others. We must respect and honor everyone: the poor because they are the members of Jesus Christ and our masters; the rich so that they will provide us with the means to do good for the poor.”\(^3\)

This experience for the Daughters of Charity of St. Louise’s time, as well as in the present, demands competence, generosity, and gentleness. St. Louise explicitly wrote to the Sisters at Richelieu in 1652, that “Gentleness, cordiality and forbearance must be the practice of the Daughters of Charity just as humility, simplicity and the love of the holy humanity of Jesus Christ, who is perfect charity is their spirit.”\(^4\) Hence one realizes that in order to carry out this holistic and reverent sense of hospitality one must be personally and firmly grounded in genuine virtues and skills. Through the recognition of our profound union with Christ the Servant, and by maturely integrating both the spirituality and wisdom of charity into our daily experiences, we endeavor to deepen our relationship with God, with one another, and with those whom we serve. All have the potential to evidence an authentic witness of God’s tender love for each — particularly those who are most poor and vulnerable. All, likewise, present hospitality in its truest Vincentian form.

The Practice of Hospitality

The total dedication of the Daughters of Charity to the act of charity, encompassed in the practice of hospitality, through God’s grace, allows our hearts to be transformed into those which are courageous, generous, and compassionate. We seek to love others as Jesus loves us, and we welcome them directly into our concrete experiences of caring. As

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\(^1\) Constitutions and Statutes of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, p. 15.


our personal union with God intensifies, we come to understand that genuine Vincentian hospitality nourishes the heart, mind, soul and body of each, allowing one to be both a giver and receiver. All are enriched by the encounter.

Specifically for us as Daughters of Charity, the values of simplicity and humility in these experiences are paramount. Our legacy of charity requires that we exercise it aware that the manner of our service — the personal and gracious way in which we extend ourselves hospitably — is as important as the particular service itself. Radical charity, as embodied in concrete form, requires courage and it also demands hard work. We believe that we must always strive to reverently serve from the heart, never allowing ourselves to adopt an attitude which is satisfied with simply getting the task done. Our tradition tells us that Saint Vincent de Paul reminded the first Sisters that the charity they were expected to share was indeed heavier than the kettle of soup and the bread that they were carrying to those who were poor; and that at times the poor would not express appreciation for these acts of generosity. Regardless of this reality, the Sisters must always continue to be faithful to their Vincentian call of offering themselves simply, humbly, and charitably in service. St. Vincent emphasized it is only because of the Sisters’ love that those who are poor will be able to forgive them for the bread given.

**Serving as Practitioner**

Like St. Vincent, St. Louise, and all who have followed them, we often experience the world we live in as fractured, reflective of the many incidents wherein individuals and groups of people experience isolation, exclusion, alienation, abandonment, and eventual
hopelessness. It is our desire that by responding to the graces which God sends, and through prayerful reflection, patient work, and positive and constructive dialogue, we as a community will be able to bring healing and renewed hope to our suffering and less-than-perfect world. When our hospitality (service) takes on tangible forms, as in seeking to address the unmet needs for those who are poor and vulnerable, our hearts are opened, and we are privileged to find Jesus in those whom we serve. Keeping our eyes fixed on the Lord, we are strengthened as we follow those examples given to us by the members of our Vincentian Family, both past and present.

A treasured piece of wisdom comes to us from advice that Blessed Rosalie Rendu offered to the Sisters of her local community. Repeating the recommendation given to her by her godfather, Reverend Jacques-André Emery, Superior General of the Sulpicians, she audaciously shared that “… a Daughter of Charity must be like a milestone on a street corner where all those who pass by can rest and lay down their heavy burdens.” With this as a defining practice in her lived-concept of welcome and hospitality, Sister Rosalie consistently demonstrated humility and respect in her daily encounters with others. When she met those who were “less polite, imperious or demanding,” she sought to receive them most cordially. There is no doubt that this originated from her deep convictions which advocated profound justice. In time, Sister Rosalie shared these heartfelt beliefs, her deep-seated wisdom, and her on-going encouragement regarding this manner of meeting the poor with Blessed Frédéric Ozanam and his companions, the newly-established Society

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of St. Vincent de Paul. We are aware that she recommended these young men approach those they visited with understanding, politeness, and a sense of “...patience which never considers the time spent listening to a poor person as wasted...”\textsuperscript{6}

Today we continue to strive to remember this same advice. In a world which has come to be characterized for its non-personal/technological interactions and encounters, we are acutely aware that those who are poor and vulnerable deserve our respect and attention, our love and our caring. We are called to address the challenges we uncover during our connections with them with a spirit that portrays sensitivity, collaboration, creativity, and audacity in our responses. We desire to be those who authentically and joyfully witness to the Gospel day-by-day, convinced that it \textit{is} the love of Jesus crucified which urges us. We find our hearts simultaneously filled with gratitude and a deep-seated call to simply but fully live out Mother Guillemin’s challenge “to BECOME, what we claim to Be”; that is, to become \textit{Daughters of Charity!}\textsuperscript{7} Indeed, we seek to share boldly a hospitality that visibly reflects our name and simultaneously calls us to more.

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Ibid.}, 210.
\textsuperscript{7} Mother Suzanne Guillemin, Annual Retreat Talk, March 1966.
Louise de Marillac and Daughters of Charity amongst the poor in Paris

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/
Rosalie Rendu sharing her savings with the poor.


Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/