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The Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg and their Federation

*by Sr. Denise Baumann
Superior General and President of the Federation*

I. The Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg, birthplace of the Federation

Our origins.

Born in 1734 in Alsace, our Congregation would not have known at its birth that it was directly linked to St. Vincent de Paul. However, it was by the route opened by him that our founders entered. We recognise as founders: Cardinal de Rohan, Bishop of Strasbourg and Grand Almoner, who wished to have a community of sisters in his diocese which was ravaged by war, sickness and misery, four young women from Alsace, in formation for two years with the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres.

From Chartres, the first sisters brought the Rule which was to be our rule of life for 150 years. A rule that is stamped from its very first pages by what is at the heart of the message of St. Vincent de Paul: belonging to the Saviour, in order to "offer to his person all those acts of charity which the least of those who belong to him have received from their (the sisters') hands."

The community grew quickly. It was able to put sisters into some hospitals and founding homes in Strasbourg. It was there, ten years after the Church had proclaimed the sanctity of Vincent de Paul, that a young priest, Antoine Jeanjean, started to arouse in the sisters an enthusiasm for the one who was already their "holy patron." Named as first ecclesiastical superior of the congregation, Antoine Jeanjean was able, up to the French Revolution, to strengthen the sisters in this spirit. The turmoil of revolution was to hunt them out of the towns of Alsace and to scatter them.

From the moment of their return to Saverne in 1804, the Community experienced a rapid growth. The sisters were called on to care for the poor and the sick in numerous hospitals in Alsace and Lorraine.

Since 1823, we had already been 'exported' to the German or Austro-Hungarian countries and due to our manner of serving the sick and the poor, our name in these areas became: Die barmherzigen Schwestern vom heiligen Vincenz von Paul.

In France, the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg never passed the thousand mark. At the end of 1997, we numbered 230. At the same time, the Federation, with its German, Austrian, Italian and Indian sisters, numbered 4,700 sisters; of whom 174 are in Africa and 42 in Peru, with 53 novices, 17 postulants and 58 aspirants.

Three distinct groups live out this life of the Congregation and of the Federation today:

- The 11 congregations gathered, since 1971, into the Federation by the decree of 2 February 1986 from the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes (with a common rule of life).
- The congregations founded by Strasbourg and, over the course of the years, integrated into the Company of the Daughters of Charity.
- The Congregations founded by Strasbourg, currently linked in friendship and/or collaboration, but not federated.

2. Some links with other members of the Vincentian Family

- At the heart of our Federation, there are strong links between the three groups named above, for example, Daughters of Charity from the provinces of Salzburg, Graz and Cologne regularly participate in our Federation Councils and in formation programmes (initial and ongoing).

- The Middle European Vincentian Studies Group (MEGVIS = Mittel-Europäische Gemeinschaft Vinzentinischer Studien) seeks regularly to deepen the Vincentian spirit and service. The last three themes have been:

- * 1996: Witnesses to the faith in the Vincentian Family
- * 1997: Frederick Ozanam and Rosalie Rendu
- * 1998: Collaboration among our institutes in Europe.

- In **France**, we collaborate with the communities of the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity for:

- * the formation of lay people in the Spirit of St. Vincent; for example, fidelity and creativity in the service of the poor, Vincent de Paul and management.
- * formation; visits to the Vincentian 'high places': journey 'In the footsteps of St. Vincent de Paul' with sisters, young people and directors of our works.
- * reflection on our works and on the new juridical structures.

- In **Tanzania**, collaboration between the Sisters of the Congregation of Untermarchtal and the Vincentians.

- In **Europe**, particularly in our Federation, we can see some seeds of hope in the direct collaboration for the future. For example:

- * the search for new juridical structures for our works
- * the active involvement of our charism on numerous lay people in these works

- * the new face of our communities and congregations in the lasting (deep) changes in Europe
- * the attention to the new poor and the diverse responses to their needs.

Dialogue is only at its start, but the field remains open for collaboration and support that are yet more concrete.

3. Faced with the Third Millennium, the most important challenges to be taken up are:

- Sisters and lay people in the service of the same mission.

The challenge is to share the charism with lay people, our co-workers in the service of the poor and the sick. The challenge is also to live out at the heart of the modern world

_ with its technological and economic pressures _ a commitment to the priority of the human person, the sick and the poor.

- The Young.

The challenge in a rich and ageing Europe is to promote a pastoral service for the young and to promote Vincentian vocations.

- The Poor.

The challenge, with Vincentian creativity, is to continue to open new ways of serving the poor: those who are excluded, those at the beginning and end of their lives, ethical questions.

Among these challenges, there are two signs which bring hope for the future:

- a thirsting for God and a renewal of prayer
- the increasing number of men and women ready to move into action on behalf of the poor.

Translated by Eugene Curran, CM