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Vincentian Charism and Spirit

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I. Charism

It is certain that neither Saint Vincent nor Saint Louise used the word “charism.” It was not until after the Second Vatican Council that the term came into general use, and one could even say over-use. Many works of the Council have specified the importance of the charismatic components inherent in Institutes of Consecrated Life. In addition, others have specified the charismatic aspect of the Church in contrast to the hierarchical-institutional aspect.

After the Council, most Institutes, with a more charismatic vision of consecrated life, undertook the work of the revision of their Rules and Constitutions trying to better harmonise the legal elements, which up until then had occupied the first place, with theological elements based on the charism of the Founders and Foundresses, always taking into account the guidelines given by *Motu Proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae*¹.

The priority given to the charismatic aspect of the new Constitutions was such that over the course of the process of approbation, the Holy See (the Sacred Congregation) was obliged to remind Institutes of the legal aspect of the Constitutions.

Since that time, there have been numerous commentaries and studies on the subject of the charism of Institutes of Consecrated Life from all possible angles : Charism, Founding Charism, Charism of the Founder, Charism of the Institute, etc.

It seems that it was Paul VI who was first to use this term when he addressed the Brothers of Christian Instruction of St. Gabriel². And it was also he who used the word officially in the *Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelica Testificatio”*³: “Only in this way will you be able to reawaken hearts to truth and to divine love in accordance with the *charisms* of your founders who were raised up by God within His Church”⁴. This same document speaks of the

¹ cf. II, I, 12-13.

² May 31, 1969.

³ July 29, 1971.

⁴ E.T., 11.

*“charism of the religious life, far from being an impulse born of flesh and blood (Jn. 1, 13), or one derived from a mentality which conforms itself to the modern world (Rom. 12,2), is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, who is always at work within the Church.”*⁵

Lumen Gentium tells us that the **charism** of all Institutes of Consecrated Life is not directed so much toward personal sanctification as it is toward others and to the Church. Because of that, the Church has great esteem for Consecrated Life.⁶

The expression “**Charism of the Founders**,” generally refers to the gift of the Spirit which is freely offered by God to certain Founders, men and women, in order to awaken in them certain gifts. These gifts enable them to give birth to new congregations of consecrated life in the Church. The most complete definition is given in the document *Mutuae Relationes*, number 11 : “The very ‘charism of the Founders’ (E.T. 11) appears as ‘an experience of the Spirit,’ transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth. It is for this reason that the distinctive character of various religious institutes is preserved and fostered by the Church.”⁷

This gift is first of all personal, in the sense that it transforms the person of the Founder preparing him or her for a particular vocation and mission in the Church. Secondly, it has a collective-community aspect, and in this way it implies that others carry out this same divine plan. Finally, it is ecclesial, because through the Founder of the Community, the gift is given to the entire Church for its dynamic edification. The entire Church is called to gather the fruits of this particular **charism**.

Founding Charism

The founder or foundress receives this gift freely, having done nothing to obtain or merit it. We could say they discover this gift by surprise.

This is what **Saint Vincent** said on numerous occasions to explain that he was not the Founder :

*It may be said with truth that it is God who established your Company. I was thinking 2about it the other day and I said to myself : Did you ever dream of founding a Company of Sisters ? O ! no, no, no. Did Mademoiselle le Gras ? ... Who then had the idea of establishing in the Church of God a Society of girls and women of the order of Charity wearing ordinary dress... I can repeat once more that it was God and not I.*⁸

⁵ E.T., 11.

⁶ cf. L.G., 44 and 46.

⁷ MR 11.

⁸ The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity. January 22, 1645, pp. 183-84.

*...Who would ever have thought that there would be Daughters of Charity, when the first of you came to some parishes here in Paris ? Oh ! no, my daughters , I did not think of it ; nor did your Sister Servant, nor Father Portail. God thought of it for you. We can say, my daughters, that is it He who is the Author of your Company.*⁹

The Rules were also inspired by God :

*Do you know, my daughters a powerful motive for embracing your rules ? Oh ! you yourselves have mentioned it ; it is that your Superiors were inspired by God to formulate those rules and give them to you...*¹⁰

In speaking about the reasons to love our vocation, Saint Vincent says :

*To all these motives... I will add one which is, my Daughters, the **holiness** of your vocation ; **for it is not of man's institution, but of God's.***¹¹

The inspiration which **Saint Louise** received on the day of *Pentecost*, 1623, ten years before the foundation of the Company, may be considered as a **charismatic inspiration** which prepared the way for the mission that she would be called to fulfil : *"I then understood that I would be in a place where I could help my neighbour but I did not understand how this would be possible since there was to be much coming and going."*¹²

In order not to remain simply at an inspirational level, let us recall Saint Vincent's joy at the thought that God had also given him a clear model of a Daughter of Charity in the person of Marguerite Naseau. He speaks of her on several occasions :

*Marguerite Naseau of Suresnes, was the first Sister who had the happiness of pointing out the road to our other Sisters, both in the education of young girls and in nursing the sick...moved by a powerful inspiration from heaven...*¹³

I believe that the entire group of first sisters, as much as Marguerite Naseau, had been chosen by God to receive the charism of the foundation. One need only notice the humility and care with which Saint Vincent and Saint Louise questioned them and listened to them. More than one time he exclaimed and blessed God when hearing their responses, which he considered to be directly inspired by God. Even more remarkable, these Daughters were so imbued with the charism that they felt free to remind Vincent to be consistent. Once when he was no doubt under stress from his many commitments, as well as somewhat swayed by his indebtedness to the Queen of

⁹ Id. June 14, 1643, p. 102.

¹⁰ Id. May 30, 1647, p. 249.

¹¹ Id. December 25, 1648, p. 406.

¹² Sullivan, L., (ed.) *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac : Correspondence and Thoughts*. p. 1.

¹³ *The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*. July, 1642, p. 71.

Poland or the Duchess of Aiguillon, he agreed to place the Daughters in their service. That was the case when Barbe Angiboust was sent to serve the Duchess of Aiguillon. Seeing herself in the court and in the service of a great Lady, she did not hesitate to complain and say : *“Madame, I left my father’s house to serve the poor and you are a great, rich, powerful lady. If you were poor, Madame, I would gladly serve you. She said the same thing to everybody : ‘If Madame were poor, I would devote myself with a glad heart to her service ; but she is rich.’”*¹⁴ In the end, she was freed from this service.

Saint Vincent also took delight in telling the story of Marguerite Moreau, whom the Queen of Poland, Louise Marie de Gonzague, wanted to keep with her :

*“I told you about her before, but I cannot refrain from telling you again...However that may be, this Sister did not like the Queen’s proposal... Ah ! Madame, I belong to the poor ; I gave myself to God with that intention ; you will find plenty of worthy people to serve Your Majesty ; allow me to do the work to which God has called me.”*¹⁵ With exclamations, Saint Vincent blessed God because the daughters preferred the service of the Poor to the company of the queen ; the poor habit to brocade, relationships with their poor Daughters of Charity to those with the Ladies, a poor lifestyle to the luxury of the court. *“That is certainly not the work of creatures but of God.”*¹⁶

Charism of the Founder

The *charism of the Founder* is in reality passed on as the *charism of the Institute* founded by him or her. This is the case of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise and the Company, and that of Saint Vincent and other Institutions which he founded.

If one were to question any Daughter of Charity on the subject of her charism, she would respond without hesitation : ***the service of the Poor***. The Founders taught this on many occasions and in many different ways, and they gave themselves totally to put it into practice. From its origins, the charism was expressed in the first article of the Common Rules :

*The principle end for which God has called and assembled the Daughters of Charity is to honour Our Lord Jesus Christ, as the source and model of all charity, serving him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor....*¹⁷

To some Sisters sent to the provinces, Saint Vincent says : *“...If you are brought to see His Lordship the Bishop of the district...if he asks you who you are and if you are*

¹⁴ Id. April 27, 1659, p. 1198.

¹⁵ Id. May 25, 1654, p. 608.

¹⁶ Id. pp. 608-9.

¹⁷ Common Rules, I,1.

nuns, you will tell him you are not...Tell him you are poor Daughters of Charity who have given yourselves to God to serve the poor...”¹⁸

Two very clear concepts emerge : the total gift to God, even though they were not religious, and the service of the poor.

...O Sister, how consoled you will be at the hour of death for having consumed your life for the same reason for which Jesus Christ gave his -- for charity, for God, for the poor !¹⁹

Saint Vincent and Saint Louise stressed in a thousand ways over the course of their conferences, their letters, etc., the end, the mission of the Company: the service of the Poor. But this service, in order to truly be the service the Daughter of Charity, must have the following conditions :

*** To give preference to the most abandoned**

“Let us go then and devote ourselves with new love to serve the poor, and even seek out the poorest and most abandoned ; let us confess before God that they are our lords and masters and that we are unworthy to render them our little services...”²⁰

On July 23, 1656, Saint Vincent wrote to Sister Jeanne Lepeintre to reproach her for not having held fast to this norm :

“We are often urged in Paris to allow Sisters to go to visit sick persons other than the poor, but we cannot consent to their serving them...both because they are intended only for those deprived of all assistance...”²¹

The particular Rules for school sisters also specify very clearly, that it is the poor children that they should teach, and it is a rare exception that a rich child should be admitted to the school.

“She shall understand that all kinds of girls are not to be received into her school, but only the poor. If, however, Providence and obedience calls her into a parish where there is no teacher for the rich and their parents beg her very earnestly to admit such children into her school, she may, in that case, receive them, but on

¹⁸ The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity. October 22, 1650, pp. 473-4.

¹⁹ Poole, M. (ed.) Vincent de Paul : Correspondence, Conferences, Documents, vol. 7. Letter to Sister Anne Hardemont, November 24, 1658, p. 396.

²⁰ Coste, P. (trans. J. Leonard) Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Priests of the Mission. January, 1657, p. 367.

²¹ Poole, M. (ed.) Vincent de Paul : Correspondence, Conferences, Documents, vol. 6. Letter to Sister Jeanne Lepeintre, July 25, 1656, p. 49.

condition that the poor be always preferred to the rich and that the latter do not look down on the others.”²²

To serve the most abandoned is a demanding obligation which is not easy to fulfil. It requires great mobility. At times, services which began by addressing the needs of the poorest and most destitute no longer have that same focus. This is due to growth and change in different situations and countries. We are, as it were, victims of our own efficiency. This can be seen most of all in the area of education. Small schools which began by serving the children of the marginalized, have now attained a higher status because of economic and social progress through the generations. This is reflected in the level of the students who attend our schools. It is not always easy to relinquish these services to others and to begin anew in other marginalized areas, of which there are so many today.

*** Corporal and spiritual service**

“Do you think, my daughters, that God merely expects you to bring His poor a morsel of bread, a scrap of meat, some soup and medicines ? Oh ! no, no, no, my daughters, that was not his design...He expects you to provide for the needs of the soul as well as the body...”²³

“...It is indeed something to assist the poor, as far as their body is concerned but, in truth, it was never Our Lord’s intention, in founding your Company, for you to take care only of the body, because there never will be wanting persons to do that, but it is Our Lord’s intention that you should assist the souls of the sick poor...A Turk, an idolater, can assist the body....”²⁴

*** With a love that is affective and effective**

Our Founder, with his characteristic realism and his feet on the ground, wanted the service to be real, bringing to it soul and body :

“Affective love is the element of tenderness present in love. You should love Our Lord tenderly and affectionately...this affective love gives rise to effective love, for, Sisters, the first does not suffice ; it is necessary to have both. Affective love must pass on to effective love which is the practice of the works of the Company of Charity, the service of the poor undertaken joyously, courageously, steadfastly and lovingly....The love of Daughters of Charity is not only tender, it is effective, because they serve the poor effectively, both in body and soul.”²⁵

He explains this more forcefully to the Missionaries :

²² Particular Rules for the Sisters Employed in Schools, number 20.

²³ The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity. January 22, 1646, p. 212.

²⁴ Id. November 11, 1657, p. 925.

²⁵ Id. February 9, 1653, pp. 526-7.

*“Let us love God, my Brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows. For very often many acts of love of God, of kindness, of benevolence, and other such affections and interior feelings of tenderness of the heart, however good and very desirable, are not to be trusted if they do not come from the practice of effective love.”*²⁶

*** All forms of poverty**

No type of poverty is excluded from Vincentian service :

*“You have a vocation which obliges you to help, without any discrimination, all sorts of persons, men, women, children, and in general all poor persons who need your assistance.”*²⁷

This thought is contained in article 1.8 of our Constitutions :

*“At the school of the son of God, the Daughters of Charity learn that no type of misery should be foreign to them. Christ appeals constantly to their Company through their suffering brothers and sisters, through the signs of the times, through the Church...Multiple are the forms of poverty and multiple the forms of service, but one is the love that God bestows on those whom he has ‘called and assembled’.”*²⁸

*** Wherever the poor are,** which implies great availability and mobility

*“That is how you should be prepared to serve the poor wherever you may be sent : in the army, as you did when called on to do so, with poor criminals and generally in all those places where you can assist the poor, because that is your end.”*²⁹

During this same conference, Saint Vincent accentuated the **missionary spirit** of the Company :

*“That is how you should act if you are to be good Daughters of Charity, going wherever God may wish to send you ; if to Africa, into Africa, to the army, the Indies, to whichever places ask for you, it does not matter ; you are Daughters of Charity and so you must go.”*³⁰

*** A great openness to the future**

Our Founder, no doubt guided by the Holy Spirit, did not confine himself to the limits of his own time and context, but set his gaze further :

²⁶ Coste, P. (trans. J. Leonard) Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Priests of the Mission. Number 22, pp. 49-50.

²⁷ The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity. January 6, 1658, p 1028.

²⁸ Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent De Paul. Article 1.8, p. 7.

²⁹ The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity. October 18, 1655, p. 742.

³⁰ Id. p. 743.

*“...and that, my daughters, was the beginning of you Company ; as it was not then what it is now, there is reason to think that it is not now what it will be later on when God brings it to the state on which He has decided....”*³¹

□ This implies that there must be constant attention to the movement of the Spirit, who speaks through the signs of the times, and through ever-changing appeals and demands.

At another occasion, Saint Vincent rejoiced when he noticed how the Company was receiving new requests. He attributed this to its fidelity which was pleasing to Our Lord : *“I am pleased with these girls; they have carried out this duty so well that I will give them another.”*³² In addition to the sick, he makes reference to the poor abandoned children, to “criminals,” that is to say, the galley slaves, to the elderly in the “name of Jesus,” to the mentally ill, to refugees of war, to soldiers... and he finishes by saying :

*“We so not know whether you will live long enough to see if God will give new employments to the Company, but we do know quite well that if you live conformably to the end which Our Lord demands of you, if you fulfil you obligations faithfully, both in regard to the service of the poor and the observance of your rules, if you do all things well, as I trust you are no beginning to do, Oh ! God will bless your exercises more and more and He will preserve you ; but to be worthy of this you must be faithful to Him.”*³³

* **A simple and poor life style**

The need to embrace a poor style of life in all ways, is constantly pointed out in the teachings of our Founders. Poverty and confidence in God are the two foundations on which the Company is built.³⁴

Our Founder rejected everything that would be a sign of greatness for the nascent Company ; he delighted in calling it the *“Little Company.”* He wanted the young women who were seeking to join the company to be of humble backgrounds, like *“good village girls”* ; and he wanted their virtues to be acquired by the members of the Company - among these virtues, temperance. If an aspirant belonging to a higher class of society were admitted, it would only be on the condition that she adopt the life style of village girls. All of this had as its purpose to facilitate living a life in proximity to the poor, and to have women capable of tolerating the hardship of service to the most needy and marginalized in society. Saint Vincent learned this lesson from the Ladies of Charity, who because of their

³¹ Id. February 13, 1646, p. 218.

³² Id. October 18, 1655, pp. 740-1.

³³ Id. p. 742.

³⁴ Sullivan, L., (ed.) *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac : Correspondence and Thoughts.* July 31, 1656, p. 516.

rank in society, had family needs and commitments that prevented them from being able to render direct service to the poor. This difficulty was the very origin of the Daughters of Charity, who were free from all that would keep them from being totally given to God for the service of the poor. They have a life style close to the poor, which does not have or is not seeking, a social “status” which draws them away from the poor. Of course, it is not only a question of social and monetary poverty. It is a matter of the imitation of a model which gives meaning to poverty, and to all other aspects in the life of the Daughter of Charity : the model is **Christ**.

*“...who would wish to be rich after the Son of God had resolved to be poor ?”³⁵ “My Daughters, you have chosen Him ever since you entered the Company ; you have pledged Him your word and as He led a life of poverty, **you must imitate Him in that respect.**”³⁶*

“...blessed are the Daughters of Charity who have chosen a way of life which has for its chief end to imitate that of the Son God Who, being able to possess all the treasures of the world, despised them and lived in such poverty that He had not a stone whereon to lay His head.”³⁷

He explained these concepts in concrete terms with one of his straightforward expressions which has retained its boldness through the centuries :

“You have a right only to food and clothing ; the surplus belongs to the service of the poor.”³⁸

Saint Louise was not less demanding when she said :

*“We are the servants of the poor ; therefore, **we should be poorer than they.**”³⁹*

Quality is another characteristic of the service of the Daughters of Charity.

It is not a matter of haphazard service. Their condition as servants of the poor, who are their lords and masters, obliges them to render service of the highest quality. Throughout the conferences and letters, it is possible to glean the following qualities :

- professional competence :

At various occasions, the Sisters are invited to learn to read, especially during

³⁵ The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity. August 20, 1656, p. 812.

³⁶ Id. p. 815.

³⁷ Id. August 20, 1656, p. 813.

³⁸ Id. January 25, 1643, p. 81.

³⁹ Id. July 3, 1660, p. 1261.

free time, the purpose of which was to teach poor girls. We know the response given by Saint Vincent when Saint Louise expressed her reluctance to let the sisters study the Bellarmine Catechism : *“There is no other catechism, Mademoiselle, than that of Bellermine...because if it is necessary for them to demonstrate it, they must know it.”*⁴⁰

In the same way, the Founders wanted the Sisters to learn how to let blood and to be exact in following the orders of the “doctors,” etc.

The poor must also be served with :

- respect, leniency, gentleness, cordiality, discretion, prudence, compassion.

*“You are destined to represent the Goodness of God to those poor sick people.”*⁴¹ *“Sisters, you should nurse those poor sick with great charity and gentleness so that they may see you are going to their assistance with a heart filled with compassion for them.”*⁴²

*** Priority of the service of the poor**

Here is another new important focus : the service of the poor must take priority over everything, including prayer and Sunday Mass, when urgent needs require it. That is what Saint Vincent called “leaving God for God.” Already in the first conference which we have preserved, July 31, 1634, he says to us :

*“My Daughters, remember that when you leave prayer and Holy Mass to serve the poor, you are losing nothing, because **serving the poor is going to God and you should see God in them.**”*⁴³

*“My Daughters, **the service of the poor should be preferred to everything else.** You may even omit hearing Mass on Sundays and holidays of obligation, but only in case of grave necessity, such as if a patient were in danger of death...”*⁴⁴

*“If there ever is a legitimate reason (to leave prayer or spiritual reading) it is the service of the poor. **To leave God only for God...is not to leave God...**”*⁴⁵

“...as your chief obligation is the service of the sick poor, you should never be afraid to neglect some rules, when the needs of the poor are urgent, provided it is

⁴⁰ Sullivan, L., (ed.) Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac : Correspondence and Thoughts. March 31, 1648, note 1, p. 240.

⁴¹ The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity. November 11, 1657, p. 923.

⁴² Id. August 4, 1658, p. 1117.

⁴³ Id. July 31, 1634, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Id. January 22, 1645, p. 190.

⁴⁵ Id. May 30, 1647, p. 284.

really necessary to do so, and that you do not neglect them from idleness or mere natural inclination."⁴⁶

*** Common Fraternal Life**

□ The Founders did all they could to provide ways to support the service and ensure its fulfilment and continuation. That is why, knowing the great value of common fraternal life, they established the Sisters in communities where each one would be able to acquire and renew the necessary strength for service. The two Founders use the phrase, "***called and assembled by God for service.***"

Saint Vincent will consecrate several of his conferences to this theme in its various aspects. "*...as the Father gave everything of himself to his Son, and the Son everything to his Father, from which proceeds the Holy Spirit, in the same way they should be one given for the other to bring about works of charity which are attributed to the Holy Spirit...*"⁴⁷

Saint Louise gave great attention to the fraternal life of the communities that she directed and encouraged by her visits and especially by her correspondence. Fraternal life was one of the clauses in her Spiritual Testament :

*"Take good care of the service of the poor. Above all, live together in great union and cordiality, loving one another in imitation of the union and life of Our Lord."*⁴⁸

II The Spirit

Saint Vincent, who did not use the word "***charism***," according to Father Dodin, used the word "***spirit***" 2,891 times with 27 different meanings.⁴⁹

Spirit goes hand in hand with ***charism***. Every Institute has its own spirit which enables it to fulfil the mission confided to it by the charism. The charism is a totally freely given gift of the Holy Spirit. The spirit is also given by the Holy Spirit, but it requires collaboration and effort on the part of the person who receives the charism and wants to live it. The spirit of any Institute is above all ***the imitation of Jesus Christ*** with a particular focus on certain aspects of the Lord's life which help it better live out its own charism.

Our Founder constantly invites us to imitate Jesus Christ, to be clothed with Jesus Christ, in continuing his life and his work.

⁴⁶ Id. June 14, 1643, p. 113.

⁴⁷ Coste, P. (French edition) Saint Vincent de Paul : Documents, Vol. XIII, Number 159, Conference of June 19, 1647, p. 633.

⁴⁸ Sullivan, L., (ed.) Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac : Correspondence and Thoughts. Spiritual Testament, p. 835.

⁴⁹ Dodin, A. El Espíritu Vincenciano, Salamanca 1982, p. 182.

“...Give yourselves wholly to God to do thoroughly well what you are going to do. **Ask Him for the Spirit of His Son** that you may be able to perform all your actions, as He did His, because, being Sisters, you have the happiness of imitating the life which the Son of God led with His Apostles. I beseech Him, my Daughters, to replenish you with His spirit and to **give you the graces that are necessary for you to be true Daughters of Charity...**”⁵⁰

“Our Lord Jesus Christ is the true model and the great invisible picture on whom we should model all our actions.”⁵¹

“Another point to which you should pay particular attention is to **depend greatly on the guidance of the Son of God** ; I mean to say that, when you have to act, you should reflect like this : ‘Is this in conformity with the maxims of the Son of God?’...moreover, whenever there is a question of doing a good work, say to the son of God, ‘O Lord, if you were in my place, what would you have done : How would you instruct the people ? How would you console this illness of body or mind ?’”⁵²

“They will endeavour to **conform their lives to his (that of Our Lord Jesus Christ)**, particularly in his poverty, his humility, his gentleness, his simplicity and temperance.”⁵³

Our Constitutions have powerfully summarised and expressed this doctrine on the imitation of Jesus Christ in article 1.5 :

Christ is the rule of the Daughters of Charity. They endeavour to imitate him as their Founders perceived him revealed in Scripture : Adorer of the Father, Servant of his Loving Plan, Evangeliser of the Poor.

To follow him more closely and to carry on his Mission, the Daughters of Charity choose to live totally and radically the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience ; this makes them available for the service of the poor, which is the end of their Company.”⁵⁴

In speaking about the imitation of Jesus Christ, Saint Vincent particularly emphasised **humility, simplicity, and charity**. These specific virtues enable the sisters to carry out the sometimes difficult mission to which their vocation calls them : service of the poor.

⁵⁰ The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity. October 22, 1650, p. 474.

⁵¹ Coste, P. (trans. J. Leonard) Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Priests of the Mission. Number 128, p. 208.

⁵² Id. Number 153, p. 327.

⁵³ Coste, P. (French edition) Saint Vincent de Paul : Documents, Vol. XIII, Number 145, Rules of the Daughters of Charity, p. 555.

⁵⁴ Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent De Paul. Article 1.5, p. 6.

To the Missionaries, Saint Vincent proposes simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal, virtues which are also necessary to live out their charism and mission : **evangelization of the poor and formation of the clergy**.

Saint Vincent devoted entire conferences to the explanation of the three virtues which he wanted as the foundation of the spirit of the company of the Daughters of Charity. The first of these conferences, which is very well-known, is that of January 25, 1653 on the imitation of country girls. Our Founder saw these virtues as the profile virtues of members of the Company. He taught the value of these virtues throughout the entire conference : simplicity, humility, temperance in eating, purity, modesty, poverty, obedience, fidelity to their vocation... He will finish the conference by saying :

“...if I have ever said anything true and important to you, it is what you have just heard. You should strive to preserve the spirit of good and true country girls...If girls of noble families present themselves, wishing to enter your Company, O Sisters, they should do so in order to live, in body and soul, like those who really and truly possess the virtues of village girls, as our great St. Genevieve possessed them, who is now so honoured for her simplicity, humility, sobriety, modesty and obedience...”⁵⁵

Even though the words used above may seem outdated, they do convey the message of the Founder. The Company would already be in existence for twenty years when Saint Vincent gave three complete conferences (February 2, 9, 24, 1653) exclusively on the spirit of the Company, focusing on humility, simplicity and charity, the virtues which make up the profile of the true servant of the poor.

“You should know then, my dear Sisters, that the Spirit of your Company consists of three things : to love Our Lord and serve Him in a spirit of humility and simplicity. As long as charity, humility and simplicity exist among you, one may say : ‘The Company of Charity is still alive.’”⁵⁶

During the course of this same conference, he repeats this idea, but makes the distinction between charity toward God, toward the poor and toward the Sisters in Community :

*“I repeat once more, Sisters, that **the spirit of your company** consists in the **love of Our Lord, love of the poor, love of one another, humility and simplicity**. I would be far better that there were no Daughters of Charity if they had not these virtues.”⁵⁷*

In the same conference and in others devoted to these virtues, he explains of what the virtues consist and the means to acquire them. He also talks about the negative consequences that will come about if the virtues are not

⁵⁵ The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity. January 25, 1643, p. 84-5.

⁵⁶ Id. February 9, 1653, p. 528.

⁵⁷ Id. p. 529

practised, as well as the joy that comes from striving to live out these virtues. On several occasions questions the Sisters, having them repeat what constitutes the spirit that should animate them. In this way he can be assured that they have understood, because he considers the spirit indispensable for the life and mission of the Company.

In each one of these virtues, he contemplates the imitation of Jesus Christ, and the power that the virtue brings in order to enable the living out of the charism.

Humility

For our Founder, humility is the virtue par excellence of Jesus Christ. *“Humility is a virtue so comprehensive, so difficult, and so necessary, that we can never reflect on it sufficiently ; it is the virtue of Jesus Christ.”*⁵⁸

At another time, he says, in speaking of Jesus Christ : *“If we carefully consider that beautiful picture which we have before our eyes, that admirable model of humility...”*⁵⁹ The invitation to constantly contemplate and imitate him, is as much for the Sisters as it is for the Priests.

*“There is a question then, my dearest brothers, of the holy virtue of humility so much loved and earnestly recommended by Our Lord and which we ought to embrace, because it is recommended and loved by Our Lord.”*⁶⁰

*“Let us give ourselves utterly to God, let us labour solidly to acquire virtue and, above all, humility, yes humility, I repeat it, humility.”*⁶¹

For the Daughters of Charity, he asks the Lord to enable them to imitate Jesus Christ in the practice of this virtue : *“You were so humble as to be willing to be regarded as a sinner and to be nailed to a cross...It is then from you, O Saviour, that we ask the grace of striving to acquire this virtue, according to your wishes.”*⁶²

Humility must be understood and lived according to the charism. It is an essential virtue for a person who wishes to devote himself or herself to evangelisation and to service of the Poor, our Lords and Masters.

Saint Vincent says to the Missionaries :

⁵⁸ Coste, P. (trans. J. Leonard) Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Priests of the Mission. Number 30, p. 60.

⁵⁹ Id. Number 165, pp. 367-8.

⁶⁰ Id. Number 203, p. 527.

⁶¹ Id. Number 162, p. 363.

⁶² The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity. March 15, 1654, p. 605.

“...When I say it is a virtue of Missionaries, I mean it is a virtue which they need most...for this poor Company, which is the last of all, should be founded only on humility as its own proper virtue. Otherwise we shall never do anything worthwhile, either at home or abroad...”⁶³

And to the Sisters, he says :

“Give me a sister in whom humility is apparent, a poor girl who thinks nothing of herself, who loves to be rebuffed...give me such a Sister, I say, and I will tell you that she is a true Daughter of Charity.”⁶⁴

Humility must be the virtue not only of each Missionary and each Daughter of Charity, but of the two Companies :

“I desire that the Company be established on this foundation of humility and that it conform, as much as possible, to the way of life of the Son of God.”⁶⁵

“As long as the Company keeps this spirit of humility and lowliness it will remain alive. But if it begins to highly esteem itself, it will be lost, and God will no longer bestow graces on it.”⁶⁶

Simplicity

This is the hallmark characterising the works of Saint Vincent. He recommended it to the Ladies ; he emphasised to the Daughters of Charity as well as to the Missionaries. Interior simplicity, which is purity of intention, must be put into practice. The two Founders wanted their disciples to be total truth and transparency, with no duplicity or affectation. Simplicity leads directly to God and helps foster closeness to the Poor.

God is simple. For Saint Vincent, to live simplicity is to be directed toward God.

“God is very simple, rather, he is simplicity itself ; therefore, where there is simplicity, there is God.”⁶⁷

Simplicity brings us close to the poor, because their behaviour is free of ostentation. Saint Vincent praises this quality when he talks with his Missionaries :

⁶³ Coste, P. (trans. J. Leonard) Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Priests of the Mission. Number 30, p. 60.

⁶⁴ The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity. July 14, 1658, p. 1093.

⁶⁵ Coste, P. (French edition) Saint Vincent de Paul : Documents, Vol. XIII, Number 172, Conference of April 27, 1656, p. 716.

⁶⁶ Id. Number 170, Conference of February 27, 1656, p. 710.

⁶⁷ Id. Vol. XI, Number 33, Excerpt of conference on simplicity, p. 50.

*“If we consider our neighbour, and how we should assist him in soul and body...how essential it is for us to be on our guard against appearing crafty, wily and, above all, against everusing ambiguous language. Ah ! far be that from a Missionary !”*⁶⁸

As for the Sisters, he could not conceive of their not having simplicity ; it was an essential virtue for them :

*“...the spirit of true village girls is extremely simple ; no cunning, no double-meaning words...Daughters of Charity should be like that and by this you will know if you are really so ; I mean if you are quite simple...”*⁶⁹

Without the simplicity of a few good girls, the Company would not have been able to be founded :

*“Firstly, God has chosen poor girls. If He had chosen rich ones, would they have done what poor girls have done ? Would they have served the sick in the most lowly and painful forms of service ? Would they have carried pots of soup in the streets, panniers to the markets to purchase provisions ? And although, by God’s grace, there are at present among you some of fairly high rank, it is quite credible that, in the beginning, they might not have done such things.”*⁷⁰

The Founder wanted to instil in his followers the same esteem for simplicity that he himself had :

*“...God has given me such a high esteem of simplicity that I call it my Gospel.”*⁷¹

Charity

One might consider it redundant to name charity as one of the virtues of the spirit of the Daughters of Charity, considering that their charism and their mission are precisely that : charity lived out in all its aspects : charity toward God, charity toward the Poor, charity toward the Sisters.

It is in this light that charism and spirit meet. Today more than ever, it is necessary to stop and consider this virtue of our spirit. Any service, however praiseworthy it may be, is not necessarily charity. A good many people, even atheists, give of themselves to others through altruism, natural compassion, and

⁶⁸ Coste, P. (trans. J. Leonard) Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Priests of the Mission. Number 211, p. 674.

⁶⁹ The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity. January 25, 1643, p. 74.

⁷⁰ Id. May 30, 1647, p. 279.

⁷¹ Id. February 24, 1653, p. 538.

respect for the dignity of the human person. Charity requires the presence of God in our service : *“I assure you, as often as you did it for one of the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it for me.”*⁷² *“...by serving the poor, we serve Jesus Christ.”*⁷³ *“A sister will go and visit the poor ten times a day, and ten times a day she will find God there,”*⁷⁴ Saint Vincent tells us. That is also the basis of the expression *“leaving God for God.”* To serve the poor in a spirit of **charity** assumes that one sees the presence of God in them even if sometimes one needs to *“turn the medal.”* On the contrary, our service can be lacking in soul and the presence of God. It can happen that our service endures only as long as our presence in a work, or as long as a natural inclination remains. On the contrary, when our true motivation is the love of God, the flame can be easily rekindled at times of weariness or discouragement, and we will not be tempted to run from failures. This spirit of **charity** also will bring to our service the quality befitting a service given to God present in the poor.

The Charism Today

No one can doubt that both the charism and the Vincentian spirit are relevant in today's world. As we have already said, the Founder left the doors wide open ; he had the insight that over the course of time, other services, in response to the evolving needs of the poor, would be confided to his followers. Experience shows us unfortunately, that each moment of history brings new areas for the followers of the Apostle of Charity to carry out their mission. The charism is not something of the past, but as a gift of the Spirit, it must be a living reality, a constant challenge and invitation. It is up to us to preserve it, to develop it and to live it in dynamic fidelity and with audacious creativity.

In fact, the many and constant requests for the services of the Company come from all continents. Even if we cannot answer all the requests, we are able to generously answer many, even in high risk situations.

In the same way, the Church assures us of the relevance of the charism and spurs us on to radically live it. The Holy Father in his Messages to the Daughters of Charity gathered during the different General Assemblies tells us :

*“Have eyes and hearts only for the poor.”*⁷⁵

*“Come winds and high waters, keep your identity”...“My Sisters, do your utmost to go to the Poorest ! They are so numerous today !”*⁷⁶

⁷² Mt. 25, 40.

⁷³ The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity. February 13, 1646, p. 223.

⁷⁴ Id.

⁷⁵ John-Paul II, January 11, 1980.

⁷⁶ John-Paul II, June 20, 1985.

“Dear Sisters, in the name of Christ and the Church, I dare to send you out anew into the immense, very diversified world of poverty.”⁷⁷

“Walk with assurance along the pathways of the Poor. The Lord goes before you and awaits you there !”⁷⁸

“The charism of Monsieur Vincent is of burning relevance for our time...it is for you to give it life wherever you are sent.”⁷⁹

In the Cathedral of Paris, during the beatification of Frederic Ozanam, the Pope made an appeal to all the disciples of Saint Vincent :

“I encourage you to pull your forces together, so that as the one who inspires you would want, the Poor would be always better loved and better served, and Jesus Christ would be honoured in their persons.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ John-Paul II, May 27, 1991.

⁷⁸ John-Paul II, Assembly, 1997.

⁷⁹ Id.

⁸⁰ John-Paul II. Homily in Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, August 22, 1997.