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Presentation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity

*Sister Juana Elizondo, D.C.
Superioress General*

The Company, founded in the 17th century by St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac, is known in the Church as: *Company of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, Servants of the Poor.*

Origins

The Company came into existence to respond to the many needs of the countless numbers of poor in France at the beginning of the 17th century. St. Vincent began by founding the Confraternities of Charity at Châtillon-les-Dombes, today Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne. The first volunteers in the villages were women who were used to hard work since childhood. In Paris, they were the ladies, often ladies of rank, who belonged to the Confraternities. Pulled between the service of the Confraternity and the demands of their family and their social life, they began to neglect the service of the poor. In order to meet the needs of the extreme poverty, it was necessary to have women from the country, loving the poor, always available and ready to carry out the lowest services, hardly proper for “persons of condition,” such as: preparing meals, caring for the sick or cleaning an attic.

During a mission preached by St. Vincent himself, Marguerite Naseau, a young cowherd from Suresnes, heard him propose his plan of sending young women volunteers to care for the poor; she gave her life for this, contracting the plague after having offered hospitality to a sick person. Marguerite arrived in Paris in 1630. Vincent sent her to Louise de Marillac to form her for the service of the poor. Soon other women came to present themselves and together, under the direction of Louise de Marillac, a new Institute was created: **The Company of the Daughters of Charity.**

For the service of the poor

In the beginning they had the care of the poor sick in their homes, in cities and the countryside — this was the great innovation of the new born institution — then, little by little, as needs arose, they moved to caring for them in hospitals, assumed responsibility for little girls in schools, foundlings, galley slaves,

wounded soldiers in the battle fields, refugees, the elderly, the mentally ill and others.

Service must be holistic; it must address both the needs of body and soul, that is to say corporal and spiritual service. All of this was expressed in the first article of the *Common Rules*:

“The principle end for which God has called and established the Daughters of Charity, is to honor our Lord Jesus Christ as the source and model of all charity; serving him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor, whether sick, children, prisoners, or others who through shame, dare not make known their wants....”

Service given to the poor is service given to Jesus Christ, who himself wanted to identify himself with them: *“In serving the poor, one serves Jesus Christ.”*¹

We are very familiar with the rich doctrine concerning the purpose and qualities of service developed by our Founders in their conferences and their writings.

St. Vincent created an institution open to the future:

“And that, my Daughters,” he said, *“was the beginning of your 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 which he has decided.”*²

Today we continue to carry out **traditional services** which respond to forms of poverty that have always been and are still present in our days, such as care of all types of sick people, schools, care of children and young people, the elderly, refugees. However, to those we add responses to the new faces of poverty: drugs and their consequences, AIDS victims, prisoners; serious implications of the destruction of family life: abused women, children in difficulty; unemployment with its repercussions, emergency services in response to natural catastrophes, war, displacement of peoples, refugees, the homeless, etc.

In the countries where the Company has been serving for many years, and even for centuries, the great political, economic and social transformations that have occurred are in part responsible for the social services undertaken by public institutions. There are always, however, marginalized groups, those who are excluded from these services, as well as actions that governments do not tend to,

¹ St. Vincent, Conference of February 13, 1646, p. 223.

² St. Vincent, Conference of February 13, 1646, p. 218.

such as acceptance and listening. Many Daughters of Charity are committed to that. More and more, our canonical provinces in Europe and in the United States are putting into place volunteer services to which the poor have free access. We are trying to put into practice what the Holy Father said to us in *Vita Consecrata*:

*“It is necessary ... to show concern for what the world neglects, and to respond generously and boldly to the new forms of poverty ... above all, in the most abandoned areas.”*³

Secular, not religious

The Company was the first institute in which the members, women totally given to God, non-cloistered and non-religious, were ready to serve the poor in their homes. This was a real revolution of the concept of consecrated life at that time.

To the sisters sent to the provinces, St. Vincent specified the response to be given to the bishop, should he ask if they were religious:

*“You will tell him you are not, by the grace of God, not indeed that you do not think highly of religious, but that if you were religious, you would have to be enclosed and consequently, would have to say good-bye to the service of the poor. Tell him that you are poor Daughters of Charity who have given yourselves to God to serve the poor.”*⁴

Another time St. Vincent said:

*“A Daughter of Charity is always **in the world**. 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.”*⁵

To be “in the world” to “assist all sorts of persons” was not compatible with the condition of “religious” of that time, who were obliged to be cloistered. That would have hindered movement, the “coming and going”⁶ that St. Louise had perceived in her mystical light experience.

One of the texts in which our Founder most categorically explained the secular character of the Company is his response to Jacques de la Fosse on February 7, 1160:

³ VC n° 63.

⁴ St. Vincent, Conference of October 22, 1650, p. 474.

⁵ St. Vincent, Conference of January 6, 1658, p. 1028.

⁶ St. Louise, Spiritual Writings, A.2, p.1.

“The Daughters of Charity are not nuns, but sisters who come and go like seculars.”⁷

In the *Rules for the Sisters in the Parishes*, the Founder, in an extraordinary fashion, stresses the elements in the life of the sisters that are equivalent to the elements that protect nuns in their cloisters. This text is contained in our Constitutions:

*“They shall bear in mind that they are not in a Religious Order, as this state is unsuitable to the duties of their **vocation**.*

Nevertheless, because they are more exposed to the occasions of sin than religious bound to the cloister, having

- *for monastery, only the houses of the sick and the place where the Superioress resides,*
- *for cell, a rented room,*
- *for chapel, the parish church,*
- *for cloister, the streets of the city*
- *for enclosure, obedience, going only to the homes of the sick or to places necessary for their service,*
- *for grill, the fear of God,*
- *for veil, holy modesty, and making no other **Profession** to ensure their vocation than their constant trust in Divine Providence and*
- *the **offering** they make to God of all that they are and of their service in the person of the poor,*
- *for all these reasons, they must have as much or more virtue than if they were professed in a religious order.*

Therefore, they will strive to conduct themselves in all those places with at least as much reserve, recollection and edification as true religious in their convent.”⁸

Nowadays, there are many religious who are not obliged to live within a cloister, and consequently, they can consecrate themselves freely to outside services according to their charism. The Daughters of Charity continue to be **secular** because their vows do not have religious characteristics. Others do not perceive these distinctions very well.

⁷ St. Vincent: *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 8, p. 277.

⁸ St. Vincent, Conference of August 24, 1659, p. 1213.

In community

Since the official foundation date, November 29, 1633, the sisters come together to live out the ideal of community life in view of a better service of the poor. The two founders held firmly to that. They would say to the sisters that they are “*called and assembled for the service of the poor.*” St. Vincent would give several of his instructions on this subject, explaining the excellence, difficulties, solutions to bring to it, especially stressing the necessity of mutual pardon. St. Louise would wonderfully accompany the local communities through her correspondence.

Today, after four centuries, our Constitutions and Statutes continue to give community life the importance it is due: the mission cannot do without it. Sisters, who are carrying out their services in situations that are more and more demanding and stressful, need appreciation, understanding, a listening ear and the support of a loving community. Participation in community is one of the ways to concretize belonging to the Company. This is so important in a world where anonymity and loneliness are a constant threat. In addition, community life has an evangelical value: “... *that all may be one ... that the world may believe that you sent me.*”⁹

Certainly the manner of living community life is no longer the same, since there does not exist the uniformity that was in place at the time of its foundation and during the years that followed. Numerous variations were introduced according to the needs of the many situations in which the sisters serve.

The expressions of community are many and varied according to the group concerned, whether it be a community made up of senior sisters who have more time for their community encounters, or of sisters in active ministries who have to combine times of service and times to gather for prayer, meals and relaxation. The essential is to find a balance so as not to fall into excess or insufficiency, and even less, into decline. Our sisters young in vocation are begging for community life. The Common Plan is a helpful instrument to determine the manner of community life while safeguarding the essential elements according to the Constitutions and Statutes.

With a specific spirit

Once the charism concerning “the service of the poor, the most abandoned, victims of all kinds of poverty” has been defined, it is important not to neglect the **spirit** in which the service must be rendered. **St. Vincent proposed three virtues: humility, simplicity and charity**, virtues to help make

⁹ Jn 17:21.

the sisters capable of service in their mission to the most abandoned, something which is not always easy. These dispositions help the Daughters of Charity recognize the dignity of the poor. They are their “lords and masters.” Simplicity, which St. Vincent called his gospel, makes the Daughters of Charity able to be close to the poor, enabling them to establish genuine fraternal relationships with them. These virtues enable the servants of the poor to carry out their mission in conditions that are sometimes difficult. The virtues teach them that it is sometimes necessary to turn the medal to see the face of Christ.

With a simple, frugal style of life

A simple, frugal lifestyle will be one of the aspects the founders most stress. In the conference of January 25, 1643, “On imitating the conduct of country girls,” St. Vincent expresses his thought on the manner of life that he hopes for the members of the Company. They must possess the virtues of country girls: humility, simplicity, moderation in eating, purity, modesty, poverty, and obedience. He concludes this conference with these words:

“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. Let you to whom God, by his grace, has naturally given this spirit, thank him for it, and let you who have it not, strive to acquire the perfection which I have just pointed out as characteristic of true village 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.”¹⁰

St. Vincent and St. Louise built up a solid Company, capable of the difficult task that the charism requires: a Company founded on the rock of charity, humility and simplicity, combined with audacity, prudence, moderation, poverty and the common sense of country people. Some succinct phrases demonstrate this: “*You have a right only to food and clothing; the surplus belongs to the service of the poor.*”¹¹ St. Vincent again said, “*Ah! Who would wish to be rich after the Son of God had resolved to be poor?*”¹² Therefore, there was no place for superfluity or waste.

St. Louise affirms: “*... holy poverty and ... confidence in God ... are the two pillars of the Company of the Daughters of Charity.*”¹³

¹⁰ St. Vincent, Conference of January 25, 1643, p. 84.

¹¹ St. Vincent, Conference of January 25, 1643, p. 81.

¹² St. Vincent, Conference of August 20, 1656, p. 812.

¹³ St. Louise, Spiritual Writings, L. 489, p. 518.

1 region
2,687 houses

Our presence by continents is as follows:

Africa	19	Countries
	9	Provinces
	144	Houses
	959	Sisters devoting themselves to the service of the most abandoned.
America		Most countries in America (North, Central and South), as well as the larger islands of the Caribbean, rely on the presence and service of 5,987 Daughters of Charity in 23 countries and 796 houses . Their works are very diverse.
United States and Canada:	2	Countries
	5	Provinces
	130	Houses
	1,006	Sisters
Latin America (Spanish speaking)	20	Countries
	15	Provinces
	411	Houses
	3,111	Sisters
Latin America (Portuguese speaking)	1	Country
	6	Provinces
	255	Houses
	1,810	Sisters
Asia		The Daughters of Charity have the joy of serving the Lord in:
	17	Countries
	9	Provinces
	212	Houses
	1,685	Sisters
Australia, including Fiji and New Zealand	3	Countries

1 Province
17 Houses
80 Sisters

As we can notice, the sisters are not very numerous for a territory so immense. However, their service, which is especially dedicated to immigrants who are not well integrated into society, the aborigines and those physically and mentally handicapped, deserves special mention.

Europe

Despite difficult moments that Europe has had because of the decrease in vocations, the Company is present in:

28 Countries
33 Provinces
1 Region
1,509 Houses
15,210 Sisters

Presence of the Company by Continent

Continents	Countries	Provinces	Regions	Houses	Total # Sisters	Seminary Sisters	Median Age
Africa	19	9	0	144	959	63	47.68
Latin America (Spanish)	20	15	0	411	3,111	67	56.70
(Portuguese)	1	6	0	255	1,810	24	61.60
N. America	2	5	0	130	1,006	1	68.70
Asia	17	9	0	212	1,685	94	51.98
Europe	28	33	1	1,509	15,210	75	69.17
Oceania	3	1	0	17	80	0	66.03
TOTAL	90	78	1	2,678	23,861	324	60,26

Currently, the Company is present on 5 continents and in the poorest countries. Over the past 5 years, new missions have been opened in:

Africa Angola in 1995, Ghana in 1996, Libya in 2000 and Chad this year 2001, and we are considering a response to a call from Kenya. The sisters who arrived in Sierra Leone in 1997 were obliged to leave for the time being following the tragic events that took place. They hope to return when

- conditions are more favorable.
- America** Thanks to our sisters in Los Altos Hills (California), the Company has extended its service to Alaska.
- Asia** Recently the sisters of the Province of Thailand courageously went to Cambodia and Laos.
- Europe** Another place of expansion took place in Eastern Europe. Since the fall of communism, our provinces in Poland and Slovakia have opened five houses in Ukraine, two in Byelorussia and two in Asia: one in Siberia and the other in Kazakhstan.

It seems important to us to note the presence of the Daughters of Charity in Moslem countries: Algeria, Indonesia, Iran, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Tunisia, Turkey, etc.

The assertion of St. Vincent: “*The Daughters of Charity ... are sisters who come and go like seculars,*”¹⁶ continues to be meaningful, enabling them to go everywhere. Faithful to this spirit, the Company remains available and mobile to respond to new appeals.

Evolution of the Company

God, who is the Author and Master of the Company, leads it wherever he wants. No doubt, this is toward the poorest of the poor.

The **Company**, as a whole, **decreases** considerably each year. Considering only the last ten years, the decrease was 6,315 sisters, which is an average of 630 sisters per year. Death and those leaving the Community are the two most important factors in this phenomenon. Deaths corresponded to the numbers of those entering 50 or 60 years ago. Over the course of the years 1940, 1950 and even 1960, the seminaries of Europe and the United States had hundreds of sisters. There was an extraordinary growth of the Company, and naturally, as is the rule of the human condition, they must return to the Father’s House. Currently there are fewer leaving the Community now compared to the years following Vatican Council II. Over the course of these last ten years, the average number of sisters having left the Company is between 0.38% and 0.54%. This, of course, is always too much.

The decrease which, in a certain sense, is normal, both from deaths as from certain departures, is far from being compensated by entrances. That is our greatest problem in Western Europe, the United States, and it is now beginning to

¹⁶ St. Vincent: *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 8, p. 277.

be felt in other countries. In recent years, the decrease in the number of sisters and the aging of the provinces have had **a great repercussion on the works**. Some provinces have been obliged to withdraw from many of them, even if the sisters remain in active ministry until well advanced in age. Over these past ten years, the **decrease in the number of houses has been 491**.

The aging and diminishment of the work force necessitate a restructuring of the Provinces. Last June, after several years of preparation, the six Provinces of France were courageously regrouped into two. This is an example that other countries and provinces must follow, Europe, as much as the United States.

The number of provinces in the Company, however, has not diminished, because **new provinces** have been created: **Burundi-Rwanda, Cameroon, China, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Haiti and Thailand**. Last year a second Province was erected in **India**. At the same time the Company is diminishing in number, it is extending itself in the most needy countries. God is guiding us toward the poorest of the poor in Africa and in Eastern Europe where we were not present before, and the calls continue.

In **Africa** and in **Asia**, the number of sisters in the provinces is currently growing. For Africa: **Central Africa (Burundi-Rwanda), Cameroon, Congo, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nigeria; for Asia: China, Philippines, India, Indonesia and Vietnam**.

Currently the Province of Vietnam has the greatest number of vocations.

It is not difficult to present the current situation of the Company and its numerical and geographic evolution. Reality is there and we must confront it without fear or discouragement. The most difficult challenge is to discern the causes of this evolution, especially the causes of the decrease in vocations in certain countries and in certain provinces. We share this phenomenon with most religious congregations. Some of the most certain influences are the following: secularization, dechristianization, the consumer society, materialism in general, eroticism, destruction of spiritual, moral and human values and the destruction of the family. All of this does not make the best “medium” for vocations to consecrated life. Added to this is the decrease in the number of children in families. The raw material is lacking. It is also necessary to take into account the great number of new institutes and spiritual and apostolic movements that are arising. Another important factor in the decrease in vocations is the promotion of lay ministry at the heart of the Church. In our case, since we have a charism that is expressed by multiple and diverse social works for the promotion of the poor, we find a great number of associations, NGO’s and lay groups that dedicate themselves in these areas. Does this mean that we are no longer needed in

today's world? Far from it, for there still exist areas that are abandoned, "those whom no one wants" who lay claim to our presence and service.

*"It is necessary ... to be attentive to the needs of both the universal and particular Church, to show concern for what the world neglects, and to respond generously and boldly to the new forms of poverty through concrete efforts, even if necessarily on a small scale, and above all in the most abandoned areas."*¹⁷

This situation seems rather like an invitation to examine the real meaning of our vocation. Today, if one only wants to serve the poor, it is not necessary to become part of the Company or of another congregation having the same charism. However, those who wish to serve the poor within the context of total consecration to God, with all the characteristics that the Founders demand for the service of the Daughters of Charity, will find the opportunity and the support to do so. Are we able to show this difference in our life? St. Vincent wanted us to be **totally given to God for the corporal and spiritual service of the poor.**

Another question that we must ask is concerned with our response to the signs of the times. Are we sufficiently open, flexible to respond to the needs of today in that which concerns service (formation, information), lifestyle and forms of community life adapted to the demands of service?

Some people think that we are too slow. The Company, however, endeavors to ensure that the essential is maintained along with the necessary openness and flexibility. The Common Plan is a precious tool that allows us to live according to the demands of each house and each service.

Challenges

As I have just said, the unfavorable context in which the sisters must live out their vocation brings a series of challenges to us, who have the mission of animating the Company.

Challenges Common to All Provinces of the Company

- **To keep alive, in all its radicalness, the charism of caring for the poorest of the poor, which requires continuous availability and mobility.** It is only in this way that we will be signs in the Church.
- **To maintain unity of life** by preserving balance between the three key elements that constitute the identity of the Daughters of Charity: spiritual life, life of service and community life.

¹⁷ VC n°63

Today, for various reasons, there exists among the sisters in active ministries a great danger of excessive work and a certain tendency toward activism. This poses for them the risk of falling into a state of exhaustion, not only physically, but also spiritually by causing them to lose sight of their motivations. This is one of the most commonly given reasons for sisters leaving the Company in recent years. Because of excessive work, time devoted to prayer, to community meetings and to relaxing together in community can be lacking. In the end, all this creates a community lacking warmth, with superficial relationships and even a certain loneliness. The sisters complain about the lack of community time, and even when these times do exist, they do not foster communication. In particular, the sisters identify television as occupying too much of our attention. They ask for the intervention of superiors as a protective measure. Of course, one cannot generalize. It is the responsibility of the persons confronted with this reality to verify and discern.

Specific Challenges according to place

Do not lose sight that attentive reading of the **signs of the times** certainly prompts more intense, urgent and specific challenges according to the places. The fact that today in Europe, North America, Australia and Japan the Company is diminishing in number and in vitality due to aging, can have, as a consequence, a certain despair or discouragement. In these countries, revitalization requires:

- **Suitable accompaniment** for the great number of **elderly sisters** who continue to be our wealth, and for whom the Company must always take care to confide to them some service of the poor adapted to their abilities. For this it is necessary to safeguard their spiritual life, their enthusiasm and their convictions. Even if they cannot “work,” or have the joy of direct service, which is something they complain about, they remain authentic Daughters of Charity, “servants of the poor” by prayer, suffering and offering the diminishment of their strength.

As our Constitutions affirm:

*“By their prayers and suffering, the sick and elderly sisters truly share in the Mission. The community surrounds them with care and affection and helps them to accept their infirmities as a form of service.”*¹⁸

In this same perspective, which is to put all at the service of the poor, Provincial Superiors must:

¹⁸ C. 2.20.

- **Be inventive so that no Daughter of Charity be deprived of the service to which she has a right.** Retirement from a profession, which can sometimes last for many years, does not suppose the immediate cessation of all activity. The sister herself must not lose sight that the poor await her and provincial superiors will do everything possible to satisfy her need. To be sure, there are cases where illness or other circumstances can make it inadvisable for a sister to continue activity. All of this can be worked out in a sisterly dialogue between the Visitatrix and the sister.

The lack of vocations also leads us to encourage:

- **Vocational promotion**, which is so important for all provinces, must be **a priority for those who are suffering a shortage**, even though this presupposes, at times, much work and little success. What must never happen is that despair and discouragement reach such a point that they put a damper on our enthusiasm to seek new members and that we are incapable of integrating them into our communities.
- **The provinces having a great number of vocations** are called to make a circumspect discernment as to the motivations that lead candidates to the Company. It is necessary to give priority to quality and not quantity.
- **Provinces having a great number of sisters who are young in vocation**, must give great importance to their initial formation. It is necessary to watch over not only the seminary, but also the following stage, which is most especially confided to the Sister Servant and the local community. This is the time that the sister young in vocation solidifies her vocation as a Daughter of Charity in all areas. All efforts in this are warranted and must be encouraged in order to assist the sister young in vocation to integrate herself into the Company.

Specific challenges for the Provincial Directors

- **Spiritual animation.** All efforts in this area are necessary and more than justified at all levels: personal, community and provincial. Sometimes the sisters find themselves in places and work situations that are not appropriate to the spiritual or faith life. These are milieus where all that is related to faith and to behavior in accord with faith are not only neither understood nor accepted, but are even rejected and ridiculed. These atmospheres lead to a cooling off of the spiritual, to a lack of motivation and even to the loss of vocation and faith. According to persons concerned, sometimes loss of vocation was preceded by these states of soul.

Special attention must be given, on the part of all those to whom spiritual animation is confided and more especially by the Directors, to the sisters, who in places where we have sent them to carry out their mission, do not have the necessary means for the spiritual life proper to a consecrated person, such as the Eucharist and the sacrament of penance, nor someone with whom they can communicate in a difficult time. There have been cases, and they still exist, where the sisters only have Mass every three months. Is it prudent to put them in these situations? Would our Founders have done the same?

- **Formation.** Another way in which the role of the Director is fundamental is that of formation. This is necessary at all stages, but especially during the initial period: postulancy, seminary, and preparation for making vows for the first time. His function during these stages is indispensable, as much for assisting with discernment as for an accompaniment which can enlighten and form.

Our Constitutions also specifically give to the Directors the formation of Sister Servants, in whose hands are the animation and government of the communities. They must often face difficult situations in the practical realm. Thus, there is the need for formation, accompaniment and support. Constitution 3.11 gives to the local community and, above all the Sister Servant, the responsibility for the final stage of initial formation of the sister young in vocation. This is a task that also encompasses her integration into the local community. We are well aware that, according to the characteristics of today's youth, without excluding its great values, as well as the fact that our communities in some countries have enormous differences in age and mentality, integration into community life becomes very difficult. These situations require accompaniment both for the Sister Servants and for the local communities.

Before concluding, I would like to thank you for all that the Company receives from you through your competence and your dedication. It is difficult to find the right words to express everything that, from the origins of the foundation, the accompaniment of the Congregation of the Mission has meant for the Daughters of Charity, and through them, for the service of the poor. THANK YOU!