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The Identity of the Daughter of Charity: Characteristic and Distinctive Elements

How does a Daughter of Charity live in today's world?

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Introduction

Today, the rationalist and totalitarian ideologies have fallen, and the great scientific and technological strides that are being made undoubtedly offer our world immense possibilities. Material progress gives rise to an amelioration of human conditions within the different areas of health, education, and food as well as a greater openness for universality and solidarity of our planet, especially during catastrophic times. Yet, we are witnesses to greater and deeper disparities between the richer part of humanity and the poorer part where endemic illnesses rage, hunger, AIDS and their consequences on society, especially on those who are least protected.

Moreover, the development of human science has provided a greater understanding of the human being in its complexities. While society recognizes the value of freedom, respect, and human rights, we are unfortunately witnesses to the growth of violence in different forms: war, break-up of families, exclusion both of persons and of certain groups.

Faced with the wonders mentioned above, if I may thus qualify them — brought about by science and technology, we are part of the emergence of a culture of dechristianization and a phenomenon of secularization at all levels in spite of the growth of all kinds of sects. This brings with it a certain relativism, a worship of the ephemeral and a lack of landmarks, resulting even in despair.

Many realities positively and/or negatively influence and affect the life of a Daughter of Charity. Thus, the identity of a Daughter of Charity, clear and easily understood at one time, seems to be becoming, in some regards, confused and nebulous through a lack of unity among its different aspects:

- **“totally given to God,”**
- **community life,**
- **service of the poor and the vows “which give their service its specific character.”**

It seems important then to clearly re-establish ourselves as to who we are in order always to be able to respond with fidelity, boldness and creativity to the mission that is ours in the circumstances of today.

Today, in light of the theme “inculturation of the charism in a changing world” from the 1997 General Assembly, we are at a turning point in our lives in preparation for a revision of our Constitutions and Statutes. This revision is to be “a revitalization” of our being as a Daughter of Charity, servant of the poor, in order to be “more” in the living than in the doing.

I. Identity Revealing God

“When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi he put this question to his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say he is John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ ‘But you,’ he said, ‘who do you say I am?’ Then Simon Peter spoke up, ‘You are the Christ,’ he said, ‘the Son of the Living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘*Simon, son of Jonah, you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. So now I say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church*’” (Mt 16:13-17).

To Christ’s question, the apostles replied according to what they had heard said about Jesus. But Jesus’ question is directed to them. For you, who am I? Who do you say I am? The Spirit, who comes to the aid of the weaknesses and inabilities of humanity, helps Peter to confess in faith: “***You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!***” The Spirit revealed to Peter and the apostles the true identity of Jesus. The name “Messiah” clearly reveals, at the same time, **the identity and mission of Jesus.**

But, they must wait for the Resurrection of the Lord and especially Pentecost, the anointing of the Holy Spirit, before the apostles and disciples knew from within and understood the length, breadth, and depth of Christ’s identity: the Messiah, the Anointed One, sent by God, and Son of God.

Attentive to events and the Spirit of God who continuously acts in events, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac discovered that Jesus Incarnate, who assumed the human condition, the Messiah, is: **Adorer, Servant, and Evagelizer.** They felt urged by the fire of charity that emanates from the total gift of Christ to the Father for the salvation of humanity: “**the charity of Christ crucified urges us.**” Thus Vincent de Paul and Louise experienced the identity of Jesus in his redemptive Incarnation. It is this Jesus that they propose to those who will vow their lives to his cause, taking from him their own identity.

A. Who are these women wanting to share in the experience of Vincent of Paul?

1. They have a name: Daughters of Charity.

If a name holds the identity of a person, it also reveals the mission and lifestyle of the person, that which the Daughters of Charity have from then on assumed. This identity is stipulated to them in these terms by Vincent de Paul in the response they are to give the bishop, if they are asked who they are and if they are religious: “*tell him that you are poor **Daughters of Charity**, who have given themselves to God for the service of the poor*” (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 474).

Since this identity has its roots in the same life as God, St. Vincent unceasingly reminds the sisters of the source of their life on which they must always build and conform their existence to be worthy of the name they carry: “*They shall remember the name of Daughters of Charity which they bear, and shall strive to render themselves worthy of it by the holy love which they shall bear towards God and their neighbor*” (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 1034).

And again: “*... when you gave yourselves to God to serve the poor ... you received this name which God has given to you. Therefore, you should live in conformity with the name you bear, since it was God himself who gave it to the Company, for it was not Mademoiselle Le Gras, Father Portail, and certainly not I, who called you Daughters of Charity. Observe that it was the people, who, seeing what you were doing and the service our first sisters rendered the poor, gave you this name, which has remained as one most suitable to your mode of life*” (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 1045).

This name, received from God by the voice of the people, expresses and reveals the very essence of God’s Being: “*My dear people, let us love one another since love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love*” (1 Jn 4:7-8). Therefore, this name demands that a Daughter of Charity live in such a way that she reflects the love God has for the world and the poor. Because “*... to say a Daughter of Charity ... is to say a Daughter of God*” (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 741).

It is from this beautiful name **Charity, Love**, that all takes and receives existence (life) in the deepest sense of the word. Within this name alone, all the commandments are summarized and give rise to eternal life. “*‘Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ he said to him, ‘What is written in the Law? What do you read there?’ He replied, ‘You must love the Lord your God with all*

your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (Lk 10:25-28).

This love of God is at the center of the good news of salvation given by Jesus Christ, an intense love that consumed the heart of God made man, a love he wanted to give to the world, a love which made him say: *“I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already!”* (Lk 12:49). In Jesus Christ, Love incarnate, life in its fullness is given to humanity: *“I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full”* (Jn 10:10). Within the name of Daughter of Charity is hidden a mission: that which God, in his Son, desired in order to save our humanity. Indeed, it is through love for humanity that God became human to elevate us to the dignity of children of God which could not have been done to sinful humanity except by Love. *“There is no greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”* (Jn 15:13).

The being of a Daughter of Charity must correspond to this love. St. Vincent urged the sisters in these words: *“Give all your goods to the poor, if you have not charity, you are doing nothing; no, not even if you gave your lives. O, my dear sisters, we must imitate the Son of God who did nothing save from the motive of the love which he had for God his Father. And so your design, on coming to the Charity, should be to come here purely for the love and pleasure of God and, as long as you remain in it, all your actions should tend to the same love”*(Coste, Conferences to DCs, 17-18).

A Daughter of Charity must be, in the words of Mother Guillemin, “obsessed with charity and review her interior and exterior attitudes to adapt them to charity. Wherever she is, she must be ‘an expression of charity.’ The witnessing to charity is the prophecy of today. Her look, her actions, all of her being must be an expression of love, which is life to communicate to her community and to men and women that God sends to her.”

Because a Daughter of Charity is born of the Love of God, she is called to be, in the fullest sense of the word, a witness of charity, of love. It is a question of life or death for her.

2. They have an option: living the fullness of their baptism in and through the service of the poor.

The vocation of a Daughter of Charity is rooted in baptism lived to its fullest. *“While it is, at one and the same time, intimacy with the three Divine Persons and closeness to humanity, this life should be the transparent vessel of the love which burns in the hearts of the children of God”* (Instruction on the Vows of the Daughters of Charity, p. 21).

The entire life of the Daughters of Charity is situated at the heart of this **Baptismal and Trinitarian life**. They endeavour to live the evangelical message in the radicality desired by Christ when he invited the rich young man: "... Go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, ... then come, follow me" (Mt 19:21, Mk 10:21, Lk 18:22). The vocation of following Christ takes all its meaning from this baptismal life which makes us co-heirs with Christ and successors of his mission.

For St. Vincent and St. Louise, to be "good Daughters of Charity," one must be above all and in all "good Christians." Christian life gives us an unequivocal choice: "That our Yes be Yes, and our No be No!" It is with reason that the Founders insisted on the resemblance that must exist with Christ: "Whoever sees the life of Jesus Christ will see the same in the life of a Daughter of Charity."

Constitution 1.4 clearly expresses and gives both the content and the essentials of what is the **Identity of a Daughter of Charity**: "*The Daughters of Charity, in fidelity to their baptism and in response to a divine call, consecrate themselves entirely and in community to the service of Christ in their brothers and sisters, the poor, in an evangelical spirit of humility, simplicity, and charity.*"

"One same love inspires and directs their contemplation and their service; through faith, they know that God awaits them in those who suffer. This dynamic unity of their life finds expression in the words of St. Vincent: 'You are poor Daughters of Charity who have given yourselves to God for the service of the poor.'"

The characteristic elements (essential or distinctive) **of our identity** clearly emerge from this article of our Constitutions:

2.1 Given to God (totally consecrated)

The gift of themselves that Daughters of Charity give to God is found in the furrow of Christ, who, while the One sent by the Father as Servant of his Loving Plan **and** Evangelizer of the Poor, could not be totally turned towards the Father as **Adorer** until this project of the love of God and humanity took flesh. All of his life was a continual act of relationship, of communication and communion with his Father, to the point where all he said or undertook, he did as Son. "*The Father and I are one*" (Jn 10:30). "*For what I have spoken does not come from myself; no, what I was to say, what I had to speak, was commanded by the Father who sent me, and I know that his commands mean eternal life. And therefore what the Father has told me is what I speak*" (Jn 12:49-50).

It is **Christ, Adorer of the Father**, consecrated by the Spirit, and totally open to the will of the Father, who carries out the mission of Servant and Evangelizer. In this relationship to the Father through his prayer (cf. Lk 9:18, 28; 11:1; Mk 1:35), Jesus makes the will of his Father his mission and his sustenance. “*My food is to do the will of the one who sent me, and to complete his work*” (Jn 4:34).

By the example of Christ, all in the life of a Daughter of Charity takes its meaning in “totally given,” entirely consecrated to God. The Daughter of Charity exists for a specific mission: **the service of Christ in the poor**, the ultimate reason for this consecration. Only in Jesus, Son of God and God himself, is found the starting point and arrival point in rendering service to the poor. St. Vincent focused all his thoughts on Christ as the ultimate model to look upon and imitate.

“Christ is the rule of the Daughters of Charity. They endeavor to imitate him as their Founders perceived him revealed in Scripture: Adorer of the Father, Servant of his Loving Plan, Evangelizer of the Poor” (C. 1.5).

In creating a true relationship with Christ, the Daughter of Charity is able to do as Christ did. His gospel, his word must always make up the rule of life and the light of the Daughter of Charity. All of her life must be focused on Christ, so as to be identified with him.

As expressed to us in the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, the profound requirement of the call to total conversion and holiness, causes the servant of the poor to look for the Kingdom of God, above all, through self-renunciation to live totally for the Lord, so that God may be all in all. Called to contemplate and witness to the transfigured face of Christ, she is also called to a “transfigured” existence (cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 35).

Such an existence is only possible in the measure that a Daughter of Charity accepts to live in deep affection with Christ, to enter into intimate and joyful communion with him. It is only in allowing oneself to be guided by the Spirit that it will be possible to advance on this road and become, day after day, a person “conformed to Christ, the prolongation in history of a special presence of the Risen Lord” (*Vita Consecrata*, 19). Thus, she enters into an experience of meeting God, that is not an abstract ideation or a distant God, but in the experience of a God alive in Jesus Christ.

The Daughter of Charity cannot remain and realize her vocation and mission without a spiritual vigor that has her accept the gospel as an absolute in its radicality. The word of God of which St. Paul tells us: “is near you, on your lips and in your heart,” must seize her by her attentive listening and meditation to

understand it to the point that she transforms her attention, her actions and her life. She must be impassioned with the gospel and make it a place of meeting Christ to become like him. There, she finds the strength for the life and witness she is called to bring to this wounded world.

If God is not at the center of the life of a Daughter of Charity, if her life is not nourished and watered by the daily meeting of Christ in the Eucharist and his word, in the end, a deadly void will be created within her and the service of the poor. Empty, she will fill the void with secondary things. She cannot exist, in the fullest sense of the word, without a life deeply rooted in the Triune God.

2.2 In Community (Called and Assembled)

The Founders could not conceive the life of a Daughter of Charity without community life. They were convinced that it was God who assembled the sisters to form the Company. And St. Vincent marvelled: *“What a marvel! God chose and brought together girls from various places and provinces to unite and join them together with the bond of charity to make manifest to men, in so many different places, the love he bears them and the care his Providence takes of them that they may be helped in their necessities and his Providence be thus recognised”* (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 1218).

The originality of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac in this new form of community life marks the Identity of the Company, and that of the Daughter of Charity. It is a **community life for the mission**, a place of apostolic discernment, where the charity of Christ resides in a spirit that binds the sisters together and is no other than the Spirit of God.

During the first conference of 31 July 1634, which has been handed down to us in the book of Conferences of St. Vincent to the Daughters of Charity, Vincent remarks that Providence assembled the Daughters of Charity with the design that they honor the human life of Jesus on earth and serve God.

The essential reason for this coming together is brought back to us in Constitution 2.17: *“Called and assembled by God, the Daughters of Charity live a fraternal life in common the better to fulfill their specific mission of service.”* Thus, fraternal community life is seen by the Founders as *“...one of the basic supports of the vocation of the Daughters of Charity. This fraternal life in common is lived in a local community, where the sisters collaborate in faith and joy, bear witness to Jesus Christ, and continually strengthen one another for the good of the Mission”* (C. 1.6).

In relation to the other elements that constitute the Identity of the Daughter of Charity, fraternal community life is no more less important, for it was God who

assembled the first 12 sisters for a greater good in service. “*Oh! what a favor to be a member of a community, for each member shares in the good that is done by all. You will by this means have more abundant grace*” (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 1).

A theological place, community life witnesses the same life of God, communion of Father, Son, and Spirit, in a reciprocity of love that is gift and life. Constitution 2.17 speaks well of this topic: “*The local community is modeled on the Holy Trinity.... The mission to serve the poor is received from the Company and it is in the name of the Company that the Daughter of Charity lives this life. It was there, as one of St. Louise’s biographers states, the **Cenacle**, where the sisters came together in prayer and in union of soul to receive the Spirit of God and the mission which the Lord reserved for them, with the passing days, through the Company (cf. Constitutions, p. VII). This is our holy ground, where union with Christ must exist, if not, there is risk of a “splintered body.”*”

We are not always aware of the prophetic strength that comes from fraternal life, while it is the responsibility of every Daughter of Charity and of the entire Community to become and to be prophets of communion with God. It is the “*see how they love one another*” of the gospel. Fraternal life, if truly fraternal, bears witness to a God who is union and creates union among peoples (witness given at rue du Bac: the large number of the faithful at Vespers).

The entire local Community has the mission to proclaim, by its “**being**” and “**service together**,” that Jesus is present and that his kingdom is within us. St. Louise wrote to the sisters at Angers: “Encourage one another, and by your mutual good example speak louder than any words could” (*Spiritual Writings*, L. 402, p. 450). Our responsibility therefore, is to make visible the wonders of God in this fragile humanity of ours and that also call out to us. We witness to these marvels, not so much in words, as by the eloquent language of a transfigured life, capable of amazing the world (cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 20).

2.3. For the service of Christ in the poor (continuing the mission of Christ).

This is the purpose of the Company. It is for this that the Daughter of Charity was born in the Church and in the Company. All in her life, (the “totally given to God,” the confirmation of this gift by the four vows, and community life) is lived according to this end in which the unity of her life is found: *The principal end for which God has called and assembled 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*” (Common Rules, I, 1).

To honor our Lord Jesus Christ is to be turned towards the “Other” in openness and listening, it is to live in union with him in an attitude of adoration that becomes a welcoming of life and gift of self in **service** that is at the same time **corporal and spiritual**. Because of this purpose, the Daughter of Charity is, in following Christ, a servant of the poor.

This service is nothing more than the continuation of the mission of Christ. *“To be true Daughters of Charity you must do what the Son of God did while on earth. And what did He chiefly do? ... He labored unceasingly for his neighbor, visiting and healing the sick and instructing the ignorant unto their salvation. How happy you are, my daughters, to be called to a state of life so pleasing to God!”* (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 13).

With eyes centered and fixed on Christ, as contemplated in the Scriptures (particularly the gospels of Lk 4:18-21 and Mt 25:31-46), Vincent de Paul found a surprising resemblance between Jesus himself and the poor of society which was his. His relationship with the poor truly revealed Jesus present in their person, he who desired to become human to restore humanity to its first beauty (In God’s image God created them, man and woman...). With faith and conviction, he stated, *“serving the Poor, is serving Jesus Christ. O my daughters, this is true! You are serving Jesus Christ. And that is as true as we are sitting here. A sister will go ten times to visit the sick and ten times she will find God.”*

2.3.1. Eyes of faith

This conviction strives to cultivate and develop **eyes of faith** and to consider the poor as **Lords** and **Masters** whom the servant must show respect, cordiality, and devotion.... *“Following the example of their Founders, they look upon them as their lords whom they must love tenderly and respect highly, and as their masters ‘who preach to them by their presence’”* (C. 2.1). *“Through faith they see **Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ**”* (C. 1.7).

Page 2, of the document “A New Fire,” reminds us that Christ and the poor are two inseparable points of reference that should orient the life and mission of the Company today and always, and therefore that of the Daughter of Charity. This places the Daughter of Charity in an ongoing movement of unity, in a constant coming and going between Christ adored in the Blessed Sacrament and Christ served in his suffering, disfigured, marginalized and scorned members. These are the poor to whom the Daughter of Charity must continuously reveal God’s tenderness. Service of the poor becomes for the Daughter of Charity the place where she proves her love of Christ according to the gospel: *“In so far as you did this to one of the least, you did it to me”* (Mt 25:40).

The primacy of absolute Love is lived in service. It is the very means of the state of charity that must animate the entire life of a servant. It is to be consumed for God in the service of the poor. To love with a preferential love which was received freely from God, the Daughter of Charity must give herself in the same way. She joins the poor in their specific situation in an effort to be for them a “sign” of God’s love that is expressed by generosity, gentleness, tenderness, compassion and caring.

The service of the poor is the central point of convergence of the life of the Daughter of Charity: her prayer, her community life, her poverty, her chastity, her obedience. Around this essential axis, she finds unity of life. Without the poor, there would be no Daughters of Charity, in the sense of the Vincentian charism.

2.3.2. An Evangelical Spirit of Humility, Simplicity and Charity

The privileged expression of “total gift to God” of the Daughter of Charity is **service of the poor** lived in **an evangelical spirit of humility, simplicity, and charity**. “You have a profession of helping your neighbor,” said St. Vincent to the first sisters. This spirit 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 amongst you, one may say: ‘The Company of Charity is still alive’*” (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 528).

The Founders were very exacting on the behavior that Daughters of Charity should display in regards to their spirit. It suffices to look at the Conferences of 2, 9, and 24 February 1653; 14 July 1658 and St. Louise’s Letter A. 78. This specific spirit must fill and absorb the entire being, the entire life of the Daughter of Charity. It is the specific mark that characterizes a servant of the poor and in consequence, conveys the distinction between her and all other persons, congregations or organizations serving the poor.

2.3.3. Servant Mentality

The Spirit of the Company, made explicit in the Conferences of 25 January 1643 (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 74, ff.) and 2, 9, 24 February 1653 (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 516, ff.), constitutes a base upon which the Daughter of Charity builds her life and models her attitudes. It is with eyes fixed on Jesus Christ that she learns to be **servant in the style of Jesus**. “*For the Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mk 10:45), and again “... *here am I among you as one who serves*” (Lk 22:27).

The entire life of a Daughter of Charity is service and it is in this disposition that she must remain. “*Being among the poor as one who serves, who does not*

look to be served, but who gives her life, that is our vocation,” stated Mother Rogé. *“Whatever their particular type of work or level of professional competence, they maintain toward the poor an **attitude of servant**, which implies the practice of the virtues of their state: humility, simplicity and charity”* (C. 2.9).

Called by God to be a servant of the poor, the Daughter of Charity must acquire a servant mentality, that is, the mentality of Jesus Christ who *“emptied himself, ... and humbled himself even to accepting death, death on a cross”* (Phil 2:7-8). Acquiring a “servant” mentality requires poverty of heart as one who possesses nothing, like Jesus Christ, like Mary, servant, pouring herself out to the will of the Father for her.

Fr. McCullen said: *“It is only after having learned humility and obedience, in the manner of Christ, that we can be servants of the poor in his name. We are servants because Jesus chose to be servant. He is for us the Way, the Truth and the Life.”*

2.3.4. Radicality of Life in Following Jesus

“Christ is the rule of the Daughters of Charity.” To live “totally given to God,” closely following Christ and continuing 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 Christ in the poor, which is the end of the Company”* (C 1.5). All in the Company, and therefore in the life of a Daughter of Charity, is lived in dependence to this purpose. There is an intimate union and reciprocity between the “total gift” and “service,” for this “gift” is lived essentially **in** and **through service** as such, in and through the apostolic action itself, in its most profound sense.

The living of the evangelical counsels is found in fidelity ... *“after the example of St. Louise, as the expression of a love which seeks to go to the utmost demands of radicality along the path proper to our vocation, and as a result of a spiritual progression which carries the commitment of the Daughter of Charity to the point of the most sacred bond between Jesus and herself”* (Constitutions p. VIII). Seized by the love of God, the Daughter of Charity confirms her response of love in a total and exclusive gift, in reproducing within her being, the life of Jesus who came to us to be a chaste, poor, obedient servant. Lived as a ratification of the total gift to God, the vows are a source of strength, a union that is rooted in the mystery of the Church (cf. C. 2.5).

Chastity is the road by which the Daughter of Charity gives of herself, without reserve, to Christ for the poor, and to the poor in the name of Christ. It is a *“response of love to a call of love, it involves participation in the Paschal Mystery, the mystery of life and death”* (C. 2.6).

The poverty of a Daughter of Charity allows her to live in harmony with the poor and thereby be available to them. It is the fundamental characteristic of one who follows Jesus: *“There is one thing you lack. Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, ... then, come follow me”* (Mk 10:21; Lk 18:22). This poverty invites her to live simply, with great trust in Providence and to adopt a **simple lifestyle**.

Obedience for a Daughter of Charity is a response to the calls of the poor in the sending on mission by the Company. Openly and freely adhering to the will of God, her obedience is a way of allowing herself to be formed in the mystery of Christ by experiencing placing herself under the cross of Christ. *“Christ, for our sake, became obedient unto death, death on a Cross.”* This obedience involves the Daughter of Charity in a responsible participation in the mission of the local community, in the name of the Company.

B. Daughter of Charity Identity in the Church

1. Society of Apostolic Life

Within the Church, the Company has a well-defined identity and is recognized as a “... society of apostolic life in community. By a bond which is defined by the Constitutions, its members take upon themselves to live the Evangelical Counsels” (C. 1.13).

Canon Law 731 stipulates: “Societies of apostolic life resemble institutes of consecrated life. Their members, without taking religious vows, pursue the apostolic purpose proper to each society. Living a fraternal life in common in their own special manner, they strive for the perfection of charity through the observance of the constitutions. Among these societies are some in which the members, through a bond defined in the constitutions, undertake to live the evangelical counsels.”

To strive towards the perfection of charity by the observance of the Constitutions in leading an evangelical life in the example of St. Vincent and St. Louise, the Daughter of Charity assumes:

1.1 Non-religious Vows

“If (the bishop) asks you: ‘Do you make religious vows?’ tell him: ‘Oh, no, Sir, we give ourselves to God to live in poverty, chastity and obedience,...’” (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 474). In this way, the practice of the evangelical counsels is ratified in the transmission of vows that are *“‘non-religious,’ annual, and always*

renewable” (C. 2.5) meaning the sisters are not religious, but Daughters of Charity, even well before they pronounce vows for the first time.

The expression “annual and always renewable” is not synonymous with temporary vows. They signify an ever-present, dynamic deepening of our total gift to God in the Company. *One does not make Vows to be a Daughter of Charity, but because one is a Daughter of Charity and to become more of a Daughter of Charity*” (Fr. Lloret in Initial Formation Guidelines). Therefore, they are to be lived as radically as possible.

1.2 Secularity

Secularity, a characteristic of the charism of the Company, is understood in relation to the thinking of the times, to give counterbalance to the religious life at that time, in view of allowing **greater mobility and availability, and to better respond to the needs of the poor.** *“Daughters of Charity are not religious, but daughters who come and go as seculars”* (Coste, Correspondence, VIII, Letter 3077).

In 1650, during St. Vincent’s conference to prepare the sisters being sent to Hennebont, Montmirail, and Nantes, he says to them, in these terms: *“If (the bishop) asks you who you are and if you are nuns, 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.”*

On 12 November 1653, he firmly maintains to the Bishop of Nantes: “The Daughters of Charity will never be religious, and woe to whoever speaks of making them religious” (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 588).

And yet, this secularity does not in any way conform the Daughter of Charity to the laity. It does not dispense her from the obligations she has freely made and that she must assume in all honesty and freedom of spirit, that is: “to consecrate herself totally to God, in a community of fraternal life, for the service of Christ in the poor, with an evangelical spirit of humility, simplicity, and poverty, carrying out the Evangelical Counsels which render her available for this service.” On the contrary, she is invited to live a more virtuous life than that of religious: *“They shall keep in mind that they are not in a religious order, since that state is not compatible with the duties of their **vocation**. Nevertheless, because they are more exposed to the occasions of sin than religious bound to the cloister ... they must **have as much or more virtue** than if they were professed in a religious order”* (C. 1.9).

Fidelity to our Rule of life which are the Constitutions – considered an accurate title – “a summary as it were of the Gospel, accommodated to the practices that are most suitable for uniting us to Jesus Christ and for corresponding with his designs” (Coste, Conferences to CMs, 651) – will make us achieve what God asks of us and lead us to perfection (cf. Coste, Conferences to DCs, 275-294).

2. International and Missionary Character

The international character of the Company is expressed in its life, organization and representation.

Faced with this characteristic, the Company, during the last General Assembly, was called to:

- constantly make an effort “to move forward with daring fidelity, along the path of inculturation” (A New Fire, p. 3)
- “discover personally and in community the ‘seeds of the Word’ and the values present in all cultures and among the poor (A New Fire, p. 3)
- abandon the “means which are no longer able to express, in today’s culture, the vitality of our vocation and mission in the Church (A New Fire, p. 6).

These calls are joined with the missionary concern of the Company to give “special consideration to the ‘seeds of the Word’ contained in the various cultures” (C. 2.10).

This trait of the Company expresses the **missionary spirit** that must animate all the sisters to be ready to serve anywhere they are sent.

In this way, the Company, which “**is missionary by nature**, strives to retain the flexibility and mobility needed to respond to the calls of the Church in the face of every form of poverty” (C. 2.10).

C. Other Characteristic Traits

1. A Company with the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission as its Superior General also

This characteristic comes directly from St. Louise in the concern to safeguard the unity of the Company. “God gave my soul great peace and simplicity during my imperfect meditation on the need for the Company of the Daughters of Charity to remain continuously under the guidance given it by Divine Providence in spiritual as well as temporal matters” (Spiritual Writings, L.199, p. 234).

The Daughters of Charity acknowledge the authority of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission. They vow to obey him... (C. 3.27). He names “ad nutum” (depending on his decision alone) a Director General to be his permanent representative for the Company. After consultation, the Superior General names Provincial Directors to the Provincial Councils.

2. A Company with Mary as its “Only Mother”

From the beginning, Mary has held a privileged place in the heart of the Company: “**Mary**, the first Christian and the consecrated virgin par excellence, has been present in the life of the Company from its origins” (C. 1.12).

In their love for the Virgin Mary, the Founders invite the Daughters of Charity to imitate and contemplate in Mary:

- “**the Immaculate One**, totally open to the Spirit...
- the humble and faithful **Servant** of the designs of the Father, and model of the poor in spirit...
- **the Mother of God**, Mother of mercy and hope of the lowly...” (C. 1.12).

Thus, the apparitions and the message of 1830 are, for the Company and every Daughter of Charity, at the same time a response and a welcome: response of Mary to the love they bear for her, welcome, on their part, of the love of Mary in their regard.

II. Living the Identity Today! How?

After trying, in the first part of this talk, to target the most characteristic elements of our Identity, we come to the second part with the question “How in today’s world.”

The Identity of the Company and that of the Daughter of Charity is unique. Unique is the love that animates and directs her life, but multiple are the forms of poverty, multiple also are the societies, cultures, situations and circumstances within which **the service of Christ in the poor** must take root and be expressed. This means that there are a multitude of contextual responses to give, to live out and to put into action.

Without being exhaustive, here are two groupings of some points of conviction and questions, in this search of “how” to faithfully live the Identity of a Daughter of Charity that “must never be a pure and simple repetition of the past, but a creativity that is lasting and coherent.”

1. Daughter of Charity in the World

- a. In the face of the rapid evolutions of our planet, the phenomenon of globalization, and a society where only power, prestige, efficiency, and money have value, the Company must continue to look for ways to give each Daughter of Charity a **solid** human, Christian, doctrinal, spiritual, Vincentian **formation** on which she will build her being as servant of the poor. There must be an ongoing formation and **accompaniment that allows assimilation of the Constitutions and the charism to their deepest roots.**
- b. In the face of fundamentalism, violence, divisions among peoples, war, permissiveness, marginalization, exclusion, moral and psychological insecurity, dechristianization, and drugs, the Daughter of Charity is a contrast that brings the strength of peace and reconciliation, respect, faith, communion, sharing, hope, **“love that is inventive to infinity.”** This love reveals the other as a being born of the infinite love of God, loved by God and capable of loving in return.
- c. In a society that is dispersed, noisy, quarrelsome, the Daughter of Charity creates **times and spaces of silence, contemplation** to hear God, the cries and the silence of the poor.
- d. Doubly daughters of the Church, as Christians and Daughters of Charity, but without being blended with others and in respect to our identity, we continue to be as bold as St. Vincent in collaboration with the laity and the other branches of the Vincentian Family.

2. Daughter of Charity not of the World

- a. Only rootedness in God by a life nourished through the Eucharist, the Gospel, our Constitutions, and prayer, helps the Daughter of Charity acquire the heart, sentiments and regard of Jesus himself, and find the dynamism to grow and increase in being an “interior person” capable of:
 - This conviction: **Christ is truly present in** our brothers and sisters **the poor, and they, also, are present in him,** to love and serve them with respect, humility, gentleness, kindness, joy ... like a servant.
 - Building truly fraternal, welcoming and dialogical Communities where **Christ is the sole identifying criteria** in order to be a witness and prophet for those coming to the Company and for the poor (St. Paul’s hymn of charity – 1 Cor.13, goes without any commentary).

- Concretely living the demands of our Constitutions and Statutes. Periodically revising our lived experiences and actions to readjust ourselves in the face of commitments made, could be an effective aide.
- Living **the vows and Evangelical Counsels** more **authentically and transparently, without ambiguity**: healthy interpersonal relationships, without excessive familiarity (chastity), – **clarity** in giving an account of the goods placed at our disposition and living a simple lifestyle (poverty) – renewing a spirit of asceticism, mortification, sacrifice and availability to the Holy Spirit who also acts through human thought (obedience) – eyes of faith, love and respect for the poor as Lord and Master and sacrament of Jesus (vow of service of the poor).

St. Vincent expressed his deep desire to see the Daughters live the practice of the Evangelical Counsels and their vows in this beautiful prayer: “O my God, we give ourselves entirely to you. Grant us the grace to live and die in the perfect observance of true poverty. ... to live and die chastely,... of living and dying in the perfect observance of obedience. We likewise give ourselves to you, O my God, to honor and serve, all our lives, our lords the poor” (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 22).

- b. Allowing the Holy Spirit to create us into a resemblance to Christ... (cf. C. 2.3) so as to daily become a prophetic force capable of discovering the challenges of inculturation and the New Evangelization with boldness and discernment
- c. Being in all and for all **“a true Daughter of Charity: a good Christian” in making the maxims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ our own.**

Note that a lukewarm life is led by a declining sense of belonging and communion to the Company; by self-marginalization; taking flight in memberships outside of community; superficiality in the spiritual life and prayer, and a spiritual identity crisis.

Conclusion

In a world tossed about by many winds, we need to firmly guard our identity in following the recommendations of St. Paul: “Guard the rich deposit of faith with the help of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us” (2 Tm 1:14).

Since we are born into the Love of God by baptism and we are Daughters of Charity, that is “Daughters of God,” we must become “more” like Christ, the Son of God, and, through his example, continue his work of salvation: **service of the poor.**

All Daughters of Charity, and each one in particular, must firmly believe in the witness of fraternity, for even if we personally expend much in the service of the poor, we will never witness to the gospel if we live side by side without fraternal union. Our strength will be evangelical radicalism and our weakness will be the lack of witness, a trend towards a middle class outlook.

The gospel must always be our Rule of life and our light. It is the gospel that will help us rediscover the fire, the passion of God, that of the poor, living and loving in the manner of Christ. A look of faith towards the poor allows one to recognize the disfigured face of Christ. Living this double movement of love in everyday humble service, lived in a community of fraternal life, is the heart of our vocation. It is the key to revitalizing our charism, and therefore, the life of the Daughter of Charity and the entire Company (cf. Eduardo Cardinal Martínez Somalo to the Visitatrices, Rome, May 2000).

Strongly attached to Christ, we know how to be what we are and what we must become: Daughters of Charity Servants of the Poor with all its implications. We must allow the words of our Savior to resonate within us: “Live on in me, as I do in you. No more than a branch can bear fruit of itself apart from the vine, can you bear fruit apart from me ... for apart from me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me is like a withered branch that has been thrown away” (Jn 15:4-6). Prayer will be the key to remaining faithful: **“Give me a person of prayer, she will be capable of everything” said St. Vincent.**

May the Virgin, Only Mother of the Company, obtain for every Daughter of Charity and the entire Company protection in guarding our Identity against “winds and high waters,” in having our Identity shine with a radiant beauty that amazes the world. And may the credibility with which we live our Identity, urge many others to join the chain of love begun by Christ and followed by St. Vincent, St. Louise and our first sisters.

(Translation: Translation Center – Daughters of Charity, Paris)