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The Provincial Director: “Animator” of the Daughters of Charity

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11-VII-2001*

Article 3.38 of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity states: “*The Director is a priest of the Congregation of the Mission, appointed by the Superior General; he shares with the Visitatrix and her Council the responsibility of promoting the Vincentian spirit in the Province.*”

As a Missionary, the director is, by vocation, an “evangelizer of the poor.” It is, in virtue of this title that he lives his vocation and his mission in one of the provinces of the Daughters of Charity in communion with the sisters. He “assists,” “collaborates,” and “shares” with them the evangelization and service of the poor.

It is in this spirit, as stressed in the Constitutions and the Directory, that we must situate the Provincial Director’s mission of animator.¹

I will divide my presentation into three sections, emphasizing our common Vincentian Heritage:

1. The Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity: \a common history of listening to the poor;
2. Priests of the Mission and Daughters of Charity: \Service of the Poor: a sharing of the mission;
3. Director of the Daughters of Charity, “Animator”: Community Visitations

1. The Congregation of the Mission and the Company of Daughters of Charity: \a common history of listening to the poor

In the beginning...

Two events: Folleville and Châtillon.

St. Vincent was led by Divine Providence, through the events of his life², to consecrate himself to the salvation of the poor. In 1617, while he was fulfilling his ministry in Gannes-Folleville, he became aware of the fact that the evangelization of the poor was extremely urgent.

¹ C. 3.38; S. 46; Directory # 34 and ff.

² Vincent de Paul. His Spiritual Experience and ours (Brochure)

*“The poor country people ... often die in the sins of their youth because they are ashamed to make them known to the pastors or vicars whom they know and who know them.”*³

St. Vincent tells us that after the “conversion of the peasant from Gannes,” (Madame de Gondi) “asked me to preach in the Church at Folleville,” to exhort the people to make a general confession, which I did. There was an overwhelming response and everywhere God bestowed his graces. That was the first sermon of the Mission, and the success that God granted it on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, God did not do so without a design on such a day.⁴

Reading the Event

St. Vincent always considered the date of 1617 as the beginning of his missionary work.

To better illustrate the providential character of the origins of the mission, he later confided to his missionaries: “Ah, Gentlemen, and my Brothers, no one had ever thought of that; nobody knew what were Missions; we were not thinking of them at all, and we did not know what they were, and that is the sign by which a work of God may be recognized...” (Conferences to CMs, 169).

More specifically, Vincent started by looking at life and not first of all theorizing on the mission. He himself knew that loving the poor explained the objective of the Company of the Mission.

“Let us go then, my brothers, and devote ourselves with new love to serve the poor, and even seek out the poorest and most abandoned” (Coste, Conferences to CMs, 367).

When he grasped the event well and understood that it coincided with the will of God, it was then that he moved into action.

“St. Vincent — writes Fr. Jean Morin — “proposes to us a spiritual experience ... in the manner of reading and interpreting events. It suffices to look back at the texts where he evokes the events of Folleville or Châtillon or the story of the theft, the story of the Mission of Marchais, etc.”

In all these cases and many others that punctuate the life of St. Vincent, it is a matter of events that he lives and interprets for himself and for us. This is the key to his “spirituality.”

³ Coste, Correspondence I, 48, Letter 28, To Pope Urban VIII, June 1628.

⁴ Coste, Conferences to CMs, 20, Extract on the Mission preached at Folleville in 1617.

It was in August of the same year 1617, at Châtillon-les-Dombes, that the encounter with the poor sick in need took place.

In the conference to the Daughters of Charity of 13 February 1646 “On the Love of Our Vocation and the Assistance to the Poor,” Vincent speaks to the sisters about the founding event of their Company: “in a small village where Providence had called me to be the parish priest, one Sunday morning while I was vesting for Holy Mass, a woman of the parish came to tell me that in a house, a short distance from the others, a quarter of a league away, everyone was sick, so that there was not a single person able to help the others, so great was the need of each one. This greatly touched my heart and I did not hesitate to speak about it with affection in my sermon. God touched the hearts of those who were listening, so that they were moved with compassion for these poor afflicted people....”

And that was the first place where the charity was established. St. Vincent added in rereading the event: “And that, my Daughters, was the beginning of your Company.”⁵

At Châtillon, it seems that a further step is taken by St. Vincent. The missionary, charged with the evangelization and confession of the poor people, must also know how to take care of immediate emergencies and be able to organize material help. A fundamental conviction animates this man by the experience and the reading that he does “no one can disassociate oneself from misery.” The true sinner would be the one who does not see poverty. We all are in solidarity with the poor. St. Vincent did not study files, he saw the poor. He knew them for himself, as he stated to Brother Jean Parre.

Very quickly, St. Vincent makes the connection between mission and charity: between the importance of the one and the necessity of the other.

Two Calls: Evangelize and Serve the Poor

From these two events and the calls heard, St. Vincent discovers and proclaims the intimate connection that exists between the evangelization of the poor and their service. From that time on, the evangelization and service of the poor are found at the heart of the mission of the sons and daughters of Vincent de Paul.

Our vocation — Vincent will say to the missionaries — is “to assist,” “to serve” “to evangelize and to relieve the burden of the poor” after the example of Jesus Christ.

⁵ Coste, Conferences to the DCs, 218, 13 February 1646.

“In this vocation we are in close conformity with our Lord Jesus Christ who, it would seem, made his chief care, on coming into the world, to help the poor ... And if the Lord were asked: ‘Why did you come to earth?’ — ‘To help the poor.’ — ‘Anything else?’ — ‘To help the Poor,’ etc....”⁶

“... the little Company of the Mission strives to devote itself lovingly to the service of the poor, who are God’s well-beloved, and so we have reason to hope that, for love of them, God will love us ... Let us 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.”⁷

“... If there are any among us who think they are in the Congregation of the Mission to preach the gospel to the poor but not to comfort them, to supply their spiritual but not their temporal wants, I reply that we ought to assist them and have them assisted in every way, by ourselves and by others.”⁸

In speaking of the service of Christ in the poor in the Conference of 14 June 1643, St. Vincent tells the Daughters of Charity:

“You must often reflect that your chief business, the one which God especially requires of you, is diligence in serving the poor, who are our lords. Oh! yes, sisters, they are our masters. Hence you should treat them gently and kindly, reflecting that that it is for that purpose that God has brought you together, for that purpose He established your Company. You should take great care that, as far as you can, they shall want for nothing both in regard to the health of their bodies and the salvation of their souls. How happy you are, my Daughters, to be destined by God for this work for the whole of your life.”⁹

On 24 November 1658, Vincent de Paul wrote to Sr. Anne Hardemont:

“... How consoled you will be at the hour of your death to have consumed your life for the same purpose for which Jesus Christ gave his life. It is for charity. It is for God. It is for the poor....”¹⁰

Two Responses to the Calls of the Poor

⁶ Coste, Conferences to CMs, 111-112, 29 October 1638, On Perseverance in One’s Vocation.

⁷ Coste, Conferences to CMs, 366-367, January 1657, On the love of the poor.

⁸ Coste, Conference to CMs, 608, 6 December 1658, On the end of the Congregation of the Mission.

⁹ Coste, Conferences to DCs, 107, 14 June 1643, Explanation of the Rule.

¹⁰ Coste, VII, 382, L 2734, To Sister Anne Hardemont, 24 November 1658.

On 17 April 1625, St. Vincent signed the contract for the Foundation of the Congregation of the Mission for Evangelizing the Poor.

Evangelizare pauperibus misit me (seal of the Congregation)
“He has sent me to bring Good News to the Poor.”

*“The purpose of the Congregation of the Mission is to follow Christ, evangelizing the poor. This purpose is achieved when, faithful to St. Vincent, the members individually and collectively: make every effort to put on the spirit of Christ himself, ... work at evangelizing the poor, especially the more abandoned....”*¹¹

On 29 November 1633, Vincent De Paul and Louise de Marillac founded the Company of the Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor.

Caritas Christi urget nos (seal of the Company)
“The Charity of Christ urges us.”

The Charity of Jesus Christ animates and enflames the heart of the Daughter of Charity, presses her to run to the service of every misery.

*“The principal end for which God has called and assembled the Daughters of Charity is ... to serve Christ in the person of the poor.”*¹²

Today

Since the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity share the same heritage, members should willingly give them assistance when asked, especially in the matter of retreats and spiritual direction.

*They should also show a brotherly spirit of cooperation in those works which have been undertaken together.*¹³

2. Priests of the Mission and Daughters of Charity: Service of the poor: sharing the mission

The director “shares **with** the Visitatrix and her Council” the responsibility of promoting the Vincentian spirit and “*collaborates in the organization of all that concerns the spiritual formation of the sisters, particularly that of the Sister Servants.*”¹⁴

¹¹ Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission, Article 1.

¹² Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity, 1.3.

¹³ Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission, Article 17.

¹⁴ Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity, 3.38.

In the patent received from the Superior General, the Provincial Director's mission is stated as:

“to promote the spiritual and apostolic life of the Daughters of Charity and to help the Visitatrix in the government of the province....”

In the beginning

St. Louise requested of St. Vincent that the Company, *“... receive spiritual direction from the missionaries.”*

St. Louise de Marillac wanted the Company of the Daughters of Charity to be placed under the authority of the Superior General of the Mission and to receive spiritual direction from the missionaries.

She presented three reasons:

- *“... the poor will be assisted”;*
- *The Company will remain “under the direction that Providence gave it”;*
- *The Company will be able “to live the spirit” of the Congregation animated by St. Vincent.*

In 1646, Louise wrote to Vincent:

“... Monsieur, do not let anything happen that could in any way, remove the Company from the direction that God has given it, for you can be sure that as soon as that happens, the sick poor will no longer be assisted;....”¹⁵

One year later, in November 1647, *“In peace and simplicity,”* Louise communicates to Vincent de Paul: *“it is necessary that the Company of the Daughters of Charity always be, successively, under the direction which Divine Providence has given it — in that which concerns both spiritual matters as well as temporal ones.”¹⁶*

On 5 July 1651, ... Louise, in speaking to the General of the venerable Priests of the Mission, insists on the necessity of the Company of the Daughters of Charity being *“subject to and dependent on” the General of the Priests of the Mission ... “in order to live the spirit” with which he animates the Congregation of the Mission....*

¹⁵ Coste, Correspondence, III, 132, Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul.

¹⁶ Coste, Correspondence, III, 255-256, Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul.

*“the need for the Company ... entirely subject to and dependent on the venerable guidance of the Most Honored Father General of the venerable Priests of the Mission, with the consent of their Company. United with them, we will then share in the good they do, so that the Divine Goodness, through the merits of Jesus Christ and the prayers of the Blessed Virgin, may grant us the grace of living in the spirit with which his goodness animates their honorable Company.”*¹⁷

St. Louise concludes her letter by making allusion to her experience of having been “*under the guidance*” of St. Vincent for 25 years, “*in order to do the holy will of God.*”

St. Vincent’s response that the Congregation of the Mission “*Direct the Daughters of Charity.*”

Ministry to the Daughters of Charity is mentioned in the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission: “*our Congregation was appointed to direct the Daughters of Charity.*”¹⁸

St. Vincent, in giving the Common Rules to the Confreres in 1658, commented:

“It is true that thirty-three years or so have passed since our Congregation was established, without us having given you the rules in writing.... The Congregation has, little by little, and gracefully practiced them before they were brought to light....”

Ministry with the Daughters of Charity has been part of this practice before the letter. There has been “the doing,” “the practice” and the “corporal and spiritual service of the poor” by the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

Since “the foundations” of the Double Family, “God, from whom all good things come” has been at work in this ministry of “direction” and “collaboration.”

From 29 November 1633 until his death in 1660, St. Vincent participated in the formation and the spiritual and apostolic animation of the Daughters of Charity through his conferences and exchanges.¹⁹

¹⁷ Coste, Correspondence, IV, 224-225, Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul.

¹⁸ 1658, Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission, XI, 11.

¹⁹ Coste, Introduction, xi –xxi.

St. Vincent named Fr. Portail to assist him in the spiritual direction and government of the Daughters of Charity and, in 1640, he became the first “Director” of the sisters.²⁰

Fr. Portail (+1660) attended the conferences given by St. Vincent to the sisters, presiding at some of them. He attended council meetings and was consulted regarding the vows of the sisters.²¹

In the dialogue with the sisters in the course of the Conference of 19 April 1650, he alludes to the “ten or twelve years” that he has the honor of “serving the Company.”

In the letter to Jacques de la Fosse,²² Priest of the Mission, at Troyes, 7 February 1660, St. Vincent explains the reasons why the Company takes care of the Daughters of Charity:

“the Daughters of Charity are not nuns, but sisters who come and go like seculars; they are parishioners under the guidance of the pastors in the places where they are established. If we have the direction of the house in which they are formed, it is because the guidance of God has made use of us to bring their Little Company to birth, and you know that the same things God uses to give being to things he also uses to preserve them....”

So then, there is this difference between them and nuns: the latter have for their end only their own perfection, whereas these sisters are devoted, like us, to the salvation and comfort of their neighbor. If I say with us, I will be saying nothing contrary to the gospel but something very much in conformity with the practice of the primitive Church, for Our Lord took care of some women who followed Him, and we see in the Canon of the Apostles that they administered provisions to the faithful and were involved in apostolic duties.”

Today...

As in the time of St. Vincent, the Daughters of Charity, in general, are aware of the spiritual assistance which the Congregation of the Mission can provide them:

“Spiritual direction is an effective means of growing in the imitation of Christ. The Daughters of Charity seek the direction preferably from the

²⁰ Coste, Conferences to DCs, 444-454, 19 April 1650.

²¹ Coste, Table of Contents, XIV, Portail, Antoine.

²² Coste, Correspondence, VIII, 276, To Jacques de la Fosse, Priest of the Mission at Troyes, 7 February 1660.

Priests of the Mission, who are in a position to help them to fulfill their Vincentian vocation (C. 2.13; 3.5; S. 23).

The Congregation of the Mission gladly welcomes the desire of the sisters and the responsibility that St. Vincent confided to it. The Congregation knows that, in helping the Daughters of Charity maintain the spirit of the Company and remain faithful to the demands of their vocation, it prolongs its own apostolic work in the service of the Poor, as St. Vincent assured them: 'we do with their hands what we cannot do with our own.'

The missionaries to whom this ministry to the Daughters of Charity has been confided know perfectly well, that in providing this service, they are accomplishing the desires of St. Vincent and St. Louise and that they are acting in conformity with a very important aspect of their vocation. They are equally conscious of the spiritual riches they receive from the sisters."²³

3. Director of the Daughters of Charity, "Animator"

Community Visitations

- The Director's Visitation and Community Animation. The Provincial Director *makes the visitation of the local Communities* which is required by the Church (C. 3.38; Canon 628).

Time

The Visitation should be a moment of clarification, revision and animation at both the personal and community level. It concerns the spiritual and Vincentian aspects of the life of the sisters (S. 46).²⁴ For the Visitation, the following is foreseen, as far as possible:

1. Suitable preparation. A rereading and verifying of the Common Plan. Sharing on an appropriate outline;
2. Listening to all the sisters individually, with moments of prayer, of community review. (Propose a reflection sheet for the individual meeting with the sisters);
3. The closing of the Visitation with a community celebration.

²³ Directory for Provincial Directors, 1985.

²⁴ Cf., Directory for Provincial Directors, 1985 nos. 55-58.

4. A new meeting, when it is possible, some time afterwards with the community which was visited.

In addition to the official (canonical) visitations, the Director makes informal, unofficial visits to the communities in order to be aware of the spirit of the house and its evolution, to spend time with the sisters, and to participate, if invited, in various community reflections, or to reflect together on a particular topic (Directory, no. 58).

Place

The spirit of the Company is lived in the local communities that the Director visits:

“The Founders considered fraternal life 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).

The mission of the Sister Servant is to animate the local community (cf. C. 2.24; 3.45). It consists of animating the spiritual, apostolic and community life of the sisters.²⁵

In addition, Constitution 3.38 underscores the collaboration of the provincial director “in the organization of all that concerns the spiritual formation of the sisters, particularly that of the Sister Servants.”

The local community can also be a place of privileged animation for the Provincial Director in the framework of his mission.

The Director helps the Sister Servant to be the animator of the sisters, “totally given to God for the service of the poor” in a continual and growing radical fidelity to following Christ according to the specific charism:

“animator of communion, of community and ecclesial service, animator of attentiveness to persons and of listening....” (Directory, no. 36-39).

In general, the Director “helps the sisters to be true servants of the poor, remaining always attentive to their new calls and overcoming all the temptations of routine and immobility” (Directory, no. 43).

²⁵ F. Quintano, “The Sister Servant: Animator: Of What? How?” in *Echoes of the Company*, December 2000.

- Director's Visitation: Collaboration and Formation in Community Animation.

The Director's Visitation of the Local Communities are privileged occasions in which to collaborate with the Sister Servants in animating the spiritual, apostolic, and community life of the sisters.

The Constitutions emphasize the close relationship that exists among the three dimensions of the life of a Daughter of Charity. Service “nourishes their contemplation and gives meaning to their community life, just as their relationship with God and their fraternal life in common continually revitalizes their apostolic commitment” (C. 2.1).

Animation in the local community is a good way by which, through “seeing for himself” the mission of the sisters, the Director assists the sisters to grow in their vocations, in accordance with the service that is asked of him.

To recreate communities rooted in Jesus Christ... which share the experience of God, ... which live communion in dialogue and discernment, ... in an attitude of servant, mobilized by creative, realistic, demanding, and capable of being evaluated Common Plans (A New Fire 1997).

The Provincial Director is often solicited by the Sister Servants to form and animate the communities in the practice of Apostolic Reflection and the development of the Common Plan.

This on-site animation requested by the sisters is a means of revitalizing the Community in the spirit of the most recent General Assemblies and the Constitutions:

“Apostolic reflection allows the Daughters to discern more clearly the action of God in people’s hearts and lives” (Cf. C. 2.9, S. 5).

“We commit ourselves on the way of discernment by Apostolic Reflection” (At Jacob’s Well, 1991 General Assembly).

“In order to assure the vitality of its service of Christ in the poor in the particular mission entrusted to it by the local Church and the province, each community works out its Common Plan” (C. 3.46).

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