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Sing a New Song

by Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General
Berceau, 13-VII-2001

It is not easy to be a Provincial Director of the Daughters of Charity in such a rapidly changing world. You, as Directors of the Daughters, live in daily contact with some of the greatest changes taking place today. Let me briefly mention three.

1. First, you are witnessing firsthand a slow, but dramatic change in the way society views women: their equal dignity as human persons, their role in society, their rights, their participation in decision-making. The document, *Vita Consecrata*, speaks eloquently about the changed role of women in Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and it urges that women in the Church have the opportunity to participate “at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves.”¹

Of course, rapid as such changes may seem to us, from a feminine perspective their pace may seem that of a slowly receding glacier. In my own country, for example, it surely is very hard for women to comprehend that the Constitution gave most men the right to vote in the year 1789, but that women received voting rights only in 1920. Women rightly complain too that, after more than a century and a half of women’s rights movements, they are still paid significantly less than men who perform similar types of work and that they hold relatively few positions of leadership in politics, in business, and in the Church.

2. At the dawn of the third millennium you are witnessing strikingly new forms of poverty to which, thanks be to God, the Daughters of Charity have been among the first to respond. AIDS has reached epidemic proportions in Africa. There and in other places throughout the world it has already taken millions of lives and will surely take millions more. No other period in human history has ever seen so many refugees as ours. Tens of millions of displaced people flee poverty, violence, and political or religious oppression in their homelands in search of a better life. Often they come to the megacities that have grown up on all the continents only to be rapidly disillusioned by life in neighborhoods characterized by squalid living conditions, drugs, violence, and massive unemployment.

¹*Vita Consecrata*, 58.

And though the world has never known so many rich, it has also never known so many poor, and the gap between these two groups, I am sorry to say, somehow seems almost impossible to bridge.

3. Thirdly, one of the greatest changes in modern times is precisely the accepted rapidity of change. After years of living within a philosophical-theological framework in which change was accepted slowly and sometimes even grudgingly, we now live within an information society in which change is an accepted fact of life. People change houses, jobs, even spouses and religious commitments with remarkable rapidity. Changes over the last 50 years have been drastic not just within society, but within the Church as a whole and in religious communities.

With all these changes, it is not easy to be a Director of the Daughters of Charity today. It is even inevitable, in light of the changing role of women in society, that some Directors would be suffering a crisis of confidence, either confidence in themselves or confidence on the part of the sisters. But it is precisely in moments like these that it is important to reflect on the role of Director peacefully and creatively.

St. Augustine once said that those who travel in the dark must sing. In fact, he encouraged them to sing especially when they were afraid of being assailed in the night! Song conquers fear and fear is among the greatest enemies in Christian life. And so I encourage you today to sing a new song.

The Changing Role of the Provincial Director

Let me speak very concretely about the varied, and rapidly changing, situation of Provincial Directors throughout the world. These brief observations are not at all theoretical. Nor do they imply a value judgment, either positive or negative, about these changes. They are simply a statement of what I have seen transpiring over the last decade.

1. While many Directors still work full-time in the service of the Daughters of Charity, for many others being Director is a part-time job. Many spend at least 50% of their time in another ministry.
2. Some confreres are Directors of two provinces (for example, Graz and Salzburg, and, until recently, Paris and Rennes, and, very soon, Rome and Siena).
3. While all Directors take part in the council meetings of the Daughters, sometimes they take part only in those matters strictly required by the Constitutions and Statutes.

4. Sometimes the Director of the Daughters of Charity is also the Visitor of the corresponding province of the Congregation of the Mission. We have had four or five examples of this in recent years (for example, Cuba and, until recently, Ethiopia and Ecuador).
5. Sometimes the Director of the Daughters of Charity is also the “asesor” of other Vincentian groups, like the Vincentian Marian Youth groups, AIC, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Miraculous Medal Association, etc. Even if he is not the “asesor,” the Provincial Director today usually has much more contact with these other branches than in the past.
6. Today, many Provincial Directors have significant contact with other Provincial Directors because there are national or regional meetings of Directors or because, if they are also “asesores” of the lay groups, they meet other Directors who are also “asesores.”
7. The candidates suggested as possible Directors during consultation are often reluctant to accept the job. In fact, it is often much harder to name Provincial Directors of the Daughters of Charity than to name the Visitor or the Visitatrix of the same province.
8. Most Directors know their role very well and provide an outstanding service in helping animate the spirit of the province and in assisting in the formation of the sisters on various levels. But, even today, there are occasional examples of Directors who are intrusive in the government of the Daughters of Charity.
9. On occasion, Directors feel rejected by some of the sisters and, on occasion, by the Visitatrix too. This sense of rejection flows from various causes. The principal ones that I perceive are: 1) a personality conflict between the Director and the Visitatrix; 2) authoritarian attitudes, either on the part of the Director or on the part of the Visitatrix; 3) cultural currents suggesting that the Director’s role is “useless” or “unneeded.”
10. By and large, Provincial Directors are very much appreciated both by the sisters of the province where they serve and by the Visitatrix and her council.

On Being a Provincial Director Today — Singing a New Song

Of course, as the world changes, so too must we. Otherwise, we stagnate and die. That is why I encourage you today, as Directors of the Daughters of Charity, to sing a new song. What shall that song be like at the beginning of the third millennium?

1. *Sing a deeply spiritual song*

This seems so obvious, but there is nothing more important. The Director of the Daughters of Charity is called in a special way to collaborate in organizing with the Visitatrix and her council the formation program of the province, initial and ongoing. There are many aspects to formation: human, spiritual, theological, pastoral, community. But, important as all these aspects are, we must remind ourselves again and again, as St. Vincent constantly repeated, that all formation leads toward “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.”² As formators you must not simply know *about* Christ; you must have deep personal experience of the Lord yourself. It is only if you are genuinely filled with the Spirit of the Lord that you will be able to communicate that Spirit to others.

You are also called to visit the sisters, listen to them, and speak with them individually; to be a “soul friend,” so to speak. But not everyone who makes the spiritual journey is a good guide. A guide needs training and experience to sharpen his natural gifts. He or she knows the paths wayfarers tread in the course of the journey: the high roads, the low roads, the shelters, the pitfalls, the traps. Good guides have fallen and risen many times. They know how to reanimate those who are discouraged and to temper with experienced counsel the impatience of the overzealous. The best guides walk *with* those they are forming, at times quickening the pace, at times slowing it down, at times pausing for rest.

St. Vincent would be quick to say that every formator must be humble. Is there any virtue about which he talked more frequently? The wise formator listens to the sisters' needs. He reaps before he sows. He allows himself to be evangelized and changed by those he serves. Many a good formator has found himself saying: "I think I got more out of offering this course than the participants did!" One hopes that both participants and formators are mutually transformed in the process.

2. *Sing a liberation song*

Your principal role is to be an animator. An animator is one who communicates life, breath, spirit, soul. In the presence of a good animator, people come alive. They dream new dreams and see new visions. The Spirit of the Lord enflames something in their hearts. They begin to hear the deepest voices of reality. They begin to see the possibility of a new heaven and a new earth. They become freed from the inner bonds that hold them back and become eager to pour out their lives with a new and deeper generosity.

As part of this liberating process, I encourage you to use a renewed pedagogy,

²Rom 13:14.

to engage the sisters themselves fully in the formative process so that they become active agents in their own formation. They themselves, after all, have the primary responsibility for their formation. Our hope is that they become “multiplying agents,” able to pass on to others the gifts that they have received.

The formation methods that you use with the sisters are very important. Pedagogy is both an art and a science. In order to achieve the goals of formation, a good formator must know not just the content that he is presenting, but must also know how to work with both individuals and groups. He must use modern means of communication. He must be able to stimulate the participants to help one another in the formation process.

3. *Let the leitmotif of your song be a 17th century melody*

Our song, new though it may be, must echo the wonderful melody composed by Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac during three and a half decades around the middle of the 17th century. Their song too was not completely new, since it echoed the cry of the poor of Israel which rings out from the pages of the Old and New Testaments.

In order that you might sing this song well, I encourage you to be deeply immersed in the writings of Vincent and Louise. Know their song by heart. Let it come spontaneously to your lips. Read their writings again and again so that their vision becomes yours. Vincent and Louise have given us a wonderful heritage. Their charisms remain strikingly relevant today as new forms of poverty multiply and the gap between the rich and the poor grows continually wider. The well prepared formator must know the life of Vincent and Louise, the history of the Companies they founded, their spirituality, their mission, their foundational works, their concrete and effective love for the poor. It is these elements especially that the formation process aims at transmitting to future servants of the poor.

4. *But make your song genuinely new*

Even the greatest composers adapted melodies that they had already heard and used existing poems and stories that fascinated them. Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* concludes with an ode written by Schiller. Verdi’s operas adapted stories that were already well known in Italian folklore. But these artists knew how to bestow newness on the old, to transform what they had received, and to bring forth its beauty in a new and striking form.

The Document of the Daughters’ General Assembly in 1997 has some new and striking emphases. It challenges the Company “to join forces with people who defend life and human rights, as well as with those who struggle for justice and

solidarity with those who are excluded from society, especially women and children who are the poorest of the poor in many parts of the world.”³

Do not let these emphases be forgotten, as is the case with so many documents. Sing them out. Shout out the plight of refugees, women and children in the modern world. Sing the tragedy of new forms of poverty that clamor for remedies.

5. *Sing out your song in polyphony*

In the last seven or eight years we have become very conscious of being members of a worldwide Vincentian Family. Our Family is huge, an army, so to speak, a peaceful army in the service of the poor. The groups that constitute our family have a common heritage but at the same time distinctive charisms. It is important that we appreciate both the common and the distinctive elements within our family tradition. We have a long healthy history in this regard, with much cooperation among the members of the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, AIC, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Miraculous Medal Association, the Vincentian Marian Youth groups and, most recently, MISEVI. Besides these, many other groups share in our tradition. In recent years we have had increasing contact with the Religious of St. Vincent de Paul, the Federation of Sisters of Charity in France, Germany, Austria, Italy, and India, the Charity Federation in the United States, and numerous others.

Encourage the Daughters of Charity to labor with the members of the branches of our family, to establish Vincentian groups wherever they go, especially youth groups. Young people are the future of the Church. It is they who will sing our Vincentian song in the future. So let our song not be a solo, no matter how beautiful. Let it be polyphony at its best, a harmonious melody that gives hope and joy to the poor.

St. Vincent was a wonderful formator. Generous people like the first Daughters of Charity gathered around him eagerly and were captivated by the vision he communicated. My hope is that, like Vincent, you can be faith-filled animators of the charism that he and St. Louise handed on to the Daughters.

Reflecting gratefully on the mystery of God, the Psalmist⁴ cries out, “I will sing and make music for the Lord.” I encourage you today to sing a new song. Sing a deeply spiritual song, a liberation song, a song whose leitmotif is a wonderful 17th century melody composed by Vincent and Louise, but a song that is genuinely new as we, like Vincent and Louise, envision a new place for women in the Church and

³ *A New Fire* (1997), II, 1b.

⁴ Ps 27:6.

confront new forms of poverty in the world. Sing out your song in polyphony with the Daughters and with all the Vincentian groups. Join the poor in your song. Join young people in a beautiful polyphonous hymn and let it be a mighty chorus resounding to the glory of God.