

7-2001

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Recommended Citation

Leitenbauer, Rufina D.C. (2001) "Preparation for the Assemblies of the Daughters of Charity with a View to Revising the Constitutions," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 45 : No. 4 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol45/iss4/19>

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Preparation for the Assemblies of the Daughters of Charity with a View to Revising the Constitutions

*by Sr. Rufina Leitenbauer, DC
General Councillor
24-VII-2001*

Introduction

I have been asked to give a “detailed account of the envisioned method and process for the Assemblies of the Daughters of Charity with a view to revising the Constitutions.” For a better understanding, allow me first to give an historical view.

Historical view

The 1997 General Assembly voted on a proposition that asked:

“In the light of the theme ‘Inculturation of the charism in a changing world,’ and as a consequence of the General Assembly of 1997, that a Commission be established to revise the Constitutions and Statutes and that all the provinces take part in this study.”

The General Council, responding to this request, named a Commission of four Sisters: Sister Keaveney, Visitatrix of Los Altos Hills, United States; Sister Tamargo, of the Province of Gijon, Spain; Sister D’Avella of the Province of Naples, Italy; and myself.

This Commission met for the first time in January 2000 here at the Motherhouse. First, we tried to understand well the “why” and “how” of this proposition as the idea came from two provinces. From listening and rereading the transcripts of the interventions of the General Assembly, we perceived the concern to keep the essential, that is to say that which always makes a Daughter of Charity; a concern not to touch the fundamentals, to stress the lived reality. Without a doubt, the members of the Assembly were conscious of safeguarding the essential, for the Constitutions are part of the heritage of our Company. “The whole patrimony of an institute must be faithfully preserved by all. This patrimony is comprised of the intentions of the founders, of all that the competent ecclesiastical authority has approved concerning the nature, purpose, spirit and character of the institute, and of its sound traditions” (Canon 578).

The General Assembly participants emphasized that:

- Our Constitutions are beautiful, rich, and profound.
- Additions will be incorporated into the unified whole.
- The language must be updated, keeping inculturation in mind.

The Commission also wanted to be clear on the content of terms used, therefore

Our interpretation of the terms of the proposition

“In light of the theme ‘Inculturation’” — While recognizing the importance of inculturation and wanting to remain attentive to the integral relationship between faith and culture, between charism and different cultures, we must think that the Constitutions and Statutes apply to the entire Company. The differences of culture and place can be expressed in other documents. This must be kept in mind especially in provincial and community plans. Our Superior General reminded us of this in Rome while addressing the Visitatrices: “... be sure to ask this question: Is this a general norm applicable to the whole Company, or could there be many cultural variations here? If it is a general norm, it should be part of your Constitutions... If there are many cultural variations, then it should be left to the provinces or other bodies to define the matter more specifically” (Fr. Maloney, 22 May 2000).

“Revise” – This word has different meanings: to modify, to improve, to correct. We understand it in the true sense of the Latin word “revisere” meaning “to come back to see” (revisit) our Constitutions; read them and meditate on them with “new eyes,” a new interest. Thus, this new study of the Constitutions can become a “kairos” for all Daughters of Charity, for the deepening of their “rule of life,” its “revision” can lead them to “revitalization” in finding “at the source the inspiration and intuitions of their Founders, so that they may respond with ever-renewed fidelity and availability to the needs of their time” (C. 1.3).

“Participation of all the Provinces for this study” — The members of the Commission felt that the Assemblies offered the time and context favorable for profound reflection and serious discernment. Beginning with every Daughter of Charity, an irreplaceable part of the Company, this must be entered into with prayer, discernment, and renewal.

Elaboration of the method

Thinking first of a questionnaire, we approached a Jesuit sociologist to solicit his help. After listening to our plan, he advised us against the questionnaire, not seeing that this process would be a good method of attaining our intended goal. He stressed that the Constitutions were a gift of the Spirit and that all approaches must be done with “discernment.”

So, we looked for another method to accomplish this task — a method approved since by the General Council and the Visitatrices at the time of their encounter in Rome during May 2000. We were very conscious that this important task that has been confided to us, is a great responsibility. Indeed, a revision of the Constitutions will make us touch the heart of our life as a Daughter of Charity, our “rule of life,” the heritage of our Founders.

It is clear for us that we must know our Constitutions thoroughly before being able to suggest judicious modifications. For this reason, the Commission proposed a preparatory phase in asking for:

A time of deepening of the Constitutions for the entire Company before the Assemblies.

To this end, a letter was addressed in September 2000, a small text with some suggestions for personal reflection to motivate and help all the sisters. The Commission proposed:

- a deepening of knowledge by:
 - reading* the first two parts of the Constitutions using first person pronouns (reading C 1.4 in this way: “In fidelity to my baptism and in response to a divine call, I consecrate myself entirely ... to the service of Christ in my brothers and sisters, the poor ... through faith, I know that God awaits me in those who suffer...”; *looking for* parallels between the Gospel and the Constitutions; *looking for* passages that speak, for example, of personal responsibility and dialogue.
- to pray our Constitutions as prayers of praise, thanksgiving, supplication, penitence.

The Visitatrices and their Councils have the freedom to suggest other means for the deepening of the Constitutions. The annual retreats also lend themselves to this type of reflection.

This deepening is also an opportune moment to compare the Constitutions with life, for often, “... the problem is not one of formulating definitions but of putting the principles into practice” (Fr. Quintano, *Echoes* November 2000, p. 510).

Therefore, it is a question for the Company, for every Daughter of Charity, to look into the mirror of the Constitutions, this “summary of the Gospel” and find the ideal image. On 4 March 1658, St. Vincent confirmed: “...the people seeing what you were doing, ... gave you this name....” Then, let us ask ourselves: Could those who see me and those whom I serve, call me or give me again the name of Daughter of Charity if they knew only me? Mother Guillemin’s words

to the sisters in retreat, in August 1966, are applicable for today and tomorrow: “In reality, the truth of the renewal of the Community is in the journey and the effort of holiness of each member ... All decisions can be made, all the Constitutions can be renewed, revised, updated, nothing else will matter if everyone does not put forth this essential effort, this vital effort of holiness.”

At this stage personal work follows:

Community sharings for mutual enrichment, to simply share with one another the thoughts that God has given, for the Lord reveals many wonderful thoughts through Daughters of Charity...

It seemed to us that such richness could be expressed quite naturally within

Celebrations:

- thanksgiving
- asking pardon

Immediate preparation for the Assemblies

Filled in this way with the “spirit of the Constitutions” and with a true understanding of our “rule of life,” we will be able to discern what makes an authentic Daughter of Charity today, “*given to God for the service of the poor, humble, simple, loving.*” Then we can suggest corrections, improvements in the text; we can update the basic document, find “the happy medium” between tradition and renewal, between faithfulness and boldness, between holding on to and adapting. Then the changes will be a sign of life and not an artificial adaptation to the present time...

After receiving the General Assembly convocation letter from the Superior General, the provinces will receive the questions on which the sisters must center their reflections and decisions as well as the concrete manner with which they are to present their responses.

All the sisters are invited to reflect on three simple and open questions that will be dealt with during the Domestic and Provincial Assemblies, namely:

1 – Are there essential elements that help you to realize your vocation in the world today and that you would like to **add** to the Constitutions and Statutes? What are they? Why?

2 – Are there articles or passages in the Constitutions and Statutes that present obstacles or difficulties for the inculturation of our charism in the world today and that should be **removed**? Which ones? Why?

3 – Are there articles in the Constitutions and Statutes that you would like to **modify**, reword? Which ones? Why?

As you can see, each question requires an explanation “why.” In fact, the Commission holds firm to the motivation, convinced that any change in the Constitutions requires sufficient cause.

A second wish of the Commission is to limit the pages of postulates as much as possible. It would be desirable that the responses, that is, the approved postulates, be no longer than two pages. This is in keeping with the Directory which states that “it is strongly recommended that the Postulates not be excessive in number, and that they exclude details of minimal importance...” (69).

The Assemblies

You know well that “in the Company of the Daughters of Charity, the role of Assemblies is to evaluate and promote fidelity to its specific charism and its apostolic vitality” (C 3.47).

How can we better evaluate our fidelity to the charism than by comparing our life with our plan of life, our Constitutions? The requested revision is therefore a wonderful occasion for this evaluation.

The revision also includes changes within the text: additions, deletions, modifications. In this sense, extremes must be avoided: the refusal of any change on one side and the desire to change everything on the other.

It is very likely that the third part of the Constitutions, which is rather juridical, will give rise to more interventions than the first two parts that are more spiritual and pertaining to the charism.

The Postulates

At this point, I would like to focus your attention on the postulates. By the fact that this time we envision a change in the Constitutions and Statutes, it is obligatory that we present our suggestions in the form of postulates. In fact, by definition a postulate is “a request addressed to the General Assembly relevant to some decision bringing about modifications to the Constitutions and Statutes, since only the General Assembly is legislative.

Furthermore, the Directory distinguishes between a “postulate” and a “proposition.” The latter is defined as “all requests addressed to the Provincial or General Assembly (or to the Superioress General and her Council, or to the Visitatrix and her Council) and which require no change, total or partial, in the Constitutions or Statutes.” This is the case if one wants to study provincial affairs, for example, the Provincial Plan, the revision of works, etc.

The Directory specifies that: “Propositions or postulates are limited to a single subject, are phrased in an affirmative form as to avoid the ambiguity of double negatives, are written in a declarative form to allow affirmative (Yes) or negative (No) votes (cf. Directory, 72, m-o, s).

To accept postulates at a Domestic or Provincial Assembly, an absolute majority (more than half the number of votes) is sufficient, whereas 2/3 of the votes are required at the General Assembly. The secret ballot is obligatory within Domestic (37) and Provincial (70) Assemblies.

The role of the Director during a Provincial Assembly

Please excuse my boldness in saying a few words on your role during the next Provincial Assemblies.

I admit that we sisters give you a delicate yet thankless role. According to the Directory, you preside over the Assembly, but the Visitatrix directs the debates (17). You have the responsibility to see “that all matters are treated with the necessary freedom and according to the norms of universal and particular law” (S. 46), but you do not enjoy the right to vote. You may intervene from time to time, but you should abstain from too frequent interventions (17c). You may respond when the Visitatrix calls on you, but you should not, in general, participate in the discussions (17d). It is indeed a difficult task!

Number 48 stipulates that “the Director, as President of the Assembly, shall deliver an allocution on the importance of the Assembly....”

After all I have just said on the goal of the next Assembly, it is no longer necessary to stress its importance. But allow me to address to you an entreaty:

Help us, so that this revision of the Constitutions becomes for us a true renewal in trying to bring from our treasures both the new and the old (cf. Mt 13:52), to adapt the plan of our Founders to today’s needs, to revise in order to revitalise.

Be watchful that no modification is made just to relax the rule ... for “the adaptations we are making are not made to respond to a passing fancy, a youthful

opinion or other persons! The adaptations that we are making are to deepen justly our spiritual renewal, to allow us to have a more authentic relationship with God and to allow ... our witness of religious life to be read, to be recognized by the world (Mother Guillemin, August 1966).

Help us to make this process a true revision, not only of our laws, but of our lives. Such is the exhortation of the Superior General when telling us: *“If, after this long process, the Company lives the Constitutions more deeply, then it will surely have been worth it”* (Fr. Maloney, Rome, 22 May 2000).

Climate

Finally, allow me to say a word about the climate. A true discernment, an opening to the action of the Holy Spirit assumes and creates a specific climate. That is why I ask you to help us create and maintain this climate of prayer, simplicity, freedom of expression, respect, and listening. In this way the Provincial Assemblies will become little **“cenacles”** where all will be filled with the Holy Spirit and will begin to speak ... according as the Spirit gives them to express themselves so that we all will hear proclaimed the marvels of God (cf. Act 2:4 and 11).

Now, I want to express to you my profound gratitude, and in the name of all the sisters, for all the help you will bring us during the Provincial Assemblies, but also for your invaluable service every day.

I would like to close this talk with some words from Mother Elizondo: *“Let us ask God to trace out for us the path to be followed if we are to accomplish this important task and to guide the steps of each one so that everything will be transformed into what is good ... a Pentecost experience...”* (Rome, 15 May 2000).

(Translated by: Translation Center — Daughters of Charity, Paris)