

Vincent de Paul, Founder

Your Community and its eminently apostolic style were not spontaneous creations that may be studied and understood more deeply outside of context. Before being an institution, it was a stage in the spiritual journey of St. Vincent de Paul. So, for us to have a right understanding of the Company, we must start from the man and the history of your origins. This is what I propose to do in the first part of our study.

Your Community, perhaps more than the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission, seems to me like the echo and reflection of Vincent's personality. Yours is without doubt the foundation that reveals him the most, in his originality, his audacity, his balanced outlook and his efficiency.

To take even a quick look at Vincent de Paul is certainly the best way to prepare ourselves to understand in depth your Community, into which he put the best qualities of his personality.

Unfortunately, and I have often noticed this, we hardly know the man, Monsieur Vincent. During the time of our formation, we were too quickly made to discover his holiness and his virtues. We knew that he was mortified before discovering he was sensitive and how he showed this; we learned that he renounced his family attachments before asking ourselves if he loved his family and how he loved it... and so on. This method appears to me misleading and dangerous for the study of any person's sanctity. But it is particularly damaging for those who

*History
of the
Company*

are interested in Saint Vincent and his human personality which was so complex and had such great influence.

How can we focus on such complexity in a few short quarters of an hour? We will have to be content with a quick study of some points that I hope will provide a sufficiently instructive outline for you.

First of all, in what concerns the social and family origins of Vincent de Paul, factors that are always important for a man or woman, let us never forget that Vincent was a countryman, a Gascon and he was poor.

I. SOCIAL AND FAMILY ORIGINS OF SAINT VINCENT HIS RUSTIC BACKGROUND

How many times did Vincent recall this aspect of his origins! Often we remember only the aspect of humility or humiliation of this because, as I said a moment ago, we are too eager to arrive at his holiness. But there is here an important psychological reality, and in the thirteen volumes of letters and conferences of Saint Vincent, we often find a countryman's mentality and reflections. We see this, for example, in what is wrongly called his slowness to act, or again in his attitude to money, to important people, or even in his way of speaking about Providence and about his foundations, as a peasant might speak of his fields and his harvests!

If I am emphasizing the rustic side of Vincent de Paul, it's because this profoundly marked the community. Your founder was someone with a country background, and he remained so until his death in 1660. As if by chance, the two major experiences of his life, Gannes and Châtillon, took place in a rural context. What is even more important for you, the first generations of Daughters of Charity, following Marguerite Naseau, were almost exclusively from a rural background.

We shouldn't be surprised then that in one of his most beautiful conferences, Saint Vincent proposed to you the spirit and virtues of good country girls as an ideal.

GASCON

Vincent de Paul was also a Gascon and remained one throughout his life. He was conscious of it and was proud of it, knowing very well what it meant to be a Gascon. Here is proof among many others, gleaned from his correspondence. Writing to Firmin Get, superior at Marseilles, who in some business matter only told part of the truth, Vincent was astonished: "Please allow me to ask you, *Monsieur*, your reason for having concealed from me what you told me in your last letter about having borrowed twelve hundred livres (books) from the Administrators of the hospital... I must confess, *Monsieur*, that this has surprised me more than anything that has happened to me for a long time. If you were a Gascon or a Norman, I would not find it strange. To think, however, that a straightforward man from Picardy, whom I consider one of the most sincere men in the Company, would have hidden that from me - how can I not be surprised at that...?" (Coste V, 199-200). Obviously we should not conclude from these lines that Vincent habitually told only half truths. Yet, some twenty-five years in the southwest of France have allowed me to say that Gascons have their own particular way of understanding what is real and discerning what is essential from what is relative.

In Saint Vincent there are many nuances to be grasped, and even some apparent contradictions that could surprise non-Gascons. When he spoke, surely his tone and his mimicry often softened the rigor of what he said, or when he was explaining a point.

Sometimes, he also appeared amused by the story he was telling. One day he wrote to the Superior of Warsaw: "*Mademoiselle Le Gras brought to our parlor the little dog that is being sent to the Queen. He loves one of the Sisters of Charity so much that he will not so much as look at anyone else. As soon as she goes out the door, he does nothing but whine and cannot keep still.*" We marvel how he used every possible opportunity to learn from situations when he adds: "*This little creature has made me very much shamed, when I see his single-hearted affection for the Sister who feeds him but see myself so little attached to my Sovereign Benefactor and so little detached from all other things.*" (CCD V, 364)

At times this almost reaches the level of comedy, as when he explains to the Daughters of Charity that they shouldn't take every temptation

as a tragedy, and that they have to distinguish between temptation and temptation: "*Nevertheless, Sisters, sometimes there are passing temptations, as in the case of a good Capuchin I used to know. Once, while he was still a novice, he was attending Vespers. Since he had been a famous hunter, the pleasures of the chase came to his mind. All he did was think about horses, hounds, and birds; he was pursuing a hare. In a word, that's how he spent the time of Vespers. When he came to himself, he was really amazed. 'What's this?' he said. 'You want to be a Capuchin and here you are, returning from the chase. You're not fit to be a Capuchin; you should leave.' And off he went to find his Prior saying, 'Father, have them give me my clothes; I want to leave.' What's wrong, Brother?' said the Prior. 'O Father, I'm not fit to be a Capuchin; I just came back from Vespers; and all through the Office I never left the hunt.' 'What, Brother? You went hunting during Vespers? And were you in the choir?' 'Yes, Father, but all I could think about was the chase. That's why I beg you to have them give me my own clothes, for I'm not fit to be a Capuchin.' 'Well, tell me, Brother,' said the Prior, 'when you were hunting like that, when you were pursuing the hare, did you cry out, Oh! the greyhound! Oh! the greyhound!' 'Oh no! Father; I didn't say a word.' 'Well then, it's nothing, Brother. You'll make a fine Capuchin.' And so he remained in the Order, lived to a ripe old age, and attained great perfection. (CCD XIIIb, 283-284)*

One of Vincent's secretaries, and by chance he, too, was a Gascon, Brother Bertrand Ducournau, born in Amou (Landes), adds a significant note to the December 6th 1658, conference: Note: *In saying this, he made certain gestures with his hands, moving his head around and speaking in a certain contemptuous tone of voice, which conveyed even better what he was trying to express than what he was actually saying.* (CCD XII, 82)

In a spirit of generosity and out of concern for fidelity and order in the Communities, after Saint Vincent's death, people showed a tendency to interpret his thinking in a more rigid way and to make absolute what was for him just relative, to put the secondary and the essential on the same plane, and to take everything literally. Ah! If only Bertrand Ducournau could teach us to read Saint Vincent as we should! In our Vincentian study as in all Vincentian studies, it is good and important to recall that so attractive side of Vincent de Paul's personality ... He

POOR

Finally, Vincent was poor and came from a poor family. It is essential to remember this, and in order to understand it better, it would be interesting, for example, to compare Vincent de Paul's relationship with the poor and that of Louise de Marillac. Certainly the two relationships are animated by a marvelous charity, and we must add that in some situations, Louise seems to have seen more clearly than Vincent, nowhere more particularly than in the matter of your foundation.

Nonetheless, Vincent de Paul's relationship with poor people has the advantage of being spontaneous because he was of the same background as the poor. He has their mentality and their concerns; he shares their hierarchy of values and preoccupations. So it is not enough to say that you were founded for the poor; we must add that you were founded by someone who was poor. This is essential for a good understanding of your Community and its spirit. The first generations of Daughters of Charity were almost exclusively recruited from among the poor, and you know how your founder often reminded them of it.

What I am saying here is important. In our days, poverty in the Community has become an apostolic duty, a virtue, a vow.... We should remind ourselves that at the beginning it was a normal situation, a natural mentality, a regularly lived social experience, a series of spontaneous responses, a vision born of experience. For example, the first Daughters of Charity lived "In rented rooms" ... they were dressed "in the style of countrywomen." (CCD XIIIb, 125), not in order to better insert themselves in a milieu or a neighborhood, not even to be poor among the poor; but simply because they were, in fact, poor and they were servants: because having the mentality, reasoning and reactions of the poor, they naturally included themselves in the way poor people lived. And Vincent de Paul encouraged them in this. All this is so true that he hesitated before accepting women of higher social standing into the Community. There is, then, a sort of continuity, a sort of natural solidarity between the poor and the Community, at the level of social class.

The Community was therefore founded by a poor person and initially with poor women. These origins, this social context profoundly marked the structures and the spirit of the Community of the Daughters of Charity.

Rustic, Gascon, poor... so many aspects of the personality of Vincent de Paul that we must know in order to grasp the richness and the special features of your Community. It would be good to be able to study him in greater depth and so learn more about his character. I will only recall here two particular features: his sensitivity and what, for want of a better term, we could call his pragmatism, or his respect for an experience and an event.

HIS SENSITIVITY

I recall it here for two reasons. In the first place, because it is often an aspect of Saint Vincent's personality that is not well known, as we feel over and over again the need to underline his mastery of himself, his prudence, his mortification, his modesty, etc. Secondly, because this aspect of Saint Vincent's personality certainly had a great influence on the style of relationships that he wanted in his communities.

You know quite well that we do not have two hearts, one for sensitivity, affection, friendship and the other for supernatural charity... one for family and friends, and the other for the poor! We have only one heart, and if Vincent de Paul loved those who are poor with so much tenderness and passion, it's because he had a human heart capable of loving and being passionate.

Yes, Vincent de Paul was sensitive, very sensitive. He loved his parents and his family tenderly, so much so that a simple visit back home disturbed him for three months: "... the day I departed, it was so painful for me to leave my poor relatives that I did nothing but weep all the way back, and wept almost constantly. Those tears were followed by the thought of doing something to assist them and to better their situation, to give this to one, that to another. My mind was deeply moved and I was sharing in this way what I had and what I didn't have. I say this to my own shame, and I say it because perhaps God allowed that to make me understand better the importance of the Gospel counsel of

which we're speaking. This troubling passion for improving the lot of my brothers and sisters plagued me for three months; it was a constant weight on my poor mind." (CCD XII, 180)

This text is from May 2, 1659, (Vincent was 78 years old), and is often quoted for the advice that he gives in the passage that follows, about detachment from family. Before thinking about this, we should recognize, in the telling of this remembered experience, the extreme sensitivity that Vincent manifests, a sensitivity that is found throughout his correspondence and to the last hours of his life. Several texts will help us know this better.

Around 1627, when the Congregation of the Mission was just starting and Louise de Marillac was not yet definitively settled in her vocation, Vincent wrote her, "...But let us go on to little brother Michel (the son of Louise de Marillac). That certainly concerns me, my dear daughter. I sympathize with his sufferings and those which you also have because of your love for him. Oh, well! Everything is for the best. What shall I tell you now about the one whom your heart loves so dearly in Our Lord? (N.B. this concerns Vincent himself) He is a little better, I think, but still suffering somewhat from his slight chills... Well now, I have said enough to my daughter. I must conclude by telling her that my heart will have a very fond remembrance of hers in that of Our Lord and solely for that of Our Lord..." (CCD I, 54-56).

Around the same time Vincent wrote to Louise de Marillac: "I am writing to you at about midnight and am a little tired. Forgive my heart if it is not a little more expansive..." (CCD I, 28). And a little later: "... I could not tell you how ardently my heart desires to see yours in order to know how this has come about in it, but I am quite willing to mortify myself for the love of God, in which love alone I desire yours to be immersed." (CCD I, 46)

It was no different with the Missioners. On March 22, 1652, after receiving a note from M. Lambert aux Couteaux, he wrote to him: "I received your letter of February 19th I was a little disappointed when I opened it and saw only half a page of writing. However, the little there was did not fail to give me great consolation, since it informed

me that you and your little community continue to enjoy good health." (CCD IV, 340). And to the same person he wrote on the following May 3: "I received your letter of April first. If you are happy that our correspondence should continue on a weekly basis, I can assure you that I feel the same way. To give you two proofs of this, as Thursday draws near I begin to get a little impatient to receive your letters because they are usually delivered to me on that day, and I was very disappointed not to get any by the next to last regular mail." (CCD IV, 370-371).

To his confrere of 25 years, M. Vincent wrote on May 10, 1647: "No, I cannot stop writing to you, even though I have no new reason to do so. For now, I use that of recommending that you take care of your health and of M. Blatiron's." (CCD III, 194).

A delicate and tender friendship for Louise de Marillac and likewise for Jeanne de Chantal, tenderness for his confreres and friends, here is Vincent de Paul as himself: a deeply sensitive person, capable of affection, tenderness and friendship. To discover him in this way opens new horizons; real horizons on his marvelous charity for the poor. This characteristic of the founder deeply marked his foundations. However, we have spoken much in our communities about modesty, prudence, propriety, particular friendships, detachment from family, etc.... and it is quite true that Saint Vincent spoke of these. But we have not recalled often enough and still do not recall sufficiently what he said, for example, about cordiality.

"...this joy you feel in your heart when you see someone you love and, in the second place, it shows in your expression; for, when a person has joy in her heart, she can't hide it; you see it clearly on her face. In the third place, we also express cordiality by friendly words... when a Sister approaches you, let your friendship for her be seen from your expression that you are pleased to see her. To act like that witnesses to the cordiality we have in our hearts by a certain joy we feel interiorly, which puts a kindly, gracious expression on our face while talking to our Sister or to other persons. That's called cordiality, and it's an effect of charity, you see; so that, if charity were an apple, cordiality would be its color. You sometimes see persons who have a rosy complexion that makes them beautiful and attractive. Now, if the apple were charity, its

Yes, Vincent de Paul was highly sensitive and remained so until his death. It is evident that this contributed to creating the style of relating to people that is found in your Community. It is moreover symptomatic that when speaking of local communities, Vincent most often used the term “family”; when, for example, he wrote to superiors, he asked for news...of their “little family”!

HIS PRAGMATISM or rather HIS AVAILABILITY

At the beginning and foundation of your Community, we should not picture Vincent de Paul shut up in his room, seated at a desk, with on his right the latest documents from the Council of Trent and on his left the constitutions of existing women’s religious orders, composing the rules that he thought of presenting to Marguerite Naseau, Barbe Angiboust, Marie Joly or some other Sister. For Vincent, everything flowed from life, event or experience, according to a phrase that he used at the end of his letter of August 5, 1642, to Bernard Codoing, the superior in Rome: “*Such is my belief and such is my experience.*” (CCD II, 316).

This is certainly a key phrase, a principle that allows us to touch the deepest level of his personality and of his foundations. Vincent de Paul was not a man of theories. He belonged more to the Old Testament prophets who read events and found God and God’s action in history.

God speaks and manifests himself in events. God was made manifest in Gannes-Folleville, in Châtillon-les-Dombes, in Vincent’s encounter with Louise de Marillac and with Marguerite Naseau. Vincent looked at the event, reflected on it, analyzed it and responded to it.

All these make it very difficult to understand a Vincentian foundation, to enter, for example, into an understanding of your Community and its spirit by way of principles, rules and structures because this is not the route that your founder took. It would have been entirely contrary to his mindset, to his type of personality and his type of holiness. Formulations, structures, and rules were always less important than experience and life. Not that he didn’t attach any importance to them;

God knows how often he reminded us of the rule. But for him, life experience and events were first and always the priority. He wrote to Monsieur Portail on February 14, 1648: “*I have no doubt that the Administrators intend to have the upper hand in everything. When they speak to you again about the rules for the hospital, please tell them, as if it were coming from you, that a good maxim for those whom God uses to establish holy and new works is to defer as long as possible making the regulations. Experience teaches that what is feasible at the beginning is sometimes harmful as things go on, or subject to troublesome inconveniences and, on this account, some Communities, like the Carthusians, did not draw up their Constitutions until a hundred years had passed.*” (CCD III, 272).

We must listen to life, respect life, and interpret life. We will see in following the history of your origins how Saint Vincent followed this principle and how your Community and your style were dictated by events, especially by the cries of the poor. Constituted in this way by the rhythm of experience and by the very heart of events, your Community found itself quite naturally adapted to the needs of the poor and of the times.

This has been a quick exploration of the man, Vincent de Paul. Too quick, alas! Believe me when I say that I would like to speak longer to you about this. What do we know about Vincent? However, a deeper understanding of his personality and his path to sanctify would be useful, so that his sons and daughters might know themselves better, identifying themselves and situating themselves more precisely in the world and the Church of today. To study Saint Vincent not like a historian stuck in the past but like a son or daughter, who in order to identify him or herself, wants to sensibly reflect on their relationship with a father; a relationship that has nothing alienating in it but, on the contrary, reveals itself to be profoundly liberating.

II. BIRTH OF A COMMUNITY

This rapid study of Vincent de Paul’s personality has already opened to us several horizons with regard to your Community. The fact that he was a countryman, a Gascon, poor, highly sensitive, attentive to events... all these characteristics have colored your life. This is particularly

true of the last named feature, as we will see in following the stages in your foundation. I am almost sure that after having travelled a little with Vincent de Paul from 1617 to 1633 you will come to the same conclusion as Vincent himself did: "It may be said in truth that it's God who established your Company. I was thinking about this again today and I said to myself, 'Did you ever dream of founding a Company of Sisters?' Oh no, not I! Was it Mlle Le Gras? (Louise de Marillac, co-founder of the Daughters of Charity) It was just as far from her mind. I can tell you in all truth... that it was God, and not I." (IX, 165)

However, we should not see in this sincere statement simply an example of humility! It's awful, this tendency to moralize about everything. No, it is not humility, it is faith! It is the evidence of having encountered God in events. Which events? Here they are... you be the judge.

1. CHATILLON-LES-DOBES (August 20th 1617)

It is from here that your Community came into being, with its spirit, its originality, its action and even its structures. You will see how the event was first of all intensely experienced by Vincent de Paul. Before giving rise to the idea of your Community, Châtillon was a significant step in the personal journey of Vincent de Paul, a response and a light for his anguished soul.

Think back! From 1581 to 1595 Vincent lived with his family. In 1595 he began his studies, and he was oriented to the priesthood, which, at the time, was the only "career" available to the poor. Let those who doubt this reread the letter from Vincent to his mother from February 1610. His goal is clearly expressed there: "... give me the means of an honorable retirement so that I may spend the rest of my days near you." (CCD I, 15). Vincent is just 29 years old! Almsgiver at the court of Queen Margot, he acquired an abbey that he thought would be profitable, and that's where everything gets complicated, where all sorts of challenges come one after the other and pile up.

He first thinks of becoming an Oratorian; then he is the pastor of Clichy and finally finds himself tutor in the de Gondy family. He experiences terrible temptations against faith that plunge him into darkness. It is in these circumstances that on January 25, 1617, an event revealed God to

him: Gannes-Folleville. On a personal level he intervenes very little; it is Madame de Gondy who prods him to action! Then he gradually understands and decides to abandon the honorable retirement he had in mind. So in order to return to a rural parish, where he would have daily contact with poor country folk, he goes to Châtillon-les-Dombes.

He had been there three weeks when a second event happened, occasioned by a sick, isolated and abandoned family. This time Vincent reacted right away and on his own. Since January 25th and the Folleville sermon, he had reflected; now he is ready to read and interpret the event.

This took place on August 20, 1617. Three days later (who said Vincent was slow?) the first confraternity was founded to respond to the needs of those living in poverty. This confraternity exercises its charity in people's homes, a revolutionary idea that would give birth to your Community. It was a confraternity of eight associates who gave themselves to God for the service of the poor, which is another element to which we will return. It is a confraternity that guarantees its services, corporally and spiritually, two adverbs that will be characteristics for you. Finally, it is a confraternity of people who recognize Jesus Christ himself in the person of the poor, in conformity with the Gospel affirmation of Matthew 25:31: "Whatever you do to one of the least of mine, you do to me."

All these points are essential for you; they define you, and are found already in the two first rules of Châtillon, that of August 23, 1617 (CCD, XIIIb, 3-5), and that of November 1617 (CCD, XIIIb, 8-22).

On August 20, 1617, he had not thought in any way about Daughters of Charity, and yet all the essentials are already in place. Your foundation was not a preconceived idea, not part of a master plan, but simply an event read and interpreted, a response to a question presented by a situation of poverty, a response to a call from God.

2. ENCOUNTER WITH LOUISE DE MARILLAC

At the end of the year 1617, giving in to the insistent pleading of Madame de Gondy, Vincent returned to the de Gondy household. He returned not

as a tutor but as a missionary. He set himself to going from village to village, preaching missions and establishing Confraternities of Charity. Around 1624 a woman asked him to be her spiritual director. She is an anguished, rather complicated person and entirely centered on personal and family problems. She, too, is far from thinking about Daughters of Charity.

It is interesting to read the wonderful correspondence, exchanged at the time, between Louise de Marillac, lost in her problems, and her dynamic director.

In his replies to her letters, Vincent certainly begins by speaking to her about the problems that she confronts. Then little by little, he speaks of the missions that he is undertaking and his encounters with persons living in poverty. From 1627 on, he begins to ask little favors of her: four shirts (CCD I, 29), two poor girls (CCD I, 35), twelve shirts (CCD I, 37). Gradually, Louise de Marillac comes out of herself and becomes interested in the poor.

In May 1629, without Vincent de Paul or Louise de Marillac suspecting it, a decisive change is made: Vincent asks his directee to make the visitation of the Confraternities of Charity spread out through the de Gondi territory. It's the famous first blue seal letter, or sending on mission: "Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works." (CCD I, 64, 65).

Although he only half expresses this, in Vincent's mind, Louise de Marillac has truly become the person in charge, the visitatrix of the confraternities: an important step toward the foundation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

3. THE CONFRATERNITY OF SAINT SAUVEUR (1629)

In the provinces the Confraternities multiplied very quickly and functioned well (cf. CCD XIIIb, 1-103). Then came a new and

interesting step toward the foundation of the Company: Paris wanted them! An initial confraternity was established in the parish of Saint-Sauveur, a second in Saint Nicolas de Chardonnet, the parish of Louise de Marillac, who is herself elected leader of the confraternity. It is at this time that events unfold quickly. Let's listen to Vincent recount this Parisian step.

"The Ladies at Saint-Sauveur had a Confraternity of Charity in their parish; they were serving the sick themselves, carrying the soup pots, medicine, and everything else. Since most of them were of the upper class, were married, and had families, they were often inconvenienced by carrying this soup pot, became disheartened, and talked of finding some servants who would do it for them." (CCD IX, 358). This is the first allusion to future Daughters of Charity: "some servants who would do it for them". It did not come from Vincent nor Louise de Marillac BUT from the ladies of Saint-Sauveur... "inconvenienced" by carrying this soup pot!

After Châtillon-les-Dombes, events came together providentially: the first Confraternity, the encounter with Louise de Marillac, the multiplication of the Confraternities, the sending of Louise to visit them, and finally, a reaction of discouragement on the part of the ladies of Saint-Sauveur, bring us to 1630.

4. THE INITIATIVE OF MARGUERITE NASEAU

Vincent said this about Marguerite Naseau: "When this good young woman heard of the project, she wanted to be part of it and was accepted by the Ladies." (Coste IX, 358). The situation was clear: "the ladies...talked of finding some servants who would do it for them;" this was the first time. The second time: "and this good young woman wanted to be part of it."

Vincent's testimony shows that it was Marguerite Naseau who took the initiative. She heard about the ladies' project, and she expressed the desire to respond to it.

This first step is the keystone of the foundation, the major event. It is not surprising that Vincent considered Marguerite Naseau "the

first Daughter of Charity" (CCD IX, 66), even if she died before the foundation of the Company.

The ladies did nothing more than request the aid of some servants who would undoubtedly be remunerated for carrying out their job, and here it is that a selfless vocation comes to light because in what had only been thought of as exercising a profession, Marguerite Naseau imposed the mystic reality of a VOCATION. Thanks to her, what could have been a fading out of the confraternities became considerable progress for them. Marguerite, in short, was not only a servant, but she presented herself as voluntary servant who gave herself to God for the service of the poor. She incarnates the providential prototype of the Daughter of Charity who would gradually bring Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac to the idea of founding a specific community.

5. THE INTUITION OF MADEMOISELLE LE GRAS

To understand the events that followed, it suffices to bring together three texts that complement and shed light on each other:

- CCD IX, 473: "We were so impressed with that poor young woman that we accepted others who presented themselves, and they did what she had done."
- CCD IX, 358: "The Ladies in other parishes wanted to do the same and asked me if there was any way..."
- CCD IX, 66: "She attracted to this, other girls whom she had helped to detach themselves from all superficial things and to embrace a devout life."

These three testimonies underline Marguerite Naseau's decisive role. The women asked for other servants, Marguerite attracted them, and they came forward, were accepted and placed in different parishes of Paris.

During this time Louise de Marillac was carrying out her visitations, and very quickly and this is not sufficiently well known, she decided to take Marguerite Naseau with her to the Confraternity of Saint Nicolas. (CCD IX, 194). The time they spent together in the same parish was, without doubt, essential for the events that followed. Living with Marguerite Naseau and seeing her serve those who were poor must

have helped Louise de Marillac to reflect, to look ahead, to imagine and perhaps, already, to desire.

Visiting the confraternities, she found here and there some village girls dispersed in the parishes of Paris. Who was the first, Louise or Marguerite, to say: why not come together from time to time? It probably was from a suggestion put forward one day that the Company of the Daughters of Charity was born.

Vincent recounted it himself: "A Charity was next set up in Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, then at Saint-Benoît, where there were some good country women. God blessed them so much that, from that time on, they began to meet and come together almost imperceptibly."

Note these expressions:

- "from this time on"; that is to say from 1630....
- "they began to come together and to assemble": this suggests spontaneous movement, corresponding to a very natural desire...
- "almost imperceptibly"; it seems that Vincent had not noticed it, at least at the beginning (CCD IX, 166)

However this may be, it is the very first indication of Community reported in your history: "They began to come together..." From an idea thrown out, by whom?, the village girls employed in the Parisian Confraternities came together from time to time. Where, then? In the home of Mademoiselle le Gras, it would seem.

Your Community, therefore, is not the result of a project. It sprang spontaneously from lived experience because it was just a few girls engaged in doing the same thing and who felt the need to come together and talk about it.

The group came together around an animator. Louise de Marillac appears, in effect, as the necessary leader of this type of spontaneous communal experience. It is so true that in 1631, after several reunions of this informal type, Vincent wrote to Louise de Marillac: "As for the rest, I beg you, once and for all, not to give it a thought until Our Lord makes it evident that He wishes it... You are trying to become the servant of those poor young women, and God wants you to be His

A significant text! The visitatrix of the confraternities feels more and more attracted to this group of girls who retain the spirit of Châtillon, and Vincent seems to take to the idea. He is first and foremost preoccupied with the general direction of the confraternities that are multiplying everywhere, and he counts on Louise de Marillac for this. She, more intuitive, sees how Marguerite Naseau is living; she has shared several times with the girls and remains persuaded that the future of the poor rests on them. However, she continues to carry out her role as visitatrix of the confraternities and carries out her visitations for two years while maintaining these meetings with the young women... imperceptibly!

In May 1633 Vincent wrote to Louise de Marillac: "*With regard to your employment, my mind is not yet enlightened enough before God concerning a difficulty which prevents me from seeing whether it is the Will of His Divine Majesty.*" (CCD I, 200). A solution is coming closer, but there is still an obstacle.

Three months later, another letter: "*I think your good angel did what you told me in the letter you wrote me. Four or five days ago, he communicated with mine concerning the Charity of your young women. It is true; he prompted me to recall it often and I gave that good work serious thought. We shall talk about it, God willing, on Friday or Saturday...*" (Coste I, 216).

By November 29th 1633, Vincent believes that the moment has arrived: Louise de Marillac becomes finally "the servant of these poor girls".

This is the magnificent history of your origins that were completely spontaneous. Don't think that after November 29th 1633, the rhythm is going to change and that it will just be a religious institution where all will be fixed, measured out, calculated. This was not Vincent's way of working, nor that of your community. To realize this it is enough for you to reread the precious conference of July 31, 1634 (CCD IX, 1-13) or the Rule of 1645 (CCD XIIIb, 123-127). Vincent remains true to your origins: the Daughters of Charity are servants and above all servants of the poor. So it is the poor who will be the ones who command, and the institution will remain always at their service, adapting itself to their

calls and their needs. From them comes the community's lifestyle, housing, manner of dress, which as Vincent says himself, were unheard of and inconceivable in the Church.

It is time to conclude. I should speak to you about community for the Daughters of Charity, of an institution as such. Yet up to now, I've only spoken of a man and history. Am I straying from my subject? I do not think so. Starting off as we did, from Vincent de Paul himself and from events, has allowed you, I think, to study the matter in the way that Vincent himself did.

Before leading to the foundation of your community, Châtillon was a decisive step in someone's life, their coming out of self-absorption and finding an equilibrium that built itself in a total gift to those who are poor. So we have to see a man, his discovery and his conversion. After this there was just a marvelous unfolding of events: the Confraternity of Châtillon, the Confraternities of the de Gondi lands, the progressive entrance into the scene of Louise de Marillac, the two years of informal reunions that passed almost unperceived, and finally November 29, 1633.

This is how you were born; your Community came into being, not from well drawn up or preconceived plans, but first of all from the life, personality and spiritual journey of Vincent (Châtillon and the confraternities), from the initiative of Marguerite Naseau, and from the intuition of Louise de Marillac: which gives you three founders, without our being able to say which one played the most determining role. You were born from these informal and spontaneous meetings, you were born of the sharing and exchanges among Marguerite, Barbe and Marie Joly, independently of all structures and directives.

What is certain and illuminating for understanding your Community, is that your three founders encountered each other because of and around a common point: the service of Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. This was the MOTIVE for the foundation of the confraternities after Châtillon; this was the MOTIVE for Louise de Marillac's commitment to the confraternities; this was the MOTIVE for the initiative of Marguerite Naseau in the parish of Saint-Sauveur.

It is this common link that we are going to develop, because this is what gives your Community its character of being an APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY.

III. AN APOSTOLIC GROUP

In studying the **apostolic** nature of a group or judging its apostolic value, we usually begin today by considering its insertion and questioning the **in** and the **with**. How does this group situate itself and to what point does it insert itself in the Church, in the specific pastoral work of the Church or the area, etc.? This is the first question and the first test.

Then comes the second question and test. How, and to what point, does this group work and live with others in the pastoral project? Often we stop at this, and we think or declare that such and such a community is apostolic because it has its place in the pastoral work of the whole area and because it works and lives authentically with other active members of a local area, for example. So today we have no problem in seeing a community as apostolic simply because it lives in low-income housing projects, takes part in neighborhood meetings, and is more or less closely united with others; while one might question the apostolic character of a community that lives in a hospital or a school.

There is a lot of truth in this but also some wrong judgment or illusion, and today it takes a certain courage to say it or remind others about it

Certainly it is not possible to be apostolic without being **IN**, in the Church. Only the Church is apostolic, only she received the mission to announce Jesus Christ, and it is only in the measure that one is in the Church that one participates in her apostolic character.

Neither is it possible to be apostolic without being **WITH**, with the bishop and all those engaged in the local Church or in an area. All this is clear, irrefutable, and anyone who doubts this should go back to the documents of Vatican II.

But what is often overlooked is that to be authentically **IN** and **WITH**, it is important for the Daughters of Charity to first of all be themselves, to be themselves together, in order to constitute a Community/

Communion, without forgetting, of course, to be at the same time a Community/For. It's only in this way that they really deserve to be called an "apostolic group".

A. A COMMUNITY "COMMUNION"

The historical review of your origins showed us Vincent de Paul moving from the idea of a community among us, to a community for, thereby shifting the center of the community reality from the interior to the exterior. To paraphrase an expression that has become famous, we might say that for Vincent de Paul, the community is not men or women who look at themselves, but men or women who together, look in the same direction, towards those who are poor: "*It is for this*, affirms Saint Vincent, *that God called you together, it is for this that God created your Company.*" (CCD IX, p. 97) What is essential is expressed in CCD IX, p. 432: "*If he asks you who you are and whether you are nuns... tell him that you are not... say that you are poor Daughters of Charity who have given yourselves to God for the service of the poor.*" We will try to deepen our awareness of this essential characteristic of community for the Daughters of Charity, but first of all we recognise that misunderstandings and tensions could come from divergences on this level, differences that are all the more serious given that it is perhaps here that we find the essential.

In order to understand and live in your community you must, like your Founder, move on from the idea of 'among us' to the concept 'for others'. We must move away from a dichotomy (community on the one hand...activity on the other) to unity, that is to say, a community for service in which everything is conceived with that in mind. This is the important basis of the apostolic nature of a community of Daughters of Charity.

There is much talk today of a crisis of identity, and it is too often imagined that to be authentically **with**, you must become or be **like**. For a priest, for example, to be with people at a deep level, he would have to become like them (work, dress, household, etc.). I know that motivations are complex and nuanced, and I only evoke here a rather widespread tendency in order to state our problem. In the same way, for a Daughter of Charity to authentically be with the active members

of a sector or with the personnel of a hospital, would require that she become more and more like them.

After a long period when the different states of life, the hierarchical levels, the institute and functions, took pleasure in emphasising what differentiates and distinguishes them, we are in another, or a completely contrary situation, where there is a tendency to play down and relativize differences for the good of common action. In the name of the same pastoral goal and in one or the same struggle for others, it is easy enough to confuse, as in the good old days we confused unity and uniformity.

Uniformity, at least when it is not well understood, and that was often the case, means to be LIKE: with as little difference as possible, to resemble each other as much as possible in life style, dress, eating, praying, etc.

Unity, on the other hand, is BEING YOURSELF and BEING WITH. It is clearly more difficult, but so much more worthwhile.

It is as Daughters of Charity that you must enter the pastoral work of the Church; with priests, lay people, organisers, religious and all who commit themselves to working for the salvation of the world and the liberation of people. Collaboration means putting your whole self at the service of others, at the service of those who are poor. Yes, I said: all your being, your personality, your vocation, your charism...

What I have just said about individuals applies also to communities. In order to be apostolic, a community of the Daughters of Charity must be with everyone and especially with those who work for the poor. It should be in the Church and in its pastoral mission. But... to be authentically with and in, it must BE ITSELF and BE ITSELF TOGETHER.

This means that your Community is first of all constituted by the conscious awareness and communication of what is essential to your vocation as Daughters of Charity. We will consider from a communal angle what we just mentioned about the individual. The Community is a communion in the same consecration, the same relationship with

those who are poor, the same mystique of service.

1. UNION IN THE SAME CONSECRATION

Yes, I did say: in the same consecration. It could be that among the Daughters of Charity there may be two ways of perceiving and living consecration. This fundamental divergence could have serious repercussions, not only on the level of sisterly relationships, but also on the image that the Community projects of itself and the way it sees itself in the world.

Consecration or service? This is often the way the problem is approached. To say, for example, that priority should be given to service is sometimes perceived as a rejection, or at least a diminution or questioning of consecration, vows and the spiritual life, prayer... It is said, with some exaggeration, that it is putting activism before prayer, man before God.

What do we find in the writings and the conduct of Saint Vincent? First of all, nobody can deny that from the time of Marguerite Naseau, the Daughters of Charity were always totally given to God. Let us understand what this means: I did not say that the Daughters of Charity always pronounced vows. That is what religious do, and not what Daughters of Charity do.

Unfortunately we do not have time to dwell on this point. But what cannot be ignored is that from the earliest days of the Company, in order to be a Daughter of Charity, a woman had to give herself totally to God: "To be a Daughter of Charity is to love our Lord tenderly and steadfastly..." (CCD IX, 466). Your identity is inscribed above all in this relationship with Jesus Christ; your Community is above all a shared faith and a total gift lived together. For those around you this should be a witness to and proclamation of Jesus Christ. We will say in a moment that in line with your consecration and your vocation, local communities should in no way resemble convents. On the contrary, they should appear as groups of believers, cells of faith in Jesus Christ. Those who live among you must see and know that you are Daughters of Charity by your love of God: "Daughters of Charity, that is, daughters of God." (CCC IX, p. 50)

You see, then, that your relationship with God and total gift to Jesus Christ are essential to your vocation as foundations of your Community, and it is evident that this relationship must be deepened and expressed in prayer. But according to Saint Vincent, consecration for the Daughter of Charity to God, has this particular character; it is for the service of those who are poor. And this FOR changes everything, it orients and unifies everything. It is the unifying element between consecration and service. Remember your identity card: "poor girls totally given to God for the service of the poor".

Saint Vincent did not say: girls who give themselves to God and serve the poor, as if he made a distinction between consecration and service. He combines the two because his thinking and his wishes come from the same impulse and movement. It is certainly to God that a sister gives herself, but she gives herself to God in order to serve those who are poor. It is a consecration with a specific orientation, end, and apostolate. Note that you live all this without putting it into words. It is enough to ask a Daughter of Charity if she entered the Community for God or for the poor, she will be confused, which for me is the sign that you are still faithful to your identity card.

However, a temptation has threatened and still threatens your Community, that of unconsciously replacing **for** by **and**. For deliberately puts the focus of your Community outside of itself, in the poor, while **and** makes the Community a reality in itself, an absolute, an "among ourselves" that is alien to apostolic life.

Believe me, I am not making a play on words. These are two totally different perspectives, one of which, that of the **and**, would not be long in threatening the unity of the Daughters of Charity if it prevailed. It would tend to make the Community a place of turning inward, something jealously preserved, another world that is quite distinct and separate from that of service, separated sometimes to such a degree that moving the priority from service to the community, one would experience a sort of split personality that would give the impression that you had become religious.

However, the community cannot be regarded as the place of consecration when service is not part of it. For you the community

is the place of consecration for service. The service of those who are poor must remain at the center of the community; they are the reason for the existence of your community: "This is why God has brought you together and why he formed your Company" (CCD IX, 97).

You are together, you are a community for the service of the poor. Given totally to God and consecrated, certainly, but "for"! Here is the fundamental basis of any community of Daughters of Charity. And when I say: communion to the same consecration, this means communion to being FOR, that there is unanimity on this characteristically Vincentian way of seeing yourselves. This unanimity should obviously be reflected in the particular style of your communities, it should be visible to all, and especially to those who are poor. They should understand that the community is not a citadel, a secret and inaccessible world, but the place of meeting their servants. I cannot enter here into detail, but you know very well that the FOR that characterizes you should be manifested and expressed in a thousand ways: in your attitudes, your reflexes, your mentalities, and even in more material ways, in the layout and arrangement of your places of residence. We would do well to reflect on an event that, to all appearances, is quite trivial. It was discussed during the first Council meeting of the Company on June 28th 1646. It concerned the arrangement of a parlor in the Mother House! (CCD XIII b p. 249).

2. UNITY IN THE SAME RELATIONSHIP WITH THE POOR

Every community of the Daughters of Charity should also be characterized by a common relationship with those who are poor. When Vincent speaks to Daughters of Charity about the poor, three words come up time and again in his discourse, one adjective and two adverbs: **all**, **everywhere** and **truly**. He means to talk about all those who are poor, everywhere they are to be found, but only the truly poor. We will take each of these words and emphasize the repercussions that they should have on the service given by your communities and even on your lifestyle.

A unity of relationship with ALL who are poor.

You are very familiar with the foundational text found in CCD X, 92:

... the Sisters at the Hôtel-Dieu have as their aim to work first of all at their own perfection, and after that to care for the patients; this, in a certain sense, is doing the same as you do; however, they have no Rule obliging them to assist everyone without distinction, that is, all persons who are poor, and you're bound to be always ready to practice charity, without exception of persons or places. God chose you for that...

The text is clear, and Saint Vincent frequently recalls this fundamental characteristic of your relationship with those who are poor. A community of Daughters of Charity is a community for all the poor, without exception. This universalism of perspective, preoccupation, action and welcome is essential for every community of Daughters of Charity. It is true that from the time of Vincent de Paul, each local community has had its own identity, its professional or pastoral specialization, hospitals, schools, dispensaries, etc. Furthermore, communities are often marked by the milieu in which they are inserted: a working-class, rural, or neighborhood setting. We have also seen how the first Daughters of Charity were inserted in Saint-Sauveur or Saint-Benoit parish 29 days out of 30! However, specialization should never be contrary to the universalism of perspective and welcome for all those who are poor, whether these be peasants, workers, marginalized people, handicapped, elderly, prisoners or children. Every poor person should feel welcomed by a community of Daughters of Charity, whatever its specialization.

The society in which we live is often compartmentalized, harsh and intolerant. Without being neutral and uncommitted, a community of Daughters of Charity should jealously safeguard its universal availability for all those who are poor: "you should, without exceptions either of persons or places, always be ready to exercise charity. God chose you for this." It is at the level of this universality that "Communities/sisters" should be found, one that is very engaged in the world of the worker and a hospital or school community, for example. It doesn't matter what service is offered **provided** it is for the poor and the truly poor.

A community in relationship with the poor EVERYWHERE:

"The nuns of the Place Royale have as their principal aim the assistance

of the poor sick women whom they admit into their hospital (they don't take men) and, because those are their Rules, they believe they're working out their salvation by observing them. "But you, dear Sisters, have given yourselves to God principally to live as good Christian women, to be good Daughters of Charity, to work at the virtues proper to your end, and to assist the sick poor, not in one house only, like those in the Hôtel-Dieu, but everywhere, as Our Lord used to do, for He made no exceptions; He assisted everyone who came to Him for help..." (CCD X, 102)

Everywhere! In this adverb, so frequently used by Vincent, there is the idea of movement, an echo of the experience at Châtillon and a charity that goes out into the home... You were born from that charity in motion, which does not wait for the poor to come to it, but which goes out to them: these are servants who must be mobile.

It would be interesting to make a study in the writings of Saint Vincent on the Daughters of Charity on a theme like this: The Daughter of Charity and the verbs TO GO and TO COME! It is interesting to notice that when Vincent imagines or describes a Daughter of Charity, how often she is in the street, carrying something on her back or in her arms: "... a Daughter of Charity is always mixing with people... out of the house and among the people most of the time..." (CCD X, p. 363). "There is no one who goes among the people like the Daughters of Charity... women who go and come..." (CCD X, p. 527)

You know very well the thinking behind your way of life; this ought to influence your communities: communities invented for movement, for disruption, for unpredictable situations and emergencies. Not a community where you settle down, but a community from which you go out towards those who are poor: a base for departure, a springboard, a beehive, the runway of service. It is not a train station either, of course! Because more than other people, the Daughter of Charity needs a place where she can regain her physical, moral and spiritual strength. You understand that it has a specific mentality, perspective, and let us say a spirituality; but a spirituality that should translate into a lifestyle, into the hierarchy of your values, and even into the way you organize things on a material level. A community designed for movement...

A community in relationship with those who are TRULY poor.

You remember the response made by Sister Marguerite Moreau to the Queen of Poland who wanted her for her service: "Ah, Madame, what are you saying? There are only three of us to serve the poor, and in your kingdom you have plenty of other people more capable than we are to serve Your Majesty. Allow us, Madame, to do here what God is asking of us, as we do elsewhere." (CCD IX, 463) This reply won the admiration of M. Vincent and communities of Daughters of Charity must repeat it more and more in our own times, and say to the local bishop, the vicar general or the area administrators, "Please allow us to do here what God asks of us, "to serve the poor." As I said just now, your service must have a universal aspect to it but at the same time it must be exclusive, serving only the poor. And M. Vincent added, "those who are truly poor." According to this criterion, an authentic community of Daughters of Charity has to show union and unanimity. Whether this community is dealing with working people and another one is serving country folk, another one working in a hospital or a school, this should not be detrimental to unity. From the time of St Vincent and the earliest days of the Company, there has always been pluralism and an ever increasing number of options. On the other hand, any tensions or lack of balance will endanger unity since this will distance you from those who are genuinely poor. This preference for the poor and your working only for the poor, will be for you an identifying sign and it is in this that the Daughters of Charity will recognize one another. It is also the way in which the world will recognize you.

There will, of course, be demands made by working with others in the apostolate, the urgent needs of the locality, priorities, and filling in for other people.. But you cannot, even on a temporary basis, be untrue to what you are, or compromise what is essential to your vocation.

The great danger in working in the apostolate is that of standardization. This means that in a given area, each person can be called on indiscriminately to take on a particular responsibility or commitment, no matter what their charism may be, simply to meet the urgent needs and priorities of the area or diocese. In such cases communities must show the same courage as Marguerite Naseau or Barbe Angiboust,

"Please allow us to do here what God is asking of us." (CCD IX, p. 463)

This courage must be evident, too, in every local community which makes a continual review of the commitments and activities of each of its members. This takes place in an atmosphere of transparency and sincerity which will remove any temptation to too easily justify the status quo! The community must be obsessed with concern for the poor and this concern has to be shared by all and be ongoing; this will soon be seen as a grace of conversion.

We have just analyzed the specific, identifying and unifying relationship that the Daughters of Charity have with the poor; a relationship that is for **all the poor, wherever they are to be found, and that these people be genuinely poor.** More than customs and structures, it is in a common fidelity to these basic convictions that a community of Daughters of Charity is built and flourishes "according to the mind of Saint Vincent."

3. COMMUNION IN THE SAME MYSTIQUE OF SERVICE

This is the third level of communion: the same mystique of service. We don't need to emphasize Vincent's insistence on this point. For him the word "servant" was the most accurate and complete synonym for Daughter of Charity. Marguerite Naseau committed herself to working in the Confraternity of Saint-Sauveur as a servant, sharing the living conditions and duties of all servants at that time.

It was the same for all who followed Marguerite Naseau. The first Daughters of Charity were no more than servants, and this situation put them naturally among the poor. They didn't have to deal with the problem of social insertion or find a way of being present among the poor: they were there already.

This being said, Vincent gave the Daughters of Charity a mystique of service, which should create deep unity in your communities. If we continue in the way that we studied your particular relationship with the poor, we could similarly deepen our understanding of this mystique of service by referring to three typical expressions from

the lips of Vincent de Paul: "In the person of..." "nevertheless..." "corporally and spiritually". Each of these terms allows us to enter into the very heart of your vocation.

"In the person of..." "You serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor." Since Châtillon this has been the basis of Vincent's action. It is the conviction that animates Marguerite Naseau, and it is around this conviction that the first community of Daughters of Charity was built.

What happened at Châtillon was experienced and interpreted in the light of Matthew 25:31. This Gospel text is the basis of Community and characterizes its spirit and its spirituality. "You will go ten times a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day you will meet God." (CCD IX, 199) Vincent de Paul is so convinced of this that he dared to say that in leaving prayer or Mass to go and serve the poor, you lose nothing...so much does he appreciate the reality and truth of Jesus Christ's presence in the poor.

Review of life has almost become the key element of community sharing. It would be interesting to show how today it matches what Saint Vincent wanted and what the first communities of Daughters of Charity lived. Unfortunately, too often our sharing remains superficial. We have indeed learned to look at reality, and this was not a luxury: What poor people have I encountered? What is their family, professional and social situation? What values do they live by? What is their struggle? In this way we have learned to look and learn. But for Daughters of Charity, a review of life should go further in order to attain the Vincentian mystique that should animate the community. Was I able to recognize Jesus Christ in them, and how? It is at this level of questioning and searching that all the members of a community should come together. The commitment may be different for a social worker, a nurse, a teacher, an older sister working in the kitchen or at reception, but the searching for and meeting of Jesus Christ in the poor are common to all. It is only at this level that communion will be possible and effective among you.

In the expression "in the person of" the personal dimension of the poor person is also highlighted. We do not have time to develop this aspect. However I must say that in our world that is more and more socialized,

where justice and charity take on an increasingly administrative aspect, every community of Daughters of Charity, whatever its service, should remember its origins. It is because, in Saint-Sauveur and the Parisian Confraternities of Charity, the charity of Jesus Christ had lost contact with the person of the poor, that Marguerite Naseau and her companions intervened, and your Company was born. Obviously there is no question of returning to the pastoral and social methods of the 17th century, nor even those of 15 or 20 years ago. But is not the greatest demand of the poor today, of marginalized people, for example, to be recognized as human beings? Do not forget that you should be among those most attentive to the cry of those who are poor today.

"Nevertheless..."

"The service of the poor must be preferred to everything else." (CCD IX, 171). This is a typically Vincentian declaration about service. This principle should also have profound repercussions on your communities and life style.

First of all everyone in the community has to agree on this priority and have the same hierarchy of values, otherwise there is a risk of endemic tensions and frequent conflicts. We go back again to what I said to you before about your consecration. If in a community there are Daughters of Charity who are consecrated to God and serve the poor and others who are consecrated to God but for the service of those who are poor, they will never arrive at unanimity about a hierarchy of values. Some will place service before all else while others will priorities regularity or practices. Some will wish for a way of life designed in function of the poor and service while other will want a more religious or convent-like style.

It is true that Saint Vincent never missed an opportunity to recall the observance of the rule, and he often denounced capriciousness, egoism and independence. Yet it is no less certain that he placed the service of the poor, around which he conceived and organized your communities, at the head of your hierarchy of values.

"Corporally and spiritually"

These two adverbs designate a final level of communion and unanimity for Daughters of Charity as well as the final essential aspect of your mystique of service. Here again we find an echo of Châtillon! These two adverbs can already be found in the introduction to the rule of the confraternity in November, 1617 (CCD XIIIb, 8).

Today many questions arise about service and especially corporal service. Obviously many things have evolved since Saint Vincent, and it is certainly true that centuries of good work that was somewhat paternalistic have given the terms "service, corporal service" a pejorative and anachronistic connotation. What was important for Vincent de Paul, and remains today a duty for each community of Daughters of Charity, is the combination of two concerns: corporal and spiritual service, or to use the language of your constitutions, human and Christian promotion of those who are poor, of all those who are poor and of all aspects of the poor person.

A Daughter of Charity, whatever her role, her profession and social or professional appointment, remains a worker for the Gospel, a Daughter of the Church. Each community of the Daughters of Charity should be a cell of evangelization, the place where you take up the promotion of the poor person in his or her totality, as a human person, a child of God, and one of Jesus Christ's special ones. In the community, there will undoubtedly be those, who by reason of their role and perspective, will be more attentive to human promotion and fighting for their rights; others, because of their formation and their convictions, will be more concerned with salvation and evangelization. However, the implantation in general should be the place where, thanks to sharing and apostolic reflection, each day the synthesis of two forms of service at Châtillon is born anew: a synthesis that is especially needed in the Church of today.

It is time to finish. When speaking about the local community of the Daughters of Charity, we did not start from structures or principles but from a man: Vincent de Paul, his personality, his path to God and your origins. We have seen a community imperceptibly arise from the life and service of those who are poor and constitute itself in the life and service of the poor. It is not surprising that your group is so oriented outward and also centered on those who are poor. For you, community

is not first of all a question of "among-us" but "together FOR". In order to understand a little better this particular type of community, we referred to the identity card that Saint Vincent gave you: "If you are asked who you are, say that you are poor girls given to God for the service of the poor." (CCD IX, p. 432) Of course, with regard to your community, we have not only the poor to consider. We will now study the aspect of "among-us," that is to say the relationships, the exchanges, and sharing inside your communities as Saint Vincent saw them; we will discover some very interesting and sometimes astonishing things.

I do not, however, regret having put the emphasis so much on thinking about your communities in relation to the service of the poor and for the poor. After all, it is always right to begin from the center, and for you the center is in the person of the poor, that is to say in Jesus-Christ in the person of the poor because "that is why God has brought you together..." (CCD IX, 97).

B. A COMMUNITY "FOR"

When we speak about community, we think spontaneously of an internal reality, so internal that it holds a mystery... It's all that happens behind the "community" door which of course remains closed!

There are times of working with others... of "among-us" life... There are reserved places... more or less accessible to the "goyim" (Jewish word for Gentiles)... There are procedures, responsibilities, initiatives, relationships and reactions that a Daughter of Charity has for people outside... AND, those she has for the sisters in the house!

When people approach a community they often have the impression of entering another world, another life, one that is rather removed from life because the community is a world made up only of Daughters of Charity. Community: is "among us"!

Certainly, the "among-us" aspect exists and should exist. It is the same in a family, in the home of a worker. We will talk about this later.

However, for Vincent, this was not "top priority". What's more, to approach community from this angle is inevitably to misconstrue and

For Saint Vincent, community is never an absolute: it is a privileged and necessary means to achieve a better service of those who are poor. The only reason there is this "among us" is because of those who are poor and their service: *"You must also remember that your principal concern, which God asks especially of you, is to be very attentive in serving the poor, who are our lords. Oh yes, Sisters! They are our masters. That's why you must treat them gently and kindly, reflecting that this is why God has brought you together; and why He formed your Company."* (CCD IX, 97).

It could not be clearer: you are brought together for the service of those who are poor. This is the Vincentian basis of your type of community, which should be found in your spirit, your reflexes, your mentality, your behavior in the local community and even in the material layout of your establishments.

We are going to try to quickly see the demands and the style of such a community as well as the way in which you should be seen and perceived from the outside, taking into account this "for".

Of course, this is not to transform your homes into refuges for the poor, into welcome centers or some sort of residence for the people. We rarely find this type of situation in the life of Vincent de Paul except at moments of great national crises. Let us add that this occurred especially with the priests, and for a reason: the Daughters of Charity were living in rented rooms and a single house! Furthermore, note that in today's social context, such initiatives would be misconstrued.

1. Your communities are places where women given to God for the service of those who are poor, are gathered.

According to Vincent, a Daughter of Charity who hasn't given herself completely to God could not be there. This has been a constant since the time of Marguerite Naseau.

2. Your community is a faith reality, something that is visible because lived, and yet your local community is not a convent.

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Echoes of the Company

Not that you should have anything against convents: they are very useful, but they are not for you. Consecration? Yes. Consecration to God? Obviously. But consecration **for**. And if this consecration should be lived and visible, the "for" also should be lived and visible.

However, a sort of dichotomy has always tended to operate. The "for" would only be for the hours and places of service; it would be outside of the community, the latter becoming the place of and time for consecration, the "convent" designed for the religious perfection of its members.

From this point of view, you were born out of a sort of reaction to the behavior of the Ladies. From that time each local community of the Daughters of Charity should be, and be seen as, a sign of faith in Jesus Christ, as the sign of total self-giving to Jesus Christ, in the locality where it is implanted. This presupposes that the community is a meeting place of believers, "of good Christians," as Vincent said: a faith reality and a visible reality, without being ostentatious or overzealous. "Daughters of Charity, that is to say daughters of God."

Don't anyone say now that I am questioning consecration, unless it is religious consecration. The latter could change everything in your community and make it unrecognizable. It would tend to make the community a place of jealously guarded self-fulfillment, a world completely different from the work place, one where really very few things bring to mind the service of the poor except, for example, the community room where the photos of Most Honored Father and Most Honored Mother are enthroned, and where order reigns, an impressive void. We must not be too quick to draw conclusions from appearances, and simply see that it is very religious and rather like a convent. This material setting could influence people's outlook and reactions. Remember the story of the parlor!

Your communities are, therefore, meeting places of women completely given to God "for," and this "for" should be what someone feels more than anything else when they come in your door.

3. Your communities are at the service of the truly poor; they should therefore be universal and yet exclusively for the poor:

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"The Sisters at the Hôtel-Dieu have as their aim to work first of all at their own perfection, and after that to care for the patients; this, in a certain sense, is doing the same as you do; however, they have no Rule obliging them to assist everyone without distinction, that is, all persons who are poor; and you are bound to be always ready to practice charity, without exception of persons or places. God chose you for that." (CCD X, 92).

In Vincent de Paul's time it was clear. We do not choose our poor, we serve them as they are: sick in their homes or the hospital, orphans or the aged, wounded soldiers or galley slaves, etc. This extraordinary versatility delighted Vincent who considered it the grace of the Company: "...you must be ready to serve the poor anywhere that you will be sent" (CCD X, 104). At the local level, he hoped for versatile communities.

Social and pastoral situations have certainly changed and specialization has become a necessity, just as competence has. Milieus are different, and you must take into account laws about insertion and the demands of specific neighborhoods. Yet each community of Daughters of Charity should always be, and be seen as, a sign for the poor whether these are handicapped, prisoners, migrants, country folk, workers, children or the elderly. This is a point on which each of your communities can evaluate itself from time to time. Otherwise, it could lose an essential aspect of its Vincentian identity: universality of perspective and heart.

But universalism with exclusivity, which corresponds to Vincent's experience and his progress toward the truly poor. He regularly reminded sisters of this. In a letter to Sister Marguerite Moreau, he advised her to remind even the Ladies of it: "Allow us, Madame, to do here what God is asking of us, as we do elsewhere." (CCD IX, 463)

In every pastoral plan and each pastoral insertion, there is a risk of standardization. What should count first for a Daughter of Charity: the urgings and priorities of a diocese or sector OR RATHER the demands of a charism?

An important and difficult question today, but fortunately rather simple as far as you are concerned. For the Church of Vatican II: priority is

given to the poor. It would be a little shocking if in some situation a community of Daughters of Charity was brought into a pastoral plan which would distance them from the poor! It could always take up, if not the terms, at least the words of Sister Marguerite Moreau: "God has called us to serve the poor."

4. Your communities should also be relay communities. The novel feature of the Daughters of Charity on which Vincent de Paul probably insisted most was your mobility.

After visits to the house at Chatillon, you were designed for movement: "... you go through the streets, and also in the houses where you are sent to look after the sick... a Daughter of Charity is always mixing with people." (CCD X, 362-363) "...They will consider that, since their ministries oblige them to be out of the house and among the people most of the time ... they need greater perfection..." (CCD X, 527) "... The Daughters of Charity are not nuns, but Sisters who come and go like seculars..." (CCD VIII, 277). Some have called this the theme of the streets or the schism of the Daughter of Charity. You understand that with such directives given by the Founder, and with such a mobile vocation, the local community of the Daughters of Charity has to be quite a different thing from a convent as a place for sisters to settle down and take refuge! This would be an appropriate moment to bring up again the famous description: "They have for monastery the houses of the sick, for chapel the parish church, for cloister the streets of the city or the wards of the hospital." (CCD X p. 71) Such is your convent and your cloister.

Your community should therefore think of itself more like a relay, a pause between two errands or departures, rather than as a place and a time of stability, installation or residence. Your implantation ought to be a hive of activity, where you enter and from which you leave continually. This characteristic of the community should also influence its mentality, ambiance, reactions and even its organization and layout.

5. Your Communities must safeguard priorities.

An essential element of a community's unity is unanimity with regard to the same hierarchy of values, strong agreement on this point. It

is also what gives it its identity. A contemplative community, for example, gives priority to praise and adoration, and this should be seen and felt when you come to it; you would perceive a certain quality of recollection, of silence, a particular form of dress and liturgical gestures.

With regard to communities of Daughters of Charity, Saint Vincent specified on many occasions: "Service of the poor should be preferred above all things" (cf. CCD IX, 215-216). In order for his words to be properly understood, he gave detailed examples, comparing the duty of prayer and service, the commandment of the Sabbath and service, the necessity of an annual retreat and service. By doing this, he inculcated in his communities the hierarchy of values proper to the Daughters of Charity, there must absolutely be unanimous agreement of a community about these values that give it its identity that will be recognized by people outside. Unfortunately there is the danger of thinking this is confrontational or a want of faith if it is not ranked first in traditional values.

6. Communities for evangelization.

This, too, is a point on which Saint Vincent insisted: corporal and spiritual service. It's the pastoral combination of the experience at Gannes and Châtillon. It's a holistic approach to the poor person. Paul VI and Vatican II drew attention to all men and the whole man; Vincent de Paul wanted to serve all the poor and every aspect of the poor person.

In the 17th century, this was an unheard of and revolutionary idea; Vincent was aware of this and said: "So then, you must take the sick poor two kinds of food: corporal and spiritual, that is, to tell them some good thought from your meditation--five or six words to prompt them to fulfill their Christian duty or to practice patience. God has reserved this for you. Neither church history nor secular history states that anyone has ever done what you are doing--with the exception of Our Lord--which gives you great reason to humble yourselves." (CCD IX, 467) And elsewhere: "We wouldn't, in fact, be doing enough for God and the neighbor if we only gave the sick poor, food and medicine, and if we didn't assist them, in accordance with God's plan, by the spiritual service we owe them. When you serve poor persons in this

way, you'll be true Daughters of Charity, that is to say, daughters of God, and you'll be imitating Jesus Christ." (CCD IX, 50)

A community that orients itself either to human promotion only or evangelization only, risks dangerously distorting its image and compromising its spirit and identity. What is important and specific, is the way that human promotion and evangelization are combined in a project, a concern and commitment. This is an area where you must continually be reviewing your communities: "When you serve poor persons in this way, you'll be true Daughters of Charity."

7. A community of servants.

There is no need to recall the vast number of texts on this point. The word "servant", as we said earlier, is synonymous with Daughter of Charity. Today, the word has lost much of its original meaning and could even be ambiguous. In the time of Vincent de Paul, it placed someone designated as servant, in a specific position on the social ladder and created among them and those like them, genuine solidarity. In contrast to the word "Ladies", it implied a close relationship with the poor person. The servant was not above the poor; she didn't know any better than they did what they needed; she was not an educator, much less a benefactor. On the contrary, in relation to the poor, the servant found herself in some way dependent on them.

In the same way today, the Daughter of Charity is not WITH the poor nor LIKE the poor. She is FOR them, which simply means being at their service.

For Saint Vincent, it was an attitude dictated by the Kingdom, and by the new concept of people and the world, taught by Jesus in the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount.

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