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The Role of Women and the Vincentian Culturescape

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The Role of Women and the Vincentian Culturescape

By
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Betty Ann McNeil, D.C.
Courtesy of The Hay-Vincentian Leadership Project

A “mystical arsenal” or spiritual taproot fills hearts with compassion, generating dynamism for the Vincentian mission.¹ Compassion characterizes the Christian Catholic tradition of Vincent de Paul (1581–1660, canonized 1737) and Louise de Marillac (1591–1660, canonized 1934), whose charism, or unique gifts of the Holy Spirit, for building up the body of Christ, has inspired women and men to live out their mission for almost 400 years. Louis Abelly, Vincent’s first biographer, described his life as focusing on poor persons, immersed in “a constant exercise of charity toward” them.² Contemporaries recognized Vincent as carrying out his mission with integrity, moderation, and wisdom.

This paper considers examples of the primary strategies and resources that Vincentian leaders have used to empower others to commit themselves to mission and to communicate the founding charism across boundaries of time and cultures. My premise is that effective Vincentian leadership enables the charism of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac to be expressed, individually and corporately, and sustains it at a level of vitality which facilitates its transmission in creative fidelity to the founders’ tradition. In particular, Vincentian women have played significant roles in this process, thus shaping the Vincentian culturescape.

Vincent as Leader

Vincent ranks paramount among servant leaders. He fostered an arena of evangelical service oriented toward servant friendship with and for those whose needs were greatest.³ Vincent’s approach to

¹ “Then, Sisters, you should nurse those poor sick with great charity and gentleness so that they may see you are going to their assistance with a heart filled with compassion for them.” #100, “To Four Sisters Who Were Sent to Calais,” 4 August 1658, *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, 4:168. (Hereinafter cited as *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*). “Mental prayer is the impregnable rampart which will protect the missionaries from all sorts of attacks. It is like a mystical arsenal, a tower of David, which will be the source of their arms, not only to defend themselves, but to attack and rout all the opponents of the glory of God and the salvation of souls.” Louis Abelly, John E. Rybolt, C.M., ed., *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, 3 vols. (New York: New City Press, 1993), 3:62. (Hereinafter cited as Abelly, *Life*). #37, “On Prayer,” 31 May 1648, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 2:378.

² Abelly, *Life*, 3:116.

³ The classic text on servant leadership is Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant Leader* (Robert K. Greenleaf Center: Indianapolis, 1970). Cf. James C. Hunter, *The Servant* (Random House, 1998). On the topic of servant friendship, see Kenneth Himes, OFM, “What Em’overment Means: Toward Servant Friendship,” address to the annual Catholic Charities USA convention, published in *Origins* 28:17 (1998).

mission was both affective and effective, person-centered and rooted in the Gospel. Compassion for poor persons was its touchstone. He saw Christ in the poor. Viewing them in Christ, he accepted them as persons from whom he learned about their world and needs. In so doing, Vincent lived his vision of mission with integrity and became an icon of heartfelt compassion. As a model of charity, he inspired people to develop a shared vision of mission through his relational style of communication and networking.

Vincent encouraged the early sisters to imitate models of servant leadership: Jesus Christ and "village girls," like Marguerite Naseau (1594-1633).⁴ He used Marguerite's story to encourage other "servants of the poor." Using his natural ingenuity as a creative resource for transforming obstacles into opportunities, Vincent successfully safeguarded his spiritual daughters from the imposition of the cloister. Vincent empowered his followers to be effective in mission by giving them tools – their rules, core values, and particular virtues, such as cordial respect and mutual support. The fact that members not only served, but were empowered to serve effectively through participative relationships, made real differences in the lives of people living in poverty.

Most significantly, Vincent worked with Louise as a peer.⁵ Their influence was mutual, one on the other. Organizing mission-driven projects and writing documents outlining procedures and expectations for members became tools to "'preserve the memory' and pass on the charism for future generations."⁶

Vincent and Women

Vincent respected and worked well with women. They became instruments of God for him. Vincent valued their human dignity and contributions to society. Many women supported his charitable projects financially, particularly Marie-Madeleine de Vignerod, Madame de Combalet, the duchess d'Aiguillon (1604-1675). Vincent promoted women in pastoral roles for all forms of human services.

⁴ #12, "On the Virtues of Margaret Naseau," July 1642, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 1:71. This conference presents the founding story of the Daughters of Charity.

⁵ See Louise Sullivan, D.C., "The Spirituality of Louise de Marillac: Formed by the Spirit for Charity," *Vincentian Heritage* 12:2 (1991), 139-154; "The Spirituality of Louise de Marillac: Moved by the Spirit to Charity," *Ibid.*, 155-171.

⁶ #20, "On the Observance of Rule," 22 January 1645, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 1:185.

He told the Daughters of Charity: "You have the happiness to be the first women who have been called to this holy work...."⁷ Regarding the question of the propriety of aristocratic women among the Ladies of Charity caring for foundlings, he said: "As to this not being a work for women, Ladies, you may be assured that God has used persons of your sex to do the greatest things ever done in this world."⁸

He wished the Daughters of Charity to be mission-minded women wearing "the robe of charity" as a seamless garment of love of God, neighbor, and their sisters.⁹ Some twenty years earlier, Vincent had encouraged young women attracted to mission to have a Christocentric focus, doing "what the Son of God did when He was on earth ... visiting and healing the sick and instructing the ignorant unto their salvation."¹⁰

Sometimes the charism needed to be rekindled. When the fervor cooled in the charity at Montmirail, Vincent sent Louise there in 1629 to rekindle the fire. Her success led to additional apostolic challenges among the Charities. Despite the growth of the Company of Charity, over time problems were apparent and Louise blamed herself for the shortcomings. Vincent, on the other hand, was more positive and affirming. "I thank our Lord ... for the blessing He is granting your Sisters of being so good and generous."¹¹

Vincent as Formator

Vincent placed great importance on instilling the charism and supporting its growth. Realistically, he believed that "It is to be feared that this good work [Confraternity of Charity], once begun,

⁷ #2, "On the Vocation of a Daughter of Charity," 5 July 1640, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 1:12. "You have the happiness to be the first women who have been called to this holy work... Since the time of the women who ministered to the Son of God and the Apostles, there has been no community established in God's Church with this end in view."

⁸ #197, "Report on the Work of the Foundlings," [1647], Marie Poole, D.C., ed., trans., *Vincent de Paul, Conferences, Corres'ondence, and Documents*, 14 vols. (New York: New City Press, 2003), 13b:426. (Hereinafter cited as CCD.)

⁹ #93, "On Mutual Charity and the Duty of Reconciliation," 4 March 1658, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 4:97. "Always strive to have the robe of charity of which the signs are love of God, love of our neighbor, and love of our Sisters, lest God may wipe your names out of the book of life."

¹⁰ #2, "On the Vocation of a Daughter of Charity," 5 July 1640, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 1:12. "Do what the Son of God did when He was on earth. And what did He chiefly do? ... He labored unceasingly for his neighbor, visiting and healing the sick and instructing the ignorant unto their salvation."

¹¹ #258, Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 30 December 1636, CCD, 1:363.

might die out in a short time if they [the members] do not have some union and spiritual bond among themselves to maintain it.”¹² One way he forged bonds was through conferences to instruct and sustain those embracing the mission in the centrality of spiritual values. Vincent taught with authority and lived his call with authenticity, which attracted others to his mission. His life exemplifies the “Skills Training Framework for Values-Driven Leadership” of Dennis James Mussig.¹³

His earliest experience with the Charities (confraternities), led him to recommend that “it is useful for all holy communities to come together from time to time in some place intended for discussing the spiritual progress and what concerns the general welfare of the community....”¹⁴ Members were instructed that they should “meet in the same chapel to listen to a short spiritual exhortation and to discuss matters concerning the welfare of those who are poor and the support of the confraternity.”¹⁵ Vincent no doubt used the “spiritual exhortation” as both a formation opportunity and a means for renewal. The exhortation was “aimed at the spiritual growth” of the entire Company, and the preservation and continuing development of the confraternity. In encouraging members to “discuss matters” Vincent was promoting a sense of collegiality and co-responsibility for stewardship of the mission. In effect, he was transmitting the charism by passing on the tradition to his followers.

Likewise, Vincent gave conferences to the Daughters of Charity, beginning with his first of 31 July 1634 when he explained the Rule. His style was familiar and colloquial, as a father instructing his spiritual daughters. This familiarity was in contrast to his more formal demeanor and style with the priests and brothers.

¹² #126, Charity of Women (Châtillon-les-Dombes), CCD, 13b:8.

¹³ Dennis James Mussig, “A Research and Skills Training Framework for Values-Driven Leadership,” Faculty of Business and Law, Central Queensland University (2003), 3. See also Kerry Cochrane, et al, “Spirituality and the Learning Organization,” paper presented to the Annual Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management, Woolongong, Australia (4-7 December 1996).

¹⁴ #124, General Regulations for Charities of Women I. “Meetings: their purpose and the order to be followed during them,” CCD, 13b:15. Cf. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence. Why it can matter more than IQ* (Bantam: New York, 1995), 42-4. (Hereinafter cited as Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*.)

¹⁵ #124, General Regulations for Charities of Women I. “Meetings: their purpose and the order to be followed during them,” CCD, 13b:15.

Vincent addressed the ongoing formation needs of local leaders, beginning with his first conference to the sister servants (2 February 1647) encouraging them to animate local communities on: "How you should live with one another, Sister Servants with companions, companions with Sister Servants."¹⁶ Vincent probably gave this conference at Louise's insistence, as she wrote him a few weeks later on Easter Sunday requesting that the topic be further developed in a subsequent dialogue.¹⁷

When commenting on the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity*, Vincent articulated the mission's core values: "Their principal care will be to serve the sick poor, treating them with compassion, gentleness, cordiality, respect and devotedness."¹⁸ He wanted them to be mission-minded women on fire with love of God for the neighbor in need. Through the centuries, Vincentian women tended the fire of charity and passed its flame to succeeding generations through oral history and tradition, life-giving signs of their generativity for mission.

In addition to her voluminous correspondence with the sisters, encouraging them "to serve the sick poor in a spirit of gentleness and great compassion," Louise was convinced that establishing behavioral standards and communicating expectations for living the Vincentian vocation was necessary from the beginning. The formator of new members was an important position since "it's a question of forming young women who can serve God in the Company, helping them to

¹⁶ #29, "How you should live with one another, Sister Servants with companions, companions with Sister Servants," 2 February 1647, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 1:267.

¹⁷ L.173, Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul, Easter Sunday [April 21, 1647], Louise Sullivan, D.C., ed., trans., *Spiritual Writings of Saint Louise de Marillac* (New York: New City Press, 1991), 194. Regarding Louise's role in setting the agenda for conferences, see also L.383. Louise de Marillac to Anne Hardemont, November 13 [1653], Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 773.

¹⁸ #85, 11 November 1657, "On Serving the Sick and Care of One's Health," *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 3:291.

put down deep roots of virtue."¹⁹ She wrote a detailed rule for the Directress of the Seminary Sisters (novices).²⁰

The formation of new members was so important that it was entrusted to experienced sisters noted for fidelity and virtue. Among these was Marguerite Chétif (1621-1694), who succeeded Louise as Superioress in 1660. She was particularly concerned about the formation of the Seminary Sisters and insisted they learn the Rules concerning service of the sick in question and answer form.

Vincentian Culturescape

The spiritual and corporal approach of the mission of the Company of Charity evolved from parish based confraternities which Vincent began as a result of events at Folleville and Châtillon-les-Dombes. These events were transformational. Two lay women, Madame de Gondi (Françoise Marguerite de Silly) and Madame de la Chassaigne (Frances Baschet de Mizériac), pointed out needy persons to him in those places. Through them he discovered and first responded to the spiritual and material poverty of rural peasants, refocusing his life.²¹

Vincent's orientation was Christocentric. He rooted his ministry in the Gospel, "Sent to bring Good News to the Poor."²² His first foundations marked the genesis of the fundamental principles of Vincentian spirituality for his daughters:

¹⁹ #161, Council of 30 October 1647, CCD, 13b:294. "This is the first and most important responsibility after that of the Superioress. It is a question of forming young women who can serve God in the Company, helping them to put down deep roots of virtue, teaching them submission, mortification, humility, and the practice of their Rules and of every virtue."

²⁰ A.91b, "Rule for the Motherhouse. Directress of the Seminary," Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 758-59. "Vincent took great precautions to elude the cloister and carefully crafted a vocabulary for community terminology as one strategy. The founders cautioned their daughters above all else to avoid nuances, association, and trappings of religious life because that would jeopardize mission." Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., "A Society of Apostolic Life in the Church." *The Daughters of Charity: Secularity for Mission* (Unpublished, 1998), 5.

²¹ Françoise Marguerite de Silly, the wife of Philip Emmanuel de Gondi, count de Joigny and general of the Galleys, requested Vincent to accompany her on a tour of the Gondi estates, and at Folleville to visit a dying peasant. As Vincent was vesting for mass at Châtillon, Frances Baschet de Mizériac, the wife of Gomard, lord of the manor of La Chassaigne, told Vincent about the urgent needs of a sick poor family near Châtillon-les-dombes.

²² Luke 4:18.

- Serving Jesus Christ in persons who are poor.
- Flexibility and mobility for apostolic activity in the “the streets of the city [and] ... the houses of the sick.”²³

Henceforth the spiritual and corporal service of poor persons became intertwined in his major foundations:

- 1617 Confraternity of Charity founded in France at Châtillon-les-Dombes.
- 1625 Congregation of the Mission founded in Paris, France.
- 1633 Daughters of Charity founded in Paris, France.
- 1634 Ladies of Charity of the Hôtel-Dieu founded in Paris, France.

After the death of Saint Vincent other foundations, derived from those created by him, began in Europe and subsequently the United States.²⁴

- 1809 Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph’s founded in Emmitsburg, Maryland, USA.
- 1816 Congregation of the Mission established in the United States at Perryville, Missouri.
- 1833 Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Paris, France.
- 1845 Society of Saint Vincent de Paul established in the United States at Saint Louis, Missouri, USA.
- 1850 Daughters of Charity established in the United States at Emmitsburg, Maryland.
- 1857 Ladies of Charity established in the United States at Saint Louis, Missouri.

Defining Mission

At the genesis of his mission, Vincent enlisted the participation of others. In addition to conferences, among strategies and resources Vincent and Louise used to communicate their charism were the gospels of Jesus Christ, oral instructions, letters, and official documents.

²³ #111, “On the Perfection Required for Sisters in Parishes,” 24 August 1659, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 4:264.

²⁴ Other associations in the Vincentian tradition of lay membership included the following: MiSEVI (foreign missionaries), Vincentian Service Corps (VSC), Vincentian Marian Youth (JMV), and Associations of the Miraculous Medal. For a comprehensive discussion of the Vincentian Family from a genealogical perspective, see Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., *The Vincentian Family Tree* (Chicago: Vincentian Studies Institute, 1996). (Hereinafter cited as McNeil, *Vincentian Family Tree*.)

The earliest point to a Gospel-based vision of holistic service to poor persons: "Be merciful as my Father is merciful."²⁵ For example, the fundamental aim of the Confraternities of Charity for Women was "(1)To honor the love Our Lord has for those who are poor. (2)To assist poor persons corporally and spiritually."²⁶ Similarly, the founding purpose of the Confraternity of Charity at Châtillon-les-Dombes was "to assist body and soul: the body by nourishing it and tending to its ailments; the soul by preparing those who seem to be tending toward death to die well, and preparing those who will recover to live a good life."²⁷

In her notes on the *Rule of the Confraternity*, Saint Louise designated that the patron was "Our Lord Jesus Christ who is Charity."²⁸ The motto she used on the seal of the Company of the Daughters of Charity was also Christocentric: "The Love of Christ [Crucified] Impels Us!"²⁹ Among the prominent strategic principles of Vincentian leadership for mission are the following:

- One encounters Christ in serving persons who are poor.
- God leads and provides for the Company of Charity through Divine Providence.
- To be effective charitable services must be organized, practical, and realistic.
- Apostolic spirituality flows from a value-based vision of mission.

Core Values

The writings and conferences of Louise and Vincent foster apostolic spirituality and outline the constitutive elements of the charism of Charity, uniting "the exercises of a spiritual life with the exterior duties of Christian charity towards" poor persons.³⁰ Striving for unity of life, Vincentian women journey toward Eternity living out their baptismal consecration through a life of grace rooted in prayer, as a means to foster self-awareness and spiritual growth. They strive to lead lives of virtue in the context of a shared spirituality lived in community for mission.

²⁵ Lk 6:36.

²⁶ #124, General Regulations for Charities of Women I. "Aim of the Confraternity of Charity," CCD, 13b:2.

²⁷ Ibid., 13b:3.

²⁸ A.46, "Rule of the Charity," Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 707.

²⁹ 2 Cor 5:14.

³⁰ Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 707.

The founding principles which shape Vincentian identity flow from a mission, being given to God for the service of poor persons:

The principal end for which God has called and assembled the Daughters of Charity is to honor Our Lord Jesus Christ as the source and model of all Charity, serving Him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor.³¹

Louise wrote Marguerite Chétif, "this way of life ... is totally spiritual, although they will be employed in exterior works."³² Vincent instructed the women that material assistance alone "is not enough," recommending that they join "help for the soul to the services you render the body."³³ The cofounders formed their followers in counter-cultural behaviors and attitudes rooted in core values for apostolic spirituality, encouraging them as follows:

- To respect the human dignity of poor persons, particularly those most in need, by advocating for their cause and providing high-quality services to improve their situation.
- To reverence human life through compassion and charity toward persons who are poor, particularly the bashful poor ashamed to make their needs known.
- To act with integrity and simplicity as persons dedicated to making God's love visible through innovative means and practical services to poor persons.
- To be rooted in prayer as the source of wisdom and grace in order to be effective instruments of God in revealing His providential care to persons in need.

First articulated for the Charity of Women at Châtillon-les-Dombes in 1617, the core values of humility, simplicity, and charity formed the basis of a communal spirit shared by generations of Vincentian women, possibly derived from Francis de Sales' "Instructions for Widows," previously published in *Introduction to*

³¹ §1, Chapter I, "The End and Fundamental Virtues of their Institute," *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity* (1672).

³² L.651, "To my Very dear Sister Marguerite Chétif," Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 674.

³³ #85, "On Serving the Sick and Care of One's Health," 11 November 1657, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 3:291.

the Devout Life.³⁴ Later Vincent designated these same values for the Daughters of Charity as their characteristic virtues: "They will take care in practicing humility, simplicity, and charity, each deferring to her companion and to others."³⁵

The Daughters of Charity became the first successful society of secular (non-religious) apostolic women serving actively beyond the cloister. As such, the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity* became a prototype. Vincent told the Sisters: "It was God who inspired them [the rules]. It is now twenty-five years since these same Rules began to be observed and our Lord gradually revealed what you were to do."³⁶ These rules became a lifeline for spreading the charism around the world. The secular (non-religious) nature of the Vincentian vocation liberated members from the cloister to serve in the streets of the city, homes of sick persons or wherever they found persons in need, especially the materially poor oppressed by injustice.

Among the many founders who inculturated this charism was Elizabeth Bayley Seton (1774-1821, canonized 1975) of the United States. The pattern of apostolic development of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's (Emmitsburg) closely paralleled the growth of the French Daughters of Charity: care of poor persons who were sick in

³⁴ The virtues of humility, simplicity, and charity were previously published by Francis de Sales as virtues for lay women, particularly widows. "For a holy widow the proper virtues are perfect modesty, renunciation of honors, rank, assemblies, titles, and all such empty things, serving the sick and poor, comforting the afflicted, instructing young girls in a devout life, and making themselves perfect patterns of every virtue to young women. Cleanliness and simplicity must be the ornaments of their dress, humility and charity the ornaments of their conduct, courtesy and mildness the ornaments of their speech, modesty and purity the ornaments of their eyes, and Jesus Christ crucified their hearts' sole love. In brief, the true widow is a little March violet within the Church." John K. Ryan, trans. and ed., *Introduction to the Devout Life* (Image Books: New York, 1972), 233.

³⁵ #126, Charity of Women (Châtillon-les-Dombes). "They will take care in practicing humility, simplicity, and charity, each deferring to her companion and to others, performing all their actions for the charitable intention of persons who are poor and with no human respect." "Personal Devotions," CCD, 13b:19. "The Spirit of your Company consists of three things: to love Our Lord and serve Him in a spirit of humility and simplicity. As long as charity, humility, and simplicity exist amongst you, one may say: The Company of Charity is still alive." #51, "On the Spirit of the Company," 9 February 1653, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 2:206.

³⁶ *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 29 September 1655, 3:95. See also McNeil, "Understanding Hearts – Elizabeth Seton and Louise de Marillac," *Vincentian Heritage* 20:2 (1999); "Flames of Love – Louise de Marillac and Elizabeth Ann Seton," *Vincentian Heritage* 21:1 (2000).

their homes, teaching little girls, care of orphans, parish social ministry, infirmarian services, and accommodating boarders in need.

Preserving the Memory

Fundamentally it was the work of God who called and inspired women and men to follow the Vincentian way. Vincent told the first Daughters of Charity of his belief that God's design for their way of life "was translated into a set of Rules ... and that it is necessary to set down those Rules in writing both to preserve the memory of what God asks of you, and to enable those who come after you to continue their observance."³⁷

The Vincentian Connection

Within the cultural context of a seventeenth-century woman, Louise realized the vulnerable position of women *vis a vis* dependency on the clergy and power of hierarchy. If bishops had control of the Daughters of Charity, she believed the mission would be jeopardized. Louise was convinced of the necessity of having the Company of the Daughters of Charity under the authority of Vincent and his successors in the Congregation of the Mission as a means to assure the continuation and integrity of the founders' vision of the women's mission. She doggedly pursued this goal until arrangements were made to her satisfaction in 1655.³⁸ Providentially, Queen Anne of Austria (1601-1666) petitioned Pope Innocent X in support of Louise's desire:

The Queen entreats his Holiness to name as perpetual directors of the Confraternity or Society of the Servants of the Poor of the Charity, the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and his successors in the same office.³⁹

³⁷ #20, "On the Observance of Rule," 22 January 1645, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 1:185.

³⁸ L.199, Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul [November 1647], Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 234. The Company of the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission are the only two religious institutes with an organic connection in the Catholic Church. Cf. #149, "Approval of the Company by Cardinal de Retz, 18 January 1655," CCD, 13b:144.

³⁹ #147, "Petition of the Queen, Anne of Austria, to Pope Innocent X," (1647), CCD, 13b:141. This sentence follows: "In so doing, there is reason to hope that this good work will always continue to flourish, the Church will be edified by it, and those who are poor better relieved."

The servants' personal example attracted new vocations to the Vincentian lifestyle and mission. Their heartfelt compassion and joyful devotion to caring for persons in need moved the people of Paris to call them Daughters of Charity. Vincent celebrated the uniqueness of their vocation: "I cannot see anything else like it in all God's Church."⁴⁰ There had been previous attempts towards the same end, but Vincent and Louise learned from these failures and succeeded.

Strategies for Mission

Involvement with the Vincentian mission also influenced some Ladies of Charity to found new religious institutes of women rooted in the Vincentian charism, but with a unique emphasis. Among such institutes were the Daughters of the Cross of Paris (1640) and the Daughters of Providence (1641), founded respectively by Madame L'Huillier de Villeneuve (1597-1650) and Marie de Lumague, Mademoiselle Pollalion (1599-1657).

Vincent's routine method of direct communication with his partners in mission, whether with Louise who lived nearby, or his confreres faraway in Madagascar, was through letters and memos. Soon after his death it was estimated Vincent had written 30,000 letters, of which approximately ten percent (3,300) are extant. The English publication *Correspondence, Conferences, and Documents* includes some 400 manuscripts addressed to Louise. Of the 600 extant letters written by Louise, over 250 are to Vincent and over 300 to the Daughters of Charity whom she was forming and directing.⁴¹ Thanks to their ingenuity and memory, 120 conferences of Vincent to the Daughters of Charity have been preserved, some in Louise's hand, others recorded by Elisabeth Hellot, Mathurine Guérin, or Marguerite Chétif.

Chétif stated that she admired the various ways Louise responded, with compassion and respect, to the particular needs of individuals, instilling pure love of God in them all. Marguerite believed a day would come when "our dear sisters would be comforted in having the writings of persons that we had the good fortune of knowing."⁴² After prayerfully reading, rereading, and reflecting on Louise's letters, Marguerite recopied them in order to transmit the charism to future generations.

⁴⁰ #40, "On the Love of Our Vocation," 25 December 1648, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 2:84.

⁴¹ Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, xxiii.

⁴² "Introduction," *CCD*, xxxiii.

Marguerite's appreciation of the letters as "relics of her [Louise's] spirit" is reminiscent of the Reverend Simon Gabriel Bruté's (1779-1839) stewardship over the personal papers of Elizabeth Bayley Seton. After her death, Bruté preserved them for posterity and future publication. The recording, preservation, and publication of the founders' writings have played a major role in transmitting the legacy across successive generations. A task for all Vincentian men and women is to mine beyond the printed word for its ageless wisdom on the charism still relevant in today's world.

Vincentian Dynamism

Compassion has a high place in Vincentian service and leadership, driven by a zeal which generates Vincentian dynamism (ongoing productive activity). This energy derives from the conviction that "it is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love Him."⁴³ Innately endowed with emotional intelligence, Vincent advised the Daughters of Charity to "nurse those poor sick with great charity and gentleness so that they may see you are going to their assistance with a heart filled with compassion for them."⁴⁴ Louise shared this awareness:

As for your conduct with the sick, may you never take the attitude of merely getting the task done. You must show them affection; serving them from the heart; inquiring of them what they might need; speaking to them gently and compassionately.⁴⁵

Affectivity

Empathy and ethics are rooted in altruism.⁴⁶ This orientation frames a gospel-based commitment to the Vincentian lifestyle and mission which involves skills sometimes referred to as "interpersonal intelligence." Components include: organizing groups, negotiating solutions, personal connection, and social analysis.⁴⁷ These are essential elements which contributed to Louise and Vincent's success

⁴³ #207, On Charity (30 May 1659), CCD, 12:262.

⁴⁴ #100, "To Four Sisters Who Were Sent to Calais," 4 August 1658, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 4:168.

⁴⁵ A.85, "Instructions to the Sisters Who Were Sent to Montreuil," October 1646, Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 773.

⁴⁶ Cf. Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 104-6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

in shaping the charism. They bonded in friendship for the sake of mission and formed an effective partnership.

In addition to compassion, secularity and collaboration enabled members to carry out their mission of compassionate service effectively. Vincent believed firmly in the art of collaboration: "We should assist the poor in every way and do it both by ourselves and by enlisting the help of others ... [because] to do this is to preach the gospel by words and work."⁴⁸

Compassion

The determination of Vincentian women and men to address unmet needs led to the praxis of inculturation, adaptability, and mobility according to changing circumstances of time and place, becoming a taproot of ongoing energy for mission. These inherent qualities continue as essential elements, the strategic lifeline for the Vincentian charism today. Examples of such flexibility for the sake of the mission date to the early confraternities of charity. Conscious of inculturating the charism, members of the international Vincentian Family must examine themselves periodically on their response to unmet needs within a huge variety of diverse cultures. An indicator of Vincentian vitality is the level of commitment to change for the sake of growth.

Compassion, like mercy, is a matter of the heart – "Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate."⁴⁹ Vincent strove to inculcate this virtue in the Daughters of Charity, telling them their "chief care will be to serve the sick poor, treating them with compassion, meekness, cordiality, respect and devotion, etc."⁵⁰ Vincentians have a deep desire to alleviate suffering but, despite their devotion to service, are keenly aware that "God demands first the heart ... then

⁴⁸ #195, Conference to the Congregation of the Mission, 6 December 1658, Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris, 1920-1925), 12:87, quoted in Thomas McKenna, C.M., *Praying with Vincent de Paul* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1994), 63-64.

⁴⁹ Luke 6:36.

⁵⁰ #85, 11 November 1657, "On Serving the Sick and Care of One's Health," *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 3:291. Cf. §1, Chapter VII, "Charity Towards the Sick Poor," *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity* (1672), (Paris, 1954), 99. Also see Daughters of Charity Archives of Saint Joseph Provincial House 3-1-1, §3, "Of Charity toward the Sick Poor," Chapter III, Regulations for the society of Sisters of Charity in the United States of America. (Hereinafter ASJPH.)



Period painting of Louise de Marillac, the Daughters of Charity and Vincent de Paul giving comfort to the less fortunate.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

the work.”⁵¹ Vincent would be in agreement with Dorothy A. Sisk and E. Paul Torrance who identified a “focus on love and compassion” as one of seven ways to develop spiritual intelligence.⁵²

Secularity

The Vincentian charism is essentially secular in nature. Secularity is at the heart of Vincentian identity for all members, including those consecrated by vow, and is a conduit for transmitting the Vincentian tradition and promoting new expressions of Vincentianism. This stewardship of the mission represents a critical focus for the founders, who sought to be innovative in responding to the needs of their day despite ecclesiastical constraints for religious women.

⁵¹ #71, “On the End of the Company,” 18 August 1655, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 4:114.

⁵² Dorothy A. Sisk and E. Paul Torrance, *Spiritual Intelligence. Developing Higher Consciousness* (Buffalo, New York: Creative Education Foundation Press, 2001), 180.

Louise described the canonical status of the Company as “just a secular family.”⁵³ From the beginning, members of the Confraternities of Charity and the Ladies of Charity were “wives, widows and unmarried women, whose piety and virtue are known and whose perseverance can be counted on.”⁵⁴ Louise and Vincent reenforced their intent that the Daughters of Charity were “not a religious order ... but a society of girls who come and go constantly to assist the poor sick.”⁵⁵ The year before he died, Vincent exhorted his daughters that their monastery was the houses of the sick and their cell a rented room “since they are not in a religious order ... [which] is not compatible with the duties of their vocation.”⁵⁶

Collaboration

The earliest model for the Vincentian mission was collaborative, involving teamwork and networking toward shared goals, rooted in trust and respect. Vincent was a master at working with affectivity and emotional intelligence. He capitalized on opportunities to further the mission. Vincent witnessed women working together with their pastor to assist neighbors in need, and he modified the model. A team of three officers, the Superioress, the Treasurer, and the Supervisor of Furnishings, coordinated and supervised the accomplishment of the mission by the confraternities.⁵⁷ At Châtillon-les-Dombes, a pastoral team approach with specific roles and responsibilities assured good stewardship and accountability. The Servants of the Poor elected a qualified male (a priest or virtuous resident) as Procurator, and he

⁵³ “Please Monsieur, let me know if in this article of the Rule of our sisters there is anything which indicates a regular community and is different from the Rule of Angers. This was never my intention; on the contrary, I met with the Vicar General two or three times to explain to him that we were just a secular family and that because we were bound together by the Confraternity of Charity, we had M. Vincent, as General of these Confraternities, for our Director. Once he understood our practices he then explained our type of establishment to the Bishop of Nantes who approved it so wholeheartedly that he signed his name along with the administrators of the city.” #481, Louise de Marillac to M. Abbé de Vaux, 29 June 1649, Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 293. Cf. #143, “Regulations for the Sisters of the Angers Hospital,” CCD, 13b:108-14.

⁵⁴ #124, General Regulations for Charities of Women I. “Patron and Purpose of the Work,” CCD, 13b:9.

⁵⁵ #2511, Vincent de Paul to the Sister Servant in Saint-Fargeau [January 1658], CCD, 7:64.

⁵⁶ #111, “On the Perfection Required for Sisters in Parishes,” 24 August 1659, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 4:264.

⁵⁷ #124, General Regulations for Charities of Women I. “Aim of the Confraternity of Charity,” CCD, 13b:2.

attended meetings and had a voice in deliberations.⁵⁸ Governance lay with the Pastor, the Prioress, the two Assistants, and the Procurator, who were responsible for all the temporal goods of the Confraternity.⁵⁹

The earliest versions of the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity* were continually refined as a result of Louise and Vincent working together. Their experience enabled them to hone collaborative skills for the sake of mission. Experience dictated the wisdom of explicit expectations requiring “honor and obedience in all that concerns the service of the poor.”⁶⁰ Contemporary expressions of collaboration can be found in how the Daughters of Charity share life in common in order to strengthen one another for the good of the mission, and in how the sisters network with groups and collaborate to promote human rights.

Incarnating Charism in Mission

The charism is not only taught but caught. Leaders, formators, and members communicate the Vincentian story by word and deed, formally and informally. Vincentian women have transmitted the charism in traditional and innovative ways, continuously adapting it to different cultural or historic contexts. The following are several noteworthy Vincentian women who have effectively transmitted the charism through the ages.

Louise de Marillac

Prior to Vincent becoming her spiritual director, Louise had a transformational experience 4 June 1623. This experience came to be known as her “Light of Pentecost.”⁶¹ This illumination freed Louise from inner darkness and doubts, filling her with peace. She had an instantaneous revelation about her future mission, although she could not comprehend its meaning at the time. The experience was so powerful that she recorded it and kept it folded in a little purse on her

⁵⁸ #126, Charity of Women (Châtillon-les-Dombes), “Administration of Temporal Goods and Rendering of Accounts,” CCD, 13b:10.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 13b:15.

⁶⁰ §4, Chapter IV, “Obedience,” *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity* (Paris, 1672). For a concise explanation of the development of the Vincentian rule for women, see note 1, #149a, “Common Rules of the Company of Sisters of Charity Called Servants of the Sick Poor Which They must Keep to Perform their Duty Well by the Grace of God,” CCD, 13b:147.

⁶¹ A.2, “Light,” Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 1.

person throughout her life. This precious document has come down to us through the generations. It communicates insights into her spiritual journey. Grace, prayer, spiritual direction, and openness led her to spiritual maturity as an organizer, director, formator, mentor, and spiritual leader for the founding generation.



Marguerite Naseau.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

Marguerite Naseau

The prototype of Vincentian women is Marguerite Naseau of Suresnes, who offered herself for the service of poor persons when Vincent was giving a mission at Villepreux. Marguerite confessed to Vincent and told him of her plans for teaching girls to read. She became interested in the Confraternity of Charity at Villepreux, and told Vincent: "I would like very much to serve the poor in that way." He brought Marguerite to the capital, placing her with Louise for formation. At the time, the first confraternity in Paris, at the parish of Saint Saveur, was composed of women of rank looking for a maid to carry soup to the sick. Marguerite was ideal for the job! God blessed her generosity and brought new life to the Vincentian Family. As she was the prototype of all who followed her example, Vincent called Marguerite the *first Daughter of Charity*, and declared that she "was

the first Sister who had the happiness of pointing out the road to our other Sisters, both in the education of young girls and in nursing the sick, although she had no other master or mistress but God.”⁶²

Notable Directresses

Directresses of the seminary (novitiate level) formed new members of the Daughters of Charity. They were responsible for transmitting the charism to new generations of Daughters who served in France and around the world. Particularly noteworthy are the three following:

- *Mathurine Guérin, D.C.* (1631-1704), filled this office during the last years of Louise and Vincent and afterwards completed several terms as the superioress general of the Company of the Daughters of Charity (1667-1673, 1676-1682, 1685-1691). During her administration Cardinal de Vendôme, legate of the Holy See, gave his approbation to the Company, 8 July 1668.
- *Julienne Laboue, D.C.* (1643-1703), in collaboration with Mathurine Guérin, superioress general, during her term as directress she sent a memorandum to all the sister servants regarding the requisite qualifications for entering the Daughters of Charity.
- *Aurilie Buchepot, D.C.* (1801-1875), was directress (1845-1866) when representatives of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph’s arrived in Paris from Emmitsburg, and the Sisters of Charity of Graz came from Austria, to be formed in the customs of the Daughters of Charity at the time of their union with France (1850).⁶³ She formed generations of Daughters of Charity in the charism, often instructing them as follows: “If, during the day you are asked: ‘Why do you go out at such an hour? What are you doing at such and such a time?’ You should be able

⁶² #12, “On the Virtues of Margaret Naseau,” (July 1642), *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 1:71.

⁶³ Four Sisters departed for Paris 15 May 1850 to be trained in French community customs at the motherhouse: Sister Marie Louise Caulfield, Sister Valentine Latouraudais, Sister Vincentia Reppelier and Sister Ann de Sales Farren. The next spring, Mother Etienne Hall (1st visitatrix, 1850-1855) and Sister Ann Simeon Norris (3rd visitatrix, 1859-1866) traveled to France to learn about French community customs at the motherhouse, as did Leopoldine de Brandis (1815-1900), whose community, the Sisters of Charity of Graz, Austria, was also uniting with the French Daughters of Charity the same year.

to answer: 'I accomplish the will of God; I go where His voice summons me; I prepare what is necessary for the Poor.'"⁶⁴

Françoise Bony

Françoise Bony, D.C. (1684-1759), served as both teacher of young girls and as nurse, before being sent to a very difficult assignment at The Royal Hospital of Saint Germain-en-Lays, where she was expected to be the last sister missioned there. No doubt the somber words of Reverend Jean Bonnet, C.M. (1664-1735), superior general (1711-1736), rang in her ears as he explained that he was sending her to "to a desolated place which has no support," yet she courageously accepted her new mission in a spirit of faith:

You go, my Daughter ... where the wants of the poor are daily increased, and their resources constantly lessened ... You will have to live in the midst of those who calculate with human Prudence, and count but little on Divine Providence ... You are the last indeed whom we will send to this lost establishment unless a striking change takes place – Go, tread the footsteps of your holy founder the *Father of the Poor*, if God is in this work human prudence cannot destroy it.⁶⁵

Françoise succeeded marvelously well and remained at this mission until her death. There was a charismatic quality about her zeal, and a genuine goodness which captivated the attention of Elizabeth Bayley Seton, who translated her brief biography into English, adding the comment: "We see in the life of Sister Bony the Power of Faith."⁶⁶

The publication of Françoise's life is an example of the Daughters of Charity practice of writing biographical sketches of members. It is unknown how the document came to Elizabeth's attention. The fact that Elizabeth read and translated it for her benefit, and that of the American Sisters of Charity, illustrates the mysterious ways of Divine Providence in transmitting the charism – even across the Atlantic Ocean.

⁶⁴ "Vincentian Calendar, 2 March 1875," *Supplement to the Echo of the Mother House* (10 November 1967), 1.

⁶⁵ In September 1818 Elizabeth Ann Seton completed a translation of the brief biography of Françoise Bony, D.C. Cf. ASJPH 1-3-3-24C. This quote is taken from the Seton translation. ASJPH 10-0 Part Second. "Conferences and Notes on the Virtues Remarkd in Our Deceased Sisters," #94, Sister Françoise Bony (1684-1759), Superioress of the Hospital of aged people at Saint Germain-en-Laye, *Circulars and Notices*, vol. 2 (Emmitsburg, MD: Saint Joseph's, 1870), 741.

⁶⁶ ASJPH 1-3-3-24C.

Rosalie Rendu

For forty-six years Rosalie Rendu, D.C. (1786-1856, beatified 2003) practiced social work among the most destitute in the Mouffetard district of Paris. Naturally sensitive to anyone suffering poverty and injustice, Rosalie taught energetic but idealistic students of the Sorbonne how to serve poor persons effectively. Among those she oriented in her school of charity was Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853, beatified 1997), whom she formed in the Vincentian charism along with other student volunteers. Rosalie taught them how to foster partnerships that enhanced the quality of service while establishing the fledgling Conference of Charity. It became the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.

The students learned the value of pooling resources and personnel skills, strengthening church presence, and providing mutual support as means to be effective voices for the voiceless – to be advocates for poor persons. In exerting such a significant influence, shaping the mission of the newly formed Society, Rosalie Rendu may be considered its cofoundress.⁶⁷

As a Vincentian leader, Rosalie showed others how to be comfortable with the poor. In orienting new volunteers, Rosalie often reminded that poor people have “many more things to do than to study etiquette and good manners! You should not mind rough words nor should you shrink from uncouth looks. These people are far better than they appear.”⁶⁸ She also taught coworkers about openness of heart and hand.

Her sensitivity to the *bashful poor* revealed a profound respect. Rosalie often repeated that “You should always have one hand open to give, in order to receive much in the other.”⁶⁹

Women of Mission

There are thousands of other women who have contributed to the development and transmission of the charism. Some have been hidden souls like Catherine Labouré, D.C. (1806-1876, canonized 1947). Some are famous, others less so. The charism is embedded

⁶⁷ Amin A. de Tarrazi and Rev. Ronald Ramson, C.M., *Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam* (Strasbourg, France: Éditions du Signe, 1997), 70.

⁶⁸ Céline Lhotte and Elizabeth Dupeyrat, trans., *White Wings and Barricades* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1939), 72.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 105. In gratitude the people of Paris still continue to place fresh flowers daily on Rosalie Rendu’s grave in Montparnasse Cemetery.

in each of their stories. Some have begun new expressions of the charism, becoming “the models for all who come after them,” while others played key roles at pivotal historic moments.⁷⁰

- *Antoinette Deleau, D.C.* (1728-1804, superioress general, 1790-1804), steered the Company through the French Revolution. When the sister servant of Auch perceived that Napoleon Bonaparte’s government had a great need for nurses to care for the sick and injured, she proposed that Vincentian women could help meet this need if housing and financial support were provided. Mother Deleau, who had returned to Paris to care for the sick poor, organized the Daughters of Charity to meet the need. The Chaptal Decree of 12 December 1800 made the Daughters of Charity the first institute to be granted legal recognition after the Revolution. Steady growth in vocations and membership followed.
- *Cecilia Maria O’ Conway, S.C.* (1787-1865), the first Sister of Charity in North America, made the first novitiate of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph’s in Emmitsburg (1812-1813), and pronounced vows on 19 July 1813 under the rule of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Cecilia educated young girls in Maryland and New York, before becoming the first vowed sister to transfer when she entered the Ursulines of Quebec City.
- *Mary Etienne Hall, S.C.* (1829-1872, American superioress/visitatrix [1845-1855]) led the Emmitsburg community through the stormy union with France and the painful separation of two groups of sisters, which formed independent branches in New York (1846) and Cincinnati (1852).
- *Catherine O’ Regan Harkins-Drake* (1834-1911), was educated at Pottsville, Pennsylvania, by Sisters of Charity from Emmitsburg sometime between 1836 and 1844. She imbibed the spirit of the charism as a schoolgirl. Catherine became the founding president of the Ladies of Charity in Saint Louis, Missouri (1857). Twice a wife and widow, who was also a mother and grandmother, she became a leader in charity, and overcame the social stigma women of her day faced. She collaborated with the Daughters of Charity, and was especially

⁷⁰ #25, “On Indifference,” 1 May 1646, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 1:221.

concerned about educational opportunities for orphans and neglected youngsters, and involved herself in promoting healthy development for underprivileged children living in the city.

- *Irene Kraus, D.C. (1924-1998)*, was a giant among twentieth-century healthcare leaders for more than forty years. She established a system of core Vincentian values as a means of transmitting the charism to millions of lay collaborators, and advocated quality affordable healthcare for persons who were poor. Among her many honors and influential positions, Irene was the first woman to chair the board of the American Hospital Association, and the first president/CEO of the Daughters of Charity National Health System (DCNHS). Irene was mission driven. Shortly before her death she was asked: "Of the many honors and awards you have received which are most memorable and meaningful now?" She replied with a smile: "Just being a Daughter of Charity because that gets me to heaven!"⁷¹

Transmitting Charism Across Boundaries

The timeless and universal relevance of the Vincentian charism enables inculturation across boundaries of culture, geography, ethnicity, and generations. Its constitutive elements generate transformative dynamism to meet the needs of different contexts. The mission-driven fundamentals of Vincentian apostolic spirituality encircle the globe as pathways for a worldwide web of charity.

Transmission of the tradition supersedes strategic planning, since Divine Providence is always mysteriously at work in the midst of human affairs. For example, the destructive forces of the French Revolution, with its suppression of clergy and religious, ultimately brought about new life in the Church as a result of the immigration of refugee Sulpician priests. Familiar with the charism, mission, and ministry of the French Daughters of Charity, they became instruments who inculturated the Vincentian charism in North America. The Sulpicians settled in Maryland at the invitation of the first bishop of the United States, John Carroll (1735-1815), bishop of Baltimore (1791-1815).

⁷¹ Irene Kraus to Betty Ann McNeil, 2 August 1998, Saint Agnes Hospital, Baltimore, Maryland (personal interview).

Elizabeth Bayley Seton

In New York, Louis William Dubourg, S.S. (1766-1833), a Sulpician priest traveling on business, made the acquaintance of a struggling mother of five young children, Elizabeth Bayley Seton, the widow of William Magee Seton, and ultimately invited her to Baltimore to run a school for girls. Thus began a relationship which led to the establishment of the first native community for religious women in the United States, the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's, modeled on the French Daughters of Charity.

Dubourg desired to secure "permanency to the Institution [of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's], [and] perpetuating it by the association of some other pious ladies who may be animated with the same spirit" became a significant aspect of the Sulpician mission, although Elizabeth's leitmotif was: "I must trust all to Divine Providence -."⁷²

Within months the Sulpicians began implementing the "plan of life" they envisioned for Elizabeth and others. They referred devout women who were their directees, and several joined Elizabeth in Baltimore to form the first band of Sisters of Charity in North America. God used the Sulpicians to form the first generations of Sisters of Charity as Vincentian women.

Elizabeth intuited that girls whose parents could not afford tuition lacked educational opportunities, and she desired to address that need. Providentially Samuel Sutherland Cooper (1769-1843), a wealthy seminarian who was a convert, donated land near Emmitsburg, Maryland. As the sisters began their mission, the Sulpicians made arrangements to obtain the Vincentian rule and to have French Daughters of Charity come to America. The prospect of their pending arrival was unsettling to Elizabeth Seton, who felt torn between her vocational roles as only parent to her five darlings and as mother to her spiritual daughters. "The only word I have to say

⁷² ASJPH 1-3-3-2, Supplement 3 (copy), Dubourg to Mother Seton, 27 May 1808.

at every question is, *I am a Mother*. Whatever providence awaits me consistent with that plan I say Amen to it."⁷³

Inculturating Charism. When he returned to Emmitsburg from a visit in Paris, Reverend Benedict Joseph Flaget, S.S. (1763-1850, bishop of Bardstown, Kentucky, 1808-1848) brought some Vincentian texts, a manuscript signed by Vincent de Paul himself, and a handwritten copy of the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity*. Reverend John Dubois, S.S. (1764-1842) translated the rule, and the Sulpicians adapted it for America before its approval by Bishop Carroll in 1812. This foundational document later became the basis for other independent communities of religious women in North America.⁷⁴

Dubois and Bruté worked tirelessly with Elizabeth and her Council to form the American Sisters of Charity in the Vincentian tradition. Dubois knew how the Daughters of Charity functioned because previously he had been a chaplain at their Les Petits-Maisons in Paris, a facility where there were 400 patients and forty Sisters (1787-1791).

Rose White explained in her *Journal* that the American women had a choice. They were engaged in the decision-making process regarding the proposed rules which were read aloud to them.

We were all at liberty to adopt these rules or not, free to retire, if we wished to from the Community. All were invited to stay notwithstanding bad health and other infirmities. Each was invited to raise her hand,

⁷³ ASJPH 1-3-3-2:60b, Seton to George Weise [8, n.d.]. During the period when the rule and Constitutions were being developed, Elizabeth Seton consistently reiterates her primary vocation as mother. "By the law of the church I so much love I could never take an obligation which interfered with my duties to them [her children], except I had an independent provision and guardian for them, which the whole world could not supply to my judgment of a mother's duty." Seton to Catherine Duplex, 4 February 1810, ASJPH, 1-3-3-7:65. "The thought of living out of our valley would seem impossible if I belonged to myself; but the dear ones have their first claim which must ever remain inviolate. Consequently if at any period the duties I am engaged in should interfere with those I owe to them I have solemnly engaged with our good Bishop Carroll as well as my own conscience to give the darlings their rights and to prefer their advantage to everything." Seton to Julia Scott, 20 July 1810, ASJPH 1-3-3-6:83.

⁷⁴ In addition to the Sisters of Charity of New York, the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy, and the Sisters of Providence of Saint Vincent de Paul formed the first generation congregations to develop from the Emmitsburg rule. See Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., "Sulpicians and Sisters of Charity, Concentric Circles of Mission," *Vincentian Heritage* 20:1 (1999).

if she were [sic] willing to adopt the rules. All were united but one voice.⁷⁵

This process of consultation and acceptance of the proposed rules echoes the Act of Establishment of the Company of the Daughters of Charity on 8 August 1655 by Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac.

Mining the Charism. Elizabeth read Gobillon's *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras* and Abelly's *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, making one of the first substantial translations of them into English, and translated selected *Conferences to Daughters of Charity* from the first printed edition (1803). These resources formed her in the Vincentian charism and her unique mission. From her study and prayer, Elizabeth gave instructions, conferences and guided meditations on the Vincentian charism. It was she who formed the first generation of sisters in the Vincentian charism in North America. Having embraced the charism, Elizabeth conscientiously sought to live it. Although referring to faith, Elizabeth's words are also applicable to formation in the Vincentian charism: "Link by link, the blessed chain ... O my Soul, be fastened link by link strong as death."⁷⁶

Her council consulted the Daughters of Charity in Paris regarding customs and practices, particularly related to initial formation. For example, this question was posed in 1814: "Can the Novitiate be extended to 5 years as it was by the Rule of St. Vincent for our European Sisters?"⁷⁷ The early Emmitsburg community owned a large needlework portrait of Vincent de Paul and an original handwritten letter to Louise bearing his signature, sources of inspiration for their reflection on the charism.

Elizabeth knew of the arrival of Vincentian priests and brothers in the United States in September of 1816. She commented

⁷⁵ ASJPH 7-2-1, *Journal of Rose White*. See also ASJPH RB 69, #12, *Treasurer's Notebook of Sister Margaret George*. In 1809 the following appointments had been made: Elizabeth Seton, superior and Sister Rose White, assistant. Under the Provisional Regulations for Saint Joseph's Sisters the elections were held on 18 August 1809 for the first council: Sister Catherine Martin Mullen, Sister Veronica O'Conway and Sister Cecilia Theresa Seton. In January 1812, after the Regulations for the Society of Sisters of Charity in the United States of America were approved by Bishop Carroll and Father Jean Tessier, the first election of officers was held: Mother Elizabeth Seton, superior, Sister Rose White, assistant, Sister Catherine Mullen, treasurer, and Sister Ann Gruber, procuratrix.

⁷⁶ ASJPH 1-3-3-18:67a.

⁷⁷ ASJPH, "Council Minutes, 14 February 1814," *Council Book, 1813-1829*. At this time the Council consisted of the following: Rose White, Assistant; Margaret George, treasurer; and Ann Gruber, Procuratrix. Catherine (Kitty) Mullen was Mistress of Novices.

on their mission in a letter to Simon Bruté, who had welcomed them to Baltimore: "COMMUNION – directed those of the Sisters to [give] thanks for the blessed Missioners sent to enlighten our savage land."⁷⁸

Charism as Bridge. After the death of Elizabeth Seton, and appointment of John Dubois as bishop of New York, Reverend Louis Regis Deluol, S.S. (superior, 1826-1830; 1841-1849), continued to forge the Vincentian mission among the Sisters of Charity until 1849. The 1845 mandate of the General Assembly of the Society of Saint-Sulpice required that the American Sulpicians divest themselves of any ministry not directly connected with the formation and education of candidates for the priesthood, such as governance and direction of the Sisters of Charity. Deluol was determined to preserve the integrity of the Emmitsburg sisterhood in the face of its potential decimation by opportunistic bishops.

For years Deluol and other Sulpicians negotiated clandestinely with the Congregation of the Mission for a union between the Emmitsburg community and the French Daughters of Charity. The union was formalized 25 March 1850. In the first forty years of the American community, approximately 1100 candidates entered and the sisters began 100 ministries (education, child care, and health care) in direct service of poor persons.

Rule Extends Charism. The Vincentian rule became a resource for the American church and was shared with other founders as new communities were established. The American version of the Vincentian rule was used by the New York and Cincinnati communities and they, in turn, provided it to Mother Seton's half-nephew, Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley (1814-1877), for the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth (New Jersey). Bruté copied the Emmitsburg rule (1813-1815) which Reverend Jean-Baptiste David, S.S. (1761-1841), adapted for Nazareth, Kentucky. Subsequent foundations and branches of these communities trace their roots to the Emmitsburg foundation, the American version of the Vincentian rule.

⁷⁸ #7.47, Elizabeth Bayley Seton to Simon Bruté, 2 September 1816, Regina Bechtle, S.C., and Judith Metz, S.C., eds., Ellin M. Kelly, mss. ed., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton, Collected Writings*, 3 vols. (New City Press, 2000-2002; volume 3 forthcoming), 2:420.

Compassionate Faces of Charism

As authentic Vincentian women following "Providence step by step," the American Sisters/Daughters of Charity expressed the charism with vitality and lived it in creative fidelity. Since its inception they have passed the tradition on to future generations. Their stories reflect the best practices of their day. Their secret was rooted in compassion, which some may term emotional intelligence.⁷⁹ However, such social conventions of their day were probably considered to be common sense and courtesy, as the following examples illustrate.

Matilda Coskery

Matilda Coskery, D.C. (1800-1870), taught the American Sisters of Charity the basics of nursing care which "the [French] servants of the Poor... practice[d] among themselves, the works of charity and mercy."⁸⁰ Referring to the care of mentally ill patients prone to convulsions, Matilda, who was renowned for both compassion and clinical expertise in psychiatric care, wrote: "If you are kind, gentle, patient under all their violence and abuse, they love and respect you as Angels of consolation, and each paroxysm will be lighter, as they recollect your tender compassion for them."⁸¹ In her sixties, Matilda was heroic in her valiant services as a nurse during some of the bloodiest days of the Civil War (1861-1865), serving the sick and injured of both the United States and the Confederate Army in several locations.

American Faces of Charity

Presenting the face of charism as compassion, God used these women and others as instruments to spread the "ever-growing fire of charity."⁸² Their stories are instructive and illustrate Vincentian

⁷⁹ Cf. Daniel Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (Bantam: New York, 1998), 258-77.

⁸⁰ #124, General Regulations for Charities of Women I. "Aim of the Confraternity of Charity," CCD, 13b:2.

⁸¹ ASJPH 16-2-4, Matilda Coskery, D.C., *Advices Concerning the Sick* (n.d., unpublished manuscript). In the Archives of the Daughters of Charity at Marillac Provincial House (AMPH), a similar manuscript of practical charity copied (1846) by an unidentified sister but attributed to Mary Xavier Clark, S.C. (1790-1855), is also illustrative of compassionate care in the Charity tradition.

⁸² "It is certain that when charity abides in a soul it takes entire possession of all its powers; charity allows it no rest; it is an ever-growing fire." CCD, 11:216.

vitality for mission at different times and places, some as pioneers who extended the charism in new or distant places and others who simply responded to circumstances.

- *Mary Xavier Mestezzer Clark, S.C.* (c.1790-1855), ministered to Elizabeth Seton on her deathbed and later led the community as Mother, then as novice mistress, forming generations of Sisters of Charity in the Vincentian charism prior to the union with France.
- *Sister Mary Xavier Love, S.C.* (c.1796-1840), founded Daughters of Charity ministries in Saint Louis in 1828 by beginning the first Catholic hospital in the United States and the first hospital west of the Mississippi.
- *Elizabeth Boyle, S.C.* (1788-1861), served as assistant to Elizabeth Seton and became the first superior (1846-1849) of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul of New York, thus expanding the Vincentian Family.
- *Margaret Farrell George, S.C.* (1787-1868), played a key stewardship role as treasurer and extended the Vincentian mission in new foundations in Frederick (1824), Richmond (1834), and Boston (1841) before going on mission to Cincinnati in 1845 where she founded the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati in 1852.
- *Regina Smith, D.C.* (1806-1864), began the Vincentian ministries in Louisiana in 1830, then nurtured the growth of the community as visitatrix, later providing sister nurses for sick soldiers in New Orleans during the Civil War.
- *Ann Alexis Shorb, D.C.* (1805-1875), carried the Vincentian charism to New England in 1832, successfully founding ministries in Boston in the face of rampant prejudice and bigotry.
- *Frances Assissium McEnnis, D.C.* (1812-1879), led the pioneer band of brave women from Emmitsburg to California in 1852, crossing the Isthmus of Panama on mules despite primitive conditions and disease which claimed two companions.
- *Walburga Gehring, D.C.* (1823-1883), a Civil War nurse at Gettysburg, later coordinated survival and recovery strategies during the great fire in Chicago (1871), struggling to rebuild and stabilize the Vincentian missions there.
- *Chrysostom Moynihan, D.C.* (1862-1941), served as a military nurse in the Spanish-American War and with American

troops in Italy during World War I and became a legend of charity in Birmingham, Alabama.

- *Catherine Thumel Buschmann, D.C.* (1868-1926), a widow, volunteered for China in 1876 and ministered there for thirty fruitful years, becoming the first American Daughter of Charity to serve abroad on a foreign mission.

Driven by Vincentian dynamism, the Sisters/Daughters of Charity responded to emerging and changing needs, including national emergencies like the cholera epidemic (1832), Civil War (1861-1865), Chicago Fire (1871), Spanish American War (1898), San Francisco earthquake (1906), and World Wars I and II. Most recently in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the United States (11 September 2001), the Vincentian Family responded swiftly and creatively with heartfelt compassion.⁸³

Charism Today for Tomorrow

Wherein lies the key to successful transmission of the charism today for tomorrow? What is the energy source for Vincentian dynamism? What fills hearts with compassion and fuels the fire of mission? What is the secret of successful mission integration, both personally and corporately?

For Vincent, it was prayer which nurtured his relationship with God. He advised the Daughters of Charity to turn to this "mystical arsenal" because it is chiefly in prayer that God gives strength for compassionate service of persons who are poor. He [Vincent] wanted his followers to be men and women of prayer, as much for their personal advancement as for the strength to be of real service to others. Hence, a vibrant personal and communal spirituality lies at the heart of both leadership and service in the Vincentian tradition. A vibrant spirituality lies at the heart of stewardship of the charism.

Like the mission statement of Jesus, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly,"⁸⁴ the genius of Vincent arises from his openness to being directed by the Spirit of God. As a result Vincent developed his ageless vision of mission which is our legacy. Louise and Vincent may be termed "spiritual pathfinders" who solved

⁸³ Regina Bechtle, S.C., "'In the Face of Adversity:' The Response of the Vincentian and Charity Families to 9/11," *Vincentian Heritage* 21:2 (2000): 49-95.

⁸⁴ John 10:10.

and addressed the problems of their day with long-term solutions for the benefit of the common good, particularly persons who were poor.

In light of strategic principles, Vincentian leaders would do well to be mindful that effective transmission of the charism invites personal conversion as a prelude to common commitment to mission:

- Value-based choices are required of those who profess the charism.
- Universal application of the charism calls for inculturation and collaboration.
- Inclusivity characterizes expression of the charism.
- Living the charism with integrity involves first the heart then the work.
- Exigencies of the charism require counter-cultural responses.

Conclusion

This paper focused on selected aspects of the legacy of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac and the role of women in passing it on from generation to generation. Vitality and creative fidelity have consistently been hallmarks of the founders' legacy. The core of mission reflects the intersection and overlapping of several spheres including: history, heritage and spirituality; leadership, administration, and management; application, praxis, and service of persons who are poor. The qualitative outcomes of each sphere are mutually interdependent and require attention and balance for effective accomplishment of the mission.

Beginning with the founders, rules, core values, characteristic virtues, good example, and storytelling have been effective tools in transmitting the charism to others. Likewise, strategies which defined and focused on accomplishing the mission have included principles for praxis: collaboration, partnerships, networking, conferences, instructions, written communication, witness, and mutually supportive relationships. As a result, we have inherited a living tradition with a wealth of resources for understanding and continuing the charism of charity. In addition to the gospel, among these are: the compilation, publication, and translation of the founders' writings; the Vincentian rule, biographies, images, artwork; and writings, reflections, and meditations on the charism. Added to the above are personal prayer,

ingenuity, insights, experience, and the example of others living the Vincentian vocation with integrity, compassion, and enthusiasm.

Signs in North America point to the increasing prominence of lay women and men in leadership roles charged with carrying out the Vincentian mission. It is essential for these leaders to learn about Vincentian heritage so they may be purposeful in living its values and applying its principles. Once internalized individually, the goal is to embed the charism at the corporate and institutional levels. It is important that Vincentian leaders become discriminating readers of Vincentian materials and biographies in order to select accurate literature, lest they fall into perpetuating the mythical Vincent of yesteryear or digressing into the rigidity of Vincentian fundamentalism. Tools, strategies, and resources are needed to facilitate the process of formation and education in the charism. Innovative ways to promote the charism include oral history programs, living history presentations, art forms, drama, exhibits, reproduction and display of original documents and archival artifacts, accessibility of materials for research, field experiences, special events, and storytelling.

Central to praxis for living out the Vincentian tradition is prayerful reflection, personally and communally, on the action of God in persons, events, and circumstances. Doing apostolic reflection with partners in mission promotes a sense of mutuality and support. This solidarity forms Vincentian identity and strengthens persons engaged in ministry. The process enhances mission and perpetuates the charism as a leaven for societal transformation for the common good.

Authentic Vincentianism focuses beyond itself. Programs and services branded as Vincentian require inherent adaptability and flexibility for mission in order to meet real needs rather than inner-directed means of self-preservation or institutionalism.

Lessons for Vincentian leaders are rooted in the principles for praxis used by Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, who spent their time in meetings to plan and refine collaboration in the service of poor persons, developing partnerships and networks to garner sufficient financial and human resources to support their ministries, training members and volunteers via conferences, instructions, and written communication, all of which reinforced their shared vision, mission, and values.

Other lessons for Vincentian leaders arise from the application of their own set of professional skills, encountering Christ in serving

the poor and deepening their own spirituality. Realizing that they are engaged in the work of God, Vincentian men and women rely on Divine Providence as they seek to effectively address the unmet needs of their brothers and sisters in Christ from a value-based vision of mission.

The challenge of Vincentian leadership in the contemporary world is to pass on “little flames of fire” for mission in the hearts of individuals and rekindle that fire in institutions where the embers have grown cold. Telling the Vincentian story and the stories of Vincentian heroes and heroines is to present the charism to a world in need of heartfelt compassion – person by person. This process will stir the fire amid the ashes and transmit its flame into the future.⁸⁵ The gospel of Vincent is the same today as in yesteryear. He lived what he taught, representing “the goodness of God” to poor persons as “a flame of love that darts forth into the hearts” of everyone.⁸⁶ We are called to do the same.

⁸⁵ For instructive reading on this topic in relation to religious life, see Joan Chittister, OSB, *Fire in these Ashes. A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life* (Sheed & Ward: Kansas City, 1995).

⁸⁶ #85, “On Serving the Sick and Care of One’s Health,” 11 November 1657, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 3:291. “You are destined to represent the goodness of God with regard to these poor persons [like]... a flame of love that darts forth into the hearts of those to whom... [one] speaks.”