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Address to the General Assembly of the Daughters of Charity 8 December 1979

BY

JAMES W. RICHARDSON, C.M.

My dear sisters, members of the General Assembly of 1979-1980, sisters auditors, translators, secretaries:

Father [Michel] Lloret and I have come to your assembly to offer you the service that your Community demands of us. This little address is a part of the responsibility that you have given to the superior general.

We have reached a historic point in God's providence over the Company of the Daughters of Charity. It is part of the updating of the Church and of the Company. The Second Vatican Council began on 11 October 1962 and finished on 8 December 1965, just fourteen years ago. It gave you many orientations for your own Company, and you are here today in obedience to that voice of the Church. The bishops of the world, united to the pope, had voted and signed their last documents for the Church on 7 December. Significantly, the last document to be signed was entitled "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World."

In order to update the Company it is necessary to establish securely the essential elements given to it by Saint Vincent and Saint Louise and to express them in the context of today's Church. I do not say "in the context of the ideologies that exist today, not only in the world, but in the Church as well." Your work is complicated by the fact that there is contestation within the Church and contestation against the Church. It is one of the signs of our times that the Lord told us we should be able to read, when we understand the sacred scriptures and particularly the figure of Our Lord Jesus Christ and his words in the holy gospel. We are living in a time when those who contest the Church give exaggerated emphasis to the need for plurality; they speak especially for plurality in theology and plurality in lifestyle for communities like your own. There is a very legitimate sense to unity in plurality, when there is question of applying common principles to particular situations which differ from country to

country. To understand this correctly, we need to refer again to the now classical exhortation of Pope Paul VI on evangelization. The Holy Father insists that we must respect the culture of peoples wherever we go to bring the gospel. We must not attempt to suppress or to deform the true values of these culture which are gifts of God. Last Christmas day our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, speaking of the Incarnation of the Son of God and his Redemption giving a great dignity to every human person, remarked that each one of us is irrepeatable. The same is true in a broader sense of the cultures of various peoples, but our mission is to impregnate these cultures by evangelization, by the doctrine and the lifestyle that Christ has brought into the world and exemplified for us.

Something of the same thing is contained in the directive of the Church that explains to us what updating means in a Community such as your own. It must first attend to the gospel and then to the special grace manifested in the founders of the Community, your Saint Vincent and your Saint Louise. You must also be guided by what the Church calls "sound traditions" that have been the mark of God's providence in the development of the Company during the lifetime of Saint Louise and Saint Vincent, less than twenty-seven years, and during the three following centuries. Besides these sound traditions, there are other currents spoken of by some of the sisters in the Company today. A small number of them have the characteristics that are described as "contestatory." They believe that they are guided by the Holy Spirit to institute a reform of the Company independently of the legitimate superiors. There are many other sisters who, sincerely and remaining in obedience, hope that their province will move more rapidly and adopt bolder initiatives for the service of the poor. Some of these good sisters feel frustrated because in community dialogue they have not yet convinced the superiors that their vision of the Community is authentic. Then there is a great number of sisters in the Community who are not satisfied because they consider that the Community has not put into effect what the Constitutions and Statutes, and the directives of superiors, have constantly urged in the work of conversion and renewal. It is most important that the members of the assembly can clearly distinguish these distinct trends. The assembly can answer the sisters on condition that it listens to divine revelation, to the living voice of the Church, to the directives of superiors, and to the cry of the poor. In these it will find the direction of God's providence, the guiding lights which permit the assembly to

find God's will for the Company.

There are other minor signs that are important. Let me mention one of them: failure to discern people who are seeking in the Company an easier way of life and to give a proper formation of young candidates and sisters by an environment and education that is realistic

The success today of contemplative orders and of houses of formation where the style of life is serious and challenging, seems to confirm the need of this for the Company and to explain the good results where the Company has followed such sound orientation.

I hope that all of you, sisters, who are members of the assembly have had the experience of a personal contact with the poor of the world. These poor are present in every country. I beg you to remember this experience and to make it the source of your conviction that the Community must be renewed in the formation of its members to make them all, without exception, effective instruments for the service of the poor in the spirit of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise.

You look to the future, as Saint Vincent and Saint Louise did in their day.

Saint Louise wrote to Saint Vincent on 5 July 1651, "The manner in which Divine Providence has always willed that I speak to you causes me to turn to you very simply in this matter concerning the accomplishment of the holy will of God and the obstacles which experience has shown might hinder the first establishment of the Daughters of Charity. This supposes that does not reveal that He wishes to destroy the Company entirely because of the general and individual faults which appear more pronounced in it in recent years."¹

In the conference of 25 May 1654 Saint Vincent spoke on "The Preservation of the Company." Among other things, he said this:

God was the author of it all. No other motive whatever is needed to encourage you to be perfect and to strengthen your vocation. It is a work which God has placed in your hands. He will demand an account of it from you. Sisters, is that not just? It is a treasure which you have to guard and the loss of which you must prevent. Say to yourselves: 'Ah! God has called me to his service for this work; He has placed it by way of a deposit into my hands; I

¹Letter #315, in *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac: Correspondence and Thoughts*, ed. and trans. Sister Louise Sullivan, D.C. (Brooklyn, New City Press: 1991), 363.

desire to guard it carefully. If I had a foundling confided to my care, I would not like it to perish in my hands. If I am so careful about something which only concerns the life of the body, what should I not do for the preservation of the Company which is concerned with both the life of the body and the life of the soul.' Even if we had a thousand lives, my dear sisters, we should devote them all to striving for the increase of this work.²

He asks Saint Louise for her thoughts, and she says: "Sir, the first reason we had for giving ourselves to God to obtain from His Goodness the preservation of the Company for many a long year and, if possible, forever, is to be persuaded, as we are bound to be, that God Himself willed its establishment and willed it in the form in which it now actually exists. And God does not wish His creatures to destroy what He has made. Another reason is that those who would go against the designs of God by contributing to the ruin of the Company would be the cause of the loss of many souls and would prevent many poor persons from being helped; such infidelity would put their eternal salvation in danger."³

Saint Vincent concludes the conference with this prayer: "May Our Lord Jesus Christ grant us the grace to realize the importance of what has just been said, so that we may put it into practice, and that we may not, by our sins and infidelities, be the cause of the ruin of this beautiful Company which He Himself has formed according to His own wishes. We ask this grace of Thee, O Lord, by the merits of Thy Holy Mother and by the services Thou dost wish to derive from this Company."⁴

Now the time has come where you sisters of the assembly become conscious of the state of the Company and discover what to do in completing the renewal or updating. You must combine the prudence and the courage of Saint Vincent, not forgetting what he said in that same conference: "When, however, Superiors wish to make a change, you should then believe that it is God Who wishes it; as God made use of them to establish the Order, He also makes use of them when changes are to be made. That is why you should never criticize. But if

²*The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to the Sisters of Charity*, 4 vols., trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M. (London: 1938), 2: 287.

³*Ibid.*, 293.

⁴*Ibid.*, 296-97.

a private individual wishes to interfere and bring about a change, oh! that must not be tolerated.”⁵

You will remember that the letter of convocation of this assembly, written on 1 January 1978, stated the purpose of this assembly. It is possible now to outline for you more concretely the steps that you will take in carrying out your work. You have prayed during your retreat, begun a week ago. That prayer must continue and transform all of your activity during the assembly. I know that you will cooperate with those who organize the prayer life of the Community during this period when you need so much to be always open to God and to control what is human in you, so that you will live and act with the Christian virtues, especially those commended to you by Saint Vincent in the rules.

You have already begun to organize yourself into an assembly. This will continue progressively as the days and the weeks go by. I have noted in previous assemblies how the spirit of unity becomes continually strengthened. This is a great blessing. It happens as a result of God’s grace working with your good will and the use of your intelligence illuminated by the spirit of faith. Its principal center is in the Holy Eucharist, and it is expressed in the prayer after the consecration when the priests say, “May all of us who share in the Body and Blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit.”

Then you will prepare the topics assigned to you in your fifteen special commissions, giving precedence to those preliminary to the election of the superioress general. This will permit you to go on to elect the superioress general who will administer the Company for the next six years. Some time later in the assembly the councilors will be elected and, from among them, the assistant.

As you take up the study of particular matters, you will try to discover words that will animate and guide the life of the sisters. The planning of this assembly has been carried out very carefully. It allows you to go about this work in an orderly way. It does put demands upon you to listen with respect and understanding when others are speaking and to take your own part in contributing modestly but clearly the thoughts inspired in you by the Lord.

During the assembly itself it is hoped that you will complete the text of the constitutions to be presented to the Holy See. This will demand persistent and patient work to keep up with the plan that is

⁵Ibid., 294.

presented to you by the coordinating commission. You have among you a large number of sisters who have had a successful experience in the previous assemblies, but these experienced sisters also must reorient themselves with the rest of you in order to accomplish well the specific and unique special object of this assembly, to put revised constitutions into the hands of those who represent the Holy Father. You will certainly think of this when Cardinal Pironio comes to preside at the celebration of the Eucharist ten days from now.

Let us now pray together, my dear sisters:

Heavenly Father, you have sent your son to become man, born of the Virgin Mary and given the name of Jesus, the savior. Grant that we may hear his voice, particularly as the holy gospel is read to us. Lord Jesus Christ, who came to us and lived in this world and gave up your life for us in a bitter passion to manifest the immense love that you have for us and to accomplish the redemption and the sanctification of us all, we beg you to be the master and the chief of this assembly, come together in your name. Send us again the Holy Spirit who united the first Christians and formed them into a community that today we call the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Oh, Holy Spirit, proceeding from the Father and the Son, take us and reform us in our spirit so that we may become docile instruments for the work of God in the vocation to which we have been called and in this work of becoming an effective assembly. Oh, Holy Virgin Mother of God, be present with us as we take up the task to which God has called us this day. We promise to celebrate personally and in community the contact with you in the prayers of 1980, imitating as much as we can Catherine Labouré, who was your messenger of 1830, to renew the vitality of our Vincentian families. Each one of your Daughters knows how to repeat the words you spoke to the angel when you humbled yourself before the Lord and prayed that his will be done in you. Intercede for us that this disposition may be evident throughout the assembly. Oh! holy Saint Vincent and holy Saint Louise, pray for the Daughters of Charity who are meeting these days to establish more firmly their Company for the service that you have exem-

plified to them and made the object of their annual vows to the Lord. Oh! Angels of the Lord, guide the communication among these sisters and lead them to praise God and to accomplish his will on earth as you do with such perfection in heaven. Amen."