

Marian Spirituality and the Vincentian Charism

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Introduction

I felt it would be good to center our work on two essential elements that make up the two parts of this presentation.

1. What are the inspirational sources of Marian Spirituality within the Vincentian Charism? 2. How can we create a living Marian Spirituality today within our Lay Vincentian Associations?

First, I will give some reflections on the concept of Marian Spirituality.

Marian Spirituality

Fr. Robert Maloney described spirituality as such: It is, on the one hand, the specific way in which a person is rooted in God. It is, on the other hand, the specific way in which he or she relates to the created world. It is insight as the source of action. It is a vision that generates energy and channels it in a particular direction, thereby enabling a

person to transcend him or herself. For the Christian, it is a way of seeing Christ and being in him that directs the individual's energies in the service of the kingdom.”

Spirituality expresses a relationship with life according to the Spirit, following Christ, in a new way of being and living in the Lord.

Therefore, referring to Marian Spirituality does not mean revising devotional practices to the Virgin Mary. Referring to Marian Spirituality, is finding the inspiration to follow Christ in Mary. Christianity does not consist of formulas, an ideology or concepts. It is above all gift, presence, experience, and life. The figure of Mary stands out as a challenge and an inspiration to embody Christian attitudes and values. Mary is presented to us as the most perfect disciple of Christ and the first Christian, by her attitudes, “in her own particular life, she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God, because she heard the word of God and acted on it, and because charity and the spirit of service were the driving force of her actions. She is worthy of imitation because she was the first and most perfect of Christ's disciples. All of this has a permanent and universal exemplary value.”

“Mary is the perfect embodiment of Christian Spirituality.” She is Mistress of the spiritual life, according to the words of Paul VI. In this sense, the Church calls her model of Christians and of the Church: “As St. Ambrose taught, the Mother of God is a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity, and perfect union with Christ.” “Thus the daughter of Adam, Mary, consenting to the word of God, became the Mother of Jesus. Committing herself wholeheartedly and impeded by no sin to God's saving Will, she devoted herself totally, as a handmaid of the Lord, to the person and work of her Son, under and with Him, serving the mystery of Redemption, by the grace of almighty God.” Mary is the perfect disciple of Jesus, she follows him from the Annunciation of the Angel to the foot of the Cross. “This union of the Mother with the Son in the work of salvation is made manifest from the time of Christ's virginal conception up to his death.” Mary unreservedly allowed herself to be guided by the Spirit: she was filled with the Holy Spirit; her life was life in the Spirit.

Marian spirituality spontaneously flourished at the heart of the Church since the earliest centuries. Christians from various times have proposed forms, modalities and expressions according to the practices of each era. “Mary is a grace which continuously nourishes the spiritual life of the faithful.” It is the same for the Vincentian Family. That is

why it is essential for us to draw near to the inspirational sources of Marian Spirituality within the Vincentian Charism and see, once again, how we can promote a living Marian Spirituality within the heart of Vincentian Associations today.

I. Inspirational Sources of Marian Spirituality within the Vincentian Charism

We are not going to linger here on the contents and scope of the expression Vincentian Charism. But, allow me to bring up three useful points for our work.

By Vincentian Charism we mean the gift of the Spirit given by God in the Church to Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. A gift of the Spirit shared by all who follow Vincent and Louise in the various institutions and associations that have arisen under their inspiration and that endeavor to live out, maintain, deepen and constantly develop this gift in harmony with the Body of Christ which is in continuous growth.

Etymologically the word Vincentian comes from the word Vincent (Vincentius). We cannot assign the characteristics of Vincentian Charism to the personality of Vincent de Paul alone. It cannot be completely understood without the original contribution of Louise de Marillac. The more one studies the relationship between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, the more difficult it is to attribute the Vincentian Charism to only one of them.

The profile of Vincentian Charism does not exclusively correspond to the time of the Founders. The charism is a dynamic reality, recreated in every epoch, constantly deepened and enriched through the vitality of the responses of each person, each Community and each Association in fidelity to the Spirit.

Having given these points, I will now focus on our theme: What are the inspirational sources of Marian Spirituality within the Vincentian Charism?

I will develop this in four sections: 1. Mary's life as we are told of it through the gospels; 2. the Church's faith that shows us Mary as her most eminent member; 3. the experience of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac; 4. the experience of the Vincentian Family since the apparitions to Catherine Labouré. Although belonging to various areas, I believe that it is from these wellsprings that the Vincentian Family draws its spirituality.

1. Mary's life

At the time of St. Vincent and St. Louise and at the time of the apparitions to Catherine Labouré, as well as in our own time, authentic Marian spirituality must be nourished from a personal and genuine encounter with Mary in the gospel: “Finally, we wish to point out that our own time, no less than former times, is called upon to verify its knowledge of reality with the word of God, and, keeping to the matter at present under consideration, to compare its anthropological ideas and the problems springing therefrom with the figure of the Virgin Mary as presented by the Gospel.”

There are few New Testament texts concerning Mary. In the epistles, we only find one passage, which is Galatians 4:4. There is also a reference in the Acts of the Apostles in chapter 1, verse 14. There are two indications in Mark's Gospel (3:31-35 and 6:3) and two in the Gospel of John (2:1-12 and 19:26-27). The most abundant details are contained in the infancy narratives: Matthew 1-2; Luke 1-2.

The original “kerygma” is centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, with no direct reference to Mary. As a whole, though, the New Testament recognizes the role of Mary as mother and model in the history of salvation, worthy of acceptance and honor.

Mary in salvation history

Mary's role in salvation history can be represented using two expressions that are found in the Gospel of Luke:

Servant of the Lord (Lk 1:38) — Mary is the instrument chosen by God to accomplish his will, remaining unconditionally faithful to his mission.

Blessed among women (Lk 1:42) — Mary is not simply the one favored above her contemporaries. “The blessing shows participation in the messianic process and contribution to the work of salvation. This cannot be reduced to bringing the fruit of her womb into the world, but in light of events of the Old Testament, it includes liberation and all the consequences involved in being the mother of the Messiah Liberator.”

Mary's mission in salvation history can also be deepened from the prophecy of Simeon (Lk 2:35), at the time of finding Jesus in the temple (Lk 2:48), or the two episodes in the Gospel of John, related to “the hour” (2:1-12 and 19:26-27).

Mary, model for the people of God

During the public life of Jesus, the gospels present Mary to us as the Mother who became a disciple (Lk 8:19-20; 11:28).

The Evangelists, especially Luke and John, present us the traits of Mary's personality as the perfect Christian and model for the entire people of God, for the Church. "All the spiritual dimensions characteristic of the mystical line of the poor of Yahweh in the Old Testament that would subsequently be ratified by the Beatitudes in the Gospel, are focused on Mary and make up her spiritual portrait: poverty (Lk 1:48), service (Lk 1:38, 48; Jn 2:5), fear of God (Lk 1:29, 50), awareness of her own fragility (Lk 1:52), sense of justice (Lk 1:35), solidarity with the people of God (Lk 1:52-55), joy (Lk 1:28, 47), openness and availability to the design of God (Lk 1:35, 51), trust in the promises of a faithful and merciful God (Lk 2:19, 51). All these attitudes show the depth of Mary's faith in harmony with Old Testament biblical devotion. The Magnificat, uniting historical and biblical points, is the song of the poor, true and holy people Israel, inheritor of the messianic blessings. It presents Mary as the daughter of Sion, the "little remnant" of the community of Israel, who has achieved perfection, ready to welcome messianic joy and to bring about the salvific presence of God to humanity."

Mary, worthy of honor

The Gospel of Luke invites Christians to honor Mary: "Henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (1:48); to join with Israel in calling her "blessed" (1:42), recognizing God's action in her, chosen to participate in a fundamental way in God's plan of salvation.

Mary, accepted as mother

The Gospel of John invites all who follow Jesus to receive Mary as Mother: "From this time forward, the disciple received her into his home" (19:27). As for Jesus' disciple, the reception of his Mother, in faith, was among all the goods and all things that come from being in communion with Christ.

As we see, the New Testament gives us the essential elements to fashion Marian spirituality: "The reading of Divine Scriptures, carried out under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and with the discoveries of the human sciences and the different situations in the

world today being taken into account, will help us to see how Mary can be considered a mirror of the expectations of the men and women of our time.”

2. The Faith of the Church

The Church is the sacrament of Christ and of those who follow him. It is the principle and most authentic place of encountering the Father. The Church is the “homeland,” the privileged place where the Holy Spirit dwells and acts.

Through all ages of history, there reappears the temptation to have a Christianity and a spirituality without the Church and the experience she offers us. Nevertheless, it is the criterion of ecclesial community that compares our personal Christian experience with the gospel and the experience of Jesus, so that our experience is neither sectarian nor subjective. It is also the ecclesial community that places the great spiritual tradition of Christianity within our reach and offers us living witnesses, raised up by the Holy Spirit, who are following Jesus. It is in the common celebration of faith, in the deepening of the Word of God, in shared responses to Christian commitments, that the ecclesial community guides its members to live in God by helping each other

Vatican Council II devoted chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium* to Mary: The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the mystery of Christ and the Church. “As it is the fruit of two trends, the presentation of Mary in this chapter is very beautiful, positive, balanced, biblical, ecumenical and ecclesial. Truly, it would be difficult to write with any greater scriptural basis, solid theology or fervor. The incomparable role of Mary in salvation history is stressed but always in relation to Christ and the Church.”

In 1974 Paul VI published the Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*. It updated the Marian doctrine of Vatican II, clarifying the essential relationship of the Virgin with the Savior and indicating lines of Marian spirituality and devotion, offering Mary as a model: the Virgin who listens, prays and offers — the Virgin Mother.

John Paul II published the encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* in 1987 to “promote a new and more careful reading of what the Council said about the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the mystery of Christ and of the Church... Here we speak not only of the doctrine of faith but also of the life of faith, and thus of authentic `Marian Spirituality.’”

An authentic Marian spirituality must go and draw from this source, which is the faith of the Church, constantly reflected upon and reformulated within the documents of the

Magisterium. It is impossible to create an authentic Marian spirituality in the margins or outside of the Church and even less so contrary to the Church.

The experience of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac

For us who are part of the Vincentian Family, the experience of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac must be a constant reference point. It is up to us to live, maintain, deepen and constantly develop the Vincentian Charism. Let us look at their experience and these will inspire our own Marian spirituality.

3.1. The experience of Vincent de Paul

A. Dodin, in presenting the Mariology of St. Vincent wrote, "Saint Vincent seems to be a poor family relative."

The time of St. Vincent is notably characterized by Catholic reactions to reforms. That is why devotion to Mary increased and often times became excessive. Louis XIII consecrated the Kingdom of France to the Virgin in 1638; Anne of Austria confided the accomplishment of numerous devotions such as pilgrimages to Marian centers, gifts, etc. to Brother Fiacre. Theologians and masters of the spiritual life also developed abundant treatises that furthered devotion to the Virgin and acknowledgement of her privileges. On the popular level there developed numerous confraternities, especially those of the rosary, pilgrimages and other devotional practices.

Within this context, the sparseness of Vincent de Paul's thoughts and outward signs in regard to the Virgin Mary attracts our attention. In the more than 8,000 pages of letters and conferences, we only find two hundred references to the Virgin Mary: "Vincent de Paul refers to the Virgin Mary only in passing, using classical terms and a moderate tone."

In 1600, Vincent de Paul celebrated his first Eucharist at Notre Dame de Remouille. He attributes his freedom from slavery to the Virgin Mary. In 1623 Vincent made a pilgrimage to Notre Dame de Buglose with his family. In 1639 he also participated in a pilgrimage to Chartres. He would usually close his letters with the phrase "in the love of Our Lord and His holy Mother."

From the establishment of the first Confraternity of Charity at Châtillon-les-Dombes in 1617, Vincent proposed Mary as the patroness: "And the Mother of God being invoked and taken as patroness in important matters, it can do no other than redound to the glory of the good Jesus her Son, the said Ladies take her as patroness and protector of the work and humbly beg her to take them into her special care." We also find similar references in the rules of the Confraternities that would soon follow.

St. Vincent accepted that the Company of the Daughters of Charity would be consecrated to the Virgin Mary, and that she would be considered the Mother of the Company. He urged the sisters to say the rosary and the Angelus. He recommended that the members of the Congregation of the Mission have special devotion to the Blessed Virgin: "... a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. We should try to carry this out perfectly with God's help: 1st by specially honoring the preeminent Mother of Christ every day, who is also our Mother; 2nd by putting into practice, as far as possible, the same virtues she did, particularly humility and chastity; 3rd by enthusiastically encouraging others, whenever the opportunity and means permit, to show her the greatest reverence and always to serve her loyally."

But Vincent de Paul advised against sentimentality and excess in devotional love for the Virgin Mary. He wrote to Fr. Lambert: "You would do well to get rid of that young woman. Advise her not to amuse herself with all those notions she has... Neither Our Lord nor the Blessed Virgin had all those ideas, and they conformed to the common life."

Vincent de Paul suggested Mary as a model: "...you should reflect on the example of the Blessed Virgin...", "...let us pray to the Blessed Virgin, who, better than all others, has delved into the substance (of the gospel maxims) and put them into practice." Many qualities of Mary to imitate appear within the conferences and letters: she was obedient to the Will of God, modest, discreet, without sin, humble, perfect, full of grace, poor, persevering, a virgin and servant of the Lord.

Vincent focused his attention on three events, three mysteries in Mary's life: the Immaculate Conception, the Annunciation and the Visitation. "These three mysteries constitute the support, letter and spirit of the fundamental steps of her progression toward Christ and her life with God." Vincent de Paul's contemplation of Mary was

situated within the center of the spiritual universe: given to God to serve God in the poor.

The Immaculate Conception

Within the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, St. Vincent saw the humble and chaste Virgin, emptied of herself so as to welcome God and allow herself to be filled with God. These are fundamental dispositions for those desiring to empty themselves and clothe themselves in the spirit of Jesus Christ: "(God) foresaw then that, since His Son had to take human flesh through a woman, it was proper that He take it from a woman worthy of receiving Him, a woman outstanding in grace, free from sin, filled with piety and far removed from any harmful affections. Already, God paraded before His eyes all the women who might be suitable and found none of them worthy of this important piece of work except the most pure and most immaculate Virgin Mary. That is why, from all eternity, God decided to prepare this dwelling place, to adorn her with rarer and more worthy gifts than any other creature, so that she would be a temple of the Divinity, a palace worthy of her Son. If the eternal foresight searched so far to discover this repository for His Son and, once he had found her, adorned her with all the graces that could embellish a created being, as God declared through the angel sent as an ambassador, how much more should we foresee the day and the dispositions required for receiving him."

Welcoming God, being filled with God, clothing oneself with Christ, self-emptying, as did the Immaculate one that is the first event that Vincent de Paul stressed regarding the Virgin Mary.

The Annunciation

Humility prepared and sustained the offering to God. Knowing God and recognizing God as the only Lord, knowing one's smallness before God, giving oneself to God to serve one's neighbor, in order to accomplish God's work — that is the second movement that Vincent discovered in Mary within the Annunciation: "We must recognize the essence and existence of God and have some knowledge of His perfections before offering sacrifices to Him. That is natural for, I ask you, to whom do you offer gifts? To the great, to princes and Kings. It is to them you render homage. This is so true that God observed this order in the Incarnation. When the angel went to salute the Blessed

Virgin, he began by acknowledging that she was replenished with the graces of Heaven: Ave, gratia plena: you are full of grace, you are filled with God's favor. Ave gratia plena. He recognized the fact then, and praised her as being full of grace. And then what did he do? He made her the beautiful gift of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. The Holy Spirit, within her virginal womb formed a body. God created a soul, united it to this body. And immediately the Word united Himself to this soul and body by a wonderful union. And, in this manner, the Holy Spirit wrought the ineffable mystery of the Incarnation. Praise preceded sacrifice”.

Like Mary, in the Annunciation, we must give ourselves to God to accomplish his work. “It is said then: we must seek the Kingdom of God. We must seek. This is but one word. Yet it seems to me to say much. It means that we should place ourselves in such a state as always to aspire after what has been recommended to us, to labor unceasingly for the Kingdom of God and not remain in a languishing and inactive state.... Seek: Seek, this implies care; this implies action.”

The Visitation

Emptied of ourselves and given to God, our life is at the service of the poor: “You are given to God for the service of the Poor.” St. Vincent discovered this third movement of the spiritual journey in Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. He suggested Mary's promptness, as exemplified within the Visitation, as a model of service to the poor: “They shall honor the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin who went to visit her cousin cheerfully and promptly.” Thus, he determined specific applications for the life of the Daughter of Charity: “The Company of the Daughters of Charity is established to love God, to serve and honor Our Lord, their Patron, and the Blessed Virgin. And how will you honor him? Your rule tells you, for it goes on to inform you of God's design in establishing your Company to serve the sick poor corporally, by supplying them with all they need, and spiritually, by taking care that they live and die in a holy state.”

Whatever road we take, Monsieur Vincent, without fail, guides us towards the poor. Our life, like Mary's, is totally given to God for the service of the poor.

3.2 The experience of Louise de Marillac

Contrary to that of St. Vincent, Mary's presence in St. Louise's correspondence and writings is rich, abundant and sometimes even written in a systematic way.

The great dignity of Mary

We have some writings of St. Louise where she discusses the fruits of her meditations and her reflections on the great dignity of the Virgin Mary. She presents Mary as:

God's collaborator in the Incarnation; "The Son of God having taken human form in the womb of Mary"³⁹; Very united to Christ Jesus who lives in her: "a greater love for her Son and a stronger union to his human divinity"⁴⁰; Participant in the mystery of God in Jesus Christ⁴¹; Full of grace⁴²; Mother of mercy⁴²; Mother of grace⁴⁴; Collaborator, at the foot of the cross, in redemption.⁴⁵

3.2.2. The Virgin Mary, Immaculate, conceived without sin.

One of the reflections of St. Louise is centered on the mystery of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary.⁴⁶ It concerns a very developed and elaborate reflection. St. Louise wanted to develop and write her thoughts about the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. She assures us from the beginning of this development that she intends to write them "entirely." The Church had not yet proclaimed the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception (that would occur on 8 December 1854) when St. Louise wrote this text. This feast, however, so strongly rooted in the people, was already being celebrated. St. Louise's text perfectly captures what the Church would later teach on the Immaculate Conception.

The Immaculate Conception is understood within the context of God's Salvific Plan, his design of love.

Even though she was conceived without sin, Mary never ceased belonging to the lineage of Adam. She had been prepared to be a worthy dwelling for the Son of God.

Mary, conceived without sin and chosen by God, responds by a sound life and, full of grace, she continues to grow in grace.

Having been conceived without sin, Mary is free from concupiscence that leads to sin.

We, sinners, must imitate the life of Mary, honoring her for her great dignity and asking her intercession because no one is as united to Christ as she.

It is worthwhile to slowly read the text of St. Louise and to discover the earnestness of her presentation and the richness of her intuition. This can serve as a suggestion for Marian spirituality within the Vincentian charism.

3.2.3 Marie, the ideal of life

St. Louise de Marillac discovers and proposes the Virgin Mary as the ideal for life.

Model of all states of life⁴⁷; Model of accomplishing the will of God⁴⁸; Model of poverty⁴⁹; Model of purity.⁵⁰

3.2.4 Devotion to the Virgin Mary

a) Of what does devotion to the Virgin Mary consist?

There is a text by St. Louise that perfectly synthesizes of what devotion to the Virgin Mary consists.⁵¹ It is a systematic treatise that can enlighten us today.

All Christians must

Have a great love for the holy Virgin Mary;

Celebrate feasts in her honor in the daily liturgy;

Imitate her virtues;

Choose some “little devotional practices” to Mary.

b) The “little devotional practices” of St. Louise in honor of the Virgin

In addition to her reflections and meditations on the Blessed Virgin, we also find some clear traces of these “little devotional practices” to honor the Virgin Mary in the correspondence and writings of St. Louise. Let us call to mind the most important:

1. St. Louise wrote a prayer of offering to the Virgin, placing her son and herself under the protection of Mary after the death of her husband, Antoine Le Gras.⁵³

2. In her Rule of Life in the world, St. Louise enumerates several devotional practices in honor of the Virgin Mary:

The Office of the Blessed Virgin;

A quarter of an hour of prayer exactly at midday to honor the moment when the Incarnation of the Word took place in the womb of the Blessed Virgin;

The rosary every day, meditating upon one of the mysteries;

The renewal of her vows and good resolutions every first Saturday of the month, having chosen Saturday because she took the Blessed Virgin for her protectress;

Praying the Hail Mary, honoring the Blessed Virgin;

Fasting on eves of all feasts of the Blessed Virgin.⁵³

3. In the catechism drawn up by St. Louise, she explained and recommended praying the Hail Mary and the rosary.⁵⁴

4. In a letter to the Abbe de Vaux, St. Louise gave advice on the manner in which a sister could prayer the rosary: "I will give you my views on the devotions for Sister Madeleine. I think that she could easily say two decades of her chaplet daily and three on Saturday for the complete rosary for the week."⁵⁵

5. St. Louise prepared and offered paintings of the Virgin as an expression of her love for her and her desire to honor her appropriately.⁵⁶

6. St. Louise drew up a little rosary. She wrote to St. Vincent: "This little chaplet is the devotion for which I asked permission of your Charity three years ago as a personal devotion. I have in a small box a quantity of these little chaplets, along with some thoughts on this devotion written on a piece of paper, which with your permission, I wish to leave to all our sisters after my death. Not one of them knows it. It honors the hidden life of Our Lord in his state of imprisonment in the womb of the Blessed Virgin and congratulates her on her happiness during those nine months. The three small beads hail her under her beautiful titles of Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son, and Spouse of the Holy Spirit. That is the main thought behind the devotion. By the grace of God, unworthy as I am, I have continued this devotion since the time I mentioned, but I hope to discontinue it, aided by God's same grace, if your Charity so orders. By means of this little exercise I intend to ask God, through the Incarnation of his Son and the

prayers of the Blessed Virgin, for the purity necessary for the Company of the Sisters of Charity and for the steadfastness of this Company in keeping with his good pleasure.”⁵⁷

St. Vincent certainly did not authorize her to practice this “devotion.” She alludes to this in a letter: “I feel that I must tell your Charity that I was and still am sorry at having to abandon those little prayers because I believe that the Blessed Virgin wanted me to render her this small tribute of gratitude. But with her, I console myself by offering my renunciation to her and by resolving to please her in some other way and to serve her with greater fervor....”⁵⁸

The intention of St. Louise lives on however, in the traditional prayer the Daughters of Charity recite between the mysteries of the Rosary, Most Holy Virgin....

7. In the Rule for the Sisters of the Hospitals, St. Louise lists the recitation of the rosary.⁵⁹

8. St. Louise had the practice of invoking the intercession of the Blessed Virgin in her prayers: “...Through these merits ... and for the love that you bear the Blessed Virgin.”⁶⁰

3.2.5 Mary, only Mother of the Company

St. Louise de Marillac probably did not know her mother, but she always saw Mary as the Only Mother and confided to the Blessed Virgin, Only Mother, what she loved most in this world: her son and the Company of the Daughters of Charity. She wanted this Company to be consecrated to Mary, whom she always considered its Only Mother.

The following texts capture these desires and convictions, especially those concerning her correspondence with St. Vincent.

1. St. Louise asked St. Vincent for permission to go on a pilgrimage to Chartres: “I beg you most humbly to allow me to make a pilgrimage to Chartres during your absence so that I may entrust all our needs and the suggestions I have made to you to the care of the Blessed Virgin. The time has surely come for me to reflect on myself in the sight of God. I must tell you that I am convinced that the good of our little Company requires it.”⁶¹

2. St. Louise gave an accounting of her pilgrimage to Chartres to St. Vincent: "...On Monday, Feast of the Dedication of the Church of Chartres, I offered to God the designs of his Providence on the Company of the Daughters of Charity. I offered the said Company entirely to Him, asking Him to destroy it rather than let it be established contrary to His holy will. I asked for it, through the prayers of the Holy Virgin, Mother and Guardian of the said Company, the purity of which it stands in need. Looking upon the Blessed Virgin in the accomplishment of the mystery of the Incarnation, I asked Him for the grace of fidelity for the Company through the merits of the Blood of the Son of God and of Mary. I prayed also that He might be the strong and loving bond that unites the hearts of all the sisters in imitation of the union of the three Divine Persons. In my prayers for myself, I placed in the hands of the Blessed Virgin the decision to be made...."62

3. St. Louise asked St. Vincent that the Company be consecrated to Mary and that she be chosen as its only Mother: "How can I express to your Charity, in the name of the entire Company of our Sisters, how fortunate we would consider ourselves if tomorrow at the holy altar, you placed us under the protection of the Holy Virgin? I beg your Charity to obtain for us the grace to be able, henceforth, to look upon her as our only Mother since, until now, her Son has never allowed anyone to usurp this title in a public act. Please approve this request for the love of God and implore for us the grace to do what we must and will do, if your Charity sees fit and is willing to teach us."63

4. St. Vincent de Paul said the following prayer in his conference of 8 December 1658: "Since it is under the standard of your perfection that the Company of Charity was established, if we have hitherto called you our Mother, we now beseech you to accept the offering which we make to you of the Company in general and of each of its members in particular. And because you permit us to call you Mother and you are the Mother of mercy, the channel through which all mercy flows, who did obtain from God, as we may believe, the establishment of this Company, be pleased to take it under your protection."64

5. St. Louise spoke about the Blessed Virgin as the Only Mother at several retreats: "...give greater honor to the Holy Virgin and to renew the total dependence of the Company upon her as her most unworthy daughters, who look on her also as our most praiseworthy and only Mother."65 "...the Holy Virgin is your true and only Mother."66

“...like a true Daughter of Charity, you must accept all that is said to you by the one who, here on earth, represents you true Superior in heaven.”⁶⁷

6. In the last words of her Spiritual Testament, St. Louise stressed this to the sisters: “Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only Mother.”⁶⁸

As we have seen, the presence of Mary is abundant, clear and solid in the experience of St. Louise. In the Vincentian Family, we cannot neglect drawing from this wellspring.

- 4. The Experience of the Vincentian Family since the Apparitions to Catherine Labouré=

St. Catherine Labouré (1806-1876) and the message of the Medal of the Mother of God has had a decisive influence on the life of all groups in the Vincentian Family, and especially with regard to the direction of their Marian spirituality. It suffices to call to mind several factors:

At the time of the apparitions to St. Catherine Labouré, the CM, as well as the Company of the Daughters of Charity and the Confraternities of Charity, were practically dispersed and more or less fragmented. The Miraculous Medal and its Marian spirituality are decisive in understanding the rebirth of former Vincentian foundations.

John Gabriel Perboyre (1802-1840) found the strength to witness to Christ by his life in devotion to the Virgin Mary. He propagated the Miraculous Medal in China, convinced that “the entire world be filled with Mary’s mercy.” He was one of so many witnesses to Christ in the Vincentian Family.

Several groups belonging to the Vincentian Family have rooted themselves in these apparitions to St. Catherine Labouré: Vincentian Marian Youth, the Association of the Miraculous Medal and groups that have arisen from these.

Frederick Ozanam (1813-1853) died on the feast of the birth of Our Lady, a feast for which he had great devotion throughout his entire life. He himself carried the medal and took an interest in communicating the conversion of Ratisbonne through the intercession of the Virgin of the Medal. He established the day of the Immaculate Conception as a feast for the Conferences.

We could say that the history of the Vincentian Family could not be understood without this reference to the Immaculate Virgin of the Miraculous Medal.

The Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity and of the CM, the Statutes of the Vincentian Marian Youth and the Association of the Miraculous Medal, as well as the practices of other groups, show us the value of the experience of Catherine Labouré and the Miraculous Medal as a source of Marian Spirituality in the Vincentian Family.

II. Giving Form Today to a Living Marian Spirituality within Lay Vincentian Associations

After having considered the sources from which the Vincentian Family draws its Marian spirituality, it is important to center our attention on some suggestions that would help give it form today. We are specifically referring to Lay Vincentian Associations given the nature of this Vincentian Month.⁶⁹

We want to give form to a living Marian Spirituality in today's world. Does this mean that Marian spirituality is not ongoing? Is not Jesus Christ "the same yesterday, today and forever" (Heb 13:8)? So then, why do we want to give form to a living Marian spirituality in today's world? Certainly, Christ is the same, but the human person, in which he must be received in every age of history, is not the same. The anthropological and cultural realities, in which the person's life is situated, are not the same either. From this it is necessary to return in each era to drink at the inspirational sources and update their expressions. In every period of the Church, Mary has nourished the spiritual experiences of Christians, but her person has taken very diverse forms throughout history. At the beginning of the Third Millennium, can the Vincentian Family, in drawing from the inspirational sources, give form to a living Marian spirituality?

Allow me to offer some suggestions:

Love Mary

"All truly Christian souls must have a great love for the Blessed Virgin, and honor her greatly for her quality as Mother of God, and for the virtues God has given her in this regard." These words written by St. Louise, give us a first suggestion for a living Marian spirituality. The Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity express it in this way:

“Whoever seeks to follow Jesus Christ will also encounter her who received him from the Father, Mary the first Christian....”⁷⁰

Throughout history, and in each Vincentian institution or group, the Vincentian Family has accorded a privileged place to Mary. Mary is recognized and invoked as Mother by the Vincentian Family. All Christians, clearly each of us, as members of the Vincentian Family, are invited to welcome Mary into their own home.⁷¹ In Marian Associations, therefore, we must promote a true love for Mary, not forgetting the associated observation of S. De Fiores: “What the Christian of today desires is an authentic, personal encounter with Mary, free of obstacles and outdated visions, diligently based on the gospel and expressed in a totally renewed dialogue with her.”⁷²

Here is the first suggestion: That in all of our associations, we cultivate a genuine love of Mary.

Live like Mary

St. Louise is going to guide us in a new way to formulate our second suggestion: “In carrying out our actions, let us cast our eyes on those of the Blessed Virgin, and think that the greatest honor we could give her is to imitate her virtues.”

Vatican Council II states this clearly: “True devotion consists neither in sterile or transitory affection, nor in a certain vain credulity, but proceeds from true faith, by which we are led to recognize the excellence of the Mother of God, and we are moved to a filial love towards our mother and to the imitation of her virtues.”⁷³

The great directional change of Vatican Council II within Marian spirituality consisted in viewing Mary as “the one we should imitate” more than “the one we should pray to.” Mary is more exalted through her functions than her privileges, more through her example than by her royalty.⁷⁴

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac were very clear in giving us Mary as a life ideal, as a model. The Miraculous Medal is equally a summary of the life of Mary and a support for Christian life.

In drawing from the inspirational sources of Marian spirituality within the Vincentian charism, our Vincentian Associations are able to try and give form to these Christian and Marian traits within their own lives:

Called and chosen

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac unreservedly affirmed Mary's Immaculate Conception. The apparitions to Sr. Catherine Labouré and the Miraculous Medal also proclaim this same mystery in an obvious way: And if... the Virgin of Nazareth is also called 'blessed among women' it is because of that blessing with which 'God the Father' has filled us 'in the heavenly places, in Christ'... It is a spiritual blessing which is meant for all people and which bears in itself fullness and universality ("every blessing")... This blessing, however, refers to Mary in a special and exceptional degree... In the mystery of Christ she is present even 'before the creation of the world,' as the one whom the Father 'has chosen' as Mother of his Son in the Incarnation. And, what is more, together with the Father, the Son has chosen her, entrusting her eternally to the Spirit of holiness.⁷⁵

Like Mary, each of us, from the time of our baptism, are called to honor within ourselves "the state of grace, which is friendship with God, communion with him, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit,"⁷⁶ in being holy and irreproachable in love.

St. Vincent and St. Louise often repeated: "called by God... what a great vocation!"⁷⁷

From the acknowledgement of the magnificence of God's choice regarding each of us on the day of our baptism⁷⁸ flows the generosity of our response and the urgency of our everyday responsibilities.

Attentive and available to the Will of the Father

Mary is introduced in a precise manner within the mystery of Christ through the Annunciation. "She who at the Annunciation called herself the 'handmaid of the Lord' remained throughout her earthly life faithful to what this name expresses. In this she confirmed that she was a true 'disciple' of Christ, who strongly emphasized that his mission was one of service: 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mt 20:28). In this way Mary became the first of those who, 'serving Christ also in others, with humility and patience lead their brothers and sisters to that King whom to serve is to reign.'"⁷⁹

The Annunciation has inspired the members of the Vincentian Family since the time of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. The life of Catherine Labouré is a story of

fidelity to the Will of God woven in work, simplicity, humility, charity and silence. The Miraculous Medal contributed to writing the heroic pages of fidelity to God, of true Christianity and conversion. Like Mary, as members of the Vincentian Family, we must openly live by the transforming strength of the Spirit in order to know how to give ourselves unreservedly to the accomplishment of God's Will, always being attentive and available.

Allowing Christ to take form in us

“Mary's entire existence was in total union with her Son. She was the faithful accompanier of the Lord along his entire journey. Her divine maternity guided her to a total giving, a generous giving, clear and permanent. She made a love relationship with Christ, intimate and holy, which found its fulfillment in glory.”⁸⁰ The Miraculous Medal is a visible expression of this unity of the Mother with Christ, especially through the union of the two hearts and the letter M interlaced with the cross, as seen on the reverse of the medal. We identify with Jesus Christ, we put on the spirit of Jesus Christ in order to continue his mission, belonging to the very heart of the Vincentian charism. In this process, the members of the Vincentian Family cannot cease to look upon Mary whose entire existence is in full communion with Christ.⁸¹

To proclaim the gospel of love to the poor

Mary, the perfect disciple of Christ, is the one who lived the greatest identification to Christ, directly collaborating in his works. “She was far from being a timidly submissive woman or one whose piety was repellent to others.”⁸² She was not only the admirable fruit of redemption, but an active collaborator.

Paul VI described evangelization as an authentic childbirth: “The Church, through evangelization, engenders new sons and daughters. This process, which consists of transforming from within, renewing humanity itself, is a veritable renaissance to life.”⁸³ Paul VI also stressed the extent of Mary's service and showed the variety of situations where the one following Christ must make the strength of the gospel present: “Mary is a woman of strength who experienced poverty and suffering, flight and exile (cf., Mt 2:13-23). These are situations that cannot escape the attention of those who wish to support, with the Gospel spirit, the liberating energies of humanity and of society.”⁸⁴

Evangelization and service of the poor constitute the purpose of all the institutions and associations of the Vincentian Family. On several occasions St. Vincent de Paul suggested Mary's promptness in the Visitation as a model for serving the poor: "They shall honor the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin who went to visit her cousin cheerfully and promptly."⁸⁵ The open hand of the Virgin of the Miraculous Medal and her mantel that covers the earth and embraces the poor; the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth and the spirituality of the Magnificat; through the concern of a Mother who cooperates in the birth and development of brothers and sisters, she cooperates with a maternal love.⁸⁶ There, among others, are some Marian references that continue to inspire evangelizing service and the new creativity of charity in the Vincentian Family faced with the poverty of a thousand faces!

We said at the beginning of my presentation that to speak about Marian spirituality, is to find in Mary the inspiration to follow Christ. This is our second suggestion to live a Marian Spirituality today: Live like Mary:

Called and chosen; Attentive and available to the will of God; Allow Christ to take form in us; Announce the gospel of love to the poor.

3. Celebrate the mystery of Christ with Mary

In formulating our third suggestion for a living Marian spirituality within our Vincentian Associations today, we once again turn to the recommendation of St. Louise: "This quality obliges us every day to give Him honor; and the greatest honor we can give Him is to unite our spirit to the intention of the Holy Church in the order that she offers us to praise Him in the various liturgical seasons."

Since Vatican Council II, the documents of the Church clearly show us the way:

"The Liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows"⁸⁷;

"In celebrating this annual cycle of the mysteries of Christ, Holy Church honors the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, with a special love. She is inseparably linked with her son's saving work"⁸⁸;

“Christ is the only way to the Father, and the ultimate example to whom the disciple must conform his own conduct, to the extent of sharing Christ's sentiments, living his life and possessing his spirit. The Church has always taught this and nothing in pastoral activity should obscure this doctrine. But the Church, taught by the Holy Spirit and benefiting from centuries of experience, recognizes that devotion to the Blessed Virgin, subordinated to worship of the divine Savior and in connection with it, also has a great pastoral effectiveness and constitutes a force for renewing Christian living”⁸⁹;

“Mary has by grace been exalted above all angels and men to a place second only to her Son, as the most holy mother of God who was involved in the mysteries of Christ: she is rightly honored by a special cult in the Church.... The various forms of piety towards the Mother of God, which the Church has approved ... ensure that while the mother is honored, the Son through whom all things have their being and in whom it has pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell is rightly known, lived and glorified and his commandments are observed”⁹⁰;

The Church is invited to be inspired by Mary “model of the spiritual attitude with which the Church celebrates and lives the divine mysteries”⁹¹;

“When the Church considers the long history of Marian devotion she rejoices at the continuity of the element of cult which it shows, but she does not bind herself to any particular expression of an individual cultural epoch or to the particular anthropological ideas underlying such expressions. The Church understands that certain outward religious expressions, while perfectly valid in themselves, may be less suitable to men and women of different ages and cultures.”⁹²

In light of these principles, it is sometimes necessary that we revise and update our forms of piety and devotion to the Virgin Mary. Taking into account these criteria, we must be attentive to the details of the expression of our devotion to the Virgin Mary because these expressions cannot follow a path other than that of our Vincentian spirituality.

Conclusion

In the Word of God, in ecclesial community life and in our own spiritual tradition, we find inspiring sources for Marian spirituality in our Vincentian charism. Following Christ in the Vincentian charism finds inspiration today in this Marian spirituality.

(Translation: TRANSLATION CENTER - DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, Paris)

Footnotes

R. Maloney, *The Way of Vincent de Paul*, New City Press, New York, 1992, p. 13.

Marialis Cultus, 35

S. Galilea, *El camino de la espiritualidad*. Bogotá, Ediciones Paulinas, 1982, p. 104.

MC 21

Lumen Gentium, 63

Ibid., 56

Ibid., 57

One must stress Mary's link with the spiritual life: "If Christian life is open to the Kingdom of God, Mary is the poor virgin who totally, and in an exemplary way, opened herself to God. If Christian life is a life in Christ, Mary is the believer who participates in the Lord's work of salvation along the road of fidelity, listening and perseverance. If it is a life in the Spirit, Mary is the first creation filled with the Spirit of God so that she may act with a new heart as a witness of Christ and to the praise of God who enters history." S. De Fiores, in *Nuevo diccionario de espiritualidad* (S. De Fiores, T. Goffi, A. Guerra, Editors), Madrid, Ediciones Paulinas, 1991, p. 1162.

T. Goffi, *Nuevo Diccionario de Mariología*, (S. De Fiores, S. Meo, E. Tourón, Editors), Madrid, San Pablo, 1998, p. 668.

Numerous studies have been published these last few years on Vincentian Charism. Cf., the various authors in *Carisma Vicenciano. Memoria y profecía*. Salamanca, CEME, 2001.

Cf., *Mutuae Relationes*, 11; *Evangelica Testificatio*, 11; Sr. J. Elizondo, "Charism and the Vincentian Spirit," in *Vincentiana* (1998), p. 323-340.

MC 37.

S. De Fiores, op.cit., p. 1160. Cf., Dt 28:4, Jgs 5:24, Jdt 13:18; 15:12.

Ibid. p. 1161.

“The scene described by John is of salvific, messianic, ecclesial and universal importance. It is a scene intimately linked with “the hour.” The disciple is of significance as a representative typology.” (S. De Fiores, op. cit. p. 1162).

MC, 37.

Cf. S. Galilea, op. cit. p. 66-68.

F. M. López Melús, María de Nazaret, la verdadera discípula, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1999, p. 335.

RM, 48.

Cf. MR, 11; ET, 11.

A. Dodin, “Le culte de Marie et l'expérience religieuse de M. Vincent de Paul” in, *Vicentiana* (1975), p. 207-225. Other studies on this topic: J. P. Renouard, “El sentido mariano en la experiencia espiritual de San Vicente” in *Las apariciones de la Virgen María a santa Catalina Labouré*, Salamanca, CEME, 1981; V. de Dios, “Marianismo Vicenciano” in *Diccionario de espiritualidad vicenciana*, Salamanca, CEME, 1995; “San Vicente de Paúl y la Virgen María” in *El tiempos de San Vicente y hoy*, Vol. II, Salamanca, CEME, 1997.

If it were not due to abuses where Marian worship has come about, I would not insist that they be totally abandoned, wrote Luther in 1523.

V. de Dios, op. cit., p. 351; cf., A. Dodin, op.cit.

SV I, 7.

Coste Vol. 1, p. 28.

SV XIV, 126; cf. also, 419, 446, 487, 527, 539, 823.

Coste, Conferences to the DCs, pp. 194-195, and p. 1132.

Common Rules of the CM X, 4.

Coste, Vol. 2, p. 112.

Coste, Conferences to the DCs, p. 79.

Coste, Conferences to the CM's, p. 652; cf., Coste, Conferences to the DCs, p. 360.

Cf. collection, *En tiempos de San Vicente y hoy*, op.cit., p. 368, where one may find the texts.

A. Dodin, op. cit. p. 219.

SV XIII, 35.

Coste, Conferences to CMs, p. 698.

Coste, Conferences to CMs, p. 472.

SV XIII, 419.

Coste, Conferences to DCs, p. 17.

39 Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A14.

40 *Ibid.*, A 32b.

41 Cf., *ibid.*, A 32.

42 Cf., *ibid.*, A 32.

42 Cf., *ibid.*, A 14b.

44 Cf., *ibid.*, A. 16; 100.

45 Cf., *ibid.*, A. 16; 100.

46 Cf. *ibid.*, the complete text of A 31b; cf., M. 35b.

47 Cf., *ibid.*, A 4.

48 Cf., *ibid.*, A 4, A 10.

49 Cf., *ibid.*, L 461.

50 Cf. *ibid.*, L 303 b, 333, 639.

51 *Ibid.*, M 33: "All truly Christian souls should have great devotion to the Blessed Virgin, especially in her role as Mother of God. They should honor her, also, because of the virtues with which God endowed her for the accomplishment of his holy designs. Her eminent dignity obliges us to honor her in some way each day. The best way to do this is to unite ourselves to the Church, especially at those times which it has set aside for the express purpose of paying homage to Mary. We should rejoice with her and congratulate her for the choice which God made of her by uniting his humanity and his divinity within her womb. We should also implore her to assist us to preserve in our own hearts a close union with God. When we are filled with gratitude for the graces that God has bestowed upon us through the Incarnation and the exemplary life of Jesus Christ, let us look upon the Blessed Virgin as the channel through which all these benefits have come to us and thank her by acts of love. Let us take Our Lady as the model for our daily lives and bear in mind that the best way to honor her is by imitating her virtues. We should particularly honor her purity since we are the spouses of Jesus Christ. We should also imitate her humility which led God to do great things in her. Following the example she gave us by living apart from her parents as a very young child, we must be detached from all things. In all of our actions, let us practice these virtues, of which Mary has given us the example, and beg her to offer them to her Son in our name. Let us celebrate, in a special way, the Church feasts honoring Mary and meditate, during the day, on the mystery proposed. Each day, let us implore her to help us to render to God the service we have promised him and to be as submissive as she was in accomplishing his holy will. We should faithfully recite, each day, those prayers which we have chosen to honor her. These should include acts of love as well as of joyful praise for the glory that is hers in heaven. Finally, let us continue to hope that we will one day be with her and will thus be able to render to her all the honor due to her in the divine plan."

53 Ibid., A 4.

54 Les origines de la Compagnie des Filles de la Charité: Documents, n° 823.

55 Louise de Marillac, Spiritual Writings, L.55.

56 Cf., *ibid.*, L 303b, A 85.

57 *Ibid.*, L 303b.

58 *Ibid.*, L 304.

59 *Ibid.*, A 88.

60 *Ibid.*, A 26.

61 *Ibid.*, L 110.

62 *Ibid.*, L 111.

63 *Ibid.*, L 602.

64 Coste, Conferences to the DCs, p. 1179.

65 Louise de Marillac, Spiritual Writings, 35b.

66 *Ibid.*, L 245.

67 *Ibid.*, L 598.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 835.

69 As we know, there are numerous groups and associations in the Vincentian Family. Here we are referring to the Lay Vincentian Associations founded by St. Vincent and St. Louise (AIC), or that developed from the apparitions to St. Catherine Labouré (1830) (AMM, JMV, MISEVI) or around the apparitions (SSVP). Cf. Betty Ann McNeil, DC, Monograph I, The Vincentian Family Tree, Vincentian Studies Institute, 1996.

70 C 1.12.

71 Cf., Jn 19; RM, 45.

72 S. De Fiores, op. cit. p. 1151.

73 LG, 67.

74 T. Goffi, op. cit. p. 671.

75 RM, 8.

76 MC, 57.

77 Louise de Marillac, Spiritual Writings, A.89B, p. 791; cf. L. 217; cf. Coste, Conferences to the DCs, p. 215.

78 Ibid. A.3.

79 RM, 41.

80 Cf. MC, 25.

81 "In the Virgin Mary everything is relative to Christ and dependent upon him" MC 25.

82 MC, 37.

83 Cf. Evangelii Nuntiandi, 18.

84 MC, 37.

85 SV XIII, 419; cf., Coste, Vol. I, p. 503; SV II, 247; Conferences to the DCs, p. 230.

86 Cf. RM, 6.

87 Sacrosanctum Concilium, 10.

88 Ibid., 103.

89 MC, 57

90 LG, 66.

91 MC, 16.

92 Ibid., 36.