



CHARISM

The Heart of the Mission

Lady Charity

Charity leaves the house of God
carrying gifts—
bearing the burden lightly,
for truth is a receiver
and gifts the legacy of wisdom.

Charity walks through the streets
without casting a shadow,
for she sees without
being seen.
Casting light into the night.

Charity seeks the poor.
The poor do not seek Charity
but greet her when she appears—
for Charity knows the storehouse
of poverty within her own home,
and so collects from shelves and corners
of hunger and personal need,
sharing the fruit of common ground.

She walks a narrow path, at times.
Yet, cloaked in the warmth of grace—
Charity is faithful.
For she herself was fed
by the bread she broke
along the way.

—Anita Constance, SC



Introduction

The charism of Charity for this congregation is constantly being uncovered anew. It grows, flourishes, evolves, and comes alive in each Sister of Charity and Seton Associate. Rooted in the gospel, the initial mission of Vincent de Paul takes its shape and form through the people of each era who strive to live it out centered in God's love.

We look to the words and lives of Vincent and Louise de Marillac, Elizabeth Seton, and Mother Xavier to provide the inspiration for understanding the meaning of “charism” for us in these times. We interpret it as we can, in the present. We, the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth and Seton Associates, individually and communally, are pursued by the Spirit and must leave ourselves open to the workings of the Spirit to become charity in our day.

St. Vincent de Paul saw *charity* (which is *love*) as our central charism. He focused on five virtues exemplified in Christ's life of love—humility, simplicity, meekness, mortification and zeal. Living these virtues, we grow in our imitation of God's love, for God is love (1 John 4:16).

It is our hope that this booklet will give you the opportunity to reflect on these wonderful gifts given to us by the Spirit.



The Meaning of Charism

by Sister Ellen Joyce, SC

"Charism" or "charisma" is the Greek word for gift or free gift as some express it. The point of "free" is to emphasize that it is unmerited or gratuitous. It is the gift of God, given for building up the body of Christ, meaning that it is not given for the benefit of an individual but for the common good. The broadest reference for charism is to the total gift of salvation offered in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Spirit to dwell among us. Usually the word charism refers to the gifts given to individuals by the power of the Spirit that the Church might more fully and faithfully reflect the glory of God.

The theology of charism was recovered in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. It was Cardinal Suenens who called attention to the charisms and they are described in *Lumen Gentium* as one of the ways through which the Spirit makes the People of God holy. "By these gifts (the Spirit) makes (the faithful) fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church... Whether these charisms be very remarkable or more simple and widely diffused, they are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation since they are fitting and useful for the needs of the Church" (#12). The word was unknown, the teaching unheard of at the time of the Council. It was one more example of how we had lost touch with our own history and tradition.

In the New Testament it is Paul who develops the teaching on charism. It is a recognized element in the life of the Church for the first four centuries. Under the influence of the Montanist challenge and a growing institutionalization in the Church, the recognition of charisms largely disappears, though medieval theologians use the phrase "gratia gratis data" for charisms.

Let us pray that we will be blessed with wisdom, discernment and charity in recognizing, welcoming and promoting the gifts given among us and among our local churches by the power of the Spirit.



Humility

by Mary Marinucci, Seton Associate

Humility is the ability to recognize with gratitude that all we are, have, or do comes from God. It means facing the truth about ourselves as we are, acknowledging our strengths and gifts as well as our imperfections and weaknesses. For many of us it is difficult to acknowledge the good that others see or that we see in ourselves. It is more comfortable to discredit the compliment of another by pointing out the negatives.

In scripture we find the perfect example of humility lived out in Jesus Christ, for Jesus showed us the true meaning by his way of life. His act of washing feet (John 13:1-15) is a call to follow him through service to all humankind. He lived his life on earth being attentive to the needs of others, healing, listening with compassion, yet open and accepting of the acknowledgement of his goodness. He did not deny it, but used it to point the way to the source of all good, his heavenly Father.

At the completion of each act of creation God stepped back to admire what had been accomplished and declared it good. God calls us to do the same as creation continues in us and through us.

In past decades, humility has meant the denial of our own goodness, discouraging praise and affirmation. Today we recognize that true humility involves a more balanced attitude of appreciating the good that we are and do, while at the same time recognizing that we are not yet perfect (whole), and accepting the love of God as we are in the moment. It is believing that we are loved totally by God in the face of experiencing our limitations.

To live a life of humility in the spirit of Jesus, Vincent, Louise and Elizabeth means being real, true to ourselves and true to the spirit of the God within, source of all good, calling and stretching us to growth, holiness and wholeness.

From St. Vincent de Paul:

"You will find that charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the kettle of soup and the basket of bread. But you must keep your gentleness and your smile. Giving soup and bread isn't all; that the rich can do. You are the little servant of the poor, the maid of charity, always smiling and in good humor. They are your masters, terribly sensitive and exacting as you will see, but the uglier and dirtier they are, the more unjust and bitter, the more you must give them your love. It is only because of your love, that the poor will forgive you the bread you give them."

From Saint Louise de Marillac (*Retreat resolution of 1628*):

"I must practice interior...and exterior...humility...in order to honor the true and real humility of God Himself in whom I shall find the strength... to combat my frequent outbursts of impatience and to acquire Charity and gentleness toward my neighbor."

From St. Elizabeth Ann Seton:

"It is upon the humble, the poor, and the defenseless that God has deigned to shower His greatest Mercies in order to have them serve as an example for the encouragement of poor sinners..."

"Consider, and when you consider, resolve to go meekly to Him. Tell Him you are in want of everything. Beg for the new heart, the right spirit, and that He will teach you to do the things that please Him..."

"I will do all that I can to keep me on the narrow path which leads me to God alone. The little daily experience of living sweetly and peacefully in His presence, while I force myself to direct whatever little I can, according to His will, and to praise and love Him in the midst of obscurity, as well as under the sun's rays, all this will be my only care, my only endeavor!"

From M. Scott Peck, M.D. (*in The Different Drum*):

"An important aspect of the realism of community deserves mention: Humility. While rugged individualism predisposes one to arrogance, the 'soft' individualism of community leads to humility. Begin to appreciate your own limitations. Witness others share their brokenness, and you will become able to accept you own inadequacy and imperfection. Be fully aware of human variety, and you will recognize the interdependence of humanity. As a group of people do these things—as they become a community—they become more and more humble, not only as individuals but also as a group— and, hence, more realistic. From which

kind of group would you expect a wise, realistic decision: an arrogant one, or a humble one?"

Scripture References:

Matthew 11:13-20

Jesus said: "Come to me all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light."

1 Peter 5:5-6

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for: "God opposes the proud but bestows favor on the humble." So humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your worries upon him because he cares for you.

John 13:1-15

Before the feast of Passover, Jesus realized that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father. He had loved his own in this world, and would show his love for them to the end. The devil had already induced Judas, the son of Iscariot, to hand him over; and so, during the supper, Jesus, fully aware that he had come from God and was going to God, the Father who handed everything over to him, rose from the meal and took off his cloak. He picked up a towel and tied it around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around him. Thus he came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You may not realize what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter replied, "You shall never wash my feet!" "If I do not wash you," Jesus answered, "you will have no share in my heritage." "Lord," Simon Peter said to him, "then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well." Jesus told him, "The one who has bathed has no need to wash (except for his feet); he is entirely cleansed, just as you are; though not all." (The reason he said, "Not all are washed clean," was that he knew his betrayer.) After he had washed their feet, he put his cloak back on and reclined at table once more. He said to them: "Do you understand what I just did for you? You address me as 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and fittingly enough, for that is what I am. But if I washed your feet, I who am Teacher and Lord, then you must wash each other's feet. What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done, so you must do."

Question for Reflection

How have you experienced humility in your own life?

Simplicity

Simplicity is a multifaceted virtue linked to truth. It includes seeking the truth, which we grope for on our life's journey; speaking the truth, saying things as they are; and witnessing to and practicing the truth in love: performing works of justice and charity, doing everything for the love of God, and having a simple lifestyle. The motivation which draws us to practice simplicity is the fact that God is simple; so where simplicity is there God is too. Vincent asked, "Do you know where Our Lord dwells?", and answered, "It is among the simple." As we look at the life of Jesus, we see that simplicity was an essential part of it. As followers of Jesus we are called to reflect on the rich meaning of simplicity and deepen it in our lives.

St. Vincent de Paul:

"Wherever you discover simplicity, you discover God. He who walks in simplicity, walks in confidence."

"God gives to the simple lively faith: they believe and relish the words which Jesus left us in his Gospel."

"For myself, God gives me such a great esteem for simplicity that I call it *my Gospel*. I have a particular devotion and consolation in *saying things as they are*."

"Simplicity also consists in referring things to God alone, or purity of intention. In this sense simplicity is doing everything for love of God and for no other end."

St. Louise deMarillac:

"Gentleness, cordiality and forbearance must be the practices of the Daughters of Charity just as humility, simplicity and the love of the holy humanity of Jesus Christ, who is perfect charity, is their spirit."

"My very dear Sister, I beg Our Lord to grant you the grace to make good use of all the blessings He has showered on your work. If you believe me, and I have no doubt that you do, you will be careful not to make things too magnificent, because you still do not know how many patients you will have. To have too many things and too much furniture would show a lack of confidence for which you might be criticized. As you know, the Son of God wanted no ostentation in the establishment of the Church. If we are imbued with his spirit, we will want to imitate him. Things are accumulated easily..."

"I urge them to dispose themselves to make their communications truthfully and with simplicity of heart, for the glory of God and not for their personal satisfaction or for any other reason."

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton:

"Good will, simplicity, and confidence are the keys of the sanctuary of Divine Love."

"Many seek to love God by different methods, but there is none so short and so easy as to do everything for God's love, to get this seal on all our actions."

From Richard J. Foster (*in Freedom of Simplicity*):

"Exterior simplicity flows from true interior simplicity. In the spiritual realm, this inner heart simplicity is discovered in having the crucified Christ as the unifying force of all our affections and aspirations."

"I recommend to you holy simplicity. In everything love simplicity" (St. Francis deSales).

Foster quotes Francois Fenelon: "When we are truly in this interior simplicity our whole appearance is franker, more natural. This true simplicity...makes us conscious of a certain openness, gentleness, innocence, gaiety, and serenity..."

Elsewhere, Fenelon says, "The more docile and yielding a soul is in letting itself be carried away without resistance or delay, the more it advances in simplicity."

From Sacred Scripture:

John 8:32—To the Jews who believed in him Jesus said: "If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth and the truth will set you free."

John 14:5-6—Thomas said, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me."

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

To me, to live simply means...

In our United States culture, simplicity is understood as...

It is said that simplicity is truth. Is this your experience?



Mortification

by Arlene Kleissler, Seton Associate

We are called to wholeness and holiness.

To love God and your neighbor as yourself is the highest and greatest commandment.

To be able to live with oneself and others is at the essence of life. "The question of how to be a person is never settled once and for all in anybody. It is the basic question with which all of us wrestle everyday and all the days of our lives" (*Beyond the New Morality* by Grisez and Shaw).

Just as Jesus grew in an awareness of himself and the Father's call to fullness of life, we are called to a lifelong process of growth.

Valuing self-regulation over self-indulgence is how to accomplish this lifetime goal.

The call, inherent in the charisms of the Sisters of Charity as shown through the early founders and deeply rooted in the Gospel, asks each member to continue to foster one's own personal development and strive to deepen a daily conversion of heart.

Mortification, self-denial or self-regulation is a means and an invitation to deepening one's relationship to self, others, and God. It assists us in valuing that which is more important in all areas of our intellectual, sensual, emotional and spiritual life. It speaks of an evolution to the depth that resurrects abundant life. Its motivation is love and its fruit is love.

One's efforts in this area en flesh the paradoxical concept found in the Gospel. "I tell you, most solemnly, unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest" (John 12:24).

In his book *The Way of Vincent de Paul*, Robert P. Maloney, C.M., describes Vincent's understanding of the virtue of mortification:

- a. Mortification involves renouncing one good thing in order to do a better thing.

Mortification is always for the sake of something or someone else. It is "for my sake and for the gospels." We give up good things not because we think they are bad. We acknowledge that they are good even as we give them up, because we want something better. A person may decide to cut out smoking because she wants to be in good health, or to cut down on or abstain from drinking because she wants to be clear-headed and self-possessed in thinking, judging and acting.

- b. Mortification involves recognizing our goals and channeling our limited energies into achieving them.

We cannot do everything in life. We are really very limited. It is the rare person who can be a great piano player, or a superstar in basketball, or a wonderful actor. No one combines all of these things. They all take time, practice, disciplined labor.

- c. Mortification is also "practicing for death."

We experience death as darkness. It is the ultimate renunciation. It demands that we let go of life, our most basic possession. The limitedness that we experience as creatures challenges us again and again to let go of one thing in order that we might pursue another more single-mindedly. Only the person who is practiced in this art will be able to hand herself over to her Father in an act of final resignation, as Jesus did: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

- d. Some contemporary forums in which mortification might take place:

1. Being faithful to the duties of one's state in life; preferring them when they conflict with other more pleasurable things. It is very important to know what the central values in our lives

are. Experience teaches us that these often become less attractive than other options, especially in the long run and especially if the other options provide more immediate gratification. The modern era tends to despise delayed gratification. Options like watching TV passively or spending great amounts of time with comforting but unchallenging companions (what is commonly called today "protective partnership") can easily distract us from the central values in our lives.

2. It is important to pray in a disciplined way, to set time aside daily.

3. Developing a simple lifestyle is important. This is what Karl Rahner calls "consumer asceticism." Such asceticism is very difficult in our society and very different from what society propagandizes us to do. The contemporary world again and again in its advertisements tells us that it is always good to have more.

4. Being disciplined in eating and drinking, and avoiding all anxiety or complaint about what we shall eat or what we shall drink. The key here is moderation. St. Vincent recommended not eating between meals. This can still be good ascetical practice as an aid in keeping one's weight down and staying in good physical condition.

5. Employing moderation and a critical sense in using television, radio, movies, and other media. There is much waste of time in the modern world. There is much passive entertainment. There is much uncritical drinking in of violence and sexual license. One of the consequences of this is that the lives of many people tend to become like those of characters whom they watch on the soap operas. What we take in through the senses, especially if it is a steady diet, inevitably influences our conduct bit by bit.

6. Withholding critical and divisive words. This can be a great aid to charity. It is a healthy norm to withhold critical words unless we speak them constructively to those who can do something about them.

7. Seeking equally to be with those who are less pleasing to us as with those to whom we are more attracted. We are brothers and sisters in the Lord. Naturally, we will always be closer to some people than to others. It is important to have good, intimate friends. Still, it is likewise important not to exclude others from our company and to have open-ended friendships that allow others to enter in.

Some Scriptural references:

Matthew 16:25

Matthew 14:14-16

For Reflection

1. What are some examples in our daily lives in which we renounce one good thing in order to do another?
2. How would I define my goals in life?
3. Mortification is "practicing for death." Someone I know who lives this understanding of mortification is...
4. How can we, in our daily lives with our family members, employ moderation and a critical sense in using TV, radio, videotapes, and other media?



Meekness

Implicit in the prayer, "Thy will be done...Thy kingdom come," is a realization that pray-er has a responsibility to work for a world in which the divine will can be realized. The Christian cannot remain neutral—she/he is called to act, to do battle with evil in its many forms, in all the ways in which the survival or dignity of the daughters and sons of God are threatened. And yet the tools of battle must be carefully chosen, for the means of evil cannot bring about the ends of goodness.

Although to the twentieth-century American mind meekness isn't viewed as a virtue, Vincent de Paul's understanding of this quality is neither passive nor repressive. Acknowledging that there is much in the world which ought to incite a righteous anger in those who aspire to follow Christ, Vincent suggests that meekness is a positive way with which to deal with that anger. Faced with the plight of the poor, the sick and the hungry in his society, Vincent channeled that anger into the formation of companies of women and men whose mission was to meet the needs of those who were victimized by their societies.

Vincent realized, too, that there are times when we ourselves are the victims of evil and that evil must be endured when there is no practical possibility of correcting it. Meekness then entails the suffering of oppression and violence with courage. Certainly there are contemporary models of this virtue of meekness: Gandhi's active, nonviolent resistance to the British occupation of India, the civil rights movement in the USA, and the Pax Christi attempts to turn around the militarism which plagues our world. Each of these movements found its inspiration in the crucified Christ, whose renunciation of the power and majesty inherent in his divinity overcame the forces of evil and death.

St. Vincent told us that he was choleric by temperament. Confronted with the gospel call to be meek and humble of heart, he asked God to change his heart:

"I turned to God and earnestly begged him to change this irritable and forbidding disposition of mine, and to grant me a kindly and benign spirit. And with the grace of our Lord, by giving a little attention to suppressing the impetuous impulse of my nature, I have been partially cured of my gloomy disposition."

God did hear Vincent's prayer. Those who lived and worked with him said that he was pleasant and easy to approach. He never administered corrections without mildness. By his compassion and kindness, he often won over the hearts of difficult persons.

For Reflection

How have you experienced meekness as it is described above in your own life... in yourself, your family, friends, co-workers?

Zeal

Zeal is as important today as it was in St. Vincent's time.

The following information is taken from *The Way of Vincent de Paul* by Robert P. Maloney, C.M.

Zeal is love on fire.

It is a willingness to go anywhere, even under difficult circumstances, to speak of Christ. It is a willingness to die for him. It involves not only deep human affective love for the Lord and for his people, but it also expresses itself in effective labor and sacrifice. As in the past, zeal expresses itself in our own day in martyrdom (in Central America, for example), but zealous people, now as always, also recognize that it is some-times harder to live for Christ than to die for him.

Zeal is persevering, faithful love.

It is easy to love for a time. It is difficult to love for life. Permanent commitment is more fragile today than it was in the seventeenth century, especially since many of the societal supports that undergirded it at that time have disappeared. So zeal shows itself today especially as fidelity. It is gold tested in the fire. It is creative in finding ways of loving both "in season and out of sea-son." As St. Vincent put it, "Love is inventive, even to infinity."

Zeal shows itself in a willingness to seek laborers for the harvest.

Love is infectious. Fire spreads. A love that is on fire will seek to communicate itself to others. It will seek to draw others into the same wonderful mission that it is carrying out.

The two extremes which St. Vincent contrasts with zeal also have contemporary forms that it may be helpful to say a word about.

1. The Existentialists note that the great problem of modern men and women is inattentiveness. We live in a world filled with

noise. So many sounds and stimuli break in upon us that at times it is difficult to distinguish the more important ones from the less important. As a result people's sensitivities can be dulled. They can be blind to the glaring problems that exist, especially the ever-increasing disparity between the rich and the poor and the continuing expenditure of human and financial resources in the production and sales of arms. "Inattentiveness" can be the modern form of what St. Vincent described as "Laxity, lack of fervor and sensitivity, sloth."

2. Indiscreet zeal likewise still shows itself in overwork and in what is often called "burnout." It is quite as important today, as it was in St. Vincent's day, that we know our limitations, accept our creatureliness, and develop a balanced life-style that includes sufficient rest and recreation. It is also important that we stay in good physical condition so that we will have the energy which characterizes zeal.

Questions for Reflection

1. Do you think that it is harder today to live for Christ than to die for him?
2. Why is it difficult to love for life?
3. What are some examples of "inattentiveness" that we see around us?
4. Indiscreet zeal shows itself in overwork and burnout. Do you agree?

The author adds:

"The word *character* usually denotes a seal, a sign, a visible mark by which someone or something can be recognized. The virtues of simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal are, to use St. Vincent's phrase, the *characteristic* virtues of his followers. They are the signs by which his followers are meant to be recognized."

As Seton Associates and Sisters of Charity, we are challenged to try to live these virtues daily.



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