

# Charity Unfolding



Excerpts from

## Toward Boundless Charity

The Constitution of The Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth

### Mission Spirituality

Elizabeth Seton: Eucharist was not devotion in her life. It was her life. (from: *Seton Legacy* 1992)

Blessed, broken, poured out ...  
Elizabeth of the chalice-life.

Rich wine, aged and bodied  
by the gift of others.

Fed by friendship ...  
nurtured to nourish in return.

Blessed, broken, poured out ...  
House of God, House of Bread.

Wheat ground and shaped.  
Intimate with fire  
yet not consumed.

Transformed by the burning.

Blessed, broken, poured out ...

Filled by the mystery  
of life through death.

Overflowing gift.

Emptied out.

Hollowed and holy.

Blessed, broken, poured out ...

Seeker of the vision.

Believer in the dream.

Receiver of the hope.

Creator of the future.

Lover of the now.

Woman.

—Anita Constance, SC  
November 22, 1992





# Introduction

By Sister Jean Whitley, SC

Every religious congregation is, like the church itself, both a community and a society. For this reason, there are always both spiritual and juridic guidelines that constitute a particular congregation within the church and in the midst of our world. In the years following Vatican II many articles have been written that give greater detail regarding the content of the written constitutions of religious congregations. A few of these articles are noted below for further reading.

In this brief space I am limiting myself to a few thoughts on the importance of our Constitution, *Toward Boundless Charity*, in the life of a Sister of Charity of Saint Elizabeth. To "constitute" means to establish, make up, or give legal form to a group. A constitution has life before it is ever written. It is a dynamism pulling people together into a single body. It must also be a dynamism that holds a people together when the forces of self-interest would drive them apart. As Americans we understand the supreme honor given to the Constitution of our country as it expresses the hopes and aspirations of a free people. As women religious "constitution" has far deeper meaning for us. The dynamism that pulls us together into a single body is, first of all, the Word of God, Jesus Christ, proclaimed in the church, heard in faith by a specific people, and lived by them in a unique way through the sacramental life and ministry of the church in obedience to Jesus Christ and through the power of the Spirit of God. This is the only power that holds us together when self-interest would drive us apart. This is the only loss we ever need fear.

Our Constitution was rewritten in response to Vatican II and to the changing needs of the world. The words were formed through an ongoing dialogue with the entire community and put on paper by a small group of sisters who prayed and reflected and shared their reflections with one another so as to be more authentic witnesses to the life of the

Congregation. The reason for writing the Constitution in a final form was a mandate from Rome; it was also our own need to say again, in new words, the mystery of God's love for us and the mystery of our desire, flowing from that love, to be a ministering presence to all who are in need. The Constitution is not meant to be a book used for consultation in time of legal dispute. It is a book of our lives to be read often not only for inspiration but for new insights into the very life we are living that day in all its complexity. We believe that God speaks to us through this written testimony of our faith as it is lived out in a vowed life in community with one another. We also believe that our sisters who have gone before us speak to us through these words and add their strength to ours in whatever we undertake. It is necessary to read the words together in light of our ongoing experiences as Sisters of Charity so as to further discern where the Spirit of God is leading the Congregation into new generations.

We invite our Seton Associates to read the following excerpts from the Constitution and the Directory of the Sisters of Charity to gain a deeper understanding of our lives as vowed women religious. By definition men and women religious are those who vow themselves publicly to a life of poverty, chastity and obedience according to the particular charism of their communities. Yet vows and charisms are not extraneous to all Christian life. They well up from a deeper source in Christian spirituality. Love that is simple, pure, and humble is the characteristic of Jesus that both vowed Sisters of Charity and Seton Associates commit themselves to reflect in their lives according to their state in life. For this reason we also offer these excerpts from the Constitution and Directory of the Sisters of Charity as a particular source of inspiration in answering our common call to life in Jesus Christ.

"Signs of Hope in Religious Life Today," Stephen Tutas, S.M. *Review for Religious*, Vol. 42, No.1, Jan/Feb, 1983.

"Constitutions and Directories," Joseph F. Gallen, S.J. *Review for Religious*, Vol. 40, No. 5, Sept/Oct 1981.

*The Way*, Supplement No. 36, Revising the Constitutions. James Walsh, SJ., ed., Summer, 1979.



## Principles

In the tradition of Saint Vincent de Paul the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth participate in the mission of the Church fundamentally through ministry supported and nourished by prayer and vowed life in community.

We strive to be deeply aware of the inherent value of the human person, the image of God. We affirm our conviction that it is in and through our relatedness to one another, to others, and to God that we are constituted both as persons and as a community of disciples.

Co-responsibility is a principle which affirms the vocation and the duty of all members to participate as fully as possible in the life of the community. Because we are a community of disciples, we recognize consultation, collaboration, and mutuality as stronger bases for action than unilateral decisions in matters affecting the common good.

Subsidiarity is a principle of order in our relatedness to one another that promotes respect and self-determination on the personal, local, provincial, and general levels of community to a degree appropriate to the common good and the commitment of obedience.

Strengthened by the gift of the Eucharist we pledge to pour ourselves out in service of our neighbor. In communion with other disciples, we participate in the mission of the Church as it works to transform the world in charity, justice and peace.

*The 1987 General Assembly approved the above statement of principles which it believes directs our lives as Sisters of Charity.*



*...the love of Christ overwhelms us... —2 Cor 5:14*

## **The Nature, Purpose and Character of the Congregation**

- C1 The Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth of New Jersey is a Roman Catholic apostolic congregation of pontifical right of women religious founded in 1859 in Newark, New Jersey. Through the communities of Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati and of New York we trace our origin to the community established by Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Because the Rule of Saint Vincent de Paul, adapted to American needs and conditions, was approved for Mother Seton's community, Vincent de Paul is a special source of inspiration for us.
- C2 The first impetus for our foundation came from James Roosevelt Bayley, a nephew of Mother Seton. As first Bishop of Newark his diocese then included the whole state of New Jersey. Bishop Bayley sought to establish a diocesan community of women religious with the help of Reverend Bernard McQuaid (later Bishop of Rochester, New York). Although several communities (among them the New York Sisters of Charity) had to refuse his request for Sisters to form the nucleus of a new community, he persisted in his efforts.
- C3 The next step facilitating our foundation came from an early companion of Mother Seton, Mother Margaret Cecilia George. She later became Mother Superior of the Cincinnati Sisters of Charity who had separated from Emmitsburg some thirty years after Mother Seton's death. Mother Margaret Cecilia collaborated with Bishop Bayley to provide initial formation in Cincinnati for five candidates: Margaret O'Neill, Margaret Lynah, Bridget Daly, Margaret Plunkett, and Catherine Duffy.

- C4 When the five sisters were ready to return to New Jersey, Archbishop Purcell of Cincinnati refused permission for Mother Margaret Cecilia or any sisters of the Cincinnati community to come to Newark to provide leadership for the new community. Its foundation was delayed until the position of superior could be filled. Bishop Bayley again appealed to the New York Sisters of Charity, this time with success. Mother Angela Hughes and her Council appointed Sister Mary Xavier Mehegan to take charge of the new Motherhouse and designated Sister Mary Catharine Nevin to assist her. After three years, these sisters were free either to remain with the New Jersey community or to return to New York. Mother Xavier and Sister Mary Catharine elected to stay. In 1873 Bishop Michael Corrigan, Bishop Bayley's successor, appointed Mother Xavier to the office of Mother for life.
- C5 During Mother Xavier's tenure of fifty-six years, the Community experienced a remarkable growth in membership and "missions." Schools, hospitals, crèches (day nurseries), orphanages, a home for the incurably ill, and a residence for working women were established. Then, as now, the sisters extended themselves personally to the sick, the poor, the hungry, the dying, the bereaved, in short, to those in need.
- C6 The ministry of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth extended beyond the State of New Jersey to nearby states and more distant areas. The painful struggle to discern our charism and our ministries often tested our sense of identity and purpose in those early days even as it does now. The question of whether the higher education of women could be included in the purposes for which we were founded resulted in the establishment in 1899 of the College of Saint Elizabeth, one of the first Roman Catholic colleges for women in the United States. In 1924 an outpouring of volunteers for China answered the question of whether foreign missions were included in our charism and ministries.
- C7 In 1949 the change from annual renewal of private vows to perpetual profession of public vows constituted a change in our canonical status from that of a society whose members live

in community after the manner of religious to that of a religious congregation. A further step was taken in 1957 when the status of the Congregation was changed from diocesan to pontifical right.

- C8 The Second Vatican Council and its aftermath became a watershed in our history. The directives to make the following of Christ in the Gospels the norm of religious life, to return to the spirit of our founders, and to adjust ourselves to the changed conditions of the times presented undreamed of challenges. The growth of new ministries, the revitalization of traditional ones, the proliferation of small communities, and the increased recognition of our need for prayer and for a spirituality to support the weight of our commitments created an atmosphere of excitement and tension. There were shifts from a juridically based approach, from separation from the world to an involvement with the world as the locus of God's action in history. A genuine search to recover our own history pressed us to acknowledge the Spirit as the source of what is new in the Church. Exhortations to hear the cries of the poor and to make justice a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel found willing and generous spirits among us.
- C9 We review our history with gratitude and with a renewed insight into our identity and purpose. We look forward to a future filled with gifts and challenges from the Spirit, who calls us to an ever closer identification with Christ in his mission.

The principal end for which God has called and assembled the Sisters of Charity is to honor Jesus Christ, our Lord, the Source and Model of all Charity, by rendering Him every temporal and spiritual service in their power, in the persons of the poor, either sick, prisoners, insane, or those who through shame would conceal their necessities.

—*Regulations for the Society of the Sisters of Charity in the Diocese of Newark, 1859.*



## Mission/ Mission Spirituality

- C10 Jesus Christ came "to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour" (Luke 4:18-19). The mission of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth is to proclaim and live this Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- C11 Through Baptism and Confirmation each Christian is incorporated into Christ and called to continue his work. This is the mission given to the entire Church. In the tradition of Saint Vincent de Paul our Congregation participates in the mission of the Church fundamentally through ministry supported and nourished by prayer and vowed life in community. From the beginning our ministry has encompassed commitments in education, health care, and pastoral and social services.
- C13 The purpose and spirit of the community is embodied in its symbol, the pelican, who feeds her young with her own substance. In Christian history the pelican is a symbol of Christ in his life of unconditional giving. He is the source and model of love for us. As Sisters of Charity we are called to a life of giving of our talents, our resources, ourselves, without condition and without reservation. We are called to give not just from our surplus, but from our substance. The ideal of boundless charity is at the heart of the charism and tradition of the Community.
- C20 Such a life of charity leads us to confess our reliance on the power of the Spirit to renew the face of the earth; our belief that the surest guide to living a genuinely religious life is the following of Christ presented to us in the Gospel; our conviction that a life of charity requires a faith that does justice; our resolve to support and participate in community when the demands of ministry require us to live apart from the Community, whether alone or

with others; our need to sustain and nourish our commitments by a life of private and communal prayer, by reading, reflecting, repenting, and rejoicing.

D2 We strive to respond to the great human needs existing within our complex society by being responsible members of the world community collaborating with all who work to make life more human.

D8 We see our whole life as sacramental, growing out of our baptismal commitment and strengthened by the consecration of our vows. This sacramental perspective calls us to responsibility for the earth and for all who live on it.



## Formation

- C21 Every Sister of Charity of St. Elizabeth is called to a life-long process of growth in imitation of Jesus who grew in "wisdom, stature, and in favour with God..." (Lk 2:52).
- C22 Believing that the Spirit of God forms us in all the events of life, we take seriously the need to participate continually in this process. We realize, too, the mutual responsibility of all members to contribute to one another's ongoing development.
- C23 The Community itself has been called into a life of holiness and service. As the full awareness of the demands of discipleship for us as a Congregation is deepened in each generation, it is articulated in the lives of our members. For this reason we bear a corporate responsibility for growing together and for contributing to the development of new members who, in turn, become part of our continued formation into the life of Christ.
- C37 At each stage in life and in whatever ministry is undertaken, we are called to open ourselves fully to the action and power of the Spirit. Fidelity to this call involves a constant dying and rising. In this lies our ever deepening likeness to Christ and his saving mission. Every event of life— work, prayer, joyful celebration, sickness or suffering should enrich us day by day. Thus we are challenged to enter more fully into Christ becoming his sacrament of healing and love in the world.
- D8 We see our whole life as a sacramental, growing out of our baptismal commitment and strengthened by the consecration of our vows. This sacramental perspective calls us to responsibility for the earth and for all who live in it.



## Vows

- C39 The vow of chastity consecrates us to love God and neighbor for the sake of the Kingdom. It is an invitation and a challenge to a life of total self-gift, self-transcendence, liberation that is a sign of the Kingdom. This vow calls for the forgoing of marriage and calls us to perfect continence in celibacy so that our life may be integrated, ennobled and transformed. This love is nurtured within community and extends to all in boundless charity.
- C43 By the vow of poverty we give up the independent use and disposal of material things in order to live a life of freedom from possessions and for ministry. Payment received for our services belongs to the community. Although we do not renounce the right to acquire and own property in our own name, we may not personally administer or use such property
- C45 The vow of obedience commits us to a life patterned after the obedience of Christ who fulfilled the will of the Father by his life, death, and resurrection. This vow is profound acknowledgement that we are essentially related to the world around us, to other people, and to God. It challenges us to discern and make decisions not just as individuals but as members of a Community seeking to share in the mission of Christ. Obedience calls us beyond ourselves to become part of a listening community through which we live in fidelity to our own gifts, to the charisms of the Community, and to all the demands involved in following Christ as a member of this Congregation in the Church.
- C48 The vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience call us, not to deny our humanity but to seek its integration so that we may "put on Christ" and achieve the goal of the vows, charity.

I give you a new commandment: love one another; just as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples.

—John 13:34-35

- D32 We rely on the power of prayer and the support of community to sustain our celibate commitment to Christ in the midst of human struggles present in everyday life.
- D33 We assume our obligation to live in a healthy way. We foster physical and mental health, taking time for rest and relaxation, so that we may enhance our own lives and through our ministry, enable others to achieve fullness of life.
- D34 We believe that our vow of poverty joins us to the poverty of Christ who emptied Himself becoming totally dependent on the Father.
- D35 Recognizing our interdependence, we commit ourselves to a disciplined consumption of the earth's limited resources and a stewardship of material things marked by compassion and responsibility.
- D36 Our commitment to poverty challenges us to witness to the poverty of Christ. For this reason we strive to live simply in a world of materialism, which means we carefully choose how we live, what we eat and drink, how we recreate, and what we consume. Our manner of dress adds further testimony to this expression of poverty. It should be simple, modest and suited to the time, place and needs of our apostolate.
- D42 As Christians we seek to know and do God's will as we listen to the Spirit speaking within us, in the Church, in Scripture, in persons and events, and in insights shared with members of our Community. As Sisters of Charity we also seek direction through our Constitution and the decisions of our superiors.



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