



Rome, September 22, 2023

To all members of the Vincentian Family

Dear brothers and sisters,

May the grace and peace of Jesus be with us always!

This year 2023 is a special year for the whole Vincentian Family, the whole Vincentian Family Movement, as we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the “Light of Pentecost,” the mystical experience of Mademoiselle Legras, who became St. Louise de Marillac.

As we prepare for the Feast of St. Vincent de Paul, it is a wonderful opportunity to reflect and meditate on this extraordinary experience, which in subsequent years brought about such abundant graces that we are still so strongly experiencing 400 years later.

At my request, the Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity, Sister Françoise Petit, has prepared for all of us a reflection on this life-changing event, clearly inviting us to read it not as a historical event, but as an event that must be incarnated today in the life of each one of us, and in the life of generations to come.

St. Louise and St. Vincent, continue to intercede for us all!

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Tomaž Mavrič, CM

On June 4, 1623, Pentecost Sunday, a young married woman, mother of a son, entered Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs Church in Paris. Sad, distraught, indecisive and nonetheless confident in God, she opened herself to inspiration from the Spirit. It was the beginning of a spiritual and missionary journey.

The woman was Mademoiselle Legras, who would become Saint Louise de Marillac. Because she left room for the Spirit, assured at that time that she would never again be alone, she turned towards others and over the course of days and years, strove to overcome all the inevitable obstacles. This led her to found the Company of the Daughters of Charity with Saint Vincent de Paul.

In order to give thanks for the action of the Holy Spirit, a jubilee year was opened on June 4, 2023. It offers us the opportunity to remember this foundational event and intensify our spiritual and missionary momentum.

What is the message that Saint Louise passes on? What does this event, which can speak to each person's heart and to the entire Vincentian Family today, have to say to us?

In 1623, this moment of prayer before the tabernacle in a parish church was the starting point for a journey of a life totally given, a journey of holiness. It was also one of the foundational events at the origin of the history of the Vincentian Family.

At that stage in her life, Louise was anxiously asking herself several questions: Should she leave her husband to commit to a radical following of Christ? Who could accompany her spiritually? And finally, is the soul really immortal?

Here is what she wrote on a parchment that she carefully kept:

"On the Feast of Pentecost, during holy Mass or while I was praying in the church, my mind was instantly freed of all doubt.

I was advised that I should remain with my husband and that a time would come when I would be in a position to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and that I would be in a small community where others would do the same. I then understood that I would be in a place where I could help my neighbor but I did not understand how this would be possible since there was to be much coming and going.

I was also assured that I should remain at peace concerning my director; that God would give me one, whom He seemed to show me. It was repugnant to me to accept him; nevertheless, I acquiesced. It seemed to me that I did not yet have to make this change.

My third doubt was removed by the inner assurance I felt that it was God who was teaching me these things and that, believing there is a God, I should not doubt the rest."

How can we decode this message that, due to the expressions used and our 21st century context, could seem a bit obscure?

Before June 4, 1623, Louise de Marillac was a woman debilitated by these existential questions. However, her deepest desire was to respond to what the Lord was asking of her. That day, she received the intuition that she was called to serve God and others. But where, with whom, how?

The question concerning her husband surely corresponds to a thirst to go further in order to live her Baptism better, but the Spirit whispered to her that she first had to assume her commitment, that of marriage, and raise her son. Louise was an uncompromising woman who could not imagine committing halfway. She would always carry through on her ideas in the realization of her works, the accompaniment of the Sisters in a nascent Company and what the Holy Spirit inspired in her. This is what she understood that June 4: in due time, she would be able to give herself totally to new projects.

To do this, she perceived that one day she would be able to make vows and would be entrusted with a specific mission that would lead her to serve with others, where she was and elsewhere. For the moment, nothing was clear, yet everything was there in embryo. The unbreakable bond between faith in a God who made Himself close and action to “help my neighbor” is already evident. The intuition of “coming and going” would become an essential characteristic of the Daughters of Charity’s service.

The choice of her spiritual director was another cause of emotional tumult. Her inner peace came from the confidence that she placed in God. She was deeply convinced that obeying Him is a source of inner freedom.

The message of Pentecost is an early sign of an incarnational spirituality. She knew that Christ came to touch her soul and her human nature. She sensed that no service could be carried out without a deep rootedness in Christ and that the face of a person who is poor reflects the face of the Suffering Servant.

In 2023, what does this event have to say to us, an event that we celebrate in a spirit of thanksgiving and seeking something more, not in quantity and numbers, but something more in our conformity to the Gospel and to the charism that we have all received?

The 400th anniversary of the *Lumière* [Light] of Pentecost, for it is indeed a light of the Spirit granted to Saint Louise and passed on from generation to generation, offers us a wonderful opportunity to pray with Saint Louise, to pray together and to pray that we might know how to bring out the essential for today in the world, as Church and especially with our suffering brothers and sisters. Rereading Saint Louise’s biography and her writings does not turn us back to the past but rather prompts us to retain the meaning of her thinking and action to make something new of it today. We must create the favorable conditions for this.

They could be defined as three paths on which to embark personally, as branches of the Vincentian Family and together on the ground in concrete encounter: the path of listening, the path of missionary boldness and the path of trust.

- The path of listening

Saint Louise drew her spiritual and missionary strength from listening to the Holy Spirit, from listening and dialogue with Saint Vincent and the Sisters, from listening to the calls and

needs of her time. She is a model of a woman who had an attentive ear and an available heart with a view to opening herself to others.

“I beg the goodness of Our Lord to dispose our souls for the reception of the Holy Spirit so that, burning with the fire of His holy love, you may be consumed in the perfection of this love which will enable you to love the most holy will of God...” (L. 429, May 1651, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 353).

None of our initiatives can do without this time of openness to God’s breath, attention to the realities of the world and moments of shared reflection. This way of being and acting is demanding and impossible without humility. This means accepting to not be self-sufficient, accepting to be transformed and even shaken up. It would be an illusion to think that we could act without God and without others.

How can we better listen to those who often don’t count for anyone, such as men and women who are vulnerable, impoverished or suffer from multiple forms of poverty? They have something to teach us about life and about the Gospel because the Spirit is present in every person and especially in the least among us.

Listening to the Spirit could especially characterize this year to then become an even more habitual way of being in our everyday life. It is praying before acting, praying in order to act following Jesus as a missionary disciple. Let us set off together down the path of listening...

- The path of missionary boldness

Saint Louise was not afraid to act on behalf of those who lived in extreme poverty in her time. With Saint Vincent, she was able to organize charity without fearing the rich at court and the privileged of the Church, without fearing prejudice and criticism.

“It is not enough to visit the poor and to provide for their needs; one’s heart must be totally purged of all self-interest” (L. 217, August 29, 1648, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 260).

Missionary boldness is not new for the Vincentian Family. It is even the origin and the *raison d’être* of each of the branches, but we must admit that we always have to renew ourselves, particularly, at times, in our ways of doing things. Some are still relevant; others, no. Boldness calls for discernment, clear-sightedness and the will to prioritize, for we cannot do everything.

Sometimes missionary boldness is daring to go forward despite uncertainty that a project will succeed; it is daring to experiment, as Saint Vincent and Saint Louise did, responding to needs differently than the way it’s always been done with modest local initiatives adapted to the context.

Missionary boldness already occurs when local communities and members of associations go to the periphery to reach out to their brothers and sisters in humanity who are victims of extreme poverty and injustice. Let us continue to set off together down the path of missionary boldness...

- The path of trust

Saint Louise staked her life of faith on a God come down to earth. She let divine life fill her, and she had great devotion to the Trinity. She often advised the Sisters to peacefully live a

sort of self-emptying in order to welcome the breath of the Spirit, certain that trust in a God who makes Himself close to us is the assurance, in a way, that nothing can go wrong.

“I do not know if I am mistaken, but I believe that Our Lord always desires more confidence than prudence... and that this very confidence will imperceptibly give rise to prudence when the need arises” (L. 490, August 8, 1656, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 519).

Trust in God is an act of faith that needs to be nourished by meditation on the Word of God, prayerful silence, sharing of experiences and listening to what people who are poor say. Trust, in fact, also includes the trust we have in others.

Let us trust each other to the point of being able to have a discussion in all simplicity on faith, our concerns, our indignation at so much suffering experienced by our brothers and sisters. Trust in God and in others builds the house on the rock rather than on sandy ground. It also builds fraternal friendship within the Vincentian Family. Let us not be afraid to set off together down the path of trust...

Listening, missionary boldness and trust are real challenges for our age that is often based on:

- a lack of listening due to the preference for monologue rather than genuine dialogue, to which we must add the risk of an inner life muddled by an overdose of information.
- a boldness paralyzed by fear of the future, expressed by nationalistic approaches and the temptation of self-segregation among those like us, an obstacle to creativity and generosity.
- a trust stifled by doubt and suspicion that insidiously seep into society and thus into our minds.

Saint Louise teaches us the opposite and tells us to turn resolutely towards the Lord, to let the Spirit guide us in order to serve as Jesus did. She invites us to open ourselves constantly, to free up interior and exterior spaces in order to be increasingly capable of welcoming together our brothers and sisters, the stranger, the sick person, the homeless person, etc.

“Souls that are truly desirous of serving God should place their trust in the coming of the Holy Spirit within them believing that, finding no resistance in them, He will give them the disposition necessary to accomplish the holy will of God which should be their only preoccupation... The Holy Spirit, upon entering souls that are so disposed, will certainly by the ardor of His love establish the laws of holy charity by endowing them with the strength to accomplish tasks” (Cf. A. 25, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 802).

If each person is truly invested in his or her branch with its own identity, history and life, it is possible to progress together, to reach places of precarity, to form “small faith communities” of brothers and sisters after the manner of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, in other words, unconditionally directed towards the service of the poorest among us.

Let us pray and act, for the Lord is bold enough to listen to us and trust us.

Sister Françoise Petit
Daughter of Charity