



Renewing our commitment

Sr. Pauline Lawlor DC

On 25th March, feast of the Annunciation, over 19,000 Daughters of Charity in 91 countries all over the world will renew their vows. This will not be simply a renewal of devotion, but, as their vows will have expired the night before, they will be free to choose to commit themselves to God by making them all over again. Our vows differ from those of most religious in so far as they are annual, taken for one year at a time, and also we take a vow of service of persons who are poor as well as the usual vows of Chastity, Poverty and Obedience.

To understand these differences we must go back in history to the roots of our Company in 17th century France. At that time, there was great poverty, both in the cities and in the country areas which were ravaged by war and disease. St. Vincent de Paul felt urged to respond to the terrible needs he saw daily all around him. He had already organised some ladies into what became known as the Confraternities of Charity. In Paris many of the grand ladies were involved in ministering to the poor. This arrangement went well for a time, but then some ladies grew lax and sent their servants to replace them. This was not good enough for Vincent, and he and his collaborator, Louise de Marillac agonised seeking a solution. Divine Providence provided an answer. A good country girl, Marguerite Naseau, arrived in the capital and offered her services to help in caring for the sick. Vincent was delighted, and soon other girls followed. At first they helped the Ladies in the parishes, and Louise kept in touch with them. The time came when she saw the need to gather them into a community for their protection and formation. After some initial reluctance Vincent agreed and in 1633 Louise took four girls into her house, and thus was born the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Vincent and Louise wanted these girls to give their lives totally to God in order to serve Christ in the poor, but they avoided anything that would classify them as nuns. The reason for this was that, at that time religious women were cloistered, and this would prevent the girls being free to go into the hovels of the poor to care for the sick. For eight years there was no question of vows, though the girls lived a life of total dedication in imitation of Christ. Then Vincent tentatively mentioned the possibility to them, and a year later, on the feast of the Annunciation 1642, Louise and four others made perpetual vows of Chastity, Poverty and Service of the Poor. Vows were optional for many years. Louise, with her great devotion to Mary, chose this feast, and saw Mary as a model for her Daughters in her complete surrender to the call of God, and in dedicating her life completely to the person and mission of her Son. After 1660 it became standardised that all the Sisters made annual vows after five to seven years, and this practice has endured to the present day.

One might ask why continue this now, as many religious with perpetual vows are free to come and go. The answer is, I suppose that annual vows for the service of the poor has become part of our identity and is recognised by the Church. The Sisters look forward each year to the Feast of the Annunciation when they must choose to commit themselves all over again, and a great current of renewal sweeps through the entire Company, which is now established in 95 countries all over the world.

Seal of approbation of the community of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul.

Original document signed by St. Louise de Marillac; Archive Rue du Bac

Cultivate no desire to do this or that, except to please God in all things.

St. Louise de Marillac

Pièces officielles

- 1 Approbation de la C^{ie} par le Cardinal archevêque de Paris 18 Janvier 1655
- 2 Ereccion de la Compagnie des filles de la Charité par S^t Vincent de Paul 1655
- 3 Lettres patentes novembre 1657
- 4 Approbation de la C^{ie} par le Saint-Siège 8 Juin 1668.

... nous avons signé de notre main le present acte, et fait apposer le sceau de notre dit Congreg^{ion} lequel ont aussi signé l'ad^{me} Damoiselle, et les autres Officiers et quelques unes des plus anciennes qui l'ont peu. Fait en ladite Maison de la Charité de Paris le huit d'Aoust, Mil six cens Cinquante-cinq.

Ce vuide auroit été laissé pour la signature de Monsieur Vincent, mais il avoulu signer tout le dernier.

Louise de Marillac

Nathurine Guerin