



# Engaging Aging

## Charity Impels: Reclaiming and Rethinking the Vincentian Charism as We Age

By Sister Regina Bechtle, SC

### In This Issue

Calendar	7
From the Staff of NRRO	7
From the Editor's Desk	7

*“Do the little you can very peacefully and calmly so as to allow room for the guidance of God in your lives. Do not worry about the rest.”*

*St. Louise de Marillac  
Spiritual Writings*

Ask any Sister or Daughter of Charity when she most felt like one. The answer, no surprise, will inevitably involve her life of ministry: a memorable class of students, a homeless woman she met on the streets, an immigrant family, a grieving colleague, a needy patient.

“The Spirit of the Lord...has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor” (Luke 4:18). These words describe the liberating mission of mercy, healing and hope-kindling that impelled Jesus. That passage shapes the mission statements of every branch on the family tree of Charity. Each of the congregations in the Sisters of Charity Federation is rooted in the audacious vision of Saints Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) and Louise de Marillac (1591-1660). These two companion saints galvanized responses to persons devastated by the war, violence, famine, disease, and social turmoil of seventeenth-century France.

They had eyes to see the needs before them at their moment in history. They had hearts to know and feel Jesus Christ incarnate in a crippled beggar, a despised prisoner, an abandoned child.

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**Regina Bechtle, SC, Ph.D.**, is a Sister of Charity of Mount Saint Vincent, New York. She currently serves as Charism Resource Director for her congregation and as a spiritual/retreat director, writer and presenter on Vincentian-Charity spirituality and heritage.

During her years in congregational leadership she helped to develop LCWR’s *Leading From Within* manual. Her poetry and articles on spirituality, religious life, and leadership appear in religious journals, including LCWR’s *Occasional Papers* and reflection books. She also co-edited the collected writings of St. Elizabeth Seton.



## Charity Impels: Reclaiming and Rethinking the Vincentian Charism as We Age, continued

Before “mutuality” became a buzz word, they affirmed each other’s gifts. Vincent recognized Louise’s potential, encouraging the talents she didn’t see in herself. Louise stretched the constraints of her world, as the community she co-founded with Vincent opened new doors for ordinary women to serve the poor. Together, Vincent and Louise invited a wide circle of people to see the needs before them, to mobilize in organized, multifaceted ways, and so to transform their world.

Their collective responses, affective and effective, person-centered and productive, shaped the communities that have kept their fire blazing through the ages. The Vincentian charism of Charity first found a home in North America through founders of women’s religious communities. St. Elizabeth Seton (Emmitsburg, Maryland) was the spark of congregations that stem from her 1809 foundation. Other foundations also adopted the rule first fashioned by Vincent and Louise, including Mother Catherine Spalding (Nazareth, KY) and Mother Xavier Ross (Leavenworth, KS). Embedded in each community’s living heritage are the virtues of humility, simplicity and charity, the spirit bequeathed four centuries ago to the Daughters of Charity in France to guide their way of living and serving.

Today, besides a strong legacy of ministries, these Charity congregations are marked by an abundance of elderly members. As followers of Jesus in the Vincentian way, our sisters have devoted their entire lives to ministry: educating, caring for, reaching out to, and lifting up those most in need. Now, as limitations of age, health and energy call them to a different way of living the mission, we can see profound, painful, but also grace-filled transformations at work.

What wisdom from the Charity heritage supports everyone in these transformations? What do

humility, simplicity and charity look like as anyone tries to follow the way of Charity in aging? This article explores these questions, asking how we might both reclaim and re-think the Vincentian charism of Charity amid the often-unsettling transitions of the aging process. Images by the artists Kurt Welther, Meltem Aktas, and Sr. Margaret Beaudette, SC, will guide us.

### Where Everyone Belongs

In Kurt Welther’s evocative image, *Vincent at the Table of the Poor*, Vincent de Paul invites us to the table of Christ’s love where everyone belongs, a fitting description of charity and an apt image of the reign of God. As we age, how might this image move us to reclaim and rethink our call?

Each generation of Daughters and Sisters of Charity cherishes the radical charter of their seventeenth-century foundation: their monastery was to be the abode of the sick; their cell, a hired room; their chapel, the parish church; their



*Vincent at the Table of the Poor*, center panel of triptych by Kurt Welther, hanging in the Chapel of Mercy, St. Vincent’s Parish, Graz, Austria

## Charity Impels: Reclaiming and Rethinking the Vincentian Charism as We Age, continued

cloister, the city streets or the hospital wards. The needs of the poor take priority; their world was and is where women of Charity are called to be.

So, when a sister can no longer serve in the streets, the parish, the classroom or clinic, she can find it hard to imagine how she is still in mission. Yet, Welther's image of *Vincent at the Table of the Poor* suggests that even though limitations of health and energy compress one's heart-space, that is the very time to open the heart even wider.

Many of us have been amazed by our elder members' resilience and passion for mission. With the 2015 closing of our Congregation's home for elderly and infirm sisters, residents were moved to other facilities across the city, their placement depending on their level of need. They found themselves in dining rooms, therapy areas and activity centers with lay and religious they'd never met before, people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds. At first, the adjustment to unfamiliar people and routines was difficult. In one Jewish-sponsored residence a sister confided to a friend, "It's a lovely place, but it's not home."

Soon, however, the sisters' sense of mission resurfaced. In unique ways, they took up the challenge of creating a home where all felt welcome. Sr. Angela, using her walker, navigated busy city streets on shopping trips to the local *bodega* for cookies and notions for her less mobile neighbors. The sight of the Veterans Administration hospital outside Sr. Rosemarie's window inspired her to pray for veterans and their caregivers. A chance meeting with a Jewish resident led Sr. Connie to conversations about their respective faith traditions. Sr. Doris started a weekly Scripture group for other sisters on her floor.

One day a sister-resident remarked with concern, "Some of us are in the hospital." Knowing of no sister on the hospital list, the administrator was puzzled. Then she realized that by "us" the sister meant lay residents whom she had come to know as friends. Where Charity is alive, "I" becomes "me" and "we" becomes "us." Everyone belongs.

In Pope Francis' words, "Love is dynamic, it goes out." The one who loves "does not sit..., waiting for the coming of a better world, but gets up and goes out with enthusiasm and simplicity." In their enthusiastic "going out," these sisters inspire the rest of us.

**Around the Table of Community:** Our founders frequently lauded the advantages of community living. Vincent exclaimed, "What a benefit to be in a community where each single person participates in the good done by all its members." Louise, ever the realist, taught, "The mark of charity in a soul is, among all other virtues, this ability to put up with everything."

With increasing numbers of aging members, everyday living in local communities changes considerably. At our own tables, we can find ourselves among the poor, those whose powers of hearing, sight, or memory aren't what they used to be. Witnessing daily each other's aging process reminds each one of her own limits.

Though genuinely caring for older members, a sister in active ministry may slip into giving unsolicited advice or dismissing an elder's opinion. Retired sisters may resent those still in active ministry who operate on fast forward and have little time to listen. For those who have always managed their own lives, simply learning to make their needs known can be difficult. After a tiring day in ministry, or after a frustrating day alone at home with no one to talk to, everyone's

## Charity Impels: Reclaiming and Rethinking the Vincentian Charism as We Age, continued

patience can wear thin.

Vincent reminds us to bear one another's burdens with patience, stating, "We will have to adjust to things we never expected, for Providence frequently upsets our plans." Louise urges us not to be daunted by obstacles as she counsels, "Do not be upset if things are not as you would want them to be for a long time to come. Do the little you can very peacefully and calmly so as to allow room for the guidance of God in your lives. Do not worry about the rest."

### Who Gives and Who Receives?

Meltem Aktas' iconic image of *The Beggar-Christ and Vincent de Paul* challenges us to notice who is giving and who is receiving. Jesus stands in the guise of a beggar; Vincent stands,



*The Beggar-Christ and Vincent de Paul.* Icon by Meltem Aktas. Commissioned by Rosati House residence, De Paul University. Located in the chapel. Courtesy of the Vincentian Community, Rosati House, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois

ready both to give bread and to receive it. As we age, how might this image move us to reclaim and rethink our call? Consider this story.

Rosemary, a lay associate, gave a few dollars to a homeless woman whom she unexpectedly met in a parking lot. The woman thanked her and turned to go, then turned back to ask, "Are you OK? Is everything all right?" Rosemary smiled and said she was fine, just waiting for friends. Then she added, "Perhaps I was waiting for you!"

The icon and story reveal the key Vincentian principle of "both-and." We are all both givers and receivers, those who have and those who need. At the heart of service is mutuality: we learn from those we teach and are healed by those we tend.

We learn from the poor whom we serve. This cornerstone principle of the Charity charism also speaks to the vulnerability of aging, when we're invited to meet the poor Christ in the poverty of our own declining physical and mental abilities.

After being confined to a wheelchair after a paralyzing accident, Kitty, a lay associate and a gifted dancer, was then diagnosed with breast cancer. Her journey to healing began with words she heard in prayer: "Surrender your right to be offended by your own imperfections." Can we befriend the annoying imperfections of being human?

Who among us hasn't experienced the shock of realizing our need to ask for and receive help? Maybe I can no longer carry heavy bags of groceries upstairs. Arthritic knees prevent me from bending down. I need to ask for a ride to an evening meeting since my night vision is getting worse. Aging propels us out of the role of givers to the often uncomfortable territory of being receivers.

## Charity Impels: Reclaiming and Rethinking the Vincentian Charism as We Age, continued

Aging also invites us to streamline and simplify prayer, advice reinforced by the wisdom of our founders. Elizabeth Seton taught a kind of “prayer of the heart which is independent of place or situation.... a habit of lifting up the heart to God....”

A recently retired sister shared her experience of this “prayer of the heart”: “Retirement is a time to sit before the gaze of God and wonder at the mystery of creation.... I ask God, ‘What return can I make for all the good you give me?’ God answers: ‘Receive my gift, created just for you...Receive my love!’ So I receive and rejoice and let my joy be my thanksgiving.”

Most of us think of ourselves as living our charism most fully when we are the givers – to others and to God. This sister has found deep meaning in simply being open to receive all that God desires to give her. She has learned that receiving can become a new way of giving.

In 2017 the worldwide Vincentian family marked the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our charism with the theme: “Welcome the Stranger.” Besides applying to today’s millions of migrants and refugees, the theme reminds us to welcome the strangeness of our aging bodies and minds. In the words of Sr. Eileen Haynes, SCL, it is “to be conscious of the stranger within ourselves before stepping out to serve.” As we struggle to befriend the poverty within, and simply open ourselves to receive from others, we can begin to embrace a new way of living lives of love and service.

### Hazard Yet Forward

The sculpture by Sr. Margaret Beaudette, SC, powerfully conveys zeal, energy for mission, and courage to walk without fear into the

unknown, into the future God prepared for our founders and prepares for us. How might this image, based on the Seton family motto, move us to reclaim and rethink the call of the Vincentian charism of Charity?

**Zeal and energy for mission:** For St. Vincent there were many ways to be in mission, regardless of age. He stated, “Notwithstanding my age and infirmities, I do not hold myself excused from the obligation of laboring in the service of the poor.... If my voice is too weak to be heard in great cathedrals, ...what will prevent me from gathering a few poor people around my chair and speaking to them of God’s love?”

Vincent never seemed to stop. He told the sisters: “Yours is a spirit of charity, which obliges you to wear yourselves out for the service of your neighbor.” To wear out rather than rust out is in the Charity DNA. We take pride in being workers, doers, organizers, fixers of broken people and situations.

Now, we find ourselves challenged to make peace with letting go and saying “no.” Sisters who worked long and



*Elizabeth Seton: Hazard Yet Forward.* Sculpture in bronze: Sister Margaret Beaudette, SC. Original at Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey. Courtesy of Sisters of Charity of New York.

## Charity Impels: Reclaiming and Rethinking the Vincentian Charism as We Age, continued

hard giving every temporal and spiritual service in their power may feel unmoored when forced to slow down, stop working or to admit “I’m not able to do that anymore.”

Those in their later middle years feel the crunch of having to say “no” at a time when they are expected to participate actively in congregational direction-setting, continue to serve in active ministry (preferably one that carries a salary or stipend), meet the usual responsibilities of community living, and remain attentive to the needs of their elderly and infirm sisters. They too are saying, “I’m not able to do all of that anymore.”

Vincent urged, “Three can do more than ten when Our Lord puts His hand to things.” For years, many worked above and beyond their strength, doing the work of Vincent’s “more than ten.” But now we realize that wearing ourselves out is not the only way to live the mission of charity. Along with zeal, our founders also taught a healthy balance.

Vincent chided, “Our Lord wants us to serve Him with common sense and the opposite is called indiscreet zeal.” Louise told a sick sister, “You are in the state that God wills for you.... No longer worry that you are a burden because you cannot work as you desire.” Elizabeth Seton advised the sisters that they “help others more by the peace and tranquillity of your heart than by any eagerness or care you can bestow upon them.” Their words invite us to value the ministry of peaceful prayer and presence as we age.

**Courage:** Louise cheered her sisters on: “Arise each morning with new courage to serve God and the poor well.” Once, we may have expected to stay forever young and intrepid with boundless energy. Now, we need to embrace a new dimension of courage: the courage to face

our fears of aging and to meet the grace of elderhood.

As elders, Sr. Janet Gildea, SC, writes, we can be “caught in the space between letting go and letting come.... We can hardly bear to admit that part of us is ending and will never enter the future that we are straining our eyes to see.” Alone and together, we need to make space for mourning the passing of things as they used to be, for grieving what is ending and will not return. We need to support one another through the anger, sadness and resistance that are part of grieving.

What of the future? In Sr. Joan Chittister’s view, “Elders have things to give that no other segment of society can possibly match... They come to know that the future, whatever it is, is not to be feared.” The future calls us not necessarily to be star players in the unfolding of God’s reign, but rather to humbly join our voices in united calls for action and our energies in collaborative projects.

Vincent believed firmly that God’s transforming work continues: “As it [the community] wasn’t then what it is now, there’s reason to believe that it’s still not what it will be when God has perfected it as He wants it.” When her future seemed uncertain and perilous, Elizabeth Seton offered a similar message: “Hope, ever awake, whispers Mercy for the future, as sure as the past.” When we fear the signs of our own aging and the uncertain future, the Spirit nudges us to trust that God indeed does something new, over and over. As in the past, so today and into the future, Providence continues to provide what we need.

## From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.



For the past few years, we have chosen to use the winter issue of *Engaging Aging* to highlight a particular charism's insights on aging. As you might expect, the content takes a strong tilt toward the spiritual side of life. Some might see this as less

practical and perhaps even less useful. But in my work with congregations, I've come to see that the point of charism, of speaking one's mother tongue, is exactly the point of access where necessary change becomes possible. It is where we find the courage to face and even embrace this thing called aging that shifts the very ground of our being.

Ironically, this deep language that seems uniquely ours is also rooted in a universal meaning that holds value for all with ears to hear. While Sr. Regina's article certainly issues a clarion call to those living on Vincent's, Louise's and Elizabeth Ann's family tree of Charity, it speaks to everyone else as well. How are we to reconcile the human incapacities that often accompany aging with the vibrant summons of vocation that urges, impels, and compels the heart to service of others?

The answers hinted at by those at the core of Vincentian spirituality urge us not to give up but to improvise! With a focus that remains on the other as opposed to self, they seem to suggest that a way forward will make itself known. The service rendered, the ministry engaged, the presence offered may not be as it once was, but the mission to which we were summoned will find a way to complete itself in us. In facing "what is," we will be empowered to ask, "what if?" In the humility aging invites, may we live Vincent's wisdom, "Love is inventive to infinity."

### Calendar 2018

#### January 2

- Direct Care Assistance applications mailed

#### January 28—30

- Informational meeting on Planning and Implementation Assistance; San Antonio, TX

#### February 13

- NRRO webinar; topic TBD

#### February 20—21

- Dementia workshop; Danville, CA

#### March 31

- Direct Care Assistance applications due

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30th anniversary  
of the national collection for the  
Retirement Fund for Religious.  
Please join the staff of the  
National Religious Retirement Office  
as we give thanks this Christmas  
for the generosity of  
our many friends and benefactors.  
We pray that the birth  
of the Christ Child  
will bring peace and joy  
to your life and to our world  
throughout the coming year.*

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**Staff**

**Executive Director**

Sister Stephanie Still, PBVM  
[sstill@usccb.org](mailto:sstill@usccb.org)

**Associate Director for Funds Distribution**

Brother Hank Sammon, FMS, JCL  
[hsammon@usccb.org](mailto:hsammon@usccb.org)

**Associate Director for Planning and Education**

Brother Bob Metzger, SM  
[rmetzger@usccb.org](mailto:rmetzger@usccb.org)

**Grants Administrator**

Monica Glover  
[mglover@usccb.org](mailto:mglover@usccb.org)

**Administrative Assistant**

Karen Canas  
[kcanas@usccb.org](mailto:kcanas@usccb.org)

**Affiliated Independent Consultants**

Sister Anna Marie Tag, RSM  
[NRROConsult-AMTag@usccb.org](mailto:NRROConsult-AMTag@usccb.org)

Ms. Dayna Larson-Hurst  
[NRROConsult-DLHurst@usccb.org](mailto:NRROConsult-DLHurst@usccb.org)