

Ladies of Charity National Assembly

September 8, 2017

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I am truly honored and privileged to be part of this National Assembly which commemorates the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Ladies of Charity by the great apostle of the poor St. Vincent DePaul and his extraordinary collaborator St. Louise de Marillac. What a history your organization has had, extending to the far corners of the globe and serving multitudes of persons in need: the poor, homeless, uneducated, mentally ill, developmentally disabled, immigrants, refugees, orphans, pregnant and parenting women, victims of war, floods, and contagious diseases like influenza and HIV/Aids, just to mention a few of the beneficiaries of your physical, fiscal, social, pastoral and spiritual solicitude since 1617.

Since the 1970's, when the Ladies of Charity were established in our Diocese of Albany, I have been blessed to witness firsthand the caring service and courageous advocacy you of this glorious association have exercised. So in my own name, and in the name of the bishops throughout our nation and world, I salute you on this milestone occasion and thank you profusely for keeping alive in our day the magnificent Vincentian charism.

How important your Vincentian charism remains in this second decade of the twenty first century. Never, in my 78 years, have I seen our nation so polarized between left and right, liberal and conservative, pro-government and anti-government, wealthy, middle-class and poor. The rhetoric in our political campaigns and on cable TV has become uncivilized and hurtful, forging divisions on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, national origin, religion, and social economic status.

During these first years of the 21st century we have faced harsh realities: the attacks of 9-11 in New York City, in the fields of Pennsylvania and at the Pentagon in Washington, DC, the collapse of Wall Street, 47 million Americans living below the poverty line, violent gangs ravaging many urban centers as small villages and rural towns are dying due to the decline of the family farm and the loss of jobs as result of plant closures.

I would suggest that there is no organization within the church today whose members are better prepared to address these issues than you of the Ladies of Charity. Because through the far-sighted vision of St. Vincent DePaul and Louise deMarriliac your organization has anticipated by 4 centuries, two of the most important dimensions necessary to combat these issues of the modern world, namely, the promotion of the role of the laity and

advocacy for the social teaching and ministry of the church. Let me say a word about each.

There is certainly no question about the fact that there has been an explosion of lay ministries since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. This phenomenon was brought home to me very meaningfully at a liturgy commending the 150th anniversary of one of the parishes in our Diocese.

In the entrance procession there were banners representing the various ministries exercised in the parish. I counted 31 banners representing the array of liturgical, catechetical and service ministries in which parishioners are engaged.

If that same motif had been followed at the parish's 100th Anniversary there probably would have been 5 banners representing the Altar Rosary Society, the Holy Names Society, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Parent Teachers Association and the Ushers Guild.

Yes, the past five decades have witnessed the flowering of lay ministries in liturgy, catechesis, parish administration, human services, marriage and family life and in policy making roles on parish councils, school boards and catholic charities agencies.

Further, in addition to these ministerial roles, there are innumerable lay persons who now interpret their daily lives and responsibilities in family, business, civic community, neighborhood, school, interest groups, and culture as occasions for ministry, for Christian witness, and for extending their beliefs into the world.

This emergence of this "Age of the Laity", if you will, is based upon two basic assumptions enshrined in the Second Vatican Council.

Basic Assumption 1: All believers, through baptism and faith, are called to the mission and ministry of the Church. The II Vatican Council's decree on the Church puts it this way. "By baptism the faithful are made one body with Christ and are established among the People of God. They are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ. They carry out their own part in the mission of the whole Christian people with respect to the Church and the world." (Lumen Gentium#3)

Basic Assumption II: All believers are called to this mission and ministry by God.

The call to ministry is not issued by a bishop or priest, but by God. Once again, the Vatican Council in its decree on the Church underscores this point.

"The lay apostolate is a participation in the saving mission of the Church itself. Through their baptism and confirmation, all are commissioned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself." (Lumen Gentium #33).

It should be noted, however, that these basic premises about the role of the laity in the Church which the Second Vatican Council articulated, and as it has evolved subsequently, are the result of over a century long process of development.

For example, in 1906 in his encyclical, Pascendi, St. Pius X wrote, "The Church is essentially an unequal society. That is, it is a society formed by pastors and flock -- as far as the multitude is concerned, they have no other duty than to let themselves be led."

We know that Pius X was canonized by the Church, but I suspect it was not for this particular statement. The image of a flock is a biblical one, and an important one. However, it seems misplaced in this context and interpretation. Whatever the intent of the statement that Pius X was making in his encyclical Pascendi, it is obvious that the official statements of the Church concerning the ministerial role of the laity have changed dramatically over the past century.

Pope Pius XI in the 1930's, for example, encouraged the movement called Catholic Action, which was defined as "the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy." This had a very positive side and was a huge step forward, in that it encouraged the active role of the laity and stressed their activity rather than their passivity. On the minus side, however, this definition seemed to imply that the laity were not involved in their own mission, but rather were permitted to share in the mission of someone else. The laity were portrayed as a tool or instrument to be used by bishops and pastors in those spheres of society which the hierarchy could not enter themselves. As a matter of historical fact, this was primarily in the realm of European politics.

In addition, the Catholic Action model seemed to suggest that while the faithful are allowed to share in the mission and ministry of the Church, they are called to such by delegation, not by God nor by virtue of their membership in the Church.

Pius XII, in his 1943 encyclical "Mystici Corporis" began, at least tentatively, to recognize the weakness of the Catholic Action model and definition, which held that any formal sharing of ministry by the laity was at the hierarchy's initiative and was a sharing in the hierarchy's apostolate. He pointed out that not just the hierarchy was called to service, but that the laity had a calling and mission which were properly their own. Pius XII, however, still saw the calling and mission of the laity to be a "collaboration in the apostolate of the hierarchy."

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, in other words, the laity were defined in a negative way. Put most succinctly - the laity were defined as those not ordained.

This negative definition carried a further connotation that non-ordained meant inferior, or at least subordinate. This was applied not only to the exercise of authority in the Church but to

the state of holiness as well. Inferiority in these areas suggested that the laity were dependent upon the clergy for the sacraments, correct doctrine, and other services. The clerical state was considered the normative model for Christian living to which the laity aspired as best they could, but were in no way to compete with the clergy in holiness, prayerfulness, spirituality and church leadership.

The Second Vatican Council, however, dramatically shifted the ecclesiological ground for our understanding of the laity. The laity are described by the Council not just as instruments of the Church, but the laity themselves are the Church, the people of God. Furthermore, as result of the Council's shift, the Catholic action and lay apostolate model began to wane and the notion of lay ministry began to emerge.

This evolution of the laity's role has been developed and enhanced further by a rich and coherent body of post-conciliar documents such as the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults in 1973, Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Modern World issued in 1976 and the teachings of Pope John Paul II articulated in Christifideles Laici, Catechesi Tradendae, Pastores

Dabo Vobis and Redemptoris Missio, as well as in the remarkable General Directory for Catechesis published in 1997 by the Congregation for the Clergy.

Also the documents of the American bishops such as Called and Gifted, Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium and Co-Workers in the Vineyard have reinforced this teaching that all the baptized are given a share in the priestly ministry of Jesus and that one and all are necessary for the fulfillment of the church's mission.

Lay ministry, then, is neither a luxury nor concession brought about by some American desire to democratize the church or by the current shortage in vocations to the ordained and vowed life. Rather, it is the inevitable result of the Second Vatican Council's renewed appreciation of the laity not as mere instruments of the hierarchy, but as the People of God who possess personal gifts and charisms that empower them to contribute their part to the mission of the Church and to the transformation of society. The laity's responsibility is a necessary and perennial dimension of the life of the church, exercised by those who are rooted in the living and loving relationship with Christ Jesus. It demands interdependence and

partnership between bishops and priest, between clergy, religious and laity and between parishes and diocese.

And not only have you of the Ladies of Charity anticipated lay participation but participation by women – both religious and lay- in fulfilling the healing and reconciling mission of the church. At the time, when the Ladies of Charity were founded most women religious were confined to a cloistered existence in monasteries or convents and limited to service in institutions like schools, hospitals, orphanages and facilities for the elderly.

Further, lay women had little more to contribute than to pray, pay and obey or to help out if Father, Sister or Brother asked them to assist in fulfilling that task which was basically and essentially theirs. It was only, as I have pointed out, with the Second Vatican Council and its people of God concept, that the church underscored lay ministry. Ministry is not just the realm of the clergy and religious but of all the baptized, each of whom is called to holiness and ministry. There is in the church, in other words, one mission, the mission of Jesus to be served by a multiplicity of ministries and ministers. How remarkable it is, then, that you the Ladies of Charity anticipated both theoretically and practically this

understanding of the church 350 years prior to the Decrees of the Second Vatican Council.

This brings me to my second point, the social mission of the Church. In fulfilling this vision of the laity emphasized in the Vatican Council and subsequent papal and episcopal teaching,, I believe, we may need to relearn some of the lessons of the Catholic action model of the pre-Vatican II church – not in the sense that the laity can only act by participating in the ministry of the hierarchy in those places where the hierarchy cannot go, but in the sense that it is the laity’s prime responsibility to fulfill the mission and ministry of the Church by being about the transformation of society; bringing the Christian message to bear in the realm of politics, economics, culture and entertainment.

More and more the laity must be aware of the teaching of the Church on cutting edge social, economic, medical and moral issues and seek to articulate this teaching in the public arena.

I underscore this point because Catholic social justice advocacy and ministry flowing from the exhortations of the Scriptures, papal encyclicals and bishops’ pastoral letters still remain a secret for most laity. A recent survey revealed that less than 40 percent of Catholics,

including clergy and religious, are familiar with Catholic social teaching and fail to realize that this teaching is an integral part of our faith heritage – as much a part of our tradition as the proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacraments.

We then must make Catholic social teaching part of the credenda (things to be believed) which then become for the believer a basis for the agenda (things to be done) which the believer must implement.

I emphasize this point because as bishop of Albany where the State Capital of New York is located, I served as chairperson for the Public Policy Committee of the New York State Catholic Conference for 37 years until my retirement 3 years ago. This often necessitated meeting with the governor and state commissioners or testifying before the Legislature. Through this experience, I learned quickly that when we bishops advocate on behalf of public policy issues with those in state government, our elected representatives feel free to dismiss our concerns because they know that frequently we bishops are like generals without armies, and, thus, to ignore our pleadings will not cost them at the polls.

If, then, our Catholic Christian vision and philosophy of life, especially as it pertains to the poor, and marginalized is to be translated into reality, then it is imperative that the laity become aware of the issues confronting our society, be educated on these issues and be willing to let our elected officials know of their support of or opposition to particular public-policy concerns. And the more credible the laity's witness becomes in this regard, I believe, the more believable our Christian witness will be.

In other words, if the voice of the church is to be heard in our very secularized and pluralistic society then, it is the laity who must fulfill this role and do it with knowledge, civility, integrity, and enthusiasm.

Equally significant to note, however, is that despite the directive of the Council Fathers that the ministry of the laity should be directed primarily to the transformation of society, the emphasis of the Church leaders subsequent to Vatican II, has been mainly on encouraging laity to assume liturgical and catechetical roles like lector, Eucharistic minister choir member, catechist, and preparers of people seeking the sacraments of marriage, or baptism for their children. Not that these liturgical and catechetical ministries are unimportant, but practically emphasis on such has tended to deter the laity from exercising their prime ministry of service to the world.

But from the outset 400 years ago, you Ladies of Charity recognized this fundamental truth. While there are many ways in which we might do this, you, from the very beginning of your association, you appreciated that in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, the primary sign of such stewardship is care and concern for the poor and needy. That the Good News is proclaimed to the poor and that the needs of strangers and the orphan, widow are met have always been presented in Christian Tradition and Christian spirituality as the infallible sign of the presence of God's kingdom among us.

In other words, the way we take into account the poor among us and the way in which they fit into our plan of life tell us a great deal about ourselves and our own state of spiritual health. Unless we seriously address ourselves to the needs of our suffering brothers and sisters in the world and society around us, we run the risk of losing that which we already have, namely, the right to be sons and daughters of that kingdom founded by our heavenly Father.

If, therefore, we truly believe in God's kingdom and if we are seeking to advance that kingdom in our day, then the poor must rank very high in our values and in our priority system; otherwise we are deceiving ourselves and it is not God's kingdom that we are advancing but our own.

That is why our recent popes have constantly challenged us to have "a preferential option for the poor." We must recognize that a wound in one is a hurt in each; that as long as one child falls asleep hungry at night, my stomach hurts; that as long as an elderly person can't afford heat or fears tomorrow, there is a chill in my bones; or that as long as one person is treated with lack of dignity, I am shamed. Because if one person is oppressed, manipulated or disregarded, then, it is not someone else who is debased, but all of us are. For this is the nature of the interdependence we have upon one another as members of the human family.

It is, in other words, a profound Biblical truth that the face of the poor is the face of the Lord. To the extent that we cut the poor out of our lives, to that extent do we shut ourselves off from the channel of God's love and grace. On the other hand, to the extent

that we reach out to our hurting brothers and sisters in the community around us, to that extent do we prepare ourselves for union with our eternal God.

Now the Church's reflection on this Scriptural revelation over the centuries has given rise to certain values and principles: values and principles which must be normative for us as Christians in no matter what social, cultural, or political situation in which we find ourselves.

While these values and principles have been stated in different ways in various historical contexts, I would suggest that they were only formally articulated beginning with Pope Leo XIII encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 and, then, through subsequent papal social encyclicals, most recently Pope Francis encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si*.

I would posit that these principles can be summarized as follows: 1) Every person has been created by God with a dignity that is unique, sacred and inviolable. This transcendent dignity of the human person is a profound religious truth that appears from the very first chapter of Genesis to the last line of the New Testament, and the defense of human dignity has been and continues to be the preeminent and perennial task of the Church in

its teaching and social witness. 2) From this basic dignity there flow certain rights: The right to life, and the right to adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care, education and employment opportunities for one's self and one's family. 3) There is a solidarity within the human family. For the human person is essentially a social being, and human rights are rights held in community. We need to establish, therefore, social institutions and structures which facilitate the achievements of these basic human rights and which reflect the dignity of every person. And it is the role of the government and of other mediating institutions, such as the church, to effect those social changes which will insure that the common good is promoted and that basic human rights are protected.

This belief in the transcendent dignity of the human person and in the spectrum of rights and responsibilities each person possesses, precisely because he or she is human, which is at the very heart of our church's social teaching, is indeed most timely in light of the grave and spreading tendency in our day to reduce the human person to the level of a thing, a pawn of economic or political interest, a commodity, a unit of production or a mere instrument for the purpose of scientific or medical progress.

It should be noted, furthermore, that this conviction about the dignity of the human person cannot be understood in terms of purely materialistic or atheistic constructs. Rather, this dignity must be perceived in the light of a destiny that surpasses the limits of this world and that is ultimately rooted in our relationship with our loving God.

Moreover, this understanding of the sacredness of the human person should impel us individually and collectively to be more passionate in our defense of human rights and human dignity; more determined in our quest for racial justice and social equality; more enthusiastic in promoting our causes; more resolute in our attempt to establish genuine community and more humane and compassionate in our ministry of healing and reconciliation.

It is also apparent that this vision we have about the dignity of the human person, rooted as it is in our relationship with a loving God and in our solidarity with our own brothers and sisters in the human family, should be the motivating, animating and sustaining influence in all of our efforts to respond to human need. For it is only with this vision that the maintenance of a day care center, the care of the elderly, the placement of a child, the service to the unwed mother, the rehabilitation of the addict or the alcoholic, the outreach to the poor, the mentally ill or developmentally disabled, the creation of

affordable housing or the participation in a public policy network or advocacy coalition make any sense.

Yes, it is only with this vision that these programs and services we render can be raised from the level of the impersonal, the indifferent, the self-serving, the paternalistic or the condescending to the level of the transcendental, wherein our life and ministry truly become effective signs of the God's compassionate love and a living testimony to our fundamental Christian belief that all men and women are our brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus, bound together by a unity that demands justice and charity.

In short, what I am attempting to say is that we in the Church must appreciate and rejoice in that unique dignity we have of being living instruments of God's healing and liberating love in a world that desperately needs such and as part of a person-centered tradition that extends from the call of the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures to care for the poor, the alien, the orphan and widow; to St. James' exposition to the early Christian community on the nature of selfless love, given; to 20th-century icons like Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa, Archbishop Oscar Romero and Cardinal Bernardin who made a vocation of demonstrating the congruence of our Catholic vision and belief with service to the poor and the oppressed. And you Ladies of Charity gave witness to these principles and to this prophetic vision

275 years before the hierarchy sought to formulate such into a coherent teaching. Truly amazing!

This brings me to the pragmatic question of how do we do this today? Engulfed as we are by our own personal and family problems and worn down by the demands of job responsibilities and other obligations, how do we give flesh and blood to these values and principles? How do we translate this social teaching beyond the pages of Sacred Scriptures, Papal social encyclicals and Bishops' pastoral letters into our homes, our neighborhoods, our parishes, our cities, towns and rural communities? How do we communicate such in our labor halls, our PTA meetings, our manufacturing associations, our political caucuses, our legislative bodies, in short, in all of those places where the Good News can become more than mere theory, more than pious clichés and churchy platitudes.

Let me suggest a threefold response to this question. First, traditionally, as a church, we have tended to respond to this challenge by programs of direct service to the poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged, as well as for the emotionally and spiritually impoverished. This thrust must continue, given the developments that are taking place in welfare reform and managed care wherein people inevitably fall through the cracks, so to speak; and given the

need to restore a personalized dimension to human service delivery, in light of the checkbook approach of responding to human need that has arisen in the past few decades or so.

People today are very much fed up with bureaucracies, with specialization, with an antiseptic computerized approach to life wherein everyone is reduced to a number or a statistic, or stereotyped by one's IQ range. But people want to be accepted for themselves, for their own unique history, for their own distinctive story.

Thus, I would submit that we could have perfect programs in model communities, offer well-developed educational, social and liturgical services in our parishes, provide every one with a decent home and a guaranteed annual income, and still not get at the heart of what alienates modern men and women. It is only when we begin to give testimony to what a person means and to what love means that we do something that is truly significant.

In other words, while it is fine to give food to the needy, to offer clothing and furniture to the disadvantaged, to work with the developmentally disabled or handicapped, or to respond to an emergency appeal by writing a check, what is even more essential is to reach out to these vulnerable persons in the community and

society around us and to say to them by word or deed or gesture or facial expression: "I care about you; I am concerned about you; I believe in you; I love you and I want you to have life to the full."

Second, direct service -- good, beneficial and indispensable as such is -- is not enough in the complex world and society in which we live today.

For example, a tutorial program for inner-city youngsters can be totally inadequate if the educational system in the community is inferior. A cup of cold water can be useless if that water is polluted by industries that dump their refuse into our rivers and streams. Or aid given to another can become a mockery if given in ways that debase or demean the other.

Also, we must recognize that in the global village in which we live today, our actions or omissions in the United States can affect the lives of millions of people the world over. By way of illustration, a 10% surtax levied in Washington can mean unemployment for tens of thousands of Korean textile workers. The covert activities of the CIA can mean physical decimation for another nation and moral destitution for our own. Or billions of dollars expended in our defense budget can usurp resources desperately needed to care for the poor both at home and abroad.

That is why we must not only develop particular programs that respond to specified human need but we must also address the root causes of social decay. In other words, we must be willing to involve ourselves with the messy business of social change. We must be willing to stand with the poor, powerless and defenseless in their hour of need, and not merely be content with applying band-aids to deep wounds, or with helping people better adjust to their suffering; but we must also confront those persons and those institutions that oppress, manipulate or destroy others, be such the members of government, the business community or the church herself.

This is precisely what our late Holy Father Pope Paul VI meant when he said: "We in the church must shift from a policy that seeks to alleviate the results of oppression to one that seeks to eliminate the causes of oppression."

It should be noted, however, that our advocacy efforts on behalf of peace and justice must always be rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the social teachings articulated by the Church over the centuries, which have an integrity – and an originality of their own, and must never be confused or identified with any particular political system, economic theory or philosophical ideology.

I mention this because in advocating on behalf of peace and justice, it may come across at times that we are opposed to the position or policy of the government [be it of our own nation or that of some other nation]. This may be, but if such is the case, the criteria for our opposition as Church members must not be based on philosophical, political or ideological grounds solely, but on the fact that the needs of the poor or the rights of the oppressed and disadvantaged are not being respected or protected.

Moreover, I think it is evident that to advocate on behalf of peace and justice at times will thrust us into the risky area of controversy where we ourselves may be challenged, attacked, ridiculed or ostracized. This is truly the cost of discipleship and the price we must be willing to pay. For failure to place ourselves in this position may involve complicity with forces and factors that run contrary to Gospel values and this, then, becomes the very essence of social sin.

Third, I would underscore the fact that our ministry of charity and social justice must always flow from prayer. For service and advocacy without prayer can become very humanistic and very secularistic, geared toward making things more comfortable and palatable here and now, but failing to point to that eternal Now to which each of us is destined.

Service and advocacy without prayer, in other words, only create a false sense of security, rooted in the fickle and fleeting ideas, values and movements of human wisdom but failing to communicate that life-giving power and strength that can only come from trust in the Lord God and the Good News revealed in the person of the only begotten son Jesus Christ.

I cannot emphasize this strongly enough because over the years I have observed so many people, well-motivated and well intentioned in their commitment to help others and to rectify injustice, who quickly become discouraged and disillusioned because, in placing all emphasis on human measures and natural solutions, they have forgotten that they are primarily called to be believers in Someone and Something, namely, the Lord Jesus and His plan of life. When this happens, they soon drop by the wayside or move on to other pursuits because they find themselves bringing not the Lord to others but only their own ideas, values and opinions which cannot withstand the test of time, nor endure the heat of day; and finding not the Lord in others but only petty, weak human beings like themselves who quickly sap their strength, harden their hearts and dampen their spirits.

Therefore, I am convinced that the place where we must find the relationship between our faith and our service to or advocacy on behalf of others is in our prayer, most especially the Eucharist.

For it is at Eucharist that the Church comes together as Church. It is at Eucharist that we gain a fresh insight into who it is we are and what we are called to be. It is at Eucharist that we become energized to change our wills, our wants, our loves and our desires. If, therefore, that ongoing conversion, which is at the heart of the Christian life, does not take place at Eucharist, then, it will not take place at all.

Father John Haughey, the Jesuit theologian, has suggested that the words we memorialize at Eucharist can help bring about this conversion: "This is my body which is given for you."

The night before he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and after he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body for you, do this."

What does this mean? Basically it means that the style or disposition of each person who comes to the Eucharistic table is to be the same as the disposition of the Lord Jesus who has said: "I am Bread, I am Bread broken. I am Bread broken for others. Do this."

A Eucharist, then, which does not evoke within its participants a real identification with the other members of Christ's Body, others who are in need, others who are suffering, is a Eucharist celebrated according to our own mind-set, not according to the mind of Christ.

And if we would celebrate Eucharist in this radical sense of Eucharist, if we would prepare ourselves at Eucharist to become bread broken and wine poured out for others, this would substantially alter our understanding of our personal existence and of our relationship with others. It would lead us to change our priorities and to work tirelessly both through service and advocacy to bring about the advancement of God's Kingdom of justice and peace in our day.

In conclusion, I would note that the challenges you face as Ladies of Charity may prompt you to become overwhelmed and at times to feel that you are failing or not doing enough. But you must remember, as the Dominican theological Father Timothy Radcliffe notes: "The archetypical Christian community was the Last Supper. Think what a dismal failure that community was. One of the disciples sold Jesus out; another went on to deny him, and the rest ran away. Jesus failed to gather them into a community on that last

night (after three years of intensive formation), so we should not be surprised that we do better than he did.

“What Jesus did was to offer the sacrament of communion; a sign of the kingdom that is to come as a gift in its own good time. If the Church is not the great and dynamic community we want it to be, then this may not be a sign of pastoral failure at all. Sometimes we can do no more than enact signs of what is to come.”

Yes, as Father Radcliffe suggests, the Last Supper is our foundational story, the story of God’s covenant with us and with all of humanity. The paradox of this story is that our community was founded just at the moment it was in the process of breaking up. And that has been true down through the course of Christian history: at Pentecost, in the persecution of the early church, during the fall of the Roman Empire and the emergence of the Dark Ages, at the time of the Reformation, the collapse of the papal states, the modernist controversy, the rise of communism, the emergence of secularism and now in the face of the present crisis of trust and confidence created by the clergy abuse scandals. And just as at the Last Supper the moment of betrayal and shame became a moment of gift and grace, the present challenges we face also can be ones of rejuvenation and joy. They can lead us to become a church where it is clear that

Jesus came to call sinners, not the righteous; they can help us be a community which finds a place at the table for those who have been excluded by virtue of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and marital or immigration status. They can bring to birth a church that is less clerical and secretive, and enable us to be a more transparent church in which the laity are recognized and empowered to exercise their full dignity as baptized Christians. They could mark the end of a church functioning as sort of a multinational business, operating through a distant and unaccountable bureaucracy, and can lead us to become more evidently a community of disciples.

This is what you Ladies of Charity have been doing for 400 years and I pray that by continuing to say yes to St. Vincent DePaul and St. Louise de Marillac you will be in this 21st century, as you have been for the past 400 years: beacons of light, anchors of hope and vessels of charity and instruments of peace and justice in a church, world and society which so desperately needs such.

May it be so!