**Keynote speech by Sr. Margaret Keaveney, D.C.**

**"Begin to weave and God will provide the thread."**

Dear Ladies of Charity, my dear sisters in the loving service of Christ, present in the sufferings of our sisters and brothers who are poor, I am so happy to be with you here today in Salt Lake City. May the love that brings us together grow ever stronger in the days ahead in our sharing of our hope and joy in our vocation.

Whenever I am asked to speak to a group, my first thought is to decline. Why? If you were standing where I am standing now, you would have the answer immediately. I am looking out at a sea of faces who are all servants of the poor in the Vincentian tradition. Many of you are far better able to share your thoughts and experiences in our vocation than I. I thank you in advance for your patience with my efforts. Not wanting to tax your goodness too much, I took the advice of respected speakers on how I could best prepare for my presentation. You will be delighted with the advice I received and I am committed to follow. First a longtime Lady Charity, Maura Pezzati told me that Winston Churchill said that a good lecture is like a woman’s skirt, it should be long enough to cover the essentials and short enough to be interesting. Not sure that I would have the courage to share that advise, I turned to my Spiritual Director who was particularly helpful, he told me: “Sister Margaret, when you give a talk it is important to have a good beginning and a good ending – and to keep them as close together as possible! I agreed with him wholeheartedly and will do my best to follow his suggestions precisely. In light of this good advice, I continued my conversation with him regarding the title given to my assigned talk, which is the theme of our Annual Conference, “Begin to Weave and God Will Provide the Thread: Ladies of Charity in Action.” The very boldness of the statement gave me pause. Our loving God is pictured for us as the Divine Master Weaver. We, His chosen disciples, are invited to approach the loom of life counting on Him to provide the thread for us to do our part in weaving His love into a tapestry of ministries that will lift and lighten the burdens of our downtrodden, forgotten, and poverty stricken sisters and brothers. I had never before in my life reflected on God as a Weaver who would place His divine thread in my hands. In speaking with Fr. Larry Gosselin, a Franciscan Friar at Old Mission Santa Barbara and a member of the community with whom St. Vincent’s, in Santa Barbara, has launched a new co-sponsored ministry of welcome to our homeless sisters and brothers, he offered me a poem he had just written on God as the Divine Weaver. Realizing that the gift of Father’s poem was the result of his working with the thread God had given him, I accepted his offer as a lead into our own story of what we have done and will do with the thread God gives to us as He calls us to continue the ministry, here on earth, of His Son, Jesus Christ.

The Poem is entitled “Weaving Quest” by Father Larry Gosselin, O.F.M. (used with his permission)

Spinning, spinning,

gazing into the heavens above,

dark sky illuminates dazzling lights.

Somewhere in the heavens above resides

 a dwelling place of eternal harmony,

the new heaven and new earth.

Spinning, spinning.

Gazing for the heart of the One God,

looking into the mirror of one’s soul;

there resides both light and darkness.

But now, wanting to gaze, sing, to be,

alone in the One who’s eternally alone.

Alone, with the Alone.

Alone, but never alone.

The heavenly skies keep inviting,

spin, soak, sink, weave, and stand,

to the heart of all, reflect the above.

Seeing, so to be a mirror in dark sky.

Is this all too much to ask or too little?

To be at the hand of the One who’s light

is the Light of the World.

The Quest of the Weaver.

The prayer rug is woven.

Can you drink of the cup?

Spinning light in the night,

spun as one, a holy silence.

And so the thread that the Divine Weaver provides for us Vincentians is a gift of grace given to our Founders over 400 years ago. Let us reflect together this morning on this grace. We are called to walk in the footsteps of Vincent and Louise. We speak familiarly to each other about our Vincentian Charism as the critical guiding grace in the decisions we make as we weave the tapestry of our ministries today. Do we ever stop to think of what guided Vincent and Louise to begin the great work of Charity that God confided to them? Surely it had to be the influence of the Scriptures in their lives. Both Vincent and Louise were educated people in their day. As they read the story of God’s call to Moses, a simple uneducated man who stuttered when he spoke, they must have realized that God had other criteria for his chosen servants than physical strength or an ego dominated character. What comes to my mind as we enter into this reflection on scripture as a source of revelation and encouragement to Vincent and Louise is the saying of St. Vincent to all his followers: “First the heart, then the work.” So, it was with Moses God captured His heart and Moses became the great Old Testament Patriarch who would lead God’s people – lead them at night – across the desert to the Promised Land. Why do we think the Old Testament bothers to include that God led His people by night? Maybe because deserts are hot, dry places and God was like a loving Mother for His people. He knew it would be less exhausting to walk in the cool of the night. Less exhausting, perhaps, but far more treacherous. The desert is a wild place at night and in the darkness the Jewish People would see less clearly where they were going. There is an important message here in this story of the trip to the Promised Land and one that will be woven all throughout our Vincentian tapestry. Moses and the Jewish people had to give God what He wanted from them – Trust in His Providential Love – “First the Heart, then the Work”. In the New Testament, Mary did not understand Gabriel’s annunciation message, but she trusted God, said “yes” and God did the rest. He sent His son, Jesus, to bring us all home safely to His loving embrace. Mary trusted in God’s Providential Love for her. First the heart then the work.

In the story of the loaves and the fishes, the people were hungry, the disciples wanted to send them away. They were overwhelmed with the size of the crowd and the scarcity of the available provisions. A small boy had 5 loaves and 2 fish. Jesus took them, blessed them and told the disciples to give this food to the hungry crowd. You and I know the story as did Vincent and Louise. The crowd ate, all were satisfied and the disciples collected what was left over so that nothing of what God had given would be wasted. God’s Providential Love for His people requires the simple solid response of filial trust in God’s eternal, constant and deeply compassionate love for all His children. Vincent and Louise’s understanding of God’s love for His people gave them the ears and the ability to hear God’s call in their hearts beckoning them to be the bearers of God’s Providential love for the sick, the poor, the abandoned, and the marginalized of seventeenth century France. The thread that began Vincent’s own story of weaving Gold’s love into the fabric of life is the story of the family in Chatillon who were brought to Vincent’s attention before Mass on a Sunday morning. He spoke from the pulpit to his parishioners telling them of the tragic situation of this poor family who were all ill and unable to care for themselves. The response of the parishioners was prompt, caring and overwhelming in its magnitude. Each family in the parish hastened to prepare and bring food and healing remedies to the sick. Vincent, like Jesus at the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes, did not want any food to be wasted. So, from the “problem”, if we can use that word, of the prompt and generous response to a call for the people of God gathered at a Sunday Liturgy to see and respond to the needs of their suffering neighbors grew Vincent’s vocation to organize charitable responses to the ills of his day. He had begun to weave, God had given him the thread….the Master Weaver had begun to call those weavers who down through the centuries to come would continue to work on weaving the masterpiece – not yet completed that would reveal in a zillion different ways the compassionate love of God for His people. Vincent’s heart was captured by God’s love. First the heart, then the work! Vincent de Paul, had been blessed with the gifts and talents he would need and use for the honor and glory of God and the relief of the suffering of a multitude, too great to name or number, in his time and in the centuries down to our own, through the recruitment of other Vincentians-blessed with the loving compassionate heart of Christ. Like yourselves, I am in awe of God’s Providential love for His people when I see the phenomenal depth and breadth of the ministries of the Ladies of Charity, the Vincentian Fathers and the Daughters of Charity. These three world-wide Vincentian organizations were all founded, grown and spread throughout France to Poland and to Madagascar in the forty-three years between the founding of the Ladies of Charity in 1617 and the death of Vincent and Louise in 1660. Today, the Vincentian Family is serving God’s poor in over 90 countries of the world.

In preparation for my sharing with you today, I did some research in the masterful 14 volume collection of Vincent de Paul’s Correspondence, Conferences and Documents. I found myself lost for several afternoons pouring over correspondence regarding the maintenance of the newly created ministries and the issues they had; for example, the Ladies of Charity took responsibility for the spiritual works of mercy at Hotel Dieu Hospital in Paris in 1617 – they particularly focused on helping to prepare the terminally ill patients to make a general confession of their life. They scheduled local priests to come and hear those confessions and they supported family members at the death of their loved ones. The Daughters of Charity were recruited to come and work with the Ladies there, particularly in caring for the sick in the contagious wards. Vincent and Louise were soon into writing contracts with the administration of the hospital who hired the Sisters to provide nursery, culinary and laundry services at the hospital. As I read on, I thought the seventeenth century was beginning to sound more like the twenty-first century. As the Vincentian Family was growing rapidly so was the scope and diversity of its ministries. In 1640 the Ladies of Charity took responsibility for the care of the Foundlings. The Daughters worked alongside them in the large cities of France, but the Ladies were always in the administration of these works, as they were, along with Louise de Marillac the most educated and able to provide personal resources and obtain government financing of these projects.

I would like to share with you two letters from Vincent de Paul written during the time of the Fronde. The Fronde was a series of civil wars occurring over five years in the midst of France that was already engaged in the Franco-Spanish War which lasted 24 years. Cardinal Mazarin was a significant player in the unrest at that time. He and Vincent de Paul did not agree on most things. At one time Vincent tried to have him dismissed from the Council of Conscience where both Vincent and he sat as advisors to Queen Marguerite. The queen did not follow Vincent’s suggestion, as she felt it would further divide the nation. Having had the courage to bring his concerns to the Queen and not receiving her support meant that Vincent had to leave town for a little while just to give time for the establishment of a new normal in his relationships at the court to occcur. The Queen mandated his return to court approximately five months later.

1090. TO THE LADIES OF CHARITY

[Freneville,] February 11, 1649

Mesdames,

The grace of O[ur] L[ord] be with you forever!

Although the providence of God has removed me far from you, I do not fail to see you often at the holy altar and to offer you and your families to O[ur] L[ord], confident that your charity is asking God’s mercy for me. I most humbly entreat you, Ladies, to do me this favor and to rest assured that, if God is pleased to consider the prayers I offer and will continue to offer Him incessantly for you, you will be consoled and guarded by His special protection in the midst of the afflictions with which His Divine Majesty is pleased to try us all.

You must have heard, Ladies, that God has given me the opportunity to go visit the houses of our Little Company, which I am now doing, with the intention of returning home whenever the state of affairs will allow. What shall we do in the meantime, Ladies, about the works the good God has entrusted to you, especially the Confraternity of Charity of the Hotel-Dieu and the work of the poor foundlings? In truth, it seems that private misfortunes are dispensing us from concern for public ones and that we would have a good excuse in the sight of others to distance ourselves from this concern. But, Ladies, I really do not know how this would stand before God, who could say to us what Saint Paul said to the Corinthians, who found themselves in similar circumstances: “Have you resisted yet to the point of shedding blood?” or, at least, have you sold any of your jewels yet? What can I say, Ladies, I know that several of you – and I believe the same holds true for all of you-have given alms which would be considered very great not only in persons of your state in life but in queens. The stones would cry out if I were to keep silence about this, and it is because of the preeminence of your incomparably charitable hearts that I am speaking to you in this fashion. I would be most careful not to act in this way with other persons less animated with the Spirit of God than you are.

But what, then, shall we do? It seems fitting, Ladies, to question whether it is expedient for you to hold the large meeting that had been proposed. Where, when, and how? There are reasons for and against this.

It would seem, in the first place, that it should be held because it is customary to have one around this time. In the second place, since the needs are extraordinary, it would seem that the means to remedy them must also be extraordinary, such as holding a general meeting.

On the other hand, it would seem that now is not the right moment for one because of the troubled state in which we are, which is upsetting people and causing charity to grow cold. Perhaps many Ladies are fearful of going to one, and perhaps those who go, unless they have unusual charity, will put a damper on one another. Furthermore, since the Princess will not be there, nor their Ladyships d’Aiguillon and de Brienne, it seems that things would not be as some might wish, especially if thought were being given to making some substantial change in the work.

These, Ladies, are the pros and cons that occur to me right now. Please come to a decision on this by a plurality of votes. When I was leaving Saint-Germain, the Duchesse d’Aiguillon told me, or has written to me since, that the Queen told her she would send something for the poor foundlings. I do not know if she has done so. I asked M. Lambert to send them a little wheat, and I have written to Madame de Lamoignon, the President’s wife, to be so kind as to use her influence with the city authorities to provide an escort for the wheat both inside and outside the city. I do not know what has been done about this either. If it has not been carried out, I beg both parties, by this letter, to do whatever is necessary for that purpose.

And because even that is not enough, Ladies, see if it is advisable, as officers of the Charity, to borrow the sum of two or three thousand livres to meet the most urgent needs. I am writing to ask M. Lambert to pledge himself in our name. If pledging is difficult, it would be advantageous for each one of us to make an effort to do so. In that case I am asking M. Lambert to do whatever will have to be done on our part. I admit, Ladies, that what I am saying is somewhat importunate but it would be even more so if I were saying it to persons less charitable than you. Lastly, I ask O[ur] L[ord], who presides over meetings such as yours that are held in His name, to help you to understand what He desires of you on this occasion and to grant you the grace of carrying it out.

The extreme cold has kept me in this place and will do so until the weather gets milder. I expect to leave then for Le Mans or Angers, or both. I hope to receive there the results of your meeting, unless M. Lambert sends them to me here by express messenger.

In the meantime, I ask God to bless and sanctify more and more your meeting and your own dear persons.

I am, in the love of O[ur] L[ord], Ladies, your….

VINCENT DEPAUL

1090b. TO SAINT LOUISE

Freneville, February 17, 1649

Blessed be God, Mademoiselle, for all you tell me and for all He has done for the poor foundlings. O Jesus, my Savior, how good You are to these poor little abandoned creatures! How strongly that should encourage us, Mademoiselle, to continue the little services we are trying to render them.

I thank God that you are still well and that there is good reason to hope that this little spiritual assistance for your daughters will put them back where they were before the public calamity threw them a little off balance. By God’s grace they are good; I think this slight lapse has not disheartened them. So, come and go from your house to the city Hospice; I hope that will be helpful.

Last Sunday, we had a little conference with our Sisters here. M. Escart and the two officers of the Charity were present for it. Everyone spoke up and said some very good things on the subject I sent you; namely, whether there were any particular virtues proper to the Daughters of Charity in the country, other than those which Our Lord asks of the Sisters of the same Company, who live in towns… Barbe… put her thoughts in writing. Both said no, but that it was true that many virtues should be present to a more outstanding degree in Sisters in the country than in those in towns – charity for the sick, for example, because of the distance between places where they are obliged to serve them, and because of their incomparable state of misery. They said the same for mortification, giving similar reasons, and furthermore that this was true for love of purity, poverty, and simplicity for the Sisters in the country and that perhaps, in the future, experience will show that the most virtuous should be chosen for country places.

That, more or less, is the result of their thinking, which gave me great consolation. The doctor in this area came to see me yesterday and told me he wanted to put himself under the care of the Sisters for treatment during his illness but was dissuaded from doing so by the consideration that this might do an injustice to the surgeons in Messe. Because he is well known there, that might imply that the latter were ignorant. He is urging me to buy a house for them [the sisters]. I said we would try to do so in time. He also told me they did not have enough of the common remedies used to purge those recovering from an illness. That is why most of them have a relapse. I told him we would give them some; but we are still a little short ourselves.

I hope to leave tomorrow, God willing, if the snow now beginning does not continue for very long. I hope that your prayers and those of your daughters will obtain God’s grace for me and that my sins may not hinder the accomplishment of His designs on my journey. I am, In His love, Mademoiselle, your most humble and obedient servant.

VINCENT DEPAUL

i.s.C.M.

After reading these letters, I wonder if we see any similarities between Vincent’s and Louise’s time and our own. As I was reflecting on the milieu referenced in Vincent’s letters, I could not help but see how history repeats itself. As Vincent and Louise were responding to the cry of the poor, to the weaving of Gods’ Providential love for His people, France was engaged in the Franco-Spanish war. This war lasted 24 years. During this time uninvited foreigners coming across Frances’s borders were considered the enemy. As the Vincentian works of charity grew, not only were they under the shadow of violence from the international conflict, but they were also afflicted with the Fronde, a state of civil unrest that tore France apart internally for a period of five years.

Time moves on but human nature seems to be ever the same. For the last 15 years the United States has remained engaged in international conflicts in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, and off and on during this same period of time, in 8 other international conflicts. At home in the United States we are torn apart by political polarization. Terrorism is a new form of war. Our children are no longer safe in our schools, our Churches, our playgrounds or in their mother’s arms. Adults and children have been victims of violence while shopping at our neighborhood stores, while attending concerts or driving on our freeways.

Now, as in the seventeenth century, a country’s internal and external strife and war afflict the poor disproportionately. From Biblical time to the days of Vincent and Louise right on to our own present experience, the foreigner, the immigrant, is not welcome in the land of refuge. To flee violence, religious and ethnic persecution in search of a better life for your children has become a Federal crime in the USA. Taking children from their mother’s arms and placing them in compounds where they feel abandoned by their parents, alone and frightened with nothing but a mylar blanket to comfort and warm them is using the very life and existence of children as a weapon of war against asylum seekers. This is a crime against humanity. Scripture tells us in Matthew 18:10, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of my Father in heaven.

These days, these evils, the growing poverties of soul and body of our sisters and brothers in need cry out to our hearts. We hear Vincent saying to us, First the heart, then the work! We must trust that God’s Providential love for His people, His little ones, is as real today as it was on Calvary, as it was down through the centuries to the life and ministry of Vincent and Louise, and on to our own life and vocation. We must now, and as long as there is poverty and suffering in our world, begin to weave a compassionate response and God will give us the thread of His Providential love in support of our efforts. Let our love for God, for our neighbors, for the innocent children, for all life, be the gift of our Vincentian Hearts as we sit at the loom of our everyday life, beginning again and again to weave the face of the compassionate resurrected Christ through our engagement in our existing and yet to be realized ministries to the poor, the sick, the homeless and the immigrant. May this be our prayer for each of us gathered here today and for all of our Vincentian Family. Amen.

**Questions for Reflection**

1. How have I, in my Vincentian, Gospel call as a Ladies of Charity experienced the gift of God’s “thread” in carrying out my ministry?
2. Why did Vincent constantly counsel the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity on the Vincentian Fathers with the words, “First the heart, then the work.”
3. What similarities do I see in serving our sisters and brothers in need in Vincent’s day and in our own?