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2010

# Growth of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity

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## Growth of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity

In addition to the rule of life drawn up by Saint Vincent and Saint Louise for the new community, it became necessary to have a set of rules dealing with the principal governmental aspects of the Company. In our days, these are called “Constitutions,” but they went by various names in the time of the Founders. The name generally applied to them was “Statutes.”

The first series of Statutes was approved by the archbishop of Paris on 20 November 1646, and are published in Pierre Coste, ed., *Vincent de Paul. Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Marie Poole, ed., Hyde Park, NY, 2003, vol. XIII, document 146. A slightly revised version was likewise approved by the archbishop on 18 January 1655 (document 149), but the small changes appeared as footnotes to his publication of document 146. These latter are what have been called the “Primitive Statutes.”

After the death of the Founders, these Statutes received the approval of Clement IX acting through his legate, Cardinal de Vendôme, in 1668. The legate used the term Constitutions, not Statutes, but clearly he was referring to those revised Statutes of 1655. The effect of this papal approval was to remove the Daughters of Charity from direct dependence on the archbishop of Paris, an act that would have major consequences at the time of the French Revolution.

The first two successors of Saint Vincent, Fathers Alméras and Jolly, realized that although the Primitive Statutes were good and represented the thinking of the Founders, they were not as clear or as well organized as could be hoped for. One of the first things to be done was to separate the Rules from the Statutes. This was not as easy as it sounds, since the materials were often found together in the same paragraphs. Father Alméras and Sister Mathurine Guérin published the Rules in 1672, but it took several years to finish the publication of the Statutes.

As the superioress general, Jeanne Chauveau, described in a closing paragraph to their official publication, 11 March 1718, the work of Fathers Alméras and Jolly was completed by Father Bonnet. She concluded her explanation by writing: “... we have asked Monsieur Bonnet, our Most Honored Father and Superior, to sign them in his own hand and to seal then with his seal; and so he did.” These 1718 Statutes, then, became the official Statutes.

After the Revolution, the emperor Napoleon insisted that the Daughters of Charity, by far the largest congregation of Sisters in France, submit their Statutes to the State for examination and approval. His plan was to place all religious communities under the jurisdiction of local bishops. This led, unfortunately, to a schism among the Sisters, with some approving the new order of things and others clinging to their traditional Statutes. One of the causes of the split was that in the earliest Statutes, from 1646, Saint Vincent had placed the Company under the archbishop of Paris. The crucial wording is found in several paragraphs. One concerns elections: “This will take place in the presence of the priest whom the Archbishop will delegate to direct them.” (Coste, XIII, p. 134) As is well known, Saint Louise objected strenuously, and the 1655 revision, the one approved by the archbishop and the papal legate, changed the wording: “This will take place in the presence of the Superior General of the Mission, or of a Priest of the Mission who will be delegated by him for their direction.” (Coste, XIII, p. 134, note 2) The

second crucial change of text concerns obedience: “They will also be obedient, in what concerns their conduct, to the priest who will be named by the Archbishop to direct the Company.” (Coste, XIII, p. 135) The 1655 text reads, however: “They will also be obedient, in what concerns their conduct, to the said Director and Superior.” Others deal with the government of the Company.

Napoleon overcame the problem in 1809, he thought, by suppressing the Congregation of the Mission and imprisoning its vicar general, Dominique Hanon, at the time the head of the Congregation. Hanon had strenuously opposed Napoleon’s plans and worked to rally the Sisters to his side. At all events, with the fall of Napoleon and the restoration of the Congregation by Louis XVIII in 1816, the matter was put to rest. The Daughters of Charity continued with their revised Statutes as published by Father Bonnet in 1718. They would be replaced only with the publication of the first constitutions published as a result of the general assembly of 1954.

From this time, the Company distinguished carefully between Constitutions and Statutes. In general, the articles of the Constitutions are central to the life and organization of the Company. Their authentic interpretation belongs to the Holy See. To change them requires the approval of the superioress general and her council and the Vincentian superior general. They in turn submit them to the Holy See to approve any proposed changes, according to general Church law. Statutes, on the other hand, are of lesser importance and may be modified or repealed by a general assembly. Decrees are promulgated by a general assembly, and have the force of a norm until the following general assembly. These are explained in the Glossary of the current Constitutions and Statutes, *Given to God for the Service of the Poor*, 2004, pp. 195 and 203.

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January 2010  
Revised: October 2015

## Comparison of Texts

*Two texts are presented here in various forms taken from different rules for the sake of comparison:*

### **Blessing of the pastor**

1646: “When they are sent to any parishes, they will go to get the blessing of the Pastors, which they will receive kneeling. While they are in their parishes, they will show them all honor, respect, and obedience.”

1655: “When they are sent to any parishes, they will go to get the blessing of the Pastors, which they will receive kneeling. While they are in their parishes, they will show them all honor, respect, and obedience, with regard to the assistance of the sick.”

[Not in final Statutes of Bonnet, but moved to the Rules, ch. IV, 3:

“When they are sent to a parish to reside there and to serve the sick poor, the Sister-Servant accompanied by one of her Sisters, shall go to receive kneeling, the blessing of the pastor; and as long as they remain in the parish, they shall pay him all honor and respect, and even obedience, in the assistance of the sick; particularly with regard to the spiritual help they may afford them.”]

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### **The Assistant**

1646: “The second officer will be the Assistant of the Superioress, will act as her Councillor, and will represent her in her absence. Everyone will obey her as they would the Superioress, when the latter is absent.”

1655: [No changes]

1718: “29. The Assistant of the Superioress, who is the second officer, will represent her in her absence, and everyone will obey her as they would the Superioress herself if she were present. She [the Assistant] will faithfully give her information about the needs that she will notice in her Sisters. For this purpose, she will watch over them with special care.”

1954: “133. The Assistant replaces the Superioress General in her absence and, in case of death, until the elections. She will faithfully give information to the Superioress about all the needs that she will notice in the Company, the houses, and the Sisters, over whom she watches with special care.”

1975: “75. The Assistant General, elected from among the General Councillors, replaces the Superioress during her absence. If the office of the Superioress is vacant, the Assistant replaces her until the next general assembly. In that case, she becomes a major superior and possesses all the powers.”

2004: “C. 67 a. The Assistant General, elected by the General Assembly from among the General Councillors, replaces the Superioress General during her absence. If the office of Superioress General becomes vacant, she replaces her until the next Ordinary General Assembly.

“b. If the office of Assistant General becomes vacant, the Superioress General, with the consent of her Council, appoints a replacement from among the General Councillors; she remains in office until the next Ordinary General Assembly. After the appointment of the Assistant General, the procedure is begun for the appointment of a new General Councillor, who remains in office until the next Ordinary General Assembly.”