

## It's Never Too Late...

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For decades, religious communities have seen lay people commit themselves to living the charism of their congregations. The Sisters of Charity of Saint Louis who are present in 10 countries, entered this lay-empowerment movement in Canada in the 1980s. It was a bit later that they entered the movement in the “younger” countries where the pace is sometimes slower; however *it is never too late...* No, it is never too late to gather together lay delegates from eight countries.

### A Little Bit of History

Our congregation was founded in 1803 by a Parisian in Vannes, Brittany. Her name was Louise-Élisabeth de Lamoignon and she was to become the Countess Molé de Champlâtreux. The young wife and mother saw her life deeply shaken by a profound conversion in the midst of her years of happiness. Her life took a definitive turn at that time towards service to the poor and the destitute. A few years later, she experienced upheavals of another nature: the deaths of three of her young children, the tragic death of her father and the condemnation of her husband to the guillotine during the French Revolution. The religious vocation of Louise-Élisabeth grew thanks to the fact that she managed to forgive her country and because of her desire to live her trials and ordeals with heroic generosity.

Louise-Élisabeth left everything to go to Vannes in 1803. She understood that it was through love and forgiveness that she could best contribute to restoring her country...and by giving hope to youth without a future. At the beginning of the 19th century, the Church of France was struggling with the rise of anticlericalism. Ironically, this would contribute to the expansion of French communities outside France which turned out to be the case for us. In 1898, we departed France for England; in 1902, it was for North America. In 1910, we would go from Quebec to the United States and then to western Canada. In 1945, it would be to Haiti and then after Vatican II; it was to Mali, Senegal, Martinique and Mexico that we ventured. After the 1939–1945 war, the sisters in France responded to Madagascar's call.

### Helping One Another to Live the Charism

In most of the countries where we work, lay people gather around the Sisters to make a commitment to living the charism. Since the means available to fulfill the charism are unequal across continents, we have to help one another; thus the aim of the meeting that called lay delegates together in September 2016.

We have a well-structured training program in North America. However in other countries we want to act immediately to respond to the call of poverty and misery for action. That is what a Malagasy mother is doing; she has just begun her training as an associate and is already encouraging all her relatives to join her to help feed some forty poor people every week. Elsewhere, lay associates are more attracted by the young Louise-Élisabeth who struggled with suffering. If she found the strength to forgive and to work to rebuild the Church... then they too can share the same vision “*to be witnesses of the mercy of God.*”

## Where It All Began

It is never too early to bring together women and men from different cultures who share a common ideal. The international lay associate meeting in September brought together some people who have been committed for more than 20 years and others who are preparing for their first annual promise. We talked about prayer, the pledge of commitment, the mission, group facilitation, human growth and time management. In short, we touched on everything that presents challenges. This sharing in an atmosphere of multicultural prayer is precious for a congregation. With the sisters in charge of groups and overseeing delegates from their country, these committed lay persons have taken giant steps forward.

The proximity to Vannes is a particular advantage; the delegates can gather in the room of the foundress and taste the intimacy of the place. They walk in her footsteps on their way to the Cathedral while admiring the old ramparts or the narrow and picturesque streets, which date back to Roman or medieval times.

In Vannes, so much of what we see speaks to us about the woman who founded our Congregation. From our elder sisters and their anecdotes from an earlier day to the streets bearing our foundress name and the famous city gate of *Porte Saint-Vincent*, from where one catches sight of the *Port de Plaisance* and its beautiful marina. It is no longer the *Port de Commerce* of the early 19th century, which saw so many young girls spend their days begging or offering themselves to the passing sailors. Vannes is now a city that is modern and ancient, rich in souvenirs of all kinds. It is on this esplanade of the Port that more than 4,000 people participated in the beatification of Louise-Élisabeth on May 27, 2012.

## A Crazy Dream Come True

The 23 delegates to this September's session shared the same sentiments and the same desire "*to restore in mercy and justice the humanity wounded by evil and suffering.*" They are more determined than ever *to extend gestures of solidarity and sharing, hope and forgiveness* to those around them. They left the session re-energized by the words spoken in an atmosphere of freedom.

No, it is never too late to create these kinds of solid bonds that can be maintained through prayer, communications and by the proposals adopted at the end of the session: "*Hope, joy and confidence in the future! Our charism is alive and well and we feel like passing it on.*"