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In welcoming the Ladies of Charity, Bishop Oscar A. Solis of Salt Lake City said it was "so nice to see and be with women in our church who do works of charity to make present the love of God, especially to those who are in need."

"Your association gives a strong message of hope to our society that has grown cold and indifferent to the miseries of the poor and marginalized members of our society today," the bishop said.

"Thank you for your apostolate and works of love and charity to others enslaved by poverty and other struggles in their lives, who are left in the margins of our society," he added.

The Ladies of Charity of the United States of America, or LCUSA, is a member of the international group founded by St. Vincent de Paul in 1617.

It held its national assembly for the first time in Utah. About 150 women came from throughout the country for the Sept. 20-21 conference, which opened with a Mass. Solis' welcoming remarks came after Mass.

The Ladies of Charity has 6,400 members in the U.S. and 200,000 members worldwide in 54 countries. The members are lay women and men who "seek every opportunity to make Christ present by serving the material and spiritual needs of the sick, the poor and the marginalized of our society," states the organization's website, https://aic.ladiesofcharity.us.

Presiding at the opening Mass was Vincentian Father Richard Gielow, director of the Vincentian Parish Mission Center in Kansas City, Missouri, and national spiritual adviser to the LCUSA. Fr. J.J. Schwall, pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Salt Lake City, was the concelebrant.

"What the Ladies of Charity (have done) since the time of Vincent is fight for justice to allow peace in the people who had nothing, who didn't know where to go, didn't have anybody to speak for them," Gielow said in his homily. "The Ladies of Charity were founded to bring peace to their world. ... This assembly continues to be a beacon of hope, a ray of sunshine, for all those people who have none."

The first plenary speaker for the assembly was Sr. Margaret Keaveney, a Daughter of Charity. She is assistant to the president for mission, outreach and archives at St. Vincent's in Santa Barbara, California, which serves low-income families and seniors by providing affordable housing, early childhood education and other programs.

"Our loving God is pictured for us as a divine master weaver," she said, addressing the assembly's theme, "Begin to Weave and God Will Provide the Thread: Ladies of Charity in Action."

"We are his chosen disciples, and 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 burden of our downtrodden, forgotten, poverty-stricken sisters and brothers," Margaret said.

St. Vincent de Paul founded the first of the Confraternities of Charity while he was a parish priest at Chatillon-les-Dombes in France. Hearing about a local family who was ill, St. Vincent mentioned them in his homily, and the congregation responded with abundant aid. As a result, St. Vincent suggested the women in the area band together to serve the poor.

"He began to weave there. God had given him the thread" to begin a masterpiece "that is not yet completed (and) that would reveal in a zillion different ways the compassionate love of God for his people," Margaret said.

In a plenary address the next day, Sr. Paule Freeburg, a Daughter of Charity, the Western region spiritual adviser to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, focused her comments on St. Louise de Marillac, co-founder, with St. Vincent de Paul, of the Daughters of Charity. She was the Ladies of Charity's first spiritual moderator and is the patroness of Christian social work.

Born the illegitimate daughter of a French aristocrat, St. Louise was sent as a very young child to a monastery, where she received a classical education. When she was about 12, her father died, and she was sent to a boarding house, where she learned domestic skills. Both of these "served her well all her life," Paule said.

St. Louise was drawn to religious life but was denied entry to a convent, possibly because of her frail health. She entered into an arranged marriage and bore a son.

"We could probably see Louise's life as a series of doors closing and occasionally one opening," Paule said. "She was illegitimate, sent, sent again, refused, married, (had a) worrisome son, (dealt with) husband's illness, depression, guilt, unworthiness, doubts."

At one point, St. Louise considered leaving her husband and entering cloistered life but had the prompting from the Holy Spirit to stay, because she would be in a religious community "where there would be much coming and going," Paule said.

When St. Vincent became St. Louise's spiritual adviser, they didn't get along well at first, Paule said, quoting the correspondence between the two. "She found him a little rough around the edges, he found her rather scrupulous and demanding ... but as time went on we can watch these two become closer and closer ... and by the end of their lives you can see them as mutually respectful both in ministry and spirituality."

In her letters, St. Louise talked a lot about following the will of God, Paule said, and "God took the threads of her birth, her early life, her pain and insecurity, and wove a masterpiece. She is a model for all of us."

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(Mischel is editor of Intermountain Catholic, newspaper of the Diocese of Salt Lake City.)

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