



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Introduction

SOME SAINTS, although they lived perhaps centuries ago, are well known to us. Others are bound up inseparably with a great achievement in the Church in connection with which their names have become household words; it is impossible to think of theology, for example, without coupling it with the name of St Thomas Aquinas, or the apostolate among working-class boys without at once bringing to mind the name of St John Bosco. The corporal works of mercy, charitable undertakings of all sorts have, ever since the seventeenth century, been almost synonymous with the name of Vincent de Paul, which is perpetuated to this day by the Congregation of the Mission (the Vincentian Fathers) and the Sisters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul, founded by him, whose distinctive habit is known the world over. It is right that the Sisters of Charity should bear his name, for his was the first conception, his was the guiding hand through the first difficult years, his the heavy work and responsibility attending the foundation of any great undertaking especially one so novel as the Sisters of Charity in the century in which they came into being—to fill a need in the life of the Church.

Yet right as it is that Vincent de Paul's name should be held in honour in this connection, nevertheless one result has been that the name of the woman who was his right hand in the work has been largely overshadowed by his. How many who know the Sisters of Charity connect with them the name of St Louise de Marillac, the first to wear their habit, more than that indeed, their foundress and their mother?

Mgr Calvet's *Portrait* of Louise de Marillac shows her against the background of her times. He has already written the biography of St Vincent de Paul, a huge canvas which portrays Vincent, the man and the saint, as a national figure involved in all sorts of enterprises and affairs of state, but ever concerned first with the many undertakings of his charitable heart'. This later book is also a lifelike portrait, but it is rather a miniature and so it has the advantage that we can examine its subject's moral physiognomy, for all the features are painted in with deftness and clarity.

It is an unusual story that Mgr Calvet has to tell of the illegitimate daughter of an important family who became a saint. We follow her through the difficulties of her early years, increased by the death of her father when she was in her teens, and see her torn between her desire to become a Capuchin nun, with all the austerity that such a life would involve and the impossibility of realising her project on account of her poor health, and then as the wife of Antony Le Gras experiencing a married woman's trials with a sick husband on her hands whom she nursed devotedly.

On her husband's death in 1625 she came increasingly under Vincent's influence (she had first met him while her husband was alive) and under his direction was led gradually to organise charitable undertakings that he had founded to cope with a problem that was acute. The destitution resulting from the incessant wars, the care of orphans and foundlings and much else besides form part of the great charitable achievement of the seventeenth century that was Vincent de Paul's, and under him Louise de Marillac's.

Three things emerge very clearly from this admirable life-story. The first is the novel nature of the experiment undertaken by the two saints. In the seventeenth century the religious life for women meant a convent and enclosure together with solemn vows, and two previous attempts to found congregations of religious women without these safeguards had failed. Not very long beforehand St Angela Maid (1474-1540), the foundress of the Ursuline nuns, desired to inaugurate a congregation of women without habit, vows or other distinctive sign, to teach girls in their own homes; under the influences of St Charles Borromeo and subsequent papal legislation she was obliged to adopt the canonical safeguards then required of all nuns. St Francis de Sales, a near contemporary of Louise's, with the collaboration of St Joan Fremiot de Chantal, similarly intended the first Visitation nuns to be without enclosure, but was overruled. When Vincent and Louise, therefore, founded the Sisters of Charity as religious women without distinctive habit (they wore the peasant costume of their day) or enclosure, theirs was a considerable innovation; 'Your convent', said Vincent de Paul, 'will be the house of the sick; your cell a hired room; your chapel, a parish church; your cloister, the streets of the city or the wards of the hospital; your enclosure, obedience; your grill, the fear of God; your veil, holy modesty.'

Secondly, must be noticed the patience and care lavished on the undertaking, the training of the first sisters,



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Introducti...

by Javier F. Chento - <http://vincentians.com/blog/louise-de-marillac-a-portrait-introduction/>

preceded by the careful 'grooming' of Louise de Marillac herself at Vincent's hands. The work grew and prospered because it was built on solid foundations; risks were taken, of course, on occasion, in the carrying out of this or that charitable work that was urgently necessary, but they were calculated risks, run with the knowledge that heavenly help would be forthcoming in a work that was primarily for the glory of God and the good of others.

Lastly, and principally, what is especially noteworthy in this biography is the careful delineation of the growth in holiness of a woman who started her life under some disadvantages and who, we should say nowadays, probably suffered in her early years from the unresolved complexes caused by her disturbed childhood and adolescence. By the time that she came under the firm direction of Vincent de Paul she was beginning to find the way to the resolution of her psychological difficulties and he was able to guide her surely and patiently into calm waters, but the scars remained for a long time, perhaps even to the end, and it is the merit of Mgr Calvet's study that he in no way diminishes this side of the story.

It would be an exaggeration perhaps to say that the portrait is painted 'warts and all', but the human element is made sufficiently plain for us to discern wherein lay the heroism of the holiness that is so clearly depicted. The interrelation of body and soul, nature and grace, religion and daily life, are important factors in any biography; in the biography of a saint they would seem to be paramount, because unless proper account is taken of them we are presented with one of the stock figures which appear to have no connection with the world in which they lived and worked; we fail to see what made them what they were, what caused them to be saints. In reading Mgr Calvet's account of Louise de Marillac we are left in no doubt about this: the woman and saint both appear very clearly and we are able to discern without difficulty what may be called the constituents of her sanctity. And in Vincent's relations with her and the fascinating correspondence that passed between them, we catch a glimpse of the workings of grace in two souls; Vincent frequently the vehicle of grace for Louise, helping her, advising her and protecting her from the pitfalls of her temperament, restraining the impatience that she sometimes showed to go forward too rapidly, and calming her ever-recurring fears. But if Vincent helped Louise, there can be no doubt either that Louise helped Vincent on his own way heavenwards. The interplay of character and mind between two persons, particularly when they are bound, as were Vincent and Louise, by the bonds of affection and duty, is never all in one direction, and Louise's contribution, though less obvious, was considerable. She appears in these pages as a woman whose holiness was built on the trials and tribulations of a life of no ordinary circumstances, and who became a saint by following God's call to minister to his poor.

L. C. Sheppard