



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part I: The mystery of her ancestry and youth (5)

She passes through a crisis of depression

LOUISE was not plunged into this state of confusion and weakness all at once. She resisted temptations. She profited from her trials, striving to ground herself in humility and the thought of her own nothingness, seeking in reading and meditation a firm spiritual foundation for her life. Though we do not know in detail what they were, we are told that she had a considerable collection of books. She asked permission for herself and her husband to read the Bible in its unabridged form—a freedom which was in those days a privilege for the laity. She had also the joy of reading the *Treatise of the Love of God*, by St Francis de Sales, in all the freshness of its original text, in 1616. Her biographers affirm, without offering evidence, that she was acquainted with the author and that he visited her during one of her illnesses. This is very possible, in view of the close relations between Michel de Marillac and Francis de Sales. Whether or not Louise knew him personally, she had a warm admiration for him and a confident trust which amounted to veneration, as of a saint whom she had canonised for her own use.

We catch a glimpse of the habitual tendency of her thoughts from a few letters that we have, written to her at this time by Michel de Marillac. These letters are rather cool and detached, and as we read them we are astonished to find never a word of affection, never a word, nor any advice on some particular point or urgent matter. They allude occasionally to letters written by Louise to him, and apparently also to conversations. Michel preaches to her the Berullian doctrine of self-abnegation and humility in terms a little stilted, but undoubtedly earnest.

Paris, 6th March, 1620

Mademoiselle,

. . . For what remains, Mademoiselle, it is good to learn from experience that God is not attached to our own plans and propositions, and that those souls find him everywhere who seek him according to the manner in which he wills to communicate himself; and not according to their own conception of the manner which would be useful and profitable to themselves, for very often such usefulness imagined by the mind is no more than the satisfaction of their own feelings. But the poor soul which knows itself to be such, and accepts that knowledge in peace, looks to God for whatever comes, without expecting his will to be done in this manner or in that. Such a soul is content to submit itself to God, and does not desire to prescribe to him in what manner he shall lead her. She accepts what comes, making use of all things with humility, gratitude and profit, remaining at all times poor in herself, content to do the best she can, without allowing herself to grieve for what she lacks, or for things that are not within her power. And to judge of a thing, whether or no it be within our power, we must put our trust in the experience gained from several attempts, and not in the promptings of our own inclination.

I pray that God may give you the grace to profit from this, and to advance every day in his fear and love.

Your very humble and affectionate servant,

DEMARILLAC.

Marillac is probably dealing here with scruples and anxieties with which Louise was beset and haunted; he probes the recesses of her conscience, and excites in her a sense of sin to which she was in any case only too liable. She stood more in need of encouragement than of humbling.

Paris, 12th August 1621

Mademoiselle,

The same principle which has for a long time now obsessed you in meditation about yourself causes your thoughts, in my opinion, to fall habitually into a state of dejection, because they are concerned with self-scrutiny,



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in the attempt to acquire the knowledge of self which will conduce to humility. It is not that I condemn these thoughts, which are good and useful, but they are not at times in season. It is always the same thing: too much preoccupation with one's formation of oneself; inability to bear this dereliction and privation of spirit; the inability, as you say, to arrive at self-abasement unless you go in your own way. Now, to want to attain self-abasement by one's own efforts is an act of power and capacity, and a soul entertaining such a desire cannot at the same time be regarding itself as poor: she is attempting to do a thing to which no one compels her, and a thing, moreover, which she must know she cannot do of herself. Now, to drive oneself into doing a thing presupposes that one believes oneself capable of doing it.

It is therefore more useful to the soul to recognise that it is still poor in the faculty of self-knowledge, and to set a proper value on itself: not at all to lament its own poverty, as you are doing, but, confessing itself to be poor, to ask of God true poverty of spirit, and to co-operate faithfully and with profit with the means God gives for acquiring it, such as: when we commit a fault, to draw from it a knowledge of those dispositions of the soul which have produced it; or, when we see good in another, we can acknowledge that we ourselves are less than he; in a word, the soul faithful to God has, at every moment, indications which will humble her, if only she is in a state of simplicity and poverty, knowing and acknowledging that she possesses nothing, and that she has not even a true knowledge of her own poverty! And being thus poor, she remains a beggar before God, who alone can do all things for her. He recalls her to knowledge, awakens her to the memory of all the good to be done, all the evil to be fled, and the more she strips herself of her own carefulness and activity, the more clearly she will see what to do, and what to leave undone. Let her business therefore be with God! Let her seek, and let her love, Jesus Christ! Let her bind herself to him! Let her honour his life, his labours, and his sufferings. For all that remains, the simple fidelity of the soul adhering to God, who lacks nothing of which she can feel the need, or to which she can return, will ensure that she is sufficiently supplied.

I commend myself to your good prayers, and am, Mademoiselle, your very humble and affectionate servant,

DEMARILLAC.

Pierre Camus, Bishop of Belley, friend and disciple of Francis de Sales, was more ready to help her. A nephew of Antoinette, her father's second wife, he had met Louise and treated her with affection and familiarity, calling her 'my sister', or 'my daughter'; while Marillac was never more than a spiritual adviser, Camus was a true director. To him also Louise had confided those feelings which now so completely dominated her: the obsession with the obscurity of her birth, her consciousness of sin, her desire to renew her general confession. He exhorts her to confidence and joy.

(1622 ?)

Mademoiselle, my dear sister,

Yours of 1st December only came into my hands on 15th January. I am answering it today, the loth, as I had no opportunity to do it earlier. I sympathise with you in the inertia of mind in which you find yourself on account of the illness of your dear husband. Come, then, here is your cross, and why should I be sorry to see it on the shoulder of a daughter of the Cross? To carry it well, you do not lack skill, nor counsel, nor books, nor mind. God desires also that you should not lack the courage.

You are always wanting to run to a general confession as the jubilee comes round. How many times have I said to you: Enough of these general confessions, for your heart! Ah, no! The jubilee, for us, does not come round again for that purpose, but to give us occasion to rejoice in God our Saviour, and to say: *jubilemus Deo, salutari nostro*. Oh, may God bless the paternal heart of M. de St Sauveur. Greet him from me, my dear sister, and also the dear husband and the dear little son, for I belong without division to you all,

your very humble servant,

signed : J.-P., *ev. de Belley*.



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20th January, at Belley.

Greet also Mme Menard, mother of a good daughter, and daughter of a good mother, for I know she denies she is a lady of rank.

Yet Camus, though a man of fine mind as well as a holy bishop, had perhaps not sufficient forcefulness to restrain this woman on the dangerous slope down which she was slipping in consequence of self-questioning, self-analysis and self-contempt.

The crisis was deadly. It was precipitated by the illness of Antoine Le Gras. What this illness was, we do not know, but it lasted a long time—four or five years—and its first effect was to make him very irritable, a difficult patient. It was a heavy cross for Louise, and slowly the thought suggested itself to her that it was intended as a penalty. She was being punished because she had broken her vow to become a Capuchin sister, and therefore—so faulty is the logic of temptation—she should leave her husband, the father of her child, so as to enter into the spirit of her vow. This thought tormented her. She applied for help to the Visitation nuns, who were dear to her for the sake of Francis de Sales. The Mother Superior, Catherine de Beaumont, knowing her agony of mind, wrote to console her, inviting her to accept this sorrow as coming from the hand of God.

Vive Jésus!

I sympathise greatly with your sorrow, my very dear daughter, but all the same, I have no fear, but rather the hope that the hand which has inflicted the wound will work the cure. O God! Be therefore very gentle and courageous, to support with patience what is given you with so great a love. Do you think that God would make you suffer for any other reason than that you might acquire merit? We must leave the 'why?' with him, for it is no part of our business to know it, but to be very submissive to his good pleasure. Be so then, my dear daughter, and pay less attention to what you yourself are feeling and suffering; but unite your will to that of our heavenly Father, that you may do and suffer whatever pleases him; then after that, do everything you can for the health of your dear husband, leaving the outcome to the good pleasure of God. No, I have no news at all of M. Vincent. I pray God that he will strengthen you, and aid you with his grace. Pray for me also, who am to go on a little journey for perhaps three weeks. A Dieu, my dear daughter. May God be the joy and repose of your heart. I am, in him, unchangeably yours. Amen.

Our community will pray especially for you and for all. This Saturday, at noon, pausing only to bid you goodnight.

What should have been pointed out to her by them all, was the absurd element in this spiritual grief of hers. To reason with her about her obsscssion was only to strengthen it. Her directors were no use to her. And as one aberration brought another in its train, she formed the opinion that she was too much attached to her director, and must leave him, to follow for the future her own unsupported judgment. The moment thus to deprive herself of all help was ill-chosen. She proceeded to devise a most singular method of coming to terms with her vow. If her husband should die, she would take a vow of perpetual widowhood! So here was another vow! Did Camus advise it, or did he acquiesce in it for the sake of peace? There is little to admire in it. Assuredly, it is evidence of a great love of the religious life, and of a high degree of detachment. But a right-minded Christian woman who is married, and whose husband is lying ill in the neighbouring room, does not dream of taking a vow of widowhood; she pushes open the door, and goes in to nurse her husband, so as to keep him alive. To make plans in view of his death is merely repulsive.

A ridiculous remedy will not cure a stubborn complaint, a disorder caused by a series of preposterous deductions. Louise was whirled about like a bird tossing helplessly in a storm. She fell from the sky and entered the night. She has described it herself in a few colourless words. I quote from the manuscript the complete text of her account, as other biographers have given it in fragments only.

Feast of St Monica (May 4) 1623.

God gave me the grace to make a vow of widowhood, if he should call away my husband. On Ascension Day following, I fell into a great depression of mind which lasted until Pentecost, because of the doubt which I had,



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whether I ought to leave my husband, as I desire to do in order to make atonement for my first vow, and to have more liberty to serve God and my neighbour. I also doubted whether the duty which I had to my director was an impediment to my taking another, for I felt myself obliged to leave him. I was also in great distress on account of a doubt as to the immortality of the soul.

These three uncertainties gripped my soul with torments such as, it seems to me, cannot be imagined.

Abandoned by God, she came to doubt herself, to doubt the immortality of the soul and the very existence of God. She passed the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost, 1623, in a sort of opaque and desperate atheism. All the trials of her childhood and youth were poured into this deadly crucible, at the bottom of which she found nothing but despair.

The violence of this earthquake need not astonish us. Such crises are frequently met with in the lives of the saints and persons of great spirituality, in the first stage of their ascent towards perfection. At about this same time Vincent de Paul was going through a similar trial, into which he had been drawn by charity; he also came to doubt the existence of God, to such an extent that his apostolic work was impeded. Francis de Sales had known this trouble in his youth. Some years later, Olier, another friend of M. Vincent, was to pass through a long trial of the same kind, in the course of which he seemed for long periods to be stupefied. Fen6lon has put on record the genuine mental depression he endured at the time he entered into the mystic state. We may say that God puts to the test those who engage themselves to serve him by withdrawing from the crowd, and that he inflicts on them a harsh and grievous psychological trial, which will become one source of their fruitful activity.

From this pit of despair she called upon a God in whom, so she imagined, she no longer believed. She also invoked the assistance of Francis de Sales, who had but lately died (1622) and who had once consoled her in a time of physical sickness. All at once as in a dream, everything was changed: she felt a great calm. Light flooded her—light bringing faith in God and in Jesus Christ.

‘On the feast of Pentecost I was in St Nicolas-des-Champs during Holy Mass, and all in an instant my mind was cleared of these doubts, and I was made to realise that I must remain with my husband, and that a time would come when I should be in a position to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and that this would be done with persons where other women did the same.

‘I then understood myself to be in a place for the relief and assistance of my neighbours, but I could not understand how this was being done, because these neighbours were coming and going.

‘I also understood that I was to be in peace as to my director, and that God would give me one, whom he caused me then to see, as I supposed, for I felt a repugnance about accepting him, but all the same I consented; and it seemed to me that this was because I was not to make this change just yet.

‘My third burden was taken from me by the assurance that I felt in my mind, that it was God who was teaching me these things, and that since there was a God I ought not to be doubtful about the other things. At that time, the doubt as to immortality was leading me to disbelieve in Divinity.

‘I have always believed that I received this grace through the blessed Monseigneur of Geneva, because I had greatly desired, before his death, to communicate these troubles to him, and since then I have felt towards him a great devotion, and I have received through him many graces. At that time I had some matter about which I sought his advice, but I cannot now remember what it was. This happened on the feast of Pentecost, 1623, in the church of St Nicolas-des-Champs, during the Mass.’

It was indeed the descent of the Holy Ghost. Louise de Marillac was quite overwhelmed by the experience, of which she retained a memory which became a part of her profoundest being. She ever afterwards had a deep devotion to the holy week between Ascension and Pentecost, and an attentive and tender worship of the Holy Spirit.

From this time, she was troubled no more on the score of her vows, but devoted herself to the care of her



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husband, who was worn out by long suffering. She had the consolation of seeing him become calmer, more resigned, and that her presence beside him counted for something. There is a grace for the sick in exercising charity towards them. Antoine Le Gras died on 21st December, 1625. Her grief for him was sincere. She has given expression to it, in words which cannot disguise what she felt, in a letter to Pere Hilarion Rebour.

‘Very Reverent Father,

Sicen you wish to know what graces our good Lord bestowed on my late husband, when I have said that it is impossible for me to make them all known, I will tell you that for a long time now, by the mercy of God, he no longer had any affection for those matters which can lead into mortal sin, and had a very great desire to live devoutly. Six weeks before his death he had a burning fever which put his mind in great danger, but God made apparent his power over nature, and restored calm. In gratitude for this grace, he resolved to serve God all his life. He scarcely slept at all at night; yet such was his patience that those who were with him were not in the least inconvenienced. I believe that in that last illness, God desired him to become a sharer in the pains of his own death; for he suffered in the whole of his body, and lost all his blood, while his mind was almost always occupied in meditation on the Passion. Seven times he lost blood from the mouth, the seventh time ending his life upon the instant. I was alone with him, to help him on this important journey, and he evidenced so much devotion, that he made us understand to his last breath this his mind. was attached to God. He could never say more to me than: “Pray God for me, I can pray no more”, words which are for ever engraved upon my heart. I beg you to remember him whenever you say Compline. He had so special a devotion to this Office, that he scarcely ever omitted to say it daily.’

Camus also gave her direction at intervals and now he wrote her, first the usual letter of consolation that every Christian heart expects, and then, since her reply showed that she had found no peace in her widowhood, he wrote her another letter of comfort. This second letter is singular, since it says in effect: ‘You wanted to be a widow. You are a widow. What more do you want?’

My dear daughter, my dear sister,

The letter which I have received from you by the hands of M. Chappe makes mention of two letters written by you. Of these, I have only seen one, which appears to have been written since the affliction of your widowhood. Now, my dear sister, I do not see why your mind is so troubled, and believes itself to be in shadows and abandonment. Why? You are no longer divided; now you belong wholly to the celestial Bridegroom, you have nothing now that is of the earth. You are resolved with all your mind to desire no other but him, and now you are astonished that he should have broken your bonds asunder and that you owe him a sacrifice of praise. O daughter of little faith, what do you fear? I must say to you what our Lord said to Mary on the resurrection of Lazarus. If you had more firmness of purpose, you would see the glory of God upon you. Yes, indeed! It is a thing I do not see clearly, but I know it for a certainty.

I am, Mademoiselle, your very humble servant.

26th March (1626)

The something more that Louise desired, and which Camus did not understand, was an escape from this universe in which she was stifling, and to be cured of her depression.