



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part I: The mystery of her ancestry and youth (6)

A slow cure

BUT I have anticipated. When Camus wrote this consoling letter—which was a little beside the mark—he was no longer the actual director of Louise de Marillac. The director introduced by Providence in the vision in the church of St Nicolas-des-Champs had appeared on the scene. This was Vincent de Paul, and he had actually been put in touch with his penitent by Camus himself. Camus was now obliged to reside in his episcopal city of Belley—a sad place of exile, as he called it. Deprived of the two great Paris pulpits he had so much loved, he well knew that he would also have to give up spiritual direction. To take his place in the direction of Louise, he made choice of Monsieur Vincent, whom his friend, Francis de Sales, esteemed as a true man of God.

The first meeting of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac was an event of incalculable significance. It brought about a revolution in the charitable activity of women, which from that time forth combined the life of perfection as lived by the cloistered nun with the life of activity in the world and literally, in the open air. This new form of charitable work took hold once and for all of the public spirit in France and thereafter throughout the world; it focused attention on the unfortunate and the sick, from which emerged the modern forms of social institution. One fact is indisputable. The world of today, where cruelty is so common in public conduct, dare not disdain the poor, and public men now make open profession of honouring the human dignity of the unfortunate and the weak. This is Christ's teaching put into action and is the result of Vincentian charitable works which are what they are because Louise de Marillac put her hand to them.

At first there were many difficulties to be overcome. Monsieur Vincent was reluctant to undertake spiritual direction which deflected him from his own vocation of the parochial mission. He knew from experience how burdensome could be the conscience of a woman of society. Madame de Gondi had done everything possible to persuade him that he ought to remain close to her to assist her in dying, which might occur at any moment, and she had said that he would be responsible for her damnation if she died alone and away from him. But he was reluctant to tie his hands in this way. Louise, for her part, did not feel drawn towards this rough, cold, worn-looking priest, a man far removed from the aristocratic polish and the radiant goodness of Camus and Francis de Sales. But both were very soon conscious of the need each had for the other, for a work as yet uncertain but which, as year followed year, would become more definite. Monsieur Vincent's devotion was entire and unwearied, as every moment and in every detail, for thirty-six years. As for Louise, her confidence in him was absolute, without shadow of doubt, and her submissive obedience to him knew no restriction. On both sides and in both hearts there was a clear-sighted affection, naive in its intensity, the very ideal of that pure friendship between two beings with whom God always makes a third.

Louise had first to pass through a period of uncertainties, of groping, retracing of steps, the nursing and healing of those old wounds of *her* spirit which had re-opened. First of all material questions had to be settled. The long illness and the unsatisfactory stewardship of her husband had almost ruined the family. Monsieur Gadder owed her a substantial sum: but she could not obtain payment. She was in fact once again almost reduced to living on her two pensions, which were small enough. She therefore gave up living at the Hotel du Marais, which she decided to make over to her son, and retired to a modest apartment in the Saint-Victor district, which brought her very close to the College des Bons Enfants, where Monsieur Vincent had just started the 'Mission', and also to that great group of Parisian seventeenth-century schools and colleges, where her son, still backward and difficult, would be able to make his studies.

We can form some impression of what we may call her years of widowhood (1625-1629) from the few letters out of her correspondence with Monsieur Vincent which have been preserved. Of these the greater part, but not all, have now been published.

She manifests great impatience and would like to undertake work of some kind, but does not know what the work should be. Her director restrains her, moderating and calming her impulsiveness. This was always his way, to transpose to the supernatural plane the maxim, 'Wait and see'. Let her first work upon herself and put a brake



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upon her eagerness; let her take account of her errors when she has detected them, and remove their cause; let her live her life of widowhood to the full—for she had renewed, immediately after the death of her husband, her vow of widowhood.

Here then she lived in her apartment, attended by a single servant girl, whom she desired to be pious and silent. She had wanted to live alone, yet she always felt the oppression of solitude, and the sense of obscurity which goes with it and holds so many dangers. She found a refuge in her director and attached herself to him as to a saviour. She was able to see him frequently, since he lived close at hand. But he was fully occupied with his country mission in the environs of Paris. He was often away evangelising some country district belonging to the Gondi family, and his absences were long. Louise was desperate, driven to distraction. To Calms, bishop of Belley, who continued to be a friend and close confidant, though at a distance, she made known the troubles of her mind, only to receive from him a somewhat sharp reprimand.

‘Pardon me, my very dear sister, if I tell you that you are inclined to attach yourself a little too much to those who direct you and you lean on them a little too heavily. Behold, Monsieur Vincent is now eclipsed, and Mlle Le Gras is out of humour, she has lost her bearings and is bewildered. It is very necessary to see God in our guides and directors and to look at them as they are in God; but sometimes it is necessary to look at God only, for he can cure our paralysis and other disorders without the help of man and without any new immersion. As to your retreat, take advice about it from some good spiritual father such as Pere Menard of the Oratory, or of Reverend Mother Magdalen, or else of Mother Superior of the Visitation, and then go to your retreat with confidence. It is not, dear soul, that it is burdensome to me to guide and counsel you: alas! no. On the contrary, I hope that by doing as I say you will raise me up to heaven, where your example stimulates me more than my advice can help you to find the way there. But it is in this spirit that my dear Mlle Le Gras, whom I esteem so highly and who seems to me to be so enlightened and so strong, should abide. I do not care to see in her these little weaknesses, nor these little clouds upon her spirit.

26th July.

Camus is ready to set her an example in detachment and is prepared to send her back if necessary to Monsieur Vincent himself:

My daughter, it is not for love of you that I go tomorrow to Montmartre, nor for Mlle Chaundlin’s good girl, whom I chose yesterday, but only to have the pleasure of waiting upon Monsieur Vincent in his own house; and I believed it possible that he would not be there or that you should not wish to let us return, just our two selves, on foot as far as Saint-Lazare, I would not wish to go. Let me know, Mademoiselle, your resolve; it will be the stronger when I am with you, that resolve of yours.

With her new director Louise was more reserved, but she complained of being neglected and miserable.

5th June, 1627.

Monsieur,

I hope that you will pardon the liberty that I take in communicating to you the impatience of my mind, as much for the long interval that has passed as for apprehension about the future, and not to know to what place you are going when you leave the place where you are. It is true, Father, that the thought of the matter which is taking you away does a little to sweeten my sadness, but that does not prevent the days from sometimes seeming like months to me in my present idle condition. However, I desire to await in peace the hour of God and I recognise that it is only my unworthiness which postpones it. . . .

Monsieur Vincent did not want to be harsh with her or push her along too fast. He apologised for having gone away without telling her, to save her grief at seeing him go so suddenly. But it is evident that his strategy was deliberate, to make her get used to the guidance of her own life, and to putting herself completely in the hands of Providence.



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The time had come when, if she were to be fit to undertake in the future tasks which might be tough and heavy, she must form in herself a robust and virile spirit free from womanly softness. He rebuked her constant agitation about her son. 'If you are a woman of spirit, you will rid yourself of your little diversions and motherly sensitivities. I have never seen a mother who was more a mother than you. In no other respect are you so much a woman as in this.' The word *amusements*, which Monsieur Vincent here uses, is a little hard, but he was to soften its force in later years by the solicitude he himself displayed for the apathetic and unstable Michel.

Her daily occupations were those of a lady of rank who was escaping from the world to train herself for Heaven. She attended to her household duties, received and paid a few infrequent visits, prayed and meditated, and 'amused' herself according to her tastes and aptitudes. She painted watercolour studies of sacred subjects and, now that she had the leisure, took up painting in oil. It is probably to this period that we may attribute her large oil paintings, of which the best known and best authenticated is the *Seigneur de la Charity*. She painted it at this time, between 1625 and 1628. It represents Christ, the Lord of Charity, who loves mankind and commands men to love one another and to relieve the wretched. The workmanship is robust, if a little immature, and the expression of the features of an imperious sweetness. One detail in this picture has given rise to a controversy which has not yet been satisfactorily settled: in place of the heart of flesh, the heart is in some way luminous, a kind of stain of fire beneath the linen robe. This feature has led some to believe that Louise had some conception of the devotion to the Sacred Heart, as did St Jean Eudes, before the revelation to St Margaret Mary. This is not very likely. Neither in her recorded words nor in her writings do we find any trace of this particular devotion. But it is certainly noteworthy that, by a pious intuition, she should have had the idea of representing Christ's love for men by the luminous transparency of his heart.

She did some sewing and knitting for the poor, and Monsieur Vincent levied from her a contribution, just as he did from Mlle Du Fay: send three shirts to Mlle De Lamoignon; five or six shirts for Palaiseau... She worked at religious ornaments, made vestments for the chapel at St Lazare. Monsieur Vincent sent her his thanks—perhaps he realised how much she had once needed tenderness—in exquisite words which must have touched her to the heart.

The grace of our Lord be with you for ever.

This note has three purposes: to greet you, to thank you for this very beautiful and comfortable frontal which your charity has sent to us. Yesterday it overwhelmed my heart with joy to see your heart therein, as I entered the chapel, all of a sudden, not knowing that the frontal was there; my joy lasted all yesterday and I feel it still with an inexplicable tenderness which arouses in me several ideas; if God sees fit, I shall be able to tell you what these ideas are, being content meanwhile to tell you that I beg of God to adorn your soul with his perfect and holy love, since you thus adorn his house with so many beautiful vestments. . . .

This is not his usual tone. Monsieur Vincent was affectionate, but reserved and serious even in his smiles. One of the erasures in a letter written by him shows us both the sensitivity of his heart and the resourcefulness of his pedagogy. What he had written was: 'I am, with all the tenderness of my affection, in the love of our Lord, your . . .'; he has scratched out 'with all the tenderness of my affection', it remains legible, but is compensated for by the erasure which re-establishes the spiritual tone.

In this sort of life, spiritual work becomes a necessity. Always impatient, her mind still full of complications, Louise shut herself up in a rule of life and a multitude of pious practices with not the slightest place for personal liberty or for that spiritual imagination which is so refreshing to the human spirit. Her rule is a model of mechanical living, carefully contrived. From five in the morning—soon she was to make it from four in the morning—until eight in the evening, every hour, every quarter hour, became a pigeon-hole into which was inserted a prayer, a meditation, some pious practice, activities which varied according to the day of the week. Into this framework—and with how many difficulties—are inserted the religious exercises proper to the nine or ten confraternities to which she has given her name, and acts of piety for the satisfaction of her personal devotion, such as the thirty-three acts of piety which she had devised in honour of the thirty-three years of the life of our Lord. The object of a rule of life is to sustain and strengthen the will, not to confine it in an iron collar; but this woman, without the protection of the enclosure of a convent, without the aid of conventual discipline, is always the victim of scruples, which add their weight to that of the law. Other biographers of Louise de Marillac have admired this heroism; I cannot do so, since



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it does not lead her to the joy that should be found in love.

Monsieur Vincent did not launch a frontal attack, but rallied her gently about her over-eager disposition, begging her not to load herself with rules and practices and not to scruple to omit some of those which she had laid down for herself. He was also at pains to moderate her austerities, her disciplinary practices, and her fasting, which would only have ended by ruining a health already delicate. He begged her to take care of herself so that she could be of service later. 'Go patiently, go prudently, be as happy as you can.'

This was what she lacked most. She knew nothing of joy. Since infancy nothing had caused her spirit to expand—neither marriage nor motherhood had brought her true happiness, and her religion was no better than the rest. She was sad and depressed; she lived by rigid discipline to an heroic degree, yet she was sad: a subtle form of neurasthenia had imprisoned her in its grip.

She was very anxious to escape from this frustrated state and do something. But what could she do ? Enter a convent ? Monsieur Vincent did not push her in that direction. He was waiting for circumstances which could be taken as signs of the will of God. These signs soon came. Louise had noted the direction taken by Monsieur Vincent's Mission, which tended always to the relief of the sufferings of the poor through local Charities. It was to this way of serving the poor that she came to devote her life. Her decision was taken and she told him of it. Here at last was the sign which they had both sought for so long. Monsieur Vincent was overjoyed:

1628(?)

Yes, at last, my dear Demoiselle, I sincerely desire it; why not? Since our Lord has given you this holy desire.

Will you therefore communicate tomorrow, and prepare yourself for the salutary self-examination which you suggest, and after that you will commence the holy exercises which you have drawn up for yourself. I cannot express to you how ardently my heart desires to see you and to know how this thing has come to pass in your heart, but I wish to mortify this desire in myself for the love of God, with which love I also desire that your heart should be wholly occupied. Now, I can imagine that the words of the Gospel for today must have touched you very much. In this way they are always present to the loving heart which loves to perfection. Oh, what a beautiful tree must you appear today to be, in the eyes of God, since you have produced such fruit! May you for ever more be a tree of beauty, a tree of life, producing the fruits of love, and may I be so too, in this same love.

V.D.