Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part I: The mystery of her ancestry and youth (7)

Journeyings for Charity

Her new life began with a retreat; its framework and the subjects for prayer were set down by her director. Louise had only to follow the lines laid down by him and to give him an account of her progress everyday. He was anxious to know whether it was indeed God who had spoken and he wanted her to be quite sure of herself. As with every other retreat prepared by Monsieur Vincent, these conferences recalled the retreatant to the fundamentals of Christianity: imitation of the life of Christ, submission to the will of God, an active struggle with self-love; with the most concise of resolutions, kept well within what was possible. The retreatant faithfully wrote down the course of her meditations and the 'light' that she received in making them. She had done this throughout her life on her two retreats each year, at Advent and Pentecost. The Daughters of Charity have preserved these intimate records. Unfortunately, few of the notes bear any indication of the date; others are dated only approximately. But they form a treasury of spiritual writing to which I shall return in a later chapter, since they should not be regarded as applicable only to the year 1625 or 1629. The effusion of grace was not limited to one outpouring: it had been sufficient to the occasion, so that the retreatant felt herself well armed for her new way of life. Louise was about to emerge from her solitude. She was to engage in personal activity, to assume responsibilities; and she would find in them what she had sought: the healing of that malady which had afflicted her from birth. She was at last on the point of attaining self-realisation and expansion of mind and spirit.

Monsieur Vincent had wound up all his country missions in order to concentrate upon establishing 'the Charity' in Paris. Before, he had preached the Gospel; now he set about practising it. He sent out a summons to the ladies of the aristocracy living in the parish, to women of the middle class and to any working-class wives and girls who were better ofT than their neighbours. He invited them to form an association for the regular care of the sick and assistance of the poor. Every form of misery was to be solaced on the spot by this union of all social classes in one Christian community.

Years before, in 1617, while working at Chatillon-lcs- Dombcs, Monsieur Vincent had drawn up the Rule for the first of his Charities. It is a monument of tenderness and good sense, in which everything is foreseen, yet which leaves the way open for future development and adaptation. The highly technical details keep a manner and tone which arc maternal:

'She who is on duty for the day', says the Rule, 'will bring in the dinner and carry it to the sick; as she enters, she will greet the patient cheerfully and charitably. She will set the bed-table over the bed, and put a cloth on the table, with a platter, a spoon and bread; she will wash the hands of the patient, and say grace; she will pour soup into a bowl and put meat on a plate, arranging everything on the said bed-table. She will then charitably invite the patient to cat, for the love of Jesus and his holy Mother; and she will do all things lovingly, as though for her own son, or rather for God, who will accept as done to himself the good she docs to the poor. She will address to him in this sense some few words concerning our Lord, seeking to cheer him, if he be very depressed; she will sometimes cut up his meat for liim, and pour out his drink; and having settled him down to liis meal, if he have someone else at hand, she will leave this patient, and go on her way, to find another to be likewise treated; remembering always to begin with those that arc attended and to end with those who are alone, so that she may remain with these for a longer time.'

The Charities had multiplied under his hands in the country districts round about Paris. In the early stages development had been rapid, but now there was falling away here and there. Each Charity was introducing methods of its own and too much diversity was ruining the very spirit of the foundation. It had become necessary to visit the Charities, to institute a strict enquiry, to reform and to correct. The Charities had come into being: and now it was Charity that had to be defended.

'Go then, as from God', was the mandate given to Louise de Marillac. She left Paris in May 1629.

It was a strange undertaking for a woman of society. Accompanied by one of her friends or by a servant girl, she

went at her own expense, by the public coach, facing all the uncertainties and hazards of the road, getting down at the roadside inns like any other traveller. But Louise went farther afield than other travellers—into the hamlets and hovels away from the main roads. When, because of the poor roads, she could no longer go by coach she would take to horseback and go on. Her personal luggage was of the lightest, but her large wicker basket was stufTcd with linen, clothing, medicines, sedatives and comforts. It was her happiness to be able to 'refresh*, with a clean shirt, some badly neglected invalid and give him a little of the joy which is felt by the disinherited when they receive something 'extra* and unexpected.

Upon arrival in the villages she would put up at the hostelry, seek out the members of the Charity, call a meeting in one of their houses, and see how things were with them. Here her natural aptitudes, developed by her years with 'the poor Demoiselle' and by her responsibilities in her husband's home, at last found their outlet. The records taken during these visits have been preserved. They arc objective and precise. This particular Charity has a 'reserve capital' of no more than three ecus; that one has incurred debts; here, there arc six sheep and eight lambs; elsewhere, there is no regular visiting of the sick; in another place, the Daughters themselves are becoming lax about their spiritual duties; here and there, rivalries and jealousies among the Daughters arc spoiling everything.

The enquiry completed, Louise issued directives. Then, if possible, she gathered the women and girls together again, for an exhortation to piety and mutual love. One of her greatest concerns was to know whether there was any woman in the village who could teach children to read; if there was nobody who could undertake it, Louise would take steps to provide someone. In her eyes this elementary education was part of the duty of charity. Within four years, Louise visited in this way all the Charities in the environs of Paris, travelling during the winter months as well as in the dry season. Montmirail, Asnieres, St Cloud, Villepreux, St-Germain, Vemeuil were all inspected and invigorated. Then she went further afield to Beauvais, to the villages of Champagne and into Burgundy. She arranged and rearranged, she soothed, she imparted a new zeal. The information she brought to Monsieur Vincent was of inestimable value to him, for he was often ignorant of how things had gone since his departure; and of course all this was of the greatest practical use to Louise herself as her work took shape. She was touching the depths of human wretchedness and of the resources of charity, the two things most essential to all active love, all fruitful work for mankind.

In the acquisition of this knowledge Louise had to walk upon thorns. She was not long in meeting those who turned a jaundiced eye upon good works. In one place some public official—the village constable, as he might be today— denounced her to the authorities as 'engaging in subversive activities'; in more than one parish the curate complained that this woman, who went about catechising the girls, was usurping his own functions! At Chilons the Bishop himself was inclined to be hostile to this woman, who had descended upon his diocese like a delegate whose mandate, at any rate in matters spiritual, he was resolved not to recognise. Monsieur Vincent advised Mile de Marillac always to give a frank account of herself and her mission and if her explanation was not accepted, to withdraw with good grace and go back home. For the rest, none of her travelling experience was wasted and after the adventure with the Bishop of Chalons, preliminary negotiations were regularly opened with the commissaries, bishops and parish clergy before the launching of any new mission.

Trials of this kind were scarcely to be avoided: any missionary with a novel appeal will meet both with defiance and with enthusiasm. It sometimes happened that when Louise de Marillac ended a mission she would be led out of the place in procession and acclaimed as a benefactress sent by God. We may well believe that her spirit, as yet lacking in this kind of experience, was highly sensitive to these variations in public opinion, just as her poor constitution was ill-adapted to the sudden changes of temperature so characteristic of the lie de France. The lash of icy winds reduced her face to plainness, and she had to make up her mind to wear a mask for the protection of her skin, such as the great ladies of the day wore to make themselves attractive. This mask or veil was indispensable to her on her journeys, and it inspired the distinctive feature of the habit of the Daughters of Charity, the stiff linen hood which was later substituted for the original pcasant-girl coiffe.

Absorbed though she was in this new activity of travelling, yet she could not all at once detach herself from that other world in which the family of de Marillac was carving itself a flourishing career.

In 1626 Michel de Marillac became Keeper of the Seals, then Chancellor of France, to embark shortly afterwards

upon reform of French law. Louis de Marillac received a marshal's baton and the command of the armies which were about to cross the Alps and march into Italy. There was even a day when a Marillac overthrew the mighty Richelieu and occupied his place in the King's council. But within twenty-four hours Richelieu was again in power, and on November 16th, 1630, he ordered the arrest of Michel, who had been minister of state for one short day, and had him put in prison. The Marshal Louis he had arrested at the head of his troops, and a special court set up to conduct his trial. From this day forth Louise lived through the tragedy with his wife, who in the end died of despair. The Marshal was eventually beheaded on May 10th, 1632. The fall of that illustrious head made a great noise in Europe, and struck with a dull weight upon the heart of Louise.

It is from Vincent de Paul's letters that we learn of her emotions at this time. Her letters to him are now lost, but we may well suppose that her feelings would bring her back with a submissive heart to the will of God.

'The news you have sent me concerning the Marshal de Marillac seems to me deserving of very great compassion. Let us adore in this event the good pleasure of God, and the happy state of those who by patience in their own sorrows venerate the sufferings of the Son of God. It matters not to us how our relatives go to God, provided they go to him indeed. Now, the customary observances of this manner of death give the best warrant of eternal life. Let us not therefore complain, but let us accept the adorable will of God.'

These tragic events did not distract her from her work: visiting and organising the Charities in summer, and during the winter months establishing the Charities in the parishes of Paris. Before long there was one in every parish of Paris.

During these four years of activity, a great change took place in her. She had at last broken the fetters of her debility. Much of her time was now spent in the open air. Sometimes fatigue broke down her strength. But she had learnt what she could prudently undertake and how far she could exert herself with her frail health. Her mind had cleared and had learnt simplicity. She saw life as it was and not in the distorting mirror of her imagination. She had always been very dependent upon her director, but now that she had often to be away from him, and alone, she was learning to make her own decisions. She had learnt the power of the spoken word. The women of the Charities loved to listen to Louise, and the men concealed themselves about the place so that they too might have the pleasure of hearing her discourses. She had discovered that responsive moment when religion can be introduced to the uncouth minds of the country people and appeal to the needs, if not to the longings, of their hearts. Her relations with God were no longer impeded by scruples or by fear. Of necessity and with joy she was founding her devotion upon that liberty which is love.

In short, those four years of activity worked a cure in her. True, she had still to reckon with an occasional attack of the old neurosis, but the malady had yielded to the treatment. This was a grace from God. Humanly speaking it was the work of Monsieur Vincent, not in the sense that he had formed in her a new character, but in the sense that it was he who helped her to find herself. What he brought her was not so much a doctrine as a method. She was now relieved of the heavy anxieties of her childhood and youth. She had exorcised the curse laid upon her, as once she had believed, in her cradle. She resumed now, in the light of a new day, in the light of a liberated love of God, all the rights which were hers as a member of society. She was a Marillac, of that race which had always stood level with glory, defeat and death. Whether with deliberate intent, or by instinct, she began to use again the proud name of Marillac, dropping once for all her husband's family name. All her letters henceforward arc signed 'Louise de Marillac', and it is noteworthy that the Church canonised her, not by the name which was hers by marriage, but by the name which had been given her by her father.

She had now reached the age of forty and had emerged from a long nightmare. Her personality was completely her own. Let us see what she did with it.