Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part II: The great accomplishment (1)

Part II: The great accomplishment

How the work began

In the course of her long journeys through the countryside, by coach, horseback or foot, and in the streets of the towns, Louise de Marillac had thrown ofT her past and had begun to make a study of the present. For her, ‘the present’ meant the work of the Charities, and she had arrived at the conviction that these could only survive if they were served by women attached to them permanently and by vocation.

Well-intentioned women tired of the work; married women were pre-occupied with their families and their house-keeping; fashionable ladies could not bring themselves to ‘carry the soup through the streets to the houses of the poor’; they began to depute that duty to their servants; visits to the sick began to be less regular: the ladies slipped into an easy substitute for sick-visiting, and gave alms instead of giving themselves. The real need was for servants who would give themselves.

Whether it was Louise or Monsieur Vincent who came to the idea first is of little consequence. It was a thought from the mind of God—and before long, servants were offering themselves. Wherever Louise found a good girl who was ready to devote herself to the sick and the poor, she would set her to work, observing and guiding her from a distance. This was how she discovered that inspiring personality, Marguerite Nasau, a cow-girl from a remote village and a true daughter of charity before the Daughters of Charity came into existence. She gave herself to charity; taught herself to read, getting help with her alphabet from passers- by, that she might perform the same charity for other children. She devoted herself to the most thankless tasks among the afflicted and died of the plague, contracted while nursing poor victims of the scourge in Marseilles.

There is a logic of dedication. The Charity had need of devoted servants, but no servant could be useful without some training for her duties; the girls must have technical, moral and spiritual preparation; they must be directed; they must have something to eat, somewhere to live.

Therefore, a Congregation must be founded. The word had an awe-inspiring sound and the matter was certainly a weighty one. Louise was a woman in a hurry, eager to move the work forward, but Vincent held her back. Most certainly he would have agreed with the opinion expressed by Michel de Marillac—how many years before?—that we should never seek to constrain God to grant us more graces than he wishes us to have. But at length Monsieur Vincent sanctioned an attempt.

The four or five volunteers who had offered themselves were brought together and Louise established them in her own rooms. It was November 20th, 1633. By March 25th, 1634, the infant community had acquired such stability that the foundress, who was by this time in a very great hurry, bound herself by vow to consecrate herself entirely and without reserve to this work.

About the beginning of all great works undertaken in complete simplicity for the will of God there is a freshness, the freshness of childhood. Monsieur Vincent lived very near; he came often and in grave and familiar words talked to the peasant girls as though they were duchesses. Louise poured out upon them the accumulated

treasure of her heart.

This does not mean that life went by with perfect smoothness in those cramped quarters. These country maidens were without education even of the most elementary kind. Most of them could not even read. Difficulties were encountered: mutual love and encouragement, the politenesses of charity, the life of prayer, mortification, had to be learnt until they became habitual. One or two of the volunteers rebelled and went back home, but others came in their stead. There were scenes, storms of complaint, scolding and tears and bursts of laughter. Yet gradually order and serenity were established. There could be no question of giving these girls a rule of the kind suited to nuns; they would make do with statutes as substitute for a rule. Louise drew up the statutes and Monsieur Vincent thought them excellent. In July, 1634, he came to read them to the 'Sisters', now twelve in number. His commentary upon the statutes was greatly moving. Every one of the girls accepted them with complete faith. All fell upon their knees and promised to keep the laws of the community. The Holy Spirit had descended and Vincent and Louise knelt and gave thanks. We may look back to that day as the foundation-day of the community of the Daughters of Charity.

The house in the rue St Victor had to be enlarged to receive all the postulants who began to come in from the villages. The Foundress and her director did not attempt to recruit from any urban or middle-class area: it is difficult for these classes to stoop to the lowly services which some kinds of sickness demand. But Monsieur Vincent and Louise could rightly value the stalwart spirit of the village girls. He describes them with pride and we catch from his words a certain perfume, as of the memories of his own boyhood.

True country girls arc extremely simple. They do not make use of subtleties of speech, nor words with a double meaning. They arc not obstinately attached to their own opinions, nor to getting their own way, and they believe with great simplicity whatever people tell them. These are the points in which you must imitate them: for you will truly be Daughters of Charity if you arc entirely simple and are not obstinate as to your own opinions; if you willingly give way to the wishes of other people; if you are candid in your speech, not saying one thing and thinking something different. I would like to believe that all this applies to you. God be praised, my daughters!

We may observe in true country girls a great degree of humility. They never glory in their possessions; they do not talk about how well connected they are; they do not regard themselves as having cultivated minds, they walk about modestly; and although some may be better off than other girls, they do not therefore live better than the rest, but they all live on equal terms together. Generally speaking, this is not the case with the girls of the towns, who are always talking about their houses, their relations, the things they possess: and very often they will boast of having things which in point of fact they have not. The Daughters of Charity should be very far removed from the spirit of town girls; and it does seem to me that, by the grace of God, they are indeed very far removed from it.

These country girls had to be formed by him. Most of them learned to read, so that they would be able to teach children to read; and to write, so that they would be able to send in written reports of their doings to Mademoiselle. The older girls were taught how to bleed a patient and when proficient they were entrusted with lancets. All had to know the everyday remedies and the ordinary ways of using them. The rough-and-ready nature of this training makes the modem reader smile; but it was a great advance on the methods used by the voluntary nurses of the time, who adhered firmly to traditional remedies which were of doubtful value.

Their training in religion was more thorough. Louise made it her first care to instruct them carefully, to send them out as good Christians. They had to know their catechism and put it into practice. Then through meditation they were led to a fuller spiritual life. The virtues, and particularly those essential to the vocation of Charity, were grafted on to faith and the love of God. They were taught the habit of mutual support and help which is indispensable to the stability of a community, and acquired a sympathetic understanding of the conditions of life of the sick and the poor, to whose service they were called. They were taught that the poor man comes first in the Church: he is prince and master there, for he is a sort of incarnation of Christ. He must therefore be ministered to with respect, whatever his character and his faults; and he must be loved. The sick man is a suffering member of the Body of Christ and he is therefore to be touched only with reverence. As to the care of his body, he is often, alas! no more capable of looking after himself than a child—and always the sick man is like a child in mind: illness makes him feeble and irritable, the slightest clumsiness offends him and the most fleeting of smiles will fill his heart with joy.

Thus equipped, and clad in a new dress of grey serge— they came to be called ‘the grey sisters’—and hooded in the white toque of the country districts, their feet firmly settled in stout clogs, the Daughters of Charity went wherever they were wanted—and they were very much in demand—and wherever they were sent.

Their duties were very precisely laid down for them. They were servants. They began as servants to the high-born ladies who ministered to the poor and through them, by virtue of their duty of obedience, they were themselves servants of the poor. This was the guiding principle. A guiding principle it has always remained, although the turn of events very soon put upon it new interpretations. The Ladies of Charity, especially in the towns, found it natural to delegate to the Daughters most of the active work of the Charity, of which they themselves retained the control and the credit—and also, we are bound to say, the financial burden. With the passage of time the control exercised by the Ladies became nominal: they supplied the funds and presided at the meetings; and thus the Daughters, who began as ‘servants’ of the Charities, became in fact servants of the poor. Between the Ladies and the Daughters there was occasional friction and conflict. This was to be expected. But such petty things do not make the true stuff*of life, and in truth the Ladies by their persevering generosity and the Daughters by their heroic devotion wrote the history of that age, to such good purpose that we may well ask whether without them France could have borne its sorrows.

The Charities established in the parishes of Paris asked the help of the Daughters so that they could continue to function. ‘You are in demand everywhere! Just imagine!* Monsieur Vincent said, not without a touch of affectionate irony ‘Good-natured servants content with little in the way of board and lodging—the whole world is looking for them!’ They were also in demand at the Hotel-Dieu.

In this vast hospital, the oldest and largest in Paris, had been established another charity of a very different kind. It was administered by the Canons of Notre-Dame, and no stones need be thrown at them, nor at the nursing staff, who were Augustinian nuns. Yet it has to be admitted that neither the nuns nor the Canons allowed themselves to be overwhelmed by the ever-increasing multitude of patients crowding into the inadequate premises, overtaxing the antiquated hospital equipment. Reduced to bare necessities, the patients lacked almost everything and grumbled constantly. Certain ladies of rank, touched with pity for their condition, expressed a desire to cheer the patients by regular visits, enlivening conversation and little gifts of extra food and comforts. Among these were Madame la Pr&idente Goussault, Madame la Presidente de Herse, Mme Fouquet, Mme de Traversay, Charlotte de Montmorency, la duchesse d’Aiguillon, Marie de Gonzague, la duchesse de Ventadour and . . . Mlle Le Gras.

Monsieur Vincent was consulted. At first he hesitated, reluctant to risk offending the Augustinian nuns and the Canons of Notre-Dame. But in the end, when every anxiety had been soothed, he gave way, called the noble ladies together, set up a new confraternity and drew up a Rule. There was much enthusiasm. All the great ladies of the capital wanted to enrol and it was wonderful to see them, each on her appointed day, put on the white blouse and make the round of the wards, followed by the Daughters of Mlle Le Gras. The girls carried large baskets from which they distributed cakes and jellies to the sick, exhorting them to make good confessions and get up as soon as possible.

This book is not a history of the Ladies of Charity, an organisation which appears and rc-appcars in the history of the Daughters. But it deserves to be put on record that their sick-visiting at the Hotel-Dieu, though it began as a fashionable recreation, was the source of great things. The ladies of the French aristocracv came into direct contact with human misery and accustomed themselves to solace the wretched. This education in social services stood them in good stead in future years, when they formed that great host of charitable workers mobilised by Monsieur Vincent and Louise de Marillac to save France from famine during the tragedy of the Thirty Years’ War. Perhaps never before in the history of France had there been such vast depths of human suffering and never had charity achieved so much. If misery did not at this time find an outlet in revolution, it was only because at the moment the dykes were ready to burst they were reinforced by that very goodness which wretchedness had called into activity.

But I am anticipating. In the rue St Victor the original premises could no longer hold all the daughters. They would have to move. Moreover, Monsieur Vincent had left the College de Bons Enfants and now lived in the priory of St Lazare, at the other end of Paris. Both the young community and the Foundress had need of him and they would have to move if they were to be near him: not too near, perhaps—it was his own advice—but within reach. Finding

an empty house not far from St Lazare in the village of La Chapelle, on the way to St Denis, Mademoiselle and her fifteen Daughters moved into it in May, 1636.

The youthful anxieties of the community was now at an end. Its adult life had begun.