Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part II: The great accomplishment (2)

Expansion

The house at La Chapelle was in the open country, but cramped and inconvenient and too far from the centre of Paris. The community stayed less than three years. In 1641 the Daughters established themselves with more elbow-room in the St Laurent district, opposite the priory of St Lazare. The house was first bought by the Mission and then resold to the Daughters of Charity, when they had acquired legal status. At last arrangements could be made for the long-term organisation of all their many activities. They could plan for the future with confidence, as can a man who is at last conscious of dwelling in a home of his own.

The Congregation developed with a controlled rapidity, prudently kept in hand by the foundress. Galls for help were answered only within the limits which the rate of recruitment made advisable. In many districts the Ladies of Charity were themselves the principal 'recruiting sergeants'; since they were working for their own Charities they searched zealously for vocations. Mademoiselle stood in no need of Monsieur Vincent's cautious warnings when it came to sorting out the postulants: by temperament and experience she was a prudent woman. In the first place, she rejected all melancholy applicants out of hand and on principle: a girl had to have a robust and cheerful mind if she were not to succumb to the sadness which lay like a marsh vapour over the misery of the poor and sick. Louise was also on her guard against those discontented country girls whose only vocation was a desire for change. And she distrusted those flighty maidens who were ready to answer a call if it gave them an opportunity to travel and, above all, to see Paris. She demanded a firmly- grounded vocation, a desire to serve God, the sick and the poor. Candidates were only to leave their homes for Paris with the consent of their parents and furnished with a recommendation from their parish priest. They must come with a new outfit of clothes and with a sum of money sufficient to pay for the journey to Paris and home again—for some after trying the life might not want to stay, and others might be asked to depart. It was simply commonscnse to come provided.

Once the postulant was accepted she entered the novitiate. The rules which governed this period were not formulated all at once. To bring into harmony the religious life of perfection and the life of a nurse dependent at every moment on the claims of others was no easy matter. A balance was eventually found, as we shall see, but for the moment the focus was on essentials.

Scarcely were the first girls trained when a period of rapid expansion began.

Louise de Marillac's vision had been clear. The Charities needed women devoted to the cause, who would have no purpose in life but to dedicate themselves and bring about the dedication of others. For their work to have lasting effect they must be firmly established; they must be established in community, because it is not humanly possible to live the life of a servant in isolation. So at first it was a matter of laying true foundations.

This was easy in the parishes of Paris, where the organisation was at first a sort of compromise between the older type of charitable confraternity and the new developments. Then centres were formed in the suburbs on the same model, but these soon found it better to set themselves up as proper foundations. The first suburban foundation was at St Gcrmain-en-Laye which began modestly as auxiliary work to the hospital in 1638. The second foundation was at Richelieu, in 1639. Richelieu was only a small town, but it belonged to Mile de Combalct, niece of the Cardinal, later duchessc d'Aiguiilon, a lady of high rank who was very zealous for the Mission and for all the good works of Vincent de Paul. We could almost say that the foundation at Richelieu got special attention and the most capable of the girls were sent there to please so eminent a patroness.

Lc Mans, where priests of the Mission had been working for some years, requested the help of Louise de Maril lac's Daughters. Right from the start, Louise and Monsieur Vincent had decided certain basic conditions for any new foundation, their object being to protect the spiritual autonomy and smooth working of all their houses. When it proved impossible to reach a working compromise with the 'Fathers of the Poor' in Le Mans, the Daughters, who had arrived and were about to begin work, packed their bags and returned to Paris.

It was less difficult for the community to find work in Angers. This foundation was due to the zeal of Madame la presidcntc Goussault. Here the Daughters embarked upon a new form of active work which was no longer a simple labour of charity. The magistrates and 'The Fathers of the Poor' requested the Daughters to take over the hospital and run it on their own; it was a large hospital with two hundred beds in regular use, so we arc told. To decide a matter of this magnitude, Louise set out from Paris with her group of girls. She reached Angers after a journey of fourteen days by coach and by barge, and drew up a contract with the magistrates which bears all the marks of her organising ability and that gift of foresight which could insert into regulations all sorts of provisions for the settlement of future difficulties. She found providential help on the spot in the person of the Vicar General of Angers, the Abbe de Vaux, who became the firm friend of the community, its protector and affectionate guide. He was a man of warm heart and enlightened intelligence, self-effacing in the careless style of the aristocrat. He understood Louise and felt that he was understood by her, and this complete and tacit mutual sympathy enhanced the efficacy of all that he did to promote the welfare and sustain the fervour of the Charity in Angers. In this city there were never any 'incidents' in the Charity, and it set a noble example to the Charities elsewhere.

In the midst of all the fatigues and celebration incidental to launching the Daughters in Angers, Mademoiselle was suddenly stricken with illness. The news reached Paris, growing more exaggerated on the journey. There was great alarm. Monsieur Vincent, ordinarily the calmest of men, wrote letter upon letter. He urged Louise to return to Paris by coach or by litter and to take all possible care of a health so necessary to the service of God.

From 1641 to 1660, Louise wrote almost every week to her Daughters at Angers. When she read their letters to her, she could live with them the events they described; when she wrote to them, she could share with them the daily life of the mother-house, and in a way her own personal life too, so great and so contagious was the spontaneous warmth of her heart. Let us listen for a moment to that voice, at once so firm ancl so tender, so scolding and yet so sweet, which could make her presence felt over any distance. She is writing in 1643 to the sisters at Angers. Even in a community so fervent as this, discord and even coquetry could work mischief. Louise hears something of the kind and writes forcefully:

'Can it be possible that any attachment to creatures should put us in peril of losing the great treasure of our vocation? Take good care, my dear sisters, for the danger is noxious, because people do not suspect that vanity may lurk beneath our poor habits and ugly hoods. Unless we are careful, there will be, beneath an appearance of breeding and propriety, grave faults in this matter. I do not wish to believe that any of you, my very dear sisters, should give place to a single thought which is contrary to your holy vocation, nor that you should dare to take pleasure in speaking to anyone who could do any damage to the purity of the love you should have for God. For God is jealous for the souls which he calls into his holy service. If some of you have had some little touches of this passion, O my very dear sisters, do not let the viper lodge in your bosom. Disclose the thoughts of your heart to him whom God has given you as a director, who is the person that M. l'Abbé de Vaux has appointed to hear you. God will not fail to comfort and assist you in the matter. . . .'

The renown of the hospital at Angers aroused the interest of the 'Fathers of the Poor' in Nantes. Their enormous hospital, full of intricate corridors and staircases, old, ill- fitted and ill-kept, was a great anxiety to them. The 'Fathers' paid a visit of inspection to Angers, they asked questions and looked into things carefully. Then they declared that they, too, would like to have the Daughters of Charity. Before giving them an answer, Mademoiselle concentrated her attention upon the hospital at St Denis, which her dear friends Mile de Lamoignon and Mme de Nesmond had desired. When the project at Nantes began to take shape, she decided that she would go herself and inaugurate the new foundation. This was quite an expedition and it was organised to the last degree. The duties of the mother-house were distributed for her period of absence with a wealth of proviso and delegated powers such as the Sisters of today recall with a certain amusement, as they set out for the Far East and the New World.

Louise has herself left us a description of this journey. It was hard and wearisome, yet picturesque, and in some of its details not unlike a holiday tour. We gather from her words that it was made with much eagerness and devotion and with the courage and confidence of a young girl. Trials there would be in plenty, but the venture began with anticipations of triumph. It will be of interest to produce this record in full. Students of our past will discover from it what it was like to travel, in the year 1646, from Paris to Orleans, and then from Orleans to Nantes by way of the river Loire. It is written joyously, in clear straightforward language. Students of psychology will

examine the account for evidence concerning the effects of travelling upon morale. For many years of her life, Louise dc Marillac had been of a melancholy turn; indeed, I have in an earlier chapter described her condition as neurasthenia. Her cure was still of recent date, and she still occasionally suffered attacks of sadness and anxiety. Yet now, from the moment of leaving for Nantes, she tells us that she was very cheerful and that she was able to bear with good humour the incidents of the road:

'On Thursday, the 26th day of July, by the grace of God we left Paris in the company of our dear sisters Elisabeth, Claude, Marguerite Noret, Catherine Bagard, Perrette of Sedan, and Sister Antoinette from Montrcuil. Sister Turgis was to be left at Richelieu. The six others were on their way to serve the sick poor in the hospital at Nantes, in Brittany. After Messieurs the Fathers Administrators, and some of the leading men of the said city, had requested our much honoured Father Monsieur Vincent to send some of his Sisters for this purpose, since they had heard what the Sisters had accomplished in the hospital at Angers, they asked if they might have sent to them a copy of the articles of agreement, and the document for establishing our said Sisters; and they testified that they wished to grant the same terms.

'Our much honoured Father did us the charitable service of giving a conference on the subject, on the previous Monday, upon concluding which he appointed by name the above-mentioned Sisters; and 011 the Wednesday following I went to receive his instructions for the journey, and had the happiness of receiving his holy blessing; a d when I told him of the well-grounded fear that I had, that I should commit many faults on this journey, he of his charity ordered me to write for him a narrative of our doings and encounters during the said journey. Bearing in mind his holy instructions and practices, I formed for myself no other view or intention but that of doing the most holy will of God, and faithfully keeping our rules.

'We were nine in number when we got into the coach for Orleans: that is, the six for Nantes, and the Sister for Richelieu, with Sister Fran$oise Noret and myself to accompany them. We were very cheerful without, by the grace of God, a failing to observe our rules, except that at the hours of prayer and of silence we allowed ourselves to be overcome by sleep, for which at times we blamed the heat.

'Upon entering the towns and villages, one of us would remember to invoke the Holy Angels, with the prayer that they would take ever more care of the souls in that place, and assist them to glorify God for ever; and on going past the churches, we made acts of adoration of the Most Holy Sacrament, and venerated their holy patrons. Upon arriving at the places where we were to eat or sleep, certain of the Sisters would visit the church to give thanks to God for his protection, to beg him to continue to aid us, that we might have his holy blessing to do his holy will. If there was a hospital, the same Sisters would visit it; if not, they would call on some sick person of the place; and this they did in the name of all our company, to extend the offer of our services and duty to God in the persons of the poor. Whenever we could, we paid a visit to the Church in the mornings before leaving, with the same intentions. Upon occasion, we would speak a few words, either upon those principal points of the faith which it is necessary to know for salvation, or certain little instructions on morals, but briefly.

'After Orleans, we spent a night at Mehun, and because the river was low, we were almost five days on the road after Mehun. We were a night at Cour-sur-Loire, and the next day passed through Monouy, stopping at the port of Ablevoie, where our dear Sister got down to go to Richelieu. . . .

'…We continued our journey very happily, thank God, and at Pont-de-C6 we had the honour of being refused at the inn because we arrived late; but it was only an excuse because they did not want to kill chickens for us, and so put us in danger of eating them on Friday; but after we left that precious house we found a surgeon's wife who received us kindly.*

The company stopped in Angers to visit the hospital and the Sisters there. Louise was given a welcome by the civic authorities and the Ladies of Charity. At Nantes, people were awaiting their coming with much impatience and a man was posted to keep an eye on the river so that there should be no risk of their arrival passing unnoticed. Their disembarkation, before a great concourse of onlookers, was in the nature of a triumph.

'All the ladies of the town, many in number and high in rank, took the trouble to come and visit us, and even those who lived out in the country round about Nantes made a special journey to see us, so great was their desire to

see our establishment.

‘A number of superiors of the reformed orders also came; and several convents of nuns who could not come to us insisted that some of the ladies should lead us to them, which they did, taking along the Sisters one after the other, for they wanted to see both them and their habit.’

Once the act of establishment was signed, Louise bade farewell to the gentlemen, to the Vicar General and to her dear Sisters and departed, being escorted to the boat by the same guard of honour. She left the boat at Angers and completed her journey by coach, as contrary winds and water made river navigation dangerous.

In addition to this narrative which may in a sense be called an official document, Louise mentions in some of her letters particulars of her journey and her stay in Nantes. She affirms with naive astonishment that she was taken to be a lady of rank. This she certainly was; she bore herself as such and the Marillacs had made so much noise in the world that notice had to be taken of her quality and deportment. She also reported with astonishment and joy that despite the fatigues of the road her health was very good.

‘My health is so good, that this journey has made me wish I had nothing else to do but run about the country, provided there was something for me to do there.’

Here is an accent which is new: here is the joy of a woman completely mistress of herself, who enjoys good health pardy owing to her self-mastery. Louise was now in full control of all her powers and she applied them to the organisation of the Charities. We should take note of the date: it was the year 1645,one of the high points of her life.

The hospital at Nantes was a masterpiece of skill in organisation. Yet the most perfect piece of mechanism will get out of hand and the Nantes system broke down more than once. This is not a liistory of the foundations of the Daughters of Charity and the story of the house of Nantes would in any case require a volume to itself. The successes of the Daughters were too spectacular and aroused local jealousies; moreover, the Daughters were perhaps a little too conscious of the progress they had made. They were inclined to chatter about it in the town and to encourage the formation of cliques. Harmony among the Daughters themselves was not always complete. The Bishop lent an ear to reports which exaggerated or perverted the truth and began to form a very unfavourable opinion of the Daughters and their work. The ‘Fathers of the Poor’, jealous of their prerogatives and parsimonious of their funds, came to believe that the Daughters were misusing public money subscribed for the use of the poor. In Paris, Mademoiselle carried the burden of these difficulties, writing by every courier to counsel and to correct. In consultation with Monsieur Vincent, she decided that an official visitation should be made and M. Lambert was sent. Monsieur Vincent himself stayed in Nantes and restored order and peace to the hospital. But lie was less successful in dealing with the opposition of the Bishop though he stood up to him firmly in the interests of truth. Louise de Marillac, always pacific by nature, was adamant on one point only: her Daughters had been accused, most odiously and falsely, of pillaging the funds of the poor and of misappropriating hospital equipment. She was disposed to recall the Daughters. She declared with hauteur that once they had shaken the dust of Nantes from their sandals she would be able to say truthfully that they had carried off nothing that belonged to the hospital. When we recall the efforts it had cost the Daughters to clean and equip that ill-found house, we can relish the proud irony of her words. The condition of affairs in Nantes was certainly bad, but in course of time tilings settled down. The hospital, like other human institutions, continued to have its times of crisis and its times of prosperous tranquillity while, through foul and fair, God and the sick poor were well served by courageous souls.

I have given some particulars of Saint-Germain, Saint- Denis, Angers, Richelieu and Nantes. These foundations were followed by others and the tempo quickened. Wherever the priests planted the Mission, wherever the Ladies of the Hotel-Dieu had land or interests, the Daughters were wanted. Even the most systematic recruiting was insufficient to meet all the demands.

One of the Ladies of Charity (Marie de Gonzaguc) became Queen of Poland and wanted to have the Daughters in her country. Hence the daring venture of a foundation in Warsaw—a house whose tribulations were to be a thorny anxiety for Louise. Queen Anne of Austria asked for Daughters to nurse the wounded 011 the field of battle. So

Louise de Marillac's peasant girls, enrolled as servants to carry bowls of soup to the poor, found themselves working as nurses to armies.

The congregation was available for any task of this kind. Its activities were as various as the many faces of human wretchedness. In the course of three centuries they have never ceased to expand and take new forms. Today we may say that no form of human suffering in any country of the world escapes the attention of the Daughters. When they began their work in the rue St Victor, they were five in number; today they are fifty thousand, scattered about the world. And the happy omen of this state of affairs was that consciousness that all was well which filled Louise's spirit during those triumphant days in Nantes.