



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part II: The great accomplishment (5)

A teacher still

Louise de Marillac had a gift for imparting instruction, a passionate love of teaching, for she valued knowledge and prized wisdom for which man was made. God created us that we might know him; he made us so that he might himself be known by intelligent beings. Ignorance is therefore a condition of violence which holds man back from his destiny.

At his first contact with the people of those country districts devastated by the wars, Vincent de Paul was appalled by material misery: they were dying of hunger! Thirty years later Louise de Marillac, travelling through the same countryside and observing particularly the women and girls, was appalled by their rude illiteracy.

There had for some years now been observed in France a new stirring of intellectual life. In the course of the seventeenth century it was to reinvigorate the old congregations, call new ones into being and produce a succession of gifted and practical teachers¹. So wide and deep was the influence of this movement that those historians who are now approaching the subject are astonished at the sound education of the women of the French upper and middle classes in this period. But the teaching of the lower classes was still seriously neglected. It was taken for granted that country children and especially country girls had no need of reading.

Louise de Marillac was horrified by a neglect which could have such terrible consequences. Her argument should be noted with care. She feared that little girls allowed to grow up in ignorance would be unable to benefit from the gifts of God. Of course, she did not hold that the efficacy of God's grace could ever depend on human knowledge, but she had observed that elementary knowledge opens a way for the teaching of the Church and sets this teaching in a human, social context which makes it more accessible and more appealing. One can love God without knowing how to read; but a knowledge of reading supplies additional motives for loving God and means of profiting more fully from his grace. So, as soon as she began her systematic visiting of the Charities Louise took care to gather information relating to the children and about any person in the locality who could teach them to read.

Such a step was of course a mere stop-gap. Teaching must be organised—and Louise had a gift for organisation. Now we come to a document of considerable significance; it marks the foundation on May 29th, 1641, of free elementary schools in the diocese of Paris. Here Louise de Marillac makes a formal approach to the Precentor of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, who was responsible for public education in the city.

'To M. des Roches, precentor of Notre-Dame de Paris, Louise de Marillac, widow of M. Le Gras, secretary to the queen-mother of the King, most humbly petitions:

'And says that great numbers of the poor in the Faubourg de Saint-Denis have made her desire to undertake to teach them; for the reason that if the poor little girls remain in ignorance, it is much to be feared that this will lead them into malice, which will render them incapable of co-operating with grace for their own salvation. The which considering, may it please you, Monsieur, to give the said petitioner the warranty required for such activity, in the hope that God will be glorified if the poor, giving nothing, may freely send their children to the schools; and that no wealthy person may be able to prevent such a benefit, merely because they do not desire that the mistresses who teach their own children should receive the children of the poor.

'These souls, purchased by the Blood of the Son of God, will be bound to pray for you, Monsieur, through time and through eternity.'

The Reverend Precentor replied as follows:

'Michel Le Masle, counsellor to the King in all his Councils of State and private councils, prior, and Seigneur des



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Roches de Saint-Paul, precentor and Canon of the glorious metropolitan church of Paris, to our well beloved Demoiselle Le Gras, dwelling in the parish of Saint-Laurent at Paris, health in Our Lord.

‘Whereas it belongs to us, by reason of our dignity as Precentor of the said church of Paris, to have the scrutiny and government of the elementary schools of the city, suburbs and environs of Paris; and whereas you have been found worthy to keep schools; our investigation having been made, with the testimonial of your parish priest, and of other persons worthy of credit; and having knowledge of your manner of life and your Catholic faith;

‘We therefore grant you licence for this purpose, and give our faculty to you, to keep and maintain schools in the street known as Saint-Lazarc in the Faubourg Saint- Denis, for the office of teaching poor girls only, and none others, and to bring them up in good manners, in the rules of grammar, and other pious and useful exercise, having first taken your oath to conduct the said schools diligently and faithfully according to our statutes and ordinances.

‘This present faculty is valid only until our next Synod.

‘Given at Paris under our seal, and that of Maltre Jean Le Vasseur, notary apostolic and our writer and secretary in ordinary, in the year of our Lord sixteen hundred and forty-one, on the twenty-ninth day of May.

By command of my said Lord Precentor,

Le Vasseur.’

And so popular education for the poor girls of Paris was introduced. Primary education for poor boys was to come a little later with St John Baptist de La Salle. Both systems developed together throughout the seventeenth century, at the same pace as the schools for the privileged classes and both flourish vigorously to this day.

For Louise de Marillac these schools for the poor were one of the forms of charity, and her correspondence with Sister Turgis at Angers is full of exhortations to be ever mindful of her duty of supervising the behaviour of the children and the good order of the schools. She consulted Monsieur Vincent on the subject and he at once recognised the importance of the work. He expressed the desire that some uniformity of method might be introduced; that the Sisters of the mother house might be trained in this method; and that they should take the advice of the Ursulines, who had wide experience in such work. It is true that the care of the sick and the service of the poor have always been the principal activities of the Daughters of Charity, and that they are always willing to relinquish work in the schools wherever it can be left with confidence in other Christian hands; yet to serve the poor means filling his real needs, be they of mind or body.

Louise herself may have been the first of these schoolmistresses. She tells us nothing of the methods she used for teaching little children their letters; but we are left in no doubt of her preoccupation with methods of teaching them Christian doctrine. She appears to have been less than satisfied with the forms of catechism then in use, for she compiled a catechism of her own, the manuscript of which is preserved in the archives of the mother house. This is not so much a manual as a personal directory, a quest for words and forms which will gradually introduce the truths of religion to the most infantile and immature minds. As we thumb through this manual we note her uncertainties and her false starts and also her striking insights. Expressions familiarly used of the most everyday application are always linked with some very secure dogmatic statement. She taught the mysteries with a smile:

‘What is the mystery of the Blessed Trinity?’

‘It is the mystery of One God in three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’

‘And of these three, which is the oldest and most wise?’* ‘All three are equal, for they are but one and the same God.’

The little foundlings of Bicfitre, the beggar children of Saint-Denis, heard her speak of God in their own language. Forms of speech change with time, but the problems of speech are constant and catechists of today might well



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draw inspiration from the mind of Louise de Marillac. All round us today there are children as far from God as the children of 1641.

Louise could chatter with the children; she could speak their own language with ladies of rank. We would like to dwell upon her relations with the great, but it is not easy to do so, for she never made any show of these friendships—or rather, she deliberately concealed them; and since it is here a question of the secrets of the heart, or of heart-to-heart, the ladies who had the benefit of her friendship have left little on record. But allusions made by Louise in her correspondence with Vincent de Paul are so numerous as to give the impression of one of her major works.

Mademoiselle's relations with women of rank outside her own family circle sprang out of that spiritual movement, the central figure in which had been her father's brother, Michel de Marillac. At that time her contacts with society women had been more frequent, as Monsieur Vincent had appointed her to visit the Charities and in these the Ladies had taken the lead. Later she had found herself virtually a member of the Company of Ladies of the Hotel-Dieu, where she was in close and regular contact with the best-known members of the aristocracy and the upper middle class. It was not very long before she held a special position among them, along with such personages as Mme la Pr&idente Goussault and Mme Viole. Always available and always ready to undertake practical tasks, Louise was more and more called upon, especially after she had organised her Daughters into a permanent Congregation specialising in the care of the sick.

But for those women who were seeking progress in their spiritual life she was something more: a pattern, an inspiration and a guide. In her childhood she had acquired a store of profane learning, which quickened her language and adorned her thought in a style reminiscent of Mme de Sablé, Mme de La Fayette, or even Mme de Sévigné. Her spiritual reading was even wider: Luis of Granada, Bérulle, Francois de Sales, the Gospels—all had enriched her mind. She had been accorded the faculty rarely granted to women in her day of reading the Bible in an unabridged French version. These things are evidence of a mature spirituality, and we need not therefore wonder that eminent women², knowing the extent and value of her spirituality, sought to benefit from it by spending days of recollection under her guidance. They recognised in her not a nun withdrawn from the world but a woman who had been married and borne a child, who had suffered and overcome many troubles, both outwardly and inwardly. She was experienced in the ways of the world and the life of the spirit and was therefore well fitted to direct a house of retreat.

The mother house of the Daughters of Charity now began to be used in part as a house of retreat. Monsieur Vincent was ordinarily somewhat strict upon such a point, but he gave her every encouragement to persevere in this new activity which is of a kind not, as a rule, suited to a woman. But Louise, when she conducted her retreats for ladies, followed Monsieur Vincent's guidance very exactly and would even request him to draw up a detailed timetable. Yet this would turn out to be no more than a timetable: Monsieur Vincent meant Louise to conduct the retreats by herself.

So in conversation and in prayer she dispensed the riches of her heart; the ladies who came to enjoy those riches maintained contact with her, so as to be sure always of her direct and dependable guidance.

It was not just ordinary friendship which bound Louise to such women as the Duchesse de Ventadour and the Duchesse de Liancourt; when they heard of her mortal illness they flatly refused to leave her and installed themselves to assist her last moments and be with her when she died.