



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part II: The great accomplishment (7)

The mystique of the Rules

Since 1629 Louise de Marillac had been in the service of charity; since 1634 she had belonged to the society which she had founded (with Monsieur Vincent) for the practical work of charity. With her Daughters she had sought out poverty, sickness and misery in all its forms—in hospitals, among convicts, with the foundlings—and all with a prodigality of love which is simply astounding. But never for a moment did she forget that her first duty was to watch over the Congregation which was the instrument of all these benevolent works. To train and form her Daughters and to maintain their fervour—this was her primary responsibility if she were to ensure, for today and for tomorrow, the stability of their Congregation. She knew that a community founded on an idea is held upright by its Rule, as by a spinal column.

Vincent de Paul was never tired of emphasising the essential, the fundamental, notion of rule and of law. It is because it is established upon an unshakable system of laws that the vast and complex machine of the world revolves without pause. It was because the people of Israel had under their feet the religion of the Law that they were able to resist assaults which would, in the normal course of things, have destroyed them. Religious Orders, which are a permanent defiance of the world, continue to live despite the world, protected as they are by the armour of the Rule.

It is by no arbitrary inflation that we appeal in this way to such solemn truths in connection with the Rule of the Daughters of Charity. Their Rule summed up their existence and their being.

It was by the Rule that the Sisters lived in community, and by the Rule they were what they were. Every Christian must assuredly obey the law and the will of Christ: that is a generalised will which calls for an ordinary degree of obedience. But the religious who takes a vow of obedience goes beyond this everyday obedience. He has, as it were, alienated his own freewill and accepted the particular purposes of God, so that all his own acts are, fundamentally, acts of obedience. These particular purposes of God are manifest to the religious at every moment of the day by his Rule, which covers the whole of his external life and all his conscious acts. The mystic has bidden adieu to his own senses and his private judgment and abandons himself to God in love. The religious who has made his vow of obedience, by an analogous act which is also in part mystical, obeys his Rule without interposing his own personality: to obey is to love.

Since the Rule, as an expression of the particular purposes of God, is established on human experience, it is also keyed to the limits of what is possible to man and is adapted to his needs. While it binds and bends, compels and leads him, it also sustains him and gives him strong protection, leading him away from ways of temptation, and maintaining his powers of resistance in a state of alertness. His Rule is to him a luminous signal, sending from afar its warning of danger; it is to him a source of equilibrium and peace. As the Rule is the same for all, it guarantees unanimity, cohesion and harmony in the community, which includes among its members a diversity of personalities and a great variety of duties, all of which are controlled in detail by the Rule itself. Finally, the Rule provides a safeguard for human dignity because, although it absorbs a man, it has first been chosen and willed by him.

It was with this conception of the mystical value of the Rule that, as soon as it seemed to them that the Congregation was the will of God and would endure, Vincent de Paul and Mademoiselle applied themselves to giving the Daughters a Rule. In its earliest days, the community had lived by provisional regulations, each article of which was under constant scrutiny in the light of experience. From this experience there emerged the Rule, which had to be sufficiently robust to ensure the perfection of the three vows, yet sufficiently supple to be well adapted to the life of a secular congregation of women, dedicated primarily to the service of the sick and the poor. There must at many points have been problems as to this equilibrium and many a conference between the two Founders, who were in hourly contact with the manifold difficulties of their new venture. The subject also occurs in their correspondence, although it would arise more naturally in conversation following on a study of the texts.



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Monsieur Vincent asked Louise to send him outlines, which he would revise; or he himself draws up a synopsis and submits it to her for her advice. This she would give candidly, with words of apology.

One point concerned her greatly. In the introductory memorandum presented when the Rule was submitted for approval, the Congregation was put under the sole authority of the Archbishop of Paris, who could, upon the death of the founder, appoint for the diocese any Superior he chose. Louise was much afraid that in this total subordination to the Archbishop there lay a certain danger:

'Permit me to say to your charity that the explanation contained in our rules for the Daughters causes me to desire for them the continued use of this title, which is omitted, perhaps by accident, in the memorandum of the terms of establishment. May not this condition, so absolute, of dependence on Monseigneur, the Archbishop, do us some harm in future years, since it gives liberty to take us away from the direction of the Superior-General of the Mission? Is it not necessary, Monsieur, that by these articles of establishment your charity should be given to us for a director in perpetuity? And these rules which are to be given to us, is it the intention of Monseigneur that they are to be the ones indicated in the text of the application? Does that require a separate document, or may others be drawn up at will, since they are separately mentioned? In the name of God, Monsieur, do not allow anything to happen which might contribute in the smallest way to withdraw the direction of the Company from the hands in which God has placed it. For you may be assured that the Company would then no longer be what it is, and the sick poor would no longer be assisted, and thus I believe that the will of God would no longer be done among us.'

This was written in 1646. Monsieur Vincent turned a deaf ear and did not think it necessary to modify the text of the introductory memorandum. Louise de Marillac returned obstinately to the charge and in a more solemn tone, as though she were the instrument of a Divine warning.

'It seems to me that God put my soul in a great peace and simplicity, during the prayer that I made concerning the necessity that the Company of the Daughters of Charity should always be under the direction which Divine Providence has given to it, in spiritual as well as temporal matters. I think I have seen that it would be more to his glory that the Company should cease to function, rather than come under a change of direction, since it seems to me that this would be contrary to the will of God.

'The signs are that there is reason to believe that God has inspired, and made known from the beginning, his will for the perfecting of the works which his goodness wishes to perform. And you know, Monsieur, that in these beginnings it was suggested that the temporal control of the said Company, if it should fall vacant by mischance, should return to the Mission, by which it would be used for the teaching of country people.

'I hope that if your charity has understood of our Lord what I think he has told you in the person of St Peter that as it was upon that rock that he willed to build this Company, then it will persevere in the service our Lord asks, for the teaching of children and the consolation of the sick.'

This second request had no more effect than the first. Let us note in passing the dignity of the protagonists: each holds his ground. On November 26th, 1646, the Archbishop of Paris approved the rules of the Company in the text presented by Monsieur Vincent. The approbation was signed by the coadjutor, the Cardinal de Retz, in eulogistic terms, and the founder, Vincent de Paul, named Superior for life. There was great joy in Saint-Lazare and in the rue Saint-Denis. The Congregation now entered upon its lawful existence, securely founded on a canonical basis.

The joy was great, but not entirely unmingled. Louise certainly regretted that she had not obtained all the privileges she had requested, and it may be that, upon reflection, Monsieur Vincent shared her regret. These afterthoughts may provide the explanation for one rather curious circumstance: episcopal approbation was given on November 30th, 1646; yet Monsieur Vincent kept the fact a secret for no less than six months. His precise reason for delaying the announcement is unknown. It may be that he hoped to secure some modification of the text of the grant. Louise de Marillac became impatient and appraised him in a letter written in April, 1647, of the mounting expectancy in the community. This letter seems to have decided him, for on the 30th May, 1647, he communicated the approved text of the decree to the assembled community. We may say that this meeting was



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the completion and crown of that much smaller assembly, on July 31 st, 1634, when Monsieur Vincent had read the first Regulations to Louise and a dozen 'Sisters'. On that day, the infant Company had promised obedience to a provisional Rule: the Congregation born of that obedience now engaged itself to a Rule which was definitive, as the Founder solemnly read the episcopal document to the Sisters, who knelt to hear it.

Like Moses when he brought the Law to Israel, Monsieur Vincent pointed out that this Rule had come to them from God by the hands of his minister, and he renewed to the Daughters the blessings and cursings with which the earlier prophet had sealed his mission:

'My Daughters, I say to you what Moses said to the people of God. Here are rules which have been sent to you as from God himself. If you are faithful in keeping them, all the blessings of Heaven will descend upon you: you shall be blessed in your work and in your rest, blessed in what you do, and blessed in what you refrain from doing; and all things shall be filled with blessing by you.

'If—which God forbid!—any of you should not have this intention, I say to them what Moses said to those who would not obey the Law which he taught them as from God: you shall be cursed in the house, and cursed out of it; you shall be cursed in what you do, and in what you refrain from doing.

'I have already told you at other times, my Daughters, that he who gets into a ship to make a long voyage, must be submissive to all that is done in that ship. If he were not subject to all the ship's laws, which were made for his protection, he would be in danger of perishing. In the same way, those who are called by God to live in a holy community must observe all of its rules.

'I believe that each one of you is firmly resolved to keep the Rule. Are not all of you of the same mind?'

He then slowly read through the text of the Rule, bestowing on certain articles a word or two of veneration or gratitude. When he came to the passage which provided for the appointment of a new superior-general every third year, he intejcted: 'That is, of course, when God shall have disposed of Mademoiselle.' As he spoke, Mademoiselle, on her knees like the rest, begged that no exception might be made; that rather her insufficiency and her poor health should be considered and she be relieved of the burden of command. Monsieur Vincent replied forthwith that the community would constantly pray for the restoration of her health, and that this would render her capable of doing the will of God. He then continued with the reading. When he had done, there ensued a moving dialogue between the Director and his Daughters:

'I believe that each one of you has firm intention of keeping the Rule. Are not all of you of this mind?'

The Sisters, listening upon their knees, answered, in voices which trembled with emotion, 'Yes, Father'.

Saint Vincent went on: 'I hope that his mercy will sustain your desires, by aiding you to accomplish what he asks of you. Do you give yourselves with all your hearts to him, my Daughters, to live by the observance of your holy Rule?'

'Yes, willingly.'

'Do you not desire with all your hearts to live and die in it?'

'We do desire it.'

'I pray the sovereign goodness of God, that it may please him to pour out abundantly upon you every kind of grace and blessing, so that you may accomplish, perfectly and in all things, the good pleasure of his most holy will in the practice of your Rule.'

As though she had been provoked to the act by this solemn engagement, one of the Sisters now began to speak. She accused herself of frequent breaches of the Rule. Another Sister followed her example. As emotion reached its climax, Monsieur Vincent himself fell on his knees, and confessed that he also had often broken the Rule of the



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Mission; he was an unworthy servant, and had not the right to bless the Daughters; he would therefore call upon God to bless them himself. At these words, however, there was an outcry from the assembled Sisters, who refused to be deprived of the blessing of their Father. He allowed himself to be persuaded by their supplication, and gave his blessing to an assembly overcome by an emotion as of Pentecost.

We now come to describe a highly critical period in the history' of the congregation. The Church had approved the new institute and given it official recognition. But the documents which embodied the ecclesiastical Approbation had now to be submitted for the formal approval of the civil Power—they had to be ratified by the Parlement of Paris. Here we come upon an obscure problem, 011 which historians of the Mission of the Daughters of Charity have not been very anxious to bring light to bear. They hesitate at this point, as if unwilling to know all the facts. We do not know them all. But what we do know, I set down here.

It will be recalled that Mademoiselle had not been altogether pleased with the terms of the Archbishop's Approbation, which did not altogether coincide with her objectives, nor, perhaps, with those of Vincent de Paul. Yet it was the text approved by their superiors and, as such, they accepted and revered it. While, therefore, the Founders were privately a little disappointed, they had no weighty reason for failing to open the necessary negotiations with the lawyers and this they proceeded to do. With the Icisureliness observable in all administrations, the dossier, together with the King's Letters Patent, was remitted to the Parlement—by whose hands we do not know. It was probably handed to Meliand, the Procurator General.

Time passed. The Parlement was in no hurry. The community was up against an ingrained prejudice: nobody had ever heard of a congregation of women which was not cloistered, but which proposed to live a secular life based on a novel Rule. The Parlement was therefore insisting on making a careful study of the situation that would be created by this new institute—and the investigation would take up a good deal of time.

Years passed in exasperated negotiation. Then, in 1650, the name of Meliand was again mentioned in connection with the case. Now, Louise de Marillac was acquainted with this official, having consulted him at various times in connection with the Enfants Trouvés. She went to see him and gave an account of her visit in a somewhat curious letter to Monsieur Vincent.

'Yesterday I had occasion to see the Procurator- General, who did me the honour to receive me very courteously, and told me at once that I was there on a matter which happened to be in his own hands. I told him I was there only to refresh his memory. He asked me whether we claimed to be both regular and secular nuns. I gave him to understand that we claimed only the latter. He said to me that that was without precedent. I instanced to him the 'daughters' of Madame de Ville- neuve, and proved to him that they went about everywhere. He assured me that our design was not disapproved, and said much that was good of the Company, but that a matter of such importance needed to be carefully considered. I testified to him my joy that he was interesting himself in the affair in this way, and begged him that, if the thing was without merit, or if it should be a long drawn-out affair, he should destroy it entirely, but that if it was good, we earnestly begged him to establish it firmly, and that we had put this way of life to the test for at least a dozen or fifteen years, during which time, by the grace of God, all had gone well without trouble. He said to me: "Let me think about it, I do not say for months, but for several weeks"; he took the trouble to see us to the carriage; he was in the courtyard; and he showed us great goodwill, charged us to greet you very humbly, saying he would be but a usurer if he received the very humble thanks we paid him for the honour he did to all our Sisters, when they ventured to approach him in their needs, which were as much for the poor convicts as for the little children.'

We note in this letter the casual statement that she 'had occasion', for all the world as though she were unconcerned to know what had become of a certain dossier which closely concerned her. We observe further that, according to the description by Louise, Meliand made no allusion to the dossier, but conducted himself in a detached manner, as though the papers were not in his possession. And indeed, if he had had them, he would have known from the approved text what was the precise situation in religion of Mademoiselle's Daughters and would have had no need to interrogate her upon the point.

Meliand died. He was succeeded by Fouquet, who wished to reopen the question (at whose request?), made a search for the dossier—and could not find it. It was lost. Somewhere, in the offices of the Procurator-General or at



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Saint-Lazare or in the rue Saint-Denis or at some point on the road from Saint-Lazare to the Parlement the dossier had vanished. When the new Procurator-General informed them that he was unable to find the papers, Vincent de Paul and Louise made a search in every likely place, but without result. On November 25th, 1651, Louise wrote Vincent de Paul:

'I have not found a single paper relating to the establishment, and I recall that one day your charity took the trouble to give us a reading from the petition which you had presented to Monseigneur of Paris, with our Rule following; and thinking that it ought to remain with us, I asked you for it. I believe that the reason why we did not retain it in our possession was that there was still some piece of business outstanding.'

Louise went on to write as though she saw in this untoward event a sort of visitation for her own shortcomings and sins. She ended her letter by saying that she was sending a text which she had put together from her recollection of the public reading given in 1647. Finally, as though she feared that her remarks might be lacking in clarity, she added a postscript which, so far from enlightening us, confuses the issue still further:

'I believe that Brother Ducourneau would know where to find both the original and the copy of the petition which was presented, together with the act of establishment, which it seems to me we never had.'

All that clearly emerges is that the dossier had gone astray and that none of the interested parties knew where or how it had been lost. It now became necessary to draw up another text and the Founders addressed themselves to this work of authorship as to a quite new task, as though there were no such thing as a copy or draft of the text of 1646. This time either Louise de Marillac was more persuasive, or else Monsieur Vincent conceded that she had been in the right, for the new text provided that the Daughters of Charity should remain always under the direction of the Superior- General of the Mission. Louise de Marillac may have been obstinate, but her foresight had been clear: she had preserved the unity of a congregation which, destined to spread over the entire world, would inevitably have split into autonomous fragments for want of a recognised centre and head to preserve intact the spirit of the society. Quite simply, she had preserved the identity of the Daughters of Charity.

Definitely approved in 1655, the documents of the constitution and Rule were forwarded to Rome by the efforts of Anne of Austria herself. They were finally ratified by the Parlement in 1658. Twenty-five years had been needed to provide the congregation with a Rule—which stresses the vital significance of this Rule. Vincent de Paul had promulgated the definitive text in the general meeting on August 8th, 1655. For his Daughters, this was the same text as they had received with such enthusiasm in 1647; they solemnly renewed their submission. Then Mademoiselle, and after her all the Sisters present, affixed their signatures to this charter of the Congregation, any who could not write signing with a cross. Monsieur Vincent signed last and then were added the names of the absent. The Pope, the King, the Archbishop of Paris, the Parlement, Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac and the Daughters of Charity, all were in accord as to a contract which was to govern the new foundation for centuries to come.

Founder and Foundress made it a duty to expound the Charter, so as to determine its meaning and its spirit. Vincent de Paul based upon it the whole programme of his discourses from the year 1655 to the time of his death. Neither his ever-increasing work, nor his frequent illnesses, were ever allowed to divert him from this task.

In two conferences given in August 1650, the Founder laid down the principle of obedience to the Rule, according to his 'little method', which consists, first, of considering the reasons one may have for obeying a command, then the fault one may commit by deficient obedience and finally the means at one's disposal to ensure perfect obedience. The first conference is a dialogue in which the Sisters discover for themselves, under his guidance, the reasons they have for observing the Rule and the faults they commit when they fail to keep it well. The second is a proper conference in which he expounds his own 'little thoughts'. The rules are of God. They have been given to the Daughters not to restrict them, but to sustain them.

'As the birds have wings to fly, but do not find they are weighed down by them, so the Daughters of Charity have their Rule, which serves them as wings to fly to God; and very far from being weighed down, they fly easily when they are in good training.'



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His explanation is rich in supernatural perception and in fervour. The aim of the Daughters of Charity is to honour the charity of our Lord and thus to give joy to God. Yes, God does rejoice when he sees you imitate the charity of his Son. To give joy to God—what a vocation that is! The tendency of the Rule is to make you into saints, to make you share in the Spirit of God! From poor girls to sharers in the spirit of God! It is in serving the sick poor that the Daughters have a share in the Spirit of God, and give joy to him. So the service of the sick takes precedence of everything else. To serve the sick you will, if necessary, leave everything, even prayer, even Sunday Mass, though it be an obligation; that is what we call leaving God in order to find him.

Happy are you, to have entered a Company with so exalted an aim! And as though moved by a spirit of prophecy, Monsieur Vincent concluded:

‘If you are faithful in the keeping of your Rule, God will do through your Company such things as have never been heard of.’

This conference was given on July 21st, 1658. Louise, when she heard those striking and emphatic words, had reached a point when she began to know that her end was near and that her own life’s work was done. She must have experienced profound emotion. Now she comprehended this Rule, which had caused her such anxiety, as a sort of mystic bond uniting the wills of her Daughters. Her work, and Vincent’s work, most intimately combined, were truly the work of God.