



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part IV: The interior life of Louise de Marillac (1)

Part IV: The interior life of Louise de Marillac

The soul mistress of the body

To remark that a great change took place in Louise de Marillac between 1645 and 1650 would be merely naive; for the passage of time still tempests in us all and slows the pace of life. Louise had exposed herself fully to the wear- and-tear of life and she was glad of the tranquility.

A transformation was at work in her as though she were now gathering all her strength for a new ascent towards a richer and deeper life. To assist us in following her itinerary we have no other guide than Louise herself, in a few sparse letters and odd notes which are but rarely dated.

Louise de Marillac had now arrived at a time when she could lay down some of her burdens, when she could be relieved of those heavy cares which had so agitated her mind and torn her heart. Her son had at last found an occupation and was married. The houses of the Daughters of Charity were well established and organised, her Daughters firm in their religious state. The Enfants Trouvés, which had all but foundered in the hurricane of the civil wars, had picked up and was now advancing steadily towards stability.

These intimate letters have been edited for the private use of the two Vincentian congregations. The editors have not attempted—or have not found it possible—to establish any great precision in chronology, but they have been able to convey that a far-reaching spiritual re-orientation was taking place in Mademoiselle and to justify a provisional grouping of the letters into the period before and the period after 1650. This date will provide us with our signpost.

Everywhere she could see the hand of Providence, gently leading men and their affairs to a point of equilibrium, which she herself hoped to reach before she died. She could retreat now into her inner room, whence so many claims had drawn her forth, and pay a little attention to her soul.

Let us pause a moment to look again at her portrait. We might suppose that the artist had taken licence and effaced from her features the wrinkles and furrows engraved upon it by her many sorrows. But we have the discreet testimony of her own Daughters that her countenance retained its charm to the end. No matter what hour of day she might be disturbed, her visitor was invariably received with the same smile. 'When we were ill', they said, 'she would come to see us, and it seemed to us that her visit healed us. If she had occasion to reproach us, we knew that her rebuke was just.'

Louise had great powers of persuasion and knew how to get what she wanted. Her charm doubtless sprang from a natural gift of grace, from a certain accessibility of soul. It sprang too from her will to give pleasure and be of use, and therefore from a domination of herself and her humours. This self-mastery was not inborn self-control, placid and cool, but acquired by a strong effort of charity.

First, she was completely mistress of her body, and this was a great merit in her. Her body had given her a great deal of trouble. She suffered from a chronic malady which was apparently some kind of nervous gastritis, which would throw her into sudden fevers, diagnosed—as was usual then with most feverish illnesses—as either tertian or quatern ague. She could take only a little food while the attacks lasted and weakness compelled her to stay in bed. She was extraordinarily sensitive to cold, and especially to the 'bisc', that searching wind from the north-east which often blows through the winter and the spring, attacking the face and neck in particular. When she was about fifty she had wanted to wear the habit of her Daughters, covering her head with the simple peasant cowl. But so bitter were her headaches that she was forced to revert to the fashionable veiled headdress of the great ladies, which is now the normal headgear of her order. Like all feverish patients, she had a firm belief in remedies, discreet and otherwise, some of which she prepared for herself, bestowing them also with the greatest



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part IV: T...

by Javier F. Chento - <http://vincentians.com/blog/louise-de-marillac-a-portrait-part-iv-the-interior-life-of-louise-de-marillac-1/>

liberality upon Monsieur Vincent and the priests of the Mission. She was a devotee of the medical profession and readily left one doctor for another if she thought the new one would serve her better. We need not call this a weakness: only the robust in health can afford to despise healers and remedies.

In 1647, when she asked to be allowed to resign from the Congregation on grounds of health, Monsieur Vincent remarked with a smile that she had already been at death's door for ten whole years and was only kept alive by a miracle, and that everyone would beg God to keep up the miracle indefinitely. Eight years later she renewed the request on the same grounds. Vincent de Paul retorted in the same terms, changing only the number of years from ten to twenty. There may be some verbal exaggeration in the anecdote, but the fact remains that her life was broken up by spells of illness which were to some extent shortened by will-power, and from which she promptly returned to her duties among her Daughters.

Her administrative work called for much time and for a nimble mind. In a letter to a Daughter, she remarked that it had just struck ten, that she ought to have been in bed long ago, but was still writing. All the powers of her mind had to be constantly available for a multitude of tasks: to direct the sisters in their work, encourage and console them, and manage the scattered houses of the institute. She excelled in the professional work of a 'housekeeper-in-chief' who has to put a good face on things with very little money. Monsieur Vincent marvelled, in 1655, that she was so skilful a manager, He did not know, he said, of any religious house that was better conducted than hers. All the houses he knew had had debts and difficulties, while the Daughters, thanks to the prudent management of Mademoiselle, had no debts, even though they had lately had to build and to fulfil many obligations.

This gift for management is a rare and valuable one. It calls for a precise knowledge of commodities and constant retrenchment wherever a saving can be made. Mademoiselle received the most eminent ladies in the kingdom and paid her respects to them in their elegant homes; she was always decently, if poorly, dressed, out of fidelity to her vows. One day Monsieur Vincent, reproached in the Council of Conscience with the poverty of his clothes, replied with a smile: 'No hole, no patch!' Mademoiselle could have said the same. Her deputies, wanting to see her finely dressed, brought her one day a good piece of serge to make a cloak; she put it carefully away in a cupboard, to save for some urgent need. When her son's clothes could no longer be worn in public by one in his position, Mademoiselle would look diem over with care and bestow them on one of her vagabonds. These trivial details shine with the dignity of charity and of evangelical poverty, and they have besides their economic significance. The careful superior of a community, saving up bits and pieces of cloth and thread when her work was done, to use them again, because it is a penance to work with short thread, and because, if the scraps are used, the box will never be empty—such a one had well learned the lesson of poverty.

Notice in Louise de Marillac, as in her director, the constant use of diminutives. In the eyes of the Founders all they handled and all they did was 'little'. With Vincent de Paul, this mode of thought was so habitual that when he wanted to grumble about his chronic malady, a form of malaria, he was accustomed to say that 'his little fevers were a little prolonged'. When the Founders gave their opinion, they expressed their 'little thoughts'. It is interesting to observe how all this—and we could find many examples—is far from narrow-spirited or petty. It is the mark of a refinement of mind which can wait for favourable opportunities to make its full effect felt, and hold something in reserve for use when wanted—'for the encounter', as they said in those days.

In Louise, this natural refinement had been developed by her wide and varied culture. She was well acquainted with Latin, and had a taste for philosophy and theology. She had read substantial books, such as the Imitation of Christ, Luis of Granada, and the works of Francis de Sales. She had studied the Bible. She had a feeling for the fine arts—and indeed more than a feeling, since her pictures have a professional touch. This organiser was also a humanist, an intellectual and an artist. She had no occasion to display the riches of her mind in the letters she wrote, for her correspondents were usually uneducated girls. It is from the letters she received that we can form an opinion. Michel de Marillac, her father's brother, treats Louise as his intellectual equal and as a philosopher, with a settled habit of reflection. Camus was pleased that he could keep up with her a taste for psychology, a difficult study for a woman in the seventeenth century. In the years between 1630 and 1660, when she counted among her friends many society women, she breathed easily in the atmosphere of the salon and the literary world, though she was very far from sharing its interests. In her manner of writing there is not a trace of preciousness; but we observe an instinctive and methodical preference for exact thinking, for the word which best



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part IV: T...

by Javier F. Chento - <http://vincentians.com/blog/louise-de-marillac-a-portrait-part-iv-the-interior-life-of-louise-de-marillac-1/>

expresses the idea, for the noble and plain phrase. She adopted a clear and exact syntax and wrote in correct French. The style of Montaigne was still loaded with archaisms; even Francis de Sales is not always free from them. But Louise wrote a very deliberate French in the style of the educated ladies of her day, the style of a lady of refinement and not of a pedant.

In her search for the truth she was always very much a woman. By this I do not mean to imply that she used subtlety in either thought or action. I mean that she was always careful, in the manner of refined women, to please, to conciliate and to persuade. She could use the word that caresses, the turn of phrase that sets her reader at ease. A Daughter reading a letter from Mademoiselle was made to feel that she herself was, at that moment, Louise de Marillac's only care. So reproach could be accepted without any bitterness. We can savour the charm of this feminine style of writing in a letter written to Vincent de Paul. She knows he is very busy and that she is very importunate, but she wants something from him, and this is how she writes:

'May I appear before you as a poor suppliant, and beg you, for the love of God, to grant me the charitable alms of a little visit? I am in great need of this, since I am not able to send the matter to you, but it is hindering me from doing many things, and so I am obliged to trouble you.

P.S. If your charity could come today.'

Observe the imperative postscript, the work of a woman who has already gained her point and only needs to press her victory home. There is another letter to Monsieur Vincent which ends with the words: 'Do you know that I am the littlest of your Daughters?' She knows very well that Vincent de Paul would be touched by that avowal.

She was very much a woman even in her faults, and for these we do not have to search, for she herself tells us with great simplicity what they were.

On one occasion, she was distracted. There had been a misunderstanding with the Abbe de Vaux. Her nephew should have kept an appointment with the Abbe, but this had been broken because Louise herself had failed to write a letter, which she had promised to do:

'I am often taken by surprise in this way, because I am little used to conversation. Before God, I am ashamed of this, because I do not make use of my freedom in the world to be more with him. This is one of my greatest faults, and I tell you the truth concerning it.'

We may see what is the fault to which she refers. Her mind is of a serious cast, and it attaches but little weight to words exchanged with persons in the world, even though to the world they are important. So it came about that she forgot them, or seemed to regard them as of no consequence, and sensitive people were offended and hurt. Louise was distracted: for she lived in a whole world of activity, thought and feeling, cut off from that everyday world of triviality in which she none the less had to live.

She was also very quick of tongue. On this point, all who knew her were in agreement. Vincent de Paul, the Ladies, the Daughters, all spoke of her quickness of tongue. She herself acknowledged it and accused herself of it. I do not mean a capacity for quick decisions, which is characteristic of any leader. I mean her sharp reaction to error or fault or cross-grained action. A reaction expressed and exhausted in a word, in a gesture; but one which disturbs others profoundly and with lasting result. Louise once answered sharply one of her Daughters who had wounded her by some impertinence, and the next instant begged pardon for the rebuke. As we have seen, she was prostrated by the behaviour of her son and so great was her agitation that she was completely shaken and lost consciousness. At bottom she was a woman of passionate disposition, who had suppressed both her inclinations and her imagination, just as she had mastered the deficiencies of her body. But she was dealing with a strong adversary and sometimes her passions revolted: Louise was a Marillac to the very end.