Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part IV: The interior life of Louise de Marillac (2)

Her real life an interior one

On the day following the death of Louise de Marillac, during the moving scene in which Vincent de Paul addressed her Daughters on the subject of her virtues, one of the Sisters remarked that Mademoiselle had been an interior soul. To all appearance she had lived in the external world, in a great round of activity and administration. She was obliged to see many people, write a great many letters, and go into the details of many practical matters. But by a natural reaction she was able to withdraw into herself the instant she was at liberty and her frequent retreats into her 'interior castle' sufficed to maintain there a constant spiritual life even when she was not conscious of it. This aptitude was a gift of nature. She said herself that from her early youth she had had a great facility in meditation, which in the end became a faculty of, and a need for, analysis. Where almost all of us experience a real difficulty in self-scrutiny and in selfexamination, she was always turning to her own interior spiritual world as to a refuge. This is perhaps the tendency which she so simply described as the true sense of 'being distracted'.

Within this refuge she found God and herself—herself in the presence of God. From this encounter flowed her prayer, her joys, her anxieties. Here was the source of her humility. We must study this without preconceived ideas. Her humility was less given than Saint Vincent de Paul's to overstrained expressions and measured gestures, yet it was just as profound. She fills us with astonishment. She declared that she was a sinner, that she had a hundred times merited Hell, that through her own fault the community was decadent and in peril of death, as a punishment for her sins. When she wrote to her director, there flowed from her pen the most violent self-accusations of crime and abominable disorder. She would throw herself on her knees before her Daughters, begging them to pardon her the scandal she was causing them. She would stretch herself upon the floor of the refectory and invite the Daughters to tread her underfoot. And the person who spoke and acted in this way was clear of vision, passionate for the truth, penetrating in her self-scrutiny. Was she, then, in error concerning herself? Was she in truth a miserable sinner, or are we to believe that her spiritual reading had in it too much misuse of affective language and that she had formed a habit of using conventional language which was too strong for the purpose, when all she desired was to set in relief her regret that since her soul was not sinless, her love of God was less than perfect? She was too honest and too truthful to use language to disguise her thought. What she said was what was in her mind.

Our inability to conceive of this degree of humility arises in part from the fact that we unconsciously judge according to our own standards, and that, though not exactly drunk with self-esteem, we have some difficulty in despising ourselves by comparing ourselves with others whose deficiencies we feel or suspect. But Louise never compared herself with others. Since she lived continually in the presence of God, it was with him that she compared herself. She was confounded by the absurdity of her nothingness before the Divine Being; confounded also by the gravity of the least of her sins, which since they were directed at God, should be multiplied to infinity. Her practice of the interior life, of meditation and prayer, gave to these things a violent, burning reality, which provoked expressions every bit as burning and violent as the sins, which no words can fittingly describe.

When professional psychologists undertake to solve the problem of the humility of the saints, they merely make it more complicated. We may agree with them that psychoanalysis reveals, in the depth of being, a cauldron from which any and every fever may rise. But if this psychology is scientifically concerned to be objective and complete, it must recognise in those same depths a divine mystery which is an antidote to fevers and poisons. Our being is the theatre of an unceasing conflict, in which we arc at once actors and onlookers. To suppress God before the fight begins and to yield the victory to malign powers, is to mutilate nature by suppressing a problem which we claim to be solving.

Now for some of the saints the real drama lies here. At some hour of their life, a life very possibly both pure and fervent, they have experienced an earthquake of the soul, have lost the feeling for God, the feeling of the presence of God, and all faith in his existence. Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul both made formal

declaration that, for days in the one case, for months in the other, the vacuum was complete and God was totally absent. They were in a kind of Hell, of which they saw both top and bottom—God and the antithesis of God. They felt the gravity of sin more sharply than do the sinners who commit it in seeking their own interest and pleasure. They could remember, and being conscious of some semblance of sin in themselves, the memory burned and consumed them. Hence the use of vivid expressions of horror—expressions which sound affected and are simply realistic. Louise de Marillac was most truly sincere and lucid when she humiliated herself in her nothingness and accused herself of sin. Her humility was an experience.

She meditated on this experimental humility and since she had a very uncommon gift of introspection she saw clearly that it was not sufficient to have plumbed the depths of her nothingness in order to have a horror of it in the presence of God. True humility is a supernatural virtue, a free gift of God, by which it is given to us to sec that God is all and we ourselves are nothing. This is what she said to M. de Vaux, speaking with much freedom, because she felt that she was understood by a man of great virtue and wide culture:

‘Since you ask me, I will tell you very simply that it is necessary to wait in peace until grace shall produce in us true humility; giving us an understanding of our powerlessness, humility causes us to suffer from what you have called slight infirmities, pride, sensitivity, without the hope that all those things can be destroyed in us, who are, and who will be all our lives, tossed about by such agitations.’

In one sense, sin is always present in us. With her usual liveliness, she expressed this idea as follows: ‘Even after confession, it seemed to me that sin remained in my soul.’ This is more than a memory, it is a root, an ever-present possibility which must cause us to tremble and maintain us in a state of humility. At the same time, this woman of direct commonsense, the contemporary of Pascal, having overthrown man, proceeds to set him on his feet again:

‘While the power to commit sin is gravely damaging to the soul, it is none the less a mark of its excellence, and cannot be quite useless to the soul, since God does not withhold the grace which is necessary to abstain from it.’

When she had thus measured the gravity of sin, its permanence, and human responsibility for its permanence, the bitterness and the greatness of the combat of life, it is not astonishing that she should have struggled with sin with a relendessness which, to our superficial minds, seems to spring from an obsession. Monsieur Vincent said of Louise that in her confessions she plucked herself clean, going in pursuit of her slightest fault and weeping for it with such grief and tears that it was scarcely possible to comfort her. Perhaps this was morbid sensitivity, but it is evidence of an exceptionally clear view of the greatness of God and the misery of man.

The faults which gave rise to this grievous contrition were light. Monsieur Vincent, a priest of the utmost discretion in every respect, above all in things like this, once felt obliged to demand boldly, in the presence of the assembled Sisters: ‘What [wrong] have you ever seen in her, in the thirty-eight years you have known her? What have you seen in her? A few little gnats and midges of imperfection but mortal sin—oh, never!’

To Louise, standing in the presence of God, these gnats seemed monsters. She held herself responsible for their continued presence, and punished herself because they were there. Her asceticism was not meant to achieve mastery over her own flesh—which stood much more in need of the gentleness one shows to the poor. No. Her object was punishment. Guilt must be punished with the hair shirt and the discipline. Her director forbade nothing that seemed to be inspired by the love of God; but he restrained his penitent when excess might well become a temptation to pride and endanger her health, which was always delicate and essential in the work she was doing. He allow’cd her the use of a cincture of small silver roses, which he had on loan from Mile D11 Fay, and advised her to use it instead of the shirt of horsehair, which might overheat the blood.

She set death within this perspective of merited punishment. We are prisoners, sentenced to death, justly sentenced, for sin has merited death. To accept the justness of our dying is an act of good sense which already serves as a counterweight to sin itself.

All sorrow’ and suffering serves as a counterweight to sin, though in a different sense. Louise felt convinced that she was called, from birth, to sorrow and suffering. God desired her to go to him by way of the Cross since her life

had known not a single day without sorrow'. Obviously she didn't mean just physical suffering, from which she did feel relief, but also her constant moral anguish. This was her lot and she accepted her cross, embracing it willingly; through it she entered her 'private cloister'. She took with both hands the chalice of sorrow which was offered to her and drained it to the last drop. I do not find that she paid any special attention, as some saints have done, to the redemptive nature of suffering; she took it and embraced it for herself, that she might be likened to Christ in his sufferings; that she might be united with him, love him (since to love and to suffer are the same thing), love him above all, and be one with him in his forsakenness. This imitation of Christ, this resolve to reproduce in her human measure the conditions of our Lord's incarnate Life, is in fact the supreme law written once for all upon her earthly road, to stay with her in all her ways.

If the stress of sorrow was occasionally relaxed, leaving intervals of dryness, these were filled with scruples, those timid but tenacious camp-followers of sorrow. Frequent as the deadly fogs of the seventeenth century, they were the inevitable malady of sedentary people given to analysis and reflection. They are the shadows of the interior life, and no man knows whence they come. Sister Cecilia may love God, but one cheerless morning she will persuade herself that her love is not returned; the idea takes firm root, grows, spreads, and destroys her. Sister Marie forms the notion that she is too much attached to her confessor; she must make a change, or she will be in peril of losing her soul; whereas Sister Louise feels that this same confessor detests her, is quite unable to understand her and is unworthy of her confidence. Thus the confessor is, without knowing it, the accidental cause of a double drama. These are but three examples: scruples are as varied as temperaments. They range from the simple 'gnat', which will take flight if you breathe on it, to the monster which digs itself in and feeds on blood.

Louise de Marillac, when dealing with the subject of scruples, gave her Daughters so much counsel and in such detail that it is easy to see that she herself had had much experience of the trouble. In her correspondence with her director, this is the subject of discreet but continuous complaint. She always needs a full quarter-of-an-hour to discuss her scruple: she would be lost without remedy if a hearing were to be refused. And it was so until the very end. She never succeeded in extricating herself from this flank attack of the invisible enemy, even when, caressed by the Spirit in the citadel, she had driven the foe to the outworks of her soul. She was never free from surprise attacks; ill-defended, she was very often overshadowed by light fears and afflictions, which her director reproached in her as ingratitude to God who bestowed on her very special attractions to himself.

We may perceive these movements of flux and reflux throughout her correspondence and her retreat notes. What we have on this subject is a little too precise and schematic for modern taste. She generally made two retreats a year and would have made many more, had not her director restrained her within these prudent limits. One of these retreats was always arranged for Pentecost, in celebration of the great liberating grace of 1623. Several of these pcnte- costal retreats had, as we shall see, a decisive effect on her progress towards holiness.

The framework of her retreats is strictly classical, divided according to the stages of the spiritual life through which she passed rapidly, using, for her spiritual reading, especially Luis of Granada's Guide and the Devout Life of Francis de Sales. These books hold the attention of the mind and prevent it from wandering, without restricting the liberty of love. A rapid note here and there allows us to record the movements of her heart. I shall return to this point.

Exercised by sorrow and disturbed by contradictory forces, the dogmas and gifts of religious experience were gradually clarified by prayer, and by her efforts on the road towards holiness; while the meditations and graces of every day contributed ever more abundantly to the building up of her original spiritual personality.