



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part IV: The interior life of Louise de Marillac (3)

Her prayer

After a certain date the interior life of Louise de Marillac consisted of nothing but prayer. Verbal prayer had always occupied an important place in her life. The confraternities to which she belonged, and the particular devotions she undertook, imposed upon her the recital of long offices, such as those thirty-three daily acts of devotion by which she commemorated the years of our Lord's life on earth. These prayers formed part of the universal prayer of adoration which is due to God from his creatures. But they were just as much a way of giving expression to the overflowing abundance of her life, which circumstances had forced her to bottle up within herself; whenever she had sought to break her bonds, something had gone awry. Her prayer is therefore one way, and perhaps the best way, of getting to know her.

Her prayer was never sentimental. Love, of course, animated it, but love restrained in its manifestations by humility, as though it were astonished that it had the audacity to show itself. Her prayer is fairly intellectual, seeking as it advances new foundations in doctrine. It is theological, which may seem surprising in a woman, but it need no longer astonish us when we recall her love of philosophy and the scriptures, rare gifts even among the devout of those days. Her prayer is obviously saturated in the Scriptures, and especially of the Gospels, which impart to it a special resonance, different even from that of Monsieur Vincent, which runs in a more familiar vein and springs more immediately from his daily activities and needs.

She addresses her prayer spontaneously to the Trinity. When she begs for a spirit of unity in the members of her Congregation, she does so in the name and image of the unity of the Most Holy Trinity, to which all things must return since all things have their source there. Man is made in the image of the Trinity: he is threefold by virtue of his memory, his intelligence and his will. It is interesting to notice this Augustinian attitude in Louise and to note the importance she gives to memory, which is the reservoir from which we draw the materials of prayer, which we always bring to an end by invoking the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

The movement of admiration and love which the mystery of the Resurrection inspired in her is an original feature of her devotion which I have not encountered in other spiritual writers. What exchanges of love, what effusions must have taken place between Father and Son on Easter morning, when, having shown himself to Mary Magdalen, the Son appeared before the Father. We recall the great phrase of St Augustine: 'We will know only in heaven with what fulness the Son this day dwells with his Father.' The intimate life of the three Divine Persons is the great source of our Paschal joy, which is genuine in proportion as our joy is associated with the joy of the Trinity.

I have given the example of the Resurrection. Louise's prayer follows the rhythm of the liturgy, and here again she is theological, since the liturgy is the visible face of theology.

Her prayer increased in intensity with the beginning of Lent, when in the feasting of Mardi Gras men seemed to lose their reason. Her fervour deepened also in Passiontide, as she lived through the sorrow of our Lord. She prayed to Christ tormented throughout the night of his agony, in the strictly theological statement: 'You suffered as Man because you were offended as God.'¹ Pilate, knowing him to be innocent, condemned him through self-interest, the most insidious of temptations. 'I beg God for the grace to be entirely delivered from this temptation, and never for any consideration let me be separated from justice.' The Good Thief was certainly a criminal with a great many misdeeds upon his conscience, but it sufficed that he should turn his heart to God for him to gain Paradise: 'My Jesus, how easy it is to win you!'

Jesus cried out with thirst, but willed not to quench it: 'You willed to die without any quenching of your thirst, to show us that after your death you would always be athirst for our deliverance.'

Mary, on Calvary, said 'Yes' to the Crucifixion, just as she did to the Incarnation. 'You desired that Mary should



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acquiesce in your death, which was in a sense a tearing asunder, as though you were no longer her Son.'

The prayer of Jesus Crucified rose spontaneously from her heart: 'I no longer desire anything but to be the subject of this despised King. O Cross, how much you are to be loved! I take refuge in you as in my cloister!' This taste for the retired and hidden life, which she had always had, joined the Blood of the Redemption with the radiance of the Annunciation, and with the hidden life of Jesus in the womb of his Mother. The Feast of the Annunciation occurs about the time of Easter, and is not to be separated from it.

This is a feast which, in her life and the early years of her community, marked some very important stages. She returned to this festival again and again, by a natural inclination of her heart, to adore the Infant Jesus in his hidden life. If it is the mystic who speaks here, we note that this is a mother who has known the joys of maternity, and her voice carries inflexions of genuine tenderness. She says to Mary: 'You were happy because at least for that hour, he was entirely your own.' And to Jesus she said, as to a familiar Friend: 'What were you doing while you were in her womb, little Child? And what secrets did you reveal to her?' Here is a thought which opens up the way to a 'Berullian' meditation which might indeed lead the fervent soul far along the road to contemplation. But Louise, a woman 'lost and absorbed in truth and justice', as she herself said, could never allow herself to be led away by tenderness in prayer, and at the height of her fervour and desire for the hidden life she made this declaration: 'It is true that I would prefer to appear no more to human eyes, but should I not in such a case be afraid, that I had escaped from sight in order to be the more esteemed?' It was always thus with her: her eyes were raised to heaven, but her feet were on the earth.

Sometimes in her prayers she had moments of elation, moments when she stood on the summit, as she put it. She also had her moments of dryness, and of calm level going. There were other moments when she came down from the heights of theology to take refuge in that secret life of hers, like a little girl. Here were memories of her troubled childhood—or is it that each of us has a private corner of the mind, where both great and small become again like a little child?

She had prayers of her own composition, original and long, to which she adhered because they were not common property. These she said a fixed number of times and she could not do without them. Monsieur Vincent disapproved this habit, not because the prayers were not correct, but because he held that no one should load himself with unnecessary obligations, formulas or practices. Such things fatigue the soul, and take up time which ought to be given to work or sleep. He ordered his penitent to lay aside these superfluous prayers, but she set such a value on them that he had to allow her to say them in times of anxiety, as, for example, when her son was ill. In one of her letters she admits that she has preferences of this kind:

'I think I should also say to your charity that I once had, and still do have, a certain amount of sorrow that I must leave out these little prayers. My thought was, that the Holy Virgin desired me to do her this little service of gratitude, and that I should find comfort with her by telling her of the things which hinder me, with the resolve to please her in some other way, and to serve her with more fervour; but that my resolutions are feebly carried out, and often neglected.

'Help me, of your charity, and give me your blessing often, and present me to God, all unworthy as I am, as a good father does with his prodigal children, for you well know that is what I am, and that I am, my much honoured Father, your very obedient servant.'

She had another private prayer, and this was most secret, for it was locked up in a casket which was not to be opened till after her death. This was a specially-blessed rosary which she never omitted to say throughout her life. Of this rosary she had several copies made, until there was one for each of her Sisters.

'The little rosary is the one which three years ago I asked permission of your charity to say for my private intentions. I have in a casket a number of these rosaries, with some thoughts on the subject written down, to be left to all my Sisters after my death, if your charity permits. None of the Sisters knows anything about it. This rosary is in honour of the hidden life of our Saviour in his state of imprisonment in the womb of his Mother, to congratulate her on her happiness during those nine months; and the three little grains are to honour her by her three wonderful titles of Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son, and Bride of the Holy Ghost. That is the



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principle of this little devotion, which by the grace of God, all unworthy as I am, I have never discontinued, since the time indicated, and which I hope to carry out in full, by the aid of the same grace of God, if your charity so commands. And this little exercise, in my intention, is to ask of God, by the Incarnation of his Son and the prayers of the Holy Virgin, the purity necessary to the Company of the Sisters of Charity, and the stability of the said Company, according to his good pleasure.'

We do not find that Monsieur Vincent paid any attention to this chaplet as there is no further mention of it in the correspondence.

It is necessary to mention these subsidiary devotions because they allow us to enter into familiar communion with Louise de Marillac. But they are far from characteristic of her prayer, which is anchored to more solid things: to the will of God, as manifested to her at each moment in the Rule; to God's Providence, which protects her at every moment, keeping at a distance every danger, as on that memorable day when the floor collapsed, and which shows itself the whole time in all the houses of the institute, in all sorts of ways which could never be publicly known, but which her heart stores up with careful love.

Let us pause a moment to consider some of her 'summits', which mark her out among the spiritual leaders of her time. Not all of the theologians contemporary with her held the belief in the Immaculate Conception, and devotion to our Lady at that time did not stress this mystery. But Louise de Marillac returned to it again and again, and founded all her thoughts about Mary on it. She said herself, with more brevity than we could wish, that she had meditated on the subject before the Christmas crib, and that she was sorry her mind was not capable of showing the world the beautiful things God had let her see. She goes on to say that the Immaculate Conception was strictly not so much a miraculous privilege as an act of justice, since by the Incarnation Mary consented to become the Mother of God. Her Immaculate Conception had far-reaching consequences for Mary's consciousness, from which was excluded that instinct for sin which afflicts us all; for her judgment, which was always upright and sound; and for her will, which was always strong. We have to admire the tone of this reasoned meditation, which passes from the traditional doctrine of preservation from original sin to a generalisation, almost modern in tone, which links up the mystery of Mary Immaculate with the concepts of thinking and judgment.

It was to this pure source that Louise desired to attach her Congregation, which could become the first religious society consecrated to the Immaculate Conception of Mary. On December 7th, 1658, she asked Vincent de Paul so to dedicate her community during the Mass of the feast day, which he joyfully consented to do. Mademoiselle composed the Act of Consecration, and read it in the name of all her Daughters. In it, she declared that the community took Mary Immaculate as the sole Mother of the Congregation, and gave itself to her irrevocably.

December 8th, 1658, is a date of particular splendour in the spiritual history of the Congregation. Every year the Act of Consecration, first read by the Foundress, is read and ratified. The Act therefore has its place in the history of the dogma, which, by way of the Miraculous Medal, gradually developed to its culmination with the solemn Definition, and the reply of the Virgin herself at Lourdes: 'I am the Immaculate Conception.'

Still more important in the Foundress's prayer was her devotion to the Holy Spirit. This had its basis in an attitude of her mind, which was constantly leading her by the pathways of theology back to the Trinity. And it sprang too from a chance happening in her spiritual life. We recall that, from the feast of the Ascension to Pentecost of the year 1623, she was tormented by a spiritual night of anguish, in which her understanding and her heart were darkened. From this trial she was delivered on the feast of Pentecost by an infusion of the Holy Spirit, and by the gift of his graces of light and strength. She was healed, or to use a better expression, she was conquered. Henceforward, the anniversary of this day was sacred to her. Every year, at Ascensiontide, she went into retreat to prepare herself to receive the Holy Spirit. She spent ten days in union and communion with the Apostles. It was a waiting period, at once quiet and active, in which she prepared her soul to receive a great visitor. She used the time to remove from mind and heart every obstacle that could oppose his coming, or his full possession upon arrival—not only sin, but every attachment that was not to God, and—note this carefully—every attachment to spiritual consolations, which the Presence of Jesus Christ brings with it. Louise took literally the mysterious text of St John XVI, 7-11, where Jesus, taking leave of his disciples, told them he was leaving because of his love for them: 'But I tell you the truth: it is expedient to you that I go: for if I go not, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he is come, he will convince the world of sin, and of justice, and of



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judgment. Of sin: because they believed not in me. And of justice: because I go to the Father; and you shall see me no longer. And of judgment: because the price of this world is already judged. I have yet many things to say to you: but you cannot bear them now. But when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will teach you all truth.' Louise's reaction to these words was remarkable: to receive the Spirit, we must be totally detached from all which is not Jesus Christ, 'and even from the tenderesses of his presence, so that, our soul being empty of all the hindrances which could present an obstacle to him, the Divine Spirit can fill it'. In one of her hours of elation, when she was caught up by the love of Christ, she had said to him: 'Take away from me your consolations and your tenderness, for I desire but you alone.' But now she said to him, trembling, 'Withdraw yourself, leave me empty and alone, for you have said that you must leave me for the Spirit to take possession of me'. Here is a singular development, when mystical asceticism goes so far as to deny itself love and the Divine Presence.

When the Spirit had thus taken hold of a soul, provided it does not resist his activity, he will do great things in it and for it. If we want to know what these great things are, we only have to consider the power of his gifts and the transformation which each one of them could work in us. And Louise, the moral theologian, takes this view of the mystery of the predestined: she holds that the obvious differences between one man and another arise from the varying use which each one makes of the Gifts of the Spirit: understanding, counsel, wisdom, strength. These gifts strengthen our Christian life. They give vitality to the Mystical Body of the Church, and make of us witnesses to Christ in a world which knows him not.

This lofty doctrine was not just an idea but a conviction of her mind and heart. It became part of herself and whenever she wrote, whenever she prayed, she referred to 'the Spirit' as other spiritual writers refer to God or to Jesus Christ. More precisely, her thought tended always towards the Trinity and most willingly towards the Third Person, as towards that love which would make her worthy of the Father by making her more like the Son. This preoccupation absorbed her even at the moment of Communion. She clearly saw that the Communion is food, and that the purpose of food is that it should transform our substance. She besought the Holy Spirit, before and after Communion, that this transformation might take place in her, so that she might come to resemble him by whom she was fed. I care very little for the high-sounding terminology of science; but spiritual writers speak of theocentric and christocentric souls. I venture to use the word 'pneumatocentric', to characterise the spirituality of Louise de Marillac. She is the disciple of the Holy Ghost. She is the mystic of the Holy Ghost. Let me quote here a short saying: 'The Spirit who fills us with the pure love of God. . . . The Spirit makes us obedient to God, so that we may share the divine life.'

This raises another question. Can it be said that Louise de Marillac was a mystic? If so, she came to mysticism by a spiritual way, whose stages we must now mark out.