



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part IV: The interior life of Louise de Marillac (4)

The stages in her spiritual course

The editors of the four-volume private edition of the writings of Louise de Marillac were confronted with a problem very difficult of solution, but of which they well understood the importance.

Many of her letters are not dated; her meditations and thoughts are never dated; this is a serious drawback when one wishes to use them in a study of her spiritual development. We propose to base our remarks upon the provisional classifications adopted by the editors, and to give special attention to papers which may be assigned to five decisive periods in the life of Louise. As indicated by all her biographers, these years are 1623, 1629, 1644 and 1651. These dates need not be rigorously adhered to: they are simply times when feelings, resolutions, and the effects of grace converge.

On the feast of Pentecost, 1623, she had been delivered by the Holy Spirit from a condition of neurasthenia, due to a long series of trials which arose out of the circumstances of her birth. Psychologists may attempt to determine the nature and the causes of this malady by comparing it to similar cases of psychic disorder; but in the supernatural order, this was probably also one of those severe trials or temptations to which reference is made in the Our Father, a crisis in which a Christian stands with his back to the wall, a trial similar to the one which began the ministry of our Lord. From this trial she did not emerge to enter into the fullness of divine peace, for she still had no strength, no capacity to take the right road, no idea how to do so. She fell back again upon herself, no doubt a little closer to God, yet in a colloquy somewhat limited, in which her powers could only find employment in a love of God still largely selfish. This imperfect love, which suffered from a knowledge of its own imperfection, drove her to raise herself up by following the lessons and example of Vincent de Paul and giving herself to the relief of the poor.

It was thus that, by 1629, she had begun the ascent of the holy mountain; as she herself said, she went to God by means of others.

This next stage, like all those which follow, began with a retreat, in strictly classic form laid down by her director. He induced her to rely once more upon herself, and as it were try out her working tools, before undertaking a labour which would draw her out and away from herself and give to her love for God a source of nourishment external to herself. During the next four or five years, with an astonishing strength, she co-operated in this expanding life of love. Thus she found herself on the right road; it is in the love of others that God is most truly found; and it was her vocation to find God in such love. It only remained that she should be fixed and settled in the right way by some precise undertaking or commitment of herself, to which she could give the form of that vow of religion which in earlier days she had so earnestly desired and attempted, and which had then tormented her for years after, because she believed she had broken her word. This was the stage which centred around the year 1634. It corresponded to her entering religion. Henceforth she was no longer seeking. She had completely broken with what we call 'the world'.

It is noteworthy that during this stage—and, for the matter of that, in the succeeding stage also—just when she was pressing forward so eagerly towards the accomplishment of love, it was as if her path were rhythmically punctuated by the blows of suffering; the illnesses which attacked her delicate body, the anxieties caused by the escapades of her son, the tragic events which distracted her father's family, and the anxious scruples welling up from a conscience never entirely at rest. The consequent suffering was mingled, as her director expressed it, with the caresses of God, with the resulting bitter-sweetness which is the true flavour of Christian perfection.

Between 1634 and 1644 she reached full spiritual development and bloom. Delivered from her hesitations, sure of her way, for she had entered upon it under the care of a guide sent to her by God, she was able to bring all her powers into play for the service of God in the persons of God's poor.



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Now at last she was borne along by grace and by the action of grace, though still liable to overwhelming attacks of spiritual anxiety. Her fundamental humility still sometimes brought her to the brink of despair, as when she had to stand by and see all her efforts thwarted by the rough pressure of worldly interests. But this was only by the way. The important thing, not very much in evidence, was the establishment and triumph of her personality, which was to achieve much that was new in the domain of charity and lend its colour to her inner life. She became increasingly aware of this, though she did not dare say so even when the house at Nantes was founded. On that memorable day she felt the joy of working in full accord with the promptings of grace and of being strong enough for her work, which would achieve something real and lasting for the poor. To have come so far was a considerable achievement, and it would rank in the eyes of the world as a new glory in the annals of a great family. It would be entered by God to the credit of a staunch Christian woman, whose love had borne fruit.

On the supernatural plane, where things are not measured to human scale, there is something nobler than the high eminence of the Marillac family; there is renunciation, the resolve to forgo grandeur, and sacrifice, the annihilation of everything that goes to make earthly greatness, the sacrifice of all, even if the gold be pure. I had almost said that, having attained a summit, Louise de Marillac turned right-about and began to descend again into abnegation and selfdestruction. But to put it this way is still to measure by human values. To strip oneself, to deny oneself, to annihilate oneself, is not to descend; it is a process of self-emptying, a shedding of loads, so as to rise ever higher towards summits inaccessible to him who is bowed down by the weight of his own humanity.

For Louise, this flight to new renunciations began with a Pentecost retreat in 1643 or 1644, when she was suffering from shock following on the collapse of the floor at the mother-house. She herself noted the significance of this event in her spiritual life: it was a sign, a warning that God was especially concerned for her, and therefore expected of her some special offering, and not just the works of a love which showed itself in charitable deeds.

In the course of this retreat, the theme of her meditations was Jesus in his Mother's womb. There, he was most intimately united with our human nature; he was one with it, in virtue of a fleshly continuity of our flesh with his own. Louise gave much thought to this hidden state of the Son of God, and tells us that she received singular graces, by which she means, I suppose, moments of pure and divine love. Ever practical, she drew from these graces the following conclusion: 'I have to learn to stay continually hidden in God, in the desire to serve him, without seeking any more the approbation of creatures, or my own satisfaction in communication with others; being content that God should know that I desire to be his'.

This was confession. In the past she had been gratified by the general approval of her activity, and she had taken delight—which was certainly legitimate—in conversation with like-minded persons, with her Daughters, with Monsieur Vincent, with the Ladies. All this she now undertook utterly to renounce, that she might dwell alone with God only. This was the beginning of abnegation.

She was conscious forthwith that this form of self-denial is a painful exercise. She desired to be forgotten by her fellow- creatures—yet when they passed her by, she would be hurt. It even seemed to her that it was unjust when she was ignored; no one understood her: 'Formerly, I did not like it when others took the credit for something I thought I had done myself.' This remark is an admission of a secret wound. The Ladies did their work in their own way, not with ostentation, but drawing up generous plans, which could not but bring their activities into the limelight, though the execution of these plans was left, as often as not, to Mademoiselle and her Daughters. In the eyes of the world and perhaps in their own sight the Ladies obtained prestige for the idea and merit for the result. Louise, who knew what the scheme had cost in terms of day-to-day toil, had no desire to make her share in it known, but she was not pleased that the credit should go elsewhere. Now, however, by a most grievous cfTort, she renounced all desire to keep account of the distribution of merit and effort, provided God was served. So long as God knew that Louise had desired to serve him for himself alone, what did all the rest matter?

There was one sphere in which she was unique, and need not fear that any one else would claim the credit: this was the direction of her Daughters. We know with what love and passionate watchfulness she devoted herself to their formation and daily direction. In leadership that is inspired by reason and the desire for the good, and that is acceptable to subordinates, there is a very subtle joy. The best and most disinterested of men and women cannot but be conscious of it, and Louise had certainly relished it to the full, looking upon it as a gift from God. She renounced it now—and she must have found it difficult to do so, since, unable to give up her command, she could



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not prevent herself finding joy in it. She does, however, record some little progress along this road: 'I may say that I have renounced the ambition to be a leader.' She continued to lead, as a matter of duty—and we now begin to understand what is meant by interior abnegation.

This self-abnegation of hers extended to every part of her life. We have already noticed some of its manifestations. She renounced her dominating love for her son and schooled herself to treat him as she would any other child of God. She renounced certain prayers and pious habits to which she had been much attached. She felt that in this way she was advancing towards God, and that grace was inviting her to quicken her step. Searching for words to express what she felt, but falteringly, as if she scarcely dared claim that she was making progress, she wrote to Monsieur Vincent: 'I feel within me an indescribable disposition, by which, as it seems, I desire to draw near to God, but I know not how to do it.'

In this new way, which she had entered with the sanction of her director, she felt the difficulties which are inherent in such an advance, when considered in conjunction with the external activities in which she was engaged. At the very moment when she was absorbed in her work of spiritual denudation, someone would pluck her by the sleeve to say that the *Enfant Trouvis* had not a scrap of bread left in the house, or that Sister Marie had done something silly. This was during the Pentecost retreat of 1647. But now, and this was a new feature in her character, she found herself absorbing all these daily difficulties and being nourished by them: she built them into the framework of her abnegations. In a letter to Vincent de Paul, she said:

'I believe God does not wish me to taste his sweetness to the full. I have reason to confess, and I acknowledge, that I do nothing of any value. My heart is not becoming embittered on this account, although there is reason to fear that the mercy of God may grow weary of pouring itself out on a creature who so regularly displeases him.'

She was not embittered, she was not complaining. She accepted the will of God, even though it seemed to be turning her away from him. She had stripped herself of spiritual impatience.

She began again, for she was always having to begin again; and as she did so, she could remark that she had made a little real progress, and that from now on she might look upon certain weaknesses as done with for ever. On the Ascension Day of her 1649 retreat, she realised that, at the moment of his triumph as he ascended to glory, Jesus declared that he was still under obedience, as he had always been.

'What has caused me so much confusion is, that formerly I was very much vexed that other people should take the credit for work I thought I had done myself. I have renewed a resolution which I have often made, that I will not trouble myself, but let people believe what they will, provided that God be served, no matter by whom.'

She also understood as though by direct revelation that Jesus, in his obedience to his Father, showed in his life a true union of the life of action with the life of prayer. So the spirit of detachment by which she feels herself to be beset and almost absorbed could be reconciled with her active service to the sick poor and to the servants of the sick poor. There was in her a most true love of God, which previously she had had to renew from time to time by positive contacts and concrete acts; now, this love had become a state, underlying all she did, which would effect her total abnegation without upsetting her active life. It was about the year 1651 that she entered upon this accelerated detachment, and she did it, as usual, in her Pentecost retreat, of which the plan was drawn up by Monsieur Vincent. One of her biographers, Collet, has given us a *résumé* of this retreat, though without quoting his authority. The new features in this plan of retreat seem to be as follows: the retreatant passed very rapidly through the exercises of the purgative and the illuminative way, the secrets of both of which she well knew, to reach the stage of abandonment to God and deliver herself to him to do his will with her. From this point, she no longer had control of the retreat: it was God who guided her. The director and the retreatant were of too great a humility to suppose that they could thus enter the way of mystical union; but the fact is that they had arrived at it, and we shall shortly see that Louise de Marillac made further progress along it. For the moment she believed that her abnegations should still be related to external things, that she would go on and achieve her detachment in this way, yet in reality she was already at work on interior detachment.

'I do not hear that the kingdom of Heaven lies in anything other than thyself, O my God! What then? Thou belongest to those who possess nothing. O truly, thou art the only All! To have thee, I desire to renounce all



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things. O, pure Love, how I love thee! Thou art strong as death! Separate me from all things contrary to thee!

All those things which create obstacles to pure love because they form no part of him, she stubbornly enumerates, probing into the remotest recesses of her being. She begins by rejecting her very being, as a whole and totally: 'I desire to be absolutely extinguished by the annihilation of my whole inner life.' Here we have a genuine realisation of mystic union. But these are only words, and must be put into practice.

She fell back upon the graces she had received; and here we begin to understand that she must indeed have been almost encumbered with graces, so frequently does she mention them. Now she asks that they be taken away, that she be delivered from them—she wants God only. But God caused her to understand that she had not received them for herself alone. She then began to grasp the meaning of one of Vincent de Paul's golden rules: that she was but an instrument in the hands of God, the hatchet in the hands of the woodcutter, the reed in the hands of the basket-maker. This was to be the summing-up of her own personality, and she accepted the verdict. 'I ask of God that he should not subsist in me.'

God alone is. She was never to forget the revelation received in one of her retreats. She had been troubled by a page in the Memorial of Luis of Granada, which spoke of predestination; and she received her consolation when she read, in the same author's Guide, that God is he who is. She had not been unaware of it, but now she understood it as truth, and laid hold of it for ever. Because of this, she could hope to lose her own being in the Being of God. But, as though alarmed at the ambition of her desire, she cut it down to more humane and precise limits; to die essential sacrifice of her own liberty: 'Since I do not desire ownership in my freewill, I resign it into the hand of God, and of my director.'

It will be of interest to note the form taken by this detachment, this mystic procedure, when the Foundress came to apply it, as sooner or later she had to do, in the course of her duty in the direction of her Daughters. Writing in 1658 to Marguerite Chetif, one of the most advanced in spirituality, she said:

'I am not astonished that our Saviour has made you a partner in his interior sufferings. Would you have supposed yourself to be thus honoured before God and his angels, if the honour had cost you nothing? I have not the slightest doubt that his grace bears you up very strongly in your renunciations and your states of indifference. Do you not know, my dear Sister, that these are trials to which the holy Bridegroom of our souls takes his delight, when they are used with loving patience and tranquil acquiescence, without falling into scruple about what we suffer when we are in such a state? I know well that you are careful not to lose these occasions of showing your fidelity, and that your heart will never allow itself to listen to the reasonings of the natural sense, which cause us to look at things from outside the control of Divine Providence, and as though they were not the accomplishment of the most holy will of God.

'I know also that you will turn a deaf ear to any mourning for the garlic and onions of Egypt, to any desire for the satisfaction of being in one's own homeland and among one's acquaintance. These will sometimes speak us fair and seem to do us good, because our feelings are engaged and our minds take pleasure for a-time in thinking of such things; but we do not in the end find that we are any the more virtuous for that. If we are being tried by mortification and temptation, we are at once defeated and in a deplorable state! And indeed, we should be so if we did not hold fast to God by a leaping forward of the mind, saying to him from the bottom of our heart: My God! in all that pleases thee, I am thine! working all our actions, despite temptations, purely and simply for the love of God, contenting ourselves with what his will desires we should be, in that state in which he puts us, whether by the ordering of his own Providence or through his creatures.

'Have you never noted, my dear Sister, what we can learn from St John the Baptist, who knew and loved our Lord so well that he bore witness to him in the ways that you know? Yet the Baptist withdrew himself from our Lord, or rather God separated him from him, by his vocation to penance, although he had not been born in sin. Do you not think that God wished to give this example to those souls which he desires to separate from all earthly affections, that he may fill their hearts with holy love? What consolation, when a soul sees itself thus entirely dependent on his particular guidance! It is sufficient that I should rejoice with you in this dependence.'

The confidence is veiled, that it may come within the little Sister's range and grasp; but we can feel the loving



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vibration underneath the words.