Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part IV: The interior life of Louise de Marillac (5)

Towards mystical union

The word ‘mysticism’ is often slipping from my pen. Yet I know that Vincent de Paul, dazzled by the radiance of Saint Teresa, thought himself unworthy to enter that world of reserved thought. Yet that was where lie had directed Louise de Marillac, not by premeditated design, but in obedience to the movement of the Holy Spirit. During the closing years of her life, Louise entered into the mystical life, as defined by St Teresa: she experienced union with God in pure love and in the silence of the senses and of reason. To this union she was called by God himself, and especially in the course of her retreats, by mystical invitations which she recorded very frequently, with vivid regret that she had not the strength to record them in detail, or to convey any impression of their intensity. Her response to these calls was the simple desire to bring to realisation the intentions of God concerning her. Let us look at some of these texts.

Upon entering the mystic state she had to detach herself from her reason and from reasoning processes; but here her mode of renunciation was very much her own: very French, Salesian, as was natural in so devoted a disciple of St Francis, and perhaps also with a Cartesian clement. Her method consisted of renouncing reason without a total rejection of the reasoning process. ‘I believe that God is within me, and I desire no other forms of reasoning than those which he inspires in me.’ Whatever of reason persists in her mystical life came, therefore, not of herself, but of God. Thus Louise was reassured—and we are warned.

It is not astonishing that she should be called into this way; it is not reserved to exceptional characters. ‘All souls are called to the practice of pure love; when I shall have been lifted up from the earth, 1 will draw all men unto myself.’ She was attracted to that exalted place which is the hill of the Cross, and when she entered upon the royal road of suffering she did not at first realise that it was also the way of mystical union. But she soon understood that ‘to suffer and to love are the same thing’. As I have said, we do not find in her intimate writings that the daily suffering, moral and physical, through which she passed held any redemptive significance for her. She looked upon suffering simply as suffering, and not for any use to which it might be put. Her sorrow is a state of sharing in Christ’s suffering; more than that, of sharing in Christ’s suffering and so in union with him. In fact, sorrow was a treasure which she shared with Christ crucified. That was enough for her, and she needed no other thought or feeling than of suffering shared with him. This is one of the higher forms of love, of that special love which had been revealed to her on the feast of the Sacred Heart. She says that on this day she received ‘I know not what new light on a love which is not common, and which you desire from those human hearts which you invite, to exalt upon earth the purity of your charity’. She sought words and images with which to express this very uncommon love; her humility did not dare to affirm that God was enriching her in any continuous way. She was not worthy of such a love, yet it was not for her to refuse, since the love had already been given.

‘It has seemed to me that God desired to come to me as into a place which is his own, and that therefore I could not refuse to admit him, which would moreover have been quite impossible for me, since I had already once and for all put into his hands the proprietorship of my free will.’

God was then sole Master within her. As I have said, she retained in her mystical life the use of her reason, reason bestowed on her by God, and she made use of it to conclude: ‘I ought then to desire to die, but if I consent to go on living, Jet it be a life of love. How can I not flow into this ocean of your love?’ Elsewhere, returning to expressions which are dear to her, she longed to absorb her being into the Being of God. Taking her stand once more upon the earth, and knowing well that the earth still held her, she went so far as to oflcr the prayer: ‘May the use of my senses be weakened’. We must tremble before the sincerity of a woman who knew the value and force of words and never misused them; she was asking that her use of her own senses, sight, hearing, all the organs of her life on earth, might be weakened. All this was to be to the advantage of a life of another kind, which had already begun in her. Louise was always most discreet and measured in her use of words, yet she dared to describe this higher life: when we are liberated from all attachment to this world and to the senses, from all attachment to our own self-love and our own freewill, and even from attachment to the

sweetnesses of Christ and to his presence, when we have created within ourselves a complete void, the Holy Spirit will come into it and make us live with a life that is divine.

A word of caution. Spiritual writers, or rather, the writers of books on spirituality, have accustomed us to the use of previous metaphors to such an extent that their distinctive shades of meaning, if they ever had any such, have become completely lost. For example, they speak of living with the Life Divine as an ideal at which we ought to aim, but they do not make clear what is the nature of this life, nor what are its conditions, nor the time required to attain to it. But in the present case there can be no doubt that we are dealing with a real experience. For brief moments Louise de Marillac attained to mystical union, and consequently participated in the Life Divine. She was a saint, a holy one, sancta.

This life of union with the Spirit, the Life Divine, she lived in the midst of every kind of turmoil, in face of her poor health, without lessening her activity for her Daughters and her ministrations to the poor. And then, little by little, her environment began to change. The conditions of her daily life were transformed, and what had formerly been a sorrowful and meritorious offering to the Love of God became an element in that Love, and as it were the substance of it. She had carried her Daughters in her heart, trained them and transformed them, loved them that her love might transform them, loved them the more as she watched them grow in grace—and very naturally she had loved them as her own handiwork. Now, and in proportion as she approached the apogee of her own ascetic course, the expression of her tenderness, while still vivid, lent more to nature. Her Daughters were no longer the cherished girls to whom she was individually attached, to one for her vivacity, to another for her meekness, to this other for her very faults. But all were now incorporated into a true mystical body, moving forward to meet the Spirit, and she loved them for the work of detachment upon which, as a community and as individuals, they had embarked, so that the entire Congregation, like its Foundress, might hope one day to arrive at union with the Spirit. The day might be distant, but now it would certainly come. All of us are called to the life of mystical union: we are called as individuals, and we are also called as groups.

The poor, too, were integrated into the life of union as experienced by the Foundress. Like her director and spiritual father, she entered deeply into the mysticism of material poverty. The poor are our masters, our princes and rulers, because in the mystical sense they are the Poor Christ. The more closely we are united with them and with their poverty, the more closely are we joined with the poverty of Christ and with Christ himself. Between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac there was complete agreement in thought, feeling and accent, but it is curious to note that they arrived at this mystique of the poor in different ways.

Louise de Marillac was an aristocrat by birth and an intellectual by tendency. She sought out the poor as a Christian duty, even though the duty should be a hard service even to the end. In her contacts with the poor she

discovered a human warmth which perhaps she hardly expected, and she loved them as part of humanity, though she was still the great lady intent upon her duty. But Christian doctrine, touched and transformed by the Vincentian fire, transformed her ordinary human attitudes.

Vincent de Paul, on the other hand, was of peasant origin, and concrete by tendency. He did not have to go to the poor, or seek them out. He was one of them, and between his soul and theirs there was an affinity. He loved them spontaneously because he and they were, humanly speaking, one. Since lie was a Christian, it was in them that he found the image of God, and God himself.

These formulas are, of course, over-simplified, and not absolutely just. Yet wc may venture to say that, while Vincent went to God as he found him in the poor, Louise went to the poor by God and through God. The result is the same: when they speak of the poor, the terms they use are the same terms. But there is a slight variation in tone, which we can discern if we put ourselves in the place of one of the poor, who would have liked, had he dared, to take his brother’s hand in his, but to kiss the hand of the great lady.

We have come now to 1658-1659. The general impression now is that the external details of Louise’s life had all been subordinated to her interior life, and that they were now, from day to day, being transformed into diat unique spiritual offering which she made to the Holy Spirit in her union with him: This was her work of love, and it was a love wluch was dramatic in character, for it was uncertain and always threatened from without, and it was always

in need of external support. Such was the contradictory nature, and the limitations, of a mystical life which burned, which was devoured, with ardent love.

This woman had suffered too much, she had been too much pounded and bruised throughout her childhood, too deeply wounded in the depths of her personality; and it is little wonder that to the end of her days she was fearful when memory rose up to haunt her. An exact sense of sin and of the weakness of human nature nourished in her an anxiety which was a permanent factor in her makeup, and which is indeed a familiar experience of even the most balanced characters. Hence the periodical assaults upon this soul, otherwise so sturdy, of astonishing alarms and paralysing fears which made her a child again, a scared child in need of comfort and reassurance. A few words would suffice to calm the storm, but she could not do without those words: ten minutes talk with him who knew the secrets of peace. Without her director, all would have been lost: she had no idea what she would do, she would have to appear before God in a state of inexpressible confusion.

The time had come when Mademoiselle could no longer go out of doors very much; and since Vincent de Paul also scarcely ever left his chamber, Louise was deprived of his society and his strong support.

The situation became tense. She wrote:

‘Also tomorrow is the 25th of the month [of July], on which day there should be said the Holy Mass for the whole Company, for the needs and intentions which your charity knows.

‘Permit me, my much honoured Father, to tell you that my powerlessness to do any good prevents me from having any pleasing thing to offer to our Saviour, apart from my miserable renewal, except the privation of the only consolation which his goodness has granted me in thirty-five years. I accept this for love of him, in the manner which his providence ordains, hoping of his goodness and your charity one and the same help by an interior way, and I ask it of you, for the love of the union of the Son of God with human nature, without losing hope, however, of seeing you when that shall be possible without harm to the little health which God has given you. I beg of him to preserve it to you, until the entire accomplishment of his purposes for your soul, to his glory and for the benefit of several others, of whom I have the honour to be one.’

It is necessary to hear out to the end that plaintive voice, the voice of a woman most pathetic in her weakness. She spoke of it to none but the Father, and perhaps that was why she was sometimes so depressed. To her Daughters she showed her other side: her awareness and her peace. We should read her last letter, written to one of her beloved Daughters. It is so tranquil, so tranquillising, so full of gentle expressions, that it seems to come from out of another world.

‘I do not doubt that you have a great deal to do, nor also that you take great care to help our Sisters to work at their perfection. Please always to send me news of them, I beg, and tell me especially if, while engaged in external serving, their interior consciousness is engaged, for the love of our Lord, in watchfulness over themselves, to conquer their passions and suppress them, refusing their senses anything which could cause them to give offence to God. Without this interior vigilance, you know that external acts cannot give great pleasure to God, nor merit reward for us, since they arc not united with those of our Lord, whose work was always done in the presence of his Father. You are well versed in his way, my dear Sister, and you therefore experience the peace of a soul which leans in this way upon its Well-Beloved.’

Then came the end. At the beginning of February, 1660, she lay for six weeks completely prostrated by her illness. It cannot be said that she was in her agony, for there was no active struggle with death, but she was remote from all that we call life. She herself conducted this detachment in fitting order. First, she took leave of her children: her son, her daughter-in-law, her grandchild, and gave them her blessing. Then she said farewell to the community, and to the Sisters who were waiting on her, to those who were distant, thinking of her; she gave her blessing to them, bidding them be faithful to their vocation, insisting repeatedly that she died in the love of her own vocation to the service of the sick and the poor for the love of God. That was all. Then, with only the duchesse de Ventadour to watch over her, she could believe that she was at last alone.

A last trial now exercised her heart. Before her departure, was she not to have the consolation of seeing for a

moment him who for thirty-seven years had sustained her, and whom she very dearly loved ? He was but two paces away from her, on the other side of the street. To be sure, Vincent de Paul was now himself so worn out and weak that his legs could scarcely carry him. But at the hour of her death, would he not endeavour once more the impossible, to give encouragement to her whom he had encouraged so long and loved so dearly? She asked for Monsieur Vincent—and Monsieur Vincent sent no reply. Schooled now in sacrifice, Louise renounced this last desire, renounced the visit which would have been very sweet to her before the last closing of her eyes. Yet, if he could not come, let him but write her a word or two, one of those little austere and tender letters with which he had so many times consoled her.

Monsieur Vincent refused. He sent a Brother to tell the sick woman she should depart in peace, and that before very long he would join her. This farewell by proxy had cost him as much as it cost her. The frigidity of it fills us with amazement. But it was necessary that detachment should be complete. The dying woman accepted.

Now, she had given everything.

And yet, it was not so. She had not yet given everything. She was resigned to not hearing from him, she was content not to read any consoling message; but she had not consented no longer to love him. Our literature and art, our mortal baseness, have so cheapened all the expressions of tenderness and love that we now use them with the utmost trepidation. Yet they belong to us as part of our language, and we have a right to make use of them, just as did Christ our Lord himself. Louise de Marillac had surrendered everything. There remained to her only this one precious stone which was enshrined in her heart: her love. Years ago, in many a conversation with the holy Jane de Chantal, a great many secrets must have been divulged, a great many intimacies must have been shared. Madame de Chantal may have told her how, two years before lie died, Francis de Sales had asked his dear daughter to make the sacrifice of her love for him, as lie would similarly sacrifice his feeling for her. And she had obeyed. This was a drama played out upon the heights, and such struggles are sometimes more bloody, and always more noble, than those of human life, and of art.

If Jane de Chantal did indeed so confide in Louise de Marillac, then Mademoiselle knew the way she had to take. She too could make this final offering: and so her heart was emptied of all love, of all loves, even the noblest and the purest. She was without the consolations from her spiritual Father, and without consolation from Christ. Complete emptiness. This was the hour for the Spirit to lay hold of the heart thus painfully prepared to receive him, and to fill it entirely. The mystical union was complete.

And so occurred for Louise de Marillac the event we know as death. We may even note the date of it: March 15th, 1660. But we arc wrong to regard death as an ending. The death of the saints is a continuation, and even a fixed state of continued life. While the earthly body goes through with its own adventure, in corruption and disintegration, dust to dust, until at the resurrection it is remade, the soul united to the Holy Spirit continues its life along a course that is already fixed for ever. Death simply marks its expansion. As we stand at the deathbed of Louise de Marillac, with tears and prayers about us, this is the reality, the only thing that matters. Those who judge as mortals do or pass by as quickly as they can, as though these details bored them, or find the cruelties of the saints very hard to bear and understand, will be led back to the truth by the words of Vincent de Paul. In the conference at which he presided which followed Louise’s death, he said very simply, mastering his own emotion, that he had been deprived of the consolation of seeing the dying woman again, and that Providence had willed this for her perfection. This is the word that must endure. That death, crowning so many sacrifices, was an achievement, a perfection.

There is nothing consistent about the metaphors we habitually use, giving no thought to their origin. It is said that with the memory of the dead, and particularly of the saints, there is mingled the perfume of their virtues. Pious legend, turning a metaphor into fact, declares that from the tombs of some of the dead a persistent perfume does indeed arise.

The Abbé Gobillon, who was an intelligent and loyal man, declared at the process for the beatification of Vincent de Paul that after the death of Louise de Marillac, and for a long time thereafter, he noticed a particular perfume about her tomb. He observed that the Sisters who came to visit the tomb also noticed this perfume, carrying it away upon their habits, and spreading it about the sickrooms where they worked. Who can say what degree of

simplicity and purity of heart is required, before the spiritual perfume can be noticed ? However this may be, the perfume which emerged from a tomb that was glorious, mingled with the gloom that once enveloped an anxious cradle. Within this mystery, the meaning of which we cannot know, unfolds the paradox of a holiness which is acceptable to God, a holiness which defied the world for the world's confusion, and for its own salvation.