

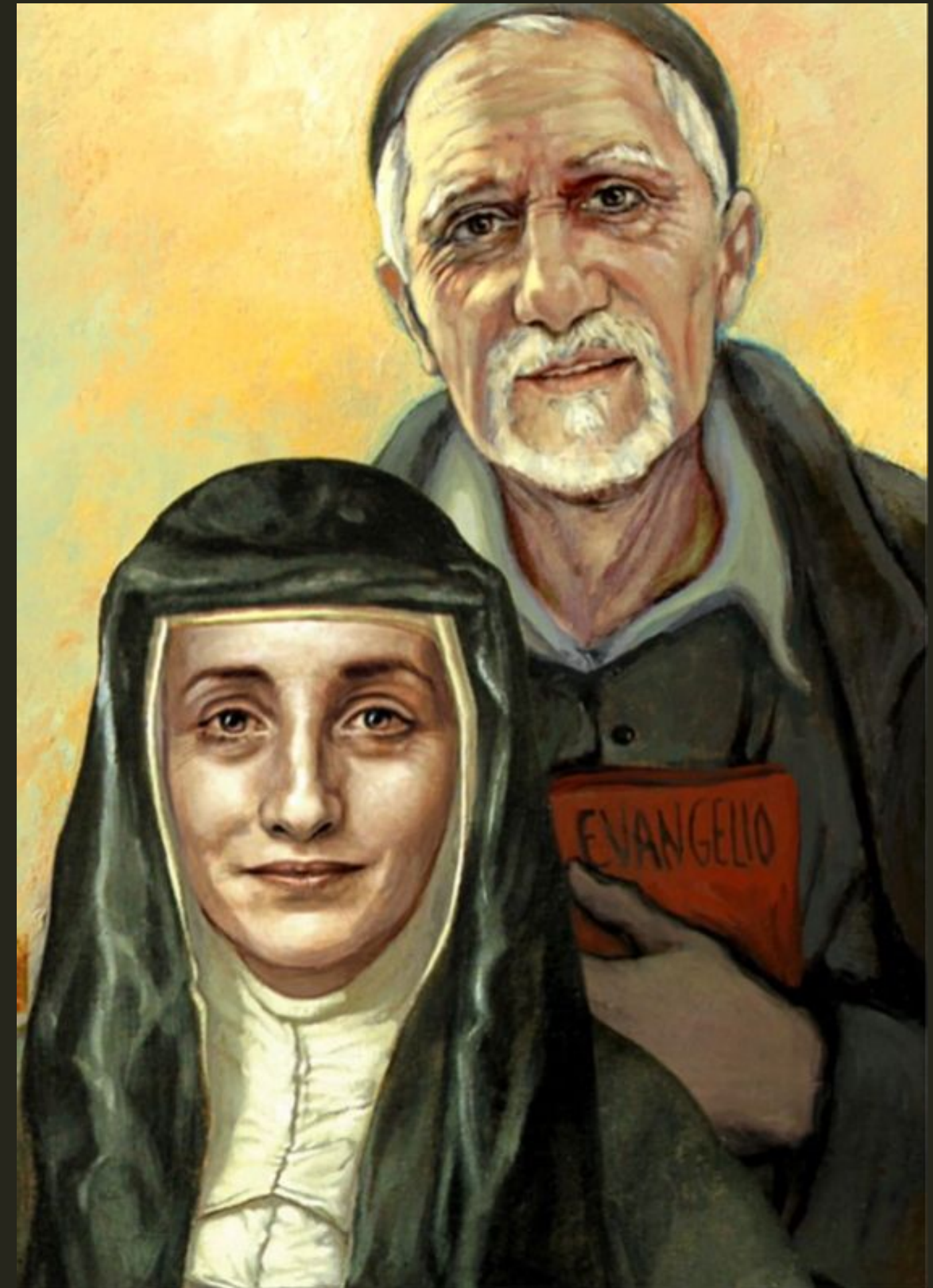
Collaboration between two exceptional people Vincent and Louise

Sr. Maggie Reynolds, DC of Australia offers these reflections on Collaboration between two exceptional people Vincent and Louise.

They put into practice the words of Bonnie LeMelle Abadie quoted at the beginning of this essay: Collaboration is challenging, time-consuming, even frustrating, but, it is also trusting that our time together is well spent and that our efforts will produce new life.

She continues in three parts...

- Vincent and Louise came from very different backgrounds.
- Collaboration between Vincent and Louise.
- What does the collaboration of Vincent and Louise have to say to us?



Introduction.

Collaboration is a word that is often used these days. We often hear that we are in collaboration with our co-workers, our colleagues, those who work in our services, those in our communities, those in our ministries. Collaboration is often referred to as partners in ministry or partners in business, and I found it intriguing to research it in the life of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac.

Let's begin with a couple of definitions on what Collaboration is.

Wikipedia gives us the following definition:

Collaboration is working with others to do a task and to achieve shared goals. It is a process where two or more work together to realize shared goals. [1]

Bonnie LeMelle Abadie, tells us in an article in Pathways:

Collaboration is a journey of sharing thoughts and ideas, of walking with each other, sharing dreams and planning together. It is the process of learning each other's systems of thinking and acting. It is the learning when and what to contribute for the good of the whole. It is becoming okay with letting go of our "lust" for perfection as we perceive it. And, yes, it is challenging, time-consuming, even frustrating, but, it is also trusting that our time together is well spent and that our efforts will produce new life. [2]



Vincent and Louise's profile.

Vincent and Louise came from very different backgrounds. Vincent was a country boy, a farm boy, who was loved and wanted by his family. Louise was a city girl, illegitimate, lonely, isolated, not wanted and separated from her family.

Their life experiences were very different.

Vincent worked on the land as a young child and looked after sheep. He learned to understand the rhythm and timing of nature as a way of life. He was secure within the family even though they were poor peasant farmers. Vincent had a good education and studied for the Priesthood. He was Chaplain to the wealthy, to royalty, to galley convicts and tutor to the de Gondi children. He was a pastor, organized charities and missions, formed the clergy, involved in politics, a member of the Council of Conscience, the founder of the Ladies of Charity, Congregation of the Mission and co-founder of the Daughters of Charity.

Louise was anxious, insecure and suffered deeply from the abandonment she experienced as a child. Put in a convent at a very young age, she received a good education and was very influenced by Dominican spirituality. After her father died when she was 12, she was placed in a boarding school where she received a good practical education. Louise wanted to become a Nun but that aspiration was rejected. She was a married woman, a wife, a mother, a stepmother, a widow, a social worker, and acquired nursing skills. Added to this, she was involved with the administration of charities, establishment of missions, formation of the sisters and co-founder of the Daughters of Charity.

Their personalities were very different.

Vincent was outgoing, flexible, confident, affectionate, adventurous, practical, realistic, cautious, prudent, patient, pragmatic, observant, charming, organized, visionary, moody and wise.

Louise was introverted, anxious, scrupulous, sensitive, reserved, creative, melancholic, impulsive, tenacious, impatient, serious, reflective, pensive, organized, assertive, strong willed and a worrier.

Their ways of operating were very different.

Vincent was action orientated and practical, a collaborative, organized, confident and outgoing man. He was also flexible, adaptable, reflective, prudent, objective, patient, steady and a great networker.

Louise was resolute but had the gift of gentle persuasion. Like Vincent she was collaborative and organized, but was also introspective, and a great planner who paid incredible attention to detail. She was complex, sensitive and impulsive.



Collaboration between Vincent and Louise.

At first glance we might be tempted to say that any collaboration between these two, so very different in backgrounds, experiences, personalities and ways of operating, could only end in disaster, but their journey together changed themselves, France, the Church and Religious life. For 35 years, they journeyed together, learning to know, esteem and respect each other as they collaborated intensely establishing missions all over France and beyond.

However, as they grew in collaboration, they experienced some disagreements, tensions and conflicts which challenged their relationship. A particular difference of opinion was over finding a new motherhouse because of the increase in numbers of country girls coming to join the community. Louise wanted to be close to St. Lazare and Vincent wasn't particularly keen on that idea. In this instance, letters go backwards and forwards for twelve months between September 1640 and September 1641, and we get a glimpse of the tension between them, when Vincent says to Louise:

We must keep on praying for the house; I am not so worried about it as about the way to set you up right now in a rented lodging. O Jesus! Mademoiselle, your concerns do not depend on a house, but on the continuation of God's blessing on the work. [3]

Eventually a house came up for sale over the road to St. Lazare and Vincent bought it. On September 6 or 7th, 1641, he wrote to Louise:

We finally have the contract of purchase (for the house) and the money has been paid. Please let me know how many rooms there are. We shall announce the purchase tomorrow in the homily. [4]



The deep inner wound of abandonment that Louise suffered affected her throughout her life, and around 1642 she began to feel abandoned by Vincent. He was very busy establishing the Congregation of the Mission, and involved in formation for the Clergy, Tuesday Conferences, setting up a Seminaries, the Council of Conscience, and new missions all over France and beyond. Louise felt she was left on her own with the new community, forming sisters, supporting them in missions such as hospitals and orphanages, dealing with issues between sisters and the constant issues regarding her son. Louise would write Vincent a letter and he would send the reply in the margin. He would say that he would give the sisters a conference on a certain day but he wouldn't turn up. These are the busy years when their correspondence lessened and it literally took the roof to fall in to get Vincent's attention.

On June 8, 1642, Vincent wrote to Louise:

Mon Dieu, Mademoiselle, how shocked I was this morning when Monsieur Portail told me about the accident that happened at your house yesterday.... God willing, I hope to have the happiness of seeing you here, if you come to Vespers, or at your house. I am sending you these lines, meanwhile, to greet you and to wish you good day in advance. I am your servant. .[5]

A serious conflict arose over the Approbation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, and the danger of them being placed under the Archbishop of Paris.

Between August and November 1646, Vincent wrote to Jean-Francois de Gondi, Archbishop of Paris asking him to erect the company under the title of Confraternity of Charity of the Servants of the Sick Poor in Parishes. He states:

Because, however, works pertaining to the service of God come to an end ordinarily with those who begin them, if there is no spiritual bond among the persons involved in them, the petitioner fears that the same thing may happen to this company, if it is not erected as a Confraternity. That is why he represents to Your Most Illustrious Lordship, with all possible respect, that it seems desirable that you be pleased to erect as a Confraternity this company of girls and widows, under the title of Confraternity of Charity of the Servants of the Sick Poor in the Parishes, and to give them as regulations the following articles, according to which they have lived until now, and are resolved to live for the rest of their days.[6]



The Archbishop writes back that he will do this on condition that the Confraternity will be under the authority of the Archbishop and his successors after the death of Vincent.

We will and ordain that those already admitted to it and those who will henceforth be received into it may freely do whatever can relieve and console the sick poor, on condition that the Confraternity will be, and will remain in perpetuity, under the authority of and dependent on the Archbishop and his successors in the exact observance of the attached Statutes, which we have approved and do approve by these present letters. Because God has blessed the care and the work of our dearly beloved Vincent de Paul in helping this pious plan to succeed, we have confided and entrusted to him the leadership and direction of the Society and Confraternity for as long as it pleases God to keep him in this life. [7]

Louise objects strongly to the name and to the fact that it is under the Archbishop of Paris. She wants it under the Congregation of the Mission forever – not just under Vincent for as long as he is alive, and expresses herself freely and assertively. She writes to Vincent:

Could this not uncompromising wording “dependence on the Archbishop” be harmful to us in the future, by the liberty it gives to draw us away from the direction of the Superior General of the Mission? Is it not necessary, Monsieur, that by this act of Establishment your charity be given to us as perpetual Director?....In the name of God, Monsieur, do not let anything happen that would even in the slightest, draw the Company away from that direction God has given it, because you can be sure that immediately it would no longer be what it is, and the sick poor would no longer be assisted....[8]

Letters go backwards and forwards between them, and in 1647 we have a Conference from Vincent on the Rules he has developed, where he states;

It will be a Confraternity and will bear the name of Confraternity of Sisters of the Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor”....So now, Sisters, here are Rules, approved by the mercy of God, which establish you as a Confraternity of Charity separate from the Confraternity of the Ladies of Charity, with whom you’ve been associated up to the present.... You should consider these Rules as coming to you from the hand of God himself, since they’re given by order of the Archbishop, on whom you depend. [9]



Vincent was also assertive and both had their points of view. Louise did not want the Company to become a religious community because at the time all communities were enclosed. If that happened the poor would not be served, and Vincent did not want the Company to fail if it was not protected by the authorities of the Church.

We do not hear again from Louise for six months, the length of time it must have taken her to work through this. No doubt she would have pondered, prayed and discerned about it until she achieved some peace and equilibrium before bringing it up again. She has not changed her mind, but is very calm and firm saying to Vincent:

It seems that God gave my soul great peace and simplicity during my imperfect meditation on the need for the Company of the Daughters of Charity to remain continuously under the guidance given it by Divine Providence in spiritual as well as temporal matters. At that time, I believe that I came to understand that it would be more advantageous for His glory for the Company to fail completely than to be under another's guidance, since that would seem to be contrary to the will of God. The indications of this are that there is reason to believe that when God inspires and makes known His will for the perfection of the works His goodness wishes to accomplish, He makes His plans known at the beginning..... If your charity heard Our Lord say what He seems to me to have said to you, in the person of Saint Peter, I hope it was that He wanted to build this Company on your charity, so that it would persevere in the service asked of it for the instruction of children and the relief of the sick.[10]

Also in 1647 Queen Anne of Austria sent a petition to the Pope, requesting the Company be put under the Congregation and successors. [11]

It is feasible Louise was behind this letter as she knew a lot of wealthy ladies of charity. Her husband had worked in the courts and was secretary to the Queen's mother, Marie de Medici, so she would have had no hesitation talking to the Queen about this matter.

Responses from Rome were slow and the question of approval continued for 9 years. Finally Vincent accepted Louise's wishes for the good of the Company and agreed to modify the text. Meanwhile the text had disappeared so the petition for approval had to be rewritten.

Eventually, on January 18th, 1655, the 'Approval of the Company' was given by Cardinal de Retz.

And since God has blessed the efforts our beloved Vincent de Paul has made for the success of this pious intention, we have entrusted and confided to him and by these present letters do entrust and confide to him for life the leadership and direction of the Society and Confraternity and, after him, to his successors as Superiors General of the Congregation of the Mission. [12]



In August of that year, Vincent gathered the sisters to hear the official text. He told them the company was officially recognized in the Church under the direction of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and his successors, for life. It was signed by Vincent, Louise and all the sisters present. [13]

It took nine years to resolve; but in the meantime, both Vincent and Louise continued to collaborate setting up missions, working with the Ladies of Charity, Hospital Administrators, Parish Priests, Bishops, Cardinals, Politicians, Penal systems, and other organisations so that the poor could be served and evangelised.

Difficulties sometimes arise between people collaborating because they are human beings and human beings have conflicts. Vincent and Louise's relationship wasn't destroyed by this – in fact it was strengthened and they were able to work for the glory of God and the good of the poor. They did cross swords. There were hard times for both of them and they were stressed because they were so busy, but their collaboration was always directed towards the mission. Conflicts would have to surface in people as dynamic as they were because they both had strong feelings and principles. Conflicts and tensions are not to be feared, ignored or regretted, as long as those involved can face them and move forward together. The experience purified both Vincent and Louise. It was their journey – it is our journey.

These two people discovered that they were kindred souls with the same ideals and aspirations. It was their dedication to the same goal, the service of Christ in the poor that attracted them to one another, as both gave their life to following the promptings of God. They were true collaborators and equals.



What does the collaboration of Vincent and Louise have to say to us?

The lively exchanges between these two pioneers of charity, enables us to glimpse the movement of the Spirit in their joint efforts of establishing a new venture in the Church. Animated by a solid sense of mission, and what they believed to be the will of God, they combined their natural gifts and skills in respectful co-responsibility, setting in motion a mexican-wave of service of Christ in the poor that has been experienced worldwide.

They are proof that whatever our background, whatever our personality, whatever our life experiences, whatever trials we have, and whatever conflicts and tensions we experience, these are not impediments to doing good and achieving goals. Vincent and Louise stand out for us as models of true collaborators in ministry, indeed for those in every walk of life.

They put into practice the words of Bonnie LeMelle Abadie quoted at the beginning of this essay:

Collaboration is challenging, time-consuming, even frustrating, but, it is also trusting that our time together is well spent and that our efforts will produce new life.



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