

Collaboration of Sts. Louise de Marillac and  
Vincent de Paul: Differing Personalities  
Brought Together According to God's Plan

from the writings of  
Sr. Louise Sullivan, DC

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## St. Louise de Marillac: the first Vincentian leader to be formed in the way of St. Vincent de Paul

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On 6 May 1629, Vincent de Paul sent Louise de Marillac out on a mission. He sent her to Montmirail to visit one of the early Confraternities of Charity. These confraternities, which had flourished and expanded since their foundation in 1617, had fallen on hard times in many areas. The spirit of their origins was threatened. Someone had to visit them, study their activities, and revive in the members the zeal that had characterized the beginnings. No one, in the eyes of Vincent, seemed better suited to undertake this delicate and demanding task than Louise de Marillac.



# Go, Mademoiselle, in the name of Our Lord

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Thus with joy in his heart and uncharacteristic lyricism on his lips, borrowed from the prayer of itinerant monks, the *Orationes Itinerantium*, Vincent wrote, "Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works."



## Vincent gives Louise some advice of his own

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As a warning that the role of servant leader, that she was undertaking, brings with it joy and suffering, success and failure, as it had in the life of Christ, their model, Vincent continued, "Go to Communion the day of your departure to honor the Charity of Our Lord, the journeys He undertook for and by this same Charity, and the difficulties, contradictions, weariness, and labors that He endured in them. May He be pleased to bless your journey, giving you His spirit and the grace to act in this same spirit, and to bear your troubles in the way He bore His."



# Louise's journey of service leadership

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On that May day, neither Vincent nor Louise was aware of just how far that journey of service leadership would take her, nor of its ramifications for the Church and for the service of generations of persons in need. What they surely realized, however, was that Louise de Marillac had reached a turning point in her life and that her heart was now ready to begin the work to which God had called her and for which he had formed her through the dramatic-- often traumatic-- events of her life. She was thirty-eight.



# A reluctant friendship, at first

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When they first met, Vincent must have reflected, as he so often did concerning the successes of his lifetime, "I never thought of it... it was God." Indeed, who would have believed that the frail, scrupulous woman whom he had first met was destined to become his friend and closest collaborator for thirty-six years and that Vincentian works would, as Louise's biographer, Jean Calvet, put it, "become what they were because Louise de Marillac put her hand to them?" Their initial contacts were difficult. There seems to have been reluctance on both sides to enter into a spiritual direction relationship.



# Vincent's initial reluctance

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Dealing with Louise's scruples took the time and energy Vincent now wanted to devote to evangelization and to the service of the poor. One can legitimately suppose that Vincent did not welcome the prospect of the responsibility for the spiritual direction of another woman of such similar character as Madame de Gondi, who had placed considerable demands on him as her spiritual director.



# Louise's initial reluctance

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Louise tells us, in June 1623, of her "repugnance" to accept any change in spiritual director. It must be admitted that, for this aristocratic, intellectual woman, who had been directed by Michel de Marillac, Jean-Pierre Le Camus, and possibly Francis de Sales, Vincent de Paul, the peasant priest from Gascony, would indeed be a big change. Moreover, at the time, she was coping with the terminal illness of her husband and the burden of being a parent for a difficult child. Fortunately, they decided to try. We are not exactly sure why but, moved by the Holy Spirit, they would set aside their own desires and hesitations to enter fully into the divine plan.



# Louise's initial reluctance

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Over the next four years, Vincent and Louise communicated often through letters and personal meetings, with Vincent guiding Louise to greater balance in a life of moderation, peace and calm. In 1629, Vincent invited Louise to get involved in his work with the Confraternities of Charity. She found great success in these endeavors.



# Brought together by God

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The friendship between these two widely differing personalities, which began so inauspiciously, was to prove to be of incalculable significance for the Church and for the poor. Many difficulties had to be overcome but both Vincent and Louise soon became conscious of the need each had for the other as they combined their considerable gifts of nature and grace for a work as yet undefined except in the mind of God.



# Collaborators, not carbon copies

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Louise de Marillac would always place a high value on Vincent de Paul's advice and support. They were friends and collaborators in the strictest sense of those words. Yet neither her spirituality nor her leadership style was identical to his.



VÉNÉRABLE LOUISE DE MARILLAC  
FONDATRICE DE LA COMPAGNIE DES FILLES DE LA CHARITÉ

# Some of what we know of St. Louise

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- She had borne more than her share of pain in life, teaching her to unite herself to Christ crucified
- She stressed the necessity for gentle compassion, no matter how trying a situation might be
- By suffering with as well as serving those in need, she united herself to Christ on the Cross
- Her devotion to, and encouragement of the sick had its roots in her own battle with illness
- Her family background and life experiences were the antithesis of Vincent's; her leadership style would evolve differently from his



# Urged by the Charity of the suffering Christ

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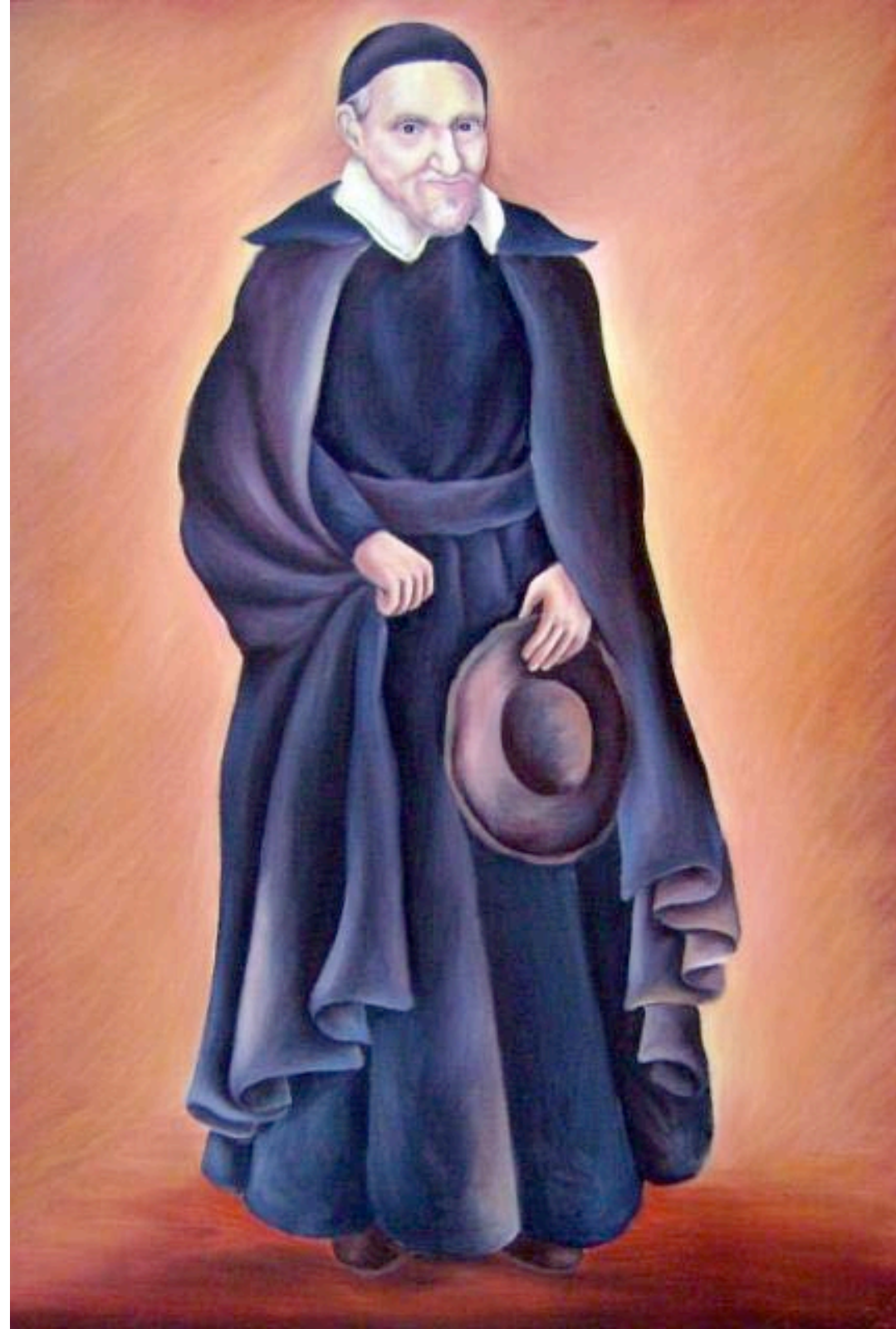
Thus a life from which pain was never totally absent and which was sustained by union with the suffering Savior, became a motor for a vast network of services for those in distress. Accompanied on her spiritual and human journey by Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac transformed a spirituality of the "I", of her own deep relationship with God, into a spirituality of the "we" or as Calvet would call it, a "mysticism of the group." She became a spiritual leader, creating in the works she organized and administered what the late Cardinal Bernadin of Chicago spoke of as "families of faith."



# Legacy of St. Vincent

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St. Vincent founded the Ladies of Charity from a group of women within his parish. He organized these wealthy women of Paris to collect funds for missionary projects, found hospitals, and gather relief funds for the victims of war and to ransom 1,200 galley slaves from North Africa. From these Ladies, with the help of St. Louise, came the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. Vincent also founded the Congregation of the Mission, or the "Vincentians". Vincent was zealous in conducting retreats for clergy at a time when there was great laxity, abuse and ignorance among them. He was a pioneer in clerical training and was instrumental in establishing seminaries.



# Legacy of St. Louise

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Louise co-founded and led the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, mentoring them to a life of service to the poor that integrated contemplation and action. The Daughters were unlike the rest of the established religious communities at that time. Up to this point, all religious women were behind cloister walls and performed a ministry of contemplative prayer.

Louise organized and administered a broad spectrum of works in health, education, and social welfare which continue to our day on five continents.



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