

Sisters' Testimonies

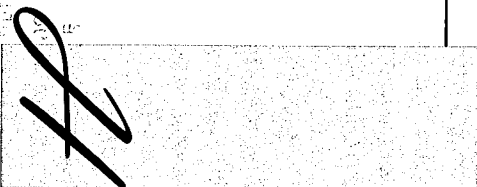
and to have the right to life and to the protection of the Pacha Mama.

I thank my community for so generously allowing me to develop this work among the poor people. Here in your presence, I give thanks today for the call I received, for the ups and downs I've experienced during these 26 years in the mountains and my 42 years as a missionary. May I say again that all your names are on this Cross of the Legion of Honor, written lovingly by the hand of our poor people.

Sister Teresita DUVIGNAU
Daughter of Charity

HISTORY OF THE COMPANY

Louise de Marillac,
formator of lay people



History
of the
Company

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In the first biography of Louise de Marillac written by Gobillon 14 years after the saint's death, I found these words: "Whenever she began her meetings, a great number of the Ladies would go there and they were delighted with her conferences." (Gobillon p.42)

All other biographers have spoken about this: Louis Baunard (biographer at the time of her canonization process), Ponciano Nieto, Leandro Daydi, Marie Dominique Poinset, Jean Calvet, Joseph Dirvin and Benito Martinez.

In my approach to this subject, I have in mind the three basic principles that the Second Vatican Council indicates in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity:

- 1) Lay people today have a mission in the Church which is specially for them;
 - 2) The apostolate of charity, which is vital for the life of the Church, needs lay people and their commitment;
 - 3) Lay Catholics need a strong and solid spirituality.
- This is something that Pope John Paul II also stresses in the Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* and in "Starting off from Christ" which is like a pastoral program for consecrated life in the third millennium.

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With these three perspectives in mind, I notice, with great joy, that Saint Louise de Marillac is truly in keeping with our times. Her life and her teaching regarding the formation of lay people echo the thinking of the Church's Magisterium.

Speaking of Saint Louise, Jean Calvet said, "*She had a gift for imparting instruction and a passionate love of teaching for she valued knowledge as something for which people are made.*"¹ The formation of other people involves:

- Teaching principles, ideas, knowledge, convictions and ways of acting.
- Passing on to others standards which will help them to face life's events in a positive way.
- Providing the key for reviewing our lives and seeing in them the action of God so as to learn how to look to the future with hope.
- Learning to see poor people as children of God and to serve them as Lords and masters.

This is what Louise de Marillac did in the Church in France in the 17th century. She passed on to others her convictions about God and life. A woman of her time, she was pious and charitable and, more than anything else, she instilled into others, particular attitudes towards the poor and a special way of serving them. That is why on February 10, 1960, Pope John XXIII declared her to be patroness of all social works of charity.²

Some points to remember

1.1 - LAY PEOPLE IN THE FRENCH CHURCH IN THE 17TH CENTURY

In his book, "*Le Catholicisme dans la France classique*", René Tavenaux gives a detailed description of the life style of the bishops, priests, religious and members of the great religious institutions but he has little to say about the laity. He only quotes Henri de Lévis, Duke of Vendadour, the King's lieutenant general in Languedoc, a layman who founded the Company of the Blessed Sacrament. This was a confraternity of pious people who met every Thursday and began and

¹ Jean Calvet "Louise de Marillac par elle-meme portrait" p. 129/118

² Pontifical Brief of Pope John XXIII. Cf. M.D. POINSENET: "De l'anglaise à la sainteté".

ended the proceedings with a prayer. They attached great importance to reading the Bible, to the imitation of Christ and to devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. The Company was financed by the alms donated by the members of the Confraternity. In circular letter dated 1660, we learn that one of its objectives was to maintain various works of charity.

*"The Company not only undertakes works of charity (for the poor, sick, prisoners, the afflicted) but also works for the missions, seminaries, for the conversion of heretics, for the propagation of the faith throughout the world.. It sees to the neighbor's needs."*³

The Company of the Blessed Sacrament was a low-key association of clerics and laymen which was founded to remedy all kinds of needs within the Church. In this sense, the historian, J.M. Román, states that the Company of the Blessed Sacrament collaborated in extending the Confraternities of Charity. In 1634 it sent to its various branches a "memo" on the practices of the Ladies of Charity...in order to set up something similar in other parts of the kingdom of France. Nicolas Pavillon, the bishop of Alet, gave his approbation to the Rules of a Charity in his diocese which was an exact copy of the rules drawn up by Vincent. In spite of this, the Church in the 17th century was very much clergy dominated and this was encouraged by the Council of Trent.

We have to wait till the 20th century and the Second Vatican Council for lay people and baptized Christians to have status and a well-defined mission in the Church.

The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity accorded them active participation in the life and mission of the Church, something that was recognized in the early days of Christianity: "*To intensify the apostolic activity of the people of God, the most holy Synod earnestly addresses itself to the laity whose prayer and indispensable role in the mission of the Church has already been dealt with in other documents. The apostolate of the laity derives from their Christian vocation and the Church can never be without it.*"⁴ (Preamble to the Decree)

³ René de Voyer d'Argenson, *Annals of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament*, Saint-Léon, 1900, BN digitised, p 196-197

⁴ Introduction to the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity

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The Council gives its reasons for this: fidelity to the earliest days of Christianity: "Sacred Scripture clearly shows how spontaneous and fruitful such activity was at the very beginning of the Church (c.f. Ac 2:19-21, Rm 16:1-16; Ph 4:3).⁵ It also mentions present day conditions in the world, "progress in science and technology... the areas for the lay apostolate have been widened, particularly in fields that have been for the most part, open to the laity only". The Council also stresses the urgent need for this apostolate: "This apostolate becomes more imperative in view of the fact that many areas of human life have become increasingly autonomous. This is as it should be, but it sometimes involves a degree of departure from the ethical and religious order and a serious danger to Christian life. Besides, in many places where priests are very few or, in some instances, deprived of due freedom for priestly work, the Church could scarcely exist and function without the activity of the laity"⁶

The Council stresses the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church: "An indication of this manifold and pressing need is the unmistakable work being done today by the Holy Spirit in making the laity ever more conscious of their own responsibility and encouraging them to serve Christ and the Church in all circumstances."⁷

In order to give lay people worthy status on the pastoral level, the Council in its preamble asked for a revision of Canon Law with regard to their apostolate and asked for a solid spirituality to sustain them. In number 8 of the Conciliar Decree, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, it was pointed out that charitable and social action is the seal that marks the Christian apostolate.

In 17th century France, the clergy formed a very small part of the population, whereas the diocesan priests were very numerous, as were men and women religious in the contemplative life. So there was no place for consecrated life outside of the cloister. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac would be pioneers of life consecrated to the apostolate lived out in the midst of the world.

5 Ibid

6 Ibid

7 Ibid

So, what then was the place of the laity? Even if they were in the majority, they played a passive role in the life of the Church: they simply listened to sermons, catechesis and received the sacraments with very little Christian formation. Many lay people could neither read nor write, especially in rural areas. That is why so much use was made of pictures.⁸

The Council of Trent had half opened a door to lay people through the parish Confraternities. These could be established by the parish priest either with pious objectives in view or for charitable purposes. Lay people could also be members of the Third Order of the great religious Congregations such as the Franciscans or the Capuchins. In the major cities like Paris, there were also "circles of spirituality" for pious people wanting to deepen their spiritual life. Some of these circles became famous, like that of Madame Acarie who would later become Mother Mary of the Incarnation, in the Carmelites.⁹

1.2 - THE CHRISTIAN FORMATION OF THE LAYTY

We have to differentiate between urban and rural communities. In the towns there were a good number of priests and religious convents as well as Catholic universities and seminaries which were able to offer a very high level of Christian formation. Saint Louise was anxious to provide this formation for her son, Michel. She had him enrolled at the Bourdoise Seminary in the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Charbonnet even though he showed little sign of having a religious vocation.¹⁰ There are other examples of this practice.

In the towns there were people who could provide the means of acquiring a good formation but few people were able to take

8 JOSE MARIA ROMAN "Saint Vincent de Paul, biographie" Editions Alzani 2004 p. 109; 111-112-113, 219-220; 709

9 A very spiritual woman with strong convictions. In January 1618 the future Cardinal de Bérulle had a violent disagreement with Madame Acarie, who was then Mother Mary of the Incarnation, because he wanted to impose on the Carmelites a fourth community vow, that of being slaves of Jesus. Madame Acarie's attitude provoked resistance from many religious and was met with definite opposition from one of the Superiors, Father Duval, who denounced the situation to Cardinal Bellarmine. Madame Acarie died in April 1618. Several Carmelites took the serious decision to leave their convent in Paris and take refuge in the Spanish Netherlands (See JM. Roman's book, "Saint Vincent de Paul, a biography" p. 112. 10 Coste 1 p.29-37- Cf. JM Román, "Saint Vincent de Paul, Biographie" p. 220-221

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advantage of these, only those who belonged to the middle class or the aristocracy. Poor people had neither the time nor the means to achieve a basic level of culture and a solid Christian education.

In the country areas there were few means of formation: no teachers, no schools and the few priests that there were had only a very rudimentary level of formation. We recall that Saint Vincent found some who hardly knew the formula for absolution when hearing confessions.¹¹ There was a high level of religious and cultural ignorance in these rural areas. The urgent need for formation was one of the first requirements that Louise de Marillac perceived during her visits to the Charities, a priority shared by Marguerite Naseau¹², the first Daughter of Charity.

1.3 - THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION: A CHALLENGE

One of Luther's convictions and his ideas for spreading the Protestant Reformation was the establishment of schools and the formation of catechists and leaders. It was by these means that the Protestant Church expanded and spread throughout the whole of Europe from the 16th century onwards. Luther's catechism quickly reached people thanks to the Protestant formation of catechists, pastors and teachers.

So the Protestant Reformation spread across France but more slowly because of the Edict of Nantes in 1598. This Edict granted liberty of conscience to all the Huguenots in France. They were allowed to build churches and to hold religious services except in Episcopal towns, in royal residences and within a radius of 5 miles from Paris. Huguenot aristocrats were able to hold religious services in their homes: they were allowed to open 4 universities (Montauban, Montpellier, Sedan and Saumur); the Chamber of the Edict was instituted to preserve their rights: this was a tribunal made up of ten Catholics and six Protestants: the same thing was instituted in the Parliaments of the French provinces. Like the Catholic priests, the Huguenot Pastors were paid by the government.

In 1629 the Edict of Nantes was revoked by Cardinal Richelieu. Persecution of the Protestant reformers broke out again in 1681. After the Edict was revoked, hundreds of thousands of Huguenots emigrated to Protestant countries. This delayed the progress of Protestantism in France compared with other European countries. The Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants was now over. It has to be said that if some Catholics converted to Protestantism it was because they lacked formation and solid convictions.

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac were well aware of this situation. They decided to respond to this urgent appeal which demanded an immediate response. From 1629 onwards, Louise de Marillac established Charity Schools which were dependent on the Confraternities she visited.¹³ She recognized the work of Protestants in forming village girls and so urged the Ladies of Charity to respond to this need by training teachers and setting up schools. Like Louise de Marillac, other people joined in the work of teaching, which they considered to be an important form of evangelization.

After the Council of Trent, Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605) set out the rules for establishing parish confraternities: their objective was to be a pious or charitable one; they were to be subject to the authority of the Bishops with Rules and clearly defined Statutes, clear-cut leadership headed by the parish priest or a delegated curate. So, under the guidance of Vincent de Paul, Louise accomplished her mission as formator of the laity. In keeping with the practices of the early Church she developed the work of the diaconate of charity as an alternative to the Protestant Reformation which had split and broken the unity of the universal Church.

2- LOUISE'S PREPARATION FOR THE WORK OF FORMATION (1626-1629)

All members of the Vincentian Family know that Louise de Marillac received an excellent education at Poissy. Every aspect of this; the humanist, cultural, social and religious aspects were carefully nurtured. When she became a widow she actively prepared for her future mission

¹¹ Coste XI p170 Cf. JM Román, *Saint Vincent de Paul, Biographie*" p.134
¹² Coste IX, p 77-79

¹³ "Spiritual Writings", St. Charpy, p. 727 A 54

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as formator and we see this reflected in her correspondence with Vincent de Paul.

2.1 HER MEETING WITH ISABELLE DU FAY AND OTHER LADIES

For three years after her husband's death, Louise asked herself what God had in mind for her. She thought deeply about the inspiration she had received; the "coming and going" of the spiritual experience of enlightenment she was granted at Pentecost on June 4, 1623 never disappeared from her mind and her heart.

Although he was a travelling missionary, Vincent de Paul was her spiritual director. He also directed Mademoiselle Isabelle du Fay, a charitable and pious lady from the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. Mademoiselle Isabelle du Fay was a friend of Louise and she had a priest brother, Antoine Hennequin, Lord of Vincy who was a friend of Vincent de Paul (and who entered the Congregation of the Mission some years later). Her uncle, René Hennequin was married to Marie de Marillac, Louise's aunt. This link of family relationship, their belonging to the same parish and the fact that they both had the same spiritual director strengthened the bonds of friendship between the two women. In an early letter that Vincent wrote to Isabelle du Fay in October 1626 he allowed himself this observation: "*Mon Dieu! How different your director's daughters are; one full of respect for the defense of the Church, and the other fully confident that she is right about the Poissy¹⁴ affair! Have courage! Our Lord is honored equally by both of them from what I see of your community, to whose Mother I send my regards (Louise de Gondt.)*"¹⁵

From these few lines we can see that they shared the same spirituality; both were concerned about the change of Prioress at Poissy and the difficulties that would arise under her successor, but each viewed these from a different angle. This concern was understandable. Poissy was the spiritual circle that both women belonged to. Between 1626 and 1629 the letters exchanged by the director and these two ladies reveal the following facts:

¹⁴ Cf. Benito MARTINEZ B, CM, "Empañada en un paraiso para los Pobres" Ed. CEMBE Salamanca 1695 pp 83-85

¹⁵ Coste I, p.25

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Isabelle du Fay and Louise de Marillac were very close friends who helped each other in their spiritual life and in their searching to know God's will. They both worked for the poor and made shirts for them. Both of them were open and obedient to the guidance offered by their director.¹⁶

This period was a formation stage for both women; they read together the gospel and the commentaries on it, they practiced *Lectio Divina*, they attended the same circles of spirituality and read the same spiritual books.¹⁷

They were both concerned by Vincent's long absences from Paris because of the long journeys he had to make for his missionary work. They wrote to him frequently and told him about their spiritual state. So in the letter that Louise wrote to her director on June 5, 1627 she told him about Mademoiselle du Fay's pain and sickness. Vincent wrote to both of them a few days later or maybe even that very day.

In October 1627 Vincent suggested to Louise that she should enlarge her circle of friends. At that time he was in the villages of Poitou and the Cevennes. He saw the needs of these poor country people and their lack of formation so he thought of appealing to the two Ladies on behalf of the Mission: "*I thank you, Mademoiselle, for notifying me of good Mademoiselle du Fay's donation. Please keep it until you need it, unless she thinks it should be set aside and reserved for going to win over poor souls to God in the region of Poitou and the Cevennes. If that is not her intention and she wishes it to be used for the poor of this area, be so kind as to forward it to me and send three shirts to Mademoiselle Lamy in Gentilly for the charity of that place.*"¹⁸

In this letter Vincent asks Louise to help Mademoiselle to make this decision. At the same time he puts her in contact with Mademoiselle Lamy (Catherine Vigor),¹⁹ the wife of Antoine Lamy, (auditor at the Paris accounts department) and President of the Confraternity of Charity at Gentilly. The Lamy couple was a patron of Vincentian works and founded a mission at Gentilly in 1634.

¹⁶ Coste I, p 27-28-34

¹⁷ Coste I, p.29

¹⁸ Coste I p.27-28

¹⁹ *Ibid*

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Louise de Marillac's relationship with Mademoiselle Lamy widened her circle of friends and increased the scope of her works of charity.

A few weeks later, Mademoiselle Guérin, the wife of Gilles Guérin, (Royal Councillor and controller of finances) lived in the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet and was a member of Louise de Marillac's circle. It was Mademoiselle Guérin herself who asked to be admitted to the Circle of spirituality and charity founded by Louise in that parish. Louise's responsibility in the spiritual and charitable domain never ceased to increase...this had Vincent de Paul's approval. In a letter written probably round the autumn of 1627, Vincent entrusted Louise with the administration of donations: he knew that the Ladies had confidence in her: "*As for the money from Mademoiselle du Fay, I gladly approve the use you wish to make of it, and I am also pleased with the decision those good young women have made to put everything in common.*"²⁰

Louise is about to start a charitable movement in Paris. She collects the donations and administers them; she is the formator and spiritual animator of the group that will later give rise to the Confraternities of Charity in Paris.

2.2 - FORMATOR OF YOUNG COUNTRY GIRLS: AN EXPERIMENT OR A MISSION CONFEDED TO HER?

The letters exchanged between Louise de Marillac and her director show a new facet of Mademoiselle Le Gras. We are struck by the detailed information she gives her director about the young country girls she is training and all this took place between 1627 and 1629, that is to say, two years before she began her visits to the Charities. In her letter of June 5, 1627, she gives Vincent this brief report: "*Father, allow me to trouble you once again about a young woman, twenty-eight [years] of age, whom they wish to bring from Burgundy in order to entrust her to me. She is intelligent and virtuous, from what they tell me. However, before her, the good blind girl from Les Vertus told me that her companion, who is twenty-two [years] old, might perhaps come to our house. She has been under the direction of the Fathers of the Oratory for four years and is a genuine country girl. I am not sure that she wants to come; nevertheless, she has given me evidence*

²⁰ Coste I p.31

of some desire to do so. I most humbly entreat you, Father, to let me know what I should do about this."²¹

This account raises some questions. There is mention here of three young women: the 28 year old from Burgundy whom Louise does not know but whom others have recommended that she should train, probably so that this person could work as servant of the Confraternities of Charity financed by the Treasury. But should Louise take on this mission of formation? She asks her director to advise her what to do. The other two girls are virtuous and she knows them, she has already spoken to them and they receive spiritual direction from the priests of the Oratory founded by Pierre de Bérulle. One of them has already expressed a desire to become a member of Louise's circle.

What was Monsieur Vincent's response?...we don't know. Louise is afraid that the next letters may have been lost.²² But Louise continues her mission as formator of young servants of the charity.

In his letter dated January 13, 1628, Vincent is still in Joigny and he asks her to accept and to train two poor girls from Joigny: "*We have decided that they should leave here. We shall send them to you from here in a week's time and ask you to direct them to some good woman who can find them work as servants, unless you know some virtuous lady who may need them.*"²³

Vincent responds to Louise de Marillac by action, which proves that he agrees that she should welcome and train young girls so that these can look for employment, that is to say, that they can find work, a position, and something that gave meaning to their lives. Here it is not a case of serving the poor in the Charities. Mademoiselle Le Gras found work for these young women; one as a servant in the household of Mademoiselle du Fay and the other was employed by a Confraternity in Joigny.²⁴

²¹ Coste I, p. 27

²² Coste I, p.33

²³ Coste I, p.35

²⁴ Coste I p.35-36

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In February 1628, Vincent wrote to Louise, thanking her for taking in another girl from Joigny.²⁵ Louise's work and mission came into being providentially as the result of events and without being planned. It was more a case of the young women coming to Louise. Vincent and Louise judged this to be God's will. Vincent told her, "*Mademoiselle, be in very good spirits in the attitude of willing everything that God wills. And because it is His good pleasure that we remain always in the holy joy of His love...*"²⁶

Joy is an indispensable condition for providing a good formation to village girls who are looking for work and for a sense of purpose in their lives. Louise is a fine tree which is beginning to bear fruit for the Kingdom of God. This is what Vincent thinks and he puts this in a letter to her which he writes on July 30, 1628. The gospel theme for Mass on that day was "a tree's fruits" (Mt 7:17-20). He tells her, "*Now then, I imagine that the words of today's gospel touched you deeply; they have such urgency for a heart that loves with perfect love! Oh! what a tree you have appeared to be today in God's sight, since you have borne such fruit! May you be forever a beautiful tree of life bringing forth fruits of love.*"²⁷

2.3 - THE WORK OF FORMATION DEVELOPS FURTHER

Louise saw her role as formator of the ladies of the bourgeoisie, the members of the Confraternities of Charity, and her work in training village girls to be servants in the Charities, as a blessing from God. She decided to make a retreat to see how she could respond to the inspiration she had to work more intensively at this mission. Vincent encouraged her, "*Well yes, dear lady, I do consent. Why not, since Our Lord has given you this holy thought? Go to Communion tomorrow, then, and prepare yourself for the salutary review you have in mind; after that, you will begin the retreat you have arranged. I could not tell you how ardently my heart desires to see yours in order to know how this has come about in it, but I am quite willing to mortify myself for the love of God, in which love alone I desire yours to be immersed.*"²⁸

25 Coste I p.37

26 Coste I p.36

27 Coste I, p.46

28 Coste I, p.46

During this retreat in 1628, she made the resolution to offer herself unreservedly to God to serve him in the Confraternities of Charity where Christian formation and catechesis were urgently needed. This is how she expresses it on the sixth day of her retreat, "*I must be mindful not to seek tenderness or spiritual consolation as a motive for serving God. Rather, I accept all the dryness and lack of consolation for which my soul is destined. I offer myself in total abandonment.*"²⁹

She informed Vincent de Paul about this unconditional self-offering but he did not respond immediately because of his work, though he thought it was a good idea. When he did reply he gave the reason for his silence: "*You are wrong, my dear daughter, in thinking that I was of the opinion that you should not accept the young lady's suggestion, because I has not given it a thought. And I have not given it a thought because I am sure that you wish and do not wish what God wishes and does not wish, and that you are disposed to want and not want, only what we tell you what God seems to want and not want. Therefore, confess your fault with regard to that thought and never let it enter your mind in the future. Try to live content among your reasons for discontent and always honor the inactivity and unknown condition of the Son of God. That is your center and forever. If His Divine Majesty does not let you know, in a way that cannot be mistaken, that He wants something else of you, do not think about nor let your mind be engrossed in that other matter. Leave it to me; I shall think about it enough for both of us.*"³⁰

Was this director worried that Louise had taken this resolution in order to gain a certain notoriety and shine in the eyes of the world, and that is why he exhorted her "*to honor the Son of God's state of being unknown?*"... This is a possibility because Louise acknowledged in herself the faults of vanity and hastiness. So Vincent took his time in discerning God's will with regard to Mademoiselle's unreserved offering. Some weeks later, towards the end of 1628, he urged her to trust in Providence during this time of waiting: "*Mon Dieu, my daughter, what great hidden treasures there are in holy Providence and how marvelously Our Lord is honored by those who follow it and do not try to get ahead of it!*"³¹

29 *Spiritual Writings*, Sr. Elisabeth Charpy, A7, p.701

30 Coste I, p. 54

31 Coste I, p.68 letter 31; cf. letters 32; 33; 34; 35; 36; 367 p. 69-71

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Between February and May 1629, he wrote six letters to her, practically one after the other, encouraging her to wait trustingly for God's will to become evident and then accept it. Even though he recognized Louise's qualities for the work of forming the village girls, he wanted to be sure that this mission really was what God wanted for her.

During this time, Louise prepared herself spiritually by meditating on the Word of God and giving assistance to the poor people who lived near her, collaborating with Demoiselles Isabelle du Fay, Lamy and Guerin who were members of the Charities she presided over near Paris.

3.- THE FORMATOR IS SENT ON MISSION (1629)

Vincent de Paul continued his missionary work during the years of Louise's "novitiate" (1626-1629). In May 1629 he was in Montmirail, not far from Paris, having been summoned there by Father Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi who had entered the Oratorian Order.³² From the de Gondi family chateau he sent Louise, on May 6, 1629, a letter which was like her "sending on mission." Before this he had already sent her a letter with all the information she needed to get to Montmirail.

3.1 THE TRAVELLING AND ITINERANT FORMATOR

The hour of her mission had now arrived. The "comings and goings" prefigured in the Enlightenment of 1623 were about to begin. Providence had determined the right time and had prepared the heart and mind of this missionary lady. Vincent was convinced that this truly was God's time for Louise de Marillac. That is why without any affectionate or diplomatic preamble he goes straight to the point regarding a holy and sacred event: "I am sending you the letters and the report that you need for your journey. 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 your weariness, your strength in your toil, and finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works."³³

Vincent gave her some advice for the journey: "Go to Communion the day of your departure to honor the charity of Our Lord, the journeys that He undertook for this same day 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."³⁴

He explained some practical details such as how long each visit should last; two days seemed to be sufficient but if necessary she was free to stay there longer, but in this case she should let him know the reason for her extended stay. Everything was regulated!... In 1629, there were more than 30 Confraternities of Charity established throughout the villages of France. From 1625 onward, the missions preached by Vincent and his companions always ended with the setting up of a Confraternity of Charity. This was one of the fruits of the Mission. As their number never ceased to grow, Vincent began to think of a central organization that would ensure coordination between them and would see that there was a good spirit in each of them.

"Some abuses had crept in; some charities were finding it hard to function; here and there the first fervor had waned and many charities felt the need for instructions on how to proceed in the face of unforeseen difficulties."³⁵ There was an urgent need for instruction and formation. This was to be the mission of Louise de Marillac as Visitatrice of the Charities. Providence had revealed its hand and in a spirit of complete availability she set off on the journey.

Until this time her work had been to administer the day to day affairs and the formation of the young women of the Charities. Now she moved to the forefront of work in the Charities. Her work began at once and was very intensive; her mission field was a wide one and completely open to the inspiration of the Spirit... So in 1629 she visited the Charities of Montmirail and Asnières. Her concern during these travels was to help people to know God and this gave her great consolation.³⁶ The formator joyfully passed on to others her knowledge, her standards and

32 Coste I, p.72, letter 38

33 Coste I p.73, letter 39

34 Coste I, p.74, letter 39

35 J.M. Roman, "St Vincent de Paul. A biography", p. 195

36 *Spiritual Writings* St. Elisabeth Charpy A50 p.704-705

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her convictions. The mystic also felt God so strongly working within her and while she went about her business as administrator and formator, she had the experience of spiritual espousal: "I left on the Feast of St Agatha, February 5th, to go to Saint-Cloud. At the moment of Holy Communion, it seemed to me that Our Lord inspired me to receive Him as the Spouse of my soul and that this Communion was a manner of espousal. I felt myself more closely united to Him by this consideration which was extraordinary for me. I also felt moved to leave everything to follow my Spouse; to look upon Him as such in the future; and to bear with the difficulties I might encounter as part of the community of His goods."³⁷

In 1630 she visited the Charities of Saint-Cloud, Villepreux, Villiers-le-Bel and went back to Montmirail and Beauvais. At this time it was at Louise's initiative that the first Charities in Paris were founded in the parishes of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet and Saint-Sauveur. The one in Saint-Sauveur started up towards the end of 1629. Why were the first Confraternities of Charity in Paris established by Louise de Marillac? The answer is simple. Vincent was committed to not organizing Missions in the towns. Since the Confraternities were one of the fruits of the Mission, these two circumstances prevented Vincent from founding them in Paris. Who could have convinced and motivated the parish priests of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet and Saint-Sauveur if not Louise who knew them both and knew how to approach them?

She also took on the formation of the Ladies of the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie who were members of these two Confraternities. She knew them because she had been a parishoner in both places. She went to Saint-Sauveur when she lived in rue Courteau-Villain³⁸ and to Saint-Nicolas when she lived in rue Saint Victor.³⁹ She was President of the Saint-Nicolas Confraternity.

In 1631, Louise visited the Charities of Montreuil-sous-Bois, Montmirail, Le Mesnil, Bergères, Loisy, Soulières, Sannois, Franconville and Herblay. Nothing could stop her. The journeys were uncomfortable as she had to travel by rickety coach, she had to stay at inns which were not always reputable in the villages or semi-abandoned

³⁷ *Ibid*

³⁸ Coste I, letter 38, p. 63-64

³⁹ "Petite Vie de Louise de Marillac" Sr. Charpy, edition DDB 1991 p.18.

small towns but she showed no fear. She sensed within herself the power of the Spirit. She put her trust in the fact that she was doing God's will and this gave her courage and serenity. Like Teresa of Avila in Spain, she moved across the highways of France with great missionary zeal, accompanied by Mademoiselle du Fay or a servant. After each visit she wrote a report which she sent to Vincent de Paul. It is thanks to these reports and the letters of Vincent and Louise that we learn about this formative and missionary activity in the Confraternities of Charity.

3.2 - FORMATION ON A LARGE SCALE: WORK IN THE CONFRATERNITIES

One of the first Charities she visited was that of Saint-Cloud. We know something of what she did there thanks to a letter from Vincent de Paul dated February 19, 1630 in which he tells her, "I praise God that you have the health for the sixty people for whose salvation you are working, but I beg you to let me know right away whether your lungs is being irritated by your talking so much, or your head by so much confusion and noise."⁴⁰

What was Louise de Marillac doing at Saint-Cloud with these 60 lay people? This letter shows us that she spent long hours talking, motivating and encouraging... Sometimes she would explain the catechism, beginning with the Creed and at other times the Gospel or the life of Christ while often she would read and comment on the Regulations of the Confraternity of Charity so that the Ladies should be firmly convinced that what they were doing was honoring Jesus Christ and continuing his mission for the poor. This was her formation work.⁴¹ She would often insist, too, on the need for those who served poor people to view these with the eyes of faith, reminding them of the passage from chapter 25 of St Matthew's gospel: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

From Saint-Cloud she went on to Villepreux, and to Beauvais where 18 Confraternities were fully operational. Then she moved on to Montreuil, Pontoise, Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, Loisy-en-Brie, Gournay-sur-Aronde, Asnières and many other places. She always

⁴⁰ Coste I p.67, letter 40

⁴¹ "Petite vie de Louise de Marillac," Sr Charpy, edition DDB 1991, p. 21

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travelled by coach and along routes she was not familiar with. At night she would stay in inns used by ordinary people where she discovered the promiscuity, the ribald intentions of men, the poor living conditions for guests and their hosts, the moral and religious ignorance of the peasants...she often had to sleep on straw mattresses in cold and badly serviced rooms. Sometimes when not travelling a great distance she would go by horse.

On most occasions she would be welcomed warmly by the members of the Confraternity. "During her time with them, Louise would gather together the members of the Association, encourage them in their work and reanimate their fervor. If she thought it necessary, she would make some adaptations to the Rules..." ("Petite vie de Louise" by Sr. Charpy). She would examine the accounts and the minutes of meetings and so decide whether the Association was working well or if there was evidence of laxity. "She herself would visit the sick, find poor young girls who couldn't read, and try to find a schoolmistress for them. Her enthusiasm was contagious." ("Petite vie de Louise" by Sr. Charpy) This is what we learn from testimonies that have been preserved, "On one occasion she went to a village where all the women were so delighted to hear her that they told their husbands about it and these wanted to go, too; they were told that men were not admitted to the meetings. They did go and they hid under the bed and in different parts of the room and afterwards they asked if she heard confessions."⁴²

One of her concerns was to train catechists and teachers in order to found a school for little girls and older ones who were without schooling in the villages. In this way her formation work expanded and knowledge of Christian truths and standards were passed on to others. It was with this in mind that she drew up the Catechism."⁴³

Organizer of the Charity in Saint-Nicolas

Vincent's letters provide us with some details about this Charity which he was not concerned with since it was Louise who had prepared the way. She began with charitable works undertaken

42 "Petite vie de Louise de Marillac" Sr. Charpy, edition DDB 1991, P.21 or "Documents", Sr Charpy, p.293

43 "Documents" Sr. Charpy, p.958

by the Ladies of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie who were ready to commit themselves to this. Then she spoke to the Parish Priest about it because he was the one who had to establish the Confraternity. Finally, she went with Mademoiselle du Fay to visit the sick people in the parish which they would both be serving.

It is through Vincent's letters to her that we know that the Confraternity was established in February 1630, probably at the beginning of Lent. A Jesuit priest whose name we don't know helped them a lot by motivating the Ladies and the curates through his preaching.⁴⁴ After the Charity was set up, Louise continued to encourage, to arouse the members' fervor and to enroll new members through her formation work and passing on to others her own convictions. This Confraternity was something of a model for the other parishes in Paris. Vincent congratulated her on this, "With regard to your Confraternity of Charity, I cannot tell you how much it consoles me. I beg God to bless your labor and to perpetuate this holy work."⁴⁵

He then gives her some practical advice which he knows she will appreciate. He knows that the curate would like to be the treasurer and administrator so he prudently warns her, "You must take care not to let the curate take the money because of the many difficulties that might arise...of all the methods practiced in the Charity, the surest ones are those that you had in mind."⁴⁶

We can see that they had already discussed the question of who would be treasurer and administrator. They were both aware of the problems that could arise and Vincent refers to these at the end of his letter, "Experience has shown that it is absolutely necessary for the women not to depend on the men in this situation, especially for the money."⁴⁷

Louise de Marillac was President of the Charity in Saint-Nicolas-du-Charbonnet. She belonged to this parish and was elected President. She worked at establishing the Confraternity in Saint Sauveur's parish

44 Coste I, p. 69-70, letter 42

45 Ibid

46 Ibid

47 Ibid

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where she lived from 1613 to 1621. Louise exercised a moral influence there and was recognized as an authority on the formation of lay people. In spite of her tenacity and her ability to convince others, there were problems at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet with regard to the duty roster for organizing the meals given to the poor. "If you now relieve each one at the Charity of the obligation of getting the meat cooked, you will never again be able to restore this practice. If you have it cooked elsewhere and someone at this moment undertakes to do it out of charity, it will become a burden to her in a short time. If you hire someone to do it, it will cost a lot. Then, with time, the Ladies of Charity will say that the woman who prepares the food should carry the pot to the sick, and in this way your Charity will be reduced to failure."⁴⁸

The correspondence between Vincent and Louise gives us a glimpse of the level of vitality in the Confraternity at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. The problem is always the same, in the past and in our own times...Many sick people and few people to serve them. That is why they felt it necessary to have help from some young women who were paid by the Confraternity. Vincent approved this, "I am delighted that you are employing these good young girls." (Letter 43) Louise undertook to train and guide them. The work multiplied and Vincent encouraged her, "So you are a small number of workers for so much work. Oh! well, Our Lord will work with you. The suggestion that each one of you should take a day to feed the sick at your own expense seems fine to me. That is how it is done elsewhere until the day the Confraternity is established."⁴⁹ Vincent knew that times were hard financially and he told her, "It will indeed be proper for you to make use of these offerings for the needs of those poor people. I think you are good managers since you are only spending half an écu. Well now, there are more than five women. I beg God to send you some others. As for the means, Our Lord will provide."⁵⁰

In the spring of 1630, Louise employed five women to work for the poor in the Charities of Paris (Saint Nicolas-du-Chardonnet and Saint Sauveur). She trained, guided and directed them, supervised their work and paid them with money from the Confraternity. During

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Coste I, p. 71, letter 44

⁵⁰ Coste I, p. 72, letter 45

this time she and Mademoiselle du Fay continued their missionary work and visited the Charities in the country areas. In April 1630, Mademoiselle du Fresne⁵¹ joined them on their missionary journeys so Louise saw her network of charity widen from day to day. People in the parish of Saint Sulpice saw the good work being done in the Confraternities of Saint Nicolas-du-Chardonnet and Saint Sauveur and asked if they, too, could have a Confraternity of Charity.

Did the reputation of the Marillac family in politics and in the circles of spirituality (especially the part played by Michel de Marillac) contribute to the spread of these Confraternities? This may well be, but that does not detract in any way from the work of Louise, her courage and her commitment in the formation of the Charities. That could only have had a favorable influence. We can be sure that the name Marillac, with its links to the aristocracy, to the "devout party" as well as to the Carmelite circles of spirituality, opened doors that allowed her to influence the ladies of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. It could also have had some influence on the parish priests and curates of the capital, Paris, helping them to look favorably on her charitable projects. But all that does not take away from the human and gospel value of her initiatives as apostle of charity.

4. - A DEEPLY EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

Louise de Marillac was a very spiritual woman with a deep interior life that reflected her experience of God. We can see this in her Rule of life, in the missionary reports she sent and in her spiritual writings, for example her words on mystic espousal following her visit to the Charity at Asnières: "Throughout my journeying I seemed to be acting without any contribution on my part; and I was greatly consoled by the thought that God wished that, despite my unworthiness, I should help my neighbor to know Him."⁵² This extraordinary union with God is at the heart of her piety and is projected onto her missionary activity.

4.1 - HER INFLUENCE ON THE MEMBERS OF THE ASSOCIATION

What precisely did Louise de Marillac do in the Charities and

⁵¹ Coste I, p. 76-77, letter 47

⁵² *Spiritual Writings*, Sr Elisabeth Charpy, A50, p. 704-705

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what did she say to the members of the Association to transmit to them the power of the Spirit urging them to work for the poor? She does not tell us this but we can guess it from her notes and spiritual writings. So, about the year 1632, she writes about "Conformity to the Divine will" and says, "With regard to self-love.. I hereby renounce it with all my heart and choose your holy will as the directing force in my life. I shall recognize your will by reflecting on the life which Your Son led upon earth, to which I shall strive to conform my own. O holy Will of God! How reasonable it is that You should be completely fulfilled! You were the meat of the Son of God upon earth. Therefore, You are the nourishment which will sustain my soul."⁵³

During her retreat in 1632, she comes back to the same dispositions and makes the same resolutions, "to resolve to follow Him wholeheartedly.. I felt interiorly moved to freely place myself in a disposition of total availability in order to receive the call of God and to carry out His most holy will."⁵⁴

It is obvious that she looks on the service of charity and presents this to others as a call from God and a way of being faithful to His Will, as Jesus Christ was. Knowing how to live like Jesus Christ, to follow him and identify with him, is a direct result of fidelity to baptism. Being like Jesus Christ, living as he did, serving the poor in the way that he did, is to carry out God's will. This is the spirituality that guides her life. We see it in the Rules for the Charity that she drew up under Vincent's direction, "It shall be instituted in the Parish Church, in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, which is a symbol of union. Its end is to honor Our Lord Jesus Christ, as its Patron, and his Holy Mother; to assist the sick poor of the Parish where it is established." ("Spiritual Writings", Sr. Elisabeth Charpy, A 46 p.707)

When we practice charity, the person we should be thinking about and imitating is Christ. He is the source and fountain of Love for every person, married, widowed or single who is a member of the confraternity of Charity. The Rule recommends constant prayer, receiving the sacraments and mutual charity, following the example of Christ. "Read the book about the love of God, in

particular, the one that deals with God's will and indifference."⁵⁵

Vincent has complete confidence in Louise and during her second visit to the Charity of Montmirail, he writes to her on the October 22, 1630, "You want to know whether you are to speak to the assembled members of the Charity. I would indeed like that very much, they would profit from it, but I do not know whether it is opportune or advisable. Speak to Mademoiselle Champlin about it and do what Our Lord inspires you to do."⁵⁶

Four days later, Vincent hears from Louise and discovers all the good she did for the members of the Confraternity. He wrote to her immediately, on October 29th, saying, "Blessed be God that you are cured... That being the case, please continue until you have results somewhat similar to those you have had elsewhere."⁵⁷

What was the source of this spiritual fruitfulness? It is a gift of the Holy Spirit and she herself tells us this in her report on the visit she made to the Charities of Asnière and Saint-Cloud, "During my travels I seemed to be acting without any contribution on my part, and I was greatly consoled by the thought that God wished that, despite my unworthiness, I should help my neighbor to know Him."⁵⁸

Her spirituality inspired by the Incarnation, leads her to serve the poorest of the poor, to encourage and motivate the members of the Charities, to check the finances of the association and to accept with serenity any misunderstandings and difficulties. The parish priest of Villepreux was angry because Louise had assembled the Ladies of Charity and some young women without asking his permission. He wrote to Vincent, complaining about Louise.⁵⁹ She accepted the reproaches her director made and continued her mission, happy to be working for the salvation of souls. This Charity, which had been in existence for 12 years, had lost its fervor so Louise's visit was an opportunity for renewal and making a fresh start.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Coste I, p.80, letter 49

⁵⁶ Coste I, p.88 and 89, letter 56

⁵⁷ Coste I p. 90, letter 57

⁵⁸ Spiritual Writings Sr. Elisabeth Charpy A50 p.704-705

⁵⁹ Coste I, p.75 letter 46, p.76-77 letter 47

⁶⁰ Coste I p. 70, Letter 43; p.78, Letter 48; VIII, p.521, Letter 3297

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Vincent appreciated the work Louise was doing. He continued to help her to simplify both her spirituality and her mission and gave her the perfect instruction which she faithfully carried out, "God is love and wants us to go to Him through love."⁶¹ y li Forming the Ladies of Charity was to be a permanent feature of her life. So, on the Saturday before Palm Sunday, April 8, 1656, when she heard Vincent was to preside over the General Assembly of the Ladies of Charity, she wrote to him, "I have been told that the General Assembly of the Ladies is today. Would you think it advisable, Most Honored Father, to explain the spiritual good that could be done by visiting the poor galley slaves at the time our Sisters bring them dinner? They serve them at ten o'clock - a convenient time for the Ladies to get back to their homes without disturbing their household."⁶²

4.2 - THROUGH PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS AND MEETINGS

From September 1639 onwards, Louise's reputation as a spiritual director spread across Paris and some of the ladies of the aristocracy asked her to give them spiritual direction. One of these ladies was Louise's cousin, Geneviève d'Attichy (the wife of Scipion d'Acquaviva, Duke of Atri in the diocese of Soissons near Beauvais) who was going through a difficult time and wanted to confide in Louise. Louise asked Vincent's permission for this and he immediately advised her to accept this formation mission. "It is not without good reason that you are going to visit a person of such high rank as the one who is asking for you and who perhaps needs your advice to make a decision on something very important. Go then, Mademoiselle, in the name of Our Lord and with His blessing. If the opportunity arises to do something for the children of that place, do it with prudence, a great deal of prudence is necessary in that diocese."⁶³ Geneviève d'Attichy's daughter, Mademoiselle d'Atri, was causing a lot of scandal in Paris and it was said that she was possessed by evil spirits.⁶⁴ This caused the family great suffering. Louise accepted this mission, confiding it to the action of the Holy Spirit. Vincent authorized her to go, using the same words as he did when he sent her to visit the Charities, "Go then, go Mademoiselle, in the name of Our Lord."

61 Coste I p.80, Letter 49

62 Coste V, p.589, Letter 2044

63 Coste I p.85-86 letter 55

64 JOSEPH I. DIRVIN, "Louise de Marillac", Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, p.33

When she was at Beauvais and visiting the 18 Charities (with their 300 members) in the diocese, she continued to counsel the Ladies as well as following up the Confraternities. On December 19, 1630, Vincent wrote her a long letter about several matters she had raised. With regard to one of these, he referred to her mission as counselor and said, "Would to God that good Madame de la Croix could follow your advice! It would be worth as much to her as a good religious order would be."⁶⁵

Day by day, her reputation as a spiritual counselor was enhanced. At the beginning of 1631, Mademoiselle Tranchot de Beauvais went to Paris where Vincent was setting up the Charité de Saint-Benoît. He wrote to Louise, "We have just set up the Charity at Saint-Benoît... You will be talked about at the Saint-Benoît meeting. Mademoiselle Tranchot is telling wonderful things about you. Do you think it would be a good idea for you to take the trouble to visit the good woman, in order to calm her mind so that she can strengthen the others? If you have visited her before, you could easily do so under any pretext you might find, for she will not fail to talk to you about it, nor shall I fail to do so..."⁶⁶

In June 1632, the Charity of Villeneuve-Saint-Georges was having big problems; only 9 members remained. Vincent sent Louise, together with Madame Goussault and Mademoiselle Poulillon, to remedy the situation. He wrote to her from Paris, "I certainly had no doubt at all that you would find great difficulty in re-establishing the Charity and more so than you tell me. But blessed be God that there is some reason to hope that you will set it up again. As for the difficulties you reported to me, I think it wise for you to act as you have written to me."⁶⁷

A month later the Charity was reorganized and on July 10, 1632, Vincent wrote to her, "Blessed be God, Mademoiselle, that in the midst of so much work you are well and that He has blessed your efforts."⁶⁸

The secret of her tactfulness, her prudence and her gift for advising others is revealed when she wrote during her retreat in preparation for

65 Coste I p.93, Letter 58

66 Coste I p.95-96, Letter 59

67 Coste I, p.162-63, Letter 110

68 Coste I, p.163, letter 111

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Pentecost, 1632, "The principal reason for the Apostles' recollection was their love for their Master. This same love must also be the sole reason for my dependence in which, with the help of His grace, I shall persevere all my life."⁶⁹

After 1633 she focused all her attention on the Daughters of Charity while the Ladies took second place. We see this in her correspondence with Vincent.

4.3 - RETREATS AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

As part of her formation work, Louise also directed the spiritual exercises (retreats) of some of the Ladies of Charity. We see from her correspondence that this work began in August 1641. This is what she wrote in a letter "asking if a lady could come here to make her retreat. I do not know if perhaps her husband is not planning to make his with you. From what I have heard, they are people who have suffered a great deal, but I do not know their name. I told him I would send him a reply tomorrow after I have had the opportunity of discussing the matter with you."⁷⁰

Louise began this new mission in August 1641. In May 1642 Madame d'Humières asked to make a retreat directed by Louise at the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity and her request was granted.⁷¹ In July 1647 two other ladies made a retreat and were directed by Louise.⁷² In June 1656 Madame Guergret from the Charity of Saint-Sauveur made a retreat under Louise's direction⁷³ and in March 1659 Baroness de Mirepoy did so and at the end of her retreat asked to take part in the General Assembly of the Ladies of Charity in Paris.

One of Louise's letters reveals the spiritual guidelines she shared with the Ladies during these retreats. "Madame, enclosed are the spiritual exercises that I mentioned. According to the insights which, in your goodness, you gave me into your dear soul, they seem to me to be exceptionally well-suited to you. Put them into practice, dear Lady,

⁶⁹ *Spiritual Writings*, Sr. Elisabeth Charpy A5, p. 714

⁷⁰ *Spiritual Writings*, Sr. Elisabeth Charpy L67, p. 57

⁷¹ *Spiritual Writings*, Sr. Elisabeth Charpy, L68, p. 70

⁷² *Spiritual Writings*, Sr. Elisabeth Charpy, L188, p. 209

⁷³ *Spiritual Writings*, Sr. Elisabeth Charpy, L482, p. 511

living entirely for God by this loving and serene union of your will with His in everything. In my opinion, this practice, in its holy simplicity, contains the means for acquiring the solid perfection God asks of you. Always have a great esteem, my dear Lady, for humility and gentle cordiality. While reflecting on the divine gentleness during your periods of meditation, speak to Our Lord with great simplicity and innocent familiarity. Do not be concerned whether or not you experience any consolation; God wants only our hearts. He placed within our power only the capacity to make a simple act of the will. He considers this alone and the deeds resulting from it. Make as few reflections as possible and live in holy joy in the service of our Sovereign Lord and Master.

In all simplicity I present these suggestions to you, Madame, as Our Lord has given them to me since, in your humility, you requested them from my poverty. I beg Him, in His infinite goodness, to raise your dear soul to the heights of holiness that, in His love, He desires you to attain. Commend me to His divine mercy, I implore you, Madame, and be assured that I have already done what you asked of me and that I shall never forget you in my poor prayers nor will I fail to remember your husband and all those dear people who are so precious to you. May God be blessed!"⁷⁴

Louise shows herself to be a real director of conscience both for married women and for the first Sisters. She counsels, accompanies and leads others to God while respecting the wishes and the liberty of each person. "This, Madame, is what your humility has requested of me and I offer it in all simplicity, just as Our Lord has inspired me." She is not content with simply sharing her thoughts with them; she puts before them high objectives on the path of sanctity. "I beg His infinite goodness to take your dear soul to the highest levels of perfection that His love desires of you." Finally, she asks for prayers, "Recommend me to His divine Mercy and be assured that I have already done what you asked of me, and that I shall never forget you in my poor prayers."

⁷⁴ *Spiritual Writings*, Sr. Elisabeth Charpy, L 40, p. 679

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5. - QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES FOR THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY TODAY

We have been thinking about Louise de Marillac as formator of lay people, in order to learn from her how we should respond to the challenges faced by the Church in these, our own days. The Second Vatican Council asked us to recall what the early Christians used to do.⁷⁵ In fact, during the first centuries of Christianity, most of the converts, martyrs, deacons and deaconesses were lay people. Monasticism and the religious life did not come into existence until the end of the IIIrd and the beginning of the IVth century.

5.1 - IN FIDELITY TO THE EARLY DAYS OF CHRISTIANITY

The first Christians and servants of charity were lay people. St. Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles give a clear account of the Christian commitment of Aquila and Prisca. Paul reminds us that all the Gentile communities were indebted to these two. (Rm 16:4). They were expelled from Rome during the persecution of Claudius. They lived in exile in Corinth and worked as tent makers (the same trade as St Paul); they offered Paul hospitality in their house. Then they went with him to Ephesus and were founder members of the Church in that city, even risking their lives to ensure Paul's safety. Members of the local Church would gather in their home (house church) and they were catechists for the great missionary Apollos. Paul and Luke considered this couple to be exceptional witnesses to the faith. The role of lay people did not stop with the end of the New Testament. Lay men and women have played a very important role in numerous spiritual movements throughout the history of the Church. In the mystical tradition of the XIIIth and XIIIth centuries, many laywomen like Julian of Norwich⁷⁶ played a very important part. In St Vincent's day, Madame Acarie, the mother of 6 children, was one of the most sought-after spiritual guides at that time.

The Second Vatican Council reminds us that ever since the earliest days of Christianity, we have all been called to share in the Church's

⁷⁵ *Documents of the Second Vatican Council, Decree Apostolicam Actuositatem, no. 1*; cf. following texts: Ac 11:19-21; 18-26; Rm 16:1-16; Ph 4:3

⁷⁶ An English mystic in the XIVth century

mission. "The Church was founded for the purpose of spreading the kingdom of Christ throughout the earth for the glory of God the Father, to enable all men to share in His saving redemption, and that through them the whole world might enter into a relationship with Christ. All activity of the Mystical Body directed to the attainment of this goal is called the apostolate, which the Church carries out in various ways through all her members. For the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate. No part of the structure of a living body is merely passive but has a share in the functions as well as life of the body; so, too, in the body of Christ, which is the Church, 'the whole body, in keeping with the proper activity of each part, derives its increase from its own internal development.' (Eph 4:16)⁷⁷

5.2 - IN FIDELITY TO THE TEACHING OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

The decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* issued by the Second Vatican Council, has rightly been called the "great charter of the lay apostolate." In it we find the teaching of Popes and Bishops for the 40 years leading up to the Council, during which the Apostolate of the Laity developed in many different ways. The Council strongly emphasized the fact that the apostolate of the laity is a duty that stems from a person's baptism and profession of the Christian faith.

The six chapters of the Decree present the most important and necessary areas that should form part of the formation of lay people today:

The apostolate and spirituality of the laity. Emphasis is placed on the need for a solid spirituality nourished by personal prayer and participation in the Church's liturgy which finds expression in the continual practice of faith, hope and charity. Lay Christians should look on Mary as a model of the spiritual life and the apostolate.

The objectives of the lay apostolate are: to contribute to the restoration of the temporal order of things so that this may be in conformity with Christ's teaching, with charity and justice in every sphere of life as well as from a cultural, economic, political and artistic

⁷⁷ Second Vatican Council Documents, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no 2

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point of view, in all other temporal affairs and so combat "the idolatry of what is temporal." (No. 7)

The different spheres in which the lay apostolate is to be exercised: the family, young people, the entire social scene with all its differing and complex facets, and on a national and international level.

The different forms of the lay apostolate: As well as personal witness, the Council insists on group or community forms of the apostolate, bearing in mind the appeal expressed in no. 19 of the Decree, "While preserving intact the necessary link with ecclesiastical authority...dissipation of forces must, however, be avoided."

The attitudes required in those taking part in the lay apostolate: emphasis is put on the coordination of different forms of the apostolate, mutual respect so that "damaging rivalries may be avoided," on relations with the hierarchy, on spiritual guidance by the clergy, respect for religious and consecrated persons, participation in parish and diocesan councils and their apostolates (family, young people, charitable and social action) as well as collaboration with non-Catholic Christians. It asks for the setting up of an international council for lay people to support the lay apostolate. (No. 26)⁷⁸

Training for the apostolate: Special formation for lay people is requested. "Formation for the lay apostolate presupposes a certain human and well-rounded formation adapted to the natural abilities and conditions of each lay person. Well-informed about the modern world, the lay person should be a member of his own community and adjusted to its culture. However, the lay person should learn especially how to perform the mission of Christ and the Church by basing his life on belief in the divine mystery of creation and redemption and by being sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit who gives life to the people of God and who urge all to love God the Father as well as the world and men in Him.

⁷⁸ The Pontifical Council for the Laity, an organization that was part of the Roman Curia, was established by Paul VI on January 6, 1976 who issued the *Motu Proprio, Catholicam Christi Ecclesiam*. In December, 1976, the same Pope amended and confirmed this ruling in the *Motu Proprio Apostolatus peragendi*

This formation should be deemed the basis and condition for every successful apostolate."⁷⁹ The whole of chapter 6 insists on the need to organize biblical, moral and social formation for lay people.

With reference to formation for the apostolate of charity, we read in article 31, "Works of charity and mercy bear a most striking testimony to Christian life; therefore, and apostolic training which has as its object the performance of these works, should enable the faithful to learn from very childhood, how to sympathize with their brothers and help them generously when in need."

Who should be responsible for training others in the apostolate? The document mentions the Christian family, the parish community and schools: "Schools, colleges and other Catholic educational institutions also have the duty to develop a Catholic sense and apostolic activity in young persons. If young people lack this formation, either because they do not attend these schools or for any other reason, all the more should parents, pastors of souls and apostolic organizations attend to it. Teachers and educators, on the other hand, who carry out a distinguished form of the apostolate of the laity by their vocation and office, should be equipped with that learning and pedagogical skill that are needed for imparting such education effectively."⁸⁰

This is one of the most relevant challenges for our times and it calls for a strong and constructive response. "Likewise, lay groups and associations dedicated to the apostolate or other supernatural goals, should carefully and assiduously promote formation for the apostolate, in keeping with their purpose and condition. Frequently these groups are the ordinary vehicle for harmonious formation for the apostolate inasmuch as they provide doctrinal, spiritual and practical formation. Their members meet in small groups with their associates or friends, examine the methods and results of their apostolic activity, and compare their daily way of life with the Gospel."⁸¹

⁷⁹ Second Vatican Council Document, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no.29

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, article 30c

⁸¹ *Ibid*, article 30d

Louise de Marillac, formator of lay people

As Daughters of Charity we must respond to this urgent need and the appeal reiterated by John Paul II and Benedict XVI. We ourselves need formation so that in turn we will be able to train others.

5.3 - IN FIDELITY TO THE TEACHING OF OUR SUPERIORS GENERAL

Father Maloney appealed to us to collaborate in the formation of the laity. He urged us to work together as *the Vincentian family* to fight against poverty, in accordance with our charism. He repeated that the work of training the laity is a matter of being true to Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. *"After the Second Vatican Council, and with a clearer understanding of the mission of the laity and the need to develop a whole range of lay ministries, the 1998 Assembly considered this new declaration of our objective as an integral development of the original perception of Saint Vincent's foundation. He himself had wished to bring together the young and the old, the rich and the poor, clergy and lay people, and men and women, to give them a greater share in the evangelization of the poor."*

Father Maloney lists 10 things that should characterize Vincentian formators. They should be:

- Rooted in the person of Jesus.
- Permeated with the Vincentian charism.
- In contact with the world of the poor.
- Capable of guiding others on their spiritual journey.
- Attentive to listening to the Word of God and to other people's problems.
- Able to communicate well with the media.
- Know the Church's social teaching.
- Be able to work in a team and collaborate with others.
- Have links with the different groups that make up our Vincentian family.
- Be a missionary in a multicultural world.⁸²

5.4 - TAKING EVERYDAY REALITIES AS OUR STARTING POINT

After all these reflections, and in the knowledge that we live in a world that is continually giving rise to new forms of poverty, Saint Louise invites us to listen to the Church's calls for the formation of lay people. She is asking us today to take to heart the objectives of the Second Vatican Council as expressed in article 30d of the decree on the lay apostolate.

"The various lay groups and associations dedicated to the apostolate or to any other supernatural end should look after this education to the apostolate with care and constancy, in ways consistent with their objectives and limits."

"The members, gathered in small groups with their companions or friends, evaluate the methods and results of their apostolic action and measure their everyday behavior by the Gospel."

The appeal made by our Superiors makes us realize the challenge that systemic change poses for us.

May the Holy Spirit guide us and give us the strength we need to respond to these challenges. The problem is not a question of age but a lack of enthusiasm and the feebleness of the flame of God's love within our hearts.

Sister Maria Angeles INFANTE
Daughter of Charity
Vincentian Week at Salamanca