

III - Louise de Marillac, Organizer 1660 – 2010

“Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes, for you will spread out to the right and to the left, and your descendants will possess the nations...” (Is. 54, 2-3)

“I don't know what else to say, Father, except that the life of Mademoiselle Le Gras is a mirror in which we have only to look at ourselves.”¹

Monsieur Vincent gathered the Sisters together after the death of Mademoiselle Le Gras to speak about the virtues that they noticed in her and that they wished to imitate. Their magnificent response calls us to reflect as well. The originality of the spirit of Monsieur Vincent is that it is rooted in Jesus who became incarnate in order to carry out **the will of the Father, which is the will to serve humanity**. For Louise de Marillac, her “Light of Pentecost” pointed out to her the path of **mysticism in action**, not just for activities she would engage in later on, but in the living out of her present circumstances. Louise strove to be faithful to God in the present moment. Little by little, as needs became evident, **she gave of herself**.

¹ Coste X p. 577 – Conference of July 3, 1660

In 1625 – Antoine Le Gras has been in eternal life since December 21st. “*I was alone with him to help him, at this important time of transition,*” she wrote. She renewed her vow of widowhood. The plan that stirred in the depths of her heart is expressed in the letter she wrote to her cousin: “*Is it not reasonable that I should be all for God, after being so long for the world? I tell you then, my dear cousin, that I want this with all my heart, and in the way it pleases him.*”² Despite this certainty, she waited for insight from God and sought guidance everywhere. In difficult moments, it is true that in difficult circumstances we need to make serious spiritual effort, but Louise also needed to make arrangements regarding her material circumstances. The absorbing task of looking after the needs of the Attichy family had led her husband to neglect his own family’s affairs.

A decision needed to be made. In the early months of her widowhood, motivated by her financial situation, but even more by her desire to lead a life of solitude, piety and good works, Mademoiselle Le Gras withdrew from the world she had lived in until that time.

She moved into a neighborhood that was farther away from the city center and unknown to the aristocracy. In the parish of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet, she occupied an old building on the street formerly called rue des Fosses Saint Victor.

Mademoiselle Le Gras was not alone, however. Her son Michel was twelve years old at the time of his father’s death. A good-hearted but very lackadaisical boy, he remained in contact with his pious mother and he showed some inclination for the priesthood. The Saint Nicolas Seminary was therefore an appropriate place for him to be educated, and the thought that he could pursue his studies there without living with her was for Louise an indescribable consolation. M. Vincent would for many years be a mentor for Michel, to his mother’s great satisfaction.

² Gobillon, p. 8, 10

In the months just after moving into her home on Saint Victor, Louise worked out a rule of life in the world that she prefaced with the following words: ***In the name of God and with His divine assistance, may this be the way I live!*** This rule began with her rising. "...Immediately after rising, I shall meditate for an hour or at least three quarters of an hour ... After Mass ... On my return home ... I shall work until eleven o'clock... at midday, I shall meditate for a quarter of an hour: I shall try never to be idle. Therefore ... I shall **work cheerfully**, until four o'clock, either for the Church or for the poor or for my household. After supper, I shall engage in some leisure activity for half an hour..."³

Without specifying the content, Louise passed immediately from this to an examination of conscience, noting down several specific points: "...Sometimes, I shall examine my conscience on the manner in which, as a woman desirous of becoming devout, I fulfill the commandments of God and my obligations as a Christian and a Catholic... Once a week, I shall read the points which I wrote down about five years ago, so as to remind myself of the obligation I undertook to serve God all my life..."⁴

"...I shall strive to the best of my ability to overcome my passions, especially vanity and hastiness...
... I shall fast on all Fridays of the year; during Advent and Lent...
... I would like to spend eight to ten days in retreat twice a year: One would be during the period between the Feast of the Ascension and Pentecost in order to honor the grace which God bestowed on His Church by giving it His Holy Spirit to guide it and by commissioning His Apostles to preach the Gospel to all nations. At this time, I would strive to be particularly attentive to the Word of God and to His law expressed in His commandments..."⁵

HER RETREATS

These retreats were of the utmost importance in the life of Louise

³ Spiritual Writings, p. 689-690

⁴ Spiritual Writings, p. 690

⁵ Spiritual Writings, p. 691

de Marillac. Monsieur Vincent organized the content and included advice leading to a broad and flexible spirituality: "*I almost forgot to tell you not to overburden yourself with rules of devotion, but persist in doing well those you have, your daily actions, your work; in a word, let everything revolve around doing well what you are doing.*"⁶

At the conclusion of this retreat, she wrote an act of consecration of herself to God, signing it as **Louise de Marillac**, the signature she would almost always use from then on. She wrote her rule of life, the beginning of which reads: "*May the desire for holy poverty always live in my heart in such a manner that, freed from all bonds, I may follow Jesus Christ and serve my neighbor with great humility and gentleness, living under obedience and in chastity all my life...*"⁷

The revisions that Monsieur Vincent made to these rules consisted above all in reducing corporal penances, restricting excessive fasts, and moderating her intense fervor by asking her to make clothing for poor persons. In her piety, which was simple, positive, and practical, Louise strove to bring Divine Love into her everyday activities. The means she used to nourish her piety were rather sophisticated: devotion to the Eucharist, to Jesus crucified, and to the Holy Spirit. Every year she celebrated with great devotion the Spirit's coming into the Church and into her personal life. Her dedication to Jesus in poor persons enabled her to overcome her worries and to work to overcome her weaknesses. The encouragement from her spiritual director invited her to "*always wait patiently for the manifestation of His holy and adorable Will...*"⁸

THE FORMATION OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC BY MONSIEUR VINCENT

Monsieur Vincent, her new spiritual director, trained his spiritual daughter in his own special way. He observed her, gave advice, asked her to work for the poor and involved her directly in his work with poor persons: this began with asking her to make two or three shirts, then four, and later he thanked her for the twelve shirts she had sent. At this time, too, he recommended two young women to her care, asking her to help them find work.

⁶ Coste I, L. 266, p. 375-376

⁷ Spiritual Writings, p. 689

⁸ Coste I, L. 12, p. 24

About 1628, Louise told him of **her desire to consecrate herself totally to the service of the poor**. Having witnessed at first-hand these apostolic activities in all M. Vincent's charitable works, she felt greatly moved by her experiences and developed the idea of consecrating her life to the service of poor persons by becoming involved in his holy enterprises.

For Monsieur Vincent, it was important to wait for God's holy will to be manifested. Vincent strove first of all to form Louise in her interior life and the primary virtues necessary for an apostle of charity: humility, simplicity, and detachment from self. She entered wholeheartedly into this process, for she herself desired to put into practice what she saw in his life: interiority, recollection and action. Aided by grace, Louise understood that her devotional practices still needed to be purified. As Vincent advised her: "...do not be distressed when you fail to do them. God is love and wants us to go to Him through love." ⁹

Monsieur Vincent was not always in a hurry to act; it was a question of waiting for God's time. And so it happened that on May 6, 1629, an apparently unexpected invitation became, for Louise, a **sending on mission by Monsieur Vincent**: "Go therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord..." ¹⁰ With these words, after years of patient waiting, Vincent sent Louise out on the highways of Charity.

Montmirail (1629) was her first experience, Saint-Cloud (1630) her meeting with Marguerite Naseau, Villepreux (1630) teaching the children catechism, Montreuil (1631): Monsieur Vincent sent her the rules for the Charity:

Monsieur Vincent wrote "... I have adapted them to the needs of Montreuil. Look them over and, if anything should be deleted or added, please let me know. Taking up a collection will be difficult in the village..." ¹¹ because this brought mockery from the townspeople.

Another appeal to her came after some difficult days: "Now, since your girls have been trained, what remains to be done, and what is preventing you from returning tomorrow? They really need you here at the Charity

⁹ Coste I, L. 49, p. 81

¹⁰ Coste I, L. 39, p. 64

¹¹ Coste I, L. 64, p. 102

of Saint-Sulpice. They have made a start but, according to what I have been told, things are going so badly that it is a real pity. Perhaps God is reserving for you the opportunity to work there." ¹² A letter invited her to "Villeneuve-Saint-Georges where the Charity is going badly. I think Our Lord is reserving the success of that good work for you." ¹³

The correspondence between Monsieur Vincent and Louise de Marillac began to reveal his increasing confidence in her, as he gave her a significant role in his apostolic works: "I certainly had no doubt at all that you would find very great difficulty in reestablishing the Charity, greater difficulty than you tell me. But blessed be God that there is some reason to hope **you will set it up again!**" ¹⁴

During this same period, Monsieur Vincent mentioned in his letter how pleased he was with the friendship between Mademoiselle Pollalion, Madame Goussault and Louise de Marillac: "O Dieu! What a virtuous little group! I beg Our Lord to bind your hearts together into one, **which will be His own, and to strengthen you in your work.**" ¹⁵

About the month of July 1632, he made an **appeal** to Louise de Marillac **for communication** with regard to a serious matter: "It will be well for you to contact Madame Goussault and Mademoiselle Pollalion to ask their opinion about Germaine. Just two days ago I became aware of that way of acting, which seems cordial and deferential to me. I may perhaps have offended them by having you make the final decision about your work without telling them." ¹⁶

GOD WISHES TO MAKE USE OF YOU...

Marguerite Naseau was in hospital and Mademoiselle went to visit her. Monsieur Vincent learned about it and wrote immediately: "No, Mademoiselle, have no fear. Our Lord wishes to make use of you for something that concerns His glory, and I think He will preserve you for that purpose." ¹⁷

¹² Coste I, L. 66, p. 105

¹³ Coste I, L. 85, p. 128

¹⁴ Coste I, L. 110, p. 162-163

¹⁵ Coste I, L. 110, p. 163

¹⁶ Coste I, L. 113, p. 167

¹⁷ Coste I, L. 131, p. 186

The Light of Pentecost never left Louise. Monsieur Vincent was well aware of this but nevertheless encouraged her to wait patiently: "*With regard to your employment, my mind is not yet enlightened enough before God concerning a difficulty which prevents me from seeing whether it is the Will of His Divine Majesty.*"¹⁸

Monsieur Vincent was in retreat. A letter he wrote to Mademoiselle contained the response she had been waiting for so long: "*I think your good angel did what you told me in the letter you wrote me. Four or five days ago, he communicated with mine concerning the Charity of your young women. It is true; he prompted me to recall it often and I gave that good work serious thought.*"¹⁹

(To be continued)

Sister Claire HERRMANN
Daughter of Charity

The spirituality of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise

SOME ASPECTS OF SPIRITUALITY IN GENERAL

The word "spirituality" was already in existence in the 17th century, but neither Saint Vincent nor Saint Louise used this word. It was not until the second half of the last century that the word came into common usage. Still, its meaning was rather vague despite the fact that writers agreed that spirituality expresses a relationship between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit. Spirituality can be considered under two essential aspects. The first, called "schools of spirituality" (systematic or consistent intellectual construction), includes the *principal teachings of the founders of religious institutions* with their principles, causes and reasons for their existence (for example, the Benedictine, Ignatian or Vincentian school). The second aspect is called "spiritual life" or *the action of the Spirit in the life of persons* and more specifically, *the person's response to the action of the Holy Spirit to put on the Spirit of Jesus Christ, in solidarity with poor persons*. There are four elements necessary for the spiritual life: the action of the Holy Spirit, a response by the person, the following of Jesus Christ, and solidarity with poor persons. Christians are all called to follow Jesus Christ, or as our Founders said, to become clothed in his Spirit, to continue his mission of evangelization and service to poor persons.

TWO MAJOR CURRENTS OF SPIRITUALITY

Jesus Christ is both human and divine, and the Christian is both sin and grace, wretchedness and image of God. Spirituality will differ according to the way people see themselves, as pessimists or optimists, and according to their ideas of Christ, as God before whom they bow

¹⁸ Coste I. L., 138, p. 200
¹⁹ Coste I. L., 151, p. 216