

# LOUISE DE MARILLAC

## PATRON SAINT OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Louise de Marillac is known for her involvement in the service of the poor in the 17th century. She as a woman who was creative and innovative in her service and looked outside the bounds of what she knew to find ways to serve people in need. There are many examples of this creativity not least of course the founding of the first religious order to be successfully out in the community visiting people and working with a variety of people in need. She brought her own experience of abandonment, family breakdown, widowhood and single parenthood to her service of people in need. *Louise's life experiences ran the gamut: riches and poverty, prestige and powerlessness, cultural/academic education and domestic training, family rejection and acceptance, ecstasy and depression, affluent marriage and dependent widowhood, grass roots service and corporate management*<sup>1</sup>

These life experiences uniquely formed Louise for her service of people in need.

One prominent example of Louise's creativity in finding new ways to serve the poor was in her care of the foundlings. The works Louise initiated with the Foundlings demonstrates well her two foundational pillars of response to documented need and well-planned beginnings. *The Foundlings project, the first modern organized effort in child welfare, also illustrates the manner in which she combined works of charity with works directed toward economic justice.*<sup>2</sup>

This work was perhaps especially close to Louise's heart because of her own experience of illegitimacy. Louise and Vincent needed to overcome the prejudice of many people who would not work with these children because of where they came from. At first the children were place together in one institution, but Louise was not satisfied with this. So, Louise developed the first foster care program. *Placing children with foster mothers would give them a much better start in life from both the physical and psychological standpoints and would allow the babies to be placed outside of Paris where the supply of wet nurses was greater.*<sup>3</sup>

Louise had great concern not only for the welfare of the children but also of the foster mothers. *In the name of God, my Most Reverend Father, consider whether we should persuade these Ladies not to accept new foundlings so that we can pay our debts and bring back the weaned children from the country. I assure you that, in conscience, we can no longer stifle the pity aroused in us by these poor people who beg us for what we justly owe them. Not only do we owe them for their services but we also owe them for the personal money that they have spent. Because of this, they are afraid of dying of hunger and are forced to come from quite a distance, three or four times, without receiving any money. We are in debt for quite an amount: for food, for the nurses, and often for seven or eight weaned infants, as well as for the money we have borrowed. However, it is not self-interest that causes us to speak in this way, although, if matters continue as they are, we will be obliged to liquidate whatever we have because we cannot refuse to pay them from the little we do have.*<sup>4</sup>

Louise gives us an example of how to care for people in need. She said *as for your conduct toward the sick, may you never take the attitude of merely getting the task done. You must show them affection; serving them from the heart; inquiring of them what they might need; speaking to them gently and compassionately.*<sup>5</sup>

She was an organizer, an innovator, a leader and someone who cared for all people.

### What touches you in this reflection?

