



Louise de Marillac as Teacher and Leader

Louise de Marillac's Daughters of Charity were a new form of religious life at the time. It was very unusual for women to be out in the world alone. Louise sent the first sisters out in pairs to serve people in need, therefore, she gave them rather detailed instructions of how to live. It was important that these young women lived the life well and did not give others cause to criticise them. So when we read the rules and advice that Louise gave them we might think that they tend toward micro- management but she needed to be particular in this new venture. We can learn from her though and the way that she taught these young women to serve.

Let us examine the advice that she gave to some of the Sister Servants who were leading the other sisters.

(1) The Sister Servant will always keep these Rules before her eyes in order to be an example to her Sisters. She will do her utmost to be the first to practice what she asks them to do, making the beds along with them, emptying the basins, and cleaning the wards, unless her duty sometimes obliges her to do something else. Above all, she will be exact in carrying out the articles of the contract of their establishment in the hospital.

(2) She will take great care to see that each Sister performs her ministry well, always watching over their actions with great gentleness and charity, refraining carefully from doing anything that might disedify them, even though she may think there is no great harm in it.

(3) She will not reprove her Sisters publicly for their mistakes in front of persons outside the Community unless the edification of the neighbor requires it, nor should she do so when she herself or the Sister she must reprove is angry, so as not to embarrass them or give them bad example and so that her correction will be beneficial. Neither will she reveal the faults of her Sisters to persons within or outside the Community, and if someone informs her of their faults, she will thank the person, without showing that she has a poor opinion of the one at fault, but excusing her as far as she can reasonably do so.

(4) She will treat all her Sisters in a humble and very respectful manner, especially her Assistant and the other officers given to her. As far as possible, in doubtful matters she will take the advice of these officers, but so discreetly that she will not reveal to them what the other Sisters have told her in confidence.¹

We see here that Louise really did want the Sisters that she placed in charge to be servant leaders. She wanted then to lead by example and do what they were asking others to do. The Sisters were to be very respectful and gentle whenever they needed to correct the young women.

We are able to gain an insight into Louise's way of serving and leading from what the sisters said about her after she died. One sister described her prudence and her sensitivity in dealing with them: Mademoiselle was very prudent in everything, Father, and she seemed to know the failings of each of us because she told us about them before we mentioned them to her; however, she was very prudent in her admonitions. ²

She was also very clear that the sisters need to recognise their own poverty and maintain a lifestyle that did not separate them from the people that they served: Father, I noticed that she was very careful and ardently desired that the spirit of humility and poverty be maintained in the Company, and she often used to say, 'We are the servants of the poor; therefore, we must be poorer than they are.' ³

It is also striking how ready she was to acknowledge when she had made a mistake or hurt someone: Sometimes, when she thought she had upset me, she sent for me expressly to ask my forgiveness, even though I was the one who was wrong; many times she anticipated me, when I should have been the first to ask her forgiveness. ⁴

Louise was a skilled servant and leader who was able to form the first sisters well and we have much to learn from her.

