

always welcomed with much joy, attention and a spirit of faith. This family seems to have a special charism in the face of this suffering, a charity without limits. I have never seen this mother or Nelson in a bad mood or impatient. We never hear any cries of anguish or complaints about anything or against anyone. The husband is also very loving and attentive to his wife. He is her nurse by vocation and by love.

We learn from them how to give our lives joyfully. Seeing the love that this mother has for Holy Communion, we understand better what Eucharist means. Jesus, the Bread of Life, communicates his strength and love to her so that she in turn, becomes "Bread of Life" for her family.

From the time she first became ill, she asked to receive Communion. One of the women catechists brought it to her each week, and when the catechist died, our community arranged to take her place. Whenever it is my turn to go, I notice that the moment I enter her home, her eyes are fixed on the pyx that I carry and her whole face becomes radiant. She always receives communion with great joy and makes a very fervent thanksgiving.

When I look at her, I often recall the passage of the Gospel where Jesus says: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower... Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."* I would go so far as to say that the limitations caused by her illness, the wasting away of her body, her suffering from bedsores, her inability to speak... all this is the road by which the living water flows, purifying her and fashioning her into the image of Christ, gentle and humble of heart.

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*Echoes Correspondent*

Saint Louise de Marillac  
1591-1660

History - Memorial - Meditation

## Louise de Marillac in her times

The works of God are accomplished slowly, each in its right time, according to God's wisdom and Providence.

On the occasion of the tercentenary celebrations honoring the death of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, in a souvenir book entitled *Monsieur Vincent vit encore*, (Monsieur Vincent still lives on), the preface contained some striking observations: *"It should be noted that Vincent de Paul's masterpiece was the creation of the Daughters of Charity... at the school of Vincent, Louise de Marillac's soul was detached and transparent, and her life was impelled solely by charity, the gift of the Holy Spirit."*<sup>1</sup>

After the death of Antoine Le Gras, Monsieur Vincent waited eight years for God to bring to maturity His plan for the heart and soul of Louise. Vincent took quite a long time to study her from a human and a spiritual point of view, for though she was striving for perfection, her whole being was in a state of tension. Vincent wanted to help Louise

<sup>1</sup> Gal 5:22

to be free of self while remaining the humble servant of the Holy Spirit. In simple ways, he told her: "*Be then His dear daughter - quite humble, submissive, and full of confidence - and always wait patiently for the manifestation of His holy and adorable Will.*" The testing period was a long one...long for Louise, as all the while M. Vincent patiently waited for signs from God. Louise was kept updated on the charitable activities of the Missioners through the letters she received from Monsieur Vincent. Her biographer, Abelly, tells us that one day Mademoiselle Le Gras told Monsieur Vincent that she **felt herself strongly moved in her prayer to give herself to the service of the poor.** Vincent was happy about this! His reply was not long in coming: "*Yes, certainly, Mademoiselle, I agree. Why not...*"<sup>2</sup> This would not happen immediately, however, as Vincent wanted to lead Louise to the point of letting go of her own will, not being turned in on herself, **not treading on the heels of Providence**, to use Vincent's own words. The following year, 1629, God's Providence sent signals to both of them.

### "Go, therefore, in the name of Our Lord"

The direction that Monsieur Vincent gave to Louise was clear: "**Go**" and off she went, with the task of visiting the Charities that were being run by the Ladies. **She went...** facing uncertainties and the possibility of accidents along the way. She went to rural villages or hamlets in the outskirts of Paris, and later into Champagne and other regions. Everywhere, she saw misery and ignorance, but also evidence that the spirit of charity was there as well.

**Visitor of the Confraternities of Charity**<sup>3</sup>, is how her first biographer described her. When she arrived in a village, she assembled the women who belonged to the Confraternity of Charity which Monsieur Vincent had established at the time of his Missions. She gave them instructions on how to carry out this task well, encouraging them by the fervor of her talks, worked to increase their number, reanimated what had cooled, raised up what had fallen, strengthened and perfected what was established. (Gobillon, p. 12) Her reports of these visits, which were handed in to Monsieur Vincent, were objective and specific.

<sup>2</sup> Abelly, Vol. I, Chapter Twenty-Three  
<sup>3</sup> Gobillon IV, p. 11

This experience taught Louise that good intentions are not always appreciated, and can even be misunderstood. In some places, the pastors thought this woman was infringing on their role, and even the bishops, who had a negative opinion of Parisians, saw her as being sent by someone in authority they did not know very well. The value of this experience was not lost. Monsieur Vincent, after reflecting on the matter, offered this advice: apologize, withdraw, and even return home if ordered to do so. Louise also had the experience deep within her being that she was putting the Gospel into practice, a sense that what she was doing was encountering "**God, in the person of Christ**" in each one she met. Monsieur Vincent gave her the necessary instructions, and at the same time allowed her much latitude in improving the rules so that the poor might be better served. This direct contact with people living in poverty, attentive observation of their needs, the wide range of appeals, the discovery of shortcomings in the quality of service, these were all signs that served as precursors to the mission that would be confided to her later, by God and people. Monsieur Vincent was delighted with this, but maintained a wise, reserved stance: "*Our Lord, in the footsteps of Whose Providence you are walking, will Himself provide someone. You must leave that worry to Him and remain in peace...*"<sup>4</sup>

Monsieur Vincent would end a mission by founding a Charity. Paris was honored by having the first Confraternity of Charity in the parish of Saint Sauveur; Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet was the second, and others followed. Louise's primary responsibility was to have meetings with the Ladies, as requested by M. Vincent. Very quickly, she was recognized as a model of authority. Her human qualities and culture, and even more, her religious qualities, allowed her to provide valuable assistance in the functioning of the Charities, one of which, according to Monsieur Vincent, seemed on the point of collapse. Louise was wholeheartedly committed to the work.

She reviewed the original rule and the end for which the Confraternity of Charity was to be instituted:

- The patron of the Confraternity shall be Our Lord Jesus Christ

<sup>4</sup> Coste I, p. 216, L. 151

- It shall be composed of a stated number of virtuous women and girls... with the consent of their husband or their father and mother.
- Three elected members will direct the Confraternity with the approval of the Pastor, one as Directress, the others as Assistants to serve as Council to the Directress. The rule also included the duties of each servant of the poor, the manner in which the servants of the poor should serve the sick... the manner in which the sick are to be fed... mutual charity among themselves... election of officers and financial reports<sup>5</sup>.

Visits to the Confraternities showed Louise the concrete realities that called for a response. She kept M. Vincent updated by the detailed and intuitive reports she sent him, pointing out shortcomings. Their collaboration was founded on complete mutual trust. Monsieur Vincent guided the efforts of Louise de Marillac, readily welcomed her advice and took it into account, and moderated the intensity of her work, specifying: "*As for the sisters of the Charity, I think it is expedient that you assemble all of them, read the rules together, and try to put everything back into practice according to those rules, which are different from the others because that was the second establishment. But please tell them the practice in other places and try to persuade them to do likewise, especially with regard to the perpetuity of the sisters' membership...*"<sup>6</sup>

Louise tried to put things in order under the guidance of Monsieur Vincent, or using her own organizational skills, for which Monsieur Vincent spontaneously praised her: "*You are a very competent woman to have adapted the rule of the Charity in this way; I think it is fine.*"<sup>7</sup> Vincent had founded this Charity but did not have the time to continue guiding it. He confided it to Louise when it was in difficulty, and with her special ability in applying the rule, she was able to return it to good working order.

### Monsieur Vincent, Spiritual Director

Monsieur Vincent always kept in mind that he was **Louise's spiritual director**. At the end of 1630, Michel de Marillac, former Keeper of the Seals, was imprisoned at Châteaudun. Mademoiselle, who loved him dearly, wanted to visit him in prison and

<sup>5</sup> *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, p. 707-709

<sup>6</sup> Coste I, p. 79, L. 48

<sup>7</sup> Coste I, p. 114, L. 74

Monsieur Vincent did not think it appropriate: "...As for Monsieur de Marillac, I consent to everything that you think proper, but take care not to implicate yourself. I think that in these matters one must be disposed to take the advice of the person from whom one has asked counsel. When he tells you something contrary to your opinion, you must not go back to it again. Do, however, what Our Lord suggests to you." (Coste I, p. 150) Louise decided not to make this visit and continued to visit the Charities. After these trying times, M. Vincent encouraged her and expressed his concern for her health: "...Take good care of your health and spare nothing in order to eat properly during your hard work. I still think that you do not eat enough..."<sup>8</sup>

The frequent absences of her director during the year 1632 made it more difficult for Louise to overcome her interior struggles. M. Vincent understood: "*Here I am, your neighbor, since noon. ... If you would kindly take the trouble to come here tomorrow right after dinner, we will hear from you in person what you have been writing to us.... P.S. I cannot resist telling you that I intend to give you quite a scolding tomorrow for giving way as you do to those useless and futile apprehensions. Oh! prepare yourself for a good talking-to!*"

Later, when Louise was having difficulty finding a place to live, her director responded with his usual clarity: "*I am asking you to let me know if you have decided upon a place to live and where it is. You may perhaps think that I have some reason which involves you on account of which I think it unwise for you to live in this neighborhood. Oh! no, that is not the case at all I assure you. The reason, rather, is this: we are among people who watch everything and pass judgment on everything. They would not see us go into your house three times without finding the opportunity to talk, to draw conclusions which they ought not to draw, and to repeat them wherever they go. It is not that we have been watching them, but only the one who has the power to do so. When I have the happiness of seeing you, I will speak to you about the matter in greater detail.*"<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Coste I, p. 284, L. 198d

<sup>9</sup> M. Vincent had moved to Saint Lazare from his former residence at Bons-Enfants, which he was visiting at the time of this letter (Coste I, p. 157-158, L. 106)

<sup>10</sup> Coste I, p. 308-309, L. 215

Louise's spiritual journey, which included doubts, torments, anguish and unbelievable suffering became clearer in time. Monsieur Vincent guided her towards her new vocation of dedicating herself to poor persons for the love of Christ. In her total gift of self to her neighbor, Louise gradually discovered a sense of balance, focused her heart on God's will and never let the difficult events experienced by her loved ones lead her away from her responsibilities. She visited the Confraternities and the Charities in the rural areas, slowly but continually guided by insight and by her integrity. This was the work of God's inspiration and her quiet confidence in God's Providence. Louise knew that the Charities needed persons capable for service and prepared for their role; God sent a sign through Marguerite Naseau.

### Marguerite Naseau

**"... was the first Sister who had the happiness of showing others the way, both to teach young girls and to nurse the sick poor, although she had almost no other teacher or schoolmistress but God."**<sup>11</sup>

How did this happen? Monsieur Vincent had founded several Charities in the city of Paris. Some Ladies of the nobility had the same desire to assist poor people in their parish, but when it came to carrying out their good intentions there were various reasons why they could not engage in lowly and difficult tasks. Abelly explained how the Ladies went about serving the poor: "*Since they themselves employed servants in their own homes for taking care of these chores, they were unable or unwilling to do them personally. They realized that it was absolutely necessary to have some servants who would only work for the sick poor. They would distribute food each day, or the required medicines. This situation was brought to Monsieur Vincent's attention in 1630. He considered the matter carefully before God and recognized the need to find some way of remedying the situation.*"<sup>12</sup>

Once again, Providence guided M. Vincent in arranging for him to meet Marguerite Naseau! He explained how it happened in the Conference of February 24, 1653: "*I never thought of it; consequently, it's God himself who did it on His own.*"

<sup>11</sup> Conference of St Vincent de Paul, July 1642, Coste IX, p. 65

<sup>12</sup> Abelly Volume I, Chapter Twenty-four

The Archives of the city of Suresnes have produced a very detailed document about Marguerite's life and the origin of her name, stating: "*She was called, according to Monsieur Vincent himself, Marguerite Naseau.*"

When did she meet M. Vincent for the first time? We have no texts that mention this, other than those referring to a Charity that had been established in Saint-Cloud, very close to Suresnes, and that Louise de Marillac was there in February 1630. Monsieur Vincent wrote to her on February 19, 1630, and ended his letter by asking: "*Let me know also whether that good young woman from Suresnes, who visited you before and who spends her time teaching girls, has come to see you as she promised me last Sunday when she was here.*"<sup>13</sup> After this visit, Marguerite went to Villepreux. She taught there for some time, and then permanently left her parish, Saint-Leufroy, when she learned that Monsieur Vincent was going to found a service in Paris to care for sick persons and those who were poor. Despite her interest in continuing teaching she said: "*I'd like very much to serve the poor in that way.*"<sup>14</sup>

God spoke through this event. Marguerite assisted Louise de Marillac, and went to work at the parish of Saint-Sauveur. She was then sent for a short time to the parishes of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, Saint-Benoit, near the Sorbonne, and then returned to Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. The harsh conditions under which Marguerite lived affected her health. Monsieur Vincent became aware of this, and on February 24, 1633, he wrote to Mademoiselle Le Gras: "*As for Marguerite, it would be well to have the surgeon from the Santé visit her in case the doctor objects to going there. Monsieur Cotti is easily frightened. Nevertheless, I think it would be wise to have that done as soon as possible. Monsieur Bourdoise will give the order for it. Please see that he is asked. He knows what has to be done...*"<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Marguerite continued her service. It was Monsieur Vincent who told the Sisters about her much later, during one of his conferences, when he spoke about Marguerite Naseau without mentioning her by name:

<sup>13</sup> Coste I, p. 68, L. 40

<sup>14</sup> Coste IX, p. 473

<sup>15</sup> Coste I, p. 187-188, L. 132

"Around that time, because the Ladies of the Charity of Saint-Sauveur were women of quality, they were looking for a young woman who would be willing to carry the soup pot to the sick. When that poor young woman came to see Mademoiselle le Le Gras, she was asked what she knew, where she had come from, and whether she was willing to serve the poor. She gladly accepted. So, she came to Saint-Sauveur and was taught how to administer medicines and to render all the necessary services, and she succeeded very well... Called to establish the Charity in Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet parish, she slept with a girl who had the plague, which she caught from her, and was taken to Saint-Louis Hospital, where she died."<sup>16</sup>

In the conference on the virtues of the first deceased Sisters, Monsieur Vincent, referred to Marguerite Naseau and ended his conference with the following words: "Having contracted this illness herself, she said good-bye to the Sister who was with her, as if she had foreseen that she was going to die, and went off to Saint Louis [Hospital], her heart filled with joy and conformity to God's Will." <sup>17</sup>

#### Charity needs servants... the Charities are waiting for them

Urged on by the Spirit of God, Marguerite made herself available to Louise de Marillac. In the course of several meetings, Marguerite told her about her work with poor little girls who had no school to attend, her work with young girls and even some young people who had learned to read. All her work had been inspired by love for God. Meeting Monsieur Vincent when he preached a mission, she told him about her life: "'Monsieur,' she said ... 'I've taught myself to read, in a certain sense. I've had a strong desire to teach other country girls who don't know how. Would that be a good thing?'" Monsieur Vincent responded: "Certainly, certainly, my daughter, I advise you to go ahead." (Coste IX, p. 358)

She followed his advice, and her way of teaching must have been so attractive that some of her students followed her example and went to other villages to share their limited knowledge with other young girls. Marguerite, in turn, gave herself completely to her role as school

<sup>16</sup> Coste IX, p. 473

<sup>17</sup> Coste IX, p. 66

teacher, with little regard for herself. She even deprived herself of necessities in order to help young men to complete their studies and prepare for the priesthood. Several of them succeeded in doing this.

Despite the success of her apostolate as school teacher, her life took a different turn. She learned that in Paris there was a Confraternity of Charity for poor persons who were ill. When Monsieur Vincent preached a mission outside Paris, Marguerite went to confession to him and became involved in his plan: "I'd like very much to serve the poor in that way." (Coste IX, p. 473) The Charities needed servants, women who were freely available volunteers. "And that was how God wanted it, so that she might be the first Daughter of Charity and Servant of the Sick Poor in the city of Paris." (Coste IX, p. 66)

She went to serve the poor people at Saint-Sauveur. Here she learned how to give medicines and render other forms of care, and she was very successful. Other young women, whom Marguerite Naseau helped to detach themselves from all the vanities of the world and to "devote themselves", made themselves available. They were sent to Louise de Marillac who had them make a four-day retreat when they arrived, as recommended by Monsieur Vincent. When the retreat was over, the young women were placed in one of the Confraternities. Monsieur Vincent oversaw their formation to some extent, recommending them to the parish priest. Marguerite was the key figure in the Confraternity of Saint-Sauveur. Very quickly initiated by Louise de Marillac into all the requirements for the service of poor people, Marguerite moved from the parish of Saint-Sauveur to Saint-Nicolas, then to Saint-Benoit. "In the parishes, she was just as charitable as she had been in the country, giving away anything she might have, whenever the opportunity presented itself."<sup>18</sup>

In his conference on the virtues of Marguerite Naseau, Monsieur Vincent declared: "Marguerite Naseau from Suresnes was the first Sister who had the happiness of showing others the way, both to teach young girls and to nurse the sick poor, although she had almost no other teacher or schoolmistress but God."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Coste IX, p. 66

<sup>19</sup> Coste IX, p. 65

This pathway was familiar to Louise de Marillac. Teaching was included in her visits to the various Confraternities, and she even drew up a catechism to be learned. She founded schools for children who were poor, taught the faith, and cared for poor people who were ill. She formed newcomers for these services, those who, like Marguerite Naseau had come, “for the glory of God.”

Louise de Marillac, always faithful to her “*Light of Pentecost*” experience, responded to God’s calls by being solidly rooted in God: “*I must practice great humility and mistrust of myself; abandon myself continually to the Providence of God ... assist my neighbor to the best of my ability, both corporally and spiritually, for the love which God has for all of us equally.*”<sup>20</sup>

Sister Claire HERRMANN,  
*Daughter of Charity*

## **The joint influence of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac on the nature of the Company**

### **THEY ARE NOT RELIGIOUS**

When several young women gathered together in Louise’s home, Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul did not think they were starting a Company of consecrated women. Just a few months later, however, they were already taking precautions so that this group of celibate women who were living in community, in poverty and obedience, would not be considered religious, for this would mean the cloister and, with the cloister, they would have to say goodbye to the service of the poor.

In those days, the religious ideal was linked to seeking personal holiness through contemplation and separation from the world. To facilitate this, the Church imposed the cloister in all convents of women. The cloister helped promote the path to holiness, and also safeguarded women religious from real moral danger.

From the time of Pope Boniface VIII, papal law demanded strict enclosure for women religious. Although the Council of Trent that took place just prior to that time was not yet officially implemented in France, it appeared as a guiding light in the face of the Huguenots and as the Church’s absolute authority in the matter of reform. It called for strict adherence to its laws. Even harsher was the declaration by Pope Pius V that any women’s congregations that were not cloistered could not receive new novices, thereby condemning them to extinction. Together with this legislation, the Church determined

<sup>20</sup> Spiritual Writings M 40b, p.776