



Louise de Marillac: Street Children

By Benito Martínez, C.M.

“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.”

Louise de Marillac, letter to St. Vincent de Paul (L. 279)

Reflection:

1. In Paris, a good number of abandoned children were collected at night at the doors of churches and convents. Those who did not die at night from the cold or eaten by the rats, would probably die shortly by the ruthless conditions that they had passed. Most of them were children of female workers and seamstresses that were dismissed by employers who had abused them; of servants abandoned by their householders after having seduced them, or of girls arrived in the city in search of work. Keeping the child involved many difficulties to marry or to get a job; and consequently starvation for both mother and son.
2. The actions of St. Vincent, St. Louise, the Ladies of Charity —AIC— and the Vincentians with these children, adolescents and young people, are known, giving them education, Christian instruction, learning a trade and a place to practice it. St. Vincent said that it would take 40,000 pounds a year. And he gives this solution: “do what you can.”
3. The most important economic contribution was given by the Ladies. Without them, the work would have perished. Those sons and daughters of the nobility and of the upper bourgeoisie (with sufficient fortune) who were considered bastards were placed a decent place in the administration or in the Church (bishops, abbots and priors); or the child was delivered to a matrimony by compensating for a sum of money.
4. In our modern society this situation seems to have been overcome, because the institutions take care of the children; but there are still places, in some less and in others more, where the “street children” lurk like little criminals, take drugs by absorbing cheap gasoline and learn to be thieves, or, sadder still, they have to leave school and college to work since childhood and provide some money needed to live badly at home.

Questions for dialogue:

1. What are the causes of this situation of the “street children”? And that of women that poverty forces them to be unfaithful or to indulge in prostitution?
2. What are the objectives, and what are the various Vincentian branches working on today? What is the mission and occupation of the Vincentian Family with these marginalized? And in the feminist struggle?
3. Do you think that the work of the Vincentian Family is sufficient and successful in the struggle for a more just society and solidarity with the children of the orphanages? What kind of marginalized women and children do you think the Ladies —AIC— should dedicate their efforts?