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Saint Louise's faith journey

Notes taken from a recording of a talk given to the Sisters of the Motherhouse. We have deliberately retained the oral style.

We are going to speak about the long journey that Louise travelled over 60 years, a journey in which we see that her faith was challenged by the circumstances of her life and the events that guided her. It was a life filled with doubts and worries but also with joys and wonder. We will go deeply into Louise's way of life which can serve as a model and consolation for us where we experience difficulties.

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In the document *The Door of Faith*, Benedict XVI says that the journey of faith begins with baptism and ends in the eternal light of God. This is more or less the journey that Louise de Marillac would travel.

Baptism was important for her. She wrote in one of her texts: "*on the day of my holy Baptism, I was vowed and dedicated [that is, consecrated to God] to my God to be His daughter*" (A.3). She is therefore aware that baptism made her a daughter of God, and she would try throughout her life to live that faith. Baptism was something important for her, and she would often speak of it; we know that at the time she made vows in 1642, the formula, like ours, began with the words, "*I renew the promises of my baptism.*" Many Sisters, in the early years of the Company, would make their vows for the first time on their baptismal anniversary, aware of its importance. Vincent and Louise always insisted on the fact that Daughters of Charity should first be good Christians in order to be good Daughters of Charity.

What was Louise's life like during her early years?

We do not know much about her early years; we do know that she was in Poissy and that she received a very good education and religious formation. At that time, the Dominican nuns had just received the writings of a Dominican "Catherine of Sienna" who was considered saintly at her death, and they read Catherine of Sienna's writings, which made frequent references to the blood of Christ. I think that this idea deeply impressed Louise de Marillac, because in her writings she often spoke of Christ's blood. She would speak, for example, of souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. She refers to this several times in her letters as well as in her prayers. We know that she made miniature paintings, and one of them represents Christ with one of the sheep drinking the blood of Christ coming out of His side, so it is an idea that must have remained with her.

But what is striking, when we read Louise's writings, is that her first years were marked by suffering. She wrote in one of her meditations, "*God... led me to understand that it was His holy will that I go to Him by way of the Cross. His goodness chose to mark me with it from my birth*" (A. 29).

So, suffering was part of Louise's life. It is true that she did not know her mother, she had no family life, she was somewhat rejected by her family, and at the age 13 she would be taken away from the convent of Poissy to go to a boarding school run by a poor woman who accepted middle class girls. For Louise this was a step down on the social scale, and here she would learn completely different things, mainly practical skills. All this disturbed her a little.

In 1606, she nevertheless had a "light." In 1606, there was a major procession that led the Capuchin nuns to their new monastery. Louise took part in the procession, and she was fascinated by this life of poverty and mortification, and she felt drawn to it. She had no other desire than to become a Capuchin nun. For her, her future became clear, and she prepared herself to become a Capuchin nun; she would often go and pray with them. It seems she had some degree of fulfillment at this point, but her joy would very quickly fall away because her guardian, Michel de Marillac, sent her to see the Provincial of the Capuchins, who

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would tell her that she was not made for the life of a Capuchin nun, that she didn't have the health for it, but that God had another plan for her.

This was a shock for her, and a new form of suffering, but this idea nonetheless remained in her heart: "God has a plan for me." Over many years, she would seek God's plan for her. What did He want of her? After the Capuchin Provincial's refusal, the Marillac family would set to work to arrange a marriage for her.

For a long time, Louise would certainly consider that marriage was God's plan for her. She would, then, enter into married life joyfully because, for her, it was what God wanted for her. She brought a child into the world; she was happy, happy with her husband, and she would later say that she had very good memories of her husband. With him, she prayed and had a spiritual life which was actually very austere. During her years of marriage, especially at the beginning, there was her guardian Michel de Marillac, a man of great devotion, who sent her letters giving spiritual direction. Let's look at how he guided his niece.

Letter from Michel de Marillac

"Be patient and humble yourself before God for the failures you may have in the peaceful submission of your soul before God, waiting for the graces you need from Him, and do not endeavor to force God to give you more graces than he wants. Remain at peace and humble before your faults, for it is our lot, and we must expect nothing else of ourselves than this" (September 2, 1619).

There was, then, a focus on faults, on humiliation before God, a God who grants graces when He wishes. This is a rather distant God, not close at all, who asks each person to recognize their poverty and to humble themselves. This is not very motivating, but it is the spirituality that Louise had at this time.

Louise was able to think of her marriage as God's plan for her. But then, around 1622, that is, 9 years after her marriage, her husband Antoine fell ill. For Louise, this came as a shock. She did not understand how happiness could just disappear. Her husband became difficult, his character changed, and Louise no longer understood anything. She

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began to imagine that God was punishing her through her husband's illness because she had not kept the promise she had made to God to become a Capuchin nun. She imagined this and would try, as she said, to overcome God's justice by multiplying her prayers, fasts and all sorts of mortifications. Nothing worked, but with all that she fell into a state of depression, had a gloomy view of everything, was confused, and even got to the point of wanting to leave her husband and son and, above all, no longer believed in the immortality of the soul and, in the end, doubted God's existence. She herself wrote in the first days of May 1623 that she was suffering terribly. It was then that, in June 1623, on the day of Pentecost would come that famous "light", an account of which she would write down, and this would give her back some hope. She would write at the end of her text, *I doubted God, but God exists because "it was God who was teaching me these things"* (A.2). She clearly says that it was God who spoke to her, who showed her that she should remain with her husband and son and would have a new director, and the future was opened to her by telling her that she would one day be in a community. So thanks to this light, Louise would rediscover a certain joy and balance, but it would take a long time for her to recover completely. Just before Christmas 1625, her husband died. Now she was, a widow with a 12 year old child, and, at this time, she met M. Vincent.

She was a widow when she met Vincent de Paul. Neither of them wanted this encounter, but they did meet, and this was surely out of love for, and in memory of, Francis de Sales whom they had both known. After some time, Vincent de Paul realized that Louise, beneath her sad and very anxious exterior, had a strong personality. Little by little, he would direct her toward the Confraternities of Charity that he had founded. So there she is in the Confraternities of Charity, and in May 1929, Vincent de Paul asked her to go with him to Montmirail. It was the beginning of a whole new life for her. She went to Montmirail and then continued to visit the Confraternities. On February 5, 1630, she experienced a very special event, and she wrote down what happened.

Visit to the Confraternities of Saint Cloud (1630)

"I left on the Feast of Saint Agatha, February 5, to go to Saint-Cloud. At the moment of Holy Communion, it seemed to me that Our Lord inspired

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me to receive Him as the Spouse of my soul and that this Communion was a manner of espousal. I felt myself more closely united to Him by this consideration which was extraordinary for me. I also felt moved to leave everything to follow my Spouse; to look upon Him as such in the future; and to bear with the difficulties I might encounter as part of the community of His goods." (A. 50. February 1630, Spiritual Writings p. 705)

That February 5, Louise experienced something extraordinary. February 5 is the anniversary of her marriage with Antoine. It had been five years since his death, but Louise liked to celebrate her wedding anniversary. Each year, she asked Vincent de Paul to say the Mass for a wedding, in memory of her marriage. And then it happened that day, February 5, 1630, that Our Lord had her experience what she would call a mystical marriage. Jesus told her that He would be her Spouse, and Louise accepted Him. It was a discovery for her, and she would share a "community of goods" with Him, as a man and woman often do when they are married: they put their goods in common, and Louise accepted to "put her goods in common" with Jesus. Sharing goods means sharing joys and sharing sufferings, and following Him. So, this was really quite an extraordinary moment. From 1630 onward, Louise's spirituality was transformed. Up to that time, she had been focusing on an austere God.

Now, her spirituality focused on Him whom she had just discovered: Jesus Christ, who had become her Spouse. Her retreat in 1632 shows how much she is attentive to the Gospel, meditates on all the actions of the Son of God related in the Gospel, from His birth to His death. For example, she would say about his birth: "*Jesus Christ made himself a little child so that we would have greater freedom to approach Him.*" She would speak about the washing of the feet, when Jesus knelt down before His disciples. Louise felt much more fulfilled.

1630 is also the year of Marguerite Naseau's arrival and that of other young women who came to serve in the Confraternities. At that time, Louise would perceive that God really had a plan for her, a vocation.

Retreat of 1632

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"Kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament, I felt interiorly moved, freely to place myself in a disposition of total availability in order to receive the call of God and to carry out His most holy will. I considered that I was unworthy that the goodness of God should have a design for my soul. But I desired that it be fully accomplished in me and I offered my entire life to Him for this end." (A. 5)

We can sense a certain joy in Louise. She is no longer the sad woman; she was happy and felt that God was calling her. She now has but one desire, to accomplish God's will. Throughout her retreat of 1632, we see her thinking about what God will ask of her. She saw that the young women in the Confraternities needed to be brought together, to be brought together in a group, but she asked herself many questions: am I capable of this? She would not commit herself without having reflected, because she could foresee that she would be living among peasant women. We need to understand what it meant for a great Parisian aristocrat to live with peasants; these two social classes didn't speak to each other. It was for her something entirely contrary to what was customary in her world and she anticipated that she would be criticized, harshly criticized. So she would have to accept these criticisms, and she asked herself: will I have the courage to do it? She would reflect at length on the "community" life of Saint Joseph, the Virgin Mary and Jesus. She told herself, they lived together for thirty years in order to show us the importance of community life. She concluded, I will do it. Yes, she still worried, asking herself: is this really God's will or my own?

Louise seems to be a woman who questions herself, who reflects, who sees the vocation that God suggests to her but who doesn't enter in blindly. She added: "to be sure it is really God's will, I will wait for my director's agreement." Vincent de Paul had to agree to this, and he didn't do it right away because he, too, thought that it was beyond Louise's ability or that it wasn't necessary. It was only at the beginning of September 1633 that Vincent de Paul would give his consent.

The beginnings of the company: on November 29, Louise welcomed the young women who wanted to join her in this venture. She was happy but knew that the task would be a hard one. The first thing that she did, apart from the human and professional formation of the Sisters, was to teach them to live the Gospel. At noontime, when they returned from

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servicing the poor, Louise had the Gospel read to the Sisters and taught them to meditate on it. Louise would continue to reflect on the mystery of the Incarnation, which was the center of her spiritual life at that time.

"Your admirable Incarnation might be the source of the graces of which souls stand in need in order to reach their end... Neither could [the soul] become so closely united to God who is its object since He is inaccessible to all beings except through this most admirable of means which makes God man and man God who, continually present to the soul." (A. 13b)

This is Louise's fundamental meditation on the Incarnation: for her, it is a marvel that God would become man and that this God who, she said, had been inaccessible, would come close, and above all that this God comes close so that man can be closer to God. God became man so that man might become God.

This is the meditation that she would try to put into simpler language for the Sisters.

Thoughts on the Incarnation and the Holy Eucharist (A. 14)

"This thought came to me after a long period during which I prayed for a great love for the humanity of Our Lord as a means for moving me to practice His virtues especially gentleness, humility, forbearance and love of my neighbor." (Spiritual Writings, p. 785)

Here, Louise used an expression that she would repeat frequently in her meditations: she considered the holy humanity of Christ, which means she looked simultaneously on Jesus the man, his humanity and his holy humanity, that is, without sin, and it is the humanity of Christ, the Son of God. She united Jesus the man, and God. She noted all His qualities, all His virtues, and she would invite the Sisters to meditate on Jesus, man and God.

Her letter to Anne Hardemont in 1648 sums up her spirituality:

"My dear Sisters, we must continually have before our eyes our model, the exemplary life of Jesus Christ. We are called to imitate this life, not

only as Christians, but as persons chosen by God to serve Him in the person of His poor." (L. 217)

Louise's spirituality can be summed up as following Jesus Christ in order to serve Him in the person of the poor, thereby recognizing His presence in those who are poor, and imitating His virtues. When the Sisters did not do this, Louise would call them to order.

To the Sisters in Angers, she wrote:

"Where are the gentleness and charity that you must preserve so carefully when dealing with our dear masters, the sick poor? If we deviate in the slightest from the conviction that they are the members of Jesus Christ, it will infallibly lead to the weakening of these beautiful virtues in us." (L. 104b)

This is why contemplating Jesus Christ, going deeper in prayer and living this in the service of those who are poor was so important. Louise integrated this well in order to be able to transmit it to others.

For Louise, God had a plan for the Company, the very precise plan "of giving themselves to God to honor Jesus Christ by serving Him in the person of the poor." Louise was aware that God's project for the Company was very important. She told herself that it was essential that the Sisters live this plan well.

In 1644 she would go to Chartres to ask Mary to watch over the Company so that it might accomplish its purpose.

"On Monday, Feast of the Dedication of the Church of Chartres, I offered to God the designs of His Providence on the Company of the Daughters of Charity. I offered the said Company entirely to Him, asking Him to destroy it rather than let it be established contrary to His holy will. I asked for it, through the prayers of the Holy Virgin, Mother and Guardian of the said Company, the purity of which it stands in need." (L. 111)

Louise went to Chartres to entrust God's plan for the Company to Mary's care because Louise thought that if the Daughters of Charity

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were not faithful to God's design, it would be better that the Company disappear. She is categorical about this because she considered this plan so important, and she asked for the purity needed by the Company to preserve this plan. It was a question of carefully watching over this divine plan, without altering it, without deviating. She said to Mary: "Be its guardian and help the Sisters to be careful to remain faithful to God's design, and you will be its Mother to breathe life into this group so that it may live well."

This is the meaning of the act of consecration in Chartres. Louise is filled with awe at the thought of God's plan and wants it to be well protected.

However, in 1647, difficulties arise. The Sisters no longer live according to the plan. The first warning is for Nantes. The Sisters had arrived in Nantes in August 1646, and now in 1647, the local community was divided into two groups. One of the Sisters was a little too close to the hospital chaplain, so the Sister Servant called her to order, but she didn't listen, and the community divided into two groups that argued and kept watching each other. In the end, the service of the poor was not carried out properly. A patient died without the sacraments; Louise received letters about the situation, and she wrote back.

To the Sister at the Hospital in Nantes (L. 174)

"O my dear sisters, what great reason I have to fear that it was my bad example which placed unfortunate impressions in your minds. If that is the case, do me the charity of asking God's forgiveness for me; and I ask you to forgive me as well by doing better than you have seen me do."

What is Louise's reaction? She accuses herself; it's her fault! She wasn't able to listen and accompany the Sisters. Louise would sink into a deep sense of guilt because, following this letter, there would be a visit to Nantes, and two Sisters would be called back to Paris, but these two Sisters would leave the Company. Then there would be a wave of departures from the Company: Sisters from Nantes, Angers, Fontainebleau, Pontoise, and the Mother House, from just about everywhere.

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The result was that Louise was very sad and she blamed herself. In November 1649, she wrote a letter to Vincent de Paul: "Another of our sisters left [...], she is one from Saint-Cloud. [...] It seems to me that God wishes either to strengthen or destroy us through these episodes". She adds this terrible line: "let me know in all honesty if I am the Jonah who must be removed [for the Company to recover its calm]" (L. 268). Louise feels guilty. How will she get over these failures? Will she overcome them? How will she pull through? Guilt, in fact, is wounded pride: we are not happy, we thought we were better than that, and we are hurt to see that we were not able to accomplish the task we had to do. As a result, we feel bad. So, how could Louise improve the situation?

This was the time of the wars of the Fronde. In Paris there were many poor people, and soup distribution was organized in various parishes. Louise said: 3000 are served at Saint Paul, 2000 at Saint Laurent, and the same number in several other parishes. Louise reflected and said to herself: God has pity and mercy on these poor people; perhaps I am also one of these poor people. That would transform her, and rather than thinking about her guilt, she would admit that she made mistakes, that she was inadequate, but she would place all her faults and mistakes in her hands and offer them to God, saying, "I am but a poor person." She would accept God's forgiveness after the example of the tax collector who placed himself humbly before God, who accepted his poverty. Louise discovered and welcomed God's mercy. She wrote a very beautiful letter to Barbe Angiboust in 1652 because Barbe had experienced something similar to what Louise had suffered. Barbe was in Brienne where there was war, and Barbe was crushed by the number of sick and wounded whom she couldn't manage to care for.

Letter to Sister Barbe Angiboust (June 11, 1652)

"In the name of God, my very dear Sisters, do not be impatient with your trials, and at seeing yourselves as receiving no other consolation but God's. Oh, if we only knew God's secrets when He places us in this state, we would see that this must be the time of our greatest consolation.... If the goodness of God does not expose us to the worst miseries, let us be truly thankful to Him for this, and let us believe that it is due solely to His mercy and is in no way merited." (L. 353)

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Louise recognized after the fact that this was for her good. She finally understood God's mercy, the mercy of this God who never tires of forgiving, but we must go to him in a state of poverty. She thanked God for this period in her life because now she could help the Sisters to persevere and understand God's mercy.

From 1652 onwards we see that Louise would enter into a period when her meditations showed her wonder at God's love; she would continue to meditate on the Incarnation because she could never meditate enough on this extraordinary mystery.

"The design of the Blessed Trinity from the creation of man was that the Word should become flesh so that human nature might attain the excellence of being that God willed to give to man by the eternal union... Is it not glorious for souls to cooperate with God in carrying out this plan?" (A.26, A. 27)

Louise was always filled with admiration at this great mystery of the Incarnation, understanding that God wanted to make man reach glorification, and she added, *"Is it not glorious for souls to cooperate with God [in human salvation]."* She thereby put service of the poor as a way of cooperating with God, with Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. For her, service of the poor carried out well, and in accordance with God's designs, is like an extension of the Redemption. Through the service of the poor we allow people to live well, to die well, but also to recover their dignity as persons and as children of God. This is what Jesus Christ did when he came on earth: he allowed humans to be welcomed by God with a great forgiveness for their faults. So we are there to cooperate with God in the salvation of the world. Louise emphasized the importance of our service being carried out with a concern for the good of people because this is Jesus Christ's desire. Louise didn't just meditate on the Incarnation. She would meditate at length on the Eucharist.

"We must try to discover in God some motive for this admirable and, in a human sense, incomprehensible action. Since there is no apparent reason, other than His pure love, we must render honor and glory to God by acts of praise, adoration, love, and gratitude for His loving invention which unites Him to us." (M. 72)

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"A loving invention which unites Him to us!" Louise takes up what Vincent de Paul said about the Eucharist: "[God] is inventive to infinity" (Coste XI, p. 131). Louise said that God couldn't be satisfied with the Incarnation and wanted to remain present among us so He invented the Eucharist. For her, the Eucharist is something extraordinary.

In her *Spiritual Writings* (M. 72), we find a conference Louise gave to the Sisters on the Eucharist: she explained to them the three things we need to consider for making a good communion: how to prepare well, how to receive communion, and how to thank God. Near the end of her text, she said, *"God... give[s] us the capacity to live in Him."* The Sisters said that Louise was always very emotional when she received communion and had a little handkerchief to wipe away her tears. She was so happy that she cried for joy on receiving her God.

All her meditation did not keep Louise from directing the Company. There were foundations in Poland, on the battlefields, in Ussel, Narbonne, and Cahors... She led both her practical life and her life of spiritual reflection.

In 1657, she made her retreat, meditating on the **Holy Spirit**. Until then she had hardly spoken of the Holy Spirit at all. She loved the feast of Pentecost because it held the memory of her Light of Pentecost. However, when she spoke about her Light of Pentecost, she only spoke about God; she only knew God. There was another important event in 1642 when the floor collapsed on the day of Pentecost. But in 1657, she devoted her retreat to meditating on the Holy Spirit. Her text is rather complex. She said that the Holy Spirit is a strength, a strength that would help the apostles to bear witness, and that the Holy Spirit will also give us the strength to bear witness. She also says that the Holy Spirit is a source of unity which will allow the Church to develop and be united, but she also insists on the action of the Holy Spirit within us: the Holy Spirit comes to create unity in ourselves because we are often divided within ourselves. She speaks of our three faculties: understanding, judgment and will, and we realize, as Saint Paul said, that we do not do the good that we wish to do but do the evil that we do not wish to do; the will does not manage to be consistent with what is desired. Finally, she said that the Holy Spirit is love, and she has a beautiful prayer:

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Meditation on reasons for giving oneself to God in order to receive the Holy Spirit (A. 26)

"O Eternal Light, lift my blindness! O Perfect Unity, create in me simplicity of being! Humble my heart to receive Your graces. May the power to love which You have placed in my soul no longer stop at the disorder of my self-sufficiency which, in reality, is but powerlessness and an obstacle to the pure love which I must have as a result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit."

Louise would put this into a simpler language for the Sisters:

"I beg the goodness of Our Lord to dispose our souls for the reception of the Holy Spirit so that, burning with the fire of His holy love, you may be consumed in the perfection of this love which will enable you to love the most holy will of God." (L. 429)

So, Louise is totally fulfilled. At this time, she would overcome the difficulties that would present themselves within the Company without sinking into a sense of guilt; she would accept difficulties peacefully even as she suffered from them. We know that Marie Joly would refuse to obey, the Sisters in Angers would refuse to accept their new Sister Servant, and the Sister who was supposed to go to Cahors left, taking with her the money given her for her food, etc. There were difficulties, but Louise bore them, went forward calmly in joy, aware of God's love, and would approach death peacefully.

But in January 1660, a letter from Louise shows that she was haunted by a terrible fear. Louise asked herself: "what if I was mistaken about God's plan for the Company?" She no longer knew what to think. For in the Company there were some Sisters who wanted to divide the Company into two groups: a first group for "coming and going", those who would continue the service of the poor, and the other group who would have a much more religious life, with a veil, who would be called "Mother" and not "Sister", and who would have much more time to read the Word of God. Louise asked herself, "But what does God want of me?" She sent a very anxious letter to Vincent de Paul where she explains all this.

Letter to M. Vincent (L. 655)

"I am truly distressed to cause you this trouble. If your Charity sees that God wills something other than what has been done until now, then in the name of Our Lord, be the one to declare and order it."

However, as Vincent is sick, she asks that M. Alméras be sent. I suppose that M. Alméras and Vincent de Paul reassured her. But why did she have this fear at the end? I think that she can be compared to Francis of Assisi. In fact, a short time before his death, Francis of Assisi had the same torment because he saw that some of his brothers wanted less poverty and changes in the community. Louise saw the same thing; she saw that some wanted to modify this work of God, and you get the impression that God wanted to ask her to put into His hands this community that she had so loved, and that Louise, at the moment of her death, considered too much as her own work. She had struggled to keep it going, she had done everything so that the Sisters might be faithful to God's designs, and it was her work. Now we feel that God was asking her to let go of her work, to offer it to Him and to place the future of the Company in His hands. Louise did so, and she could die in peace on March 15, 1660. She would say at the beginning of her spiritual testament: "I...pray that [God] will grant you the grace to persevere in your vocation."

Conclusion

I will end with I some lines from Saint Vincent in the first of the two conferences he held on the virtues of Louise de Marillac.

"O mon Dieu, what a beautiful picture! What humility, faith, prudence, sound judgment, and always the concern to conform her actions to those of Our Lord! It's up to you, Sisters, to conform your actions to hers and to imitate her in all things." (Coste X, p. 585)

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