

***Come Wind
or High Water,***

Louise de Marillac



"Come wind or high water, hold fast to your identity," said John Paul II to the Daughters of Charity at the 1985 General Assembly.

During her entire life, Louise de Marillac, too, had to confront winds and high waters, tempests and hurricanes. Firmly anchored in Faith, she set her course for Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary, the Christ who willed to be present in the poorest members of his Mystical Body.

Louise de Marillac was possessed by a great desire, that of being faithful to the design of God upon her. But how could she realize this plan of God, how could she be faithful to his will when obstacles frequently arose to bar the way and threatened to founder her feeble boat? In October 1655, she wrote to Vincent:

"... I must learn to be prepared (to leave this world). I expect your help so that I will not be shipwrecked as I enter the home-port of my voyage." (1)

The engraving of Saint Louise is taken from the book: *Life of Mademoiselle Legras*, Gobillon, 1676 edition.

The letters and meditations of Louise de Marillac enable us to discover her spiritual progress and how through lights and shadows, joys and sorrows, she advanced towards the Lord. In her writings, Louise reveals herself as a woman profoundly affected by her background (birth, social milieu), a woman involved in the political and religious events of her epoch, a woman full of life, who loved to laugh, reacting intensively to each situation which presented itself. She also appears as a theologian and a mystic: she had an experience of God and received from it love and respect for each person.

“My mind recalled the thought I had had that the plan of the Holy Trinity at the moment of creation was that the Word should become flesh, so that man could attain the excellence of the existence that God wishes to bestow on him through the eternal union he intended to have with him” (2) she wrote in one of her meditations.

In the course of this year 1987, the “Echoes of the Company” will offer reflections on Saint Louise de Marillac, her personality and her role in the foundation and strengthening of the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

1. CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC

“God made me realize that his holy will was that I attach myself to Him by the Cross which his goodness willed me to have even from my birth, almost never leaving me without times of suffering at each stage of my life.” (3)

The childhood and adolescence of Louise de Marillac were indeed punctuated by sufferings which penetrated deeply into her being. Her personality was marked by these painful imprints.

Louise would never know the gentleness of a mother. Neither would she experience the warmth of a family home. Her father, Louis de Marillac, born in 1556, was a widower at the time his daughter was born. Who was her mother? No one knows, and no one will ever know. Louise's Baptismal Certificate could not be found, for many XVIIth century records have disappeared.

Louise's father remarried on January 15, 1595. He married Antoinette Le Camus, a widowed mother of three children. At that time, no doubt foreseeing future difficulties, Louis de Marillac, by a notary act, provided an income for his daughter. Louise was placed in the Convent of Poissy; she would never return to live with her step-

mother. In her writings, Louise spoke of her de Marillac cousins and of Attichy, but she never referred to her half-sister Innocente, born in 1601.

Louise de Marillac was born August 12, 1591. Her place of birth is not known, but it is most likely that her mother lived in Paris and that during her pregnancy she had to undergo the privations of a long siege of the city. In 1590 Paris was surrounded by the troops of Henry IV, heir to the throne of France after the assassination of Henry III. Being a Huguenot, Henry IV was rejected by a part of the French. The siege of Paris brought about a great famine for all its inhabitants. All this might explain the fragile health of Louise de Marillac and her frequent migraines.

At the age of 13, Louise experienced a new suffering at the death of her father, July 25, 1604. Louis de Marillac deeply loved his daughter, even if his affection was manifested in an irregular manner. He wrote in his will:

“that she had been his greatest consolation in the world and that he believed she had been given him by God for his peace of mind amidst the afflictions of life.” (4)

At the death of her father, Louise again felt a great loneliness and abandonment. She was alone in life. Her uncle Michel became her tutor, but he remained rather distant and aloof.

In spite of the sufferings which left their mark on her youthful personality, Louise would attain sanctity. Isn't this a message that God is giving to us, revealing to us in this way that each child wounded by life can do something good, can blossom, and arrive at true sanctity?

The education young Louise received, while bringing her much joy and enrichment, was also a source of new sufferings. While still very young she was confided to the Dominican Nuns of the Royal Convent of Poissy. Founded by the King Saint Louis IX, this Convent took in a few young children of the nobility to provide them with an education corresponding to their rank in society.

Louise de Marillac belonged to one of the great French families which occupied important posts in the army and administration in the XVIth and XVIIth centuries. Her uncle Michel, her guardian, became Minister of Justice, the most important person in the Realm after the King. Her uncle Louis was Marshal of France, the highest dignity of the Army. Her aunt Valence's husband became Minister of Finances.

From her family, which had its origins in Auvergne, Louise received the heritage of a keen sense of honor, a love of work, a certain impetuosity, and the soul of a mystic. It is also said that the de Marillacs were handsome and proud people.

At Poissy, Louise would receive an excellent education and a thorough religious formation. She learned to know Jesus Christ, to love Him, to pray to Him and to serve Him in the poor. Her day was regulated by the life of prayer and the sacraments.

The Dominican nuns gave their students a solid humanistic education. Louise learned to read and write, studied Latin and perhaps Greek. She was initiated into painting and music. At Poissy, she experienced the strong and deep affection of one of her aunts, a very learned nun named Mother Louise de Marillac.

But suddenly Louise had to leave this Convent that she loved. Was it her father who, unable to pay her tuition at Poissy, withdrew her? In 1602, Louis de Marillac instituted proceedings against his wife who had squandered his money. Or was it Michel de Marillac who, after his brother's death, was unable to pay the expenses of the royal boarding school? Louise was then placed in a family boarding house.

"She was placed in the hands of an able and virtuous schoolmistress who would teach her tasks appropriate to her station." (5)

Louise had her first experience of real poverty. In this family boarding house, the lifestyle was completely different from that of Poissy. Louise would receive a practical education there, learning cooking, housekeeping, sewing, all necessary for a woman to know.

By this diversified education, God prepared Louise for her future task as educator of the Sisters and Foundress of the Company. Is this not a new message from God inviting us to discover in each event the signs of His Love?

In 1606, a new event in the Church awakened or reawakened in Louise, who was then 15 years of age, the desire to consecrate herself to God. The Capuchin Nuns were solemnly installed in their Convent on Rue Saint-Honore in Paris. "They walked through Paris, barefooted, preceded by a procession in which the Archbishop himself participated. These Capuchins brought with them an example of the greatest asceticism and the influence of Franciscan piety." (6)

Young Louise was attracted by this life of prayer, manual labor and great poverty. Often she went to pray in the Chapel of the Capuchin

nuns. It was at that period that she promised (or made a vow) to give herself to God in this rigorous cloistered life. According to the thinking of the time, this was no doubt for Louise de Marillac a way of "triumphing over the justice of God" and of making reparation for her father's fault at the time of her birth.

Some years later, Louise would find her guardian to tell him of her desire and to ask for his authorization to enter the Capuchin order. Her uncle Michel advised her to meet with the Provincial of the Capuchins, Father Honore de Champigny. The response of the Provincial was very firm and clear: Louise, who had precarious health, would not be able to endure the austerity of the Rule. She was not called to this cloistered Capuchin life. And, whether to console the young woman, or whether inspired by God, the Priest concluded his advice with these words:

"God has other designs on you." (7)

For Louise de Marillac it was another profound heartbreak, accompanied by the impression of having betrayed the promise she had made. Perhaps she also felt the pinch of poverty and her solitude, for every young woman entering religious life had to bring a dowry with her. Was not this refusal linked to the difficulty of providing this dowry?

In the heart of Louise were engraved the words of Father de Champigny: *"God has other designs on you."* But what did God want of her? This question recurred often in her prayer. During her retreat in 1632, Louise was still questioning herself. She wrote:

"in accepting this ignorance ... the paths along which God wishes me to serve Him ... I must abandon myself entirely to His dispositions ... to become entirely His ..." (8)

To distract Louise, her uncle Michel sent her to live with her aunt Valence, where she was kept busy with her seven cousins, and the de Marillac family would try to find a husband for this young woman, soon to be 22 years of age.

(to be continued)

Sister Elisabeth Charpy

History of the Company

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2. Her Years of Marriage

Following the custom of the time, Michel de Marillac, Louise's guardian, looked for a husband for his niece. Marriage for love did not exist in the XVIIth century; the parents prepared and regulated the unions for their children.

The choice of the de Marillac family was one of the secretaries of the Queen, Marie de Medicis. Monsieur Antoine Le Gras, 32 years of age, was a valued functionary of the Intendant of Finances for the Queen, Sir Octavien d'Attichy, husband of Louise's aunt, Valence de Marillac.

Antoine Le Gras was a simple squire, not a nobleman; he belonged to the bourgeoisie and not to the aristocracy. Louise de Marillac would not be able to carry the title of Madame, reserved for women of the nobility. She would have the title of Mademoiselle.

February 4, 1613, the marriage contract was drawn up before a notary in the city hall of Attichy. Louise had been living there for some time taking care of her cousins. In the marriage contract it is recorded that Louise de Marillac was the natural daughter of her father, and her aunts and uncles who were present for this official act were called "friends" of the future bride.

Louise felt once more all of the suffering and loneliness of her youth.

The next day, the marriage was celebrated in Saint Gervais Church in Paris. Before God and society, Louise de Marillac became Mademoiselle Le Gras. For better or worse, the de Marillac family had determined the future of the natural daughter of one of their own.

Antoine and Louise did not choose one another, but a true love would be born between them. Near to her husband, Louise found the joy and warmth of a family home.

The two young newlyweds went together to set up their home on rue Courteau-Villain. They began work on it and had a little turret built. As did all women in Parisian society, Mademoiselle Le Gras met with and received into her home young wives whose husbands worked in the court: Mademoiselle Rousselet, Mademoiselle Foras, Madame Menard, Madame de Vaillesabin, etc.

Louise also participated fully in the spiritual and cultural life of her epoch. She read the writings of the Bishop of Geneva, Francis de Sales; the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, published in 1608, and the *Treatise on the Love of God*, published in 1616. Mademoiselle Le Gras would have the great joy of welcoming this holy Bishop of Geneva to her home in 1618. She absorbed the spirituality of Berulle who had just founded the Oratory (in 1611). In her preoccupation with finding God, Mademoiselle Le Gras asked for permission to read the Bible in a French translation. Monsignor de Camus, her director, gave her permission as well as her husband.

Together, Antoine and Louise meditated on the Word of God and prayed; at night, they prayed Compline.

In her free time, Mademoiselle Le Gras visited the poor and rendered them many services. One of the women of the Court who served in the Le Gras home, gave this testimony:

"She had a great piety and devotion for serving the poor. She brought them sweets and preserves, biscuits and other delicacies. She brushed their hair, washed away their scabies and vermin, and prepared them for burial.

Often at table she would seem to be eating, but she was not. She got up at night to place the food in her closet (and for prayer) as soon as Monsieur was asleep.

She had hair shirts and disciplines." (2)

This happy period in the life of Mademoiselle Le Gras was brightened by the birth of little Michel on October 18, 1613. But the parents' joy was to lessen somewhat in the coming years. The child had difficulty in developing, and learned slowly.

Monsieur and Mademoiselle Le Gras were also affected by the deaths of Louise's uncle and aunt, which occurred within a few years of one another. Octavien d'Attichy died in 1614, and his wife Valence in 1617. They left seven orphaned children who were still very young. Michel de Marillac was named their guardian, but he confided the management of their goods to Antoine Le Gras, who accepted in gratitude to the d'Attichys who had favored his marriage.

This management of the orphans' inheritance was difficult. Antoine Le Gras spent much time with it and even used a part of his own resources to avoid bankruptcy. The oldest of the Attichy children who had their pride injured by the services rendered by Monsieur and Mademoiselle Le Gras, wrote them hurtful letters. Louise informed her uncle Michel about them and he encouraged her to have patience.

Louise had the experience of ingratitude. Giving service to others not only brings joy, but is also a school for the stripping of oneself.

New trials were to befall Louise. Around 1621-1622, her husband, Antoine fell ill. This painful illness affected his behavior: *"his mood becomes angry and despondent."* (5) Louise cared for her husband with much affection, but his mood changes and frequent bouts of impatience became more and more disturbing to her. She who had found the sweetness and warmth of a family no longer understood. She worried and panicked. Was this not all her fault? Had she not promised God to become a Capuchin? Was this not a punishment from God for her infidelity to her promise?

Despite some letters of spiritual encouragement from her uncle Michel and her director Monsignor de Camus, Mademoiselle Le Gras sank into a state of depression. Very turned in on herself, she thought of nothing but her dejection and misery.

"On St. Thomas' feast day I fell into a state of depression at the sight of my abjection, which made me appear as a source of pride and self-love; discouragement, annihilation of myself, deserted by God because of my infidelities, with my heart so depressed that it sometimes resulted in physical pain ..." (6)

In order "to make God's justice triumph" (using her own expression) Mademoiselle would multiply prayers, vigils and mortifications. But her anguish became greater and greater. May 4, 1623, on the feast of

St. Monica, she made a vow of widowhood. She thought she would again find peace in this way, but no, everything continued to topple within her, all was becoming black ... She wanted to leave her sick husband and 10-year-old son ... She no longer believed in the immortality of the soul.

"The feast of the Ascension ... I fell into a state of great depression because of a doubt I was harboring about leaving my husband, which I had wanted to do so as to honor my first vow and be more at liberty to serve God and my neighbor.

I was also fearful lest my attachment to my director prevent me from seeking someone else — he being absent for a long time — and I feared being obligated to him.

And I was very disturbed because I was in doubt as to the immortality of the soul.

From Ascension to Pentecost, all this caused me unimaginable torment." (8)

It was then that the great Light of Pentecost took place. Sunday, June 4, 1623, Mademoiselle went to pray in her parish church, Saint Nicolas des Champs.

"On Pentecost Sunday, I was assisting at Holy Mass in church when suddenly my mind was relieved of any trace of doubts." (9)

And God gave her a glimpse of what He expected of her: to remain with her husband to take a new director. And, in a manner yet obscure, God revealed to her his plan for the company of the Daughters of Charity.

"I was informed that I was to stay with my husband and that a time would come when I would be able to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience; moreover, I would be in a little community where some others would do the same. I was given to understand that I would be in a place where assistance would be given to others, but I was unable to grasp how this would come about because there was to be a great deal of coming and going.

I was also assured that I was not to worry about my director; that God would provide one for me, and I seemed to perceive him and was reluctant to accept him. Nevertheless, I acquiesced, but I understood that the change was not to take place immediately.

My third trial was taken away because of the certainty I felt in my mind that God Himself was instructing me in this matter, and since God existed, I was not to worry about anything else." (10)

With much precision, Mademoiselle Le Gras wrote down this "Light" on a piece of paper which she folded carefully and kept in her pocket or in a little bag. In difficult moments, when she would ask herself what God wanted of her, Louise would reread the text.

Examination of the manuscript, a yellowish paper covered with rapid handwriting front and back, shows it has often been opened and refolded. Around a dozen deep folds have made the paper very fragile. On the back, on what served as a cover for the little booklet, we can read the word "Lumiere" — "Light."

If this Light of Pentecost profoundly appeased Louise, it did not resolve all her difficulties, Antoine's illness continued to evolve: insomnia kept him awake most of the night and frequent hemorrhages weakened him. Louise surrounded him with vigilant and affectionate care.

On December 21, 1625, Louise was alone with her husband when in the middle of the night, he suffered a violent fatal hemorrhage.

In a letter to her cousin, Father Hilarion Rebours, Mademoiselle Le Gras told of this rapid death:

"I was alone with him to help him on this important journey and he evidenced so much devotion that he made me understand to his last breath that his mind was attached to God." (12)

All her life Mademoiselle Le Gras retained very good memories of her husband. She liked to mark their wedding anniversary, and in 1630, in the journal of her visit to the confraternities of Asnieres and Saint-Cloud, she wrote:

"Having the desire to have a Mass said on that day because it was my wedding anniversary, I deprived myself of it to make an act of poverty, wanting to be completely dependent on God in the action I was going to make, and without saying anything to my confessor who said the Mass at which I received communion, God permitted that, on arriving at the altar, he had the thought to say it for me as a charity, and to say the nuptial Mass. (13)

In the testament Louise de Marillac wrote in 1645, she recalled the virtues Antoine Le Gras had practiced in his life:

"... his strong fear of God and exactitude in making himself irreproachable; and above all else his patience in suffering the great evils that befell him in his last years, during which he practiced the greatest virtues." (14)

more graces than he wills. Remain tranquil and humble in view of your faults, for we share nothing of ourselves except our faults, and one cannot expect anything else from us.

I beg God to give you by his grace, a long and happy life, and I am, Mademoiselle, your most humble and affectionate servant

de Marillac." (3)

September 12, 1619

LETTERS OF M. CAMUS, BISHOP OF BELLEY,
TO MADEMOISELLE LE GRAS

My dear daughter, I am still waiting for your serenity to return to you after these clouds that are preventing you from seeing the beautiful clarity of joy in the service of God. Do not attach so many difficulties to things which are indifferent; avert your gaze a little from yourself and place it on Jesus Christ, and then, in my judgment, you will be perfected. (4)

January 20 at Belley

Mademoiselle my dear Sister, your letter of December 1st did not fall into my hands until January 15. I answered it the 20th, not having had the time to do so before then. I sympathize with you in your state of mind over the illness of your dear one. Now this is an additional cross and why should it anger me to see it on the shoulder of a Daughter of the Cross? In order to carry it well, you lack neither skill, nor advice; neither books nor intelligence. God also desires that you not be lacking in courage. And here you are, still making general confessions for the coming Jubilee. Oh! how many times have I told you: Grace is the general confession for your heart. Ah! the Jubilee is not coming to you for this reason, but to help you rejoice in God, your salvation, and to make you say: "Jubilemus Deo salutari nostro." Oh! that God would bless the fatherly heart of M. de Saint Sauveur. Greet him for me, my dear Sister, as well as your dear husband and little son, because I am, your most humble and undivided servant

Jean-Pierre, Bishop of Belley. (7)

LETTER OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC
TO Father Hilarion Rebours.

Very Reverend Father, since you wish to know what graces our good Lord bestowed on my late husband, when I have said that it is impossible for me to make them all known, I will tell you that for a long time now, by the mercy of God, he no longer had any affection for those matters which can lead into mortal sin, and had a very great desire to live devoutly. Six weeks before his death he had a burning fever which put his mind in great danger, but God made apparent his power over nature and restored calm. In gratitude for this grace, he resolved to serve God all his life.

He scarcely slept at all at night; yet such was his patience that those who were with him were not in the least inconvenienced. I believe that in that last illness God desired him to become a sharer in the pains of his own death; for he suffered in the whole of his body and lost all his blood, while his mind was almost always occupied in meditation on the Passion. Seven times he lost blood from the mouth, the seventh time ending his life upon the instant. I was alone with him to help him on this important journey, and he evidenced so much devotion that he made me understand to his last breath that his mind was attached to God. He could never say more to me than: "Pray God for me, I can pray no more," words which are forever engraved upon my heart. I beg you to remember him whenever you say Compline. He had so special a devotion to this Office that he scarcely ever omitted to say it daily. (15)

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3. HER YEARS OF WIDOWHOOD

Widowed, Mademoiselle Le Gras was distraught. What would become of her and her son all alone? Who would help her guide her boat in the midst of the tempest she felt arising once more? How could she find the way God had destined for her?

In the depths of her heart, Louise de Marillac still felt the intense desire to be totally given to God. In order to concretize and discover the design of God for her, she intensified her prayer life. Every day, she recited the Rosary and the little office of the Blessed Virgin; she made many acts of the presence of God and made 33 acts in honor of the 33 years Jesus Christ spent on earth. In addition, she assisted at Holy Mass every day, read the Gospel and the life of the Saint of the day. (1)

She also fulfilled the exercises required by the numerous Confraternities of spirituality to which she belonged: the Confraternity of the Five Wounds of Our Lord, the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament, that of the Rosary, of St. Monica, and of Saint Francis. (2)

All these exercises were accompanied by fasting on Friday, eves of the feasts of Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin, and during Advent and Lent. She also took the discipline regularly.

This very structured life of prayer was a source of tension for her; it was sometimes very difficult to be faithful to all the exercises. Each failing, however involuntary, increased her worry and reinforced her anguish. Vincent, who had become her director, helped her to encounter God in a more relaxed manner:

“As for all those 33 acts to the holy humanity and the others, do not be distressed when you fail to do them. God is love and wants us to go to Him through love. Therefore, do not hold yourself bound to all those good resolutions.” (3)

Still tormented, Louise tried to find comfort and support among those she knew. She confided her search for God and the obstacles she encountered to her cousin, Father Hilarion Rebour:

“It is not reasonable that I should belong entirely to God, after having been for so long in the world? So, my dear cousin, I tell you that I want this with all my heart and in the manner in which it will please Him. But I have great reason to distrust myself in the perseverance of this great desire because of the continual obstacles presenting themselves against the designs God has for me. So help my poor soul by your prayers to break the bonds that keep me so strongly attached to all that is not God.” (4)

Louise also wrote to Bishop Camus, her director. She explained to him the darkness in which she found herself and the trouble that invaded her soul. From his house in Belley, he responded with this rather harsh letter:

Mademoiselle, my dear Sister,

What I heard about you through Monsieur Chappe indicated that you wrote two letters, of which I have received only one, that you said you wrote since the affliction of your widowhood. Now, my dear sister, I do not know why your spirit is troubled and thinks itself to be in darkness and abandoned. For what reason? You are no longer divided. Now you belong wholly to the heavenly Spouse having nothing more to do with earthly things. For a long time now you have desired only him, and now that he has broken your bonds and that you must offer a sacrifice of praise in the Host, you are astonished? Daughter of so little faith, why do you doubt? You must say

what Our Lord said to Mary at the resurrection of Lazarus: If you have more confidence, you will see the glory of God coming upon you. But what is it? It is what I do not see clearly, but what I believe most assuredly.

Belley, March 26, 1626 (5)

Bishop Camus understood this tormented and anxious young widow very poorly. During the illness of her husband she had made a vow of widowhood, and now that she was a widow, she had not recovered her peace. What was she seeking? Overcoming a state of depression, the pain of widowhood and anxiety about the future was not something that was easily done, even with all the good will in the world. What was needed was time.

Bishop Camus, whose house was far from Paris, appointed a new director for her. Louise was hesitant and felt very little attraction for Monsieur Vincent de Paul. The simplicity of this priest was far removed from the refinement of Bishop Camus or Bishop Francis de Sales. But Louise remembered the Light of Pentecost in which God had revealed her new director, and, despite her "repugnance," Mademoiselle Le Gras went to speak to Monsieur Vincent. She wanted to adhere completely to the will of God, to this Light of Pentecost that had come to tear apart the darkness in which she found herself.

"I was also assured that I should not worry about my director, that God would give me one whom he then showed me, I think, and I felt reluctant to accept him. Nevertheless I acquiesced."
Louise wrote in the account of the Light of Pentecost. (6)

Vincent, for his own part, was reluctant to accept the spiritual direction of this young widow. He had had the experience of spiritual direction with Madame de Gondi. He knew the demands made by women of the nobility, and was very hesitant. The Congregation of the Mission was established for the evangelization of the poor, and the missions to the country made great demands on him.

Who convinced Vincent to accept the role of Director of Mademoiselle Le Gras? Was it Monsieur de Berulle? Was it the memory of their common friendship with Bishop Francis de Sales, who had died in December of 1622? Perhaps it was simply an inspiration from God. Several years later, Vincent wrote to Louise who was constantly telling him her personal problems:

"... a person whom God in His plan has destined to assist someone else is no more overburdened by the advice that the other requests than a father is by his own child." (7)

In obedience to the will of God, Louise accepted being directed by Vincent, this priest so filled with good sense and so close to God and the poor. And Vincent accepted this anxious, worried woman and would help her free herself from her anguish and find peace in God.

Louise was now living close to the College des Bons Enfants, the home of Vincent. In the beginning of 1626, she had decided to leave her house on rue Courteau-Villain to come and live in rue Saint-Victor in the parish of Saint Nicholas du Chardonnet. No doubt her decision had been motivated by the lessening of her resources following the death of her husband. Several times, while living on the same street, she had changed houses. In her correspondence, we see that she lived in the house of Monsieur Tiron, then that of Monsieur Guerin, and next that of Monsieur Veron once more.

His first encounters with Mademoiselle Le Gras seemed to comfort Vincent in his hesitation and reticence. Beginning with her first letter in 1626 we see her as very exacting of her director. She wrote often, and Vincent could not respond to all her letters. Mademoiselle was concerned and worried whenever her director left Paris for a mission in the country. What would become of her? Vincent endeavored to reassure her:

"Our Lord ... Himself will act as your director. Yes, He will surely do so, and in such a way that He will lead you to see that it is He Himself." (8)

The tone and style of these first letters are very reverent and somewhat complicated. The expressions that would seem to us to be those of friendship and tenderness are actually a reflection of the language of daily life in the XVIIth century. Louise wrote to Vincent:

"I hope you will forgive the freedom with which I reveal to you the impatience of my soul, since you have been away so long and your destination is so uncertain." (9)

Vincent responds in the same manner:

"Forgive my heart if it is not a little more expansive in this letter." (10)

"Kindly assure your own heart that, provided it honors the holy tranquillity of Our Lord in His love, it will be pleasing to Him." (11)

Through encounters, and letters that became more and more frequent, Vincent and Mademoiselle grew to know each other, discovering their likes and differences. Vincent discovered how much Mademoiselle Le Gras, an ultra-sensitive woman, had been marked by the harshness of life. He listened to her suffering and patiently helped her to accept it. On a day of a violent storm in Paris, he wrote this guidance to her:

"... do not think all is lost because of the little rebellions you experience interiorly. It has just rained very hard and it is thundering dreadfully. Is the weather less beautiful for that? Let the tears of sadness drown your heart and let the demons thunder and growl as much as they please. Be assured, my dear daughter, that you are no less dear to Our Lord for all that. Therefore, live contentedly in His love ..." (12)

Vincent gave encouragement in his many letters, directing the attention of Mademoiselle Le Gras towards the Son of God.

"Try to live content among your reasons for discontent and always honor the activity and unknown condition of the Son of God." (13)

"Honor the Blessed Virgin's sorrow when she saw her Son suffering. Honor as well the eternal Father's acceptance at the sight of His only Son's sufferings. I hope that He will make you see and understand how much you are obligated to His Divine Majesty for His having honored you by associating your sufferings with His ..." (14)

Much of Louise's anxiety was caused by her worry over her son's future. One of every two letters she wrote (up until the foundation of the Company) spoke of Michel. Right from the start, Vincent was attracted by the child. Was he, perhaps, moved to pity by this mischievous orphan, alone except for his anxious mother? While Louise's letters speak of him as "Monsieur, my son", for several years Vincent would use a more affectionate term. For him, Michel was "the little one."

Mademoiselle Le Gras made frequent appeals to Vincent for advice concerning her son:

"The main reason for writing (but I think that my letters must have been lost) was some advice I needed about my son." (15)

Vincent reassured her, moderating the exaggerated worry of a mother's heart. In 1628, he wrote:

"I praise God because if (your heart) has freed itself from the excessive attachment it had to the little one and because you have made it correspond to reason." (16)

At that time, the "little one" was already 15 years old and was a boarder at the Seminary of Saint Nicholas du Chardonnet directed by Monsieur Bourdoise. The adolescent's work was very irregular, and he had much difficulty progressing in his studies that were supposed to bring him to the priesthood. Would he ever succeed if he did not work, his mother kept asking him!

Early on, Vincent discovered in Louise a great concentration for knowing and accomplishing the will of God. He joined her in these efforts; but whereas Louise was in a hurry, lively and acted quickly, Vincent took his time. One should not go ahead of Providence, and Vincent waited for events, for signs from God.

Mademoiselle Le Gras expressed her concerns:

"During these past days I have been longing that you will remember to offer me to God, and to ask of Him the grace of accomplishing His will in me entirely, in spite of the obstacle of my imperfection." (17)

Vincent, knowing the richness of the spiritual life of the one he was directing, as well as the firmness of her union with God, simply invited her to seek after the will of God in joy and confidence.

"Be quite cheerful in the disposition of willing everything that God wills." (18)

"Mon Dieu, my daughter what great hidden treasures there are in holy Providence and how marvelously Our Lord is honored by those who follow it and do not try to get ahead of it!" (19)

In her frequent contacts with Vincent, Louise soon discovered his activities in favor of the poor, and the existence of the Confraternities of Charity. Very naturally, she went to participate in them with her cousin Mademoiselle du Fay. On June 5, 1627, she wrote to Vincent:

"The work which your charity gave me is done; if the members of Jesus need it and if you so wish, my Father, I will send it to you; but I will not do so without your direction." (20)

Vincent called upon her principally for the preparation of clothing for the poor and having it sent to the different Confraternities. But very soon, he asked other services of her: visiting the poor in their

comes, and receiving and finding accommodations for girls in distress. Vincent appreciated the availability of Louise, as well as her sure judgment and sense of organization.

"These few lines will be to thank you for having taken that good young woman into your home, for the twelve shirts that you sent me" ... (21)

Little by little, Louise regained confidence in herself, helped by Vincent who sustained and advised her. He relied on her more and more and would make her his collaborator for all the activities of the Confraternities of Charity.

Sister Elisabeth Charpy

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History of the Company

*Come Wind
or High Water*

Louise de Marillac



**4. IN THE SERVICE OF THE CONFRATERNITIES
OF CHARITY**

Both Vincent and Louise showed themselves to be attentive to events, these signs through which God speaks to us. An appeal from Father Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi was received as an appeal from God and became the starting point of an intense collaboration between these two missionaries of Charity.

At the end of April, 1629, Father de Gondi, former General of the Galley Slaves, and having been an Oratorian priest for two years, asked Vincent to come and meet him at Montmirail. This little village of the Brie region was situated on the property of the de Gondi family. Vincent went there several times and in 1621, he had a Confraternity of Charity established there. Before his departure, he informed Made-moiselle Legras:

“Father de Gondi sent me word to come by coach to see him in Montmirail. That will perhaps prevent me from having the honor of seeing you, because I am leaving tomorrow morning”

The letter continued with an invitation to come to Montmirail to visit the various Confraternities of Charity in the region.

"Do you feel like coming, Mademoiselle? If so, you would have to leave next Wednesday on the coach to Chalons ... And we shall have the happiness of seeing you in Montmirail" (2).

Louise's response was not long in coming. She felt full of fervor for working and serving the poor. Vincent knew that this journey was an important event. With solemnity, he had sent to Louise her "sending on mission," her traveling papers. The text was inspired by the liturgy for the journeys of Clerics.

"Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works." (3)

Vincent next explained that for this first visit, a stay of one or two days in each Confraternity would suffice. But he left Louise completely free to decide otherwise:

"Although I say two days, take more, if need be, and do us the kindness of writing us" (4).

This journey to Montmirail was the beginning of a great work for the Confraternities. Louise was in the prime of her life: she was going to be 38 years old. The depressive state that had overcome her at the time of her husband's death had now dissipated. Her 17-year-old son Michel was a boarder at the Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet college. Louise could now utilize her time.

Without sparing herself, she would come and go, riding many kilometers on horseback, in a coach, or going on foot, if need be. February of the year 1630 would see her at Asnieres and Saint-Cloud, north-west of Paris, May at Villepreux in the west, October at Montmirail once again, 100 kilometers east of Paris, and December at Beauvais in the north. In the years following, she also made many trips.

On each visit, Louise would gather together the Ladies of Charity and speak to them. She would review the functioning of the Confra-

ternity, the financial state, and the role of each of its members. She would ask about their spiritual life. If there was a need, she would readjust the Rule. Moreover, she herself would visit the poor, take an interest in the little girls and try to find them a schoolmistress.

After each visit, she would write Vincent a detailed report of her evaluations.

"It has been a year that there has been no Procurator at the Charity of Sannois, and nevertheless a good man has always written the receipts and expenses ... The Sisters of the Charity are a little lax in the exercises and have often missed their days for visiting the sick ... The said Sisters, at least most of them, have not received Holy Communion for months and need to be roused by some preaching ..." (5).

At Franconville, Louise noted the difficulties in the relationship between the Ladies of Charity and the Procurator who was "strongly uncompromising." At Herblay, the Confraternity still maintained the same fervor.

"At Conflans ... the exercise of working with the sick has ceased for quite some time because of diseases (contagious)" (6).

Seeing the impact of these visits, Vincent wanted Louise to go everywhere. While Louise was staying with her niece in Attichy, he wrote her:

"You must not go so near the Charities of the Beauvais diocese without paying them a visit at your convenience" (7).

During a visit to Villepreux, Louise received this message:

"Please find out how the Charity in Crosnes is doing ... If you had a horse to go there, you would not lose any time" (8).

Whenever the Confraternities were going badly, collapsing, or experiencing tensions, Vincent made an appeal to the competence of Louise de Marillac to bring them back to life.

"They really need you here at the Charity of Saint-Sulpice. They have made some beginning but, according to what I have been told, things are going so badly that it is a real pity. Perhaps God is reserving for you the opportunity to work there" (9).

A short time later, it was Mademoiselle Tranchot, the president of the Charity of Villeneuve-Saint-Georges who asked for Mademoiselle Legras.

“Mademoiselle Tranchot really wants you in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges where the Charity is going badly. I think Our Lord is reserving the success of that good work for you” (10).

The missionary *savoir faire* of Louise de Marillac was known to all. Her cordial attitude, her manner of speaking, of encouraging, gave people back their confidence and aroused enthusiasm. Even the men came to listen to her on the quiet.

Louise shared her thoughts and questions with Vincent who was in admiration of this woman with such sure judgment.

“Now let us respond to all that you wrote me ... Would to God that good Madame de la Croix could follow your advice! ... As for the drugs, you have done well to deliver them” (11).

“I am satisfied with everything you told me about the Charity. Please propose to the Sisters whatever you find appropriate in that regard, and draw it up, as much according to what you have written me as to what you will consider best ...” (12).

Whenever he thought it necessary, Vincent would give his opinion but let full freedom of action to his collaborator.

“You want to know whether you are to speak to the assembled members of the Charity. I would indeed like that very much; they would profit from it, but I do not know whether it is opportune or advisable. Speak to Mademoiselle Chamlin about it and do what Our Lord inspires you to do” (13).

Around 1632, moved by the misery of the Convicts of the Saint-Bernard Tower, which was close to her house in Paris, Louise explained her actions to Vincent. He responded:

“Charity towards those poor convicts is of incomparable merit before God. You have done well to assist them and will do well to continue in any way you can ...” (14).

But Vincent knew that the actions of an individual risked having no follow-up. He also asked Louise, if it would be better to think of a collective action, of having a Confraternity of Charity taken on the responsibility for the convicts, in this instance, that of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet of which Louise was President?

“Give a little thought to whether your Charity at Saint-Nicolas would be willing to take on the responsibility for them (the convicts). Indeed, it is difficult, and that is what makes me suggest the idea casually” (15).

During these years 1629-1633, a true teamwork was established between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Vincent no longer used the term “my dear daughter” in his letters to Louise, indicating the Director-directee relationship, but he used that of “Mademoiselle,” which recognized the full participation of Louise in the common mission.

Both of them discovered their complementarity. In Louise, Vincent found a woman who was intuitive, quick, lively, and always ready to go to the fore. Often, he will be obliged to moderate her passion and to remind her that missionary work was neither overwhelming activism nor excessive zeal.

“I am really afraid that you are doing too much ... Our Lord wants us to serve Him with common sense, and the opposite is called indiscreet zeal” (16).

“Be careful not to do too much. It is a ruse of the devil, by which he deceives good people, to induce them to do more than they are able, so that they end up not being able to do anything. The spirit of God urges one gently to do the good that can be done reasonably, so that it may be done perseveringly and for a long time. Act, therefore, in this way, Mademoiselle, and you will be acting according to the spirit of God” (17).

Vincent often had recourse to the organized mind of Louise de Marillac, to her concern for precision, especially in the writing of the various regulations for the Confraternities.

“I shall send you ... the rules for the Charity which I have adapted to the needs of Montreuil. Look them over and, if anything should be deleted or added, please let me know” (18).

“You are a skillful woman to have adapted the rule of the Charity (of Saint-Nicolas) in this way; I think it is fine” (19).

As for Louise, she knew she could rely on Vincent, as well. In him she found a sure and prudent advisor, a solid support, and an attentive director. In her letters to Vincent, she spoke of the joys encountered in her missionary work, and with a certain humor, he responded:

“After that, will you say that you are of no use to the world” (20)?

Nevertheless, Louise was concerned about the many compliments she received everywhere she went. Was there not a danger of being taken up with them? Her director reassured her:

"... Be at peace. When you are honored and esteemed, unite your spirit to the mockeries, contempt, and ill treatment that the Son of God suffered. Surely, Mademoiselle a truly humble spirit humbles itself as much amid honors as amid insults, acting like the honeybee which makes its honey equally well from the dew that falls on the wormwood as from that which falls on the rose" (21).

She also told Vincent of any difficulties she encountered in her work. At Villepreux and Mesnil, the pastors refused to give "that missionary woman" the authorization to speak in their parishes. Prudently, Vincent invited her collaborator to withdraw.

"It is very difficult, Mademoiselle, to do any good without conflict. And because we must relieve other people's distress as far as it is in our power, I think that you would be performing an action agreeable to God by visiting the Pastor and apologizing for having spoken without his knowledge to the Sisters of the Charity and the girls. Tell him that you thought you could act in Villipreux just as you did in Saint-Cloud and elsewhere ... Our Lord will perhaps draw more glory from your submission than from all the good you could do" (22).

"Honor in this way of acting the humility of the Son of God" (23).

This act of submission on Louise's part won for her the complete trust of the Pastor of Villepreux. She set to work with so much ardor that she became ill from it. Her state of health would often check her enthusiasm. Frequent migraines obliged her to stop, and the conferences she gave caused her to lose her voice. With concern, Vincent begged her to take care of herself.

"It seems to me that you are killing yourself from the little care you take of yourself" (24).

"... Please take care of your health. It is no longer yours since you destine it for God" (25).

In 1630, the political events of the Kingdom profoundly affected the heart of Louise de Marillac. On November 10, a *coup d'etat* tried to overthrow Richelieu, the Prime Minister under Louis XIII. This day, afterwards called the Day of the Dupes, was a failure. The protagonists

of the coup, one of whom was Michel de Marillac, the Keeper of the Seals and Louise's uncle, were arrested and put in prison. Some months later, the Marshall, Louis de Marillac, was also imprisoned. The whole family was distraught. Madame the Marshall de Marillac died of grief September 15, 1630, some months after her husband was arrested. He was decapitated May 8, 1632 in the square in front of the City Hall of Paris, before a booing, bellowing crowd. At the end of the same year, her uncle Michel died in prison at Chateaudun. Louise shuddered at each new sorrow.

"... Although the interior is upset," Vincent wrote to her, "it will soon be quieted ... why should you not weep ...? ... so long as, like the Son of God, you conform yourself in this matter to His Father's Will" (26).

Around 1631, a completely different event would distress Louise. Someone said that she had promised to marry a man, and, completely bewildered, Louise confided her feelings to her Director. Only his response has been preserved:

"How sorry I am about your suffering! But, such being the order of Providence, what can you do? And truly, what real harm do you have to fear from this? So, there is a man who says you promised to marry him, and it is not true ... You are suffering interiorly, unjustly, and without cause ..." (27).

Vincent's response showed how much Louise was troubled by these gossips. At 40, Louise was still an attractive woman and knew she was pleasing to men. Was this all that was bothering her, or was there the conflict and temptation at the bottom of her heart that her vow of widowhood was being threatened? The end of a letter of Vincent allows us to suppose this.

"... Rest assured that that is one of the greatest means of conformity with the Son of God that you could have on earth. You will thereby acquire victories over yourself that you could never have had. Oh! how much vain complacency is being destroyed in this way and how many acts of humility are being brought forth by this means! ... So, strengthen yourself within against the feelings of nature, and the day will come when you will bless the hour in which Our Lord tried you in this manner" (28).

Perhaps Louise had the experience that a vow of chastity should be reinforced each day. A temptation should not surprise us. It requires vigilance and prudence. Christ warned his disciples: "Be on guard, and pray that you may not undergo the test."

And so, come wind or high water, Louise de Marillac followed her pathway. The Light of Pentecost that had given her the insight that she would one day be in a little community to serve the poor, stayed in the foreground in her mind. She often thought of it in the course of her meditations and retreats. She wrote in one of these meditations (doubtless, in 1632):

"... accepting this ignorance together with the paths along which God wishes me to serve Him, I must abandon myself entirely to His disposition in order to prepare my soul to become entirely His. I must willingly renounce everything to follow Him" (29).

Louise perceived that God would be asking something more of her, a more complete commitment. But it was in peace that she waited for God to manifest his designs more clearly.

Sister Elisabeth Charpy

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History of the Company

**Come Wind
or High Water,**

Louise de Marillac



5. HER GREAT INTUITION

Louise de Marillac, still working actively in the service of the Confraternities of Charity, reflected on what God had given her a glimpse of on Pentecost, 1623: to live in community and to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Completely unaware of how this would be accomplished, she made the effort, following the advice of Saint Vincent, to live in peace and joy and to remain available.

Vincent, on his part, continued his missionary activity in the country. In 1630, in the course of a mission, he saw a peasant girl approaching him. At once he was struck by her appearance of depth and aliveness, radiant with joy and reflecting the love of God living within her.

Briefly, Marguerite Naseau told her story. Vincent often recalled it to the Sisters in his conferences. Originally from Suresnes, Marguerite had been a cowherd for her parents for quite some time, when:

“Moved by a powerful inspiration from heaven, the idea occurred to her that she would instruct children and so she bought an alphabet but, as she could not go to school for instruction, she went and asked the parish priest or curate to tell her what were the first four letters of the alphabet. On

another occasion, she asked what were the next four, and so on for the rest. Afterwards, whilst she minded her cows, she studied her lesson. If she saw anyone passing by who seemed to know how to read, she would say: ‘Sir, how is this word pronounced?’ And so little by little she learned to read, and she then taught the other girls of her village. She afterwards made up her mind to go from village to village instructing the young, accompanied by two or three other girls whom she had taught.”(1)

Marguerite had just heard M. Vincent speaking of the Confraternities of Charity and the many sick persons who were being helped by them. Should she not consecrate herself to this new service? The teaching of little girls could be continued by the young girls she had with her.

Vincent was in admiration. Providence was watching over the Confraternities. As a matter of fact, for some time now, Vincent had been worried. The Ladies of the Confraternities of the parishes in Paris, all ladies of “condition” (that is, of the aristocracy and the high “Bourgeois” or middle classes) had a great desire to assist the poor, but, as Vincent relates concerning the beginnings of the Company:

“... when the project began to be carried out they were greatly impeded in rendering poor people distressing and lowly services.”(2)

“They were often incommoded by carrying this soup-pot, so that they became disgusted with it ...”(3)

The Ladies gave over all of these painful tasks to their servants. “What would become of the Charity?” Vincent asked himself. These servants obeyed their mistresses and did the work, but they did not bring to the poor sick the affection and tenderness they were awaiting. Was not the Charity going to transform itself into a cold and impersonal work? Filled with emotion, Vincent accepted Marguerite’s offer.

“... the Ladies of the Charity of Saint Saviour, because they were women of rank, were looking for a girl who would carry soup to the sick.”(4)

Very simply, Marguerite began her service in the parish of Saint Saviour in Paris. Also, very naturally, Vincent told his collaborator of this event. Louise de Marillac and Marguerite would meet each other several times.

"I beg you ... to ... let me know 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." (5)

In the course of these encounters, Louise initiated Marguerite in caring for the sick. Marguerite recounted all her experiences during her years consecrated to teaching the little girls. Both marvelled at the guidance of Providence, and both became ever more conscious of the needs of the most abandoned: the poor sick who had no one to help them and the poor little girls whom no school would accept.

Louise de Marillac discovered the profound Faith of Marguerite, a Faith marked by a docility to the Spirit, a very simple humility and an interior joy. She admired Marguerite's kindness towards all the poor, even the most repugnant.

One evening, Marguerite welcomed a poor sick woman and offered her her own bed for the night. Some days later, Marguerite fell ill, and everything pointed to the plague as the cause, a rapidly fatal illness in those years of epidemics. Vincent asked Louise to ensure that everything possible be done to save this Servant of the Poor.

"As for Marguerite, it would be well to have the surgeon from the Sante visit her ... I think it would be wise to have that done as soon as possible." (6)

Marguerite's condition worsened, in spite of the care, and she was transported to the Saint Louis hospital, which was reserved for the plague victims.

"... she bade good-bye to the Sister who was with her, as if she had foreseen she was about to die, and went to the hospital of Saint Louis, her heart filled with joy and conformity to God's will." (7)

Marguerite died one day near the end of February, 1633; she was 39 years of age. Marguerite Naseau remained in the hearts and minds of Vincent and Louise, *"the first Sister who had the happiness of pointing out the road to our other Sisters."* (8)

The example of Marguerite was contagious. Very quickly, other peasant girls came to help in the Confraternities: Germaine, Jeanne, Jacqueline, Michele, Marie ... Normally, it was Vincent who welcomed them, then sent them to Mademoiselle le Gras.

"Marie (Marie Joly) has replied to me quite earnestly, lovingly, and humbly that she is ready to do what you wish and in the way you wish. She is only sorry that she does not have enough common sense, strength, or humility to be of use for it; but, if you tell her what she has to do, she will follow your instructions completely." (9)

Louise instructed these girls, teaching them the rudiments of care, and explaining how a Confraternity of Charity functioned. In addition, she had them make a little retreat, taking into account their spiritual growth (10). When their numbers grew, Louise divided up the work and chose parishes in which there was a greater amount of work. Vincent gave advice, but left all initiative to his collaborator.

During the visit to the Confraternity of Mesnil, Louise informed Vincent that she had found a schoolmistress, but that she was still quite young.

"If that good eighteen-year-old girl has common sense and an intelligent mind, do not scruple about letting her take care of the girls. A good mind is better at that age than a poor one at the age of fifty." (11)

During a new outbreak of the plague epidemic, Vincent wanted Louise to be prudent. He was still thinking of the sudden death of Marguerite.

"Allow me to tell you that you should not send your young women to the place you mention without finding out from the doctor if there is any danger." (12)

Louise, who was in daily contact with these peasant girls desirous of serving the poor and of living their Christian life fully, thought that it was necessary to go even further. Was this not what the Light of Pentecost showed her: "A community in which there would be coming and going?"

It seems that, beginning in 1630, Louise spoke to Vincent of this intuition. He showed himself to be very reticent.

"I am delighted with the employment of those good young women (in one of the Confraternities in Paris) ... but not your giving way to concern over the matter. You belong to Our Lord and His holy Mother. Cling to them and to the state in which they have placed you until they make it clear that they wish something else of you ..." (13)

At another request of Louise, her Director responded by asking her to honor the hidden life of Our Lord.

“Cling to it, Mademoiselle, and courageously resist any feeling you get that is contrary to it. Rest assured that by this means you will be in the state God requires of you in order to have you advance to another for His greater glory, if He so sees fit ...”
(14)

The months passed, and it seemed that her intuition was becoming more and more clear in the mind of Louise. Perhaps she spoke of it to Marguerite Naseau. Humbly, Louise once again submitted her thought to Vincent (around 1631-1632), but he remained firm:

“As for the rest, I beg you, once and for all, not to give it a thought until Our Lord makes it evident that He wishes it, and at present He is giving indications to the contrary ... You are trying to become the servant of those poor young women, and God wants you to be His own ...”(15) (*)

Thus, the request of Louise de Marillac to become the Servant of the daughters of the Charities seemed opposed to the designs of God. Were not the Visitandines of Bishop Francis de Sales obliged to enclose themselves within a cloister? To form a community, then, seemed to require the suppression of visiting the poor in their homes! What was more, these girls whom Louise de Marillac desired to unite were only peasants, without a dowry and without refinement. How then could one think of founding a community in this XVIIth century in which religious life seemed to be reserved to daughters from a “good family.” Everything seemed opposed to the desire of Louise. Vincent invited her to remain at peace.

“The kingdom of God is peace in the Holy Spirit; He will reign in you if your heart is at peace. So, be at peace, Mademoiselle, and you will honor in a sovereign way the God of peace and love.”(16)

What should she do when an inspiration that seemed to come from God and to be an obvious fact, received nothing but opposition and refusal? Wait, pray and ask for clearer signs for those who must make decisions; that is what Louise did. Her project, or rather, God’s project, she did not abandon. She allowed it to mature in her heart and begged God to enlighten Vincent.

(*) Coste points out that it is not easy to grasp very well the meaning of this letter, and Abelly situates it after the foundation of the Company!

Around May, 1633, it seemed that Vincent began to take Louise’s project into consideration. He reflected on it.

“With regard to your employment, my mind is not yet enlightened enough before God concerning a difficulty which prevents me from seeing whether it is the Will of His Divine Majesty. I beg you, Mademoiselle, to recommend this matter to Him during these days in which He communicates more abundantly the blessings of the Holy Spirit. Let us persist, therefore, in our prayers, and may you remain quite cheerful.”
(17)

Slowly, prudently, Vincent tried to discern the signs from God, to discover His wishes. Louise would have liked a more rapid decision and manifested some impatience.

“... and ... what I think He is asking of you is that you honor His holy Providence in your conduct by not hurrying or bustling about.”(18)

“Permit me to add to this the recommendation of holy indifference, although nature grumbles against it. I tell you that everything is to be feared until we succeed in this, since our inclinations are so wicked that they seek themselves in all things.”(19)

The admirable conclusion of the letter shows how much Vincent had made his own the project presented by his collaborator, and how much he desired that it truly be the plan of God.

“Courage! May Our Lord be in our hearts and our hearts in His, so that they may be three in one and one in three and that we may wish only what He wills.”(20)

Vincent took advantage of the eight days of silence and prayer of his annual retreat in August of 1633 in order to question God on the timeliness of bringing the young women together. He knew these servants were capable of the highest Christian virtues (the same virtues as nuns practiced). Marguerite Naseau had been an example of this. He had seen all of these young women of the Charities at work, simple and without pretense, not afraid to suffer with the sick, and animated with a profound love of God. If they were to be united in a little Confraternity, would this not be a means of aiding and supporting them, of “perfecting” the service in the midst of the confraternities?

At the end of his retreat, Vincent very simply shared the conclusions of his meditations with Louise.

"Four or five days ago, (your good angel) communicated with mine concerning the Charity of your young women. It is true; he prompted me to recall it often and I gave that good work serious thought. We shall talk about it, God willing, on Friday or Saturday ..." (21)

Some weeks later, the decision was made. Louise de Marillac would propose to the young women the experience of this "adventure" of a consecrated life in the midst of the world. All would not respond with a yes. It seems that Germaine, the schoolmistress of Villepreux, never came to join the group. At the end of October, Vincent, ever prudent, wrote to Mademoiselle:

"We must surely meet before making a firm decision about the girls, and it can only be towards the end of the week. In the meantime, please send them away for the next twelve to fifteen days, at which time you can notify them ..." (22)

Certain of the will of God, on November 29, 1633, Louise de Marillac welcomed into her home close by Saint Nicholas du Chardonnet Church, five or six young women, that they might live in community and serve the Poor. And thus the Company of the Daughters of Charity was born.

Sister Elisabeth Charpy

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History of the Company

*Come Wind
or High Water,*

Louise de Marillac



6. THE FIRST STEPS OF THE LITTLE COMPANY (1633-1636)

On November 29, 1633, Mademoiselle Le Gras received "a few girls to be housed with her, and to live a community life" according to Gobillon, her first biographer. This date marked a new stage in the life of Louise de Marillac.

From then on, she would no longer have servants (at present, we use the term house employes). She shared her own home, her life and her daily work with these few peasant girls who had the same desire she had: to consecrate their lives to God and to serve Him in the poor. Louise was the superior of this little group, of this new "confraternity" that was gradually being constituted.

Marie Joly, Jeanne, Marguerite, Nicole and Michelle were soon joined by others. Coming from the areas around Paris, they came on their own or were sent by the Ladies of Charity. Some had heard about this little group of "Servants of the Sick Poor" through the Priests of the Mission in the course of a mission in their villages. July 31, 1634, there were twelve of them at the conference given by M. Vincent. Barbe Angiboust, from Serville near Chartres, had just arrived. Louise quickly took note of her strong and rich personality.

Elisabeth Martin of Argenteuil, Henriette Gesseume of Villers-sous-Leu, Madeleine Mongert of Sucy-en-Brie, little Barbe Toussaint of Suresnes, Cecile, the sister of Barbe Angiboust, Genevieve Poisson, Marie-Denÿse and many others came to offer themselves to the Charity. Very quickly, M. Vincent and Mademoiselle Le Gras were led to examine the motivations for this influx to Paris, and the seriousness of these vocations. The letters they exchanged allow us to see their concern for discernment.

Louise had just seen three girls who had come from Colombes. Very pleased with her interview, she gave an account of it to Vincent:

"Good Sister Jeanne of Saint-Benoit has just brought me three girls from Colombe, very well-mannered, who have the great desire of serving the poor anywhere we would wish to send them." (1)

Often these young women who desired to serve in the Confraternities of Charity would address themselves directly to M. Vincent:

"Yesterday three fine girls from Argenteuil came to offer their services for the Charity at the suggestion of the priest to whom I had someone mention it. He is supposed to come and see me tomorrow concerning the matter. I did not send them to you because it was too late when they arrived but, according to what they told me, they will come to see you on Friday." (2)

In a continuous correspondence, Vincent and Louise exchanged their impressions, reflecting upon decisions to be made.

"I have seen that good young woman, Madeleine. I think you will have to work with her a little as her passions are rather strong. So what! When these young women have the strength to overcome themselves, they work wonders afterwards. Accept her, therefore, please ..."

"As for that good young woman from Argenteuil who is melancholy, I think you are right in raising objections to taking her, for it is a strange disposition, that of melancholy." (3)

One young woman who had lived for a time in a monastery and had left it, presented herself to Louise. What should she do? Vincent was first of all reticent and advised prudence:

"That entering and leaving religious life indicates some instability; you will have to be careful about that." (4)

Louise, who had seen and evaluated the young woman, asked that Vincent might meet her. After the interview, he responded:

"That good young woman seems to have a fair amount of common sense and good will. The only problem is that she has been in a religious community. However, she told me that, although she was persuaded to enter that community, her heart was with the Charity. Therefore, I do not think there is any harm in letting her try." (5)

Some widows also presented themselves. Perhaps Louise had a little more difficulty when they should not be accepted. It seems that in these cases, it was Vincent who made the decision.

"I really wish that widow from Colombes could read; please have her see us. Well! I just noticed, on rereading your letter, that she has two children; if that is so, how could we admit her?" (6)

A short time later, Vincent advised sending away a widow who did not seem to him to be suitable to serve the poor.

"As for the good widow ... she strikes me as uncouth, very gloomy, and vulgar. I think we shall have to send her away very gently and tell her that we shall have to think it over for a long time." (7)

When the interviews with a "postulant" who presented herself did not allow the necessary discernment, a time of trial was suggested to her:

"But what shall I tell you about Mademoiselle Laurent? She appears to have good judgment but her age worries me. Nevertheless, if you think it advisable to have her come to the Hotel-Dieu, spending two or three days with her, and after that to have her come and go from one house to the other ... then do so. She can observe and you can observe her. But make it quite clear to her that this is just an experiment ..." (8)

"I saw that young woman and do not know what to tell you, except that I think your plan to see her three or four days before she enters is a good one. With that in view, I gave her half an ecu to live on." (9)

This prudence is self-explanatory. Certain young women seemed to want to discover the capital and its pleasures rather than to serve the poor. One girl who came from Normandy, gave scandal at the Hotel-Dieu. Vincent informed Louise who was visiting the Confraternity of Charity at Gournay.

"... that ... girl ... is scandalizing them (the other Sisters) because of the way she behaves with some young men who come to see her ... I sent for her yesterday to tell her not to bring young men into the house, but she did not take it well and told me she would rather leave. We must remain at peace after we have done all we can in such cases." (10)

Some months later, it was Louise who described to Vincent the life another was leading with some young men:

"She obtains conveniences from them, eats well, and receives bottles of wine and pates." (11)

If these cases existed, they were a very small minority. Most often, Vincent was enraptured by the generosity and fervor of these first Daughters of Charity. He shared his feelings and admiration with his collaborator who had too much tendency to see what was going wrong and to blame herself.

"I thank our Lord ... for the blessing He is granting your Sisters of being so good and generous." (12)

In May, 1636, the Duchess d'Aiguillon asked Vincent for one of these young women to be near her to help her with her good works of the Charity. Vincent dared not give a refusal to this generous benefactress. Marie-Denyse refused when contacted, because as she told M. Vincent:

"she had left her father and mother to give herself to the service of the poor for the love of God, and she begged me to excuse her if she could not change her intention in order to go and serve that great lady." (13)

Barbe Angiboust, who was approached next, accepted at first, but: *"she was startled to see such a grand court, that she could not live there, and begged me to take her away ... and ... send her back ... to the poor (to whom) the Lord had given her ..."* (14)

Much impressed with the responses of these two young women, Vincent concluded his account to Louise with these words:

"Are you not delighted to see the strength of the spirit of God in those two poor young women and the contempt that He has given them for the world and its greatness? You could not believe the ardor that this has given me for the Charity ..." (15)

Courage, patience and *savoir-faire* were also needed by Louise in order to teach these peasant girls how to care for the sick, to support them in their spiritual life, and to help them live together in community. The differences in culture and education were so great between Louise and these first Daughters of Charity!

The majority of these young people coming from the country were illiterate, as were most women of the XVIIth century. They had to learn to read and write so they could teach the little girls in the parishes and villages. In her free time, Louise patiently taught them their letters. She also composed a little catechism with questions and answers to facilitate the teaching of the "faith." Vincent encouraged their efforts:

"How I wish your Sisters would make an effort to learn to read and that they might really know the catechism you are teaching!" (16)

Knowing how to read is one thing; teaching others to read is very different. Vincent and Mademoiselle Le Gras together researched the best teaching methods.

"We must reflect a little on some way of preparing the Sisters to teach school," Vincent wrote. (17)

Louise prepared a project and submitted it to him. The Daughters of Charity could go to learn from the Ursulines who educated the children of the wealthy classes. Vincent gave his opinion:

"I do not expect much from the Ursulines' way of communicating with your Sisters. Please send them there, nevertheless." (18)

What freedom and honesty there was between Vincent and Louise, with each giving an opinion to the other without fear. Their differing views on matters did nothing to weaken their collaboration.

Louise prepared a rule of life and submitted it to Vincent. The attention of the Sisters was continually oriented towards Jesus Christ, the Son of God, living in the midst of men. It was in contemplating Jesus with the sick, the blind and the lame that the Sisters would learn to serve the poor with meekness, respect, cordiality and compassion. It was in meditating the life of the Son of God at Nazareth and during His public life that the Sisters would discover the beauty of humility, the importance of asceticism, and the grandeur of obedience. The first rule indicates:

"When they have all returned to the house ... they shall read a passage of the Holy Gospel so as to stimulate themselves to the practice of virtue and the service of their neighbor in imitation of the Son of God." (19)

Louise asked Vincent to come and speak to the daughters. In 1634, three conferences were dedicated to the explanation of the rule (only the third is preserved). Vincent categorized the service of the poor as the prolongation of prayer. It was an act of love of God and the neighbor.

"... serving the poor is going to God and you should see God in them" (20)

Community life was not easy. Mademoiselle saw the difficulties encountered by the daughters in living together, accepting one another and supporting one another. Some of them even went so far as to strike their companions. Concerned for fraternal charity, Louise asked to meet with Vincent in order to reflect upon means to be taken "to perfect" this life in common.

"I find quite appropriate ... discussing with you at length some means of establishing perfect charity among your Sisters." (21)

Louise would insist that there be cordiality, support and mutual affection among the Sisters. The rule of Angers, drawn up in 1640, invites the Sisters to a profound friendship:

"They shall cherish one another as Sisters whom God has united with the bond of His love." (22)

In order to assure the formation of the daughters, Louise often had recourse to Vincent, but he was very busy and could not often free himself:

"I am involved up to my ears with a large number of retreatants, an appointed bishop, a First President, two doctors, a professor in theology, and M. Pavillon, in addition to our exercises. All that, I must say, prevents me from coming to see you." (23)

Through the letters from this period, we see that, little by little, Vincent urged Mademoiselle Le Gras to assume full direction of the Daughters of Charity:

"Exercise your authority," he said several times. (24)

Vincent presented Louise as the Superioress of the Daughters of the Ladies of Charity.

"The entire company (of the Ladies of Charity) considers it essential for that house to depend on the Superioress of the Daughters of Charity." (25)

And each time Vincent wrote to Louise, he utilized the term "your Sisters" (or "your Daughters") when speaking of the Daughters of Charity.

"I received your letter yesterday and your outline of the rules for your Daughters ..." (26)

"I shall see your Daughters individually and then all together ..." (27)

"Your Sisters at the Hotel-Dieu are doing fine." (28)

Louise did not want to carry the sole responsibility for the little Company. With a refined delicacy, she replied to Vincent: "They are also your Daughters."

"Monsieur, all your Daughters take the liberty of recommending themselves to your charity." (29)

Through these exchanges, can there be seen the seed of the resistance that would oppose both Vincent and his successors being the Superior of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, and the pressure Louise would exert in order to obtain his assent?

From 1630 on, the Ladies of Charity valued the work of the first Servants of the Poor. In the Confraternities of their parishes, they all wanted to have daughters like Marguerite Naseau. When the "Servant" did not give satisfaction, these Ladies requested that they be changed. They usually addressed themselves to Vincent, since he was the person in charge of the Confraternities. He would then inform his collaborator of it and ask her to intervene:

"Mademoiselle de la Bistrade and Madame Forest are supposed to come and ask you to relieve them of Nicole because of her many health problems and because Marie, who is bearing the whole burden, cannot go on unless you send them someone to replace Nicole." (30)

Mademoiselle reflected on the problem, and planned the replacement of Nicole. When she was preparing to do so, the Ladies intervened once again; they wanted to keep Nicole.

"Madame Forest came here to thank us for the good stout young woman you wanted to send them, because their Nicole is better." (31)

If collaboration with everyone is indispensable, it is not always easy. This is why Vincent reflected with Louise on indifference, "that interior disposition that makes us agree to whatever God sends us." (32)

"I am like you, Mademoiselle; there is nothing that bothers me more than uncertainty. But I do indeed greatly desire that God may be pleased to grant me the grace of making everything indifferent to me, and to you as well. Come now, **we shall make every effort, please God, to acquire this holy virtue.**" (33)

Together, Vincent and Louise assumed responsibility for the Daughters of Charity; together they reflected upon and faced the appeals and difficulties that presented themselves. But their actions were accompanied by a common search to live and progress ever-better in their total belonging to Jesus Christ.

Louise asked Vincent not to hesitate in warning her of her faults. He wrote to her quite simply:

"Above all, try not to rush around, but do everything gently as you can imagine the good Bishop of Geneva did." (34)

In her letters (which have not been preserved), Louise must have told Vincent he was a little slow in his decisions. His response shows how much he appreciated their complementarity.

"This slight indisposition will give me the means to reflect a little more on our concerns about the Charity. Afterwards, if Our Lord grants me life, we shall work at it in good earnest. Your letter the day before yesterday let me see some slight reluctance in your mind about it: **Mon Dieu! Mademoiselle, how fortunate you are to possess the antidote for eagerness.**" (35)

The prudent slowness of Vincent de Paul was compensated by and compensated the ardent vivacity of Louise de Marillac. The acceptance of their differences and complementarity assured to the work of God, accomplished by them, a balanced and harmonious character.

Sister Elisabeth Charpy

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History of the Company

*Come Wind
or High Water,*

Louise de Marillac



7. THE FIRST EXPANSION OF THE COMPANY (1636-1642)

The number of Daughters who committed themselves to the service of the sick poor in the parishes of Paris was constantly growing. Five or six in number in 1633, they were twelve in July of 1634 and around 20 at the beginning of 1636. The house of Mademoiselle Le Gras was becoming too small to receive them all. It became necessary to think of moving. Where would they find such a large house? How could they cover the expenses involved in rental or purchase?

Louise wanted to benefit from this necessary change by moving closer to Vincent. For four years, the Congregation of the Mission had been located in the Priory of Saint Lazare north of Paris (where the present Gare du Nord is). Louise wanted to look for a house in this district because thereby the meetings with Vincent would be facilitated, and the many problems being presented by Community life and the service in the various parishes could be solved more rapidly.

The thinking of Vincent did not go along with that of Louise. He did not think it appropriate that the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity should be located near Saint Lazare. He explained to his collaborator that the drawbacks did not come from her side, but that there was the risk of "what people would say" seeing the frequent relations between the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

"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 ..."

Fearing that he might have saddened his correspondent by his refusal, Vincent added:

"When I have the happiness of seeing you, I will speak to you about the matter in greater detail ... Meanwhile, honor the holy cheerfulness of Our Lord and that of His holy Mother."
(1)

Louise accepted the decision of him whom she considered to be the Superior of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, and she participated in the search for a house. For her part, Madame Goussault, the president of the Confraternity of the Ladies of the Hotel-Dieu, was making inquiries. Two houses for rent were examined, one seen by Madame Goussault, the other by Vincent. He proposed them to Louise de Marillac with this commentary:

"The house to which Madame Goussault was referring is not the one I mentioned to you. The first is more beautiful and is priced at forty or fifty thousand livres; the second costs about seven or eight. The first one would be scandalous for poor girls and the second is too far from the Church. You will see." (2)

Vincent had confidence in the prudence and simplicity of Louise. Neither of the two houses was chosen. The search continued. At La Chapelle, a little village situated between Saint Lazare and Saint Denis, a house was vacant. Madame Goussault spoke to Vincent about it and he invited Louise to go see it.

"I wrote Madame Goussault, the President's wife, that I think you would be wise to go and see the house in La Chapelle and find out how much rent they want for it. That will give you a diversion as well. She feels, as I do, that the country air is good for you. Meanwhile, remain cheerful and take care of your health." (3)

The house was suitable and was rented. It was not Mademoiselle Le Gras who would sign the contract. The Company of the Daughters of Charity had no legal recognition, and she could not sign a lease.

Madame Goussault could act in the name of the legally constituted Confraternities of Charity, and it was she who was responsible for administrative procedures.

"Madame Goussault told me that she signed the contract for the house," wrote Vincent. (4)

No doubt, the price of rental was taken in charge by the Confraternity of the Ladies, because the Daughters of Charity had scarcely any resources in those first years of their foundation.

In May, 1636, the move took place. Some daughters remained in the parish house of Saint Nicholas du Chardonnet in order to continue the service of the sick there. The choice of those who left for La Chapelle and those who stayed in the first house was a decision made by the agreement of the two Founders.

"You will have to see us in order to decide whom you will take there." (5)

Going beyond all the upset of the move, it is probable that Louise proposed to the Sisters that they honor on this occasion *"Jesus and the Blessed Virgin leaving their dwelling in Bethlehem in order to go into Egypt,"* as she had written at the time of one of her moves around 1632. She shared her own meditation with the Sisters:

"To go to my new home with the motive of honoring Divine Providence which is leading me there. To place myself in the disposition to do all that this same Providence will permit to be accomplished there." (6)

Within a few years, the Providence of God, to which Louise wished to be so faithful, would broaden the field of action of the Daughters of Charity. The relief of misery will not stop with the sick poor, but would extend itself to little children, galley slaves, and the poor taken into the hospitals. The charitable acts of the Sisters will no longer be confined just to Paris, but will reach the nearby suburb of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, as well as cities much farther away: Richelieu, Angers and Sedan.

For each one of these new services and establishments, Louise would choose with care the Sisters who would be sent there, and would prepare a rule and an adapted plan of life. She would regularly accompany the Sisters through her counsels, letters and visits.

THE FOUNDLINGS

The work of the Foundlings was the result of a real and efficacious collaboration among Vincent, Louise, the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity and the Priests of the Mission. This collaboration proved to be demanding. Working with others is a source of patience and humility: knowing how to wait, to accept the weaknesses of others and not to dramatize the difficulties; knowing one's own limitations and failures. This work in common was a source of Charity, because it revealed the presence of the Lord:

"When two or three are gathered in My name, I am in the midst of them."

In XVIIth century Paris, 300 to 400 infants were abandoned each year and placed in the streets of the city or under the porches of Churches. Taken in charge by the district superintendents, they were brought to a house called La Couche to be fed and reared.

But, as Vincent himself explained to the Ladies of Charity, *"these poor little creatures are poorly looked after ... There was not a single one found alive after 50 years"* (7). There were not enough wet nurses; only one for four or five infants. To keep them from crying at night, they were given laudanum pills. Some of these babies were sold for eight sols to the beggars who broke their arms and legs to excite the pity of passers-by. Others were given to women who had need of being recognized as mothers. All this trafficking in infants allowed compensation for the lack of resources of La Couche.

The Chapter of the Cathedral of Paris was responsible for this house. Was it they who asked Vincent to come to the aid of these little ones, or was it Vincent who, overcome by all this suffering, proposed that something be done? A long period of time was given to reflecting on the subject with the Ladies of Charity, and this was summed up by Vincent in the course of a Conference:

- 1) *Our Lord has had you reflect for two or three years by means of the Messieurs of Notre Dame.*
- 2) *You have had different meetings on this subject.*
- 3) *You have prayed much to God.*
- 4) *You have taken counsel from wise persons."* (8)

On January 1, 1638, Vincent informed Louise of the decision taken by the Ladies of Charity in the course of their last meeting:

"At the last meeting, it was the general opinion that you be asked to experiment with the foundlings to see if there is a way of feeding them with cow's milk, and to get two or three of them for that purpose. I am consoled that Providence is turning to you for this work." (9)

The Ladies could not undertake the service of the Foundlings alone. Louise was certainly moved by the choice of Providence. She was intensely stirred by the suffering of these little ones without father or mother. Her heart was wide open to love all these babies, innocent victims. Three of them were received into the House at La Chapelle.

At the end of the month of January, the first efforts seemed very positive, and the Ladies wanted to broaden the experiment:

"Let us talk ... about the little foundlings ... Would there be any objection to your buying a goat and continuing your experiment further?" (10)

Among the Ladies of Charity, there appeared differences of opinion on the manner of pursuing this experiment. Some thought they should proceed prudently and progressively in receiving the babies, because it was necessary to assure their livelihood. Others wanted a quick and complete solution that would mean taking over the house of La Couche entirely! Vincent asked advice of Louise:

"Mademoiselle Hardy is still urging me to call a meeting of the Ladies who promised her they would contribute ... She expects those Ladies to go to the foundling home (La Couche) and would have everything done right there according to the order prescribed. I think it would be better to give up the capital of the established house rather than be subject to rendering so many accounts and overcoming so many difficulties, and to set up a new institution, leaving the former as it is, at least for some time. What do you think?" (11)

Louise approved of the thinking of Vincent. During a new meeting of the Ladies, the proposition of Mademoiselle Hardy was rejected. It was resolved to rent a house to receive twelve infants on the rue des Boulangers, outside the Saint Victor gate.

Vincent wrote to Louise: *"The entire company considers it essential for that house to depend on the superioress of the Daughters of Charity, as I wrote you, and for you to go and spend a week or so there, if your health permits."* (12)

The immediate direction of the house was confided to a Daughter of Charity, Madame Pelletier. Louise prepared a rule of life for the house, and it was read by Vincent and the Officers of the Ladies at two assemblies (13). It specified the role of Madame Pelletier, her relationship of dependency towards the Ladies "for purely temporal matters" and towards Mademoiselle Le Gras "for the direction of the Sisters, the wet nurses and the children" (14). But shortly after her installation as the head of the house, Madame Pelletier schemed with the ecclesiastical authorities and judiciaries in order to dismiss Vincent and the Ladies of Charity from the Work of the Foundlings in order to become sole mistress of it. For several months, Louise endured the peculiar activities of Madame Pelletier, who finally left the Company of the Daughters of Charity. The house of the Foundlings was entrusted to another Sister, Elisabeth Turgis, whom Vincent always called Madame Turgis.

At that time, difficulties of another kind arose. The house was requisitioned as a lodging for soldiers. The inhabitants of the quarter were thus freed from the obligation of having to find military housing. Louise informed Vincent of it:

"Sister Turgis is very upset because the sergeant of M. de Castillon's company has told her he's going to lodge soldiers in the front part of the building and in the children's quarters." (15)

Louise was very worried about this cohabitation. Could not Vincent intervene with the Duchess d'Aiguillon, the niece of Richelieu, with Madame Segulier, the wife of the Chancellor, or, if need be, with the Queen? Vincent took several steps but had the impression that no one wanted to make a decision!

"... nothing is certain concerning things that depend upon the great," confided Vincent. (16)

Two years after the first attempts made on behalf of the Foundlings, the Ladies of Charity thought that it was now the time to underake the responsibility for all the little abandoned ones. The decision was made in the course of their meeting on January 12, 1640. As the house on rue des Boulangers was not large enough, a certain number of children were received at the Motherhouse at La Chapelle. Upon their arrival on March 30, Louise organized the sending of the healthiest ones to be cared for by wet nurses. Very precisely, she drew up the list of these departures:

"A girl named Simonee was placed with a wet nurse in Villars called Saint Sepulcre, to one Marie Parsin, the wife of Jacques Prevault."

The same day, a girl named Madeleine Lebon was given to be wet nursed to Thomasse Patrice, wife of Denis, a butcher, residing in Drinville near Montfort Mamaury ...

The second day of April, Charles whom people say is a gentleman and little Catherine were both given to a wet nurse of the house of faubourg Saint Victor ..." (17)

In three weeks, 20 infants were thus entrusted to wet nurses chosen with care by Louise and the Ladies of Charity. Some Sisters went to visit them and to see the education being given them. In 1649, a Brother of the Congregation would be sent, doubtless because of the dangers on the roads because of the civil war of the Fronde.

Always watching over the children, Louise helped the Sisters to go beyond the opinion of the times that considered the Foundlings to be "children of sin." In the course of the Conference of December 7, 1643, one Sister summed up this negative outlook well:

"Father, these children, who are in all probability doubly conceived in sin, represent a very thorny plant ..." (18)

Unceasingly, the Founders would come back to the dignity of these children, of these little souls, which were also "ransomed by the blood of Jesus Christ." Louise wrote in the rule for the Sisters of the Foundlings:

"... they shall ... offer to God all the services that they are going to render to the childhood of Our Lord in the person of His children." (19)

Vincent concluded the Conference of December 7, 1643:

"When you serve those little children ... you are rendering God the greatest service that can be rendered Him; you are contributing with all your might that the death of the Son of God may not prove unavailing ..." (20)

This service that gave prominence to *eminent dignity of the Poor*, according to an expression of Bossuet, witnessed that the Church, throughout history, is attentive to the lowly and the abandoned, and that it has concern for all men.

RICHELIEU

At the beginning of the century, the Cardinal of Richelieu had built on his land a city that would bear his name. Many Protestants inhabited this region, and the Cardinal also asked Vincent de Paul to establish in his city a house of the Priests of the Mission. The contract was signed January 4, 1638, and ten priests were sent to Richelieu.

Upon arriving, M. Lambert, the Superior, wanted a Confraternity of Charity to be established in the city, and asked for the Daughters of Charity. The Duchess d'Aiguillon, the niece of Richelieu, supported the request, and the 20th of February, Vincent planned to send Barbe Angiboust whom he presented to M. Lambert:

"I hope to send you an excellent Daughter of Charity for that purpose (the Charity). She does bloodletting, administers medicines, and gives enemas. She is the one who preferred the service of the poor to that of the great lady whom I mentioned to you." (21)

It was Mademoiselle who slowed the departure, hesitant at sending Sisters so far from Paris (Richelieu is 320 kilometers away, and was a journey of several days). Who would follow them and sustain them in their difficulties?

For several months, Vincent repeated his promise to M. Lambert. In September, 1636, a letter came questioning Mademoiselle:

"The Charity in Richelieu really needs Sister Barbe now because of the great number of sick people. What do you think, Mademoiselle, of sending her to help those good people in this necessity? Their illnesses are not contagious." (22)

One could say that Vincent tried to sway Louise by stressing the needs of the poor, but at the same time he tried to reassure her that there was no danger whatsoever for the Sisters. Louise finally accepted this departure that Vincent had already organized very well. Barbe would be accompanied by Louise Ganset. On October 1, Vincent wrote of his joy to M. Lambert:

"Here are two Daughters of Charity coming to see you about relieving the Ladies of Charity and assisting the sick poor. Both of them know how to teach little girls." (23)

Louise prepared for the departure and gave advice to the two Sisters. She asked Vincent for the blessing of Our Lord for the two

travellers. In his response, Vincent exalted the vocation of the Daughters of Charity — perhaps to calm the worries of Louise who was upset about sending them so far from Paris:

"... Mademoiselle, what happiness for those good Sisters to be about to continue the charity Our Lord exercised on earth in the place where they are going! And who would think, seeing them together, those two headpieces, in the coach, that they are departing for a work so admirable in the eyes of God and the angels that the God-Man found it worthy of Himself and of His holy Mother?" (24)

In December, Vincent paid a visit to the house at Richelieu and saw the good work accomplished by the Sisters.

"The two Sister Servants of the Poor whom we sent from here are working wonders there." (25)

But some months later, in October, 1639, Louise was informed of some difficulties in the relationship existing between the two Sisters. With a certain severity, she invited them to a revision of life:

"What I have always feared has come to pass; the good you are doing for the sick and the instructions you give the children have not helped you to attain perfection. On the contrary, they seem to have harmed you ..." (26)

Louise invited each Sister to review her behavior with regard to her companion; Barbe, her lack of support and cordiality, and Louise, her lack of acceptance of her Sister Servant and her attachment to money. She entreated the two Sisters to turn their eyes towards Christ,

to *"act with great meekness and charity, as the Son of God recommended when He was on earth ..."*

and *"to cultivate a love for poverty so as to honor the poverty of the Son of God ..."* (27)

In passing through Richelieu at the end of the month of November, Vincent saw the beneficial effect of the letter. He calmed Louise de Marillac by sharing with her what he had seen. The eyes of Vincent were always watching over his Daughters:

"Your letter worked wonders for your Daughters; they are happy at present and content, provided they see you." (28)

At the end of that year, 1639, there was a new establishment being planned for Angers. Louise planned to accompany the Sisters who

were going to serve the sick of the hospital. A stop at Richelieu was planned, either on the way or on the return journey, which was a source of joy for Barbe and Louise.

(to be continued)

Sister Elisabeth Charpy

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History of the Company

*Come Wind
or
high water*

*Louise
de Marillac*



7. THE FIRST EXPANSION OF THE COMPANY (1636-1642)
(continued)

At the end of the year 1639 a new and different type of foundation was being prepared: The Daughters of Charity were being asked for at Angers to help with the sick in the interior of the hospital.

ANGERS

For some time, Madame Goussault had been asking Monsieur Vincent to send some Daughters of Charity to the hospital of Angers, where great disorder reigned. On September 20, 1639, she died without seeing her desire fulfilled. In order to negotiate the Sisters' coming, the aldermen of Angers delegated the Abbe de Vaux, who brought about the fulfillment of Madame Goussault's plans.

At the end of November, 1639, Louise de Marillac left Paris with three Sisters and arrived in Angers on December 5, eve of Saint Nicholas. Throughout the journey, bad weather had aggravated the bronchitis from which she had been suffering before her departure. Louise fell ill and had to begin by taking care of herself. The Abbe de Vaux welcomed her into his home with much generosity, and a relationship that was both friendly and respectful was established between them. The Abbe de Vaux would be a vigilant director and counsellor for the Sisters.

The plague was raging in the hospital of Angers when the Sisters arrived there. Fearlessly they set to work. At the request of Louise de Marillac, who realized the immense task that was facing the Sisters, Monsieur Vincent sent three other Sisters *"the day before Christmas Eve on the Orleans coach."* (29)

The arrival of the Daughters of Charity would upset the usual pattern of life of the Hotel-Dieu Saint-Jean where many abuses reigned. The Administrators asked that a written contract be drawn up; and this had not been foreseen. Vincent thought that a verbal agreement would be sufficient. Having informed him of it, Louise received a response dated January 11, 1640:

"Seeing that these Gentlemen want this handled in writing, do it, in nomine Domini, and have it drawn up in your name as directress of the Daughters of Charity, servants of the sick poor of the hospitals and parishes, under the good pleasure of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission, director of the said Daughters of Charity." (30)

Vincent knew that the Company of the Daughters of Charity had no legal recognition, and he added:

"If someone asks you for the letters of the erection of his body, you will say that there are none, other than that of the power that has been given to the said Superior, director of the Confraternities of Charity, as is done everywhere, notably in this very diocese, at Bourgneuf on the estates of Madame Gousault. It seems to me, I am never very assured of this, (and) at Richelieu in the diocese of Poitiers." (31)

This somewhat Gascon response must not have satisfied Louise, who liked precision. She felt in it the effects of the prudent slowness of Monsieur Vincent who hesitated in having the little Company officially recognized. This slowness is explained by his fear of seeing it assimilated by an Order of Nuns. Was it only because the mail was so irregular or was it because Louise reacted that, in two other letters dated the 17 and 22 January, Vincent came back to the problem? On January 28, he said again:

"I told you of my thoughts concerning these articles and the qualities you must bring to them." (32)

Louise de Marillac, humbly submissive to her director, signed the contract passed between the Administrators and the Daughters of Charity, on February 1.

She had scarcely returned to Paris in March, when Louise was taken up with all of her customary work: the formation of the Sisters, receiving the new ones, distributing the work, and receiving the Foundlings at the Motherhouse (the Ladies had just decided to take in all of the children from La Couche). Moreover, Vincent was waiting to reflect with her on "the assistance" to be given to the Galley Slaves.

THE GALLEY SLAVES

Condemned to manning the Galleys of the King, all of these men were imprisoned in the Saint Bernard Tower, near the church of Saint Nicholas du Chardonnet, before their departure for Marseille. Their living conditions were inhuman. In 1630, the Company of the Blessed Sacrament had undertaken the payment of wages to four supplementary guards in order to allow the prisoners a walk in the courtyard each day. In 1639, Monsieur Corneul bequeathed an annuity of 6,000 livres to improve their lot.

To send Daughters of Charity to the galley slaves, among criminals bound with chains, was it not folly? Vincent, who had seen them, had compassion for them:

"I have seen them, those poor men, treated like beasts." (33)

Louise had also seen them when she lived in the parish of Saint Nicholas du Chardonnet. The Confraternity of the Ladies of this parish had taken charge of them to a certain degree. For Monsieur Vincent, as for Louise de Marillac, serving the galley slaves meant honoring Jesus Christ. Vincent will often repeat to the Sisters:

"O my daughters, how true that is! You serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor ... Go and look at the poor convicts in a chain-gang, you will find God there ..." (34)

Louise, who was very much in agreement with Vincent for this new service, prepared the rule for the Sisters, that would assure:

"As the employment we have among the Galley Slaves is one of the most difficult and dangerous the Sisters of the Charity have ... those who have been called by God to this holy exercise ... should encourage each other and have great confidence in Our Lord, seeing that by assisting these poor people, they will render Him a service that is most pleasing to Him, the more so because it will have done to His own person ..." (35)

Prudence, simplicity and patience were needed by the Sisters. Barbe Angiboust experienced this while serving a meal. Her soup pot was overturned and the broth and meat were on the ground. Gently, without saying anything, she gathered it all up.

"... she bore it all without saying a word ... looking as pleasant as if they had not said or done anything to her," one of her companions said. (36)

In order to try to avoid scenes such as these, Louise asked the Ladies of Charity to come and visit the Galley Slaves at meal times. (37) A great respect would then be paid to the Daughters who were particularly at risk.

SEDAN

The foundation in Sedan, which had been requested by Madame the Duchess de Bouillon, raised some difficulties:

"It is a new Christianity," wrote Monsieur Vincent. *"Monsieur the Duke and Madame the Duchess have been Catholics for a short time, and the heresy has established its throne in that principality for 90 years."* (38)

So it would be necessary to send a solid Daughter, who was firm in her vocation. Vincent's choice fell on Marie Joly who had served the poor in the parishes of Paris since 1632. But withdrawing her from the parish of Saint German was a delicate move. She had to be replaced by a Sister who was as competent as herself, and the transactions were distressing. Wishing to hasten the departure, Vincent de Paul intervened with Mademoiselle Le Gras:

"Mademoiselle, I think I was not well understood concerning the Daughter who must be sent to Saint Germain. I wrote you that these Ladies asked for the one you took from there and placed at Saint Etienne. It is up to you to see if you can give them that one or another who is close to her in experience." (39)

This letter must have aroused the great sensitivity of Louise de Marillac. Two days later, on February 9, she reacted:

"The resolution that it seems to me you took never to send anyone alone, has stayed in my mind so strongly that it seemed necessary to me to send someone with her (Marie)." (40)

Louise proposed sending the good Sister Claire who knew how to read and would be able to teach school to poor little girls. Vincent approved the decision, but not without expressing his doubts about Claire's abilities:

"I approve your thought that concerned sending two Daughters, provided that the second knows how to run a school, and this is something I doubt." (41)

As can be seen, the tone of the letters between Monsieur Vincent and Louise de Marillac changed as the months went on. In preceding years, their collaboration had shown a great dissimilarity in their two personalities. The differences were now seen as complementary. The slow prudence of Vincent had been compensated for by the vivacity of Louise, and her severity had been lightened by his great kindness. But little by little the differences were becoming more difficult to accept. The sanctity of Monsieur Vincent and Louise de Marillac was rooted in their humanity. Between 1640 and 1642, their relationship was subjected to the laws of every collaboration and friendship, and what might be called a "crisis" would become a source of deepening and growth for them and the others.

Louise de Marillac, whose mind was very organized, wanted the Company of the Daughters of Charity to be recognized by the civil and religious authorities. We have seen her embarrassment at signing the contract for Angers, and this problem arose again at the end of 1641 when a new Motherhouse was purchased. It was the Congregation of the Mission that signed the bill of sale.

The choice of the location of this new Motherhouse was also a source of difficulties between Vincent and Louise. The house in La Chapelle had become too small, and Louise had always wanted to be closer to Saint Lazare. Vincent was not always in agreement. A house was available in La Villette, a little village halfway between Saint Lazare and La Chapelle. Vincent proposed it to Louise, who refused the offer. (42) They looked elsewhere, but finding a large enough house was not a simple task!

After some months, Vincent gave in to Louise's insistence and looked for a house in the faubourg Saint Denis, in the parish of Saint Laurent, near the Saint Lazare priory. Louise was impatient and thought matters were not proceeding quickly enough. (43)

In February, 1641, Vincent was ill, and Louise expressed her worry at the fact that there was still not a house in sight. Vincent wrote her a letter that was quite severe:



Church of St. Lawrence, parish of the new Mother-House

"I see that you are still relying on human feelings since you heard that I was ill, and thinking that all is lost for lack of a house. O woman of little faith and showing so little agreement with the conduct and example of Jesus Christ ... For a handful of girls that His Providence has manifestly raised up and brought together, you think He will fail you!" (44)

After a lengthy search, two houses adjoining one another and situated face to face with Saint Lazare were rented from two bourgeois from Paris, and then purchased in September, 1641. The Ladies of Charity helped with the expenses by establishing an annuity on a capital of 45,000 livres.

Some adjustments and repairs were needed, but on May 29, the Sisters were already occupying their new Motherhouse. (45)

Louise would have liked the girls in formation to make rapid progress, and became impatient with the slow progress of Vincente Auchy, a young woman from Richelieu whom Vincent knew well. He was astonished at such severity:

"She is a good strong girl of good reputation in her region who served her mistress with perseverance for seven or eight years. This poor woman is experiencing inexpressible suffering at her absence. There are some spirits who do not adjust at first to all the little regularities. Time accomplishes all. I experience this every day among ourselves." (46)

There was the same appeal for patience for Jeanne Lepintre who wanted to wear a coiffe that the other Sisters did not have.

"I told Jeanne not to think at all of that handkerchief for the coiffe when going to Church. I think we must support her in this attachment. She will be able to get over it in time." (47)

There existed another source of discord between the two Founders. Vincent, who was overwhelmed with work, always promised to come and never did. Twenty-eight letters from March 1640 to June 1642, about one per month, expressed either a promise to come: *"If I can, I will come tomorrow,"* or else an excuse for not having been able to come or for having forgotten the rendez-vous. Several times it was necessary to *"inform the girls otherwise,"* (48) that is, to tell them that the planned Conference would not take place. All this was not very comfortable for the organized Louise. It took a long time to travel across the whole of Paris, telling Sisters not to come. Was this not taking time away from the Poor of the quarter?

Pitilessly, Louise de Marillac noted down his words or personal reflections at the beginning of his Conferences (which he gave, nevertheless, at that period).

On August 16, 1640, Vincent showed himself to be very much in a hurry:

"It was somewhat necessary that I not come today because I had to go quite some distance from the city. Also, I will have little time to speak with you." (49)

On August 16, 1641, one year later (and there had not been a conference between those two dates), Louise pointed out the excuses of Monsieur Vincent:

"For quite a long time I should have been coming back to you, but I was prevented from it principally by my wretchedness and my affairs. I hope that the goodness of God will itself supply what I owe you." (50)

And, at the beginning of the Conference of March 9, 1642, she even wrote:

"Monsieur Vincent was not able to come for the beginning of the Conference, because of some pressing business ... Monsieur Portail began it." (51)

And when Vincent arrived, she noted down the hour, five o'clock, and the conference had begun at two o'clock!

And the following March 16, Louise noted with a touch of humor:

"Monsieur Vincent paid us the honor of being present from the beginning." (52)

Only the Conferences given between March 1640 and March 1642 bear such annotations.

Vincent's letters, in which he excuses himself for not having come, show that he gave priority to the Ladies of Charity, the Archbishop of Paris and the Queen. The Daughters of Charity always came second. Was it his first schooling that made him always place the Daughters after the Ladies? Louise accepted this with difficulty. With the freedom her own education gave her, she wrote to Vincent:

"... I humbly beg you to do the charitable deed we are hoping for, since the need is great (a conference had been planned) ... The occasions that have prevented you from it will not suffer as they are always there; if you would only do us the honor of not attending to them. Forgive me for taking this liberty." (53)

For Louise de Marillac, the Daughters should be treated with as much honor as the Ladies and the Queen.

During these years from 1640 - 1642, in spite of these difficult relationships, and also because of them, the life of the little Company went on: the sending of Sisters to Fontennay-aux-Roses and Nanteuil, and above all, the preparation of the Company for vows for the first time. On March 25, 1642, Louise de Marillac, Barbe Angiboust, Elisabeth Turgis and two other Sisters whose names are unknown, gave themselves completely to God through the four vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and service of the poor. What a profound joy for Louise!

Suddenly, on the eve of Pentecost 1642, an event occurred that upset both Vincent and Louise. On this Saturday, in the afternoon, the floor of one of the rooms in the Motherhouse collapsed. There were no victims. Mademoiselle had withdrawn from the room some minutes before the accident, because a Sister had come to tell her that a beam had just cracked.

Vincent would have been in the room with all the Daughters for the conference, but something had prevented it from being held until later!

Vincent, always most attentive to events, let himself be deeply challenged by this one. He looked at it in Faith, and was completely renewed by it. On Pentecost morning, he wrote to Mademoiselle:

"In this experience you have a new reason for loving God more than ever, since He has preserved you as the apple of His eye, from an accident in which you would have been buried under these ruins, if God had not turned aside the blow by His lovable providence. We have given thanks to God for this, and this afternoon, with God's help, I hope to have the happiness of seeing you here in this house, if you come to Vespers, or at your house. I send you these lines of greeting in the meantime and wish you a good day in advance." (54)

What kindness there is in all these lines from Monsieur Vincent. What a difference in tone from the preceding letters! Louise, herself, was completely transformed by this event. Some years later, she wrote in her meditations:

"The day and the season when God permitted us to recognize His Divine Providence by the remarkable events surrounding the collapse of our ceiling reminded me once again of my profound interior conversion at that time when His goodness gave me light and understanding concerning the great anxieties and difficulties which I was then experiencing." (55)

Monsieur Vincent and Mademoiselle were aware that the Providence of God was challenging them and urging them to surmount the little crisis they had just gone through. In giving them a new light, God showed them once again that He is the Author of the Company, of which He takes a particular care. He asks that they continue their work together for the good of the poor and for His glory. This event of the falling ceiling will be recalled several times by Vincent and Louise as a tangible sign of the love of God for the Company.

The following month, as if to rediscover the “breath of the origins,” the conference Vincent gave to the Daughters of Charity had for its subject the virtues of Marguerite Naseau, “the first Sister who had the happiness of pointing out the road to the other Sisters.” (56)

Sister Elisabeth Charpy

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*Come Wind
or High Water,*

Louise de Marillac



8. THE PILGRIMAGE TO CHARTRES

The providential event of Pentecost 1642 strengthened Louise de Marillac in her mission. God was protecting the Company of the Daughters of Charity and God loved it with a particular love.

The year 1643 began with the famous Conference on Imitating the Conduct of Country Girls. The very evening of the conference, Louise thanked Monsieur Vincent for it:

"I hope that our Sisters will make good use of the instruction that your charity gave us today. Their hearts are completely filled with the desire for it, and it is to be hoped that they will remember it always. This is what makes me ask you very humbly to send us the little reminder of the points you had in it; it seems to me that it will help me remember a part of what our Good God has told us through your mouth." (1)

After having received the little outline of the conference, Louise artfully wrote up the report; she brought out each virtue necessary for a Daughter of Charity through these words which recur as a refrain:

*"By this you will know if you are true Daughters of Charity, if ...
if you are ... not attached to your own ideas ...
if you do not believe yourselves to be more than you are ...
if you conserve the sobriety of village girls ...
if you are content with what is given to you ...
if you prefer the convenience of the poor to your own ..."*

The Virgin Mary is present as the model of every Daughter of Charity.

"If you want to be true Daughters of Charity, the example of the most Holy Virgin should help you." (2)

In June, 1643, a small event led the two Founders to ask themselves questions. A Sister of a parish asked to have in writing "the practice of what is done in the house." As yet, nothing was written. Had not the moment arrived to do so? At the beginning of the account of the Conference of June 14, 1643, Louise noted:

"Our most honoured Father had not yet been able to make up his mind to have a written rule and, from this fact, we have reason to believe that Divine Providence has reserved to Itself the guidance of this work, which It advances or retards, according to Its pleasure." (3)

Monsieur Vincent, aware that "the works concerning the service of God ordinarily come to an end with those who begin them, if there is no spiritual bond among the persons employed in them," (4) agreed to write the rule of the Daughters of Charity and thought of having the Company recognized by the Archbishop of Paris.

Louise de Marillac was happy with this decision, but she saw difficulties that could arise within it as well. Would the Church agree to recognize this "secular" Confraternity of Servants of the Poor? Was there not the risk of seeing reenacted what had happened to the Visitandines of Bishop Francis de Sales, who had to enclose themselves behind the grilles of a cloister? If the Archbishop of Paris refused to see girls consecrated to God "coming and going" in the streets and villages, how could the service of the Poor be continued?

But on the other hand, the official recognition of the Church appeared to be necessary for the survival of the Company, so Louise de Marillac thought of undertaking a pilgrimage to Chartres to ask for

the help of Our Lady. She explained the goal of her journey to Monsieur Vincent, who was absent from Paris at the time:

"I beg you most humbly to permit me to make the journey to Chartres in your absence, in order to recommend to the Blessed Virgin all our needs and the propositions I made to you. It is indeed the time to reflect on my own needs and, before God, I tell you that I believe it is for the best interests of our little Company." (5)

In October 1644, Louise de Marillac set out on the journey, and arrived in Chartres on Friday, October 14. On Saturday, she went to pray to Our Lady in the cathedral. On Monday, October 17, with some solemnity, she confided the burgeoning Company to Mary, the humble servant of the Lord, and asked her to become its Mother in order to maintain it in the Mission God had confided to it.



The Blue Virgin,
Chartres cathedral,
stained glass of the XIIth century

In taking this step, Louise was led by her profound desire for fidelity to the will of God and her great concern for continuing the Service of the Poor that had been placed in the hands of the Company. Mary appeared to her to be the one who, in spite of difficulties, had adhered fully to the plan of God throughout her life.

"May your beautiful soul be forever triumphant, elect among millions, because of your faithful accomplishment of the designs of God." (6)

The account of the Consecration of the Company to Mary that Louise wrote on her return, expresses clearly the motivations for her choice of Mary as Mother and Guardian of the Company.

"On Monday, anniversary of the dedication of the church at Chartres,

I OFFERED TO GOD THE DESIGNS OF HIS PROVIDENCE ON THE COMPANY OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

I dedicated it entirely to Him declaring that I would rather see it destroyed than established against His holy will.

I asked our Lady, Mother and Guardian of the Company,

for the purity it requires.

I SAW IN THE BLESSED VIRGIN THE FULFILLMENT OF THE PROMISES OF GOD TO MEN:

and seeing in the mystery of the INCARNATION the vow of our Lady accomplished,

I asked this same fidelity for the Company

by the merits of the BLOOD OF THE SON OF GOD AND OF MARY.

I begged Him to be the strong and sweet bond uniting the hearts of all the Sisters to honor

the union of the THREE DIVINE PERSONS." (7)

Louise de Marillac made the link between the design of God on the Company and the promises made to Mankind. Mary is at the center of the Incarnation and Redemption. In effect, it is Mary who gave Christ His human life, that life which would be delivered up for the salvation of humanity; it is Mary who gave Him his blood, that blood which He would pour out on Calvary.

"Most Holy Virgin, have pity on all souls redeemed by the Son of God, your Son, Jesus Christ. Offer to the Divine Justice your pure body which furnished the blood which He shed for our Redemption so that His merits may be applied to the souls

of the dying and effect in them complete conversion. Procure for us, through your intercession, all that we need to give glory to God in the fullness of heavenly beatitude and to enjoy the blessedness which your dear presence imparts to the saints who are now with you in glory.” (8)

Louise de Marillac asked Mary, who was so closely associated with the Redemption, to grant the Company fidelity to the vocation God had confided to it. Louise admired the complete adherence of Mary to the design of God who wanted to have the Incarnation of the Word and consequently, the Redemption of mankind, depend on her “yes.” She also requires of all Daughters of Charity this same adherence to the will of God manifested in their vocation and this same availability to serve suffering humanity, in order that they may be the humble servants of Christ in the poor.

Mary participated in a privileged manner in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. Louise delighted in glorifying her with her titles of beloved Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son and worthy Spouse of the Holy Spirit.

“... throughout my life, in time and in eternity, I desire to love and to honor her to the best of my ability by my gratitude to the Blessed Trinity for the choice made of the Holy Virgin to be so closely united to the Divinity. I wish to honor the three Persons separately and also together in the unity of the divine essence.”
(9)

Louise asked Mary to be the guarantor of the community life she so often presented and wished to be in the image of the Trinity.

In the purity of her love, Mary placed no obstacle between herself and God. Louise asked this same purity for the Company in its gift to God, and this same integrity in its adherence to the mission it had received.

By accepting to be the indispensable link in the Incarnation of the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, Mary committed herself to participate in the Salvific Mission of her Son by a total gift of herself. In Faith, she agreed to follow Him in suffering and in being misunderstood. The first “yes” of Mary was followed by many others. Mary advanced step by step in the understanding and accomplishment of her mission. Louise recognized how much Mary lived in intimacy with the mystery of the Redeemer.

“... your dear Son, my Redeemer, is the source of the heroic virtue of which you gave the example during your life on earth ...” (10)

On Calvary, Mary welcomed the Words of her dying Son. Her motherhood was extended to John, to the Church and to all humanity. “Mary’s motherhood of the human race ... emerges from the definitive accomplishment of the Redeemer’s Paschal Mystery,” says John Paul II in his encyclical “The Mother of the Redeemer.” (11) Louise de Marillac admired the total availability of Mary for her new mission towards all those whom her Son had confided to her from the Cross.

“... the Blessed Virgin accepting to be deprived of her Son and remaining on earth for the good of Christians ...” (12)

Mary brings to mankind all her womanly tenderness, and all her motherly kindness.

“Everything is comprised in her title of Mother of the Son of God. How admirable are her deeds! With good reason the Church addresses her as the Mother of Mercy ...” (13)

Mercy has its source in the heart and womb of a mother. It is the manifestation of a love that is faithful and full of care and compassion. Meditating on these virtues of Mary, Louise reflected on:

“Her complete detachment and the sweet tranquillity of her soul during the passion and death of her Son. Her renunciation of all things and her willingness to remain on earth after the Ascension of her Son because of her pure love of God and her zeal for the salvation of souls, for which she labored for the remainder of her life, thereby imitating perfectly the Spirit of her Son.” (14)

In establishing Mary as Mother of the Company, Louise asked her to guide each Sister and the entire Company towards the full acceptance of the vocation that is given to them. She asks her to direct each Sister and the entire Company towards the discovery and recognition of Christ in all those they meet. Louise confided to Mary this corporal and spiritual service of the poor, and a humble participation in the loving mystery of the Redemption. For each Daughter of charity and for the entire Company, to accomplish the design of God means to live as a humble servant given to God for the liberation and salvation of the poor, all those whom Christ loves with a preferential love.

On her return to Paris, Louise de Marillac continued to work with Monsieur Vincent on the petition that would be submitted one year later, around September, 1645, to Jean-Francois de Gondi, the Archbishop of Paris.

Sister Elisabeth Charpy.

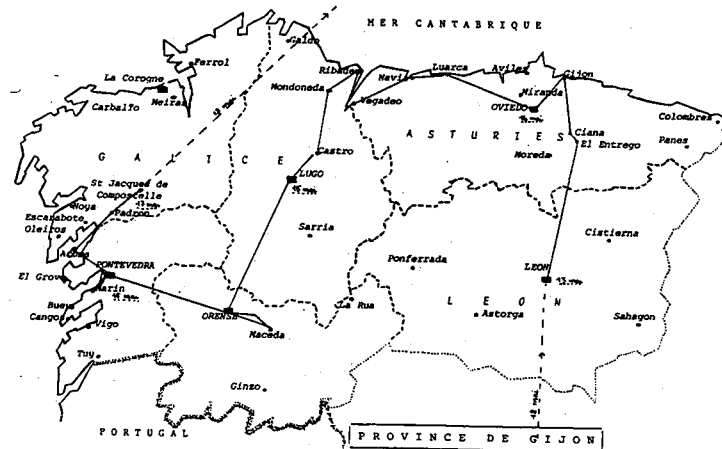
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News from the Provinces

Province of Gijon (Spain)

Visit of Mother Duzan (May 12 — 18, 1987)



*Come wind or
high water,*

Louise de Marillac



9. THE STORMY YEARS (1645-1649)

In October, 1644, Louise de Marillac went on a pilgrimage to Chartres to entrust the Company to the Blessed Virgin and to ask her to always be its Only Mother and Guardian. On Sunday, October 16, Louise prayed very specially for her son Michel.

"(My devotion) on Sunday was for the needs of my son." (1)

Shortly after her return, Louise de Marillac was confronted with difficulties of all kinds. The conduct of her son wounded her mother's heart. The Company of the Daughters of Charity was shaken by the departures of Sisters who had been members for a long time. A veritable storm assailed Louise, and attacked her in what she held most dear, her son and the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Louise would come out of this crisis mature, calm and peaceful in God.

THE PROBLEMS WITH HER SON MICHEL

On December 2, 1644, six weeks after the pilgrimage to Chartres, Louise wrote Vincent a letter filled with anguish. Her son had disappeared and no one knew where he was. Louise cried out in her suffering and appealed for help:

"You know that my pain and my apprehension are not small ... I can have no help from those who are in the world, and I have had scarcely any except from your Charity." (2)

What, then, are the apprehensions of Louise de Marillac for her son? Why such anxiety? At the age of 31, is not Michel free to lead his own life?

Michel Legras had a difficult childhood. From the age of 9 to 12, he lived between a sick father who had become very irritable, and a sad and depressed mother. After the death of his father in 1625, he had the opportunity of meeting Monsieur Vincent, who would fill the role of educator, replacing his absent father.

The years of study at college were difficult. Michel worked very irregularly and demonstrated much indecision about his future; should he become a priest or not?

Michel was 20 when his mother brought the first Daughters of Charity to her home. What were the reactions of this young man upon seeing his home occupied by girls he did not know and with whom his mother was very involved? At that time, he was a boarder at the Jesuits in preparation for becoming a priest. At vacation time, he was taken in by Vincent at Saint Lazare.

Relations between Michel and his mother seemed to be often tense and even conflicting. One day, no doubt in torment about something that had happened, Michel went to find Vincent and tell him about his discussion with his mother.

"Your son ... told me very calmly and soberly that he had seen you and that you had been feeling somewhat ill." (3)

What could the son have said to make his mother suffer enough to bring on a fainting fit? The pain of Louise de Marillac seems to have been comparable to that of Saint Monica over her son Augustine.

Through the years, Michel hesitated more and more about a commitment to Holy Orders. He wanted to take off the cassock he had worn since the minor seminary. Louise was anxious. Would this not be infidelity to God? Vincent showed firmness in this matter:

"I have never seen a woman such as you for feeling so guilty about certain things. Your son's choice, you say, is a proof of God's dealing with you according to your deserts ... I have already asked you at other times not to talk that way any more." (4)

Two years later, Vincent advised Louise to respect the freedom of her son. A vocation could not be dictated by the mother, because only God was the author of it.

"I shall tell you that your son told Monsieur de la Salle that he was entering into that state of life only because you wished it, that he wished he were dead because of it, and that, in order to please you, he would take the Minor Orders. Now, is that a vocation?"

... his will is not free to make a decision in a matter of such importance and you must not wish him to do so ... Allow God to lead him; He is more his Father than you are his mother and loves him more than you do. Allow Him to guide him." (5)

Vincent's firmness permitted Michel and his mother to see things more calmly. Little by little, Michel abandoned the idea of the priesthood and looked for ways to occupy himself. He found some gentlemen of his own age and led a life that was not very responsible. Louise was often worried about his conduct, and his disappearance in December of 1644 disquieted her more than it surprised her, because she had no doubt that he had left with a girl.

Some months later, the young people were found, and the girl was placed with the "Daughters of the Madeleine," a monastery founded for repentant women. Michel was brought back to Saint Lazare. In July, 1645, the chaplain of the Monastery of the Madeleine acted as intermediary for the girl who wanted to return to her home after having shown signs of a real conversion. Louise had little trust in this, because she knew her son had but one desire, to find his beloved. Once again, she confided to Vincent all her motherly anguish:

"His (Michel's) plan after marriage is to associate with the parents of this girl, who sell wine, or to withdraw into that part of the country and live there in peace, but in idleness. The girl's thought, then, is to come out and make an appearance because

she believes that as soon as she does so, he will go find her. I ask your pardon very humbly, Monsieur, for speaking to you of this affair that to me is as painful as it was in the beginning, and sometimes more than I can express.” (6)

The months passed, and Michel seemed to be no longer involved with this girl, the object of a passing fancy. But his behavior remained an ever-present source of worry for his mother. One day, she decided to discuss it with him, and Michel, taking his mother's words badly, disappeared once more.

“My sadness is so great! If God does not help me, I do not know what I will do. Help me keep myself strongly attached to Jesus crucified,” wrote Louise to Vincent. (7)

For Louise, the years 1645-1658 were years of torment. What did her son do with the Count of Mauny, who received him into his bedroom at Saint Lazare; what offenses did he commit there? Her letters at this time reveal how much Louise suffered and how concerned she was over the salvation of her son. In March 1646, she sent a painting of the Blessed Virgin to Saint Lazare and told Monsieur Vincent:

“My intention is that the painting of the Blessed Virgin ... will serve as an ornament for an altar dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, in reparation in some way for the faults of my son, and using some of the rings I have left in order to have it done. That is why, Monsieur, I beg you most humbly to agree that it be in your Church so that satisfaction may be made, having been so unfortunate that the offense has occurred in one of your houses through this son of mine.” (8)

In April, 1647, Louise painfully expressed the suffering Michel had once again caused her:

“Mon Dieu, how much my pride makes me suffer in this matter, and how great a relief it would have been to have been exempted from it. The most Holy Will of God did not permit it; may He be ever blessed for it.” (9)

It is likely that all of Louise's suffering at this time was enhanced by the unconscious presence of all the suffering of her childhood and adolescence. In her son Michel, aged 32 to 35 years, did she not see her

own father who, at the same age, had conceived her outside of marriage? In the depths of her being, did she not fear that a child would be conceived, who would be, as she had been, in danger of suffering throughout her life?

In 1649, in order to try and stabilize Michel, Vincent entrusted him with the occupation of “bailiff,” that is, the role of officer of justice on the lands of Saint Lazare. Louise wanted her son to be able to establish a stable home, but how could she find someone who would agree to marry him? On the evening of Ascension Day, Vincent expressed comfort to her:

“In the name of God, Mademoiselle, do not worry about Monsieur the Bailiff. Do you (not) see the extraordinary care Our Lord has taken of him almost without you? Allow His divine Majesty to act; He who cares for so many children will know well how to make the mother see the satisfaction he takes in him whom He will claim for His own, and that she will not be able to foresee it or surpass Him in goodness.” (10)

A short while later, Madame de Romilly, a friend of Louise de Marillac, suggested Mademoiselle Portier, whose parents lived in Saint Paul's parish, as a future wife for Michel. A meeting of the two families was necessary in order to determine what each party would contribute as wedding gifts. As Louise was on a visit to Liancourt, she was represented by Vincent, to whom she recommended the prudence and discretion required of her social milieu.

“Under such circumstances, it is better not to declare openly what one has, because if the matter falls through, it can be quite prejudicial.” (11)

Three days later, Vincent gave a report of the meeting.

“They are giving this good girl fifteen thousand livres, and she can expect the same amount upon the deaths of her father and mother. I enumerated the details about the possessions of Monsieur the Bailiff in the presence of Madame d'Aiguillon who, like you, was of the opinion that these things should not be said in front of everyone.” (12)

Monsieur Vincent knew he had acted contrary to the recommendations of Louise de Marillac, and that is why he relied on the opinion of the duchess of Aiguillon. But what a difference in viewpoints and what freedom there was between Vincent and Louise!

Because her father wanted a "good match" for his daughter, the marriage between Michel and Mademoiselle Portier never took place, and it was necessary to begin the search once more.

The choice then fell on Gabrielle Le Clerc, the daughter of Lord de Chennevieres. Negotiations between the two families took place rapidly and without difficulty. In December, Louise told Vincent of her joy at meeting her future daughter-in-law, who came, accompanied by her uncle, to settle the final marriage preparations.

But Louise was obliged to take another step that was much more difficult and delicate. For the future household to survive, it would be necessary to buy for Michel, as was customary at that time, the office of Councillor at the Ministry of Finance, that was then held by Monsieur de la Rochemaillet, Gabrielle's uncle. Louise was poor and found herself obliged to ask her family for aid. She wrote to the Count de Maure, husband of Anne d'Attichy, one of her cousins:

"As a Christian, I must love the scorn that ordinarily comes with poverty." (13)

Louise explained that she had little in the way of goods and money to give her son, and humbly recalled the aid she and her husband had brought to the d'Attichy children at the death of their parents. Louise took a similar step with Marie Angelique d'Atry, the daughter of another one of her cousins, Genevieve d'Attichy. It seems these different requests were well received.

January 18, 1650 was a day of rejoicing for Louise de Marillac. On that day, in Saint Savior Church, the marriage between Michel and Gabrielle was celebrated. On the eve, she had received a little note from Vincent:

"I beg our Lord to bless the couple and that He might give you the dispositions He gave the Blessed Virgin when she assisted at the marriage of Cana with her Son." (14)

At the beginning of the following year little Louise-Renee was born. To the great joy of her grandmother and the Sisters, the parents often brought the little girl to the Community. Louise-Renee was nicknamed "the little Sister."

At the time of Louise's death, Michel, his wife and daughter were present and received her blessing. Michel would not die until 1696, and Louise-Renee, who had become Mademoiselle d'Ormilly by marriage, seems not to have had any descendants.

In 1631, Louise de Marillac, who was always seeking to do the will of God, questioned herself on the possibility of reconciling her life as mother of a family and formation directress of the Servants of the Poor. With his good sense and a bit of humor, Vincent answered her:

"Our Lord most certainly did well not to choose you for His Mother, since you do not think you can discern the Will of God in the maternal care He demands of you for your son. Or perhaps you feel that that will prevent you from doing the Will of God in other matters. Certainly not, because the Will of God is not opposed to the Will of God. Honor, therefore, the tranquillity of the Blessed Virgin in such a case." (15)

During the hours of suffering brought about by Michel, Louise must have looked to Mary whose heart had suffered so because of her Son, birth in destitution, exile in Egypt, the anxious search in Jerusalem, the mockery of Nazareth, and death on the Cross. Like the Blessed Virgin, Louise de Marillac had experienced in her heart and flesh the words of Jesus to His disciples:

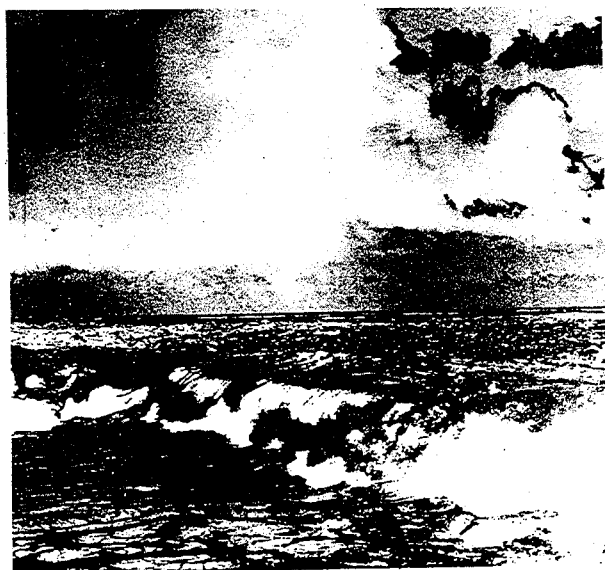
"If anyone comes to me without turning his back on his father and mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters, indeed his very self, he cannot be my follower. Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." (16)

Sister Elisabeth Charpy

History of the Company

*Come Wind or
High Water,*

Louise de Marillac



9. THE STORMY YEARS (continued)

THE APPROBATION OF THE COMPANY

For several years, Louise de Marillac had seen the necessity of having the little Company recognized by the civil and religious authorities. At Angers in 1640, she had experienced some difficulties with the signing of the contract with the hospital in the name of the Company that did not yet have legal existence. In 1641, the purchase of the new Motherhouse had to be undertaken by the Congregation of the Mission.

Monsieur Vincent did not seem in a hurry to take the steps necessary for this official recognition of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Perhaps he may have thought that this Confraternity of Young Women, coming and going through the streets, might be considered a religious order and that the cloister would be imposed on it. This is what happened to the Visitandines of Bishop Francis de Sales.

In 1645, the time seemed to have come to take the necessary steps for this approbation. The first document was prepared by Monsieur Vincent.

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16. Luke 14: 26-27.

After having described the establishment of the Confraternity of Charity in various parishes of Paris and many villages of the diocese by the Priests of the Mission, the text explained how the Company of the Daughters of Charity was born:

“But because the Ladies who form this Confraternity are for the most part in a condition which does not permit them to perform the most lowly and base tasks that must be done in the exercise of the said Confraternity, such as carrying the pot through the city, doing the bleeding and bathing, dressing wounds, making beds and staying up with the sick who are alone and dying, they have taken some good country girls to whom God has given the desire of assisting these poor sick, and who attend to all these little services, after having been prepared for them by a virtuous widow named Mademoiselle Le Gras.”(1)

The various types of poor persons whom the Daughters of Charity serve in Paris were named: the sick of the parishes and of the Hotel-Dieu, the Foundlings, and the Convicts. Next, the cities in which they are found in the realm of France were named: Angers, Richelieu, Saint Germain-en-Laye, Sedan, and Saint-Denis. As it was not possible to name all the villages in which the Daughters of Charity were established, the text simply said: *“and other places in the country.”*

Through her service, the Daughter of Charity goes to mankind with her entire being:

“And what is even more remarkable in the employment of these poor girls is that, outside of the corporal service which they render to the sick poor, they try to contribute to the spiritual in the manner which is particularly suitable to them, by telling them some kind words from time to time and giving them some small advice on their salvation, as much for those who are going to die so that they may leave this world in a good state, as for those who will regain their health, in order that they may live well.”(2)

The text is completed by the Rule of the Daughters of Charity, the very first draft of our future Constitutions. The beginning of this Rule concerns the Government of the Company:

“The said Confraternity will be composed of widows and girls, who will elect four from among their number, with a majority

vote, every three years, to be their officers, the first of whom shall be the Supérieure or directress, and may be re-elected.”

(3)

After the employment of the day, the final part of the text explains the spirit with which the Daughters of Charity comport themselves in their employment:

“In order to better honor Our Lord, their patron, they will have a pure intention of pleasing them in their actions and will try to conform their lives to His, particularly in His poverty, humility, meekness, simplicity and restraint ...

They will remember that they are called Daughters of Charity, that is, daughters who profess to love God and their neighbor, and therefore, besides the love they should have for God, they should excel in the pious love of their neighbor, especially that of their companions.”(4)

This long document was submitted to Louise de Marillac, and her remarks show how much she loved precision and how much she wanted the Community to live in humility.

“The number of girls employed in the service of the Children is greater and should grow by the feast of All Saints.”(5)

In the employment of the day, the reading and silence at two o'clock are not mentioned. Louise poses the question:

“Is it perhaps not necessary (to specify them)?”(6)

It seems to her that the text extols the Daughter of Charity too much. Is it really necessary to say all that?

“Is it necessary to dwell so long on the praises of the said girls?”(7)

This first document was rewritten according to the suggestions of Louise de Marillac. The petition, signed by Monsieur Vincent, and the Rule were sent to Jean-Francois de Gondi, Archbishop of Paris, around September, 1646 (8). Louise perhaps could not have read the rewritten text, because she was absent from Paris from July 26 to the end of September. She had gone to Nantes to take the first Daughters of Charity called to care for the sick of the hospital.

November 20 of that same year, 1646, the coadjutor of Paris, Bishop Jean-Francois Paul de Gondi, nephew of the archbishop, signed the act of approbation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

“Through the persons here present, we erect the congregation of the said girls and widows in this diocese in the form of a particular Confraternity under the title of the Servants of the Poor of the Charity; we desire and ordain that those who are presently within it and who will afterwards be received into it may freely perform everything which might relieve and console the said sick poor, provided that the said Confraternity will be and will remain in perpetuity under the authority and dependence of the said My Lord, the Archbishop, and his successors in the exact observance of the statutes attached herein which we have approved and will approve through these here present.” (9)

The reading of the text of the approbation brought a reaction from Louise de Marillac, and she expressed her discontent to Monsieur Vincent. She began by refusing to communicate this official act to the Sisters.

“I never thought to ask you if I should communicate this (the act of approbation) and I have not done so.” (10)

She questioned the name of “Servants of the Poor of the Charity,” given to them by the Archbishop. She firmly desired to keep that of Daughters of Charity, which was written into the Rule.

“Permit me to tell your Charity that the explanation of Daughter of Charity that is written in our Rule makes me wish for the continuation of this title which has been omitted, perhaps through an oversight, from the record of the terms of the Establishment.” (11)

But what Louise objected to especially was that the Company be placed under the authority of the Archbishop of Paris and his successors.

“This most uncompromising term of dependence upon the Bishop might perhaps harm us in the future, giving freedom to deprive us of the direction of the Superior General of the Mission. Might it not be necessary, Monsieur, that your Charity be given to us by this establishment as our Director in perpetuity?” (12)

Louise de Marillac was well aware that the Bishop of Annecy was the one who had cloistered the Visitandines when they came to establish themselves in his diocese. Did they not risk undergoing the same experience by placing themselves under the authority of the bishops? The end of the letter assumes a tone that is both solemn and pleading.

“In the name of God, Monsieur, do not let anything happen that might someday withdraw the Company from the direction God has given it, for be assured that soon it will no longer be as it is now, and the sick poor will no longer be helped, and thus I believe that the will of God would no longer be done among us.” (13)

These two arguments, the service of the poor and the will of God, will be used continually by Louise in order to obtain from Vincent the revision of this act of establishment of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Louise knew how attentive Vincent was to doing the will of God and how concerned he was for the service of the poor, but she would have to wait nine years before obtaining the modification of this text!

Even though Louise did not wish to speak to the Sisters about the approbation of the Company by the Archbishop of Paris, Vincent did, but he waited for a favorable moment. In the course of the Conference of May 30, 1647 (six months after the signing of the text!), he thought the time had come. The subject being treated was the importance of the exact observance of the Rules. He took out the text he must have brought with him, and said:

“Here is the petition that was presented to him (the Archbishop of Paris), here are the rules and here is the approbation. I will read them out for you one after the other.” (14)

In the report she made on this Conference, Elisabeth Hellot noted that Monsieur Vincent read all the texts “even though there was a lot of writing in them.”

When Louise heard the passage on the election of the officers, she went on her knees and begged them to begin immediately to elect the Superioress General for three years. Vincent replied with much kindness:

“Your Sisters and I, Mademoiselle, are bound to beg God to give you many more long years of life. It is God’s usual method of acting to preserve, by extraordinary means, those who are necessary for the accomplishment of His works; and if you reflect, Mademoiselle, you will see that for more than ten years you have not been really alive, at least in the ordinary way.” (15)

This was the year 1647, and Louise would assure the direction of the Daughters of Charity for another 13 years!

After Mademoiselle had arisen, Vincent continued to read and add his little comments. Louise had greatly regretted that the name Daughter of Charity was not retained. Vincent paused at the article which said: "This shall be a Confraternity, bearing the name of The Confraternity of the Sisters of the Charity, servants of the sick poor." And then Elisabeth Hellot noted:

"Whereupon he (Monsieur Vincent) gently cried aloud: 'Ah! What a lovely title, my daughters! What a lovely title and what a beautiful qualification! What have you done for God to deserve it? Servants of the poor, that is the same as saying Servants of Jesus Christ, because He regards what is done to them as done to Himself, for they are His members.'" (16)

The reading continued, and Vincent remembered that Louise had asked that silence be noted in the Rule, so he paused again (perhaps in order to have his boldness forgiven!)

"... when he came to the rule on silence, he added: 'I exhort you to observe this, my daughters. Honour the hidden life of the Son of God by doing so.'" (17)

At the end of the reading, Monsieur Vincent emphasized the importance of the exact observance of the rules, and quickly, without pausing there, he pointed out that, nevertheless, the Company depended on the Archbishop of Paris.

"You should consider these rules as coming to you from the hand of God Himself, since they are given by command of His Grace the Archbishop, on whom you depend." (18)

The report of the Conference mentions no reaction on the part of Louise. For a long time, over a period of months, she prayed and reflected, and when she felt at peace, she wrote a new letter for Vincent in November, 1647. Six months had gone by since the famous conference.

"It seemed to me that God had placed my soul in great peace and simplicity during the meditation that I made, which was most imperfect on my part, on the subject of the necessity that the Company of the Daughters of Charity be always and continually under the guidance divine Providence has given them, as much for the spiritual as for the temporal; and in which I think I saw that it would be more advantageous for His glory for the Community not to exist at all rather than to be under another guidance since it seems it would be contrary to the will of God." (19)

Vincent did not answer. There is no letter on this subject and Louise would not have failed to treasure it carefully!

Louise knew that the episcopal approbation would normally have had to have been confirmed by royal approbation. The royal text, called Letters Patent, takes effect after being registered with Parliament. The Letters Patent for the Company were drafted and sent to the Procurator General, Monsieur Meliand. And what happened next? It is difficult to know the truth. These letters were lost!

Moreover, Queen Anne of Austria, on the initiative of an anonymous person, drew up a petition to the Pope in order to have the Company of the Daughters of Charity depend in perpetuity on the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission.

"The Queen begs his Holiness to name as perpetual directors of the said Confraternity or Society of the Servants of the Poor of Charity, the said Superior General of the said Congregation of the Mission and his successors in the same office. And this being done, it is to be hoped that this good work will always grow and that the Church will be edified thereby and the poor cared for to a greater extent." (20)

This approbation by the Pope would forever suppress any difficulties with the Bishops. Louise de Marillac, who certainly must have known about this petition, never intervened again on the subject, awaiting the pontifical bull. It was not until April, 1650 (28 months later), that, seeing nothing forthcoming, she began to take measures.

Many other concerns were assailing her at the same time; her son, Michel, the violent crisis that was shaking the Company, and the extreme difficulties with the Work of the Foundlings.

Sister Elisabeth Charpy

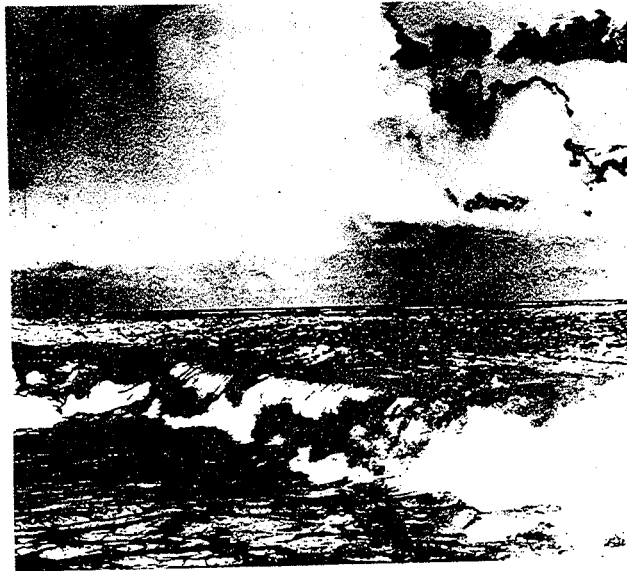
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History of the Company

*Come Wind
or High Water,
Louise De Marillac*



9. THE STORMY YEARS (continued)

After 14 years in existence, the Company of the Daughters of Charity was shaken by a serious crisis that upset all the Sisters and worried Louise de Marillac.

The crisis did not come suddenly. At the end of the year 1645, warning signs appeared that the flame that had animated the first Sisters was growing weaker. Some refused to leave the parish in which they worked, and others defied their Sister Servants. Murmurs and criticisms were heard: "Why must we always live in such poverty? Couldn't we look for a little more comfort?" Even the poor themselves were no longer being treated with the same love as before.

Concerned for the fidelity of the entire Company to the charism received from God, Louise suggested a Conference on the love of our vocation. On February 13, 1646, Vincent explained to the Sisters assembled at the Motherhouse about the origin of the Company, beginning with the event at Chatillon and the foundation of the Charities. He spoke at length of Marguerite Naseau. During the whole of his narrative, perhaps to respond to certain criticisms, Vincent strongly stressed that it was God Who was the Author of the Company.

"... it was God's will to have a Company of Daughters with the express object of serving the sick under the guidance of those Ladies." (1)

"God, from all eternity, had chosen and elected you to do so." (2)

With a certain vigor, Vincent spoke of the poverty that is indispensable to the Daughter of Charity in order to serve the poor.

"The first of these daughters was a poor village girl; I must tell you this, my daughters, to let you see the Providence of God, Whose will it was that your Company should be made up of poor girls, either by birth or by the choice they would make of poverty; yes, my daughters, I say poor girls, because you must be so in reality." (3)

Concluding his narrative on the history of the Company, Monsieur Vincent once again emphasized the action of God and the necessity of a "voluntary poverty." Then, he proposed some means for loving one's vocation and living in fidelity to the call of God:

"A means of doing as God wishes, my daughters, is to do it in charity." (4)

Next, calling their attention to various difficulties encountered in daily life, Vincent urged them to become aware of everything that endangers this charity and to try to remedy it, for instance, to free themselves from excessive attachments to a Lady or a Sister, to avoid being critical, to eliminate murmuring among the Sisters, to be on guard against aversions among companions, and to speak with kindness and gentleness ... and above all, to vivify their love for Jesus Christ and the Poor.

"You serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as that we are here. A Sister will go and visit the poor ten times a day, and ten times a day she will find God there ...

I beg of you, have a great affection for the poor ..." (5)

This conference caused many of the Sisters to reflect. Monsieur Portail, the director, who followed the events of the life of the Company with interest, wrote to Louise de Marillac:

"I praise God for His merciful treatment of your Company by purging it of some ill humors in order to make it healthy and holy." (6)

Anne, who had heard the words of Vincent, did not feel herself to be in conformity with the vocation he had described, and on March 19, she abruptly left the Motherhouse. Louise expressed her suffering to Monsieur Portail, who had known this Sister at Richelieu.

"... tall Sister Anne of Richelieu left as soon as she realized we were going to take her away from there. This happened just yesterday, and we do not know where she is. You see, Monsieur, that we have need of your holy prayers, and myself in particular, who am the cause of all these evils for which I beg you to ask pardon of God for me." (7)

Did Louise think, then, that this departure was the beginning of a long series? During his stay in Le Mans, Monsieur Portail negotiated the arrival of the Daughters of Charity with the hospital Administrators. He wanted Louise herself to accompany the Sisters, there as had been the case in Angers. On March 23, Vincent's reply was negative:

"If the health of Mademoiselle Le Gras should permit it, and if the weather were fine, and if it were after Easter, she could make the journey to Le Mans; I do not see a possibility beforehand." (8)

Some days later, a letter from Louise gave different reasons, humility and suffering among them.

"It would be most presumptuous of me to think I was needed at the establishments of our Sisters, in the places to which God calls them, and in particular, those places where you are. I should much sooner fear spoiling everything. I think that what makes me think of going to some places is the doubt I have concerning the ability of our Sisters, due to my bad example and lack of application to their guidance." (9)

Louise busied herself with the preparations for the departure. The choice of Sisters was made, in agreement with Monsieur Vincent and Monsieur Portail. Jeanne Lepintre, the Sister Servant, was accompanied by three other Sisters, Claude Brigide and Genevieve Caillou who had hospital experience, having served the sick at the hospital in Angers, and Andree. They left on May 4, 1646.

The joy of a new mission was quickly tempered by the difficulties that presented themselves within the hospital of Le Mans. The most senior employees of the hospital refused admission to the Daughters of Charity. Louise considered herself responsible for the state of affairs, and on May 25, she wrote to Monsieur Portail:

"If your Charity had not known of our poverty for a long time now, I would say that our good God would have you experience it through the suffering He wishes you to undergo in the negotiation of the affair for which you are working so generously for the service of the poor. It causes us great shame to think that it is precisely our weakness and bad disposition which are the cause of so much distress on the subject of our employment." (10)

After three weeks of effort and bargaining, it was necessary to recognize the failure of this new hospital insertion. Two of the Sisters returned to Paris, and the two others went to Angers to reinforce the community there. In fact, during this same month of May, Louise received a letter from Monsieur Ratier, the Assistant to the Abbe de Vaux, informing her of the death of Marie Despinal and the departure of Catherine Huitmill.

Marie Despinal, who had been at Angers for two years, had been outstanding in the hospital for her simple joy, great goodness, and deep love of God and the poor. Abbe Ratier wrote:

"I have never seen more obvious marks of predestination than in this soul; but I was completely astonished to see so much suffering with so much purity." (11)

Louise was very much affected by this death, coming so soon after those of two young Sisters: Marie, who was at Saint Denis, and Jacqueline Midy, *"who patiently accepted being admonished of her faults. Although she had considerable difficulty in overcoming her self-will, she submitted to others very peacefully."* (12)

The departure of Catherine Huitmill was emotional for the community of Angers. Catherine seemed to have entered the Company at the invitation of her brother, a Priest of the Mission. When she arrived in Angers in May, 1644, she demonstrated a certain repugnance in caring for the sick. Little by little, she manifested the desire to leave the hospital, and thought of disguising herself so she would not be recognized. But she did not want to return to Paris through fear of her brother and of Mademoiselle. Monsieur Ratier, who pitied this poor girl, did not know how to resolve her dilemma, so he wrote to Louise de Marillac:

"She does not wish either to do evil, or to be lost ... She says she never had a vocation, and that her brother betrayed her by having sent her to work for you." (13)

Louise quickly sent a message to Madeleine Mongert, the Sister Servant of the hospital.

"Assure her (Catherine) that she will be welcomed, and that if she wishes to go away in order to serve, we have a very particular work in which to place her; this is why she should avoid committing the fault of running away like a vagabond."

(14)

The letters which followed no longer spoke of Catherine, so doubtless she returned to her parents' home.

There were difficulties of one kind or another everywhere. The Motherhouse had been in upheaval for several months because of the behavior of Jacqueline, one of the very first Daughters of Charity, who had been present on November 29, 1633. Jacqueline was very critical of everything that went on in the community, and sought out the young Sisters to tell them of her discontent. She would not accept any correction and became insufferable at the least remark.

During the Council meeting on June 28 of that same year, 1646, Monsieur Vincent was led to propose that this Sister be sent home because her behavior was causing so much disorder. The question was debated for a long time because Jacqueline *"had rendered much service to the poor."* But it seemed that she was living only begrudgingly in the community. Louise thought Jacqueline should no longer remain in the Company. She tried to find work for her and had already contacted Madame de Lamoignon.

At this same Council meeting was decided the Community that Louise would take to Nantes at the end of the following month. Six Sisters were chosen, and from among them, Elisabeth Martin was named Sister Servant.

Louise would be absent two months. Before her departure, she organized everything so that the Company would not suffer due to her absence. Jeanne Lepintre, who had returned from Le Mans, was named Sister Servant of the whole Company. For two weeks she studied the various problems that were occurring with the two officers (councillors) and regularly asked for advice from Monsieur Vincent or Monsieur Lambert. Each Sister was confirmed in her duties; the Sister responsible for the Care Center, the Reception Sister, the Sister Cook, and so on. Some of the older Sisters, Henriette Gessaume, Genevieve Poisson, Barbe Angiboust and Elisabeth Hellot, were designated to visit on a regular basis the Sisters who worked in the parishes of Paris.

During this month of July, Louise also took time to reread and make corrections in the text of the Rule of the Company that was going to be submitted to the Archbishop of Paris.

On July 26, Louise, accompanied by Françoise Noret, set out with the six Sisters of Nantes and Elisabeth Turgis, who was going to Richelieu. The account of it that was written by Louise at the request of Vincent, allows us to follow the travellers. It was a long journey of 14 days, first, by road to Orleans, then by the Loire River. The account is studded with savory episodes.

"We all got into the coach for Orleans and were very cheerful, without failing in our observances, by the grace of God, except during the times for meditation and silence, when we were overcome by sleep; sometimes we blamed the heat for this."

(15)

At Ponts de Ce, not far from Angers, the Sisters were evicted from the inn where they had planned to stay:

"because we did not want them to kill the chickens, so we would not be in danger of eating them on a Friday." (16)

Happily, the surgeon's wife received them into her home, for, as Louise wrote, *"we were in great need of rest."* (17)

At Nantes, the Sisters were welcomed with a great deal of enthusiasm by the Ladies of Charity, the priests and a crowd of people who had arrived before them. Then they were taken by carriage to the hospital in the midst of the population's acclaim.

Louise remained in Nantes one month; she saw the Administrators, prepared the terms of the contract with them, paid a visit to the Mayor of the city, and to the Vicar General of the diocese. She met with Monsieur des Joncheres, chaplain of the convent of the Visitation, who agreed to be the confessor and counsellor of the new community. During her stay, Louise was assailed by many persons who wanted to see her, to participate in the work of the Sisters and to serve the sick with them. With a certain humor, Louise complained to Vincent:

"I believe that your Charity is somewhat responsible for the honors people are paying us here. In God's name, please do not give others a false image of me; they are treating me like a great lady. I think that there is hardly any lady of quality who has not come to see us here; there are even people coming from the fields for this purpose. Oh! how I shall burn one day (for this) and what great embarrassment will be mine! God's will be done." (18)

Often, during her stay at Nantes, it was a song of thanksgiving that came from the heart of Louise:

"My most honored Father, may it please God that I should have enough strength and love to recognize the care of the guidance of divine Providence in our regard. O! How I should sing His praises!" (19)

At the beginning of September, Louise expressed herself in a similar manner to Jeanne Lepintre:

"I praise God with all my heart for the graces He gives to our little Company and the blessings which His Goodness gives for our guidance. Oh! How I love our dear Sisters for giving so many proofs of fidelity to their vocation." (20)

Louise's joy was tempered somewhat by the fact that her son was going out with the Count de Mauny! As soon as she returned to Paris, the Superioress of the Company was taken up with daily problems. Perrien, who had left the Company, wanted to return to the Daughters of Charity:

"She has done all she could to be accepted back; and soon, she says, she will throw herself at the feet of the Queen." (21)

At the Motherhouse, Marguerite de Turenne refused to work. She complained about everything; the Sisters, the work, and the food. At the Council meeting in October, 1646, Louise proposed that they look into her being sent home. Vincent gave his opinion:

"I will tell you that, concerning the mood I know her to be in, she is here (in the Company) because she made it possible for her parents to be fairly well off by not having her with them. Living in the way she does now, I do not believe she will ever do anything with you. She could do something and be saved in the world." (22)

Louise would have the delicate task of writing to her parents and to the pastor of Sache, Monsieur de Mondion, who had sent her.

The winter of 1646-1647 was marked by the sickness and death of many Sisters. At the end of March or beginning of April, Louise wrote to Elisabeth Turgis:

"We have had so many sick persons for the last six months that our infirmary was always full." (23)

In the month of November, Mathurine died at Saint Denis, and then there were Perrine Fleury, Francoise de Montargis, Florence, a Sister from Saintonge, and the tall Michelle of Richelieu.

It had been at the beginning of this same winter that the Act of Establishment, placing the Company under the direction of the Archbishop of Paris, had been signed, provoking Louise's discontent (see the "Echoes" for January).

In March, 1647, Louise, who had barely recovered from a long illness, received five letters in rapid succession from the hospital of Nantes. They were from Monsieur des Joncheres, the Sisters' confessor; from a Priest of the Hospital, from the Sister Servant, and from two other Sisters. All of the letters reflected the state of grave conflict within the community. Some accused Elisabeth Martin, the Sister Servant:

"She treats the Sisters with too much imperiousness and self-importance, and never commands or forbids anything except in a spirit that is ill-humored, peculiar, melancholic, vexed and most haughty, and she ceaselessly pecks at them for unimportant things, which greatly discourages them." (24)

Other letters accused the hospital Chaplain of interfering too much in the daily life of the community, and of supporting a group of Sisters against the Sister Servant.

"I see some of our Sisters who are so familiar with the Chaplain that I always see them together, either in our rooms or our attics or even in his bedroom, because of which I was most ashamed. But when they are together and see us, they move to another place." (25)

The climate of mutual suspicion that reigned among the eight Sisters brought about long silences, criticisms, and tale-bearing outside of the community. The service of the poor suffered from it, the sick were neglected and some died without having received the last Sacraments.

Louise was distressed by this "immense disorder" at Nantes. She began by asking to meet with Monsieur Vincent. Monsieur des Joncheres suggested sending an extraordinary confessor, either the Abbe de Vaux in Angers, or one of his friends, the Abbe d'Annemont. The arrival of the latter was an unfortunate experience for the group of Sisters opposed to the Sister Servant, so Louise asked Vincent to intervene, himself:

"Something that I believe to be very necessary and of great usefulness, is that your Charity take the time to write a letter to all our Sisters, if you deem it proper, in order to express some dissatisfaction and to encourage them." (26)

Suffering grievously with her Sisters, Louise was overwhelmed by all this difficulty, and blamed herself:

"My most honored Father, it is also true that this poor Company suffers a great deal under my wretched guidance! I also think that soon God will deliver it from this captivity which is such an obstacle to the perfection of His work." (27)

Nothing seemed to be able to calm the conflicts in Nantes. In order to assess the situation, Monsieur Vincent and Louise de Marillac decided to send Jeanne Lepintre. Louise announced this regular visitation to the Sisters:

"Sister Jeanne Lepintre will come to see you on behalf of Monsieur Vincent, and I believe that his Charity would have sent me if I had sufficiently recovered from my serious illness. And do you know the reason for this visit, my dear Sisters? It is to learn from your own lips the disposition of your spirits, and where these little problems might be coming from that are appearing in your Company, and how this cockle has been allowed to be introduced among the good wheat, and seems to want to suffocate it. Oh! my dear Sisters, I have great reason to fear that it is only my bad example which has made such a regrettable impression on your spirits." (28)

At the same time as she was preparing for the departure of Jeanne Lepintre for Nantes, Louise was also organizing the journey of Anne Hardemont and Marie Lullen who were going to Montreuil-sur-Mer to serve the sick of the hospital at the request of the Count de Lannoy. Jeanne Lepintre left Paris around June 20, and the two Sisters of Montreuil on the 26th, after having received the advice of Monsieur Vincent and Mademoiselle.

The months of July and August were just as much affected by upsetting and painful events. Louise asked herself: "How can I help the Sisters get hold of themselves again, and to live more calmly in this difficult time for the Company?"

The Conference of September 22, 1647 is a clear picture of the situation. Guided by Monsieur Vincent, the Sisters reflected on temptation and on perseverance in their vocation.

The temptation against our vocation could be a test of our faithfulness to God, and temptation might also arise after a period of negligence in the practice of the Rules. A dialogue ensued among all the participants:

— *"Well, my daughter, what should a Sister do who feels troubled, tempted, urged to abandon all?"*

— *I think she should mention the fact to our Superiors as to persons given us by God to guide us in our calling.*

— *Do you think, my daughter, that this is a means of conquering the temptation?"*

— *Oh, yes, it certainly is, and an infallible one, provided it be done ingenuously and with the intention of following the advice that will be given us; for nothing wards off the strokes of the Evil One so surely as to mention them ...*

— *And you, my daughter, what should we do when we feel tempted? What means do you think we should employ to resist temptation?"*

The Sister replied that it would be well to re-read the resolutions taken during retreats.

— *Oh! my daughters, what an excellent means! For these were thoughts which came to us from God when we were dealing with Him most familiarly; they are provisions which He gave us for our time of need."* (29)

In concluding the Conference, Vincent told the Sisters once more that we must never be astonished at temptation. The Saints and the Apostles were tempted. But we must take means for resisting temptation.

"... love your rules, my dear daughters, and keep to them as the road by which God intends to lead you to Himself." (30)

Gradually, calm was restored to the entire Company. The year 1648 would see only one departure and one sent home. At Nantes, the community was reconstructed in charity. Louise wrote to Elisabeth Martin who was at Richelieu:

"If we walk in the presence of God, we will be rid of many sorrows we bring upon ourselves by the seeking after and an inordinate love of our own satisfaction. I want you to believe in this practice, since I know for certain that you wish to love and serve God your whole life." (31)

These months of crisis prompted each Sister to a new awareness of the vocation God had given her, a vocation that was new to the Church, and a vocation that was sometimes questioned in the society of the XVIIth century. It was in order to maintain the veracity of the response of the Company to this vocation that Louise, in November of 1647, begged Vincent, and his successors after him, to be the Superior General of the Daughters of Charity.

During these long months, Louise had let herself be chiseled by the grace of God. Though at the beginning she was convinced of her heavy responsibility in the crisis the Company was experiencing, she gradually discovered the work of purification of the Lord, and the tearing asunder that goes hand in hand with all growth. The "survival" of the Company, after all these convulsions, was the proof that God was watching over it. She confided her profound conviction to Jeanne Lepintre, the new Sister Servant of Nantes:

"Let us always adore and love the guidance of divine Providence, the only true assurance of the Daughters of Charity."
(32)

During this period between 1647 and 1650, on August 24th, the eve of the feast of Saint Louis, her holy patron, Louise wrote Vincent a letter that reveals her full adherence to the mystery of the love of God, to the mystery of the Incarnation on which she meditated so often.

"My heart is still filled with the joy of the knowledge that it seems to me our good God gave him in these words: 'God is my God.'" (33)

God is my God: Louise de Marillac exalted the gift of God to humanity. God became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. A person is great in the eyes of God.

God is my God: Louise de Marillac recognized God coming to her throughout her life. She knew with certitude that God loved her with an immeasurable love.

God is my God: Joyfully, Louise proclaimed the grandeur of the vocation she had received — that of serving God, her God, in the person of the poor.

God is my God: Louise could not remain silent about the immense joy of communing with this Love. She prepared herself with much emotion for the encounter with her God in the Eucharist.

God is my God: Louise responded to this divine Love by the gift of her whole-self, to be the Servant of her God, the Servant of all these daughters God had confided to her.

And now, totally detached from herself and peaceful in God, Louise de Marillac was available for the work of the affirmation of the Company during the final years of her life.

Sister Elisabeth Charpy

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History of the Company

*Come wind
or high water
Louise de Marillac*



The Pedagogy of Louise de Marillac

After the stormy years and the crisis which had so seriously shaken the Company, Louise perceived the need to affirm each Sister in her vocation. The various conferences Vincent gave were along the following lines:

- the importance of prayer in May, 1648, and the love of vocation in December of the same year,
- the love of God and love of work in September and December, 1649,
- the importance of obedience in August, 1650.

The three conferences of February, 1653 present a magnificent synthesis of the spirit of the Company, developing the three characteristic virtues of a Daughter of Charity, humility, simplicity and charity, or the love of God and the poor.

In her letters to the Sisters, Louise stressed fidelity to the spirit of their vocation, and fidelity to the rule of life of the Daughters of Charity. In particular, she helped the Sister Servants to fulfill their function as animators of the local Community, and showed herself to be an excellent educator.

Through the many events which had marked the life of Louise de Marillac, God had prepared her for this task of education.

At Poissy, Louise acquired a basic classical education that was Christian, humanist, and philosophical (as her first biographer, Gobillon, states). She studied Latin, the Bible, music, painting, etc.

In the home of "the capable and virtuous" woman of whom Gobillon speaks, Louise was initiated to a more concrete way of life with housekeeping tasks. She had the experience of material poverty.

In her married life, she discovered the human love of a husband and child. There, she experienced financial difficulties and learned the necessity for economy. She pursued her education by reading the spiritual authors of her day, such as Grenade, Berulle and Francis de Sales. Did she then frequent the worldly circles of the capital where the intellectual life was expanding with men of letters such as Malherbes, Maynard, Corneille and Descartes? Her uncle Michel participated in them.

Louise de Marillac, whose personality was forged by life, and who was imbued with the love of Jesus Christ, placed all her womanly being at the service of this function of educator. Her pedagogy was simple and rested on three points:

- Louise personalized the formation she gave.
- Louise began with the realities of concrete life.
- Louise transmitted the dynamism that was alive in her.

ATTENTION TO THE PERSON

In reading the letters of Louise de Marillac to the first Sisters, it is striking to note how attentive she was to each one. The style and tone of the letters varied according to the Sister. Louise took into account the cultural level of each one which, in the XVIIth century, was closely linked with her social origin.

The letters to Elisabeth Hellot and Françoise Carcireux reveal that these correspondents came from the bourgeoisie, and that they had a certain degree of culture. While on the other hand, with Barbe Angiboust and Anne Hardemont, the language is much more concrete. Louise was addressing peasant girls, and, placing herself on their level, she used a simple, direct style.

For Louise, adapting herself to her correspondent was a sign of respect for the person.

Louise was very attentive to the character of each Sister. The manner in which she pointed out an error and gave a reproach varied a great deal according to the knowledge she had of the Sister.

With the Daughters of Charity who had a "strong temperament," such as Barbe Angiboust, Anne Hardemont, Julienne Loret, and Madeleine Mongert, Louise was very direct, and sometimes even seemed to be a little harsh.

"I thought I had made it very clear to you" (1) she wrote to Julienne Loret at Chars, who was ringing the bell for the office as was done in monasteries. The reproach was severe:

"Is it not just proclaiming one's own actions, and Our Lord teaches us to act in secret when only our own interests are involved." (2)

The Sister Servant at Saint-Denis (probably Barbe Angiboust) received a letter strongly urging her to reflect on her conduct:

"How many times have I begged you to get rid of these animals (some cats which were even present at meditation) and you have not paid the least attention! And a Sister will not obey you promptly!" (3)

With those who were timid and shy, such as Claude Brigide and Genevieve Doinel, Louise was milder and more benevolent. She never upset them.

Genevieve Doinel had sent a beautiful fish to the Motherhouse. Louise began by thanking her, and then came the remark:

"If I could have sent it back promptly, I would have asked you to give it to your sick poor for a celebration, for you know well that our Company does not treat itself in such a manner." (4)

And perhaps in order to soften the reproach that risked upsetting Genevieve who was showing affection for the Sisters in this way, Louise added:

"But being unable (to send it back), your charity helped several of our sick Sisters, and I was one of them." (5)

What thoughtfulness! Louise knew that the purpose of remarks was to educate and not to break someone down. Writing to Claude Brigide and Genevieve Doinel who were together at Chantilly, Louise began

by praising their good work among the poor. Then she spoke of the importance of fraternal charity and contented herself with merely suggesting:

"Am I wrong in recommending to you this virtue of cordiality and being on good terms with each other, without which you would not know how to be good Daughters of Charity, much less Christians!" (6)

What goodness and thoughtful affection Louise showed the sick Sisters, especially if they were far away. Often unable to go herself, she would send a Sister to visit them. Elisabeth Martin went to the deathbed of Jeanne Dalmagne in Nanteuil, and brought her a touching letter.

"(God) knows how much I regret not being able to assist you in this final act of love which I believe you will make, that of most willingly giving your soul to the Eternal Father, with the desire that it will honor the moment of the death of His Son." (7)

Anne Hardemont went to Barbe Angiboust who was in danger of dying at Fontainebleau. Some years later, it was Barbe who was sent to Marguerite and who had to bring her back to Paris for better care. What suffering Louise felt at not having been told of the grave illness of Elisabeth Turgis.

"Can you imagine how saddened and surprised we were at the news of our dear Sister's death, which we were not at all expecting ... We are very distressed ... that you did not let us know she had taken a turn for the worse, because we would have sent someone to visit her." (8)

Louise had learned from Monsieur Gauthier, a Priest of the Mission at Richelieu, that Elisabeth Martin was suffering more and more. She wrote to her:

"In this way, Our Good God makes you participate greatly in his sufferings ... I beg His goodness to give you the usual consolations He gives to souls whom He desires to sanctify by this means." (9)

Louise asked her companion to take great care of the patient, and she insisted that Elisabeth allow herself to be cared for:

"I beg you to ask her with great confidence for all the assistance you will need; if you feel pain because of all the constraints to which your illness reduces you, you should also, my dear Sister, see and love in them the will of God." (10)

Louise recommended to the Sister Servant at Angers to take particular care of Marie Despinal who was ill, and she added for the benefit of the latter:

"I greet her with all my heart, and her condition increases my affection, believing her to be in the closest union with the most holy will of God." (11)

As these letters to sick or dying Sisters show, Louise was attentive to the spiritual development of each Sister. She knew that the way to God was traveled by different routes and that it was necessary to respect "the ways of God."

Most of the Daughters left this life to go to God. Louise helped them with their spiritual progress. The Sisters of Angers were becoming lax in their service to the poor sick of the hospital. Louise expressed her sorrow to them and questioned them on their real attitudes:

"Where is the meekness and charity that you must so carefully cherish for our dear Masters, the sick poor?" (12)

After this view of the reality of their life, Louise invited them to bind it to the Gospel, with the attitude of Christ:

"If we distance ourselves, however little, from the thought that they are the members of Jesus Christ, infallibly this will be a means for diminishing in ourselves these beautiful virtues." (13)

Louise was able to share with Marguerite Chetif the depth of her spiritual experience.

"Our Lord would have you taste the sweetness that souls filled with His holy love feel in the midst of the sufferings and anguish of life." (14)

There is a completely different tone with Jeanne Lepintre. Louise de Marillac attempted to enlighten and appease this Sister of such a worried and complicated spirit.

By experience, Louise knew that growth in the spiritual life followed the laws of all growth. She gave great attention to young Sister Servants and educated them with much love. For the older ones who knew the spirit and rules of the Company, the style was much more direct.

The attention of Louise de Marillac did not stop with the Sister herself but extended to her whole family. Journeys were difficult and costly, and mail was often impossible because the parents did not know how to read or write. Whenever she could, Louise gave news of their families to the Sisters who were far away. In this way, it is possible to follow the life of the Angiboust family, the Menage family and the Carcireux family, with their marriages, deaths, and other events.

Louise also often made use of the intermediary of the Sisters and their families. She sent the Sisters of Nanteuil to the parents of Laurence Dubois. The Sisters of Brienne were invited to pay a visit to the family of Barbe Bailly who lived in the area.

In this way, each Sister felt herself to be known and recognized by Louise de Marillac. But if one of them no longer perceived this, she would say so vehemently. Charlotte Royer spoke of "the wicked Louise" who had sent her far away to Richelieu. Anne Hardemont and Avoie Vigneron were upset in their new house at Ussel and were feeling their isolation deeply. They sent such harsh letters to Louise that Vincent was obliged to ask them to be polite towards their Superior.

The education given by Louise de Marillac rested upon the knowledge and respect of each person, which allowed them to have a true and valuable relationship.

A KNOWLEDGE OF THE REALITIES OF LIFE

Louise de Marillac never held to an abstract education plan. There are many letters in which it can be seen that she possessed a deep knowledge of the situations lived by the Sisters. She was informed about them either through the Sisters' letters or by the visits she made to the houses. Louise also knew of the lives of the local communities through the reports made by the Priests of the Mission and the letters coming from the Ladies of Charity and the Hospital Administrators.

Louise began with concrete facts and events of daily life in order to educate the Sisters. The community of Chantilly made out an entire order for materials for the service in the homes, a pot for the distribution of soup, pills, oil for the treatments, etc. First of all, Louise taught them to be very precise in their orders.

"Here is a portion of what you asked for, since we do not know at all for what purpose you need a pot, if it should be of iron or copper, or of what size." (15)

The delivery was accompanied by an explanation on the utilization of the material, that it was for the service of the poor and not for personal use.

"Here are ... two pairs of gloves to carry the pot, for I believe that you know very well, my dear Sisters, that you should not wear them to the church or to the village unless there is need. You should also know that they are part of the furnishings of the house, and that if either one of you is called back before they are used, you must leave them there for those who will go in your places." (16)

Always full of kindness, Barbe Angiboust sent to Paris some beautiful linen cloth, made in the factories of the region of Bernay. Louise, who knew Barbe's personality well, was not afraid of having her reflect on her gift, while at the same time thanking her for it. She explained to her that the cloth was "a little too beautiful" for the Daughters of Charity, and that it would be expensive because it was "single width." Barbe could apply to herself the sentence written for her companion Laurence:

"I beg her to always love holy poverty, not only in value and words, but in the practice of all its effects." (17)

Louise knew with certainty that this remark on the living of poverty would in no way diminish the affection and trust of Barbe.

"Your heart still witnesses to its dear affection for the Company which you love so much." (18)

Frequently, Louise suggested that the Sisters reflect together on their way of life. At Angers, community life had become less fraternal. The Sisters were invited to look at how they were conducting themselves together, the aggravation brought on by the faults of one, the lack of acceptance of another's mood, etc. In a very simple fashion, Louise explained feminine psychology:

"If our Sister is sad, if she is a little dejected, or too quick, or too slow, what do you want her to do; it is her nature. And even though she often tries to overcome herself, yet she cannot prevent these inclinations from appearing often. And a Sister who should love her as herself, should she become angry, treat her harshly or put on a worse expression:

O my Sisters, how necessary it is to take care not to do this, but do not act as if you notice it, do not argue with her, and think that soon it will be your own turn to need her to do the same for you." (19)

Then Louise directed the reflection towards the vocation to which the Sisters responded:

"This is what it will mean to be true Daughters of Charity since the mark of charity in a soul is, with all the other virtues, to bear all." (20)

Louise stressed the importance of the call of God which had united them together to serve Him in the poor.

"Renew yourselves then, my dear Sisters, in your first fervor, and begin with the genuine desire to please God, remembering that He has guided you with His Providence to the place where you are, and united you together in order that you may help one another to become perfect." (21)

The Sisters of Richelieu made it known that they did not have time to do everything. Perhaps, they had even asked that another Sister be sent. In her response, Louise suggested that the Sisters reflect on the use of their time.

She asked them to look at the events of their day. What time did they rise and go to bed? Were the visits they made or received necessary? Were there not useless words and chatter? Were the meals taken outside the house indispensable for the service of the poor? What she proposed was a review of the organization of the day.

Next, Louise invited the Sisters to confront the use of time of the local community with the vocation of the Daughter of Charity. What was the spirit that animated each action? What was the importance given to community life? How did they live obedience, the cloister of the Daughter of Charity?

Louise wished to have a written account of their community reflection:

"I am so consoled when you send me such detailed news of yourselves. I would like a report of all you have done concerning what I have asked of you." (22)

Louise knew that the Sisters were confronted with many difficulties, and did not hesitate to speak of them. She knew that to look a problem in the face was the best way to define it, was often a way to discover its causes, and was often a means to make it lose its intensity.

Some of these difficulties were linked to the newness of the Company. The Sisters had to know how to affirm their identity, and to

defend the service of the poor in their homes before the Ladies of Charity and the Bishops. Louise encouraged the most timid to express themselves:

"If someone asks your opinion, it will be in order to know how the poor are served in Paris. If it is a hospital, do not forget to tell them of the bashful poor who receive no care whatsoever, because they will not come to the hospital no matter what anyone does, and for this reason the establishment of the Charity is most necessary." (23)

Other problems arose from the difficulty of maintaining balance in all matters. The Sisters of Chantilly served the poor very well, but they allowed themselves to be completely taken up with the work and neglected their prayer time. Louise reminded them of the importance of meeting God in prayer in order to serve Him well in the Poor person.

"I believe that you maintain as much exactitude as you can in your little rules, without neglecting the poor, whose service should always be preferred, but it should be done in the proper manner, and not according to our own will." (24)

At Bernay, Laurence Dubois did not know very well how to reconcile the freedom every Sister has to write to Superiors with the confidence she should have in her Sister Servant. Louise explained the attitude to be adopted. In the XVIIth century, mail was taken by a mail coach which was infrequent, or by people who agreed to carry the letters.

"If you have some secret to tell me, write it yourself, and even if you are not obliged to show your letter, nevertheless, through cordiality, you should tell her that you are going to write to us. Do not fear, she will neither ask what you wish to tell us, nor will she look at it, for she knows well that it would offend God." (25)

Difficulties also arose following a poor understanding of the recommendations of the Founders or an excessive zeal in putting them into practice. Hygiene and cleanliness are indispensable for all community life, and some Sisters, under this pretext, looked for a certain satisfaction and forgot the poverty necessary for all Servants!

"If we are not alert we might overlook the vanity that can be hidden beneath these poor habits and lowly headpieces. Under the appearance of cleanliness and neatness great faults can be committed in this matter." (26)

At la Fere, the necessity for learning in order to teach catechism well incited Juliette to "a grim resolution for study" that almost brought with it a rejection of humble and lowly services.

Louise showed herself to be attentive to all these realities of life, in order to help each Sister grasp their meaning and grow in the love of God, the poor and her companions.

A CONTAGIOUS DYNAMISM

In all of her teaching and with her whole being, Louise de Marillac transmitted the flame that was alive in her, a love for mankind drawn from a love for Christ Incarnate.

In her meditations, Louise was in admiration of the man whom God had created and loved so much that He Himself wanted to participate in his humanity in order to redeem him.

"God ... who ... said: 'Let us make man to our image and likeness,' now resolved to create him anew by redeeming him." (27)

Another day, in order to share it with her Sisters in a conference, she noted:

"Ponder the excellence of the being which God has given to us." (28)

Louise paused many times on the theme of liberty. This gift of God to man allowed him to make free decisions. It was up to him to choose between good and evil, between life and death.

"... free will enables man to bring about his own damnation by following his evil inclinations and the temptations of the devil, or to earn his salvation by grace which applies to him the merits of the Son of God." (29)

Louise strongly emphasized how the Incarnation of the Son of God had given man back all of his grandeur. During her retreats, she liked to contemplate the Holy Humanity of Christ. Meditating on the Nativity, she wrote:

"To adore ... the divinity in the infant Jesus and imitate, to the best of my ability, His holy humanity, especially His simplicity and charity which led Him to come to us as a child so as to be more accessible to His creatures." (30)

During a retreat between Ascension and Pentecost, she desired in particular to honor the glorious Humanity of Christ:

"To keep my mind as fully occupied as possible in honoring the glory which the holy humanity of our Lord receives in heaven ..."(31)

Her meditation continued with the words of Christ in the Gospel: "Whatever you have done for these the least of my brothers, you did it for me." In the poor person, whoever it might be, Louise discovered Christ.

"My meditation was more reflective than reasoning. I felt a great attraction for the holy humanity of Our Lord, and I desired to honor and imitate it insofar as I was able in the person of the poor ..."(32)

Animated by this powerful love of the Son of God made man, Louise de Marillac believed in every person's possibilities, however poor or deprived he might be. She recognized the grandeur of the Foundlings, the Galley Slaves, the Insane, and of all those rejected by society. Louise tried to share with the Sisters this strong conviction which dwelt within her. She insisted on the respect, esteem and love of every person, rich or poor.

"Our vocation as servants of the poor reminds us of the meekness, humility and support we must have for others; that we owe respect and honor to everyone, to the poor because they are members of Jesus Christ and our masters, and to the rich so that they will give us the means to do good for the poor."(33)

Louise went into detail, and recalled that meekness and amiability were signs of respect and love.

"... be very gentle and courteous towards your poor. You know they are our Masters and we must love them tenderly and respect them profoundly."(34)

Cordial reception of the Ladies was a sign of this same respect:

"... greet warmheartedly the people who come to visit the poor ..."(35)

Louise lived deeply what she proposed to the Sisters. Her respect for each Sister was expressed by her concern to bring out what was good in her. A look of affection and friendship is always valuable for the other.

For Julienne, who did not know how to keep apples from spoiling, Louise brought out her qualities as a baker. The next time, Louise marvelled at the beautiful apples which arrived in such good condition, but she remarked to Julienne that she should not indulge too much in fancy in her baking.

If Barbe Angiboust did not choose the linen cloth with enough regard for poverty, Louise praised her love for the Company.

For the Sister Servant of Saint Denis, Louise did not point out a single quality, but she stressed that self knowledge is an excellent thing, and that a recognized fault is a source of progress.

Through her life and the formation she gave, Louise desired this reconciliation between man and God. The holy humanity of Christ was found, contemplated and served by her in the suffering humanity of the poor. Louise proposed to the Sisters that they reflect upon the life of the Son of God on earth in order to be filled with His love and to discover his attitudes towards the poor.

"It is reasonable that those whom God has called to follow His Son should try to become as perfect as He, and strive to have their lives be a continuation of His."(36)

In her daily prayer, the Daughter of Charity discovers and contemplates in Jesus His look of love, His gestures of respect and His faith in mankind.

"We should strive often to come before our Lord and to see Him practicing charity towards the neighbor."(37)

Some passages recur more frequently from the pen of Louise de Marillac. She liked to quote the verse of Matthew 11,29: "... learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart." She wanted so much for the Sisters to allow themselves to be transformed gradually by these words of Christ:

"(Keep) in mind the instruction which the Son of God has given us, commanding us to learn from Him to be gentle and humble of heart."(38)

To the Sister Servants she liked to give the example of Christ the Servant:

"We have the duty of imitating the manner of life and action of Our Lord who was always subject to others and who said He was not on earth to do His own will, but to serve and not to be served."(39)

To imbue ourselves with the Gospel is to permit ourselves to be invaded by the spirit of Christ which is the spirit of the Company. On January 10, 1660, Louise said this once more to Marguerite Chetif. This message, written two months before the death of the Foundress of the Company, is marked by a certain solemnity.

“May God be blessed for everything and may He give the strength and generosity to the Company to maintain itself in the primitive spirit that Jesus placed within it through His own spirit and with His holy maxims. Let us often give ourselves to God so that we may obtain this generosity from His goodness for the glory of His designs on the Company.” (40)

To belong to God, in order to belong entirely to the Poor, this sums up the formation given by Louise to the first Sisters. Her message corresponds with that of Pope John Paul II to the French on August 13, 1983:

“To give God back to mankind,
To give mankind back to God,
Is to give mankind back to itself,
Is to help it find once more its resemblance to God.”

Is this not the goal of all education, the goal of the service of the poor, and the goal of every Daughter of Charity's consecration to God?

Sister Elisabeth Charny

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Come Wind or

High Water,

Louise de Marillac



11. THE AFFIRMATION OF THE COMPANY

Louise de Marillac had emerged from the difficult stormy years detached from herself and at peace in God. She was totally available to God so that she might “found” the Company through Him.

This work of affirmation, which began in the course of the crisis, continued during the final years of the lives of Vincent and Louise. The setting up of some structures seemed to be indispensable after the first years of existence and experience of this new Community.

THE COUNCILS OF THE COMPANY

The Councils of the Company at which some Sisters participated were instituted in June, 1646. The Founders thought it necessary to form the Sisters gradually to assume the full direction of the Company. The health of Louise continued to be frail and precarious, and Vincent spoke of it to one of his confreres on December 13, 1647:

“I consider that Mademoiselle le Gras has been dead, humanly speaking, for ten years; and to see her, you would say that she came out of the tomb, so weak is her body and so pale her face. But God knows what strength of mind she has.” (1)

During the first Council on June 28, 1646, Vincent spoke to the participants:

“My dear daughters, by the grace of God, here is a beginning of order and foundation that His Providence has let fall upon your Company by the establishment of this little Council.” (2)

Three Sisters were present there beside Louise de Marillac: Anne Hardemont, the Sister Servant in the parish of Saint-Paul in Paris, Jeanne Lepintre, who would replace Louise as the person responsible for the Community during her long journey to Nantes from July to September of that same year, and Elisabeth Hellot, Mademoiselle’s secretary, who would take the Council minutes. Monsieur Almeras replaced the director, Monsieur Portail, who was visiting the communities in western France.

Monsieur Vincent began by explaining the purpose of a Council:

“We are assembled here ... to see to some needs, as is the practice in all well-regulated Communities.” (3)

Some varied subjects were studied in the course of the Council: the dismissal of Jacqueline, who was the cause of much disorder by her words and conduct, the admission of a young Sister named Catherine, who was very good, but in poor health, the choice of a Sister Servant for Saint-Paul parish to replace Anne Hardemont, the choice of a new community for the hospital of Nantes, and whether or not there was need for a parlor at the Motherhouse.

Vincent took his time explaining to the Sisters their manner of participation. Louise de Marillac, the Sister Servant of the Company, presented business matters to be dealt with by giving reasons for and against, and then each Council member was invited to give her opinion simply, in which Vincent motivated them by emphasizing that opinions could differ, and that they should not be afraid to express them. However, each one should take care not to wish to impose her point of

view at all costs. The decision fell to Louise de Marillac, who either made the decision immediately or postponed it in order to better "reflect on it before God." (4)

During this first Council, each Sister freely expressed herself. Sometimes the discussion was long because their opinions differed, and some decisions were postponed until a later date.

Eight days after this first Council, the second took place. It is difficult to know whether or not succeeding Councils took place each week. Only 29 reports have been preserved from between 1646 and 1660. These documents, that show how the Founders reflected on a problem and made a decision, are a treasure for the entire Company. The General Council as well as some Provincial Councils have begun their meetings by reading and meditating on them in order to better imbue themselves with the thinking of the Founders.

THE SEMINARY

On October 30, 1647, Vincent began the Council by insisting upon the need for continuing the organization of the Company.

"My daughters, it is a question of putting order back into some of the needs that Mademoiselle has noticed in the Company where, if there is something to be done, it is well that it were done now rather than later on. Mademoiselle Le Gras is now living. Whatever we shall do now will always remain, whereas, if we were to allow more time to pass and at some future date, 30, 40 or 50 years from now, if the Company should last that long, we were to try to remedy them, it would not be possible. Some will say: 'That was done at the beginning, and it has been continued. Monsieur Vincent was there, as well as Mademoiselle Le Gras, and they greatly approved that it be done in that manner.' This is why, my daughters, if there is something to be done for the perfection of this Company, it were better that it be done as soon as possible." (5)

An important point studied at this Council was the question of the formation of the newcomers to the Company. Up to that time, Louise had received the postulants who came from the houses, studied their vocation with them, and explained to them the mission of the Daughter of Charity. Each young Sister was entrusted to an older one and,

with her, learned to serve the poor in a parish in Paris or at the Hotel-Dieu. After some time, abuses had appeared. The young Sister became too strongly attached to her teacher, whom she called "aunt." Small groups were formed, bringing about disorder in the houses.

Louise thought it necessary to have one Sister specifically in charge of the "novices." She submitted her plan to Vincent who approved it and suggested it to the Council. Julienne Loret was named first Directress of the Seminary. Vincent explained her role as teacher:

"O my Sister, what do we wish to do with you? This is the first and most important responsibility after that of the Superioress. It consists in forming the girls who might serve God in the Company, in having them become rooted in virtue, and in teaching them submission, mortification, humility and the practice of their rules and all the virtues." (6)

At the time the Seminary was begun, the young Sisters were taking part in the whole life of the older Sisters of the Motherhouse, prayer, meals and dormitory. It was not until the generalate of Mathurine Guerin that a building was erected for the Seminary.

THE RULES AND CONSTITUTIONS OF THE COMPANY

From the foundation of the Company in 1633, Louise had put in writing the employment of the day and had established a little rule for the first Sisters. Around 1639-1640, she had prepared a plan of the Rules which Vincent read and commented on during the Conference of July 19, 1640.

"By the permission of Providence, the very first words of your rule run as follows: 'The Company of the Daughters of Charity is established to love God, to serve and honour Our Lord, their Patron, and the Blessed Virgin.' And how will you honour Him? Your rule tells you, for it goes on to inform you of God's design in establishing your Company 'to serve the sick corporally, by supplying them with all they need, and spiritually, by taking care that they live and die holily.'" (7)

After having explained this article, Monsieur Vincent read the second:

"... the second point tells you to love one another like Sisters whom Jesus Christ has bound together by the bond of His love." (8)

This first copy, the text of which we do not have, was only a rough draft made by Louise de Marillac. It served as the guideline for the preparation of the Rule of the Sisters in the hospital of Angers. (9)

Louise wanted a definitive copy to be made so that each Sister could read the Rules of the Company or hear them read. On Easter, 1647, Louise, reminding Vincent of the subject of the next conference, ended her letter with this request:

"That we might have our little Rules so as to read them in the Company from time to time." (10)

These Rules that Louise desired so much were partly completed. They had been submitted to the archbishop of Paris (see the "Echoes of the Company," January, 1988, p. 21), but Louise could not accept them because they placed the Company of the Daughters of Charity under the direction of the Archbishop of Paris and thus under the Bishops of the various dioceses.

Without becoming discouraged, Louise persistently took measures to see to it that Monsieur Vincent and his successors might be recognized as the Superiors of the Company. In April, 1651, she met the Procurator General with whom the Letters Patent had been placed after having been drawn up in 1646, but they were not to be found! During her visit, Louise had insisted a great deal upon the secular character of the Company, and the Procurator General had praised the work the Sisters had accomplished with the Foundlings and the Galley Slaves.

The following July 5th, Louise simply revealed to Vincent what could prevent the "affirmation" of the Company.

"The foundation of this establishment without which it seems impossible that the said Company can continue, or that God can draw the glory which it appears to want to render to Him, is the need that the said Company has of being established either under the name of Company or of Confraternity, completely submissive to and dependent on the guidance of the Most Honored Father General of the Priests of the Mission." (11)

The insistence of Louise rests on two convictions. The Superior General of the Mission was the rock on which God had founded the Company. It must be he who will fortify the faith of this Company. The Superior General of the Mission has given a spirit to this Company. His successors, formed in the same spirit, will be able to maintain it within the Daughters of Charity.

But on his part, Vincent saw obstacles to this project. In his humility, he did not want to be recognized as the Founder of the Daughters of Charity. It was God Who had done everything, and God was the author of the Company. Vincent did not want to turn aside the Congregation of the Mission from its end, the evangelization of the Country people and the work of the Seminaries. Was it possible or necessary for the Congregation of the Mission to take over the direction of the Daughters of Charity? Moreover, Vincent had always manifested great respect for the Church. In each diocese, the entire life of Christians was dependent upon the Bishop. Could the Daughters of Charity escape from this rule? They were simple Christians, consecrated to God, and not nuns.

Patiently, Louise waited for the grace of God to act. In September, 1651, Vincent wrote to her after the death of several of the Sisters, seeming to respond indirectly to her requests:

"It is God Who has instituted this little Company and Who guides it. Let us allow Him to do so and adore His divine and lovable direction." (12)

Gradually, Vincent allowed himself to be convinced. With the help of Monsieur Portail he prepared a new request for the archbishop of Paris. On January 18, Cardinal de Retz, who had taken refuge in Rome, once again approved the Company of the Daughters of Charity. From that time on, its guidance and direction were entrusted to Monsieur Vincent for life, and after him, to his successors, the Superiors General of the Congregation of the Mission. (13) Louise was happy, not because of her success, but because the Company would be able to pursue the work it had begun according to the design of God. With the help of the Priests of the Mission, the Company would be faithful to the Charism confided to it.

"May Our Lord in His goodness continue the accomplishment of His designs on the Company for many long years, under your holy guidance," (13) Louise wrote to Vincent.

On August 8, 1655, an important ceremony took place at the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity in the faubourg Saint Denis. In the presence of Louise de Marillac and all the Sisters who had come for the Conference, Vincent officially erected the Company.

"I intend to have read out to you the approbation of your establishment by His Grace, the Archbishop of Paris, and its confirmation by His Eminence Cardinal de Retz, his coadjutor. I also intend to have your rules read to you."(14)

After this reading, Vincent encouraged the Sisters chosen by God to be the "foundations" of the Company to persevere faithfully in their vocation.

The Rules specified the nomination of the Superioress and her Council. Louise de Marillac had asked Monsieur Vincent that the nomination of a new Superioress take place in conformity with the approved Rules. Acting as Superior General, Vincent begged Louise to continue her responsibility as Superioress and directress of the Company. Three officers were named on that day. Julienne Loret was the first assistant, Mathurin Guerin was second assistant and treasurer, and Jeanne Gressier was the disbursing officer.

To mark this important event, each Sister present placed her signature at the bottom of a large parchment on which were stated succinctly the origin of the Company, its approbation by the archbishop of Paris, and the nomination of the Councillors. Louise signed first, carefully leaving a blank space for the signature of the Superior General. Next came the signatures of the three officers and the 37 Sisters who were present. Some were very moved. Marie Joly made a large ink stain before tediously writing her name. Others made a cross because they did not know how to write, and the secretary wrote their names. Vincent, in his humility, wanted to sign last.

Next were carefully written *"the names of all the other Sisters who have been received since the first institution of the said confraternity and society up to this day, August 8, 1655."*(15) The order in which the names were written is in the approximate order of their date of entrance into the Company. For the older ones who had entered between 1634 and 1640, the order was not followed exactly. Then the Sisters present were asked to recall the names of those who had made

their Seminary at the same time as they themselves did, but memory fails and there were some forgotten. At least fifteen Sisters whose names are well known or whose notices were preserved were not mentioned, among them were Marthe Dauteuil, Jeanne Delacroix, Françoise Manceau, and Avoie Vigneron. The Sisters who had died during the twenty-two year existence of the Company were not mentioned.

Vincent concluded the ceremony with a prayer to Mary and her divine Son:

"... We beseech Thee, these good Sisters and, I, to assist this little Company. Continue and perfect a work which is the greatest on earth ... Continue Thy holy protection over this little Company ... grant, if it be pleasing to Thee, the grace of perseverance to these good Daughters ..."(16)

On the following September 29, Vincent began the explanation of the common Rules. Twenty-four conferences are consecrated to it from 1655 to 1658. They were followed by the explanation of the employment of the day and the particular Rules for the Sisters in the parishes.

For Louise de Marillac, if the affirmation of the Company came about through the setting up of structures, it would go beyond them. What appeared to her to be essential was fidelity to the vocation received, adherence to the will of God and the mission confided to the Company. Structures were only there to better aid each Sister to live as a Daughter of Charity. During one of the Conferences of Monsieur Vincent on the explanation of the Rules, Louise expressed what was close to her heart:

"God wishes to be glorified in us in every way ... He wishes us to co-operate with His Will."(17)

Frequently, she invited the Sisters to remain faithful to the vocation received from God:

"Go courageously, progressing from moment to moment in the way in which God has placed you in order to go to Him."(18)

D'icelle Confrerie jusques a present. Et pour ce
 qui est des autres Officiers nous avons nomme
 pour premiere Assistante Julienne Lopez
 Pour seconde Assistante & tresoriere Maturine
Guerin. Et pour dispensiere Jeanne Grefier.
 Et qui estant fait nous avons exorté lesd. filles &
 veufes de ladite Confrerie de rendre graces a Dieu
 de leur vocation, a bien viure en jelle, & a
 se rendre exacts a l'observance desd. Regles de
 de leurs charges; & qu'elles ont tous promis de fe
 moyennant la grace de Notre Seig. En for
 dequoy nous avons signe de notre main le presen
 acte, & fait apoyer le seu de notre dit Congregon.
 lequel ont aussi signe lad. Dameselle, & les
 autres Officieres, et quelques unes des plus
 anciennes qui l'ont peu. fait en ladicte
 Maison de la Charite de Paris le huities
 d'Aoust Mil six cens cinquante cinq

Cc vuide auroit été laisse pour la signature
 de Monsieur Vincent; mais il avoulu signer
 tout le dernier.

Eusebe de Mandiac. Mathurine Guerin.
 Jeanne Grefier. Julienne Lopez.

Ma vie jolis jeunvire noce
 Antoinette la bête +
 Jeanne baptiste
 Françoise
 Baillie
 Françoise
 Baillie
 Françoise
 Baillie

mesd. collegianes
 Madeleine menage Genevieve gautier françoise ysecaume +
 Marie La Ruelle
 Marie Depaul
 Marie

Suiuent les noms de toutes les autres sœurs qui ont été receuies depuis la
 premiere Institution de la dit Confrerie, et Société Jusques a ce jourd'heuy huities
 Apust mil six cens cinquante cinq. Jeanne Drouot dite Christine, Gillete Solay,
 Louise Gausset, Cecilie Angibouit, Jeanne Le pointe, Henriette Descaume, Marie
 & Marthe Traumau, Claude Carre, Marie Le Trim, Nicole Gouquet, Louise
 Christine Richeau, Jeanne de St Benoist, Cathonnet de Jesty, & Anne Dastin, Barthe
 Angibou, Jeanne Cozignart, Marguerite le Jeun, Perrette Chadeville, Jeanne Laon,
 Françoise Carreua, Jeanne Leblin, Jeanne Buis, Charlotte Raye, Marguerite
 Moreau, Madeline Druyon, Françoise Borelle, Marguerite Laval, Madeline
 Riquet, Marthe Boudouin, Jeanne Gouard, Charlotte prou, Anne Veron,
 Catherine gram dauvine, Nicole Abilede, Françoise Goupy, Barthe Chada,
 Claude Chantereau, Claude Lurion, Toullante
 & Marie Nauaon, Françoise
 Menage, Jeanne Linaux, Laurence Dubois, Jeanne Buis, Perrine de
 Bouhory, Nicole Baran, Elisabeth Houreau, Nicole Fouillet, Marie Gaudin,
 Marie Boulot, Nicole Collette Abouget, Marguerite Manquier, Michele
 Le Creste, Estienne Massie, Anne Taculle, Cathonnet Bauchet, Anne
 Beauvais, Claude Taculle, Jeanne Bonville, Anne Le Lieur, Jeanne
 Marie Boisle, Susanne Charlotte Moreau, Marie Guinville,
 Jeanne Turot, Jeanne Larbiche, Genevieve Gigneron, Antoinette Le Roy,
 Marie Paulhaard, Claire Rodouze, Françoise Bouhory, Antoinette Pastouze,
 Claude La muette, Marie Rat, Antoinette, Antoinette Villain, Claude Tibau,
 Louise Rivard, Louise Corbe, Claude Parallet, Françoise Guin, Claude
 Blanchard, Marie Ellet, Perronille Gillet, Anne Rocheron, Anne Lenoir,
 Antoinette Richerillan, Jeanne La Meire, Maturine Brillehaut,
 Jeanne Deruau, Marie Dame, Julienne Dubois, Elisabeth Marrier,
 Marie Papillon, Marie Petit, Michele Melayer, Marie Roger,
 Jeanne Blot, Catherine
 Marguerite

The Company can only be maintained and persevere in its service if it truly cooperates in the Mission of Christ the Redeemer.

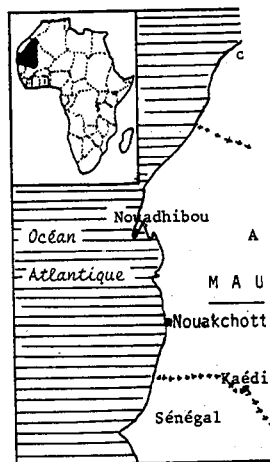
Sister Elisabeth Charpy.

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Province of I

IN THE SERVICE IN MAURITANIA



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the truly poor."

*Come Wind
or High Water,
Louise de Marillac*



12. DURING THE GREAT MISERY OF THE FRONDE

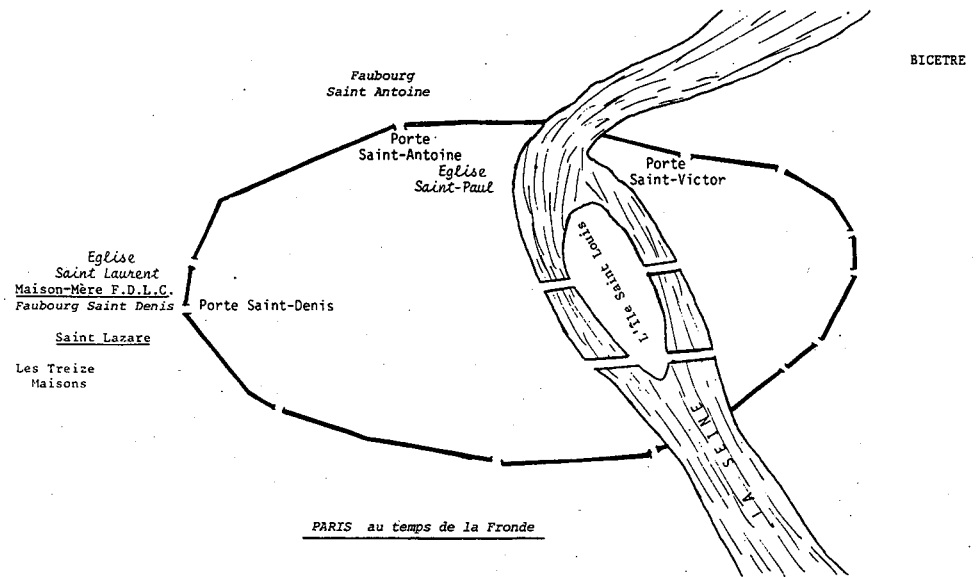
From 1648 to 1653, France was torn by a civil war. The revolt had been developing in the country for several years. Taxes were continually increasing in order to maintain the armed forces at war against the Austrians and Spanish. All manner of levies, such as tailles, salt taxes, taxes for Lords and church tithes aggravated the very precarious situation of the peasants.

The Fronde was the revolt of various strata of society, the members of Parliament, the great lords, the peasants and the ordinary people, against the royal power exercised by the Prime Minister, Mazarin.

The revolt began in May, 1648. The royal power was demanding an anticipated payment of four years of pledges from the royal officials. The members of Parliament refused and united together in a front against Mazarin. Despite the arrests of some of the heads of the opposition, the revolt reached the provinces. Parliament demanded control of the budget.

On August 20, at Lens, Conde, at the head of the King's army, won a victory over the army of Ferdinand III, Emperor of Austria. Relying on this success, Mazarin believed the moment had come to react against Parliament. On August 26, he had Broussel arrested, a Coun-

cillor in Parliament and a very popular man. Immediately, Paris was filled with barricades and the people revolted. Queen Anne of Austria and the young King Louis XIV fled to Rueil.



News of the revolt in the capital spread rapidly. Louise, then at Liancourt, learned of it that evening, or the next morning at the latest. She wrote an anguished letter to Julienne Loret, the directress of the Seminary:

"I am very distressed by a rumor that is spreading through the countryside, that there has been some uproar and murder in the streets of Paris. In the name of God, my dear Sister, give me some news of Monsieur Vincent, my son and our Sisters and what you will have learned about this rumor." (1)

The following day, August 28, having received no news, Louise wrote to Elisabeth Hellot, her secretary:

"In the name of God, send me some news of Monsieur Vincent, Monsieur Holden (a friend of the de Marillac family,) of Monsieur de Marillac (he was a councillor at Parliament like Broussel) and of my son. I am in such great anguish that if I had the means, I would return there today, but do not conceal anything from me, I beg you." (2).

In her letter, Louise manifested a great confidence in her Sisters who were exposed in this way:

"I assure myself that God is giving you all enough courage to die rather than allow that God be offended by you, and that your modesty will make it known that you belong to the King of kings to whom all powers are submissive." (7)

Even as she was writing this letter, Louise was looking for a means of bringing them all home to the Motherhouse, which would be accomplished soon afterwards. Some of the children were welcomed at the Treize Maisons, near Saint-Lazare, and some at the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity.

Some hope for peace appeared in March. Negotiation took place between Mazarin and Parliament. It resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Rueil on March 11. Louise wanted Vincent to return to Paris now where there were immense needs:

"We are in very great distress concerning the place and state in which you are now ... You are very much needed in Paris for the works of charity. The President, Madame de Lamoignon in particular, begs you to return promptly. I shall leave it to others to tell you the news concerning the peace, knowing nothing of it other than the fact that it has caused us to praise God with the people." (8)

Because Monsieur Vincent had to have been at Angers, Louise wrote that same day to the Abbe de Vaux in order to have some accurate news:

"I give myself the honor of writing to you in order to beg you to give us some news of Monsieur Vincent, if you know of any, because we are deeply distressed, having had nothing since March 14th when he was in Le Mans. I knew for a fact, Monsieur, that he had also been to Angers, but since then, we have heard nothing at all spoken about him; and the most recent news was neither from him nor from someone close to him. Do me the favor, Monsieur, of making the effort to tell us what you know of him." (9)

Did Louise know that while on his way to Angers, Vincent had fallen from a horse into a small river? He was barely rescued in time by the priest who was accompanying him.

While Louise looked forward very much to Vincent's return, she did not remain inactive. There were many poor people in the capital, and there was no bread. With the Ladies of Charity and the Sisters, assistance was organized, and in April, Louise gave some news of the Motherhouse to Jeanne Lepintre, the Sister Servant of Nantes:

"During all this time of affliction ... all our Sisters ... still continued to serve the sick poor, and besides them, the poor who had no bread, for you would not believe all the alms that were distributed in Paris. I believe that this has caused the mercy of God to be drawn to us to give us peace." (10)

Obtaining supplies was difficult; wheat was very expensive. To feed the entire large family, the poor, the children and the Sisters, Louise invited the Sisters to be careful:

"I beg our Sister gardeners to work hard for the bounty of their garden while our good God is providing us with good weather." (11)

"I beg you not to let the pigs out all together, and above all, that they never get into the garden, so that soon we shall see it grow green again. I trust that you are careful to feed the cow and the other animals." (12)

Milk, eggs and vegetables contributed substantially towards preparing the soup for all the starving poor.

Finally, on June 13, 1649, Vincent returned to Paris. What joy for Louise to see him again after these long months of absence. So many things to see together, so many affairs to be dealt with ...

"Monsieur Vincent has scarcely arrived and is in the midst of as many affairs and predicaments as you could imagine!" (13)

Normal life seemed to be resuming its usual course. The Parliamentary Fronde had ended, and on August 18, 1649, Queen Anne of Austria and the young Louis XIV, age 11, returned to Paris amidst popular rejoicing. Mazarin and Conde, the commander of the armed forces, accompanied them.

If the political situation was improved, the economic situation was disastrous. Seeds had not been able to be sowed in time. To feed themselves, the soldiers had pillaged everything as they passed.

In November, 1649, Louise exclaimed in alarm; there was no more money for the Foundlings! The Ladies no longer gave anything, there was no more linen, and how were they to buy wheat, which was so

expensive? The wetnurses returned the babies because they had not been paid in several months.

"I am too importunate, but we are absolutely at the point where we must have some relief without delay or else leave all. Yesterday, it was necessary to give all the money for our expenses here in order to have wheat for the children at Bicetre ..." (14)

Some days later, Louise insisted and told of all her sorrow as a mother before her hungry children:

"My most honored Father, do us the charity to tell us if in conscience we can see them placed in the state of dying." (15)

Suffering with all her children, Louise made herself "their voice" to everyone. She begged Monsieur Vincent to intervene with the Ladies of Charity whom she judged severely in this period of shortage:

"It is pitiful that the Ladies put themselves out so little; either they believe that we have enough to live on or they wish to make us leave all!" (16)

"The Ladies do not come to our aid at all!" (17)

These are very harsh words from the pen of Louise de Marillac, but she could not allow herself to see the suffering of these children, who were loved by God. She then proposed to go to influential persons, such as the Princess de Conde and the First President. She herself wrote to Chancellor Seguier, asking him to come to the aid of 100 little children who were in grave danger of spending Christmas without bread. (18)

Vincent, who was also moved at the distress of the children, convoked the Assembly of the Ladies of Charity. Quickly, Louise prepared a memorandum on the situation of the work of the Foundlings:

"Here is a little memorandum I made so that, if you think proper, you might take the time to speak of it to the Assembly." (19)

This memorandum served as a framework for Monsieur Vincent in preparing his presentation during the Assembly. In it he specified that a child can be killed in two ways: through a violent death or through refusing it food. Now the Foundlings were in great need because there was only enough food remaining for six weeks.

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Going through the entire history of the Work of the Foundlings, Vincent invited the Ladies to continue the work that had been begun. It was certainly on this date that the following famous text can be situated:

"Now then, Ladies, compassion and charity caused you to adopt these little creatures as your children; you have been their mothers according to grace since their mothers according to nature abandoned them; see now if you also wish to abandon them. Cease to be their mothers now in order to become their judges; their lives and their deaths are in your hands."

I am going to take the voice and the vote; it is time to pronounce their judgment and to know whether or not you desire to have mercy on them. They will live if you continue to take charitable care of them; and, on the contrary, they will die and certainly perish if you abandon them; experience does not allow any doubt about it." (20)

Very much moved, each Lady gave Monsieur Vincent either the little purse she carried with her, or a ring or a necklace, or a gold coin. The children would not die!

In 1650, a new political event had just reawakened passions. Conde had saved the royal power, and he counted on having his service recognized by becoming the guardian of the Monarchy. But he had much scorn for Mazarin, against whom he multiplied public insults, and so, at the beginning of the year 1650, Mazarin had the scheming Conde arrested.

This time it was the nobles and princes who revolted and carried the provinces along with them. A situation of confusion reigned throughout the country. The Marshal of Turenne, at one time allied with the Spanish, next found himself at the head of the royal armed forces. Conde, the Fronde fighter who had become unpopular, joined the enemies of France. The Great Mademoiselle, cousin of Louis XIV, supported Conde who wanted to crush the King.

In December, 1650, the Ardennes region was devastated. After the battle at Rethel, 1,500 dead soldiers remained unburied, exposed to vultures. Vincent sent some missionaries to bury the dead. Two Daughters of Charity, Jeanne and Guillemine Chesneau went to take care of the sick, the starving and the homeless. Louise encouraged them in their hard work:

"All our Sisters recommend themselves to you and praise God for the courage which His goodness has given you for the service of these poor afflicted ones. Oh, my dear Sister, what a grace to have been chosen for this holy employ. It is true that it is extremely painful, but it is in this way that the grace of God will appear greater in you. You are right to have confidence in and abandonment to His Holy Providence. It will never fail to let you know that this is agreeable to Him." (21)

In the letter Vincent wrote to Guillemine Chesneau, the same recommendations appear. It is from prayer that the Sisters will draw the strength needed for their difficult service.

The Fronde, said to be that of the Princes, grew in scale, and Mazarin had become so unpopular that he was obliged to flee. In Germany, where he took refuge, he raised an army and marched on France at its head. War raged everywhere; everywhere there reigned misery, revolt and confusion.

At the beginning of that year 1652, Louise fell ill with "double tertian fever" that placed her in great danger. For long weeks, she remained feverish and tired. On April 20, she wrote:

"I am having a difficult time regaining my strength and I am always having relapses." (22)

In spite of her very poor state of health, Louise remained most attentive to the Sisters who were experiencing such painful situations. In February, 1652, the region of Angers was ravaged by the armies. More than 200,000 poor from the country took refuge in the city for shelter and food. Louise shared the suffering of her Sisters and helped them to read into the events:

"Reading about all the afflictions and losses that have occurred at Angers have made me extremely sensitive to the pain the poor are suffering there. I beseech the divine goodness to console them and give them the assistance they need."

But, my very dear Sisters, you are suffering a great deal; have you reflected that it is right that the Servants of the Poor should suffer along with their Masters?" (23)

On May 22, Monsieur Vincent described the situation in Paris to one of his Confreres:

"Here we are in more trouble than ever. Paris is crawling with poor, because of the armies that have made the poor people of the countryside take refuge here. Every day, there are Assemblies in order to try to assist them." (24)

On June 21, he described to another Confrere the part the Daughters of Charity were taking in the assistance to the refugees and the poor:

"At the home of Mademoiselle Le Gras they make and distribute soup every day to 1,300 bashful poor and to 800 refugees in the faubourg Saint-Denis. And in the parish of Saint-Paul alone, four or five of these girls serve something to 5,000 poor, as well as 60 or 80 sick people they have right there at hand." (25)

Barbe Angiboust, who was at Brienne, in devastated Champagne, expressed her suffering at not being able to come to the aid of all the poor people she encountered. Louise supported her in this pain that was so frequently felt:

"You see so much misery that you are unable to alleviate ... Bear their pain with them and do everything possible to give them a little assistance, and remain at peace. Perhaps you have your portion of need, and that is your consolation." (26)

Everywhere, the Sisters were really experiencing the suffering of the poor. As Servants, they were sharing insecurity and privation with their Masters. The Etampes region had been occupied by enemy troops for two months. After the lifting of the siege of the city on June 23, a spectacle of desolation met the eye. The fields were ravaged, the villages were pillaged and many peasants were executed. Children wandered about with haggard expressions, looking for food and shelter.

The Sisters of Valpuiseaux, a little village close to Etampes, had followed the inhabitants into exile. Having returned to their post, they were comforted by a long letter from Monsieur Vincent:

"You have had much suffering, but you also will be rewarded for it, and your reward will be great not only because of the evil you have suffered, but for the good you have done in serving the sick and wounded in the hospital and for the good example you have given." (27)

Vincent and Louise wanted to send other Sisters to assist in the care and education of the many orphans, but the roads were so uncertain. Brigands and runaways were robbing travelers, and wild animals wandered throughout the countryside attracted by the many cadavers.

Three women had been devoured by wolves in the Etampes region. So they were to wait a little while. The wait was longer than had been foreseen, because troops were again marching towards Paris. On July 1, Conde's army, made up of Spaniards, was near the Saint-Denis gate. During the night, pillagers entered Saint-Lazare, threatened Monsieur Almeras, went upstairs to the Seminary bedrooms and pillaged all they found. (28)

Would soldiers also come to the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity across the street? Louise was worried and wondered how they should conduct themselves:

"Most of the people are leaving this suburb and are moving their furniture. We are not following their example, but for us this would be a serious affair. If we have reason to fear for our young Sisters, we might send them here and there to various parishes ..."

As for myself, it seems that I am awaiting death and cannot prevent my heart from jumping each time they cry 'to arms'." (29)

On the advice of Monsieur Vincent and the older Sisters, Louise, who had recovered but poorly from her recent illness, agreed to take refuge in the interior of Paris with the youngest Sisters. The others remained at the Motherhouse with the wetnurses and children. The Priests of the Mission remained at Saint-Lazare.

On July 2, the royal troops won the battle at Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Soldiers were everywhere, making demands. Gradually, calm returned; the people were weary of war. On August 24, Louise transmitted public opinion:

"I am extremely surprised that you have not received our letters in such a long time. It must have been the war that prevented them from reaching you ... Blessed be God! who in His goodness gives us hope for calm through the belief that He will soon give us peace." (30)

Finally, on October 21, 1652, Louis XIV, who had come of age, entered Paris, where he was most favorably received. Slowly, France arose from her ruins. Vincent aroused public charity to come to the aid of the most needy: the peasants of Champagne and Picardie who had to rebuild everything, the wounded soldiers at Chalons, the many orphans in Etampes, the beggars of Angers and Paris. Everywhere Daughters of Charity were at work. Louise continued to accompany

and sustain them. She wrote to Jeanne-Francoise, who was responsible for the orphanage of Etampes:

"I am certain that ... you take great pleasure in instructing as best you can these little creatures who have been ransomed with the blood of the Son of God, so that they may praise and glorify him eternally." (31)

Through Anne Hardemont, Louise sent this message to the Sisters who were working in the various villages of Champagne:

"The pure intention, which they must often renew, of performing their actions for the love of God, will serve as a help to preserve themselves in the spirit that true Daughters of Charity should have." (32).

Louise ceaselessly repeated to the Sisters that whatever work they accomplished, whichever persons they might meet, their Service was and should be "putting Love to work."

The war with the Spanish would continue another ten years. Vincent and Louise who had seen at close range the great distress of the wounded soldiers, abandoned and without care, did not hesitate to send Daughters of Charity to their aid on the battlefields. Two of them, Francoise Manceau and Marguerite Menage, died at Calais in 1658, victims of their devotion. Many were the Sisters who offered themselves to go and replace them. At all times, the Daughters of Charity showed themselves to be available to go to their most disadvantaged brothers and sisters.

Sister Elisabeth Charpy.

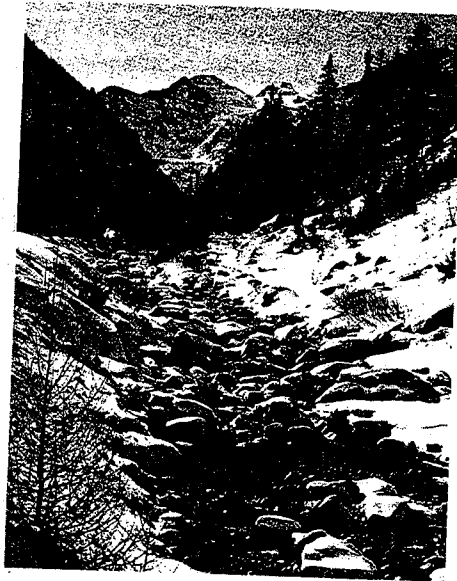
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*Come Wind or
High Water,
Louise de Marillac*



13. THE ARDUOUS ROAD OF HUMILITY

Louise de Marillac had never been in good health. Migraines and bronchitis often forced her to stop and submit herself to the treatments that were current in the XVIIth century, purges and bleeding. At the beginning of the month of May, 1656, she took to her bed and her condition suddenly worsened. Monsieur Vincent hastened to the sickbed, and, perceiving that death might come shortly, he questioned her:

"Mademoiselle, have you cast your eyes on any of your Daughters who will take your place?" (1)

Louise, who was very tired, seemed to be asleep. Her lips moved, and in the manner of a litany, she presented her daughters to the Lord. Opening her eyes, she said:

"Sir, as you have chosen me, by Divine Providence, it seems to me that it is not expedient on the first occasion for a Sister to be elected by a majority of votes but that you should appoint her, but for this time only." (2)

After a prayer-filled silence, she humbly added:

"... I think Sister Marguerite Chetif is most suitable. She is a Sister who has shown wisdom in all things and succeeded everywhere." (3)

For several days, Louise was in agony. Fervent prayers rose to the Lord from all the Communities of the Daughters of Charity. Many letters must have informed the Sisters, and one of them, which was sent by Monsieur Vincent to Francoise Menage on May 17, has been preserved:

"Mademoiselle thought to escape us. She was extremely ill and is not yet completely out of danger, even though her condition is better, thanks be to God. I do not recommend her to your prayers, knowing that you have not ceased to offer them to God for her preservation." (4)

Louise slowly came back to life. On June 10, she had a letter written to Francoise Menage:

"It did not yet please God's goodness to wipe me from the face of the earth, even though I have deserved it for a long time." (5)

Some days later, on June 19, she herself was able to write to Barbe Angiboust:

"The goodness of God continues to grant me new strength. Please help me, my dear Sister, to make better use of it for His glory and for the service He wishes me to render to the Company." (6)

On June 25, Louise's state of health had improved to the point that a Council meeting was able to be held. The last one had been on April 29, just before her grave illness. The order of the day for the Council meeting reflects the concern Vincent must have felt on seeing the approaching death of Louise. Mathurine Guerin, who wrote the account, noted how Monsieur Vincent expounded with great solemnity on the obligation of the Company to remain faithful to God. He especially stressed the virtues which could maintain the Company and allow it to serve the poor everywhere; those of poverty and purity. (7)

Indeed, many appeals arrived in the course of this year 1656. The Ladies of the Charity of Arras asked for Sisters to work for the solid establishment of the Confraternity. Queen Anne of Austria wanted Sisters to care for the wounded soldiers in the hospital at La Fere. The Bishops of Cahors and Narbonne also desired to have Daughters of Charity in their dioceses. Where could a sufficient number of Sisters be found to respond to all these appeals?

On July 29, 1656, Marie-Marthe Trumeau and Elisabeth Brocard were sent to La Fere, and on August 30, Marguerite Chetif and Radegonde Lenfantin left for Arras, but it was necessary to wait until November, 1658 to send two Sisters to Cahors, and until September, 1659 to respond to the request of the Bishop of Narbonne.

One morning in September, while Louise was recovering her strength, she slipped when getting out of bed and fell heavily to the floor. On September 27, Vincent informed Nicole Haran, the Sister Servant of Nantes:

"Mademoiselle Le Gras is sick in bed with a slight fever caused by a pain in her ribs. Ten or twelve days ago she wanted to get up, and fell from her bed to the floor, and this caused the illness from which she feels no relief; nevertheless, we hope that it will come to nothing." (8)

Louise would suffer for several weeks from this rib fracture.

At the end of that year 1656, during her monthly retreat, Louise wrote these words about the long months of illness and the time remaining to her to live on earth. On December 30, she wrote:

"After I had recovered from my most recent serious illness in the month of (Louise did not indicate this, but left a blank) of the present year, I asked Monsieur Vincent, Our Most Honored Superior and Founder, with what dispositions I should once again take the resolution to live." (9)

What is striking when reading these brief retreat notes, is Louise's insistence on patience:

*"...(to serve souls in their needs by ... patience,
... (to) put up with a great deal and rely more on God than on our own means.
... direction is a gift which must be obtained through patience."*
(10)

In effect, Louise de Marillac possessed a lively, impetuous temperament which was revealed in all her behaviors and attitudes.

Her handwriting was rapid. Often, her thoughts went faster than her hand, and she skipped words, which makes it difficult to read some of her letters and meditations.

During the first years of the life of the Company, Louise reacted with a certain vehemence to Sisters who forgot the demands of their vocation. She wrote to two Sisters in Richelieu who were having difficulty living fraternal charity:

"How shall you dare to appear before God one day? He would draw His glory (from this vocation) and there you are, usurping it!" (12)

The Sisters of Nantes who were experiencing serious community conflicts received a most severe letter:

"What have we returned to God, ungrateful soil that we are! Nothing except discontentment, ungrateful soil that we are, through our infidelities to God ..." (13)

When the service of the poor was neglected and when the sick were poorly cared for, Louise vigorously challenged the Sisters:

"Where is the meekness and the charity which you should preserve so carefully for our dear Masters, the sick poor?" (14)

Louise manifested this same vehemence in defending the Daughters of Charity when they were accused. At Angers, Perrette was suspected of stealing the goods of the poor. Louise reacted, writing to the Abbe de Vaux:

"Let them inform us if our service no longer agrees with them ... but to suffer this calumny and suspicion, I beg you, Monsieur, to consider if this is to be borne ..." (15)

And Louise continued her letter with these words:

"You see, Monsieur, that the point of honor transports me. I ask your pardon for this." (16)

Monsieur Vincent, himself, would acknowledge to the Sisters this lively temperament of Louise de Marillac. In the conference on her virtues, he explained:

"If, by human infirmity, she sometimes fell into a little act of hastiness, there is no reason to be astonished at that; the Saints point out that there is no one without imperfections. We see this in what happened to St. Peter and St. Paul. God allows such things to happen that He may be glorified by them ... And so little acts of hastiness were sometimes to be observed in Mademoiselle Le Gras. This was nothing, and I am far from thinking there was anything sinful in them." (17)

This vivaciousness which provoked passionate reactions, this hastiness which too quickly pointed out the least fault, this vehemence which could sometimes wound, Louise would endeavor to fight against them her entire life. Reading her letters and thoughts permits a discovery of how, step by step, she walked the road of humility.

Two motives led Louise along this road of humility:

- the desire for conformity to Jesus Christ,
- the quality of servant of the Poor.

In her prayer, Louise gazed upon and contemplated the humility of Jesus. The mystery of the Incarnation held her attention for long periods:

"To love abjection since God is to be found there. Jesus teaches us this by His birth. He wanted us to know that this abjection filled heaven with astonishment and gave glory to the Father. However, I must unite my miserable, weak self-abnegation to His glorious abjection." (18)

The humility of the newborn Jesus is an act of love for mankind. It is lived so simply that it is very close to us:

"I shall calmly adore the divinity in the Infant Jesus and imitate, to the best of my ability, His holy humanity, especially His simplicity and charity which led Him to come to us as a child so as to be more accessible to His creatures." (19)

The contemplation of Christ, the Son of God made man, led Louise to discover humility throughout His entire life on earth. On a Monday morning during her retreat in 1633, she noted:

"I must bear in mind the fact that the humility which our Lord practiced at His Baptism is not only a source of humiliation for me but it must also serve as an example which I must imitate ..." (20)

On the evening of that same day, she continued her meditation on the Washing of the Feet:

"Nothing should keep me from humbling myself. For this, I have the example of our Lord who had a legitimate interest in advancing His glory and in reminding His Apostles of their obligation to honor Him, yet He did not shrink from humbling Himself to the point of washing the feet of His Apostles ..." (21)

In her letters to the Daughters of Charity, we again find Louise's meditation on the humility of Christ. What did the Son of God do when he came to earth for the salvation of the world?

"an occupation so lowly as the work of carpentry." (22)

It is an invitation to each one to work in the service of the Poor without commotion or noise.

How did the Son of God react to accusations and false witness? Did he endeavor to defend Himself or to prove His innocence?

"I have truly felt your pain in all the matters of which you informed me, although we shall always think strange all the slander which may be untruthfully said about us, since we are Christians and, moreover, Daughters of Charity, which obliges us to bear with everything, as we have been taught by that great lover of suffering, Jesus Christ." (23)

One sentence might sum up this entire meditation on the humility of the Son of God, the Incarnate Word:

"... love for the humanity of Our Lord (should be) a means for moving me to practice His virtues especially gentleness and humility ..." (24)

As a servant, the Daughter of Charity recognizes the poor to be her Masters and Lords. The Servant must not and cannot be treated better than her masters, and these are very often humiliated, mistreated and unrecognized. Louise ceaselessly shared with the Sisters her meditation on this point:

"Our condition of servants of the poor reminds us of the meekness, humility and support we must have for the other." (25)

This title of Servant of the Poor is not an honorary one, but it is an invitation to concretely live what it signifies:

"All are most content with being servants of the poor, but there are few who can suffer the least word that is said to them with authority and harshness." (26)

How was Louise able to meditate in the concrete situation of her life? Through her writings, it is possible to see the means she took in order to advance on the road of humility.

First of all, she endeavored to know herself: she looked at her life and compared it with the Gospel. She spoke of her frequent impatience (27), of her obstinence in defending her opinion (28), of her pride which prevented her from being simple (29). She accepted being assisted in this self-knowledge by her spiritual director, but also by the Sisters with whom she lived. As she explained to Cecile Angiboust, the reactions of the companions are sometimes linked with the behavior of the Sister Servant:

“As much as possible, may we bring consolation to our Sisters who will always have enough to suffer in supporting us, sometimes in our moods, and other times from the repugnance which nature and the evil spirit give them.” (30)

In the conference on the virtues of Louise de Marillac, one Sister explained that Mademoiselle examined herself when a Sister left her presence in anger, in order to know if she had not spoken too harshly (31).

During her retreats, Louise specified her resolutions. Humility was a point which always entered in, and in 1628, she wrote:

“I must practice interior humility by a desire for abjection and exterior humility by willingly accepting all the occasions which occur for humbling myself. I shall do this in order to honor the true and real humility of God Himself in whom I shall find the strength to overcome my pride, to combat my frequent outbursts of impatience, and to acquire charity and gentleness toward my neighbor. Thus I shall honor the teaching of Jesus Christ who told us to learn of Him to be gentle and humble of heart.” (32)

In 1632, she mostly developed the reasons for living humility better:

“Pride and all its effects are great obstacles to the action and plan of God in the soul. Since I recognize this to be true in my case, I shall strive to simplify the workings of my mind and to keep it humble ...” (33)

Later on, these same resolutions were once again specified:

“I must practice great humility and mistrust of myself ...” (34)

In December, 1656, she emphasized the importance of patience, that virtue which permitted her to remain calm in the face of difficulties and contradictions, that virtue which is drawn from the merciful love of God:

“... turning to God ... and trusting Him to accomplish ... all that I could not do ...” (35)

After the death of Louise de Marillac, the Sisters pointed out how attentive she was to asking pardon for her shortcomings.

“She was the first to confess her faults and to ask pardon ...” (36)

She did not hesitate to recognize her faults during the Conferences. On August 7, 1650, after having given the means to live obedience well, she added:

“I felt deeply ashamed for I saw that I have frequently failed in all those observances through my pride and obstinacy, of which I repent and ask pardon of all my Sisters who may have remarked it.” (37)

This request for pardon was written on the small paper that Louise had prepared for the conference, and on which she had carefully noted her thoughts. (38)

During the first years, Louise de Marillac was troubled by her faults and shortcomings. She thought she gave bad example to her Sisters by her conduct and feared *“spoiling everything”* (39) in the work of God. But little by little, true humility calmed her soul and she could truthfully write to Monsieur Vincent:

“I have such reason for admitting and recognizing that I do nothing of value! And yet, my heart is not bitter because of this.” (40)

Louise allowed herself to be chiseled by the Spirit of God on this arduous road of humility. For this reason she was able to guide the Sisters along the same road, towards this resemblance to Christ, meek and humble of heart, towards this conformity to the Poor.

“Souls that are truly poor (humble) and desirous of serving God should place their trust in the coming of the Holy Spirit within them believing that, finding no resistance in them, He will give them the disposition necessary to accomplish the holy will of God ...” (41)

She helped the Sisters to peacefully accept their errors and faults and to use them as a means to progress. It is a means of maintaining oneself in a low esteem of oneself.

"God sometimes permits that we are subject to committing many faults in order to humble us. Otherwise arrogance ... would condemn us." (42)

Louise de Marillac also knew how indispensable humility is for fraternal charity and community life:

"A true humility will reconcile everything." (44)

In December, 1659, some months before her death, Louise reminded Francoise Carcireux that the spirit of the Company is a spirit of humility and simplicity and that all actions of the Daughter of Charity must be guided and animated by this spirit.

"I give all the advice which I believe I should give and which I foresee should be beneficial to those whom I think God wishes to use in order to maintain the Company in the spirit of the humility and simplicity of Jesus Christ." (45)

Because she sought neither glory nor honors, and because she allowed the Spirit to transform her, Louise de Marillac became the instrument God was able to use in order to accomplish an immense work in the Church for the relief of all those who suffer. On the evening of December 30, 1656, she was able to write:

"... who are we to think that we can undertake such a difficult and important task? ... we must ... rely more on God than on our own means." (46)

Sister Elisabeth Charpy.

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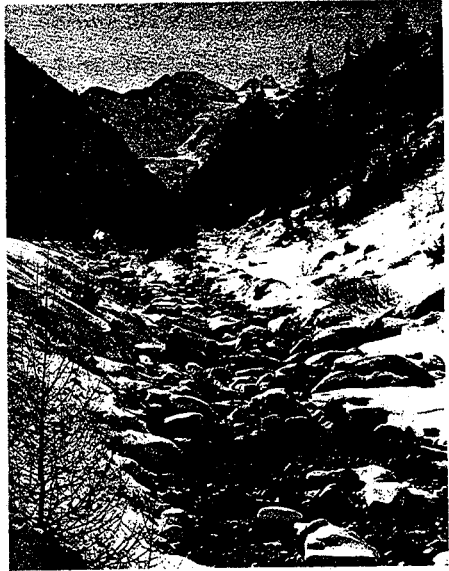
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History of the Company

*Come Wind or
High Water,*

Louise de Marillac



14. IN THE EVENING OF HER LIFE

The final hours of a year always invite us to cast a glance back over the year which has just finished. For many, they prefigure the moment in which it will be necessary to render an account to God for their life.

On December 31, 1658, Louise de Marillac, in sending her New Year's greetings to Monsieur Vincent, told him:

"These are the final hours of the year. I throw myself at your feet in order to beseech your charity to obtain mercy for me, simply awaiting that (hour) in which God will call me to render an account to Him." (1)

Louise's reflections lingered for a long time on the Company. Had she done all she could to help the Daughters of Charity remain faithful to the design of God for them? She would have liked to speak for a long time to Vincent about the difficulties she was then experiencing, but not knowing when she could meet with him, she proposed to put in writing the different points which would need to be determined for the affirmation of the Company.

"It seems to me that there is yet something to be done for the spiritual affirmation of the Company. If your charity will allow me to send you a reminder, I shall do so, and because of it I should blush with shame." (2)

A feeling of sickness, due to Louise's great fatigue, prevented her from finishing her letter that same evening. The next morning she took it up again:

"Last night, my infirmity prevented me from finishing this letter, and I begin the year most feebly and painfully in mind and body." (3)

Louise took several months to write her reminder. In October, 1659, she finally sent it to Vincent:

"My most honored Father, I am sending you the paper about which I spoke to your charity. It speaks of spiritual means for achieving the affirmation of the Daughters of Charity, which I beg you not to show to anyone, for fear that it will be ridiculed." (4)

This reminder seems not to have been preserved, but several texts written in the last years of her life permit an understanding of the worries of Louise de Marillac with regard to the Company.

For some time, conflicts had been manifested within the Company. Some Sisters opposed certain of its structures and orientations, and wanted them changed. To Louise, this appeared to be suicidal.

"Another thing which would contribute to the ruin of the Company would be, first of all, a desire to alter its customs, because this would, in a way, be to prefer one's own judgment to the guidance of God who knows well enough its future needs." (5)

Three points which touched on the very foundations of the Company were, it seems to me, called into question: poverty, humble employments and secularity.

For several years, Louise had noticed changes occurring in the behavior of some Sisters. The first Daughters of Charity were, for the most part, born into a poor milieu. Constant contact with the Ladies of Charity in the Confraternities had made them discover another sociological milieu and another life-style. In addition, for the service of the poor, the Sisters received from the Ladies a certain sum of money with

which they purchased medicines and food, etc. For these country girls, who were not used to handling money (peasants scarcely had any of it in the XVIIth century) there was a great temptation to enjoy the comforts it could procure:

"Since the majority of those who enter the Company are not in the habit of conversing with persons of rank, nor are they used to handling money or to possessing little things which are now freely obtainable, there is another danger which is greatly to be feared; namely, that as they become accustomed to working with the rich and the influential they may take advantage of the situation ... Moreover, the management of money gives them the opportunity to appropriate some of it for themselves or to use it as their impulses dictate by purchasing useless objects because they have seen others with them." (6)

The fact of having money led the Sisters to live in more comfort, without having to worry about working to earn their living. (7) The Founders put a great deal of emphasis on this manual labor which maintained the Sisters in their sociological condition of servant and prevented them from becoming Ladies living tranquilly off their pensions. In 1649, during a conference on work, Monsieur Vincent explained to the Sisters:

"When our Sisters are comfortably established (that is, they regularly receive money in the form of indemnities) and have not enough to do, they will neglect the work they have and will not go to the trouble of visiting the poor. Ah! then, one must bid good-bye to the Daughters of Charity ... its funeral must take place." (8)

Monsieur Vincent seems to be saying that a life that is too easy and comfortable would prevent the Sisters from being attentive to those who are suffering, from being creative in discovering new forms of poverty. In 1648, Louise de Marillac with a certain vigor, had reminded Elisabeth Turgis of the importance of manual labor:

"Remember well that this is a practice among ourselves; that we must work in order to earn our living. For a short time we have had Sisters around Milun. Oh! May they not spare themselves!" (9)

This reminder of one of the rules of the Company was continued in the following letter by an invitation to open their eyes:

"My God, how apprehensive I am about places in which we are too well off for our station! ... Haven't you any sick people in the small surrounding villages?" (10)

The manual labor the Sisters performed in order to earn their living was a type of craft work which was done by most of the women in the country or the city: sewing, spinning, washing clothes, raising livestock, making preserves, etc. This work was always done besides the service of the poor. Louise de Marillac was formal: if the Sisters forgot their condition as servants, if they lost the habit of working for their living, and if they regulated their life-style according to that of the Ladies of the Bourgeoisie or the Nobility, they would no longer be able to persevere in their vocation as Servants of the Poor:

"Another fault which ... could cause the complete destruction of the Company would be for the sisters to forget what they are, and on account of their long collaboration with the Ladies which gives them the opportunity to handle the money donated for the poor and to live comfortably without worrying about earning their livelihood, to become complacent. This could lead to vain satisfaction and the desire to accumulate goods. Forgetting the obligations of their vocation ..." (11)

The Daughter of Charity cannot, in all truth, call the Poor her Lords and Masters unless she agrees to live "poor for the love of the Poorest of the Poor, Jesus Christ Our Lord." (12) She cannot content herself with beautiful desires and words, but she must choose to live the reality of poverty in a concrete fashion.

"I beg you to always love holy poverty, not only in esteem and in words but in the practice of all its effects." (13)

Louise de Marillac also noticed that some Sisters tried to draw attention to their abilities and to make themselves noted either for the manner in which they taught catechism or taught the little girls or in preparing the many remedies in the apothecary workshops. Louise was concerned because these Sisters always wanted more education and left aside the lower, more humble tasks required by the service of the sick poor.

"... those sisters who have great capacities ... might, after having been well trained ... seek dispensations from several exercises and expect better treatment than that given to those in more humble duties. If contradicted in this matter, they would soon leave the Company." (14)

And Louise strongly insisted, as she continued in this same text:

"(those who) turn to avid reading. In the desire to appear capable, they would devote their attention to learning without taking into consideration other necessary work." (15)

These Sisters, who liked being placed on a pedestal, regarded with a certain scorn those who were less gifted or capable. Their conceitedness made them seek to form a dominant group in the midst of the Company. For Louise de Marillac, to foster brilliant, sophisticated actions in this way would be, without a doubt, to end with the total destruction of the Company.

"... to turn this into an essential function in the Company of the Daughters of Charity would be to enter on the pathway to its destruction. At the very least, it would divide it into two bodies. Those who would judge themselves capable in this employment would be the dominant group and, in their illusions of grandeur, they would fulfill the functions of Saint Mary Magdalene. They would compromise and they would lord it over those employed in visiting the sick. Little by little, poor girls would be prevented from entering the Company, and the others would soon become ladies. This already the pretense of several sisters." (16)

Louise foresaw that these "new Ladies" would experience the same difficulties as the Ladies of Charity of the Confraternities of the parishes in Paris, even though they were full of ardor for the relief of the poor.

"... they were often incommoded by carrying this soup-pot, so that they became disgusted with it ..." (17)

Who, then, would render to the sick and the poor "who did not have the faces of human beings," the difficult services which were a part of their state? Who would agree to perform these many small humble services which were not spectacular and often scorned in the eyes of the world? On January 10, 1660, Louise de Marillac wrote to Marguerite Chetif, whom she had chosen, at the request of Monsieur Vincent, to assume the responsibility for the Company after her death, and explained once again the choice that is made to serve the poor by simple means and lowly tasks. This choice requires a solid and profound Christian life:

"Do you not find any girls who wish to give themselves to the Company for the service of Our Lord in the person of the poor?"

You are well aware ... that what are needed are well-formed spirits which desire the perfection of true Christians, and who wish to die to themselves through mortification and genuine self-renunciation which had already taken effect at their holy Baptism so that the spirit of Jesus Christ might be established in them and give them the firmness of perseverance in this manner of life that is completely spiritual, even though it might be expressed in continuous exterior actions which seem lowly and base in the eyes of the world, but are great before God and His angels.” (18)

The Sisters who were questioning the Company also touched upon a point that, to Louise, seemed essential to maintaining the Service of the Poor. In January, 1659, she informed Monsieur Vincent of a discussion she had had with some of the Sisters:

“Some delicate minds in the Company are repelled by this word Confraternity, and just wish it to be Society or Community. I took the liberty of saying that this word is essential to us and might help a great deal towards firmness in order not to innovate and which signifies secularity to us.” (19)

These Sisters would have liked the Company of the Daughters of Charity to be renowned and magnificent like a Regular Community or a Monastic Order. They found that to live in a confraternity was to live outside of Religious Life. For them, the dress of the country girl did not have the glamour of a religious habit, and the toquois they wore seemed to attract scorn. They thought that the contemplative life, lived in a cloister, was much superior to the life of service.

Without any difficulty at all, these Sisters would have the Company of the Daughters of Charity become a “Religious Order,” with cloistered Nuns (who would be addressed as “Mother,” as was the custom at that time). The service of the poor would be assured by a group of Sisters outside of the cloister, or extern Sisters. Louise explained all this to Vincent in January, 1660:

“This would be to make a body that is very interior (that is, cloistered) and not active (without the service of the poor), and to have some living separately from those who move about freely and are poorly clothed, because, as some say, this head-piece (the linen coiffe worn by the Sisters), and this title of Sister (and not Mother, like the nuns) carry no authority, but attract only scorn.” (20)

This secular character of the Company surprised and astonished those who encountered the Daughters of Charity in the XVIIth century. Throughout their lives, Monsieur Vincent and Louise de Marillac explained and clarified it. In 1649, Louise wrote to the Abbe de Vaux:

“Three or four times I have seen the Vicar General in order to help him understand that we are nothing more than a secular family.” (21)

One year later, while recounting to Vincent the visit she had just made to the Procurator General, she explained what she had affirmed:

“He asked me if we claim to be regulars or seculars. I made him to understand that we claim to be the latter. He told me that this was without precedent.” (22)

For Louise de Marillac as for Vincent de Paul, this secular character of the Company was indispensable for the maintenance of the service of the poor, and for the mobility necessary to go to the most abandoned wherever they were to be found, whether in the city, the country, in the hospitals or the prisons, on the battlefields or in the regions devastated by war. It required each Sister to have a life of profound relationship with Jesus Christ, a great esteem for the Rules of the Company, and a constant concern to live according to her spirit of humility, simplicity and charity.

“Meekness, cordiality and support must be the exercise of the Daughters of Charity, just as the humility, simplicity and love of the holy humanity of Jesus Christ, Who is perfect charity, is their spirit. This, my dear Sisters, is what I thought of telling you as a summary of our rules.” (23)

A life that is “poor, simple and humble” (24) is fundamental for the Company of the Daughters of Charity. It is only in this way that they will be able to go to serve the most abandoned, and “destitute in all things” (25) and to lead a life that is more human.

At all times and in all places, the Daughters of Charity have endeavored to rediscover the inspiration of Louise de Marillac, so that they may respond with ever-renewed fidelity and availability to the needs of their time. (26)

A few hours before her death, when Louise was addressing some final words to the Sisters gathered around her bed, she spoke of the specificity of the Company:

"My dear Sisters, I continue to ask God for His blessings for you and pray that He will grant you the grace to persevere in your vocation in order to serve Him in the manner He asks of you.

"Take good care of the service of the poor. Above all, live together in great union and cordiality, loving one another in imitation of the union and life of Our Lord. Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only Mother." (27)

On Monday of Passion Week, between eleven o'clock and noon, Louise de Marillac, aged sixty-eight, rested in the Lord and gave Him back her soul. (28) It was March 15, 1660.

Sister Elisabeth Charpy.

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*Come Wind or
High Water,*

Louise de Marillac

15. Vincent de Paul — Louise de Marillac: A True Friendship?

For 35 years, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac worked together in the Mission God had confided to them. A reading of the numerous letters which have come down to us (more than 600*) helps us discover the astonishing and marvellous itinerary of their friendship.

Neither in Vincent de Paul nor in Louise de Marillac was sanctity innate. It rested on their humanity. Their life of relationship with God and the poor and their mutual relationship would gradually transform, perfect and enhance their entire being. The friendship which would unite this XVIIth century man and woman was born from a series of encounters in which each became aware of his or her identity, discovered their mutual complementarity and helped each other to assume it fully.

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* 400 letters of Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 75% of which were written before 1642, the date of the installation of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity in the Faubourg Saint Denis.

200 letters from Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul, 80% of which were written after 1645, the date of the appointment of Brother Ducourneau as secretary to Monsieur Vincent.

The first meeting between Vincent and Louise was a difficult one. Reticence, hesitation and incertitude marked the beginning of their relationship. Louise noted how much "repugnance" she had felt in accepting the new spiritual director that had been suggested to her. This word "repugnance" is strong, and indicates a lively sentiment of natural, uncontrollable repulsion.

For his part, Vincent hesitated a great deal in taking on the responsibility for the spiritual direction of this widow, the niece of the former Keeper of the Seals, and a worried, tormented woman.

Everything separated them: their social origin, their education, their life-style, and their temperament. Nevertheless, through obedience to the will of God manifested by a third party, Louise opened her soul and her conscience to this 44-year-old priest. Vincent responded to the expectations of his directee aged 34 years, and helped her to free herself from her anguish and to calm herself, directing her outlook towards God and the poor.

For more than two years (1625-1627), the tone of their letters was very polite and reverent and reveals very different expectations. Louise often wanted to see her director and worried when he absented himself. Vincent did not want his activities to be undermined by the excessive demands of his directee.

"Our Lord ... Himself will act as your director. Yes, He will surely do so, and in such a way that He will lead you to see that it is He Himself." (1)

Progressively, the tone changed, and beginning in 1628, it can be seen that encounters were wished for and desired. Vincent expressed this in several letters:

"If it were not so late as it is, I would come and see you to find out from you the details of the matter you wrote to me about. However, that will be for tomorrow ..." (2)

"If I come early this evening, I shall have the happiness of a word with you ..." (3)

The more abundant correspondence was joyfully received. Vincent expresses it in all simplicity:

"Mon Dieu, my dear daughter, how your letter and the thoughts (you) sent to me console me!" (4)

The more frequent encounters permitted Vincent and Louise to discover the richness of each other's personality. In Vincent, Louise

discovered a priest of sure judgment, concerned with leading souls to God and preoccupied with the poor. In Louise, Vincent recognized a great sensitivity and, it is true, a sometimes excessive search for the will of God. If Vincent walked in the footsteps of the peasant, guiding his plow in the field to be planted, Louise, quick and hasty, already wanted to reap the harvest.

In this period of mutual discovery, Vincent played the dominant role. It was he who directed and restored confidence. Humbly, Louise allowed herself to be guided.

In 1629, Vincent decided the moment had come to associate Louise more closely with his charitable activity. The sending on mission to Montmirail on May 6, 1629, marked a genuine turning point in their relationship.

An intense and efficacious collaboration was established between them. There they were, working together for the same mission which was growing ever larger. Their activity was enormous; both of them were in the prime of life.

The problems they encountered were studied at the times they met or through letters; they both gave their opinion and assumed their respective responsibilities. Their complementarity is very clearly seen. Vincent considered Louise to be his collaborator, and in his letters, he no longer used the term "my dear daughter," which indicated the relationship of a director with the person directed, but the term "Mademoiselle," thus recognizing the full participation of Louise in the common Mission.

In Mademoiselle Le Gras, Monsieur Vincent encountered a woman who was intuitive and always ready to forge ahead, a woman with a great sense of organization and a concern for precision, a Lady who was very much at ease among the Ladies of Charity. In Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac esteemed the priest concerned with proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, the man full of common sense, the judicious advisor, and the peasant who knew the need for maturation.

The missions, either the commencement or the visiting of the Confraternities of Charity, often called Vincent and Louise outside Paris to various regions. The correspondence intensified, and regular letters (sometimes one per week) kept the other up-to-date on the joys and difficulties of the Mission, the problems which were encountered, and the proposed solutions. These epistolary exchanges overflowed quite naturally from the missionary work, and the two correspondents informed each other about little news items from their daily life:

"The horse's falling on top of and under me was quite dangerous and the protection of Our Lord most extraordinary ... The fall left me with a slightly sprained ankle which, at present, gives me little pain." (5)

"We have no water at all. I am sending to Monsieur Deure for some." (6)

They very naturally shared their reflections on the different events. Louise expressed the difficulty she felt when things were lacking in clarity and precision. Vincent shared the same point of view:

"I am like you, Mademoiselle; there is nothing that bothers me more than uncertainty. But I do indeed greatly desire that God may be pleased to grant me the grace of making everything indifferent to me, and to you as well. Come now, we shall make every effort, please God, to acquire this holy virtue." (7)

The missionary collaboration brought about the same spiritual needs, and Vincent used the word "we." In another circumstance he wrote to Louise:

"... Remember our spiritual needs ..." (8)

In his letters to Mademoiselle Le Gras, Monsieur Vincent did not hesitate to make a "revision of life" on certain of his actions:

"It will be well for you to contact Madame Goussault and Mademoiselle Pollalion to ask their opinion about Germaine. Just two days ago I became aware of that way of acting, which seems cordial and deferential to me. I may perhaps have offended them by having you make the final decision about your work without telling them." (9)

The friendship which was beginning to dawn between Vincent and Louise caused them to worry about the other's state of health, especially during the plague epidemics which were ravaging Paris (1631-1633). Vincent made this recommendation to his collaborator:

"... Please take care of your health. It is no longer yours since you destine it for God." (10)

For her part, Louise prepared small remedies for Vincent, which he gratefully accepted.

The work in common and the sharing of life did not erase the differences that existed between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, and it is not surprising that a few misunderstandings arose. After the coup d'état which was meant to overthrow Richelieu, Michel de

Marillac, the Keeper of the Seals, and Louis, the Marshal, were arrested and imprisoned. Louise suffered with her family, and Vincent, doubtless desiring to provide a distraction from her pain, proposed that she go to visit the Confraternities of Charity in the region of Montmirail. Louise's reaction was unexpected. She thought that Vincent no longer wanted to see her, that he wanted to separate her from himself by sending her far away. Astonished by this very feminine reaction, Vincent wrote of his pain:

"... Banish from your mind the reason you advanced to me for taking this trip. You could not imagine how that has saddened my heart. Oh no! I am not made that way, thank God; but God knows what he has communicated to me with regard to you, and you will understand in heaven." (11)

For many months, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac would have a different opinion on the future of the girls who were serving in the Confraternities. Louise had the intuition that it was with these girls that she would fulfill the Light she had received on the feast of Pentecost, 1623:

"... One day ... I would be in a small community ... and ... in a place where I could help my neighbor ..." (12)

But at the time, Vincent did not see the need to have them group together at a distance from the Confraternities of Charity. While still cooperating effectively in the discernment and formation of new vocations, he left all responsibility for them to Louise.

"... you should not send your young women to the place you mention without finding out from the doctor if there is any danger." (There was a plague epidemic spreading.) (13)

However, Vincent gradually allowed himself to be swayed by Louise's insistence. What if God was speaking to him through his intermediary! After having prayed and reflected a long while during his retreat, Vincent invited Louise to come and see him in order to study more closely the possibility of bringing the girls together in a small Community if they so desired. November 29, 1633, Louise welcomed some of the girls of the Confraternities into her home to live in community and better serve God and the poor.

The rapid increase in the number of girls, their being sent to the different parishes of Paris, then to the Ile-de-France and even to Richelieu, led Vincent and Louise to specify the spirit which should animate the members of this new Confraternity. Louise prepared the

employment of the day and the rules, and Vincent corrected and then explained them to the girls gathered for the Conferences. From day to day, Louise helped the Sisters to initiate themselves to prayer, to live together in charity and to love and respect the poor whom they served.

Vincent and Louise helped each other face up to the many events which arose: the requests of the Ladies of Charity desiring Sisters for their parishes or villages, the sickness and death of some Sisters who were victims of their devotion, and the problems created by the behavior of some of the girls. Louise, somewhat wounded by the attitude of one girl who came from Nogent, received this encouragement from Vincent:

"Do not be astonished at seeing the rebellion of that poor creature. We shall see many more like her, if we live on; and should we not suffer as much from our own as Our Lord did from His? Let us be truly submissive to His good pleasure in the situation of the moment." (14)

The enthusiasm of Monsieur Vincent often helped Louise to recover her serenity after being concerned with so many daily problems.

He often exalted the beauty and the grandeur of the vocation of a Daughter of Charity. Upon the death of one of the Sisters, he wrote: "... she died in the exercise of divine love since she died in that of charity." (15)

The death of the Sisters upset Louise a great deal. What did God want to say by taking His workers in such a way? Vincent intervened once more:

"You seem depressed. You are afraid that God is angry and wants none of the service you are rendering Him because He is taking your Daughters away from you. Far from it, Mademoiselle, His acting that way is a sign that He cherishes it, for He is treating you as His dear spouse, the Church. At its beginning, He not only had the majority die by natural deaths, but also from torture and torments. Who would not have said on seeing that, that He was angry with those holy young plants? Therefore, do not believe that any longer, but rather the contrary." (16)

This attention to the other allowed an efficacious assistance to be given at the desired time, but genuine friendship goes beyond this support. It cannot be reduced to a permanent assistance, because there is a danger of conflicts arising.

As often happens in all human relationships of intense collaboration, a difficult period occurred between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in the years from 1640-1642. What had been accepted as differences became a source of distance, and what had been experienced as complementarity provoked opposing reactions. The relationship between this most committed man and woman became more reserved and cool.*

A fortuitous event, the collapse of a floor in the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, brought about a profound encounter which permitted them to surmount the difficulties. Vincent and Louise centered their outlook on God who had brought them together for a common work; God who had manifested so clearly to them that He was the Author of this Company. On that Pentecost day, 1642, God incited them to begin a new stage and to continue their mission in a deep mutual esteem and confidence.

Vincent and Louise journeyed together for 17 years (1625-1642), learning to know each other over and over again, to esteem each other and respect each other. The true friendship which united them for the final 18 years of their lives would be lived in freedom and would be a source of strength for them, leading them to a real communion.

(to be continued)

Sister Elisabeth Charpy

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*Come Wind
or High Water,*

Louise de Marillac



**15. VINCENT DE PAUL — LOUISE DE MARILLAC:
A TRUE FRIENDSHIP? (continued)**

One same mission brought Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac together. The first years of getting to know one another, those of mutual discovery and then of intense collaboration, followed by a period that was rather more difficult, permitted them to become acquainted, to esteem one another, and to progress together. The magnificent friendship they would experience for 18 more years would radiate humanity and sanctity.

The spontaneity and authenticity of their encounters show the absolute freedom which existed between them. Faced with the many problems to be resolved and decisions to be made, their friendship transcended daily mutual assistance and arrived at a profound sharing. The strength which flowed from their friendship was even more unshakable because it was rooted in their Faith in God and in Jesus Christ who died and rose again for the Salvation of mankind.

Their friendship was one of "Freedom."

Freedom, that independence of mind which is dominated neither by timidity nor fear nor prejudice, was at the basis of the relationship between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. It permitted them to

communicate their thoughts and give their opinions in all simplicity and truth, certain of the other's receptivity. This freedom was constructed through the acceptance of their own responsibilities and the concern for mutual trust.

Louise, who was often afraid of bothering Vincent, wrote to him in 1644:

"The confidence which our Good God has given my heart towards your Charity overcomes the fear which I should rightly have for being so importunate towards you."(17)

In 1655, she noted how free she felt to express her thoughts, this time in much different terms:

"I most humbly ask your Charity's forgiveness for the liberty I am taking to speak to you so freely. I realized this in rereading my letter."(18)

This freedom of expression manifested itself from day to day in the way in which they discussed the life of the Daughters of Charity. The decisions they made would be enlightened by the light of the Gospel and by their reflection on the events.

"We must decide what shall be done with Marie-Denyse."(19)

Louise proposed changes which seemed expedient at Chars where the Jansenist pastor was somewhat uncompromising:

"Since yesterday, it has entered my mind to suggest to your Charity, if you think proper, in order not to shock the Pastor of Chars too much, that we should send Sister Jeanne-Christine in place of Sister Turgis and to reserve Sister Jacqueline for Chantilly."(20)

Neither did Vincent do anything without first consulting Louise. He submitted to her the letter he had just written to the Abbe de Vaux:

"I wrote to the Abbe de Vaux that you gave your promise to provide girls in eight places before being able to send him some. See, Mademoiselle, if this contradicts what you have told him."(21)

In 1650, the Marquise de Maignelay had just asked for two Sisters to be sent to the parish of Saint-Roch. The appeal was urgent, and the Marquise wanted the Sisters for the following day. Louise showed much reticence and gave her reasons for it to Vincent, who did not dare to say no to the sister of the former General of the Galleys, Philippe

Emmanuel de Gondi:

"There are two difficulties opposing this idea, one, that it is necessary that we suggest to you those whom we must send and that we make them known to you, because they need to have a retreat beforehand; and the other difficulty is that this girl (a girl who had left the Company) who has remained and is now married, is living in the house in which our Sisters must live; and this is a dangerous proximity. I beseech you most humbly to take the trouble to tell me what I should do in this encounter in order not to displease Madame the Marquise and so that we shall not do the wrong thing." (22)

The conquest of personal freedom occurred through the awareness of one's own reactions, tendencies and motivations for choices. To judge oneself fairly is always difficult. Through the confrontation of ideas, the friendship which never seeks to dominate or conquer permits points of view and a deeper knowledge of oneself. Louise de Marillac desired this relationship which allowed for differences and helped growth to occur:

"I beseech you most humbly, Monsieur, that the weaknesses of my mind which I have exposed to you do not require anything of your Charity concerning the condescension which you might think I desire to have you defer to my thoughts, for that is not my desire at all, far from it, because nothing pleases me more than to be justly impeded, God having granted me the grace of almost always knowing and esteeming the opinion of others much more than my own, and especially when it is your Charity, I have the assurance of seeing this truth clearly, even though it may pertain to matters hidden from me for a time." (23)

Vincent and Louise wanted neither to influence one another nor to prefer their own opinion, much less see it as valuable. Together, they sought to make the task they were accomplishing one step closer to humanity for those whom they served, as well as to proclaim Jesus Christ to them. This very unselfish characteristic of their friendship allowed them to express their opinion very truthfully.

During his long sojourn in the west of France in 1649, Vincent visited the various houses of the Daughters of Charity. Before his arrival in Nantes, Louise spoke to him of Marie Thilouze, a Sister who had always presented a problem.

"If your Charity would think it necessary for Sister Marie of Tours to be changed, it is preferable that she be sent back to Tours (to her family) rather than back to Paris. We have tried her in several places, and when I sent her to Nantes, I told her it would be the last try. Do whatever your Charity thinks best to arrange matters according to what Our Lord inspires you to do." (24)

Vincent, who was always so good, was repugnant to send her home so rapidly and suggested that she be sent to Richelieu for one last try:

"It is necessary to send Marie to Richelieu, and while she is there, we shall think of how we are going to send her home." (25)

A Sister from Saint-Germain who was having difficulty regaining her strength after an illness asked to be sent to a faraway place to rest. Louise recognized the need for a change of air for this Sister but was opposed to the long journey. She expressed her point of view to Monsieur Vincent, whom the Sister was going to meet:

"I believe that the change of air will do her a great deal of good and that this house (the Motherhouse, which in the XVIIth century was outside the Paris city limits) will be better for her than another."

Allow me to say, my most honored Father, that ... I foresee much difficulty if your Charity allows this journey, the same thing having been refused to others for several reasons." (26)

With what mutual confidence and freedom Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac were also able to exchange their points of view on the future of Michel (*).

Their friendship was "Sharing."

The more they encountered one another, the more Vincent and Louise discovered their complementarity. They not only shared their points of view concerning events, but also the depths of their being, their gifts, their qualities and their love for Jesus Christ. The mutual enrichment which resulted presupposed the long process of all germination.

(*) See Chapter 9, "Echoes of the Company," December, 1987, p. 433.

Gradually, Vincent communicated to Louise the goodness of his outlook in all things and his deep peace. He was often the witness of Louise's quick and lively temperament and her somewhat severe judgments. Slowly and patiently, he encouraged Louise to live calmly, to change her outlook and to conform herself to Jesus who is meek and humble of heart.

The departure of the girls who abandoned their vocation was felt very painfully by the Superioress of the Company. At the same time, she severely judged these girls and recognized her guilt at not having known how to help them. Vincent calmed her and reassured her:

"You are a bit too sensitive about your girls' leaving. In the name of God, Mademoiselle, endeavor to acquire the grace of consent in such matters. It is a mercy which Our Lord grants the Company by purging it in this way, and it will be one of the first things Our Lord will show you in Heaven." (27)

Some girls had difficulty in acquiring the competence that was necessary in order to bleed and to teach catechism. Others refused to make the necessary efforts for this formation which they found difficult and tedious. Louise questioned herself whether they should remain in the Company. Vincent made an appeal for discernment and patience:

"Concerning the desire you have to relieve yourself of these useless girls, I do not understand very well what uselessness you are complaining about, if it is those who have no values or do not know how to act after having been tested for some time and who, in effect, have no quality which gives hope for their betterment, you would do well to send them home. But if it is those who are not yet trained well enough in the works of the Charity, and who, for this reason cannot attend to them or are prevented from doing so because of some infirmity (illness) from which they may be cured, then, Mademoiselle, I believe we should be as patient as possible with regard to them." (28)

Little by little, Louise clearly became aware of her impatience, anxiety and tendency to dramatize. She thanked Vincent for coming to her aid:

"I very humbly thank your Charity who has done me a great deal of good. It seems to me that when I allow myself to be carried away in this way by my apprehensions which place me in the same state as true afflictions do, that I have need of being treated a bit harshly." (29)

The counsels of Monsieur Vincent encouraged her in her search for peace:

"Be at peace, and do what you must do according to God." (30)

The benevolence, indulgence and forbearance which characterized Vincent de Paul gradually transformed the comportment of Louise de Marillac. In 1655, she wrote about a difficulty at Saint-Denis Hospital:

"If it pleases your Charity, tell me if I have something (more) to do in this matter, except to admire Providence, endeavor to recognize its goodness and effects in it, and believe that it is a good thing to suffer and to wait with patience for the hour of God in the most difficult affairs which my too-precipitous mood so often repels." (31)

In 1658, Louise in her turn invited the impetuous Anne Hardemont to live in peace with the difficulties she was experiencing at Ussel:

"Do not worry if for a very long time you do not see things happening as you would like. Do whatever small things you possibly can in great peace and tranquillity in order to make room for the guidance of God for you." (32)

At the same time, Louise de Marillac shared with Vincent de Paul his sense of organization and his perspective on the future of the Company. She often saw that the many affairs Vincent had to deal with made him forget the meetings he had planned with the Daughters of Charity. She simply made herself his memory by sending him a little note of reminder before the Conference:

"I beg your Charity most humbly to remember the need we have of the Conference which you had the kindness of promising us tomorrow, Thursday." (33)

"I beg your Charity most humbly to remember that it is a week from today that you promised us a Conference." (34)

Very much aware of the richness of the teachings of Vincent, Louise wished to write the minutes of the conferences in order to read them afterwards and to send them to the Sisters who were far away, as well as hand them down to the Sisters of the future. What Monsieur Vincent refused to the Priests of the Mission, he ended up by granting to the delicate insistence of Louise. In January, 1643, no sooner had he finished than she asked the speaker for his notes:

"I very humbly beg you to send us the little reminder of the points you had in it. It seems to me that it will help me to remember a good portion of what our good God had to say to us through your mouth." (35)

It was thus that the magnificent conference on the virtues of country girls has come down to us. On August 19, 1646, Vincent spoke in the absence of Louise who had accompanied the Sisters going to Nantes. The account was made by Elisabeth Hellot who submitted it to Monsieur Vincent. Very moved, he sent it to Louise de Marillac:

"Here is the result of the conference for our dear Sisters, written by dear Sister Hellot. I have just read part of it, and I can assure you that it brought me to tears two or three times. If you are not returning soon, please send it back to us after you have read it." (36)

Louise had within herself a solid conviction that she desired very much to share with Monsieur Vincent. A most intuitive woman, she perceived that the Company of the Daughters of Charity could never "be solidly established" if, in each diocese, it was dependent upon the Bishops. She thought that only the absolute dependence upon the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission could assure a solid fidelity to the Charism (*). The service of the Poor was the end of the Company, and in order to maintain this service that was desired by God, the Daughters must remain humble servants. The Priests of the Mission, who had been formed in the same spirit by the same founder, could assist them in this fidelity. In order to maintain this service, the Daughters of Charity must continue to go to meet the poor in their homes, as God had wished them to do at the time of their foundation. Being dependent upon the Superior of the Congregation of the Mission would prevent a Bishop from one day transforming the Company into a cloistered order of nuns.

With all her feminine delicacy, Louise intervened with Vincent:

"The manner in which Divine Providence has wished that I speak to you on every occasion ordains that at this time, when it is a matter of the thought of executing the most holy will of God, I should speak to you most simply." (37)

Many years would pass before Monsieur Vincent would allow himself to be convinced and agree to have the act of the approbation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity changed, recognizing him and his successors as Superiors (see chapter 14). At that time Louise de Marillac expressed her gratitude at the fact that in this way the Daughters of Charity could continue the work that was wished by God.

"In His goodness, God has ordained the continuation of the execution of His designs for the Company, for many years under your holy guidance." (38)

The sharing between Vincent and Louise had truly become a communion in which each one gave and received, in which each one placed at the service of the other all that he or she had and was. Their genuine friendship, based on the solid conviction of one same mission, led them to a profound acceptance of their differences and obtained for them an immense mutual enrichment (39).

Their friendship was "Strength."

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac knew that they could count on each other in all circumstances. In 1657, Louise expressed this clearly:

"The needs of the Company are urging us somewhat to meet and speak with you. It seems to me that my mind is so weak that it is completely enveloped. After God, all its strength and rest are to be, through His love, my most honored Father, your most humble and obedient servant." (40)

The friendship between Vincent and Louise was a strength, because it was not self-seeking, but a seeking together to conform to Jesus Christ. So many times they re-read the small daily events in the light of the Gospel. The pastor of the parish of Saint-Roch had just dismissed the two Sisters. Vincent meditated on this dismissal in writing to Louise:

"If this is a means for honoring the suffering of Our Lord when He and His Apostles were expelled from the places they were in, oh! how good it is to have like occasions to unite ourselves to the good pleasure of God." (41)

The death of faithful companions along the way were moments when friendship dared to express all its tenderness, and when fidelity became a force for overcoming the pain of the disappearance of a dear

(*) See "Echoes of the Company," Chapter 9, January, 1988, p. 19.

person. In 1653, Monsieur Vincent was overcome at the death in Poland of his dear Monsieur Lambert. Louise de Marillac wrote to him to express all her feelings and affection:

"Am I not bold, my most honored Father, to dare to mingle my tears with your usual submission to the guidance of divine Providence, my weaknesses with the strength that God has given you to bear the best part of his sufferings which Our Lord so often grants you (.....) Your Charity has taught me to love the most just and merciful will of God." (42)

In 1658, it was Vincent's turn to give his affectionate support to Louise at the death of her dear Sister Barbe Angiboust:

"Let us honor nevertheless the acceptance of the Blessed Virgin of the good pleasure of God at the death of her Son." (43)

To honor the life of Jesus Christ on earth and to conform one's life with His were counsels very often given by Vincent and Louise to the Daughters of Charity, and which they themselves lived to the fullest. It was in this that the true strength of their friendship was found.

This faithful support and certain reliance were what Louise, most particularly, found in Vincent when she was tormented by the behavior of her son Michel. In these most painful moments, Louise did not hesitate to address herself to Vincent:

"It is impossible for me to seek relief elsewhere ... My suffering is so great." (44)

Vincent endeavored to bring peace to this mother who was wounded and in anguish:

"Allow his divine Majesty to act: He will know very well how to show the mother who cares for so many children the satisfaction He has with her, by means of the care He takes of His own, and that she could neither precede Him nor surpass Him in goodness." (45)

Age and infirmity were altering more and more the health of Vincent and Louise. Many mutual attentions reveal the kindness of their friendship.

"I most humbly beseech your charity," wrote Louise, *"to permit me to ask you the truth concerning news of your health, and for the love of God, do not be in haste to go out."* (46)

"Vincent wrote back: "I thank Mademoiselle Le Gras most humbly for the concern she has for my health, and I beg Our Lord to return health to her." (47)

Louise, who had discovered the properties of tea, extolled its benefits (48). With much attention, she closely followed the development of the ulcers on Vincent's legs; his suffering had become her own. In all truth, she could say: "I feel the pain in your leg." Louise suggested some dressing techniques and various medicines.

"This will help bring relief to those poor legs." (49)

Fatigued and ill, Vincent accepted with good-naturedness the indicated treatments and wrote back to his nurse:

"Your charity will decide whatever she thinks proper as to what I shall take tomorrow and at what time. With God's help I shall do so. I was constipated last night and this morning. I have just taken the tea." (50)

How beautiful it is to read the "thank you" they wrote to each other at the end of their lives. In March, 1659, at the age of 79, Vincent wrote:

"Never has charity seemed more valuable and kind than it does now. God be praised that it is manifested so well by that of my said lady, whom I thank with all the gratitude of my heart." (51)

In January, 1660, two months before her death, Louise in her turn thanked Vincent for the firmness with which he had supported the will of God against all opposition (52).

With this same simplicity, Vincent and Louise would help each other to prepare themselves to "leave this world" and be born again in a new world. The prayers they offered for each other at the end of the year 1659 are the reflection of their mutual gratitude and their profound desire to remain faithful to God:

"I beseech God," Louise wrote to Vincent, *"to preserve the little bit of health (he gives you) until the full accomplishment of his designs on your soul for His glory."* (53)

Monsieur Vincent dictated a little note for Mademoiselle Le Gras to his secretary, Brother Ducourneau:

"For Mademoiselle Le Gras I desire the fullness of the Spirit for her New Year's gift; and for her Company, the preservation of such a good Mother, so that she may communicate to it more and more the gifts of this Spirit." (54)

In this search for adherence to God, they gradually accepted the fact that they would never see each other again. In October, 1658, Louise expressed something that was somewhat painful for her:

"I am suffering a bit because of being deprived of speaking to you for such a long time. God wants it since He also permits it." (55)

One year later, on December 24, 1659, she very calmly wrote:

"(I have) nothing agreeable to offer to Our Lord ... except the privation of the only consolation His goodness has given me for the last 35 years, and which I accept for His love, in the manner in which His Providence ordains." (56)

The friendship of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac was now beyond all meetings. Their friendship had become so simple and transparent that it had no more need of human support. To the dying Louise, Vincent sent this short message:

"You are the first to set out; if God forgives me my sins, I hope soon to rejoin you in heaven." (57)

The friendship experienced by Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac united them, beyond their differences, in the certainty that they were fulfilling the will of God.

It found its source and model in Jesus Christ who revealed the Love of God for mankind through His Incarnation.

This friendship was based on authenticity, that is, the profound acceptance of the other's identity and the recognition and respect of their complementarity.

It became the image of the Trinity, that great mystery of God in which the mutual gift is experienced in unity and diversity.

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac enriched the Church by their foundations for the service and evangelization of the poor, but

above all, they illumined the world by their witness of a life that was simple, humble and full of love.

THE END (*)

Sister Elisabeth Charpy.

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(*) All of the articles of "Come Wind or High Water" which have appeared since January, 1987, are collected in a small book which can be obtained at the Procure of the Motherhouse, 140, rue du Bac, 75340 Paris, under the title: *Come Wind or High Water, Louise de Marillac*. Price: 50 Francs.

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