

The Light of Pentecost never left Louise. Monsieur Vincent was well aware of this but nevertheless encouraged her to wait patiently: *"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."*¹⁸

Monsieur Vincent was in retreat. A letter he wrote to Mademoiselle contained the response she had been waiting for so long: *"I think your good angel did what you told me in the letter you wrote me. Four or five days ago, he 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."*¹⁹

(To be continued)

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The spirituality of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise

SOME ASPECTS OF SPIRITUALITY IN GENERAL

The word "spirituality" was already in existence in the 17th century, but neither Saint Vincent nor Saint Louise used this word. It was not until the second half of the last century that the word came into common usage. Still, its meaning was rather vague despite the fact that writers agreed that spirituality expresses a relationship between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit. Spirituality can be considered under two essential aspects. The first, called "schools of spirituality" (systematic or consistent intellectual construction), includes the *principal teachings of the founders of religious institutions* with their principles, causes and reasons for their existence (for example, the Benedictine, Ignatian or Vincentian school). The second aspect is called "spiritual life" or *the action of the Spirit in the life of persons* and more specifically, *the person's response to the action of the Holy Spirit to put on the Spirit of Jesus Christ, in solidarity with poor persons*. There are four elements necessary for the spiritual life: the action of the Holy Spirit, a response by the person, the following of Jesus Christ, and solidarity with poor persons. Christians are all called to follow Jesus Christ, or as our Founders said, to become clothed in his Spirit, to continue his mission of evangelization and service to poor persons.

TWO MAJOR CURRENTS OF SPIRITUALITY

Jesus Christ is both human and divine, and the Christian is both sin and grace, wretchedness and image of God. Spirituality will differ according to the way people see themselves, as pessimists or optimists, and according to their ideas of Christ, as God before whom they bow

¹⁸ Coste I. L., 138, p. 200
¹⁹ Coste I. L., 151, p. 216

down or as a human with whom they converse. This is why two major currents of spirituality have appeared throughout history. In the first, humanity is considered as worthless, a product of sin, in comparison with the grandeur of Christ-God. In the second, humans are regarded as children of God and find the love and mercy of the Father through Jesus Christ. These two currents branch out and take on numerous different forms.

FIRST CURRENT OF SPIRITUALITY: THE FRENCH SCHOOL

In 17th century Paris, the first current of spirituality is found, with a few distinctive features, in what is called the *French School* (Berulle, Benedict of Canfield, Andre Duval, director general of the Carmelites in France, and Michel de Marillac). This group is heir to the Gospel of Saint John, Saint Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and the Rheno-Flemish mystics.

In this school of spirituality, God is considered more in his Divine Essence than in the three Persons of the Trinity. The emphasis for this school is for the person to carry out God's will in order to be united to the Essence of the Divinity more than to imitate Christ. In mystical contemplation, direct union with God is sought without any intermediary, setting aside anything that has to do with human nature, including the human nature of Jesus. Those who wish to achieve this union must be totally stripped of themselves, demean themselves, empty themselves completely to the point of complete interior poverty. In this way, by abandoning themselves to God, they allow themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit.

We know very little about the interior life of Saint Vincent, for he rarely spoke about it.¹ When we study the language he used, it seems that in his early years in Paris, he followed this first current of spirituality, and would continue to maintain this throughout his life, although he added some more human elements to it. He talked about certain concepts such as mortification, abnegation, abandon, and the corrupt state of human nature. These ideas were common at this time, and stemmed from the Augustinian influence on this school.

¹ ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God*, Paris, Ed. Florentin Lambert, 1664, Book I, ch. XVIII. However, he uses these ideas and language to express this spirituality, when he speaks of priesthood, vocation and the Will of God.

Some of Louise's writings (meditations, retreat reflections) demonstrate more clearly the spirituality that she had discovered at the school of the Capuchins and the Oratorians. Vincent, on the other hand, had found his spirituality through Berulle.

A spirituality that responded to Louise's needs

This spirituality was a good response to the questions that Louise de Marillac asked in her youth. As a member of the nobility who had been disinherited and estranged from the Marillac family because of the circumstances of her birth, and taken out of the Poissy boarding school on the death of her father, Louise realized that she was alone in the world. In those days, the *family* to which one belonged guaranteed one's personhood, whereas Louise had been separated from her family. In addition, as a woman, she was subject to the authority of a man: father, husband, brother or guardian, and Louise had no man to defend her. At the age of about 15 or 16, she was introduced to prayer and meditation by a Capuchin priest.

When she was older, she wrote, as she recalled her early years and wondered why she had suffered so much: "*it was His holy will that I go to Him by way of the Cross. His goodness chose to mark me with it from my birth and He has hardly ever left me, at any age, without some occasion of suffering.*" (A 29) Her spirituality led her to seek a response from God. Trusting in God, she meditated on the series of events that made up her life and understood that this was God's plan and that she should collaborate with Him. This idea brought comfort and meaning to her life: *to collaborate with God so that his eternal plan would be accomplished.*

As a married woman, Louise had as her director the Bishop of Belley, Jean-Pierre Camus. In her meditation, she sensed that the Holy Spirit was leading her into a dark night of the soul (1622-1623), a way into mystical contemplation. She had a profound experience of the Holy Spirit's presence within her. We know this from her writings: "... *my soul was made to understand that my God wanted to come to me. However, He did not wish to come into some temporary dwelling but to a place that was rightly His and which belonged entirely to Him.*" (A 17)

This led her to the point of mystical union (about which Saint

Teresa of Avila speaks in the sixth mansion). "I left on the Feast of Saint Agatha, February 5th, to go to Saint-Cloud. At the moment of Holy Communion, it seemed to me that Our Lord inspired me to receive Him as the Spouse of my soul and that this Communion was a form of espousal. I felt myself more closely united to Him by this consideration which was extraordinary for me. I also felt moved to leave~ everything to follow my Spouse; to look upon Him as such in the future; and to bear with the difficulties I might encounter as part of the community of His goods." Louise has arrived at the level of transforming union, and continues: "Throughout my travels, I seemed to be acting without any contribution on my part; and I was greatly consoled by the thought that God wished that, despite my unworthiness, I should help my neighbor to know Him." (A 50)

We know that Vincent, too, experienced a dark night of the soul. In visions (extraordinary phenomena that may accompany contemplative prayer) he also entered into contemplation. It is not surprising, then, that he invited the Daughters of Charity to practice contemplation.

Louise and Vincent became mystics, something that Karl Rahner hoped all people would be, and he said that the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all. Spirituality in the future will not be based on one unanimous conviction that is clear and public. It will only grow through spiritual experiences and personal decisions.²

The Founders knew, however, that this sort of spirituality was accessible to only a limited number of Daughters of Charity (LG 39-41), as most of them were simple peasant women. They lacked cultural upbringing, and their interior life was greatly influenced by popular religiosity. The Founders also thought that in order to reach holiness in the service of poor persons, another form of spirituality was more appropriate, and this is what they advised for the Sisters generally.

SECOND CURRENT OF SPIRITUALITY: A MORE HUMAN DEVOTION

This second manner of living spirituality is based on the synoptic Gospels. It has many points in common with modern day devotion and humanistic piety. In the past, ordinary people

found the Rheno-Flemish spirituality confusing, as something abstract that belonged more to monks (that is, a few people) than to people living and working in the world. This latter group needed a form of spirituality that was more human and more simplified.

The basic characteristics of this spirituality (with many variations) are found in the "Imitation of Christ" of Thomas Kempis, in the Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, and associated with Brother Luis of Grenada and Saint Francis de Sales.

This is the spirituality that Vincent and Louise passed on to the Daughters of Charity. The most important elements of this spirituality are: being centered on Jesus Christ, and imitating him in all the aspects of his life, not just in his self-emptying. This spirituality pays less attention to the intellectual aspect in order to focus on affectivity. It gives an important place to prayer with a method which insisted on practical resolutions, and careful choice of topics for each meditation and the different stages and parts of prayer.

Guided by Berulle, **Vincent** sought holiness through the first form of spirituality, termed "abstract", and later progressively adopted the second spiritual current as he drew nearer to the poor. Little by little, as his entire life became focused on poor persons, he found that this first spirituality with its intellectual approach was no longer useful for him, and so he gradually abandoned it. We can think of him as eclectic, as he had recourse at times to Benedict of Canfield, Berulle, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Brother Luis of Grenada or Saint Francis de Sales. This depended on what he found helpful in terms of caring for poor persons and evangelizing them.

Louise's spiritual pathway was different. From the time of her birth, she had always known suffering, and needed to struggle on her own to find a place in society's pyramid of social strata. After all she had experienced, she felt attracted to the sense of annihilation offered by the first "abstract" spirituality current. This included a pessimistic concept of the person, which was significant in

2 K. Rahner *Eccritis Theologiques (Theological Investigations)* VII DDB, 1967

Augustinian thought in the 17th century,³ especially in the first current of spirituality. Louise's way of thinking was also very metaphysical. In 1629, Louise's spirituality began to change. Vincent gently accompanied her towards a life with a more human God, a spirituality less speculative and more focused on Christ and everyday situations. This would continue until about 1653, at which point she returned to her first form of spirituality but one now colored with Vincentian overtones. This is what I would call "Louisian" spirituality, with a strong presence of the Holy Spirit. It is a Trinitarian spirituality in which the Spirit appears in relationship with the Son and the Father within the Trinity. We see it also in the Spirit's action in human hearts, connecting them with the humanity of Christ and helping them to reach the state of pure love through total self-emptying.⁴

THE FOUNDERS' SPIRITUALITY

The spirituality Louise developed in her youth was a foundation for the service of poor persons. What Bremond said of Saint Vincent can also apply to Saint Louise: "*It was not the love of others that led him [her] to holiness. Rather, it was her holiness that enabled her to be effectively charitable. It was not the poor who brought her to God, but rather God who gave her to the poor.*"⁵

Spiritual life nourished by service

Vincent easily guided Louise towards the discovery and service of Our Lord in poor persons: "*Go then, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord.*" Beginning in 1629, Louise became "*the servant of poor persons*".

³ Certain anthropological and theological arguments of Saint Augustine (profound corruption of humanity as a result of original sin; the necessity of grace for salvation) were adopted in a very strict way by Jansen. This influence marked the 17th and 18th centuries. For Jansenism, grace could not be obtained by virtuous conduct, not even by prayer and the sacraments. Even the just, in order to follow the commandments, needed grace for salvation, bestowed solely by the mercy of God.

⁴ Reread these marvellous writings of Saint Louise: A 25, 26 and 27. Also Coste XII, p. 210-211.

⁵ H. BREMOND, *Histoire du sentiment religieux en France. T. III. La conquête mystique*, (History of religious sentiment in France, vol. 3. The mystical conquest) Paris, Boud B. and Gay, 1923, p. 246.

After his captivity and dark night of the soul, Vincent was convinced that he must bring relief to the poor and that these were waiting for his help in their difficulties. He had no problem in convincing Louise to do the same. In her heart, her "Light" experience that God had communicated to her several years earlier (1623) was very clear: she, herself, had to take care of poor persons and seek ways to meet their needs. At the end of her life, she meditated on the fact that Jesus: "*had taught us charity to make up for our powerlessness to render any service to His person.*" (A 26, 3rd day)

Vincent encouraged Louise in her solidarity with all humanity. In prayer, the two saints discovered that, through the Incarnation, the Son of God took on our human nature. Each poor person is therefore a suffering member of this humanity, and Jesus wants to establish the Kingdom of Heaven for everyone, including the poor. Vincent and Louise were called to help Him.

The mystery of the Incarnation in the spirituality of the Founders

The Incarnation became the focal point of the spirituality of both the Founders, but in different ways.

Vincent never explained how this event influenced all his spirituality, but we know that he recommended teaching this doctrine to poor people for their salvation. This was the thinking at that time.⁶ Jesus was at the center of Vincent's life, to such an extent that he identified holiness with the expression: "*to clothe oneself with the Spirit of Jesus.*" With regard to the Incarnation, Berulle emphasized the divine nature of Jesus more than his human nature. This was what he taught and what he shared with the other schools of spirituality as they meditated on Christ. Like them, Vincent taught and lived a Christocentric spirituality.

Louise described how the Incarnation of the Son of God had changed her spiritual life, and how this mystery had become the focal point of her personal life and her commitment as a Daughter of Charity. This is confirmed in several ways: she decided to make her vows in the Company on the feast of the Incarnation itself, which she called *our dear feast*, she meditated on the mystery of it and wrote

⁶ Coste I, p. 119; XI, p. 173, 343; XII, p. 73.

pages of beautiful reflections on this topic, after the model of the Scottish doctrine (of Duns Scot) that she adopted. This confirms that the salvation of the human race is achieved through the Incarnation, and that holiness comes from uniting oneself to the humanity of Jesus.

In order to have an authentic love for God, we must love not only God, but also the world, the object of God's love. Louise added that God did not create the world out of nothing, but rather *out of Himself*, that God is love. Besides being the product of God's love, the human race also participates in this divine love. As human beings we love to be happy, but we cannot find true happiness in created things which are imperfect and become obsolete. God alone is the source of happiness. This is why Louise strives to be united with Christ in his human nature.

She frequently meditated deeply on this insight: "*I saw that His power to possess me was, by the excellence of the divine plan in the creation of the human race, to be found in His close, eternal union with His creatures. He brought this about through the unique means that He possessed which was the Incarnation of His Word. As perfect man, the Son willed that human nature should participate in the Divinity through His merit and through the close union of His nature with the Father.*" (A 26 p. 817)

"*It seemed to me that it is in this way that the holy humanity of Our Lord is continually present to us.... His presence is like air without which the soul is lifeless. It is thus that I see the Redemption of men in the Incarnation... the personal union of a God to man. All nature is thereby honored since it causes God to see His image in all mankind*" (A 14, p. 784-785)

Both saints spoke of following and imitating Jesus Christ and advised *emptying oneself of self and becoming clothed with the Spirit of Jesus Christ*. To follow and imitate Jesus Christ means to walk with Him and take on his ways. To be clothed with his Spirit means to become Christ himself. This implies incorporating the humanity of Christ, *becoming rooted in Him as the source and model of all charity*, as Saint Paul said to the Colossians: "*As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught*" (Col. 2:6-7). This explains how Louise was able to write one day: "*Let us live, therefore, as if we were dead in Jesus Christ. Henceforth, let*

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there be no further resistance to Jesus, no action except for Jesus, no thoughts but in Jesus! May my life be solely for Jesus and my neighbor so that, by means of this unifying love, I may love all that Jesus loves, and through the power of this love which has as its center the eternal love of God for His creatures, I may obtain from His goodness the graces which His mercy wills to bestow upon me." (A 23, p. 786)

As she began her visits to the Charities, Louise clothed herself with Jesus Christ in such a way that on one of her journeys, she realized that she was not the one who was doing the work, but that Jesus Christ had taken possession of her life. (A 50)

The spirituality of service lived out in community

At Chatillon-les-Dombes, Vincent discovered that helping poor people is only effective if it is done as a team. This is the reason why he founded the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity, to which Louise de Marillac consecrated her entire life. This is how the traits of his spirituality took shape: "*clothe oneself with the Spirit of Jesus Christ to evangelize and serve poor people in community*". In order to achieve this more easily, its members are supported by the Eucharist, the sacrament of reconciliation, and especially by prayer. As recommended by the spiritual leaders of the 17th century and in the words of Vincent: "*Give me a man of prayer, and he'll be able to do anything.*" (Coste XI, p. 76)

For Vincent and the Priests of the Mission, the sign that they had clothed themselves in the Spirit of Jesus Christ was when they acquired simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal for the salvation of souls (missionary charity). For Louise and the Daughters of Charity, it would be humility, simplicity and charity.⁸ The central axis supporting all these virtues is charity, or love. To use a more modern term, this is solidarity in the service of poor persons, while living in community.

⁷ See the two conferences to the Daughters of Charity on Prayer: May 31, 1648 and October 13, 1658.

⁸ Coste XII Conference to the Missionners of August 22, 1659; Saint Louise A 78

When solidarity is called compassion

Charity or solidarity with those who suffer is motivated by human emotion, a feeling called compassion that comes from the heart: "...the sick poor should be treated as this same [Divine] Goodness teaches you, that is, with gentleness, compassion, and love" (Coste X, p. 268). Compassion became a defining element of the spirituality of the two Founders as they shared with and served those living in poverty. Charity in the spirituality of the Founders has been the object of much study. Compassion needs to be studied as well.

Because she had been deprived of affection during her childhood, Louise was very sensitive and emotional. Vincent often advised her be careful about her emotions, but her suffering had made her very sensitive to others' suffering. Vincent, despite having a personality that seemed sullen, harsh and quick-tempered, also had a sensitive, compassionate side to his nature. He had a childlike devotion to the Virgin Mary, gave alms to poor people, became emotional at the age of 20 on seeing the tomb of the apostles in Rome, and felt deep pain as he visited his family for the last time and gave up the idea of giving them any further financial assistance. Several years later he wrote: "*Do you think I do not love my relatives? I indeed have the same feelings of affection for them that anyone would have. My natural instinct is to help them*"⁹

Love begins with compassion: sharing the suffering of poor people, discovering and providing solutions to their needs. This is the way the compassion that Jesus experienced for the poor has been communicated to us and transformed into Vincentian charity: "*Since the Son of God was unable to have feelings of compassion in the state of His glory, which He possesses from all eternity in heaven, He willed to become man and to be our High Priest in order*

9 Abelly Book 3 Chapter XIX. Abelly describes that about 1650, M. du Fresne gave Vincent a thousand francs to help his family, who had lost everything to soldiers during the war. When the saint had finally agreed to accept to use the money to help them, he uttered the words quoted in the text, and added: "*but I must act according to the movements of grace, and not those of nature. I should think of those poor persons who are even worse off, rather than of my friends and relatives.*" Similarly, he was touched by a priest, former member of the Congregation of the Mission, who had saved Saint Vincent's life. Many times he had asked to be readmitted, but always in vain. The idea occurred to him to remind the Saint of the service he had once rendered him. On recalling it, Saint Vincent yielded and sent him a letter of which Collet has preserved only the following words: "*Come, Monsieur, and you will be received with open arms.*" (Coste V, p. 543).

to share our sufferings. To reign with Him in heaven, we must, like Him, commiserate with His members on earth." (Coste XI p. 69)

In this form of spirituality, the first way that compassion is manifested is in approaching those who are poor and experiencing their suffering. Louise expressed this clearly to Vincent during the distress of the Fronde war. She was with the abandoned babies and children, heard their cries and witnessed the sacrifices made by the wet nurses, poor peasant women whom she was unable to pay. (L. 279)

Vincent also said that we cannot live a spiritual life unless we have compassion: "*Quoi! To be a Christian and to see our brother suffering without weeping with him, without being sick with him! That's to be lacking in charity; it's being a caricature of a Christian; it's inhuman; it's to be worse than animals.*" (Coste XII p. 222)

The great danger for Vincentian spirituality and service of poor people is if those who are compassionate, who give, heal and help others, do it in a way that makes them superior to those who are receiving – the poor or sick person. There is a danger that those who are compassionate will feel that they are superior to those who suffer. In order to avoid compassion that is tinged with self-importance for the giver and humiliation for the recipient, Vincent and Louise chose the virtues of *humility and simplicity* in imitation of the humble and simple Christ. This God became human and was born in a stable, was baptized as if he were a sinner, had compassion on humanity, and died on a cross. He wanted to be part of those who are marginalized, *the humble ones, the anawim* of the Bible.¹⁰ Compassion evokes a desire to bring the poor out of their state of misery and to proclaim a Kingdom of justice, love and peace, a more human and compassionate reality.

Compassion must be sincere, without hypocrisy or deception. It was only with this sort of compassion that Louise could contemplate the simplicity of Jesus as a little baby, or Jesus on the cross. This is what Vincent advised for the Sisters.¹¹ As we read the letters of Louise and the conferences of Vincent, we see that they defined compassion as

10 SL Spiritual Writings L. 183, 353, 377, 565, 647B, A 8, 14, 62, M 40B... SV:Coste XII, 216, 221-222...

11 SL Spiritual Writings A. 8, 9, 21 and 21B. SV Conference of February 24, 1652

the human way of living like Jesus. Compassion towards poor people leads us to serve them with simplicity, gentleness and respect, just as Saint Paul recommended to the Romans: *"Let love be genuine... Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are."* (Rom. 12: 9, 15-16)

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Jubilee year
of the 350th anniversary
of the death
of the Founders