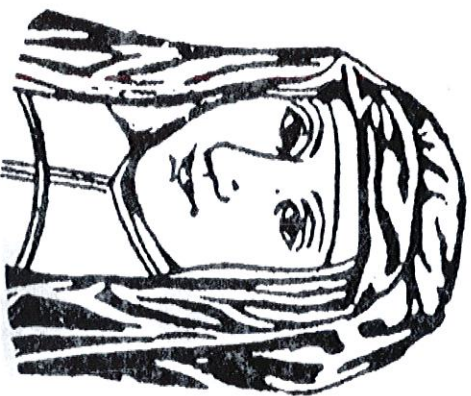


***St. Louise de Marillac***  
***A Woman For Her***  
***Times and Ours***



In 1591 a baby girl was born to a young woman in Paris. We do not know the young mother's name or anything about her but we do know that the baby's father was a member of a famous and wealthy family - the De Marillacs - of the France of that day.

That little girl grew in compassion and courage which were to become dominant in her character as she grew older and developed her life's work as co-foundress of the Daughters of Charity.

This is her story.

**Foreword**

I chose the title of this booklet because I believe that just as Louise was really and truly a woman for her own times, her example and her energies expended for the good of the most needy are as relevant today as they were then.

Sr. Angela Magee  
Mission Co-ordinator  
1991

Sr. Angela Magee DC worked in the Daughters of Charity Service for Persons with Intellectual Disability for many years and in many roles.

She was the Service's first Mission Co-Ordinator.

In 1991 she wrote a series of articles on the life of St. Louise de Marillac in celebration of the four-hundredth anniversary of the birth of St. Louise.

The articles were published in the Service Newsletter and this booklet contains those writings.

Sr. Angela is remembered with affection and gratitude by service users and staff alike.

**Louise** was born on 12th August 1591. Her father, Louis de Marillac, was a member of a noble family of Auvergne in France, wealthy, aristocratic, mixing in the elite social circles of the royal household. Her mother, however, remains unknown; it has been suggested that she may have died at Louise's birth.

financial independence by bequeathing an annual pension and giving her the title to some of his land. She was never to be very wealthy but she was secure.

*Louise's childhood  
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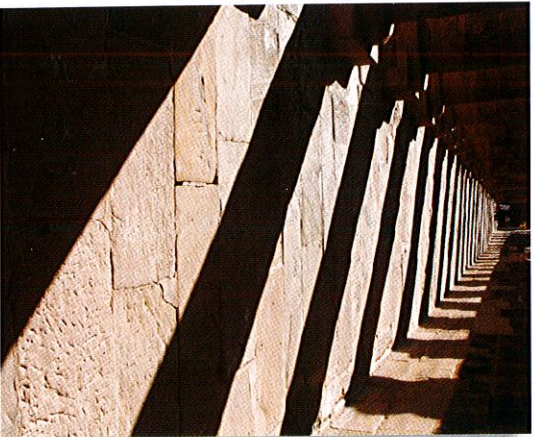
Louise's education was arranged by her father and he confined her to the care of the Dominican Nuns at the Royal Monastery of Poissy. Here, she received a solid intellectual and religious foundation which in later years enabled her to mix with the people of consequence in royal and political circles, who were of great help to her in establishing her many projects to help the deprived and needy people.

The mystery surrounding her birth gave Louise her first experience of poverty - the poverty of a child deprived of the love of a mother. A big consolation lay in the fact that her father loved her intensely and that he acknowledged her as his daughter. He assured her

Louise's childhood by necessity was lonely for a little girl, but she lived for her father's visits and he treated her with such gentleness and guided her education in such a way that one writer states that "he awakened her intelligence to matters of the spirit". At the monastery, Louise

received solid literary and artistic education in the company of other girls from noble families.

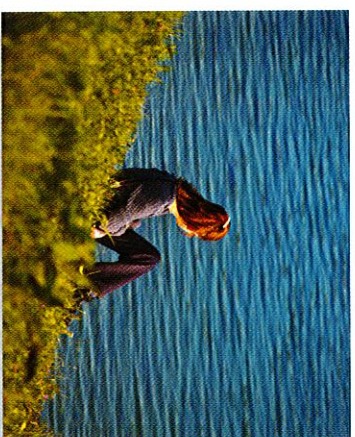
We can understand that Louise's childhood was one of light and shadow; she had the wonderful love of her father, the luxury of good education, companions and accommodation, but there was such a void in her heart for a normal home life, for a mother, for good relations with her father's wife and her half-sister Innocente, that she often became despondent.



When Louise was 13 years old her father died and this, of course, constituted the greatest sorrow in her young life. At this time she was transferred from her high-class boarding school to what perhaps would be regarded as a domestic economy school today. There she learned many practical subjects that later she would be able to teach to the first Daughters of Charity.

It was in this establishment that Louise's adolescent years were spent, throughout which a legal battle had to be fought to ensure that the provisions for her in her father's will were carried out and it was not until she was nineteen that she won her case and the money was paid to her.

One can easily imagine the suffering all this must have brought to the life of the young girl. Obviously Louise's character was strengthened by all the adversities that she experienced in her young life.



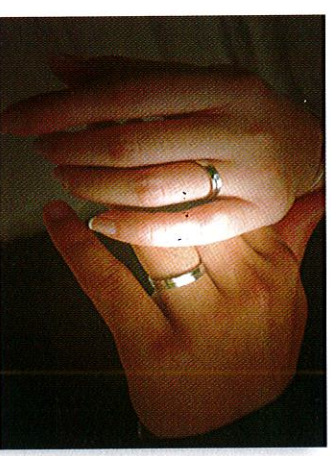
She had developed an intense religious approach and wanted to dedicate her life to God. All sorts of obstacles stood in her way and she was advised by her Spiritual Director that "this is not for you, God has other designs on you". With this setback the second stage of her life began.

*"God has other designs on you."*

What God's designs were was still a mystery. As time went on it became clear to her father's family that they should see Louise settled. At that time the choices for young women were limited to only two - either marry or enter a convent. For Louise, as we have seen, the latter was ruled out, so a marriage was

arranged for her. She was presented at Court and introduced to Antoine Le Gras, Secretary to the Queen, Marie de Medici.

Antoine was a rather serious-minded 32 year-old. His bride was ten years his junior. The fact that Louise had aspirations to the religious life, and, also, the difference in their ages, caused some people to see this union as simply a marriage of convenience. However true that might have been at the time, there are strong indications that a deep love soon grew up between them. The devotion of the young couple to each other was apparent to their friends of that time and a letter to Louise that still exists speaks of "your dearly loved husband". Louise indeed seems at last to have found love and security.



*A son was born to the young couple a year later and Louise was to know the profound joy of motherhood*

Antoine le Gras had his place at Court and Louise was received there. Although they were not wealthy they had sufficient means to be able to live in the fashionable Rue Courteau-Villain in the Parish of San Sauveur. A son was born to the young couple a year later and Louise was to know the profound joy of motherhood.



In fact, later on in life Vincent said to her "I have never known anyone so completely a mother as you".

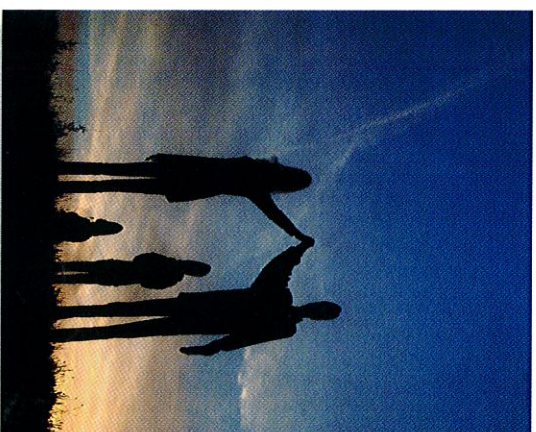
The future at this time seemed bright. Louise's lifestyle at this stage was varied. She divided her time between her duties as wife and mother, her responsibilities as a lady of the Court and her service to the poor who had a big place in her life. Her servants were quick to recount many deeds of charity and love which she performed for the poor and downtrodden.

Louise and Antoine did not neglect their religious duties and indeed they had permission - which was rare at that time - to read the Bible. She also participated very much in Parish activities and it was during this work that she met noblewomen who would later become her collaborators in the works of charity which she established.

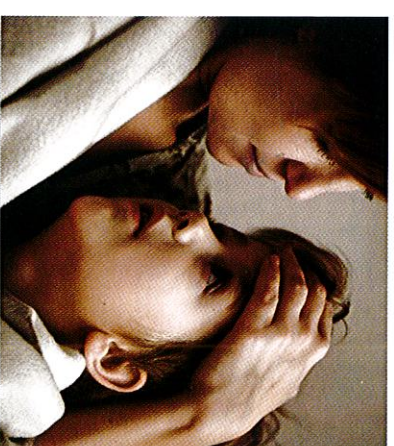
*Her servants were quick to recount many deeds of charity and love, which she performed for the poor and downtrodden.*

However, this untroubled happiness was to prove fragile.

A year later her aunt and uncle who had been friends of Louise in her time of distress and who opened their home to her, died, leaving behind them three children. It was Louise and Antoine who became the devoted protectors of the children, spending so much time attending to their financial affairs that their own were neglected, without recompense of any kind.



It was at this time, also, that Louise began to notice in her child a slowness of development.



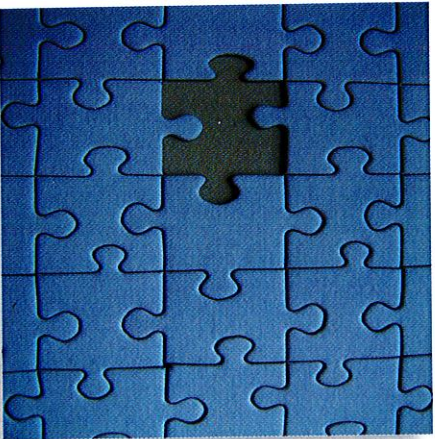
There appeared to be something wrong with Michael.

In addition the first signs of illness, which was eventually to cause his death, appeared in Antoine. He became irritable and difficult to live with and the political events of the time did nothing to alleviate the situation.

Because of his role as secretary to the Regent, Marie de Medici, he was caught up in the difficulties between the Queen Mother and the future King, Louis XIII. King Louis obviously intended to reign alone and did not want any interference from his mother.

The situation became so bad that the Queen Mother fled Paris and Louise was to share the anxiety of her husband, whose health was worsening day by day.

The political upheaval, the apparent slowness of her son and the illness of her husband had such an affect on Louise that once again she was disturbed about her future and was wondering just what it was that God was asking of her.



Louise turned to anxious introspection. Death, illness, loss of fortune - was it all a punishment from God for her failure to keep her adolescent vow to enter the Convent? These questions constantly tortured

Louise but fortunately she had many good friends and The Bishop of Belay, a disciple of St. Francis de Sales, would constantly help her to rise above her dejection and to depend on the goodness of God. Her uncle Michael also was most helpful to her and wrote to her many times with calming, reassuring words. This help was all the more necessary at this time because of the constant upheaval in the political situation and many were the worries that Louise and Antoine shared, during which time Antoine's health continued to decline.

***God could not leave his servant without coming to her aid and great joy was to come to her, great peace of soul was to return to her.***

However, Louise continued her ups and downs. She continued to see her trials as a punishment from God for her infidelity to Him and at one point in 1623, she promised that she would never re-marry should her husband die. But this wasn't

sufficient and her anguish continued. She was sent into a torment of self-searching and she herself describes her anguish.

*"I was tortured with doubt about whether or not I should leave my husband as I believed I ought so as to make up for my first vow and have greater liberty to serve God and my neighbour".*

And so, we see a person anxious, depressed, her life full of shadows, powerlessness, total poverty of soul, teetering on the edge of despair. God could not leave his servant without coming to her aid and great joy was to come to her, great peace of soul was to return to her.

On June 4th, 1623, during the Mass for the Feast of Pentecost, Louise had a deeply significant experience during prayer, when she received the consolation and courage she needed to continue her life in peace.

*"In an instant my spirit was cleared of all its doubts. I was advised that I should remain with*



*my husband. That a time would come when I would be in a situation to make Vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, and that I would be with other persons who would do the same thing. I understood that I would be in a place where I would be able to help my neighbour, but I did not see how this could be since there would be much coming and going.*

*I was also assured that I should be at peace concerning my Director, that God would give me one whom he seemed to show me. I found it repugnant to accept him. Nevertheless, I acquiesced. It seemed to me that this change would not take place immediately.*

*My third doubt was removed by the assurance I felt within me that God was speaking to me, and that since there was a God, I could not doubt the rest”*



**T**wo years later, Louise, who had remained constantly at her husband's side, assisted at Antoine's death and she writes:

*“I was alone to assist him in this all-important passing. He showed great devotion until his last sigh. His spirit was entirely attached to God. He repeated over and over to me ‘Pray to God for me since I can no longer do so’. These words will be forever engraved in my heart”.*

Louise would never forget her beloved husband whom God called to himself on 23rd December 1625. Every year thereafter she would have a Mass celebrated for him on the anniversary of his death.

As for herself, Louise was to experience yet again another form of poverty, widowhood. Antoine le Gras had not been able to amass a fortune during his lifetime, although he had a good position. His long illness, the political situation and the time and energy that he devoted to the affairs of the young children whom Louise and himself cared for after their parents died, caused his own affairs to be neglected. For Louise, there were no retirement plans or life assurance policies. Such things did not exist in 1625! Louise had to rely on the small annuity mentioned in her marriage contract to support her son and herself. It was certainly insufficient to support the way of life to which she had become accustomed and therefore she had to leave the fashionable district in which she lived.



*Vincent de Paul had become her spiritual director*



1624 and Louis would become the Field Marshal of France.

Later in life, Louise was to realise that all her painful experiences which introduced her to the world of poverty enabled her to understand the sufferings of the poor.

Herein lay her real life's work.

*Vincent recognised in Louise the rare qualities of compassion linked with administrative skills and a determination to work for the poorest and most abandoned in society*

Over the next few years this young widow, with her growing son, had to move a number of times in order to exist on her meagre income. Vincent de Paul had become her spiritual director and he helped her to find suitable accommodation. Louise, struggling financially was to know a great contrast between her own relative poverty and the rise to prominence of her family, particularly her uncles, who at this stage were enjoying great royal favour. Her uncle Michael became Minister of Finance in

Vincent de Paul had a strong desire to improve the lot of the poor, marginalised and deprived people of France including the galley slaves who were convicts chained together to row the huge ships entering and leaving the ports of France. Ladies of the Court and the aristocracy kept him supplied with money to come to the aid of those in need.

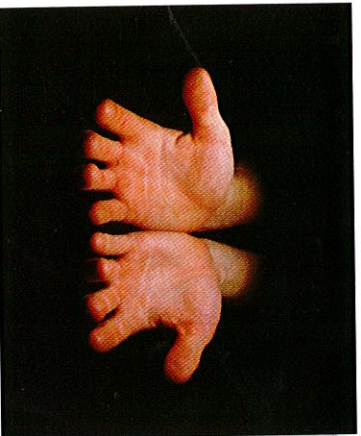
Vincent recognised in Louise the rare qualities of compassion linked with administrative skills and a determination to work for the poorest and most abandoned in society. He appointed her to the post of Co-ordinator of all his “Confraternities of Charity”, made up of groups of high-ranking wealthy ladies whom Vincent had gathered together to help him in alleviating the hardships and suffering of the poor people of that time.



Louise journeyed constantly to the various towns and villages, usually by coach, horseback or boat. The journeys were fraught with difficulties, physical discomfort and danger from

robbers but nothing daunted Louise and God worked in a special way through her generosity of spirit and the complete gift she made of herself to him.

Louise was so successful in her visits that the movement flourished throughout France. The rules reveal an admirable compassion and respect for the poor. There was always to be direct contact between the ladies and the poor and they were to treat the poor with gentleness, respect and devotion. Much good work was done and Louise’s zeal knew no bounds. She was fired with the love of God and was prepared to do anything and go anywhere provided the ‘poor would be better served’. This great desire was a response to the call of the suffering Christ.



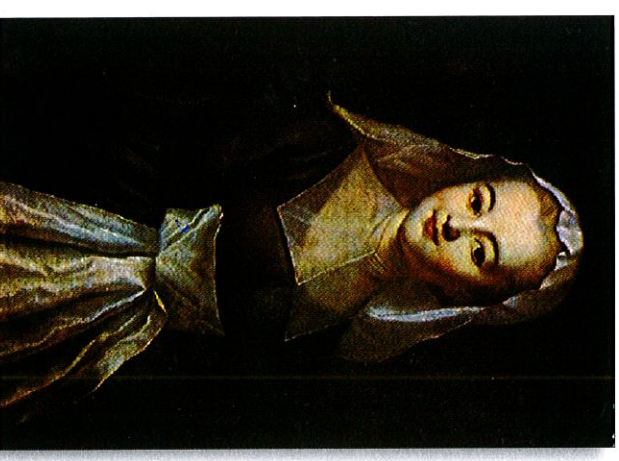
Ten years after the Confraternities of Charity were established, goodwill began to weaken and abuses crept in. Visits to the poor became less and less frequent, servants replaced their mistresses in ministering to the poor and they often treated the unfortunate people with contempt. Vincent and Louise continued to encourage the ladies and more and more confraternities became established but at this stage Louise was reflecting on the means for bringing about a ‘better service of the poor’.

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Her visits to the confraternities had taught her that something more was needed. Vincent shared her views and together they waited for God to show the way.

As the Vincentian priests went around the country preaching missions, young girls would come and talk to them about their desire to serve God with their whole being. Vincent recognised the hand of God in all this and described to them the life of serving the poor to which they responded generously.

One young girl, Marguerite Nassau, was the first to take the step which would lead to the foundation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

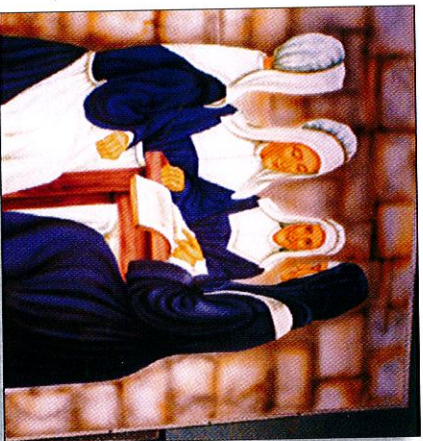


Marguerite was a poor, uneducated girl who was employed in minding sheep but she was moved by a powerful inspiration from heaven to teach children so she started learning the alphabet, asking passers-by how words were pronounced etc. and diligently educated herself to the point where she went about the villages teaching the poor children.

Such was her great love for God that when she heard about the confraternities in Paris she went there and offered her services. This was the humble beginning of the Community and God showered his blessings on the tiny mustard seed because gradually other girls made their way to Louise and Vincent, offering themselves for the service of the poor.

In 1633 there were twelve girls and Louise came to live with them in the Rue Fosses Saint Victor, where an order of day - including prayer, instruction, both religious and secular, and an active service of the poor - was established.

The little group could not be seen to be "Nuns" nor indeed was that idea considered by St. Vincent or St. Louise. The custom of the time demanded that "Nuns" lived in convents or monasteries and did not go out carrying soup and bread into the hovels of the poor. The girls were seen simply as helpers of the ladies in the confraternities.



Gradually the numbers grew and the girls were to be found serving the poor everywhere, in poor homes, in hospitals, boarding houses that were established to care for the many abandoned babies and young children, the galley slaves and eventually on the battlefield to nurse the wounded soldiers.

*For thirty years Louise continued to instruct and train the sisters in their spirit and in their work for the poor.*

Louise, as President of the Ladies of Charity, was able to interest a great many people in all her works of charity and she devoted much time in training her girls in the corporal and spiritual service of the poor. She shared everything with them and her zeal in searching out ways and means of 'serving the poor better' inspired them to give of themselves generously to the needs of the poor.

It is difficult today to realise just how daring and innovative all this was in the context of the religious and social outlook of the era. Louise carried on regardless and grew closer in mind, heart and spirit to the crucified Christ whose love urged her on to more and more service to the most abandoned of society.

For thirty years Louise continued to instruct and train the sisters in their work for the poor. By 1660 the community had grown and

spread to many countries and she kept in touch by visits and by letter right up to her deathbed.

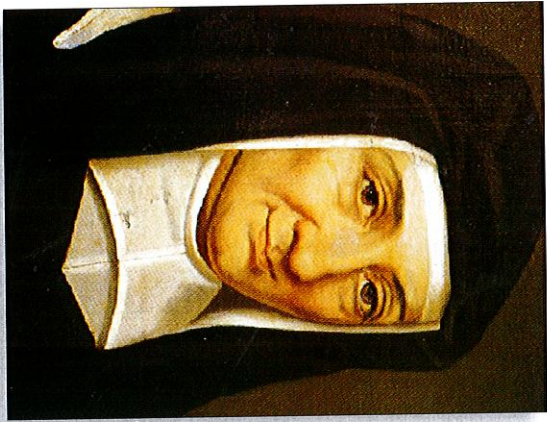


The sisters of that time have left testimonies to her strength of character, her total forgetfulness of self, her abiding love for God which was shown in her complete absorption with the service of the poor person in whom she saw Christ.

In this way, Louise lived her life and continuously instructed the sisters in the way in which to spend their lives, and as a result, despite human failures, they were able to bring the love of God to those in need by their total gift of themselves to the service of Christ in the person of the poor.

On 15th March 1660 Louise died. Until her last breath her thoughts and prayers were with the sisters and with the poor. Her last words to the sisters summed up all her teaching...

*Take great care  
of the Poor,'*



Thus died a great Saint who had risen above many obstacles, to achieve close union with God, by living out to a heroic degree, the maxim of the Gospel which urges us to love our neighbour as ourselves.