

The joint influence of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac on the nature of the Company

THEY ARE NOT RELIGIOUS

When several young women gathered together in Louise's home, Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul did not think they were starting a Company of consecrated women. Just a few months later, however, they were already taking precautions so that this group of celibate women who were living in community, in poverty and obedience, would not be considered religious, for this would mean the cloister and, with the cloister, they would have to say goodbye to the service of the poor.

In those days, the religious ideal was linked to seeking personal holiness through contemplation and separation from the world. To facilitate this, the Church imposed the cloister in all convents of women. The cloister helped promote the path to holiness, and also safeguarded women religious from real moral danger.

From the time of Pope Boniface VIII, papal law demanded strict enclosure for women religious. Although the Council of Trent that took place just prior to that time was not yet officially implemented in France, it appeared as a guiding light in the face of the Huguenots and as the Church's absolute authority in the matter of reform. It called for strict adherence to its laws. Even harsher was the declaration by Pope Pius V that any women's congregations that were not cloistered could not receive new novices, thereby condemning them to extinction. Together with this legislation, the Church determined that religious life required solemn (public) vows and this obliged members to be cloistered. Anyone who did not take solemn vows was not considered religious and was not bound to the cloister. However, no congregation was allowed to pronounce vows that were not solemn.

It is not easy to understand the nature of this confraternity that Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac were forming. This was a situation where love for poor persons encountered rigid Church law, which made it impossible to form new institutes of consecrated life dedicated to the apostolate of charity. Nevertheless, that is what they were undertaking.

RESPONSE TO CERTAIN PROBLEMS

The foundation of the Daughters of Charity was a response to one of the ever-present concerns of the Church: how to adapt the living forces of the Church to the social needs of each era. There was much potential energy in women consecrated to God, and one of society's needs was to resolve the issue of helping poor persons who were left abandoned. The problem was threefold in nature: how could women consecrated to God in prayer dedicate themselves to action, how could consecrated women in a convent

exercise charitable works in the midst of society, and how could consecrated women in the Church be exempt from the local bishop?

These three problems had become intertwined since the 12th century, and called for a convincing response. Women from wealthy bourgeois families in the cities had great innovative potential; however, they were not generally encouraged to enter convents, for these were reserved for the nobility. For many the convent was certainly a place to live a religious vocation, but we should not overlook the fact that it was also considered a position within society just like any other civil occupation.

Because of this understanding of consecration to God in convents and monasteries during the 13th and 14th centuries, many poor women, who were unable to pay a dowry, lived chastity and poverty in private and dedicated themselves to works of charity. An example of this was a women's movement that history calls "*mulieres religiosae*" semi-religious or extended branches of Beguines, who were widespread in the Netherlands, Germany and northern France. As a result of accusations typical of that period, they were obliged to become cloistered, and those who refused to conform met with ecclesiastical censure.

However, neither the situation nor the problem of poverty was able to be resolved; rather they continued to exist throughout these centuries. Many congregations without solemn vows were founded in the 16th and 17th centuries for the purpose of caring for poor people. However, when Pope Leo X codified the rules for Third Orders in 1521, and when Pope Pius V promulgated the constitution *Circa Pastoralis*, most of these groups eventually became cloistered. Those institutions that did not adopt enclosure disappeared over time. Saint Vincent and Saint Louise would have known many of these congregations.

THE CHARITIES AND THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

It is true that the Daughters of Charity began as one of the Charities founded by Monsieur Vincent, although a distinctive one, as was the Charity of the General Hospital (Hotel-Dieu) a bit later. It is equally certain that the Charities existed before Saint Vincent's time. This was a gradual development of the guild fraternities of the Middle Ages that were formed to protect professional trades from intruders. Later they began to assist the widows and orphans of the artisans or guild members who were ill, thereby becoming confraternities. They were then placed under the patronage of a saint and assistance was extended to help all poor persons, not only those belonging to the confraternity. At this point they began to be called "Charities n. Membership was limited to men, for in those centuries only men had legally recognition.

When Vincent de Paul arrived in Chatillon, he discovered that in order for charity to be effective, it needed to be carried out by a group and be organized. He established a Charity there, similar to those that existed in other places. He gave as an example, the Charity in Rome. (Coste XIII b, p. 9) Vincent's creativity can be seen in the two modifications he made.

-First, membership was reserved exclusively to women.¹ This required unbelievable courage at a time when women were excluded from civil, political and social citizenship, unless they were widows. In one same association there were wealthy women and women from the working class. The women “of means” would defray the costs, and in addition, “experience has shown that it is absolutely necessary for women not to depend on the men in this situation, especially for the money.” (I, 70) The women who were the salaried servants, called Nurses of the Sick Poor (XIII b, 10) would bathe and care for the sick.

- The second modification was this: although each Charity was completely autonomous, they would all be joined in an inter-diocesan union in order to maintain the founders' influence and create unity through a common rule adapted to the particular situation of each parish. Certainly, the authority of the local bishop was fully recognized, as he was the one who would approve the Charity, its rule and statutes. He had juridical authority and oversaw its development. The pastor of the parish was the president of the Charity, and would participate in meetings with deliberative voice, overseeing its functioning and proposing charitable activities. Saint Vincent was not the president of any of the Charities except the General Hospital (Hotel-Dieu) and the Daughters of Charity when they came together in community.

Vincent's role was limited to founding the Charities with authorization from the Archbishop of Paris and the Holy See, to draft the rule and to visit them to encourage them and correct any possible irregularities. Saint Louise or one of the missionaries frequently made these visits on his behalf.²

The Company of the Daughters of Charity marked a change from these Charities of Saint Vincent. However, when the Founders thought of making the Company juridically independent, they discovered fertile grounds for the feminine movements of charity that had been lying fallow in the hearts of women even into the 17th century. The two saints were already familiar with the Ursulines, the Canonesses of Saint Augustine, the Religious of Notre-Dame, and the Daughters of Saint Mary. They knew that all these had been transformed into cloistered groups that made solemn vows.³ It is quite probably that they would have also known that the daughters of Mary Ward who did not become cloistered and would be almost completely suppressed.

The two Founders, in ongoing conversations, were creating a modern form of the archetype of the Company that was making its way into Christian society at various rates and in different ways, yet still not achieving their end until that time. The Council of

¹A few Charities composed of men and women were founded, but they did not exist for very long. "Men and women working together do not agree on administrative matters. The men want to assume entire responsibility for them and the women cannot tolerate this. In the beginning, the Charities of Joigny and Montmirail were governed by persons of both sexes ... but because the funds were in common, we were obliged to remove the men. And I can give this testimony in favor of women, that there is no fault to be found in their administration because they are so careful and trustworthy." (IV, 76)

² Coste II, 1-3; XIII b. 23-48, 53

³Coste IX, 458; X, 92, 93, 102, 117...

Trent brought about the means of doing this. The two saints saw that the confraternities of Charity that the Council had left in the hands of the bishops were a possible way of renewing the world and the Church through the laity. Others had had the same vision but had not succeeded. Vincent de Paul's and Mademoiselle Le Gras' holiness and personalities were what drove them forward. That is, they knew how to collaborate with Divine Providence at the right moment, without rushing it or holding it back. They knew how to see and read the signs of the times, and had the courage to act, the perseverance to never give up and the wisdom to not be confrontational in their dealings with Church or civil authorities.

CREATIVITY and COURAGE

By communicating and working together, the two Founders overcame obstacles arising from the mentality of the official Church and civil society in order to give a firm foundation to a new Church Institution, the Company.

The four appeals and responses in the Inter- Assemblies Document (2009) seem identical to what Saint Vincent and Saint Louise had in mind for the Company "*the abandoned poor who are in great need and who can only find relief in the service of these good girls, who are detached from all self-interest and who give themselves to God for the spiritual and corporal service of these poor creatures that His goodness wills to look upon as His members.*"⁴ In the past and in our own times, the Company appears as a four-sided pyramid: Given to God, service of poor persons, community life and defining spirit. Animated by what is called a Vincentian charism, all the members feel they belong to an Institution of women who are secular and not religious.

Given to God in chastity, poverty and obedience

The document speaks of being rooted in Christ. The Founders used the expression *clothed* with the Spirit of Jesus Christ: humility, simplicity and charity nourished by prayer and Eucharist (which today includes the Word of God).

For the corporal and spiritual service of persons who are poor.

Saint Vincent made the service of the poor the objective of the Company but this service is not unique to the Daughters of Charity. Every human being has the duty to practice solidarity towards all people and especially the most deprived. It is an even greater obligation for Christians who follow Jesus' teaching. The whole history of Christianity is evidence of this and the Second Vatican Council put a strong emphasis on it.⁵

In community

Community life for the Daughters of Charity was a true revolution in consecrated life, with challenges of living together that until that time had been unknown. As the Sisters set out from a community setting for their service, they need to find the support and friendship of a united and prayerful community when they return to it. Although the Constitutions quote the famous text of Saint Vincent (C. 12), we see that this charter is

⁴ Spiritual Writings, Sr. Charpy, L9 p.19

⁵ Especially part 2 of *Gauium et spes*, Chapter 3§.2

also inspired by Saint Louise, who wrote to the Sisters on their way to Narbonne: “*Before you arrive, I must tell you, my dear Sisters, what a consolation it is for me to see you living in your cloister on this journey as you did in the streets of Paris.*” (SW, L. 628 b) In former times women religious generally entered a convent to live their entire life with the same companions in community. They only experienced community during liturgy and mealtimes. Otherwise, their time was spent individually in their cells or in the gardens. It was not unusual for them to also pray privately. The Beguines, mentioned earlier, might have lived in the same house or in several small dwellings within one larger enclosed area called a Beguinage, but they did not have a motherhouse, common rules or superiors. Each beguine was free to choose the way she lived her life and served poor people. And above all, they were free to come and go as they wished.

The community life ideal in a Vincentian community was modeled on the image of the unity of the Trinity, according to the Regulation that the two saints developed by common agreement, and the purpose was always the service of the poor. Unity was hard to achieve for they did not choose their companions, they were given to them, nor did they choose their community, but instead were sent to it. Certainly, although this way of life was designed by both saints, it was Mademoiselle Le Gras who brought it into being by forming the women who lived with her. Once they were sent on mission, she continued this formation through her letters. Her amazing results show the practical talent and holiness of this woman, who had neither models to guide her nor books to instruct her. Her school was prayer and her teacher was the Holy Spirit, who at times worked through Vincent.

In the beginning, it was not difficult to live united in community. They generally lived in twos, located quite close to Mademoiselle. Difficulties arose when they were at a distance from Paris, for example, in Richelieu (SW, L. 11), and even more so when they formed larger communities of five or more Sisters far away from Paris, as in Angers and Nantes.⁶

BELONGING TO A SECULAR COMPANY

The most distinctive feature of the Company was *exemption from the local ordinary in governance and internal life, while remaining a secular Company.*

For many years, Louise de Marillac feared that the Company would disappear. Until the Company was officially recognized by the Church and the government, it might have disappeared at any moment.

It was September 1645 when the two Founders decided that, without the risk of being confused with religious, they could request of the archbishop of Paris the establishment of the Daughters of Charity as a “confraternity independent from the Confraternity of Charity” with a juridical identity and its own autonomy. Vincent de Paul explained to the Sisters: “*Up to the present, you haven't been a body independent of the Ladies of the Confraternity of Charity; but now, Sisters, God wills that you form a special*

⁶ SW, L.104 b, L.174; Coste III, 181-185

*body which, however, without being separated from that of the Ladies, will still have its particular functions and spiritual exercises.”*⁷

Vincent de Paul, who was trained in law, deliberated on how to secure the juridical nature of the Daughters of Charity while dealing with a canon in the Council of Trent, which confirmed another from the Fourth Lateran Council, and the Constitution “*Quaecumque*” of Clement VIII. He drew up a petition and sent it to Louise to get her opinion. Louise was horrified on reading that the Company would remain under the authority of the archbishop of Paris. There was disagreement between the two saints for several reasons. Vincent did not wish the Company to be suppressed but to be recognized by the civil and religious authorities. After Trent, the establishment of new religious communities was prohibited. Bishops, however, had the power to approve pious or charitable confraternities. Saint Vincent saw this as the only way to have the Company established. He also thought that no bishop would sign a decree of establishment if the Company depended on a priest, even if that priest was Monsieur Vincent. The Company would be accepted if it depended on the archbishop and this would also put an end to the opposition he encountered within his own congregation to assuming direction of a Company of women⁸.

Louise was firmly opposed to this although she acted with feminine tactfulness. Realistic and observant, she was more aware of the situation of her daughters who were not part of the social or religious culture. She was familiar with the psychology and customs of these young women and well aware that these simple peasant women were in need of well-trained priests. She also feared that the Daughters of Charity would be rejected in other dioceses, if they remained under the authority of the archbishop of Paris, and if they depended on other bishops, each one would direct the Daughters according to his own ideas and this would cause division in the Company. On the other hand, the Vincentian priests had the same Founder, the same purpose and an identical charism and spirit. At that time, the Congregation of the Mission was greatly esteemed because of the fame of its Founder and the fact that many of its members had come from the secular clergy. Louise would rather see the Company destroyed than for it to be no longer dependent on the Superior General of the Mission⁹.

Vincent de Paul reflected on this question for a year. He knew that Louise was intelligent and intuitive but feared making a serious and irreparable mistake. It would be better to wait for God's will to be clearly manifested.

Unsuccessful attempt at approbation

In the autumn of 1646, Vincent de Paul decided to send the petition to the archbishop (III, p. 59-62). He requested that the “*Confraternity of Charity of the Servants*

⁷ Coste IX, Conf. of 30 May 1647, p.255

⁸ Coste VIII, 271-72, 276-279; XII, 76-77

⁹ SW, L. 124b, L. 130d

of the Sick Poor in the Parishes” be established as a confraternity independent of the Ladies of Charity. The archbishop coadjutor of Paris, Jean Francois Paul de Gondi, approved it on November 20, 1646¹⁰. The young king Louis XIV gave his approval and sent the letters patent to the procurator general, Blaise Meliand, so that it would be registered in the Parliament of Paris. Without this step, neither the approbation of the archbishop or that of the king would have any civil validity.

The clause that caused so much fear was clearly expressed: “*The Confraternity will be, and will remain in perpetuity, under the authority of and dependent on the Archbishop and his successors*”. It is true that this was qualified by another vague phrase that gave a particular nuance to that clause: “[to] our dearly beloved Vincent de Paul ... we have confided and entrusted to him the leadership and direction of the Society and Confraternity for as long as it pleases God to keep him in this life”. (Coste 13b, 133) But what would happen after his death?

In spite of her respect for Vincent and the way she always deferred to him, Louise could clearly see the danger that threatened. Some days later she wrote to him: “*Could not this unqualified term of ‘dependence on the archbishop’ be harmful for the future, since it allows us to be withdrawn from the direction of the Superior General of the Mission?*”

Is it not necessary, Monsieur, that through this Act of Establishment your Charity be given to us as perpetual director?..In the name of God, Monsieur, do not permit anything to take place which even slightly draws the Company away from the direction which God has given to it. You can be sure that immediately it would no longer be what it is. The sick poor would no longer be helped, and thus I believe that the will of God would no longer be accomplished among us.” (SW, L. 130D)

This letter raised questions for Vincent de Paul and led him to wait for six months before communicating to the Sisters that they had been approved by the archbishop of Paris. At the same time, the Rules of the Daughters of Charity had been approved and he wanted to tell the Sisters about this. He did so on May 30, 1647 during a conference he gave on the observance of the Rules. He then explained the name of servants of the poor, the article that dealt with work, the one relating to chastity and the one about silence.

At the end of 1647, Louise, returned to the question and, with the perseverance that God gives a person when something must be done, insisted: “*Monsieur, it seems that God gave my soul great peace and simplicity during my imperfect meditation on the need for the Company of the Daughters of Charity to remain continuously under the guidance given it by Divine Providence in spiritual as well as temporal matters. At that time, I believe that I came to understand that it would be more advantageous for His glory for the Company to fail completely than to be under another’s guidance, since that would seem to be contrary to the will of God.*” (L. 199)

¹⁰ Coste III, 59-62; XIII, 131-133

Definitive approbation of the Company

The two Founders were well aware that the Company had still not gained official recognition as the Parliament had not registered the letters patent from the king. The Parliament of Paris had not registered them because the Procurator General did not present them with the annotation *requiero a consiento* that would validate them. Blaise Meliand, the Procurator General, wanted to safeguard the interests of the State, for if the Daughters of Charity were cloistered religious, they would not have income to provide for their living expenses and they would be a burden on society. If they were seculars, this would be a completely new situation (SW, L. 283). The Fronde civil war broke out soon afterwards, and Blaise Meliand died a few months later. Nicolas Fouquet replaced him as Procurator General. When they went to him about the letters patent, these letters could not be found; they had no doubt got lost in the tumultuous events of the Fronde.

A political event came to the aid of Louise. The archbishop of Paris, Cardinal de Retz, having to flee from Mazarin, had arrived in Rome. The Holy See asked the Vincentian priests to take him into their house and they obeyed. The Court in Paris protested at this and ordered all the French Vincentians to return to Paris. Just days prior to this, Vincent de Paul had sent the archbishop all the documentation needed for the approbation of the Company. In gratitude for the hospitality given him, Cardinal de Retz approved it but with considerable modification: the Company would be a simple confraternity under the authority of the archbishop of Paris, but this time the archbishop would confide and entrust its responsibility to Vincent de Paul: “*to empower the petitioner and his successors as Superiors General of the Congregation of the Mission to direct the Confraternity*” (XIII b, 146) On August 8, 1655 the Company of the Daughters of Charity, numbering more than 150 Sisters, was officially established. On December 16, 1658 the Parliament of Paris registered the Letters Patent that King Louis XIV had signed in November 1657, approving the Company in France and in all the countries under his jurisdiction¹¹.

Originality of the Company

Vincent knew that it was common practice for the local ordinary to delegate the direction of a confraternity to a priest, but for him to give up his authority to the Superior of a men’s Congregation in accordance with the Directives of the Council of Trent would be highly unusual. Also, would future archbishops of Paris agree to this arrangement? Would bishops in other dioceses reject it? This being the case, the only solution was to take the matter to the Holy See. Saint Vincent did not seek pontifical approbation because this would bring the danger of the Company being approved as cloistered religious or quite simply, suppressed, as happened with the daughters of Mary Ward, by giving the right and obligation of the Company to the successive superiors of the Congregation of the Mission.

What Saint Vincent and Saint Louise were not able to achieve was finally granted to their successors. When Cardinal Louis de Vendome, Papal Legate, passed through

¹¹ Coste V, 270-276,334; VI, 25-26; XI, 165; XIII, 131ff, 144ff, 225ff, 236ff

Paris, he met the superiors of the Company and listened favorably to their request. In his capacity as Papal Legate to His Holiness Pope Clement IX, he signed the document on July 8, 1668, giving the approbation: *“We approve and confirm by the Apostolic authority with which we are invested, in this cause of the said Company or Congregation, its novitiate and its constitutions as well those of the said Vincent, its institutor, as those made and approved by the said Cardinal [de Retz] ...”* (Genesis of the Company, p. 26) The Company which had been approved by the Archbishop of Paris, now had Papal approval. The astonishing thing about this is that the approbation was granted without any official request being made to Rome as required by the IVth Lateran Council. The Company existed now by pontifical right while remaining under the authority of the Superior General of the Mission.

Saint Louise was well aware of the situation of women in the 17th century. It was rare for women to act independently and freely in civil society. They were excluded from political citizenship, civil society and had no property rights. They were excluded from social citizenship or the right to participate equally with men in public life and the administration of the goods of society. From the moment of their birth, regardless of social rank, girls were dependent on men, whether their father, husband, brother or guardian. Whether single or married, by law they were considered inferior. Their destiny was to bear children and take care of the household, for the belief was that women were flawed men, that they were born female by a fault of nature. In order to be respectable, women needed to be either married or in a convent¹². A single young woman was marginalized for the double reason of being a woman and being single, and at times was mistakenly regarded as a woman of ill-repute. We should recall that one of the arguments that Saint Louise presented to the city council of Paris when she asked that a well be installed in the garden of the Daughters of Charity Motherhouse was the verbal abuse that the Sisters received when they went to collect water because people considered them to be neither religious nor married¹³.

Louise was a widow of the bourgeois class who needed to defend the rights of her son who was then a minor and this gave her some autonomy and certain rights on a par with those of men. On the other hand, she was also marginalized by civil and family laws by the mere fact of being a woman and the unknown circumstances of her birth. She knew that women were defenseless, and she sought support from her director, Vincent de Paul.

The Company of the Daughters of Charity was revolutionary in its time as it allowed women of the lower classes to take on responsibilities which up to then were reserved for wealthy men and women and these women of low social status were even allowed to direct many of these works¹⁴. This was inconceivable. They could become “superiors” solely on account of their personal qualities and not their aristocratic title.

¹² See Coste I, 308-09; IX, 463-64, X, 527-29

¹³ Documents Sr. Charpy, p.826 (in French)

¹⁴ SW, L. 547, 136, 174,481,283,333,341,368,655; A 61; Coste, IX, 430-33

It is no wonder that this new Company was a matter of concern for the Procurator General of Paris and that the deputy of Beauvais tried to prohibit the meetings of 300 Ladies of the Charities that had been founded in the city by “a certain priest named Vincent”¹⁵.

Saint Vincent said in one of his conferences: “ ‘This is alright for men; you may say, ‘but women?’ Do you know, Sisters, that many persons, even of your sex, are crossing the ocean to go and render service to God by serving their neighbor?’¹⁶” (X, 407)

Benito Martínez, C.M.

Source:

This article appeared in the “Echoes of the Company”, an international publication for the Daughters of Charity, March April 2010 No. 2

¹⁵ SW, L. 283; Coste I, 92, footnote quotes Alphonse Feillet

¹⁶ Coste X, p.508