

1984

## The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras

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The Life of  
Mademoiselle Le Gras



by

MONSIEUR GOBILLON





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BOOK ONE

**THE LIFE OF  
MADEMOISELLE  
LE GRAS**

**Foundress and First Superior  
of the Company of the Sisters  
of Charity  
Servants of the Sick Poor**  
by

**MONSIEUR GOBILLON**

**Priest and Doctor of the House and Society of  
Sorbonne  
Parish Priest of Saint-Laurent**

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## INTRODUCTION

This first-ever biography of Mademoiselle Le Gras – now better known as Saint Louise de Marillac – was written in 1676, only sixteen years after her death, by Monsieur Gobillon. We quote from his introductory pages:

“Even after most careful research I have not been able to discover all the details of such a Christian life. I must be content to communicate to the public what I have been able to learn from her writings, which were put into my hands, and from the accounts of some persons who were witnesses of her virtues, and who have shared in her good works.”

More than two hundred years later, in 1886, Father Fiat published a “textual reproduction of the edition of 1676”. It is this which we have used for our translation, omitting however the introductory pages, except the quotation above.

Both before and after 1886, Saint Louise has had other and excellent biographers, each of whom has incorporated later findings and personal insights. Gobillon’s work, however, is more than a biography. It ranks now as a document, a fundamental source-book.

We are therefore happy to offer, in 1984, an English translation of this first biography of Saint Louise, who in collaboration with Saint Vincent de Paul founded our Company in 1633. We do so in the belief that her spiritual fragrance will be a delight and an inspiration to our readers everywhere.

Published by: Sisters of Charity  
Provincial House  
The Ridgeway  
London NW7 1EH  
15th March, 1984



# BOOK ONE

## CHAPTER 1: Birth of Mademoiselle le Gras. Her education. Her practices in her youth.

Louise de Marillac was born in Paris, of Louis de Marillac, “sieur de Ferrières”, and of Marguerite le Camus, 12th August, 1591. She was left motherless in her infancy, and her father, realising that he alone was responsible for her, took special care over her education. He placed her as a boarder in the monastery of the religious of Poissy, where he had some relatives, so that in that house she would be given the principles of Christian piety. Having taken her away from there some time later, he placed her in Paris, in the hands of a capable and virtuous woman, who would give her suitable training in household skills. He forgot nothing that could perfect her in mind and body. He had her instructed in painting, and she had such a leaning towards this fine art that she continued to practise it in the different stages of her life, as far as her infirmities and occupations allowed, and some of her devotional pictures are still kept in her family.

Her father, discovering in her a mind capable of all kinds of instruction, cultivated it with every imaginable care. He had her learn philosophy to form her reasoning and to give her entry into the higher reaches of knowledge. This gave her such a love of reading that it was the most ordinary of occupations for her, and her father had no greater pleasure than to talk about it with her, and to see in writing the reflections and remarks she made about it. He found such satisfaction in the obedience with which she seconded his plans, that he even declared in his will *that she had been his greatest consolation in the world, and that he thought she had been given him by God for his peace of mind in the afflictions of life.*

## **CHAPTER 2: Marriage of Mademoiselle le Gras. Her virtues in this state. Her retreats under the direction of the Bishop of Belley.**

From her earliest years the world held no attraction for Louise. She had an ardent desire to consecrate herself to God and planned to become a Capuchin, but when she told this to Father Honoré de Champigny, a Capuchin with a great reputation for holiness, he judged that with her weak constitution she would be unable to bear the austerities, and he declared to her that he thought God had some other design on her.

During the time she was deliberating on her vocation her father died, and seeing herself thereby deprived of his guidance, she felt obliged to marry. She did so because she could not fulfil her desire for the religious life, and entered into marriage only through the necessity of having a home.

Heaven, which destined her for the assistance of the poor, united her with a family which made a special profession of practising charity. God gave to Louise de Marillac as husband Antoine le Gras, born in Montferrand in Auvergne and secretary of the queen Marie de Médicis. His family had distinguished itself by love of the poor, and had founded a hospital in the town of Puy. She entered into this marriage at the age of twenty-two, in the month of February 1613, and it was blessed in the church of Saint-Gervais, in Paris.

Her practice of every virtue possible in that state was edifying. She applied herself from the first years to visiting the poor sick of the parish where she lived. She herself gave them broths and remedies, made their beds, instructed them and consoled them by her exhortations, disposed them to receive the sacraments, and buried them after their death. And the Saint Saviour parish, among others, where she was living when her husband died, was the witness and object of all these acts of charity.

This virtue of charity which, according to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, is strengthened and evermore increased by helping the sick, was established in her heart with such strength and zeal, that she set no limits to her plans. She did not rest satisfied with helping the sick in their homes, but went to visit them in the hospitals to add some comforts to the basic care which was supplied there, and to render them personally the lowest and most distressing services.

It was not enough for her to serve them herself. She attracted ladies

to this service by her advice and example, and this gave her some experience of the great work which she was later to undertake for the relief of all the poor, namely, the institution of a congregation of girls, of which she had conceived some idea in the course of her married life, as is shown by something she wrote.

Although she lived in society, she kept inviolable that "*religion, pure and without stain*" of which St. James speaks (Ja.1:27), which consists in "*visiting widows and orphans in their affliction, and keeping oneself unspotted from the corruption of the world.*"

Her heart was always far from its false pleasures and its vanities. During the time of public entertainments she used to withdraw into the Capuchin monastery, for which she had a tender affection all her life. She always showed great modesty in dress, following the advice of St. Peter (1Pet.3:4), "*not outwardly adorning herself, but inwardly adorning her heart by purity of spirit*". There could not be anyone more detached from the life and maxims of the world. She was never more joyous than when she could separate herself from its affairs by retreats, in order to be free to unite herself with God and converse with Him in prayer.

It was under the direction of the renowned Bishop of Belley, Jean Pierre Camus, that she learned to make these exercises of the spiritual life, giving herself to them with such ardour that this wise director considered himself obliged to moderate her excess. He showed his feelings about it in a letter, expressed in these terms:

*"I am consoled to know that recollection and spiritual retreats are so useful and pleasing to your taste, but in your case they are to be taken like honey, rarely and moderately. For you have a certain spiritual greed that needs to be restrained."*

As she knew that the life of the spirit as well as that of the body cannot continue without nourishment, and that the just man who lives by faith needs, as Tertullian says, to foster and feed it with divine truths, she often read books of piety and had a special love for the "Imitation of Christ" and for the "Spiritual Combat", as also for the works of St. Francis de Sales and Louis de Grenade. The learned bishop who guided her, judging her capable of the most solid diet, put into her hands the Sacred Scriptures, which according to the words of the Apostle (2 Tim. 3:16,17) "*are useful for making the man of God perfect and giving him the right dispositions for all kinds of good works*".

The soul cannot freely unite itself to God by meditation and other

spiritual exercises, unless it keeps under control the insistence of bodily passions, which offer resistance to the movements of grace, and unless it separates itself from the numerous temporal occupations which distract it. Knowing this, Louise de Marillac tried to master and subdue her body by fasts, vigils, and penitential cincture, although it was already very mortified by her ordinary infirmities and by the painful and continual practice of charity. Moreover, since preoccupation with temporal matters is like those tasks of Egypt which prevented the Israelites from going to offer sacrifice in the desert, she applied herself to them only so far as was necessary, and she always took care not to let them be obstacles to the union she had with God.

However, no matter what precaution she took, she could not completely avoid the demon's interference with the peace and tranquillity she was looking for. This enemy, seeing that he could not trouble her by the revolt of the passions, nor by the attractions and allurements of the world, used a more subtle and artful method. He tormented her by her own virtue, and used the purity and tenderness of her conscience to accomplish his designs against her. He inspired in her such a great fear of sin, and applied her mind so forcefully to the consideration of faults which the most innocent of souls commit through weakness, that she found it difficult in her meditations to turn her gaze away from them.

The Bishop of Belley, learning of this disposition in her did all he could to calm her, and we see the advice he gave her on this subject in a letter:

*"I am still waiting, my dear daughter, for serenity to return to you after these clouds which prevent you from seeing the beautiful light of joy which there is in the service of God. Don't make so much difficulty about indifferent matters; turn your gaze away from yourself a little and fix it on Jesus Christ: therein, according to my judgement, is your perfection, and I can say with the apostle, that in that I think I have the Spirit of God."*

Among these misgivings with which God allowed her to be disturbed for several years by the sight of her sins, there was some length of time when he permitted, for a greater trial, that her soul should be agitated by contradictory movements. She passed from excessive fear of sin to the other extreme. In order to combat the very foundation of this fear, and destroy it entirely in her heart, the demon suggested thoughts of infidelity, and attacked her by long, violent temptations against faith in the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. These temptations lasted from Ascension Day 1623 until Pentecost. But she was sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit, who delivered her from these

tribulations on that great feast-day, when she was assisting at the sacred mysteries in the Church of St. Nicholas-des-Champs. She declared in writing that she believed that she had obtained this grace through the intercession of St. Francis de Sales to whom she had great devotion, and from whom she had received in his lifetime special marks of esteem and affection, having been honoured by his visits during an illness, the last time he had travelled to Paris.

### **CHAPTER 3: The assistance she renders her husband in his illness. The sentiments she manifests at his death. Letter of consolation from the Bishop of Belley.**

This Christian woman, during her marriage, acquitted herself fully of all the obligations of her state. Not only did she render to God all the duties of religion, and to the poor all sorts of charitable services, but she carried out perfectly all her obligations to her husband and family. God blessed her marriage by the birth of a son, whom she brought up with special care, and whom in the course of time she helped to obtain the office of King's counsellor in the court of finance.

She entered into the sentiments which Saint Chrysostom advises Christian mothers to have for their children. *"We have"* says this Father, *"in their person a precious trust which is confided to us. We are obliged to conserve it with much care, and we must be on our guard lest the demon take it from us by surprise. No goods whatever should be as dear to us as our children, since everything we try to acquire is for their sake. It is a great disorder and extreme imprudence to have less concern for their education than for riches, which are amassed only for their benefit. Above all it is necessary to impress on them in their tender years the love of virtue. They should be taught to look upon external goods only as accessories, since possessing them will be useless without virtue, and being without them will do no harm where there is virtue."*

According to the view of the Apostle (1 Tim. 5:8), Christians are bound to take care of their servants; to act otherwise is to disown their faith. One cannot see this obligation fulfilled with more fidelity and more success than in this pious family. All those who were fortunate enough to be employed in its service, profited by her instruction and example. There were among others two of her husband's clerks who were inspired by the life of such a holy woman to leave the world, one of them entering the order of Minims, the other the congregation of St. Maur.

Divine providence wanted to sanctify her by trials, and allowed her husband, three or four years before his death, to fall into frequent illnesses, which put him in a tiresome and fretful humour. At such times this charitable and faithful wife showed her husband a more tender affection, a more compassionate goodness, and a more condescending love, trying to calm his spirit and soften his pains and sorrows. The great care which she took to help him and serve him at this time was an apprenticeship for her charity, during which she acquired knowledge of the sick and of the means necessary for alleviating their pain. She gained so much experience and competence in this exercise that she derived from it lessons and rules for the girls whom she was later to train in the care of the sick.

It was by her care and the tangible signs of her love, as well as by her example, that she gained her husband's heart, and made him capable of the Christian dispositions with which he died. One cannot better discern these dispositions than from the letter which she wrote to the Reverend Father Hilarion Rebours, Chartreux, first cousin of her husband.

*"Very Reverend Father,*

*Since you wish to know the graces that our good God gave my deceased husband, after telling you that it is impossible to let you know them all, I will say that for a long time, by the mercy of God, he no longer had any affection for anything which can lead to mortal sin, and had a very great desire to live devoutly. Six weeks before his death he had a high fever which put his mind in great danger; but God, showing his power over nature, calmed him, and in gratitude for this grace, he firmly resolved to serve God all his life. He hardly slept at all any night, but he was so patient that those near him were not at all inconvenienced.*

*I think that in this last illness, God wanted to give him a share in something like the pains of his death, for he suffered in his whole body, entirely losing his blood, and his mind was almost always occupied in meditation on the Passion. Blood poured abundantly from his mouth seven times, and the seventh took his life in an instant. I was alone with him to help him, at this important transition, and he gave proof of so much devotion that it was evident till his last sigh that his spirit was attached to God. He could never say anything to me except: Pray to God for me, I can do no more. These words will be forever graven on my heart. I ask you to remember him when you say Compline. He had such a special devotion to it that he hardly ever missed saying it every day."*

Nothing can be added to the testimony given by this wife's own letter, of the Christian dispositions of her husband at his death. Nor can the love and courage with which she rendered him the last duties be more sensitively expressed.

He died on the night of 21st December, 1625, in the Parish of Saint Saviour, after receiving all the sacraments. I cannot better express the sentiments she had at this time than by the example of a virtuous lady called Salvina, spoken of by St. Jerome. "*This widow*", says the good Father, "*wept so much over the death of Nebridius her husband, that she thereby proved her tenderness and married love. At the same time she bore her sorrow with so much virtue, that she looked upon it rather as a way forward than as a loss and privation.*"

A few hours after her husband's death, Mademoiselle le Gras went to see Monsieur Hollandre, her pastor, doctor of the House of Sorbonne, to receive consolation from him in her sorrow. She also went to confession and communion, not only to strengthen herself by the presence of Jesus Christ, but to consecrate herself to him as her only spouse.

The bishop who directed her and who took an interest in all the events of her life, wrote to her on her husband's death, and taught her the use she should make of her widowhood. Here is the touching manner in which he expressed himself in his letter:

*"At last, my dear Sister, the Saviour of our souls, after taking your spouse to his bosom, has placed himself in yours. O heavenly spouse, be for ever that of my sister, who chose you as such when she was still divided. But rest on her bosom, Lord, as a bouquet of myrrh, sweet to the smell, but bitter to the taste. Give her some consolation in the bitterness inseparable from her widowhood. O God, my very dear soul, it is at this hour that you must hold the cross fast and close, since you have no longer any other support on earth. It is now that you must ask God to remember his word. And what is this word, my very dear daughter? It is that he will be the father of the orphan, and the judge of the widow. He will be the judge, dear sister, to take her cause in hand, and to judge her enemies. It is at this hour that we shall see if you have loved God as you should, since he has taken away from you the one you loved so much. Eternal rest and peace be to this dear soul for whom we pray, and consolation to yours, from the Father of all consolations, and the God of mercies."*

## **CHAPTER 4: She makes a vow of widowhood. The Bishop of Belley puts her under the direction of Monsieur Vincent, who sets her to work in the service of the poor in the Confraternities of Charity.**

In 1623, when her husband was dangerously ill, Louise de Marillac had decided that if God took him she would remain a widow, which the Apostle, inspired by the spirit of God, considers a more blessed state than re-marriage (1 Cor. 7:40). She had made a vow to that effect on 4th May, feast of St. Monica. When Divine Providence gave her this opportunity through her husband's death, she felt obliged to fulfil her vow, and wrote to Father Rebourts about it in these terms:

*"Is it not reasonable that I should be all for God, after being so long for the world? I tell you then, my dear cousin, that I want this with all my heart, and in the way it pleases him. But I have much reason to doubt my ability to persevere in this holy desire, because of the continual obstacles which oppose the designs God has on me. So then, my dear Father, help my poor soul, and by your prayers break those bonds which attach me so strongly to all that is not God, and for his holy love continue the prayers that you promise me."*

She had such great esteem and love for the state which she had embraced that every year on the feast of St. Monica she used to renew this first offering that she had made of herself to God, and that day was a solemnity for her because of the grace she had received on it. She used her widowhood in the same way as Salvina, for whom, according to the testimony of St. Jerome, *"the death of her husband was a favourable opportunity for applying herself with more liberty and zeal to the exercises of religion."* She then redoubled her devotions and prayers, sanctifying herself more and more by frequent participation in the sacraments, by works of charity, by reading, meditation, fasting and austerities.

The Bishop of Belley saw that she was set on applying herself solely to acts of piety, and as he was not always able to be at hand to give her individual and continual direction, thought he could not confide her to a better director than the great Vincent de Paul. Through the secret ways of eternal Wisdom, it was he who brought about the holy bond which united these two leaders with their companies for works of charity.

Vincent, servant of Jesus Christ, was at that time laying the foundations of his congregation in the Collège des Bons-Enfants which

was given to him in 1625 by Jean François de Gondi, Archbishop of Paris. He was beginning there a form of community with a few priests who had joined him for the missions. Although he was not really in a position to undertake individual direction of souls, Vincent could not refuse the bishop's request that he take on the direction of Mademoiselle le Gras. She, for her part, wanted to be nearer to him so as to benefit more easily from his guidance, and moved in 1626 to a house near the College, in the parish of St. Nicholas-du-Chardonnet.

When she saw at close quarters the many charitable activities of this apostolic man and his constant pre-occupation with his growing company she felt still more strongly animated by his example. She conceived the plan of consecrating her life to the service of the poor, and of co-operating in his holy enterprises as far as she possibly could. But when she made known to him this plan he did not consider it appropriate to give way immediately to her desires. Wanting to try her out first for a few years, he advised her to make retreats, and above all to approach the Holy Eucharist, oracle of the witness of the new law, to consult there the will of God.

This delay, which was for her a kind of novitiate, served only to increase and strengthen her resolution even more, and make her take up during this time every opportunity of charity which arose. By her fidelity and perseverance, she obliged him at last to accept her offer, and to give her a share in the works of his missions for the assistance of the poor. This wise director judged her worthy of it, having found in her the disposition which St. Paul requires of widows for the ministry of charity. *"To admit a widow,"* says this Apostle, *"she must be known for her good works, and for the way she has practised hospitality, washed the feet of the Saints, helped those in trouble and applied herself to all kinds of good work."*(1 Tim. 5:10).

Monsieur Vincent began to employ her in these holy functions in 1629, and he sent her into the villages to visit the Confraternities of Charity that he had established there, in which the women assembled to help the sick poor.

He had instituted the first Confraternity at Châtillon in Bresse as early as 1617. God had given so many blessings to this work of piety that it had since spread to many places, and although these Confraternities were at first meant only for the countryside they spread to the towns. In this same year 1629 one was established in Paris in Saint Saviour parish.

This faithful and zealous soul received the orders of Monsieur Vincent with as much joy as submission and respect. She gave him such

perfect obedience that never afterwards did she undertake anything except in entire dependence on his advice and instructions, regarding him as the minister and interpreter of the will of God.

Before going on a journey she received his written instructions concerning the way in which she was to act during it. On the day of departure, she went to communion in order to receive through the presence of Jesus Christ a more abundant share in his charity, and a surer guarantee of his protection and guidance.

The first journey she made was to Montmirail in the diocese of Soissons, where this great missionary had established a Confraternity of Charity. Here is what he wrote to her on this subject, 16th May 1629:

*“Go, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I beg his divine goodness to accompany you, to be your consolation on the way, your strength in your work, and finally to bring you back in perfect health and full of good works. You will receive communion on the day of your departure to honour the charity of Our Lord, the journeys that He made for and by this same charity, the difficulties, the contradictions, the weariness and hard work that he endured; and also that he may be pleased to bless your journey, give you his spirit and the grace to act in this same spirit, and to bear your difficulties in the way that he bore his.”*

She was accompanied on these journeys by some pious ladies, and travelled in uncomfortable coaches, putting up with many inconveniences, living and sleeping very poorly in order to share more fully in the misery of the poor. She took with her a great supply of linen and medicines, and gave alms and made the journeys at her own expense.

When she had arrived in the village, she assembled the women who belonged to the Confraternity of Charity, gave them the instructions necessary to acquit themselves well of this employment, encouraged them by the fervour of her talks, worked to increase their number, re-animated what had cooled, raised up what had fallen, strengthened and perfected what was established.

To practise charity in all its fulness, she was not content with having the poor served, and supplying them with alms from her own resources. She wanted to do more than those rich religious people of whom St. Jerome speaks: *“who practise mercy by other ministers, and who are well-doers and charitable only with their possessions, and not with their hands.”* She visited them, and gave them food and remedies herself, following the example of Fabiola, who according to what this Father

wrote in her epitaph "*served meat to the sick with her own hand, and gave these living skeletons broth and beverages to drink.*"

After providing comfort for bodily infirmities, she worked to remedy sicknesses of soul, and as ignorance is their origin, she did all she could to destroy it, assembling girls of the countryside in private houses, where she taught them the articles of faith and the duties of the Christian life. If there was a school-mistress in the place she instructed her in her duties; if there was not she tried to establish one. In her person were seen renewed and revived the ministry and functions of those widows of the first centuries, who, following the ruling of the fourth Council of Carthage, were chosen "*to instruct rustic and ignorant women in a familiar language suited to their ability, and to teach them the maxims of sound doctrine, and the obligations which they contracted in their Baptism.*"

## **CHAPTER 5: Confraternities of Charity established and visited by Mademoiselle le Gras. Charity more excellent than miracles is her life's work.**

It was not fitting that Mademoiselle le Gras, after obtaining such great benefits for the poor of the countryside, should not give some share of them to those of Paris, who were reduced to equally great extremities. Her parish of St. Nicholas-du-Chardonnet, where she was living at the time could rightly lay claim to such a useful organisation. That is why in 1630, she undertook to set up there a Confraternity of Charity by assembling some ladies, whom she urged to join her for the service of the sick.

She first started this practice by the most perfect and heroic acts of charity, and she was worthy of being given signs of God's special protection. She generously risked her life in visiting a girl who had the plague, and Monsieur Vincent, on getting to know about it, wrote to her: *That this news had touched his heart, that if he had received it early enough he would have left at once to go and see her. In any case, the goodness of God towards people who give themselves to him in the Confraternity of Charity, not one of whom had so far been struck by the plague, gave him perfect confidence that she would not come to any harm. No, Mademoiselle, do not fear, Our Lord wants to make use of you for something concerning his glory, and I consider he will preserve you for that.*

The confidence of this man of God was not misplaced. Divine Providence preserved her from this danger and afterwards she used the life which had been spared her only to serve and assist the poor. She went to the market towns and villages to set up and visit meetings of the Charity, giving talks to the ladies who were in the association, instructing the girls, helping the sick, always putting before herself the example of the Son of God, who as the prince of the Apostles says, "*went about the towns and villages, doing good everywhere, healing, and freeing from all kinds of infirmities.*"

She was an ever-moving star, incessantly spreading her light and influence. In the month of February of that year, 1630, she visited the Confraternity at Saint Cloud in the diocese of Paris, where Monsieur Vincent wrote to her on the 19th of that month. *He praised God that she had the health to work for the salvation of so many people, and he begged her to send him word as to whether her lungs were not upset by so much talking, and her head by so much difficulty and noise.*

In May of the same year she visited the Confraternity in Villepreux which he had established as early as 1618, and which was the second of those which he had set up. On hearing that she had had some difficulty with the parish priest, he advised her to go and see him to declare *that if he did not find it advisable for her to continue her charitable works in his parish, she was ready to stop. He said that Our Lord would perhaps draw more glory from her submission, than from all the good she might do; that a beautiful diamond is worth more than a mountain of stones; and that an act of virtue of acquiescence and submission is worth more than a quantity of good works practised towards another.* After she had explained herself to the parish priest, he gladly accepted the good that she wanted to do for his flock. She worked there to excess, so much so that she fell ill, and later she regained her health and strength only to continue these exercises.

In the following autumn she undertook another visit to Villiers-le-Bel, but she could not moderate her zeal, and went about her visitation with so much application and such continual speaking and activity, in spite of being very indisposed with a cold, that she drew upon herself a second illness. When Monsieur Vincent heard about it he gave her this consolation in a letter of 22nd October:

*"Mademoiselle, is not your heart very joyful seeing that it has been found worthy before God to suffer in serving him? Certainly you owe him a very special thanks. Do all you can to make good use of it, and ask him for the grace to do so."*

It is surprising that so many infirmities could not stop the course of her works. At the beginning of December she went to visit the Confraternity of Charity established in the town of Beauvais. Immediately on her arrival her director, being concerned about her well-being, gave her this advice in a letter of 4th December:

*“Blessed be God, Mademoiselle, that you have arrived in good health! Take care then to keep well for the love of Our Lord and his poor members, and be careful not to do too much. It is a trick of the devil, with which he deceives good souls, to incite them to do more than they can, so that eventually they can do nothing. The spirit of God gently urges us to do the good we reasonably can, so that we can do it perseveringly and for a long time. Act in like manner then, Mademoiselle, and you will act according to the spirit of God.”*

Having learned of the honour that had been paid her in this town, he advised her in the same letter as to the use she was to make of it. He said that when she saw herself honoured and esteemed she should unite her spirit to the insults and ill treatment that the Son of God suffered. He also said that a truly humble spirit humiliated itself as much in honours as in scorn, acting like the bee which makes its honey just as well from the dew which falls on the wormwood, as from that which falls on the rose. She looked upon this advice as a salutary precaution amidst the applause she received on this journey. Throughout it she kept sentiments of Christian moderation, and used the dispositions she found in the heart of all the inhabitants of Beauvais only to establish there with even more love and zeal the various works of Charity. As soon as she began her meetings, the women came in great numbers and were charmed by her talks. The men, not being allowed to attend, went into the houses where she was giving her conferences, hid themselves in order to be able to hear them without being seen, and went away overjoyed and astonished.

When she had finished her work, and was leaving to return to Paris, all the people accompanied her on the way with a thousand blessings and thanks. It so happened that in the crush a child fell under a wheel of her coach, which went over the middle of the child's body. This unfortunate accident moved her deeply, but having said some prayers, she saw the child get up at once unharmed, and walk with perfect ease.

I am not concerned with wondering whether the way in which this child was preserved has something miraculous about it, nor what part Mademoiselle le Gras might have in it. There is no need to enhance by miracles the holiness of a person already outstanding by her constant exercise of charity. *“This virtue”*, says Saint Chrysostom, *“is a gift and a*

*marvel more excellent than all marvels and all gifts, since it is the hallmark of true disciples of Jesus Christ, whom he himself has stamped to make them known.*” “*The grace of miracles*”, continues this Father, “*is one of those gifts which are common to saints and sinners, just as some clothes are the same both for kings and subjects. Charity however, is a gift raised above all spiritual gifts, and belongs only to saints, in the same way as the sceptre and crown are ornaments which are for kings only, and by which one recognizes their dignity. We admire St. Paul not so much because he raised the dead and healed the sick as because he sympathised with all the infirmities of his brothers. We also admire him because his heart-felt charity for them was explained by these words: ‘Who is weak and sick, and I am not weak and sick with him?’*” *Such ardent apostolic zeal is of more value, in the opinion of St Chrysostom, than ten thousand miracles.*

To demonstrate then the merit of Louise de Marillac it is enough to show how the whole course of her life was a continual exercise in charity. She took an interest, like the Apostle, in all the troubles and needs of the poor, and was able to say like him “*Who is weak and sick, and I am not weak and sick with him?*” (2 Cor. 11:29). This redounds more to her glory than if she had had the gift of healing them or performing other marvels.

You will see that as the years went by this virtue was the beginning and end of all her actions and enterprises. Her sole pre-occupation was to discover the different needs of the poor, and to obtain for them funds and alms; to procure establishments for them, supply them with servants in the person of her daughters, and give them all kinds of relief and assistance.

The year 1631 was spent for the most part, like the preceding ones, in journeys that she made to the countryside for the establishment of the Charities. The Reverend Father de Gondy, who was respected no less for his piety than for the greatness of his family and employments, begged her, on account of her reputation for bearing great fruit everywhere, to go to several of his estates in Champagne. In order to meet the requirements of well-ordered charity, M. Vincent advised her to go first of all to meet the Bishop of Chalons, to acquaint him with the reason for the journey and assure him of her obedience.

*“Tell him, Mademoiselle, why the Reverend Father de Gondy has asked you to go to Champagne, and what your plans are. Offer to cut out of your programme whatever he wishes, and to give it up altogether if he wants you to. That is the spirit of God. I find no*

*blessing except in that. You must look upon him as the interpreter of the will of God in whatever happens. If he recommends you to change something in your way of doing things, be exact about it, please. If he recommends you to leave, do so peacefully and cheerfully, since you are doing the will of God."*

He also recommended her especially to show deference to the parish priests. He himself took it as a maxim to work only with their approval, getting their blessing at the beginning and end of each mission, in a spirit of dependence.

Under her care, these establishments were at that time spreading throughout the countryside. They began to multiply in Paris also during that year, and were received with joy in the parishes of St. Benoit and St. Sulpice, then in others following their example. Her works were not confined within the limits of one diocese. So great a public benefit had to spread further, and she extended it at this time to several other dioceses.

# BOOK TWO

## CHAPTER 1: Origin of the Company of the Sisters of Charity. Assembly of Ladies in Paris for the relief of the sick of the Hotel-Dieu.

The Confraternities of Charity, the first of which was instituted by M. Vincent in 1617, were not yet functioning as they should. In the country parishes where they had first been established, the women who had joined helped the sick personally, made their beds and prepared food and remedies.

But after they were established in Paris, since many highranking ladies joined, it did not seem that they could render the sick the necessary services with their own hands, no matter how zealous they were. And yet, if they gave the task to their servants, it was unlikely that these would have enough affection and skill to do it well. This made Monsieur Vincent judge that it was absolutely necessary to have servants employed for this ministry, under the direction of the ladies. He put this idea before girls in the countryside during his missions, and found several who offered to devote their whole lives to it.

These girls could not be well instructed for the service of the poor nor for exercises of piety, because no bond or link existed between them and they had no superior to direct them. They depended solely on the ladies of the parishes, and when it was necessary to change some of them, or send them to new establishments, it was not easy to find any already prepared. That is why Monsieur Vincent thought it necessary to unite these girls in community under the direction of a superior, so that they might be formed for the works of the Confraternities of Charity, and that there might be always some in reserve to call on in case of need.

He found no one more worthy of this employment than Mademoiselle le Gras, in whom he had recognised for so many years perfect prudence, exemplary and persevering piety, and ardent, untiring zeal. He put into her care a few girls to be housed with her, and to live a community life. She was living at that time near St. Nicholas-du-Chardonnet, and she began this little community on 29th November, 1633, eve of the feast of St. Andrew.

It was there that the Holy Company of the Sisters of Charity,

servants of the poor, came into being. Since that time Heaven has poured down on it abundant blessings, increasing and multiplying it by a great number of establishments.

Having taken on the responsibility for the direction of this new-born company, she loved this vocation so much that she wanted to dedicate herself to it entirely, and the following year, on the feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, she committed herself to it by an irrevocable vow, at the same time renewing her vow of widowhood. From then onwards she offered to God one of her communions every month for the rest of her life to thank him for calling her to this state.

Divine Providence which had begun this great work of charity by instituting a company of girls to serve the poor, brought it to completion by providing resources to meet its expenses. In Paris, the source and centre of all the riches of the kingdom, an assembly of ladies of the highest rank was formed, which was able later on to relieve all kinds of miseries, and which spread its charity into the farthest provinces, in the unhappy times of famine, war and sickness.

This holy Company brought about the rebirth in our days of the charity of the first Christians who on the advice of St. Paul brought to meetings what they could give of their goods to help the saints in Jerusalem. In this way they heaped up treasures, according to the expression of this Apostle, not only for those poor whom they helped in their needs, but principally for themselves, by meriting heavenly treasures. That is why, according to the remark of St. Chrysostom

*“Saint Paul did not only say that each one should put aside what he wanted to give, but that he should store it up. This was to teach us that almsgiving is an advantageous profit and infinite treasure for those who give with the greatest profusion and liberality”.*

At the same time, in the person of Vincent de Paul, promoter of all these charities and director of these meetings, we see reflected the conduct of the apostle Paul who begged all the churches to collect alms. Moreover Paul judged this undertaking so worthy of his apostolate that when he shared with St. Peter the ministry of preaching – leaving to this prince of the apostles the conversion of the Jews and confining his own preaching to the Gentiles – he did not make any distinction in caring for the poor, but included those of both nations. In order to take the alms of the faithful to Jerusalem (Gal.2:20) Paul was prepared to interrupt his preaching of the Gospel, which was for him the most important function, exempting him even from administering the sacraments.

At the start, this assembly of the Ladies only intended giving some relief to the sick of the Hotel-Dieu. Mademoiselle le Gras and some other pious ladies, realising when they visited these poor people that they lacked many comforts that the hospital could not provide, made it known to Monsieur Vincent who advised them to hold meetings to find ways of supplying these needs.

The first meeting took place in 1634 at the home of Madame la Présidente Goussault, and was attended by Mesdames de Villesavin and le Boilleul as well as Mademoiselle Pollalion, foundress of the Daughters of Providence.

The second meeting was larger than the first, and Madame la Chancelière honoured it with her presence, along with Madame Fouquet and several other ladies of rank.

They resolved with their charitable director who presided over the meeting that every day they would give to the sick of the hospital jams, stewed fruit and other sweet things by way of little extras. These would be presented to them by each of the ladies in turn, who would add spiritual consolations to this act of charity.

To make the meeting more orderly, they appointed three officers: a superior, an assistant and a treasurer. Madame Goussault was elected as the first superior, and acquitted herself of her functions with great leadership and zeal.

Her example was followed by Madame de Soucarière who succeeded her in this responsibility.

The third superior was Madame la Présidente de Lamoignon, whose hereditary piety gave as much glory to her family as did its brilliant record in public office. When she died, this employment passed from her hands into those of Madame la Duchesse d'Aiguillon, who in the last year of a life full of merits and good works, persevered in and completed her exercise of charity. An infinite number of good things was accomplished during the time of office of these superiors, not only by them, but by the other officers, and by a great number of ladies who joined the Company, of whom I can say in the terms of the Apostle that "*their names are written in the book of life.*"(Phil. 4:3)

Some time later, Monsieur Vincent having learned from experience that it was difficult for the same people to attend to both spiritual and

corporal works of mercy, judged that every three months fourteen ladies should be chosen from those who would be the most capable of exhorting and instructing. These would visit the poor, two by two, each on a particular day of the week, and would speak to them of the things necessary for their salvation in a touching and familiar way.

All these exercises of piety were powerfully animated by the example of Mademoiselle le Gras who applied herself to them with so much fervour that she was incessantly in this hospital beside the sick. Monsieur Vincent was obliged to moderate her zeal, giving her this advice in a letter:

*“To be always at the Hotel-Dieu, Mademoiselle, is not expedient, but to come and go is fitting. Do not fear undertaking too much in doing the good which presents itself to you, but fear the desire of doing more than you are doing and that God does not give you the means of doing. The thought of going beyond that makes me tremble with fear, because it seems to me a crime in children of Providence.”*

This work of charity could not be well carried out unless there were servants who would take care to buy and prepare all that was needed, and help the ladies in their visits, and in the distribution of these little extras. Mademoiselle le Gras was beginning to train some girls to be devoted in this way whenever the interests of the poor were at stake, and she gave some of her girls for this purpose at the request of the ladies, who lodged them near the Hotel-Dieu.

Mademoiselle le Gras not being content with engaging them in this work, made it possible for them to contribute to its upkeep by their own efforts. She gave them the idea of making jam, not only to supply it to this hospital, but to sell it in Paris. This business was undertaken only for the benefit of the poor, whom she taught the girls to regard as their masters. By this little device a large amount of money was raised to help support the Charity.

One cannot imagine the blessing God gave to this group right from the beginning. He made it an inexhaustible source of good, and the public refuge of a multitude of miseries. He successfully drew from it aid for the poor in all their bodily needs, the salvation of their souls, the sanctification of charitable persons, the edification of his church, and the triumph and glory of his Gospel.

From the first year of its institution, it produced much fruit in this

hospital by visits and instructions. An extraordinary number of Catholics was prepared to die well, or to begin a good life, and more than seven hundred heretics with some infidels were converted to the faith.

As charity is always inventive, and as, according to the doctrine of the Apostle, "*God multiplies it like seed and makes it produce more and more fruits,*" (2 Cor. 4:10) this assembly which had at first undertaken only to give a little assistance to the sick of the Hotel-Dieu, later found itself capable of providing relief for all kinds of poor people.

Paris was not big enough to contain the charity of these ladies, charity as vast as that of Fabiola, for whom, according to the account of St. Jerome, "*the city of Rome was not extensive enough; and whose ardour took her beyond isles and seas.*" They took charge of all the provinces of the kingdom, they crossed seas, they supported missions in infidel countries, and they spread their benefits to the ends of the world.

The importance and usefulness of these meetings can best be described in the words Mademoiselle le Gras herself wrote:

*"It is very evident that in this century, divine Providence willed to use our sex, to make it clear that it was Providence alone who wanted to help afflicted people and who gave powerful helps for their salvation. Everyone knows that for this work God made use of the establishment of the Mission under the direction of Monsieur Vincent. So much good has been spread by this means, that it is clear that we must continue to make known the needs at the meetings of the ladies, in which it seems that the spirit of God always presides. The Authority given by the Holy Father to the said Mission to establish the Confraternity of Charity is like the seed of this fruit which it produces every day not only in France, but one can say in almost all the habitable earth. Was it not by this light that the ladies of the company recognised the needs of the poor, and that God gave them the grace of helping them so charitably and magnificently that Paris became the admiration and example of all the kingdom? As for the means used by these charitable ladies for the order of distribution, was it not their holy meetings, at which Monsieur Vincent, head of the Mission, presided? There, as everybody knows, faithful and charitable persons were appointed to recognise real needs and to meet them wisely; not only corporal but also spiritual needs. On this account, God is now honoured in heaven by a countless number of souls who enjoy his presence.*"

*In face of such obvious truths should not the company of the*

*Ladies of Charity of the Hotel-Dieu continue its functions? Ever since the spiritual birth of this noble group of women, who simply visit the sick in this holy place, much good has been seen to be done, both for the place itself and for those who have found there the means of their salvation. Having been prepared for general confessions, some had a happy death and others were wonderfully converted by them. The ladies themselves entered into the way of sanctification, which is perfect charity, like that which they often exercised at the peril of their lives. Ladies of very high rank such as Princesses and Duchesses have been seen sitting for whole hours beside the sick, to instruct them in the things necessary for salvation, and to help them withdraw from dangers they were in. The truth of what is reported here would be more clearly seen if everything had been collected that was done by each of The Fourteen, as the ladies appointed for this holy exercise were known."*

## **CHAPTER 2: The Sisters of Charity employed in the service of the sick poor.**

At the same time as a general assembly of ladies from all the different districts of Paris applied themselves to these works of piety in the Hotel-Dieu, special Confraternities of Charity were being formed in several parishes to help poor sick workers in their homes, and to spare them the shame and inconveniences inseparable from hospital.

It was to the parish of Saint-Laurent that Monsieur de Lestoc, Doctor of Paris, its pastor, had attracted the inspiration behind these holy institutions, by establishing Monsieur Vincent and his congregation in the house of St. Lazare, which he had done in 1632. This parish wanted to share in a benefit needed there more than anywhere else as it was always filled with a greater number of poor, who came looking for shelter on the outskirts and fringe of the city which form its boundaries. It found in the person of Monsieur Vincent not only the sentiments of a founder for his works, but the zeal and tenderness of a parishioner who took an interest in all its needs. Besides obtaining alms for it to begin the funds for its Charity, he contributed liberally from his own goods, and continued his care and assistance for it as long as he lived.

It was at this time that this father of the poor, seconded by the zeal of Mademoiselle le Gras, put the final perfection to these Confraternities which he had instituted. These holy societies were composed of ladies of

the parishes and governed under the direction of priests by three officers chosen from among them, namely a superior who received the sick, a treasurer who had the alms in safe-keeping, and a storekeeper who took care of the linen and other necessary stores. The purpose of this institution was to supply the poor of each parish with all kinds of help in their sicknesses. But the greater number of these ladies not being in a position to serve them with their own hands, they needed suitable people with a liking for such service. And so favourable an opportunity was found only when heaven brought into being a company of girls entirely committed to this charitable service, and trained for it under wise and regular discipline. From the time of this establishment, Paris and the whole of France has been edified to see virgins consecrated to Jesus Christ visiting this Divine Spouse every day in the person of his members and carrying from house to house provisions and remedies needed for their relief.

That is the vision which inspired this foundress to instruct her daughters to carry out those works of charity. To help them understand how to practise them, and reveal their merit and worth, she explained to them one day in a conference, what she had learned in some reading: *That Jesus Christ had taught us charity, to make up for our inability to render him any direct service, and that the neighbour was given to us in his place. She had therefore conceived the desire of honouring him to the best of her ability in the person of the poor.*

She had them reflect often on this, exhorting them *not to lose sight of God in their activities, and telling them that it didn't amount to much to carry pots through the streets, and to do any other corporal work, if they did not put before themselves the Son of God as the object of their ministry. If we do not keep in mind, she said, that the poor are his members, it will certainly cause us to lessen our love, gentleness and other dispositions which we must keep for these dear masters. On the other hand, keeping it in mind will cause us to find no difficulty in serving them, showing them respect, making us careful about their needs, and never complaining.* A sister whom she had sent to the country wrote that what helped her a lot on going to find the sick, was to be quite convinced that she was going to find the Son of God, to which she gave this reply:

*"Ah! my dear Sister, how true it is that a soul who seeks God in this way is consoled! It is a foretaste of Paradise."*

But it would be only an imperfect charity, if when this superior

instructed her daughters to seek God in the assistance they rendered the poor in their bodily infirmities, she did not also teach them to lead the poor to God by spiritual helps, consolation and salutary advice. She knew that when the Son of God gave his disciples power to cure all sorts of evils, he ordered them to proclaim to the sick at the same time the Kingdom of God (Luke 10:9). That is why she especially recommended to her daughters the spiritual service of the poor, as the principal end of their employments.

I could relate here several pieces of advice that she gave them so as to carry out well this act of charity, but I found nothing in her writings more capable of teaching them in detail how to do so than what she set before herself one day in a meditation she made on this subject.

*“Putting myself in the presence of God to meditate on the visiting and service of our masters, the sick poor, it occurred to me that it is in our interests to know well what God wants us to do, so that he may be eternally glorified by his creatures.*

*I proposed, if I were so happy as to visit them, to make them understand that to make good use of their sickness they must bear it as coming from the paternal hand of our good God, who does nothing except for the best. To make everything that we suffer pleasing to him, we must offer him all our sorrows in union with those of his Son, reminding him that in his love he has made them one. It would be pleasing to God, to say often from the heart, as Our Lord said in the garden, may Thy holy will be done. They must dispose themselves to receive the grace of God by the sacraments to appease his anger which they have drawn down by their sins, and to assure their salvation in the uncertainty of death.*

*If it seems that their sickness will be fatal, I thought of having them make acts of hope, giving them as much knowledge of the mercy of God as I could. I would try to find examples of this in their own lives, such as dangers of death from which God has preserved them, when they were perhaps in mortal sin. I would assure them that having received graces in their lifetime they must hope for great mercy from God after death, but they must dispose themselves for it by real regret for having offended God. I should also like to be able to give them some knowledge of the greatness, the beauty and charity of God, of the joy of possessing him eternally, and of the glory of the blessed. Provided our soul leaves this world in the grace and love of God, we are assured of enjoying all this glory. Every moment of their life on earth when they have been in the grace of God, and every moment of the present sickness, will count for eternity through the merits of Jesus Christ.*

*If they become convalescent, I thought I should remind them to thank God for the health he gives them, pointing out that it is for some good reason that he leaves them in this world, and has not called them from it. They must believe that the chief purpose of God is to give them even more time to think of their salvation, and not to live as if we were created only to live a time on earth. And since the life of the soul lasts eternally, we must make good use of all the means God gives us to make it blessed. We must resolve to love God above all things and never offend him mortally. One of the most powerful means we have of keeping ourselves in his grace, is to receive the sacraments often, and we must not rely on our own judgement when difficulties arise which might keep us away.*

*I must try to produce in my own heart the same affections that I desire to give them, speaking with love, and not in a judgmental way.”*

Such are the sentiments which the spirit of God inspired in this charitable soul in her meditations, and which she would pass on to the poor sick. This example shows her daughters the way their mother leads others, and serves as a model for their own approach in exhorting the sick when they visit them.

### **CHAPTER 3: Mademoiselle le Gras goes to live at La Chapelle. She receives Ladies there for retreats. Her love of prayer.**

The number of girls who entered the company was increasing every day. It was therefore necessary to find a bigger house to accommodate them and Mademoiselle le Gras could not find just then anywhere more convenient than La Chapelle near Paris. Not only did it have the advantage of being nearer Monsieur Vincent, but it would be suitable for bringing up her fledgling community in the spirit of servants of the poor. There she formed her daughters in the poor, humble, simple and laborious life of the countryside, regulating their food, clothing and occupations accordingly.

She went to live there in the month of May, 1636. She could not be in a place without doing good there like the blessed angels, and as soon as she was settled in she applied herself to teaching catechism to the women and girls on Sundays and feasts, and had the little girls

instructed in her house. Their previous teacher had been a man, and when she took over his pupils she saw that he received compensation, never overlooking the claims of justice in her practice of charity.

It was there that she began to exercise the virtue of hospitality so recommended by St. Paul (Heb. 13:2), and so honoured in the person of Abraham, who in charitably welcoming men merited to receive God himself. A great number of girls from the frontier of Picardy had been forced to leave their homes through fear of enemies who had come into that Province and besieged the town of Corbie. They found in her house a place of safety for their life and modesty. In order to practise hospitality in all its perfection, she not only housed and fed them, but added spiritual alms. She obtained a mission for them and had the holy word distributed to them, which according to the expression of St. Gregory of Nazianzen, *"is the bread of angels, with which souls hungry for God are nourished and filled."*

That is an alms necessary for the rich of the world as well as for the poor. If the poor are in need of material goods to live a human and natural life, the rich are in need of heavenly goods to live a supernatural and divine life. Both are poor and needy, and Scripture teaches us that the soul as well as the body being poor and suppliant, piety and compassion must be exercised in its regard, trying to make it pleasing to God.

One of the greatest and most sovereign remedies for consoling the soul in its needs, is the spiritual retreat. It is a state in which, as St. Augustine teaches us, one wants to meditate on heavenly truths and dispose oneself, like the prophet King *"to receive understanding and light on them. One must separate oneself from the crowd and from the superfluity of temporal and perishable things which by accumulating divide the heart, to attach oneself to unity and eternity."* And to use the words of Monsieur Vincent: *"The retreat"*, says this great man, *"is a disengagement from all business and occupations of the world, in order to apply oneself seriously to know well one's interior, to examine well the state of one's conscience, to meditate, contemplate, pray and so prepare one's soul; to be purified of all sins and evil affections and habits; to be filled with the desire of virtues, to seek and know the will of God, and knowing it, to submit to it, to conform oneself to it, to unite oneself to it, and so tend towards, approach, and finally reach one's own perfection."* This servant of God, convinced of the necessity of these retreats, and zealous for the conversion and salvation of souls, in order to attract men pre-occupied with worldly affairs, opened his houses to receive them,

offered them his Company to serve them, and drew up exercises to direct them.

Mademoiselle le Gras supplied for persons of her sex what he could not do by himself. She began to prepare for them places of retreat while she lived at La Chapelle, and this has been continued ever since in her community. The grace which inspired her with this purpose, gave her the greatest success she could wish for. Several ladies, including some of high society, were attracted by her zeal, and left Paris depriving themselves of the conversation of the world to spend some days in a village, to converse there with God. They left the comforts and delicacies of life, to think of their salvation in a place of mortification and penance. Without considering their rank and position, which raised them above others, they came into a house of servants of the poor and submitted themselves to the same discipline of a superior, to learn to despise riches and grandeurs by her instruction and example.

To direct the ladies in these retreats, and to form them in these exercises of piety, she used the lights and rules which she received from Monsieur Vincent. She accompanied them with the great understanding she had of the spiritual life, in which she had perfected herself by long experience. She had always had an extraordinary love and eagerness for prayer, according to the testimony of the Bishop of Belley. She had a lofty mind and sound judgement, formed by the study of philosophy and serious reading. She also had a tender heart, immersed in God, and made her prayer in a strong, sublime and affective way. These dispositions of her soul can be clearly seen in the meditations which she left in writing.

Every day without fail she spent some time in prayer, no matter what occupation she might have. She even doubled it every Friday and the whole of Lent. On those days she remained alone from two until three in the afternoon to apply herself especially to meditation on the death of the Son of God. She ended her prayer with this reflection which the Apostle prescribes for all Christians, and which the Church can say in her Office only with transports of wonder, "*Jesus Christ became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross!*" And she then spoke to the cross in these words: "*Hail O Cross, our only hope.*"

She was not satisfied with these ordinary exercises. Several times a year she made a retreat of three or four days, and she always made one regularly during the ten days from Ascension to Pentecost, to honour the example of the Blessed Virgin and the infant Church, who during these mysterious days were at prayer in the Cenacle to prepare

themselves for the coming of the Holy Spirit. She also chose this time because of a devotion she had for the feast of Pentecost, and which she has noted in her writing. She says *"I have a very special affection for this feast; the time of waiting for it is very dear to me. Some time ago I had a great consolation hearing from a preacher that it was on that day that God gave his written law to Moses, and that in the order of grace he had given to his Church on the same day his law of love together with the power to make it effective. It was also on this same day that it pleased God to put into my heart a law which has never left it. Therefore I should gladly wish, if I were permitted, that on this same day his goodness would teach me the means of observing this law according to his holy word."*

Her great familiarity with prayer and retreat revealed in all her actions such awareness of God that she was always recollected amid the diversity and multiplicity of her occupations. She showed such concentration in her prayers that she was fixed and motionless before the altars; such tenderness and love in communion that she was often seen coming away from it with tears in her eyes, and that the little cloth which she used for this holy action was quite moist. She showed such union and conformity to the will of God in her troubles and sicknesses that she had a calm and contented spirit, and never complained; such fervour in her conferences and talks that she expressed herself in a touching and affecting way by rapturous exclamations.

This superior, so enlightened and spiritual, took great care to form her daughters in the spirit of prayer, and she recommended the practice of it as an absolutely necessary means of remaining in their vocation. Separated from each other in town and country parishes, deprived of the guidance of superiors, far away from the mother-house, abandoned to their own guidance, obliged to live in the world, distracted by the requirements of their works, applying themselves every day of their lives to actions that are painful and lowly in the eyes of men, how could the girls possibly persevere without being attached to God, and continually strengthening themselves by meditation on his truths?

St. Augustine judged meditation so necessary for all those in the active life that he gave them this excellent advice in the "City of God":

*"One must not live so much at rest, that one does not think at the same time of serving one's neighbour, nor give oneself up so much to action, that one loses sight of nourishing oneself with the Word of God. Love of truth makes us seek a holy rest; but the obligation of charity makes us accept just employment. If we are given it we must carry it as a burden put upon us by charity, and even then we must not deprive ourselves of that sweetness which is tasted in meditating*

*on the truth of God, for fear lest not being sustained by this heavenly pleasure, we succumb under the weight of our works."*

These two maxims were the rules of conduct of Mademoiselle le Gras, and she acted on them all her life. Love of truth detached her from creatures to unite herself to God in prayer and spiritual retreats; and the obligation of charity made her embrace every opportunity which arose for the relief of the neighbour in his misery.

#### **CHAPTER 4: Monsieur Vincent entrusts her with the care of the foundlings and the galley-slaves. She goes to establish her daughters in the hospital of Angers.**

God provided Mademoiselle le Gras in 1638 with one of the most urgent and worthy opportunities of Christian piety in the person of the foundlings. These unfortunate innocents who were the product of wickedness later became its victims by being cruelly exposed and abandoned to all kinds of dangers, often even to the loss of their souls by being deprived of baptism. This situation had been provided for in Paris for some years, and a woman had been paid and a nursery set up at the port of Saint-Landry to receive them. Nevertheless, as there were funds to keep only two wet-nurses, many of the great number brought there died of hunger and misery. The woman in charge, anxious to get rid of them, gave them to everybody who came and asked for them. Therefore it often happened that they were used for purposes which were criminal or harmful to life.

Monsieur Vincent heard of this extremity from Mademoiselle le Gras and felt urged by his charity to try and find a remedy. He had recourse to the assembly of the ladies as an effective means of finding a solution. As soon as he opened the meeting and put the suggestion before them, he found them ready to co-operate fully with his zeal. Together they resolved that they would begin by taking twelve children to have them nourished, and that out of the very many whom they could not yet undertake to take care of entirely these twelve would be chosen by lot. They undertook to increase this number from time to time whenever possible, only dispensing themselves from taking all of them through sheer inability, and feeling real pain about it. They rented a larger house

in the Faubourg Saint-Victor to take them in, and Monsieur Vincent, father of orphans, wanting them to find in charity the mother's heart which was lacking in nature, put them in the hands of Mademoiselle le Gras and her daughters. He recommended the orphans to them as a trust dear to the Son of God, telling them that he *had loved children and had promised his Kingdom to those who were like them and had also said that their good angels always see the face of God his Father in heaven.*

Another challenge was met in the following year, 1639, of the kind spoken about by Saint Paul in his letter to the Hebrews: *"Remember those who are in chains as if you yourselves were in chains with them and remember those who are afflicted since you yourselves are in a body subject to pain and death."* (Heb. 13:3) Monsieur Vincent, remembering that he had once been a slave at sea, and had been taken to Barbary, was aware through his own experience of the misery of the poor galley-slaves. He had obtained for them from the late King Louis XIII in 1632 a place of refuge in the tower near the St. Bernard gate, where he provided them with all kinds of help.

Mademoiselle le Gras, being at that time Superior of the Charity at St. Nicholas-du-Chardonnet, wanted to share in the merit of such a good work, and began to contribute to it from her own resources and with all the charitable services within her power. But she had the opportunity of fully satisfying her zeal only in 1639. That year, at the request of Mademoiselle Cornuel, whose father had bequeathed a considerable sum to be used for the relief of these poor unfortunates, she gave her daughters to serve them in their needs.

The great good which she was accomplishing through the ministry of her Company could not remain confined to Paris. She was obliged to extend it further because of requests made for it in several different places. In that same year, 1639, the town of Angers had asked for girls to serve the poor in its hospital. She took the trouble of going there in December, in spite of her weakness and the harshness of the season, to arrange for this. She suffered so many inconveniences on her journeys that she fell ill immediately after her arrival. Monsieur the Abbé de Vaux, auxiliary of Angers, who had given her hospitality in his house, had her cared for in every possible way. When news of her illness reached Monsieur Vincent, he wrote her this letter to console her, on the 31st of the same month:

*"So now you are sick, Mademoiselle, through the order of God's Providence. Blessed be his holy name. I hope that in his goodness he will draw glory from this illness as he did from all the others. And that is what I ask everyone to pray for incessantly, here and wherever*

*I am. Oh! how I wish Our Lord would let you see how wholeheartedly each one is doing so, and the tenderness of the office-holders of the Charity of the Hotel Dieu in this respect!"*

When she was convalescing in the month of January of the following year, 1640, she established her daughters in this hospital in the way he prescribed for her by a letter of the 17th of that month. She also assembled the ladies to suggest to them the practice of charity which was being followed at the Hotel-Dieu of Paris, and got them to undertake it for this hospital, giving them the notes and rules which they were to observe.

The most touching consolation that she received at that time, was what Monsieur Vincent sent her in this same letter of 17th January concerning the Charity of the Foundlings. *"Oh! how necessary your presence is here, Mademoiselle, not only for your daughters but also for the general business of the Charity. The General Assembly of the Ladies of the Hotel-Dieu took place last Thursday. Madame the Princess and Madame the Duchess of Aiguillon honoured it with their presence. Never have I seen so great yet so unpretentious a gathering. It was decided to take all the foundlings. As you can imagine, Mademoiselle, you were not forgotten."*

## **CHAPTER 5: The Sisters of Charity serve the poor who have contagious diseases. Lorraine is assisted during the war by Monsieur Vincent. Mademoiselle le Gras gives shelter to girl-refugees from that province.**

Some time after she had come back to Paris, the charity of the girls she had left in the hospital of Angers was put to the test by the plague with which God afflicted that town. They showed on that occasion that in professing charity they had neither reservations nor limits. Having left parents and goods for the sake of charity, and having consecrated to it their liberty and their actions, they were always ready to sacrifice their lives for it. They had no greater desire than to be its martyrs and acquire that glorious title with which the Church honoured in the first centuries the faithful of Alexandria, who died in the service of the plague-stricken.

When Mademoiselle le Gras heard of this generous determination of

her daughters, she showed her joy and gave them some advice in this letter which she wrote to one of them.

*“My dear Sister,*

*These sudden deaths warn us to be ready when it pleases God to call us, and remind us to take precautions before seeing the sick. You console me very much by not wanting to abandon them, and may your gentlemen and ladies be of the same mind. I think you will not fail to have devotion to St. Roch to obtain from God the strength necessary to bear the fear of this danger and its possible consequences with submission to his good pleasure, and so we must fear nothing.”*

She sent them word by this letter that there was a contagious disease in Paris also, from which many people were dying suddenly, and that her daughters who were everywhere animated by the same spirit were exposing their lives there and in many other places in order to help the sick.

A frightful desolation occurred in Lorraine at the same time through the misfortunes of war, and through other scourges which are its inseparable consequences. The famine there was so great that there was nothing left to eat except roots, and the flesh of (dead) animals, and the province was reduced to the same extremity as the town of Samaria in which, according to the account in Scripture, mothers were forced to eat their children. (4 Kings 6:28) Monsieur Vincent was at that time like an Eliseus for that province, helping to relieve its deplorable conditions. But the means he used were very different from those used by that prophet. It was only by force that Eliseus provided for the misery of Samaria. He used the power that God had put in his hands to cast terror into the army of the King of Syria who was besieging it, forcing him to flee the city and leave behind all his supplies and baggage. But it was by way of gentleness and love that Monsieur Vincent undertook the relief of Lorraine. He had recourse to the Company of the Ladies. He inspired charity in their hearts by the ardour of his zeal and the power of his words. In this way he obtained sufficient funds from their collections and alms to send abundant help to this province for several years. He was also able to give shelter in Paris to several of its inhabitants from various walks of life who came to take refuge there, casting themselves on his care.

His missionaries, whom he sent to distribute alms more knowledgeably and faithfully, informed him that the extreme misery which afflicted that province was putting girls in danger of being lost. He therefore had some of them brought to Paris in order to assure their

salvation and honour, and he put them in the hands of Mademoiselle le Gras. This charitable superior welcomed them into her house with a mother's tenderness, and then took great pains to get them settled. She found respectable homes for some; she enabled others to earn their living. There were even some who profited so much under her direction, that they were found worthy of joining her Company.

# BOOK THREE

## CHAPTER 1: Mademoiselle le Gras goes to live near the house of St. Lazare. She makes a journey to Nantes where she is asked for girls for the hospital.

As charitable occupations multiplied every day, and increased the need for more frequent communication with all those involved, Mademoiselle le Gras decided, with the agreement of Monsieur Vincent, to leave La Chapelle, because it was too far away, and so she came with her community to live in the vicinity of St. Lazare. At first a house was rented in 1641, and some time later it was bought, with the considerable help received from Madame Goussault.

It can be said that it was here she built a home and sanctuary for charity. Until then she had given it only temporary shelters, subject to change, like the tabernacle of Moses which was not fixed but carried from place to place. But she established for it in this house a fixed and settled temple, like that built by Solomon in the city of Jerusalem. It is there that pure and innocent souls, incessantly occupied in doing good, have since offered every day those *sacrifices which* – according to the teaching of the Apostle – *make us pleasing to God* (Heb. 13:16). This house became the general refuge of all the poor, drawn there from all sides by its reputation. It was like a public depot for most of the alms of Paris, which were put into the hands of this faithful superior, to be distributed on her orders.

It was there that in times of misery and sickness she had food and medicine distributed to the poor, dressing wounds herself and giving her daughters instruction and example. If it sometimes happened that the supply of alms was exhausted, she drew from the livelihood of the community or from her own family, so as not to send them away without help. One day, when two people had come to her with shirts rotting on their backs, she was seen clothing them with those of her son, thus putting into practice the advice given by Saint Chrysostom to Christian families, “*to put Jesus Christ among the number of their children, and their heirs.*”

Finally this superior established in the house a seminary and school

of piety, where she applied herself to forming girls in the exercise of charity, taking care always to train them and have them ready to answer all needs.

From the time of setting up this establishment she saw her Company grow more and more. Providence increased the number of her daughters, presenting at the same time new opportunities for employing them. She gave some to all the prisons of Paris; she sent them to its parishes and hospitals; they were asked for in the parishes of royal houses; she sent them to the countryside and to the provincial towns, and even as far as foreign Kingdoms.

In 1646, the town of Nantes wanted to have them for its hospital because of the reputation of the great services they were rendering in the hospital of Angers. Having had this wish granted by Monsieur Vincent, the latter sent Mademoiselle le Gras with eight of her daughters.

Here is her own written account of the details of her journey, which shows how she acted on the way, and which must serve as a rule and example for her Company.

*“Our most honoured Father kindly gave us a conference on the subject of this journey, Monday 23rd July, at the end of which he named the Sisters who were to go. The following Wednesday I got his instructions, and rightly fearing that I might commit many faults on the way, his charity ordered me to write about our behaviour and meetings during the said journey. Remembering his holy instructions and practices, I had in mind no other intention than that of the most holy will of God, and practice of our rules.*

*On Thursday, 26th, we got into the coach for Orleans, and by God’s grace we made the journey without failing in our observances. On approaching towns and villages someone would remind us to greet the good angels, desiring them to redouble their care of the souls of those places, to help them to glorify God eternally; and passing churches, we made an act of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, also greeting the patron Saints.*

*On arrival at the place where we were to eat and sleep, some Sisters went to the Church to give thanks to God for his help, asking him to continue it, and his blessing so as to do his holy will. If there was a hospital there these same sisters went to visit it; if not, some other sick person of the place, always in the name of the Company, to continue*

*the offering of our services and duty to God in the person of the poor.*

*Occasionally we said a few words, either on the main points of faith it was necessary to know for our salvation, or some brief little remarks about morals. Whenever possible we went to church in the morning.*

*At the bridge of Cé we had the honour of being sent away from the inn, where we arrived very late one Thursday, but as we came out of this dear house we found a good woman who welcomed us kindly.*

*We arrived at Nantes on 8th August, at two to three o'clock in the afternoon. First of all we went to the nearest church, that of the Ursulines, to adore God, and to renew our offering of ourselves to him to do his holy will. Immediately several ladies came for us, and took us to the hospital. As soon as we had arrived the Fathers and administrators gave us every authority; but whatever authority they gave us, we undertook nothing without letting them know and getting their consent.*

*All the ladies of the town took the trouble to come and visit us, and even many ladies from the countryside, and lots of superiors of reformed congregations. Several convents of religious obliged ladies to take us to them, as they wanted to see our Sisters and their habit.*

*From the very next day our Sisters set to work with great zeal, and in a few days there was such a change that people were pleased to come there. At the meals for the poor there were so many people that you could hardly get near the tables or the beds of the sick.*

*Some ladies from the town had been visiting the sick for a few months, bringing them broths and other things. We suggested that they should do their visiting in another way, and not come in the mornings, which could be an inconvenient time for their family. We also suggested that they should not bring broths, but that they would do better to come at two in the afternoon with some jam and other things, as the ladies of the Hotel-Dieu do, and they decided to follow our advice.*

*A few days after signing the act of our establishment we got ready to come back. It was evident that all our sisters were remaining behind with a great desire to do good, and before I left they renewed their resolution in our presence, which was a great consolation to me."*

## **CHAPTER 2: The Queen Mother takes part in all the works of charity. Mademoiselle le Gras manages to provide for the foundlings during the war.**

During the time she was at Nantes, she received news from Monsieur Vincent in a letter of 21st August, 1646, that our great queen Anne of Austria was asking for two of her daughters to serve the sick at Fontainebleau.

It happened that at the same time this charitable princess sent word to Monsieur Vincent to send her some other girls for the hospital she was running at Calais during the siege of Dunkirk. Two of the four girls already sent there to nurse the sick and wounded soldiers had died at this work.

As soon as the community heard of it, several came forward with holy emulation to offer themselves for this ministry, as victims giving themselves up to death, of whom he chose and sent four. Recommending their journey to the priests of his Company, he spoke to them in these terms:

*“Of the four Sisters of Charity who were in Calais, two of the strongest and healthiest died, fallen under the burden. Imagine what it is to be four poor girls among five or six hundred wounded or sick soldiers. See a little of God’s goodness and guidance in raising up at this time such a Company. In truth, gentlemen, that is touching. Does it not seem to you an action of great merit before God, that girls should go with so much courage and determination among soldiers to console them in their needs, and contribute to saving them? That they should go and expose themselves to such heavy work, and even to serious illnesses, and finally death, for those who have exposed themselves to the danger of war for the good of the State?”*

It was not only on these occasions that Her Majesty honoured Mademoiselle by using her Company. She made use of it for all the charitable employments which presented themselves, and she even wanted to show personal interest in all its plans. The great occupations of her regency could not prevent her from entering into all the works of piety undertaken by this foundress. She gave them the support of the sovereign authority she held; she opened her treasures and made liberal contributions; in urgent necessities she did not spare even her jewels. What misery has not felt the effects of her royal piety? She sent help to

provinces ruined by foreign and civil wars. She helped the bashful poor, the sick and incurable of the parishes of Paris. And the parish that God has confided to me must testify to it publicly, and be eternally grateful, having been so fortunate as to be the object of her care and well-doing to the day she died.

But although her charity embraced all kinds of needs, she applied herself with particular tenderness to the help of children, who through the indigence or cruelty of their fathers were reduced to extreme necessity. Without making any distinction in regard to birth or position, she was like a mother to them all; giving help to families for the good of those who were legitimate; contributing to the maintenance of the hospital established for those who were abandoned, and obtaining from the King some of the income from his domain.

Such charity was worthy of a very Christian queen, who inspired in her son the King the piety of the Emperor Constantine, whose fine law in favour of children abandoned by their fathers has been retained. This law ordered that such children should be supplied with whatever was needed, both from his public, imperial domain and from his private income.

Her charity was worthy of a veneration like that which the Emperor had for Helen his mother, whose history given us by Eusebius teaches us that he esteemed and respected her very highly. Not only did he allow her to use his treasures freely to give to the poor as much as she wished, but he also had her image engraved on his coinage, to mark with immortal characters the glory she had acquired by her liberality.

The example of this great queen powerfully animated the Company of Ladies. It encouraged them to continue the care and assistance of poor forsaken children when they were on the point of abandoning them because of an extraordinary increase in their numbers. Her Majesty seeing that there was not enough space to keep them all in the house of the Faubourg St. Victor, gave them the castle of Bicêtre in 1647, and she gave evidence on every occasion of her zeal for this work of charity.

But in 1649 it happened that the misery brought about by the civil war put an end to most of these great resources which provided for its upkeep, and that almost all the weight of financial responsibility fell upon Mademoiselle le Gras, and on her community. She spared no efforts in trying to meet this situation. She followed the advice given by the Apostle to Christians, "*to work with their hands at something good and useful, to have the means of helping those who are in need.*" (Eph.

4:28) She borrowed money which she handed over to her daughters to make bread and other provisions likely to sell at that time, so that the profit they might make from it could be used to keep this hospital going. The zeal of her daughters went even further. They even took from what they needed themselves to increase its funds, and were satisfied with having, once a day only, a little food of the coarsest kind. This superior, who animated them by her example, seeing these poor children one day in extreme need, gave all the money in the house except two ten-franc pieces to get wheat for them, although she saw no prospect of receiving anything for a month. And without consulting the rules of human prudence, nor even the laws of nature, she followed only the prompting of her zeal and the confidence she had in God's Providence.

### **CHAPTER 3: Assistance given to the poor during foreign and civil wars by Mademoiselle le Gras and her Company. Happy death of a Sister of Charity.**

Souls in such perfect dispositions, and possessing charity in such a high degree, could not set limits in practising it. They only needed objectives giving full scope to their zeal. A certain number of parishes and hospitals were not enough to give full expression to their zeal, which drove them to help whole provinces in the greatest and most widespread miseries.

One cannot imagine the extremity to which Picardy and Champagne were reduced by war in 1650. The people were stripped of their goods, afflicted by famine and disease, driven from their homes, and deprived of help and shelter. Some were living in tumbledown dwellings, others were stretched out in the woods and on the main roads, languishing and half dead; without pastors, sacraments, or consolation. After death they were left unburied, pastors and priests being sick, or dead, or refugees. Cloisters were open, women religious homeless, churches profaned, sacred vessels and ornaments pillaged, and the Blessed Sacrament was trodden underfoot.

Where could a remedy be found for such great evils, except in the

Charity established in Paris, which was as it were a city of public refuge for all miseries? When from all sides, news of it reached Monsieur Vincent, the author and head of this holy institution, he was filled with the keenest sentiments of sorrow and compassion, and made effective resolutions to give continual help.

He spoke about it first to Madame de Herse, the President, who responded at once to his intention, and began to send money and food. Since it was an undertaking which could only be carried out by the whole association of ladies whom the Holy Spirit had united, he assembled them to inform them about it, and to plan with them how to carry it out. He touched them so forcefully that although they themselves had suffered notable losses through the civil war of the previous year, they supplied at that time immense sums with an inexhaustible charity, and continued the same help for several years. There were some who gave even their jewels and silverware. The greatest example in this matter was that of the queen-mother, who after drawing from her resources even gave her ear-rings which were very valuable, and judged that "*the mercy which raises up and strengthens thrones*" (Prov. 20:28) was the most beautiful adornment of her royal majesty.

Missioners were sent to be the trustees and dispensers of these alms, and to be at the same time pastors to the abandoned population. Sacred vessels and ornaments were provided for pillaged churches; food, remedies and clothes for the different needs of the poor; tools and instruments for workers; grain and seed for uncultivated land; field-hospitals for wounded soldiers, and safe places for homeless girls. To complete this great work of charity, while the ladies gave their goods so liberally to provide funds, Mademoiselle le Gras contributed the ministry of her Company, and sent girls to serve and help these people in all their afflictions.

There was no service, however difficult and dangerous it might be, which they did not render generously on this occasion. Among the different helps that she brought them at that time, there was none more salutary than that of the soups she distributed to them. By this means she saved the lives of a great number of poor, languishing people, as well as consoling their souls and gaining their hearts by these works of charity.

So meritorious was this service in the opinion of the Saints, that they

judged it worthy of the highest honours of the Church. Saint Gregory of Nazianzan, in the funeral prayer that he made for Saint Basil, relates that this holy Archbishop was not satisfied, in a time of famine, with obtaining alms by his pleas, but even wanted to gather together the poor himself and have food prepared for them. *“Putting on an apron, he served them soup with his own hands, having first washed their feet, wanting to edify their souls by this honour which he paid them, as he consoled their bodies by food; and trying by these two means to soften the hardship of their miserable condition.”*

Mademoiselle le Gras had great new opportunities of continuing this ministry of charity, in the misery renewed by the civil war of 1652. The town of Etampes and several neighbouring villages felt its most cruel effects. No better means of helping them was found than to send Sisters of Charity to distribute the food and to help them in all their needs, while zealous missionaries went about consoling the people, and dispensing to them the bread of life and the other sacraments. They served as mothers to many poor orphans, whom they put in a special house, taking care to provide everything necessary for them. They treated an extraordinary number of sick, and several of them spent themselves in these works with happy results.

But nothing was more admirable on this occasion, than the example of a sister called Marie Joseph. This Sister of Charity being obliged to give way under the weight of her work, and no longer able to go and help the sick poor in their homes, had them brought into her room, sat up in bed, and had the courage and strength to bleed them. As she wanted to continue to give them this help till she died, she breathed her last at the moment she lay down, after bleeding a patient. She not only had the happiness of ending her life in the practice of charity, but it was charity which caused her death.

With the armies now close to Paris and spread out on all sides in the surrounding areas, this great city was reduced to the last extremity; shortage of food and high prices, along with the ruin of trade, drew upon it every kind of misery and sickness; and it was filled with a multitude of poor country people, who after being pillaged and ill-treated by the soldiers, came there looking for refuge.

The Charity which had always flowed from this source right out to distant provinces, could not then abandon its place of origin; it shared its goods abundantly, and found funds and remedies to provide for the great number of poverty-stricken, in both the excess and duration of their misfortunes.

For the six months' duration of this latest war, the charity provided for fourteen thousand people every day, having soup distributed to them by the hands of the sisters in the different quarters of Paris. This city was edified to see put into practice at this time the exemplary charity of Saint Gregory the Great, who according to the account given by his biographer, sent people throughout the streets of Rome, every day of the week, carrying broth and meat for all those who were sick, or who could not earn their living.

#### **CHAPTER 4: Mademoiselle le Gras sends girls to Poland. They help the plague-stricken there. The Queen founds hospitals.**

Although Mademoiselle le Gras saw her Company laden with so much work in Paris, in the countryside, and in the frontier provinces, she set no limits to her zeal and care, but also took on at this same period works in foreign Kingdoms, and sent girls to Poland at the Queen's request. This virtuous royal lady had known in France the fruitfulness of the missions and charitable institutions. She therefore desired the same benefits for her Kingdom, which was in extreme disorder through ignorance, heresies and a decline of morals.

Monsieur Vincent had already sent her priests of his Congregation under the direction of Monsieur Lambert, his assistant. She then asked him for Sisters of Charity, to give her people all kinds of assistance, through the ministry of these two companies. After discussing it with their superior, he sent three girls with a written appointment, dated 6th September, 1656, which contained these words:

*"The most serene Queen of Poland has done us the honour of asking several times for girls of the Company of Charity, to establish a similar one in her kingdom in the city of Warsaw, for the relief of the sick poor. We, desiring to meet the wishes and commands of such a worthy princess, send you herewith for the said city, to receive there the orders her Majesty will give you, and keep the manner of life you have been accustomed to in France, under the direction of Monsieur Lambert, Superior of the priests of our congregation now in Poland and under the good pleasure of our most illustrious and reverend Lord Bishops of those places."*

As soon as they arrived, the queen gave them an opportunity worthy of their profession and zeal. She established them in the city of Warsaw which was at that time devastated by the plague. The service of the plague-stricken was the apprenticeship and testing-ground of the Sisters of Charity in this Kingdom. Monsieur Lambert had homes and shelters prepared for the abandoned sick, where these generous girls treated them with tireless attention and invincible courage. God gave one of them, Margaret Moreau, the grace of crowning her works by a glorious death in this work.

The queen was so charmed by their virtues that she often took pleasure in spending whole days with them; and being attracted by their example, she visited the hospitals, gave alms for their maintenance, and even served the poor in their illnesses.

Some time later, her Majesty having desired to increase the number of her girls, Monsieur Vincent arranged for three of them to set off to her. When they were leaving, Mademoiselle le Gras gave them this letter for her daughters in Poland:

*“My dear Sisters,*

*At last the time chosen by Divine Providence for the departure of our sisters has come. We are letting them go, sorry they are leaving us, but glad in the assurance we have that they are going to do God’s will, and be united with you in fulfilling his holy purposes in the Kingdom of Poland. O my dear Sisters, how important these are! I beg God in his goodness to let you know how important, being sure that this knowledge will produce in you great humility and confusion at seeing yourselves chosen for such a task, and make you determined not to become unworthy of it. Sister Margaret will convey to you all that our Most Honoured Father told her to say on that subject.”*

But the journey of these girls was interrupted by the news, which arrived a few days after their departure, of the change of affairs in Poland. On their way they received an order to return to Paris when it became known that the Queen had withdrawn into Germany, taking with her the Sisters of Charity already in her service. During her journey this Princess used their zeal which could not remain inactive, and which found plenty of scope wherever they were, to serve and help her soldiers with their sicknesses.

When her Majesty returned to her Kingdom, bringing back with her these faithful servants, she gave them a fresh opportunity to exercise

their charity. She founded a hospital in Warsaw for poor girls orphaned or abandoned by their parents and put it under the care and direction of the sisters.

The piety of this sovereign also provided at this same time for another very pressing need of her Kingdom. Servants who became sick were usually dismissed by their masters, and remained abandoned on the roads and in the streets; there were also a number of poor vagabonds who found no place to go in their infirmities. Sometimes they were seen reduced to such an extremity that they shut themselves up in dunghills, so as to be sheltered from the cold and inclemencies of the weather. That touched her Majesty's heart so much that she had a building put up near the orphan hospital to receive these poor unfortunates, and supplied them with all necessary assistance through the hands of the girls who ran that house.

## **CHAPTER 5: Hospitals of Paris served by Sisters of Charity. Origin of the general hospital. Extent of Mademoiselle le Gras' charity.**

The charity which was spreading outside France, did not cease to act incessantly within it, until it had remedied all kinds of needs by various establishments.

In 1653 a charitable person put a considerable sum into the hands of Monsieur Vincent, to be used by him for some pious work. Being a wise dispenser, he judged he could best use it in founding a hospital to serve as a home for poor old people who could no longer earn their living. He established this home in the Faubourg Saint-Laurent under the title of the Most Holy Name of Jesus, and with funds which had been entrusted to him, supplied the income for the upkeep of forty poor people of both sexes, half and half. He lodged the men and women in two separate sections, but in such a way that without seeing or speaking to each other, they could look at the altar of the chapel to assist at the same Mass, and hear the same readings at table, where each sex would eat as a separate group. Being unable himself to do more through his industrious charity than make the plans and give the rules, he entrusted the realisation of these plans to Mademoiselle le Gras. She in her turn gave her Company the responsibility for the running and management of this hospice, and the service of the poor.

This was the origin of one of the greatest works ever undertaken by charity. Some devout ladies having noticed such good organisation in this little establishment, and such great good for this number of poor people, conceived from this idea the plan of a general hospital.

Before making a decision in such an important matter, they wanted to have the opinion of Mademoiselle le Gras. They consulted her to know whether women could be involved alone in this undertaking, and she gave them her sentiments in this letter of August, 1653:

*"If this work is regarded as political, it seems that men must undertake it; but if it is considered as a work of charity, women can take it on, in the way they have taken on other great difficult exercises of charity, which God has approved by the blessings he has given them. On the question of their doing this on their own, it seems that that cannot be, nor should it be. But it would be desirable that some devout men, either some organised body or individuals, should co-operate with them, both to advise them and to act in legal matters which may have to be dealt with in order to maintain all these kinds of people in their duty, because of the diversity of opinions, ways of acting and temperaments."*

This then was the origin of that great work of our days, the shelter and general refuge for all the unfortunate, based on the plan of a little hospice of forty old people. It was planned by a few charitable ladies, undertaken and established by zealous and generous men, governed by the highest ranking and most important persons of Paris, maintained by public alms, and supported by royal authority and liberality. It is there that the poor find in their old age rest and assurance, children are brought up in piety, and taught to do all kinds of work, able-bodied beggars are put to work and taken away from an idle and unruly life; by spiritual instructions there is an attempt to make indigence salutary, and to procure for it the riches of the grace and kingdom of God.

To sing the praises of this work in a way worthy of it, we can apply to it what Saint Gregory of Nazianzen said formerly of a hospital founded by Saint Basil in Caesarea of Cappadocia, his episcopal city: *"If you go out,"* said this Father, *"beyond Caesarea, you will see as it were a new town, the home of charity, the common treasure of all the rich, where misery appears happy and is borne joyfully, and where the way is open to all the faithful to assure their salvation."*

Mademoiselle le Gras had undertaken the relief of every bodily infirmity. To give full scope to her zeal nothing more was left but to take

responsibility for the poor mental patients shut up in the hospital of the "Little Houses". She accepted this work in 1655, at the request of the General Council for the Poor, so famous in Paris for the rank and merit of the persons composing it. Since in this hospital, besides the insane, there is a large number of old people who are kept there by order of this Council, she committed herself also to having them helped in their illnesses.

It is inconceivable how this pious foundress could meet so many demands of charity. She took on all kinds of needs, making no reservations, neither as regards the type of evil, nor the condition and number of people, nor the diversity of places. She helped the poor in every sickness of mind and body, in childhood, adulthood and old age. She had them served in their homes, in hospitals, prisons and galleys, in towns and in the countryside, in the armies, in peace and in foreign and civil wars. She spared no kind of help for their needs, whether for eternal salvation or temporal life. She had them given instructions, consolation, remedies, food, and with her community offered her care, her work and her life in their service.

Is it not a miracle of charity, and an effect of the admirable fecundity God has given to this virtue, whose nature is such, according to the words of St. Augustine, *"that it increases by distribution, and that the more it is shared out the more abundant it becomes in itself."*

The widow spoken of in the fourth book of Kings, *"had not enough oil to keep up her house and to pay her debts when she kept it closed up; but as soon as she decided to pour it into several vessels on Eliseus' orders, she found an inexhaustible source, which flowed into all the vessels presented to her by her children, and which stopped only when there were no more to fill."* Our Christian widow, who at first had only limited funds, weak health and a small number of daughters, would have been capable of little, had she set limits to her zeal. When on the advice and direction of another Eliseus, she makes it her purpose to answer all kinds of needs, she finds herself able to supply for all the situations put before her. It is an oil which flows in abundance to fill all vessels. She has enough strength, in the midst of her continual infirmities, to meet everything by her care and direction. The number of her daughters multiplies in proportion to the situations requiring them. She finds supplies enough to provide for an infinity of miseries. She embraces every charitable work, and sets up establishments, not only in several parishes and hospitals of Paris, but also in more than thirty other places in the various provinces of France, and goes even into foreign Kingdoms.

# BOOK FOUR

## CHAPTER 1: Mademoiselle le Gras' direction of her daughters.

There were many and varied calls on the charity of Mademoiselle le Gras, but her chief concern was now the Company. Chosen by her to share her ministry of charity, her daughters held first place in her heart, and she wanted by her own love for them to teach them how to love and serve their neighbour. She had the tender love of a mother's heart for them. Having accepted them and so to speak brought them to birth in her Company she was most careful to form them in her spirit. She herself taught them to read, trained them to serve the poor, instructed them in the mysteries of faith and in the way of prayer and Christian piety. Her regular weekly conferences encouraged them to live up to their ideals with love and generosity, and although she tried to use simple language she was carried away by lofty thoughts expressed with such conviction that they were filled with the very same sentiments.

She won their hearts by her gentleness and affability, and gave them liberty to speak to her, without ever letting it be seen that they were troubling her, even when she had to leave her prayers or other occupations. When several girls came to speak to her at the same time on different subjects she answered each one calmly and with evenness of disposition. Although it was sometimes very inconvenient for her she never said anything which might suggest they should leave her in peace. When sickness prevented her from listening and talking to them, her expression was so welcoming and affectionate that they always went away satisfied.

In her love for the Company, this worthy superior was continually vigilant over it. She was most careful to observe if they were all faithful to their rule, and especially those who were far away. She kept herself informed as to how they were, governed them by regular correspondence, and shared with them the Conferences she gave at the Mother-house.

If she heard that a girl had committed some fault she wanted to be well-informed about it before taking her up on it. When she found it necessary to correct anyone, she did so with the precautions required by St. Augustine on such occasions. *"There is no better way,"* said this Father, *"of recognising if a person is really spiritual than when, in*

*correcting a sinner, he acts with the intention of delivering him from his sin, rather than of insulting him. His intention is to provide him with help and remedies, rather than to hurt or reproach him. And that is what St. Paul teaches us by these words: 'If someone has fallen inadvertently into some sin, you who are spiritual be careful to instruct him in a spirit of gentleness, each of you reflecting on yourself, and fearing to be tempted in your turn.' You must then, according to the teaching of this apostle, preserve peace and love in your heart, when you want to correct another, considering that you are exposed to the same danger of falling. But as for the way in which it is to be done, whether with mild or severe words, that is to be measured against his conversion and salvation."*

That is the way this superior always acted with regard to her daughters. When she corrected one of them, it was clear that she acted solely through charity. Instead of reproving the girl for her fault, she excused it as far as possible and sometimes, with extraordinary humility, considered herself the cause of it. She tried to inspire repentance in the offender and spared her confusion by warning her in private. She never spoke about it unless it was really necessary, and even then it was to very few sisters, and only the most discreet. She was a good judge of the time and place suitable for making her advice acceptable. She was strict or gentle according to what she considered appropriate for each one, correcting with so much prudence and love that what she said was always accepted, and encouraged them to do better and persevere.

When she knew that some were tempted against their vocation, she looked upon its possible loss as the greatest evil which could happen to her. She did everything she could to sustain them in their weakness, having a special grace for winning hearts and strengthening them.

She had to do great violence to herself when someone had to be sent away. One day, when she was told about someone who had deserved this by her bad behaviour, she gave this wise and charitable reply,

*"that there is a lot to be considered when one is responsible for souls! Do you think (she said) that we have just to push them out? Oh! how careful we must be about that!"*

She always acted on such occasions in accordance with the precautions and rules indicated by Monsieur Vincent. The best source of information on this is a letter which he wrote to a girl who, before entering the Company of charity, wanted some assurance that she would be kept.

*“You will know that we rarely send anyone away, and then only for outstanding faults, never for ordinary failings, nor even extraordinary ones unless they are frequent and serious. Even then we delay as long as possible, putting up with the faults of such a person for a long time, trying in vain every possible remedy for her correction. This patience and charity is exercised especially for the older members, so that if some do leave it is they themselves who go away, either through superficiality, or because – even before superiors think of dismissing them – God himself rejects and vomits them out on account of slackness and tepidity in His service.*

*To say that those who are faithful to God and have submitted to holy obedience leave the Company, is something that does not happen, thanks be to God, with regard neither to those who are well nor those who are sick. Everything possible is done to keep them all, and they are given every possible care until death.”*

The words of this teacher are public and lasting advice assuring the daughters of their stability as far as the Company is concerned, and the conditions he asks of them depend only on their will and their conduct. Mademoiselle le Gras followed these sentiments and rules all her life, and it was clear that nothing was dearer to her than the preservation of her daughters in their vocation. There is no charitable service which she did not render them on every occasion. She could not hear that something sad had happened to them without sharing in their sorrow, and consoling them by her letters or visits. When they were ill, she spared nothing for their relief. She treated them all as very dear daughters, often visiting those who were near, and giving every recommendation that those far away be helped. When she visited them the tenderness and cordiality of her words and actions gave them so much joy and consolation that it seemed to them that her very presence cured them. She had a marvellous talent for encouraging them in suffering, and disposing them for death, and she carried out this duty of charity as long as her own infirmities permitted. If she was not fit to visit them she sent the Sister Assistant, and omitted nothing that might show her love and care.

Notwithstanding her great submission to the will of God, great care had to be taken in giving her the news of their death, and she could not lose them without being very moved and shedding tears. There was a time when death claimed a large number and she thought that their death was a result of God’s anger against her Company. But Monsieur Vincent reassured her in this letter:

*"You seem to me, Mademoiselle, crushed at heart. You fear that God is angry, and that he does not want the service you render him, because he is taking your daughters. Far from that, it is a sign that he cherishes it, since he treats it in this way. For he treats you as he treated the Church his dear Bride at the beginning, when he permitted that the majority meet their death by natural causes but others through ill-treatment and torture. Seeing that, who would not have said that he was angry with these young and holy plants? Do not believe such a thing any more, then, but quite the contrary."*

She had the custom of sending word to her absent daughters about the death of their sisters. In recommending them to their prayers, she took the opportunity of exhorting the sisters to despise life and to persevere in their vocation. Writing one day to some of them on the death of another she said, *"Courage, my dear Sisters, this life is short and the reward of our sufferings is eternal. But it is given only to those who have fought valiantly. I wish you all to be victorious."*

## **CHAPTER 2: The charity which this Superior recommends her daughters to have for one another.**

Charity was to be not only the aim but also the bond of the Company instituted by Mademoiselle le Gras. While forming her daughters for the service of the poor she also wanted them to be united among themselves, and when necessary to help each other by all sorts of kind services. That was the chief purpose and fundamental maxim of her direction. She tried to imprint it on their hearts by her example, and recommended nothing more strongly in her conferences and individual instructions. When she gave them advice on this subject she omitted nothing that might convince them of its necessity, or make them realize its qualities and effects.

*"You will love one another", she said to them, "as sisters whom Jesus Christ has bound together by his love, realising that since God has chosen and assembled you to render him the same service, you must be like one body animated by the same spirit, and look upon one another as members of one same body. You will practise, above all, holy cordiality."*

Cordiality is a disposition she requires of them if the reality and sincerity of their charity is to be made known, and be capable of

spreading outside. Cordiality is simply the openness and outpouring of a heart penetrated with love. This love is visibly poured out in word and deed, revealing its depths and conveying its own stirrings to others.

Among the virtues which she judges more necessary for their state, gentleness is one of the principal and most important. "Without it," she declares, "the Company cannot remain in union and peace, nor keep in the presence of God."

"This virtue", according to the thinking of St. Chrysostom, "is the distinguishing characteristic of Christ's servants. It even makes them worthy of bearing the name of their Master, who wished to share his noble title of child of God with those who love and procure peace."

To safeguard charity, humility is no less necessary than gentleness. That is why the Apostle, after exhorting Christians "to have fraternal affection among themselves, and to be perfectly united together," then gives them this advice: "Be the first to show respect and deference; do nothing from selfishness or conceit but in humility consider others as better than yourselves." (Phil. 2:3) And in the same spirit Louise de Marillac exhorts her daughters "to remain lowly in their own eyes, and always to think more highly of their sisters than of themselves. They are to speak well of them on every occasion but discreetly without seeming to look for the world's approval. They should bear in mind that perhaps God has more love for those who appear simplest and weakest. In his goodness he is not concerned about natural gifts, nor silliness, for these are not obstacles to his grace, which he communicates more abundantly perhaps to those who are simple. For this reason we must always see God in them, and honour them cordially as belonging to him." Finally she recommends them "to have great respect for the opinions of their sisters, trying not to contradict them, but to agree with them as far as possible. They should remember that Our Lord always deferred to his Father's will. When for love of him they leave aside their own opinion to follow that of the Sister Servant or others — when neither God nor the neighbour will be offended by it — they somehow honour this deference."

Like St. Paul, to these virtues she adds patience, which makes us bear with other people's weaknesses. This is so meritorious, according to the Apostle, that he puts it before Christians as one of the clearest signs of predestination and grace. "Put on" he says, "as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another; each one overlooking whatever complaint he might have against his brother and forgiving one another as Jesus Christ has forgiven you". (Col. 3: 12)

To acquire this virtue, Saint Chrysostom advises us to reflect on ourselves, and to consider that *“since it is not possible for a man to live without any fault, we must not treat our brothers in a spirit of rigid and severe censure. It is only right that we put up with their imperfections, so that they will bear with ours. That is how we will fulfil together the law of Jesus Christ, according to the words of the Apostle. Note that he does not only say, you will fulfil the law of Jesus Christ, but you will fulfil it all together if you bear one another’s burdens; all the more so as in this way charity will be preserved everywhere and the law of Jesus Christ will be fully accomplished.”*

Nowhere is this obligation more binding than in a body which, professing charity, must be animated by it in all its members. Its foundress thought it so important, that she recommended to her daughters more than anything else *“to be a great support to one another, as they wish others to support them, and when they see some defects in their sisters, to excuse them charitably.”* *“My God!”*, she said, *“my dear daughters, how reasonable that is, since we often commit similar faults, for which we need to be excused.”*

It is not possible to be disposed to excuse the faults of our brethren, unless we free our minds of every preoccupying passion. When the heart is full of pride, aversion, or envy, we find fault with the most innocent conduct. We make mountains out of the slightest things, or things which at any rate would be excusable because of ignorance, inadvertence or weakness. We examine them carefully, make enquiries out of curiosity, talk about them with pleasure, reprove them harshly, reproach them with insults. What is even more dangerous for spiritual people, and what often happens, is that they let themselves be carried away by the illusions of a false zeal. This hides from them their own secret passions, and makes them commit injustices, under pretext of piety. *“It is necessary”*, according to St. Augustine’s advice, *“to rid ourselves of these passions. They are like beams in our eyes blinding us, so that we cannot see to take out the splinters from our brothers’ eyes. We must look at the faults of others only with the eyes of a dove, like those the Holy Spirit loves in his spouse,”* that is to say, with pure and simple eyes, and a heart free from spite and bitterness.

These duties of charity which the sisters must carry out for one another are all the more binding and indispensable for the superior, according to the intention and orders of the foundress.

*“The Sister Servant, (as she calls her) “to whom divine Providence gives the direction of others will be the first to practise these duties,*

*considering that she is indebted to all her sisters and obliged to serve them. She will treat them gently and tenderly, reflecting that even though they all count themselves happy to be called Servants of the Poor, there are few who can bear the slightest word said to them with too much authority or bluntness. That is why we must get used to asking and not commanding, to teaching by example and not by orders. – She must console them in their little troubles with cordiality and support, and treat them in many ways with great condescension. Responsibilities must be exercised in a kindly rather than a peremptory manner. And if we are Sister Servants, that means that it is we who have the greatest sufferings of mind and body, and that we must console our sisters as much as we can. They will always have difficulty enough in bearing with us, sometimes because of our bad humour, sometimes through repugnance arising from their own nature or the evil spirit.*

*If something happens which requires correction, she will refer to it charitably, at a suitable opportunity, not seeming to dwell on it too much, and making it known that love is her only motive.”*

As well as instructing her daughters how they ought to put up with or correct the faults of their sisters, Mademoiselle le Gras wished them to be charitable in every situation. She urged them to show tangible signs of love for their sisters when they were sick. “*Take great care of your sisters in this state*”, she says, and goes on to explain:

*Consider that being consecrated with you to the service of the sick, there is no one more deserving of your help. Charity has brought you together, and you are more obliged to practise it towards them. You will spare nothing to console your sisters, since they themselves do not spare their own lives for the neighbour. Be careful not to show you are tired of helping them, when their infirmities last for a long time. Be assiduous in visiting them and serving them; give them every possible consolation. Speak to them tenderly and openly, and show that you sympathise with them. Ah! my dear sisters, you would be renouncing the profession you make of charity, if you were to neglect your sisters when they are not well, or treat them harshly or carelessly.”*

These are the sentiments that this mother has for her daughters, sentiments based not only on her relationship with them, but chiefly on consideration of the merit of their virtues and employments. Charity towards the poor is of such great value in God’s sight, that not only does he reward saints for it after their death with possession of his kingdom,

but he fills them with graces and consolation in their illnesses, and assures them by his prophet:

*“Blessed is he who considers the Poor!  
The Lord will deliver him on the day of trouble;  
He will be his comfort on his bed of sickness,  
Yes, my God, you yourself make his bed comfortable when he is sick.”*

(Ps. 40)

It is with the merit of charity in view that the Apostle Paul shows so much esteem and gratitude for Epaphroditus his disciple, who had served and helped him in his chains when he was a prisoner in Rome. And it is for the same reason that he recommends him to the Christians of Philippi with these words full of tenderness and love:

*“I am sending you my brother Epaphroditus, my helper in my ministry, and my servant in my needs. He almost died of sickness; but God took pity on him, and not only on him, but also on me, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. So receive him in the Lord with every joy, and honour such people. For he came close to death in serving Christ’s cause, risking his life so as to give me the help that you yourselves could not give me.”* (Phil. 2:29)

If the Apostle tells Christians to receive with many marks of respect and love those who imitate the zeal of his disciple, and if he wishes *“such people to be honoured”*, it is fitting to honour in the same way virgins who consecrate themselves to a similar ministry by their profession, and who offer their whole life *“for God’s work.”* Although they have not, like this disciple, an apostle as the object of their care, their work is nonetheless equally important in motivation, since it is Jesus Christ whom they see in the person of the poor. This God whom they serve has the same sentiments towards them as St. Paul had for Epaphroditus. There is no doubt that he wants his Church to consider them as people dear to him, and with whom he will share the recognition he will grant to his elect on the day of his glory: *“I was sick, and you visited me.”* (Mt. 25:36)

### **CHAPTER 3: Erection of the Company of the Sisters of Charity. Act of Establishment by Monsieur Vincent.**

It was not enough that Mademoiselle le Gras had formed a Company of Sisters to be employed in the service of the poor, and had united them by bonds of charity. To give this Institute all its strength and authority, it was necessary to have it approved by the Church. But as she was very prudent in everything she dealt with, she wanted to try it out for a few years, before having it formally erected and established. It was only in 1651 that she decided upon it, and wrote to Monsieur Vincent:

*“That she judged the formal erection necessary, because weakness of mind needed the support of a sound establishment, to help overcome temptations against vocation. That the reason for this formal establishment – without which it seemed impossible for the Company to continue, or God to be thereby glorified – was the necessity of its being erected, and bound inseparably to the direction of the Superior General of the Mission. She submitted the whole matter to his judgement, however, as she had done with all her actions since God had placed her under his direction twenty-six years ago.”*

Monsieur Vincent approved this plan, and sent her a memorandum to present to the Archbishop of Paris. It contained three points: first, the way God’s Providence had acted in the establishment of the Sisters of Charity; secondly, their way of life so far; and in the third place, the statutes and rules which he had drawn up for them.

*“I have left out”, he said, “many things which I could have said in your regard. Let us leave it to Our Lord to say it to everyone, and in the meantime let us remain hidden.”*

In reply to the request which she made to the Archbishop, she obtained from him the approval and erection of her Company, in letters given to her through Cardinal de Retz, his coadjutor. But as those letters were subsequently lost when they were presented to Parliament with letters patent to be registered there, Cardinal de Retz, being then Archbishop, gave new ones in the month of January 1655. He thereby approved this society with its statutes and rules, and erected it by his authority as a congregation and community under the title of Servants of the Poor, and under the direction of the Superior General of the Mission, and of his successors. He stipulated however that it should also remain in perpetuity under the direction of and dependent on the

Archbishop of Paris. He declared in his letters, *“that he wanted to show favour to such a good work, in the hope that it would succeed for the glory of God, and the great consolation of the poor, as it had done so far by his mercy.”* And he confided its direction to Monsieur Vincent, *“recognising that God had blessed the work that this superior had undertaken to make this devout enterprise succeed.”*

After Monsieur Vincent had received these letters of approval, he assembled all the sisters in the Mother-House on 8th August of the same year, to formally establish their company. He explained to them that *“although it had pleased God to institute their company about twenty-five years ago, it had been thought necessary, before having it authorised by the Church, to see the full observance of its rules, and to test if it worked out as hoped for. Having obtained the approbation after this trial period, he thought he should put it into effect by a public and solemn act of establishment, and that he felt all the more bound to do so because he was then about to send a number of sisters to new establishments, both in this Kingdom and in Poland.”* He then read to them the statutes and rules he had drawn up, and after taking the names of all those who had been accepted, and who wanted to continue, he proceeded to the nomination of office holders. He asked Mademoiselle le Gras to continue in office as Superioress for life, as she had done with great blessing so far, even though she had several times offered him her resignation. He named an Assistant, a Bursar and a Treasurer, and ended with an exhortation to them all to thank God for their vocation, and to be exact and faithful in the observance of their rules.

Since the Company of the Sisters of Charity had been formed to work in collaboration with the plans of the Mission, this founder always considered the direction of the Company as one of his principal obligations. That is why he applied himself to it all his life with as much attention as his pressing occupations allowed him. However, not always being free to see to it personally, he confided this community from its birth into the hands of a person filled with his spirit and love, namely Monsieur Portail, the first priest he had admitted to his Company and whom he later named as its first assistant and secretary.

The King granted them new letters patent, when he was convinced of the loss of the first ones. To show the esteem he had for their congregation, he stated *“that he accepted and authorised it, seeing that it had been so blessed when it began, and had progressed so much in charity, towards the poor sick as well as towards foundlings, galley-slaves and little girls. Its charity extended even to the poor girls who by offering them their services had so holy and beautiful a means of giving themselves to God and*

*serviug him in the person of the poor."* His Majesty declares in these letters that he wishes to favour and support every good work, and every establishment which is for the glory of God. Recognising that the Congregation of these Sisters in particular is of that kind, he gives them every possible mark of his royal goodness. *"He puts them under his special care and protection, with all the goods and funds which have been, or will be, donated to them. He confirms their ownership of a property which his father, the late King of glorious memory, had given them on his domain; and gives them permission to be established anywhere in his Kingdom."* These letters were presented to Parliament in the year 1658, and registered there.

#### **CHAPTER 4: St. Francis de Sales changed the original purpose of the Religious of the Visitation. By establishing the Sisters of Charity, Monsieur Vincent then carried it out.**

God undoubtedly confirmed in heaven the judgement pronounced on earth by the ecclesiastical and civil powers in favour of this institute, and shared in the approval given in the Gospel by the Son of God to works of charity, which he is to acknowledge in the sight of all the angels and saints. As this Company is so conformed to his maxims, it is according to his mind and heart. But to make it still more worthy of his approval, this devout Foundress wanted to place it under the protection of the Blessed Virgin. She therefore asked Monsieur Vincent to offer a Mass to God in honour of the Blessed Virgin in the name of all the Company, in December, 1658.

St. Francis de Sales had in mind a similar work of charity when he began to establish his Order. When he first assembled ladies under the guidance of Madame de Chantal, it was solely to care for the sick poor under the title of Daughters of the Visitation. Their example having later extended this Institute to the town of Lyons, its Archbishop, Cardinal de Marquemont, seeing that a number of girls were committing themselves to it, saw fit to enclose them. He went to see the holy Bishop of Geneva to tell him his intention, and found him entirely deferential to his opinions. Francis de Sales set aside his personal commitment to the establishment which he had begun. Without insisting on all the reasons he had for maintaining it, he acquiesced in the judgement of the Archbishop with extraordinary humility. He looked upon his opinion as an order from Divine Providence, whose lead

he wanted to follow by other people's ideas rather than his own lights. So he agreed with him that the Daughters of the Visitation should become enclosed religious, thus changing his original plan.

But God did not wish to leave this plan ineffective for long, and soon afterwards, through the institution of the Sisters of Charity, he brought to fulfilment what had first been intended in establishing the Daughters of the Visitation. He made it known that he had allowed the change in this first Institute only to bring to birth a holy Order in his church, which by the gentleness of its rule might serve as a place of seclusion for virgins and widows of delicate health, who could not enter austere religious communities. But he did not delay long in reviving the former plan for the good of the poor. Through Vincent de Paul he completed the work traced out by the holy Bishop, and used his ministry to form, under the guidance of Mademoiselle le Gras, the congregation of the Sisters of Charity, to replace what had been begun under the direction of Madame de Chantal.

A Company consecrated to the service of the poor could not be confined within cloisters, nor cut off from contact with the world. He had to prescribe for it a regular way of life compatible with its employments and allowing freedom to go through the streets and into houses. *"It is an institute which"* according to the words of the founder, as reported by Abelly, the illustrious historian of his life, *"has no monastery but the houses of the sick, no cell but a poor room, very often hired, no chapel but the parish church, no cloister but the streets, no enclosure but obedience, no grill but the fear of God, no veil but holy modesty."*

## **CHAPTER 5: Mademoiselle le Gras' illness. The virtues she shows when dying. Her burial.**

Such was the establishment of the Company of the Sisters of Charity, and the way in which this company, so helpful to the Church, was brought to its final perfection after being tried out for several years. Nothing remained for the glory of the foundress but to receive from heaven the reward for such a holy institution, and for the many laborious deeds and works of devotion which had filled her life. She had been subject for a long time to great infirmities, and as early as 1647

Monsieur Vincent had written to Monsieur Blatiron, superior of the Priests of the Mission at Gênes, in these terms:

*"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. If it were not for her frequent illnesses, and her respect for obedience, she would often go here and there to visit her daughters and work with them, although she is alive only by a sheer gift of grace."*

In line with the thinking of this great man it can be said that it was grace which, intending to use her ministry to carry out such an important plan, sustained her amidst her continual infirmities until it was accomplished, and that it was grace which gave her strength and zeal to apply herself indefatigably to such extensive and difficult employments.

She had a serious illness in 1656, and sent word to Monsieur Vincent that she thought *"that it was a key to allow her leave the world soon. She begged him to grant her the kindness of teaching her to prepare well for her departure, so that she would not be shipwrecked at the port to which she was sailing."* God, who destined for her a precious death, willed that she prepare for it long beforehand, and after being apprenticed to it several times, dispose herself to perform more meritoriously this last action which crowns all others. During her life she had often made death the subject of prayer, and she had the custom of consecrating her birthday especially, among all the days of the year, to this important meditation. Believing that she was going to die from this illness, she prepared for death by all the practices of Christian devotion. But the time for completing her course had not yet come, and as God wanted to leave her some time to increase her glory, she began to get well again. When she wrote to one of her daughters to give her this news, she told her what the dispositions of her soul had been in the different circumstances of her life:

*"It has not pleased the goodness of God to efface me from the earth, although I have long deserved it. We must await the order of his Providence with submission; every day we must be in such dispositions, with regard to the death of those near to us, or our own, or any other disturbing event, so that the divine will has no cause to complain of our not having followed its orders."*

In the end, the year 1660 saw the close of her life. She became ill on 4th February with a swelling in her left arm, and a high temperature,

which increased so violently for a week that she had to receive Holy Viaticum and Extreme Unction. When she received the last sacraments, she said to her son, who was present with his family at the ceremony:

*“I pray the Father, Son and Holy Spirit by the power he has given to fathers and mothers to bless their children, that he give you his blessing, detaching you from earthly things, and attaching you to him. Live as good Christians.”*

Then looking at the Sisters of Charity, she blessed them also, and recommended to them the love of their vocation, and fidelity to the service of the poor. Every means was used to ask God to cure her. Recourse was had to the relics of the Saints, and a stole of St. Charles was brought to her, with part of St. Francis de Sales' heart, for which she showed great veneration. Having received a little relief the following night, it was believed to be the effect of the intercession of these saints, whose relics she had been given to touch. After that she was without fever for nearly three weeks, and the swelling went down somewhat.

But on 9th March the fever took hold again, and her arm became gangrenous. Realising her condition she asked on March 12th to receive the bread of life a second time, and when she learned from one of her daughters that the parish-priest of St. Laurent granted her this grace for the next day, she blessed God several times with transports of joy and gratitude. Her mind being more free in this second communion than in the first, she made use of it to prepare herself more attentively. She used every moment of the preceding day to dwell on the greatness of this mystery and arouse in her heart the most tender and affectionate stirrings of devotion. Not being able to contain her ardour, she often expressed it outwardly by sighs and loving words. Among other things, she was heard to say at intervals throughout the night: *“My Lord, I shall receive you tomorrow!”*

This pure, innocent soul had the happiness of receiving him the next day, full of holy dispositions. All those present were edified and moved by the sentiments of respect and love which she showed in this act. And when her pastor urged her to bless her daughters again, she spoke to them these words, which she left them as her last will and testament:

*“My dear Sisters,*

*I continue to ask God to bless you, and I beg him to give you the grace to persevere in your vocation to serve him in the way he asks of you. Take great care of the service of the poor; and be especially mindful to live together in great union and cordiality, loving one another, in imitation of the union and life of Our Lord; and pray well to the Blessed Virgin; may she be your only mother.”*

She added that she was dying in high esteem of their vocation, and that, were she to live a hundred years, she would still recommend the same thing to them.

Her illness could not interrupt her works of charity. She always enquired if the very numerous poor of the parish were being well looked after. She also asked who was being given food in the house, and gave her orders as if she were in perfect health. There is no virtue she did not show by heroic acts. She gave signs of perfect repentance, accepting her illness as a just punishment which she said she had deserved, and declaring publicly that *"it was quite reasonable that where sin abounds, sickness should dwell; that God was acting justly in her person, and that in acting with justice he was showing mercy."* It was clear that she was completely detached from earth, and that she ardently desired to be united with God. When a lady asked her if she did not rejoice at going to possess the glory of heaven, she gave this reply: *"Ah! It is something inexpressible! But I am not worthy of it."* Finally, she maintained evenness of disposition, gentleness, patience, submission to God, and the other virtues which she had practised in the different trials of her life.

One of the greatest trials she ever had was that which God sent her in this sickness: she was deprived of Monsieur Vincent's presence. He was so infirm at that time that he could not visit her even once. Seeing that it was impossible for him to render her at the hour of death this act of charity which she had so ardently desired, she sent someone to ask him to write her at least a few words of consolation. But the test of her virtue was utterly complete; this wise director did not judge it fitting to grant her this grace, and simply sent one of the priests of his Company with instructions to tell her on his behalf that she was going before him, and that he hoped to see her soon in heaven. Although nothing could have affected her more than this privation, she accepted it with extraordinary serenity and self-control, remaining inseparably united and attached to God's good pleasure.

From the 13th of March to the 15th, her illness increased more and more. She was visited by several ladies of rank, with whom she had been associated in works of charity during her life. But none showed her greater marks of esteem and friendship than the Duchess of Ventadour, who knowing death was near, came and slept in the house of the community on the 14th, to assist her to the end. Her daughters fulfilled on that occasion all the duties they owed to so dear a person, and this charitable mother, fearing lest they be inconvenienced by their assiduous attentions to her, said to them on Monday, the 15th of the month, at six o'clock in the morning, that they should not trouble about her, and

that she would warn them, when she judged it was time. Monsieur Vincent, unable to go himself to see her or help her, sent one of his priests to take his place beside her until the last moment of her life.

As she felt herself getting weaker and nearing her end, she redoubled her piety, and expressed the sentiments of her heart by words of Holy Scripture, which she pronounced from time to time in the language of the Church, which she understood. At one time she said with Job, *"Have mercy on me, for the hand of the Lord has touched me."* At another with David, *"Look on me, Lord, and have pity on me, for I am alone and wretched."* (Ps. 34). There was a moment when her spirit was troubled by the violence of the fever, and she said anxiously: *"Take me away from here."* But she immediately came back to herself, and when a priest of the Mission presented the Cross to her, showing her that Jesus Christ had not asked to leave it, she answered, *"Oh, no, he remained on it."* Then she said, *"Let us go, since my Lord has come for me."* Some time later, feeling that the judgement of God was drawing near, she was seized with fright, and spoke these words: *"O my God! I must appear before my judge."* But she was consoled by the sentiments of trust which this ecclesiastic inspired in her by proposing among other things this verse of the psalm: *"To you have I lifted up my soul, O my God, I place my trust in you"* (Ps. 24). To show that she responded to these sentiments, she immediately added what follows: *"Let me not be confounded in my hope."* And like Gorgonia, St. Gregory of Nazianzan's sister, *"when she was about to leave the world, she spoke only the language of the psalms. Her last words were but a continual psalmody, or to express her sentiments better, they were holy affections, taken from divine Scripture, which expressed the trust she had in God."*

At eleven o'clock in the morning she had her bed-curtains drawn aside to warn her daughters, as she had promised, that her hour was near, and she entered her agony, which lasted about half-an-hour, during which she kept her eyes continually raised to heaven. Madame de Ventadour, who had spent part of the night beside her, stayed with her till her last sigh, and had the charity to hold the blessed candle for her. The prayers for the dying were said, and she heard them to the end, replying interiorly by the sentiments of her heart.

Once again, at the request of a priest of the Mission, she blessed her daughters who were kneeling around her. She herself received from him the apostolic blessing which she had obtained from Pope Innocent X for herself and her daughters at the hour of death, by a Brief of 24th September 1647. Then she had her bed-curtains closed and seven or eight minutes later she rested in the Lord, and gave up her soul to him on

the Monday of Passion Week, 15th March, between eleven o'clock and midday, at the age of 68. The parish priest of Saint-Laurent, (Monsieur Lestoc\*) who had been there at the end of her agony, gave testimony to her virtue in the presence of the company, after she had breathed her last. He knew her perfectly because of the general confession she had made to him. He said, "*O what a beautiful soul, which takes with it the grace of baptism*".

Her body was laid out on her bed for a day and a half, to satisfy the desire of several ladies, who wanted to have the consolation of seeing her again after her death, and of giving her the last testimony of their veneration and love.

The following Wednesday she was buried in the church of Saint-Laurent in the chapel of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin, where she usually carried out her devotions. She had wanted to be buried in a cemetery near the church of St. Lazare if Monsieur Vincent was in agreement. He, however, judged it more fitting to grant the pastor's request thereby giving the parish a greatly beloved treasure, and not separating the body of the mother from the ashes of the daughters who had gone before her. Her funeral was carried out in the way she had wished it in her will, where she had laid it down that no other expense should be incurred than that paid for the burial of her daughters, protesting that "*if it were otherwise, it would be declaring her unworthy of appearing to have died as a true sister of Charity and servant of the members of Jesus Christ, although she considered nothing more glorious for herself than this title.*" As she had recommended that a cross be put near her tomb with this inscription "*Spes Unica*", one was put opposite it on the outside wall of the chapel, on the cemetery side, near the burial place of her daughters, to serve as a sign and symbol common to all their tombs. Monsieur Vincent had a solemn service carried out for her at St. Lazare a few days later. It was attended by his community and by those present at the time to prepare for ordination. He had this public recognition given her, not only for the part she had played in the purposes of the Mission by helping the poor, but also for the special zeal she had had for the reformation of the clergy. During her life she used to offer communions and prayers at the times prescribed for ordinations, to ask God for faithful workers, and in her will she ordered this pious custom to be continued in the Company.

A greater sign of her blessedness cannot be wished for than charity, which she professed all her life, and in which she persevered till death. It

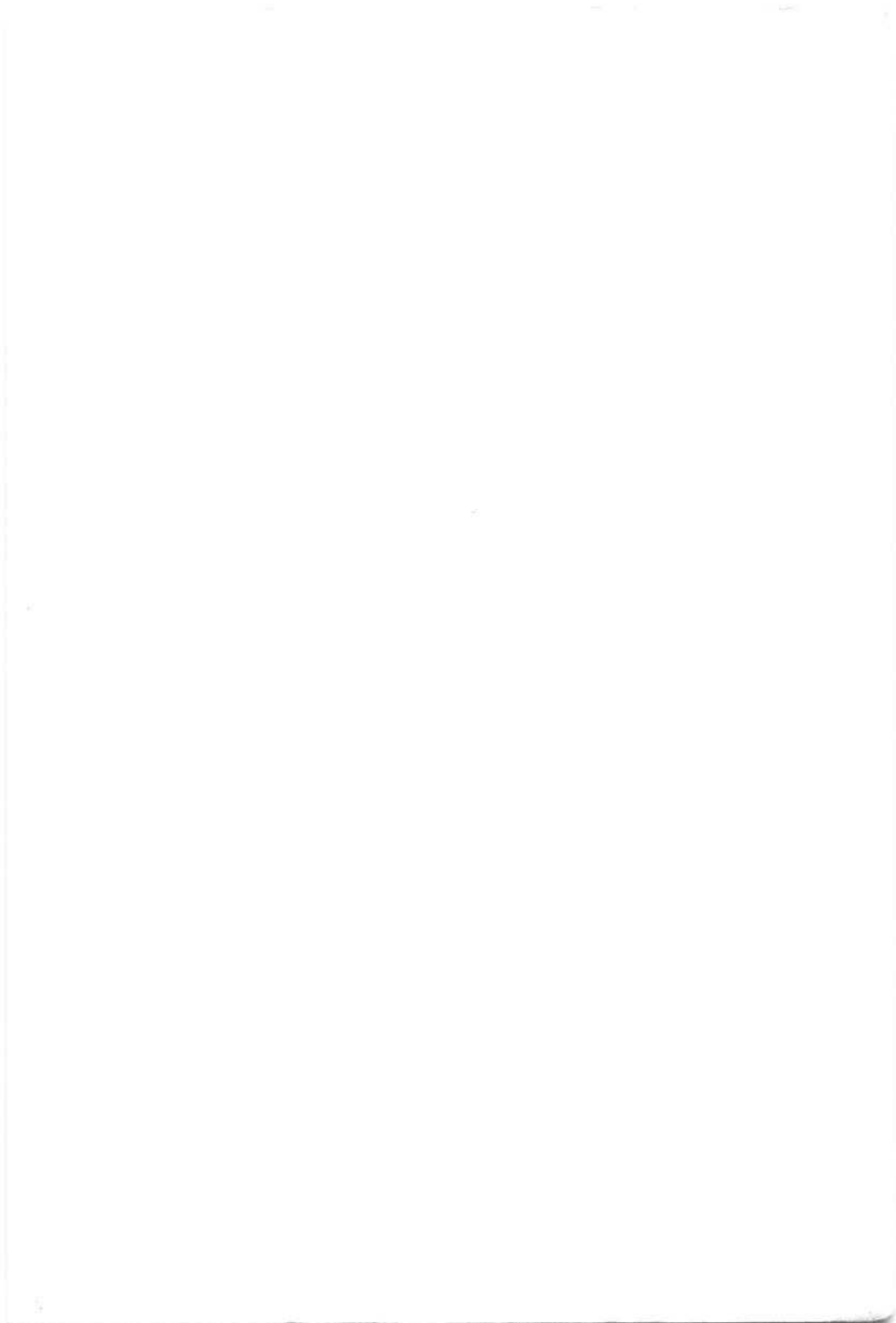
\* Translator's addition

is this virtue which makes saints and which, according to the Apostle, is a more excellent gift than the grace of miracles. However, it seems that God is not satisfied with having made known the merit of this faithful servant by so many good things he has brought about by her ministry. It seems that he even has some intention of making known by visible signs the judgement he pronounced at her death, and that he wants to reveal his glory by the extraordinary effects he makes manifest at her tomb. From time to time a kind of soft haze emanates from it, spreading a fragrance like that of violets and irises. Many people can testify to that, and what is more surprising is that the Sisters of Charity who come and pray at her tomb sometimes go away so fragrant with this perfume that they carry it with them to the sick sisters in the infirmary of the mother-house. If it were worth considering in this context, I could add that I myself have experienced it several times. I could also say that after taking every possible measure to find out if it might arise from natural causes, I could not find any to which it could be attributed. But whatever might be the nature of the fragrance which rises from the tomb of this servant of the poor, an entirely spiritual one arises from the example of her life, more precious than any perfume. This spiritual fragrance is a miracle of grace, and the most glorious sign of her holiness. It is this true fragrance which penetrates her daughters' hearts, and which draws them so gently and powerfully to imitate her. It is this fragrance which pervades every parish and every pastor, inspiring them to love and care for the poor. Finally it is this fragrance which has not only spread throughout the earth in God's church, but which has risen up to his throne, and which he has received as an acceptable sacrifice.









PRINTED BY ANVIL PRINTING, 225 PHILIP LANE, LONDON, N.15