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# An Expression of Gratitude to Saint Louise de Marillac

— On the Occasion of the 350th Anniversary of the  
Establishment of the Company of the  
Daughters of Charity —

*Sister Margaret Flinton, D.C.*

“Be very gentle and courteous toward the poor. You know they are our masters and we must love them tenderly and respect them very deeply. It does not suffice to have these truths rooted in our minds; we must display them in our gentle and charitable care.”<sup>1</sup>

In its decree on the appropriate renewal of the religious life, Vatican Council II put into motion two simultaneous processes: a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and a loyal recognition and safeguarding of the spirit of Founders as well as the particular goals and wholesome traditions which constitute the heritage of each Community.<sup>2</sup>

Faithful to the directives of the Church, the Daughters of Charity throughout the world became involved in the work of renewal. Extraordinary and Ordinary General Assemblies, the editing and re-editing of Constitutions and

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<sup>1</sup>*Sainte Louise de Marillac, Correspondance, Meditations, Pensees, Avis*, (Paris: Kremer, 1961), No. 284 bis. Hereafter cited as LDM.

<sup>2</sup>Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: the America Press, 1966), p. 468.

Statutes in order to make the thinking of their Founders stand out clearly, International Vincentian Seminars at the Mother House in Paris, and Vincentian Heritage Workshops at local, provincial and national levels have awakened a renewed interest and enthusiasm in family treasures such as the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity and the Letters and Spiritual Writings of Saint Louise de Marillac.

Today's Daughters are discovering in these writings a "spirit" throbbingly alive and a specific as well as universal path to be trod in both time and space. Research and study are enabling Vincent and Louise's Servants of the Poor to rediscover the essence of the message of their Founders: Love of God and Service of the Poor carried out with the characteristic virtues of humility, simplicity and charity.

It seems most fitting that in 1983, as the Company of the Daughters of Charity celebrates the 350th anniversary of its establishment, special attention, study, reflection, and appreciation be manifested to Saint Louise de Marillac, around whom the very first Daughters of Charity gathered on November 29, 1633, in order "to live their ideal under her guidance in a community of fraternal life."<sup>3</sup> "It was she," Vincent told the first Sisters, "who made you and brought you to birth in Our Lord."<sup>4</sup>

As an expression of gratitude to Saint Louise, Vincentian Heritage Workshops during 1982-1983 have afforded the opportunity for American Daughters of Charity to reflect on Louise's important contributions to the establishment and permanence of the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

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<sup>3</sup> *Filles de La Charité de Saint Vincent de Paul: Constitutions* (Paris: J. Hallépée, 1983), C 1.2.

<sup>4</sup> *The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, trans. by Joseph Leonard, C.M. (Great Britain: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1979), p. 1273.

The present article will attempt to develop the following contributions highlighted by her Daughters of today:

— Louise's love of the Company evidenced in her insistence and personal efforts to have the Company of the Daughters of Charity dependent on the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission so that its Vincentian spirit and its stability might be maintained;

— Louise's Marian initiative in placing the guardianship of the Company under Our Lady's maternal protection;

— Louise, the Educator and Leader who prepared her Daughters spiritually and professionally for a life of LOVE, inculcating in them the virtues of humility, simplicity and charity, and making of them women of PRAYER and SERVICE;

— Louise, the woman behind Vincent, who used her feminine intuition and genius to collaborate, suggest, urge, and even move Vincent in the direction in which the Holy Spirit was inspiring her;

— Louise's concept of a strong and vibrant fraternal life in common in order to provide the support and encouragement needed by her Daughters "the better to fulfill their specific mission of service;"<sup>5</sup>

— Louise's interest, affection, care, and compassion manifested in her relationships with her Daughters in their problems, sufferings, joys, and health as well as in those of their families.

## THE LITTLE COMPANY

The Company of the Daughters of Charity, which

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<sup>5</sup> *Constitutions*, C. 2. 10.

Louise was to love dearly, had its humble beginnings in Paris in the Parish of Saint Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, in a small house which, in the words of one of Louise's biographers, was to be "the Cenacle in which a few good and dedicated girls assembled in prayer and in union of mind and heart to receive the Spirit of God and the unknown Mission he destined for them."<sup>6</sup>

"O Lord," Louise was to write, "I experienced I know not what new light about an unusual love which you desire of creatures you have chosen to practice on earth the purity of your love. Here we are a small group: could we aspire to that? It seems to me that we truly desire this in our hearts."<sup>7</sup>

Although Vincent took delight in repeating to the first Sisters that neither he, nor Mademoiselle Le Gras, nor Father Portail ever thought of founding the "Little Company,"<sup>8</sup> it had been given to Louise while she was praying to foresee the Company-to-be ten years before its actual establishment.

On Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 1623, the Holy Spirit had descended upon her and allowed her to see that a time would come when she would be able to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in a small community in which others would do the same. "I understood further," she added, "that this would occur in a place dedicated to assisting the neighbor, but I could not imagine how this would come about, for it would require going out and returning."<sup>9</sup> It is certain that Louise was far from having a clear and complete understanding of God's plan for her. However, the Divine inspiration of 1623 must have hovered in her thoughts and prayers.

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<sup>6</sup> Mgr. Baunard, *Saint Louise de Marillac*, éd. abrégée (Paris: J. de Gigord, 1934), p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> LDM, p. 938.

<sup>8</sup> *Conferences*, pp. 534, 535, 607, 741.

Correspondence between the Founders during the years to follow reveals frequent references to young women Louise welcomed into her home or whom she referred to Ladies of Charity in need of helpers. In June 1627, she calls Vincent's attention to an "intelligent and virtuous" girl from Burgundy and a 22-year-old young woman whom she characterizes as a "true village girl."<sup>10</sup> Apparently, nothing came of this as Vincent continued restraining her zeal. Nevertheless, he asked her on February 19, 1630 whether or not "that good girl of Suresnes who visited you before and who works at teaching girls has gone to see you, as she promised me when she was here last Sunday."<sup>11</sup> *That good girl of Suresnes*, whose name was Marguerite Naseau, was destined to become, three years before the establishment of the Company, the one God intended to be "the first Daughter of Charity and Servant of the sick poor in the city of Paris."<sup>12</sup>

Louise's eagerness to serve Marguerite and others who followed her was checked by Vincent who begged her "once and for all, not to think about it until Our Lord shows that it is His Will . . . . You seek to become the servant of these poor girls, and God wishes you to be His servant and perhaps the servant of many more."<sup>13</sup>

The time marked out by God was fast approaching, if we are to judge from a letter of September 2, 1633, in which Vincent tells Louise that "Marie has replied to me quite ingeniously, lovingly and humbly that she is ready to do what you wish . . . . Oh! what a good girl she seems to

<sup>9</sup> LDM, p. 875.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Coste, *Saint Vincent de Paul, Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents* (Paris Gabalda, 1920-1925), I, 75-76.

<sup>12</sup> *Conferences*, p. 72.

<sup>13</sup> Coste, I, 71.

be. I certainly think, Mademoiselle, that Our Lord has given her to you Himself so that He might make use of her through you.”<sup>14</sup>

At the end of the same month or the beginning of October, Vincent and Louise were going to meet “before making a firm decision about the girls.” They were to be sent away for about 12 or 15 days, doubtless for a retreat, and Louise was “to let them know that a spirit of indifference is essential. Indeed, they must be trained in a knowledge of solid virtues before we can make use of them.”<sup>15</sup>

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Preparations were being made for the event to take place humbly and simply on November 29, 1633. In speaking of it to her Daughters, Louise asked:

Was there ever anything more lowly in the eyes of the world than the beginning of your establishment? You can see in some of the conferences of our Most Honored Father that the beginning was the merest nothing. Some village girls had come to Paris and were employed in carrying soup kettles and remedies. Then they were brought together in community and the Company was formed without anything of their way of life being changed, either in regard to their dress, or their simplicity, or their country rusticity.<sup>16</sup>

The Company of the Daughters of Charity was established and credit must be given to Louise for seeing the needed organization and for pushing in her own gentle and humble way until it was adopted because she was convinced that “God himself willed its establishment.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>16</sup> LDM, p. 839.

<sup>17</sup> *Conferences*, p. 615.

Her wonderful confidence in the Providence of God was manifested in all things, as testified by the first Sisters, but especially “in all that concerned the Company.”<sup>18</sup> In 1634, she had vowed to give herself entirely to God for the service of the Company, and throughout the years she would urge the Sisters to pray to God for its perseverance.<sup>19</sup>

## DEPENDENCE ON VINCENT AND HIS SUCCESSORS

From the beginning Vincent de Paul had been recognized as the Founder and First Superior of the Company and Louise de Marillac as its Foundress and First Superioress, but Louise was convinced that certain necessary steps had to be taken if the “nourishing force of the Company”<sup>20</sup> was to be safeguarded for posterity.

Between the years 1646 and 1655, she prayed, entreated and exerted personal efforts to obtain a firm and stable establishment for the Company, which should be united with the Congregation of the Mission and dependent on the Superior General of the said Congregation. She had not been happy with the clause in the Rule of 1645 which stipulated that “an ecclesiastic appointed by the Archbishop of Paris” would preside at the elections of their officers “to guide said girls and widows.”<sup>21</sup>

Nor was she satisfied with the official document of November 20, 1646 by which the Company was formally established as a Confraternity. Her objections to the first draft had been ignored except that while the Coadjutor

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1269.

<sup>19</sup> LDM, p. 956

<sup>20</sup> Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M., *Louise de Marillac* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), p. 218.

<sup>21</sup> Coste, XIII, 551.

retained *absolute* and *perpetual* control over the Company for the Archbishop of Paris, Vincent had been named as its director for his lifetime. Quickly had she taken her pen to question the latter:

Might not such an absolute term as 'dependence on the Archbishop' be harmful to us in the future by the freedom it implies of our being withdrawn from the direction of the Superior General of the Mission? Is it not essential that by this document of establishment you should be given to us as Perpetual Director?

Her language becomes stronger as she continues:

In the name of God, Monsieur, do not let anything even remotely withdraw the Company from the direction which God has given to it. You can be sure that it would no longer be what it is now. The poor sick would no longer be cared for and if this happens, I believe that the Will of God would no longer be done among us.<sup>22</sup>

In the same letter she likewise asks Vincent that the title 'Daughters of Charity' be retained, a "title which has been omitted, perhaps as an oversight, in the written statement of the terms of the establishment."<sup>23</sup>

The Daughters had been simply an association of laywomen, with or without vows, who co-operated with the Ladies of Charity in ministering to the sick poor. They lived in hired rooms in the parishes in which a Confraternity of Charity had been established. Most of the expenses were defrayed by the Ladies, but the nursing and teaching were discharged by the Sisters. The official title that had been given to their confraternity was 'the Confraternity of Sisters of Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> LDM, No. 130 quater.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Conferences*, p. 289.

Louise's campaign would continue. Exactly one year after the Approbation of November 20, 1646, Louise wrote to Vincent in the following terms:

God seems to have filled my soul with peace and simplicity during the imperfect meditation I made on the subject of the Daughters of Charity being always successively under the guidance which Divine Providence has given them both in temporal and spiritual matters. On this point I understood that it would be more for his glory for the Company to disappear entirely than to be under another guidance, since it would seem to go against the Will of God.<sup>25</sup>

In a very feminine and persuasive manner she continued: "I hope you have heard from Our Lord what I think He has told you through the person of Saint Peter, that it was on you that He wished to found this Company and that it will persevere in the service He asks of it for the instruction of little ones and for the relief of the sick."<sup>26</sup>

In that same year Queen Anne of Austria, conscious of the fact that the Company of the Daughters of Charity was extending more and more into other dioceses, sent a request to the Holy See begging the Pope

to appoint as perpetual director of the said Confraternity or Society of the Servants of the Poor of the Charity the said Superior General of the said Congregation of the Mission and his successors in that same office. In so doing, there is reason to hope that this good work will always increase and that the Church will be edified by it and the poor better cared for.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> LDM, No. 199.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Coste, XIII, 566; Sr. Marie-Madeleine Castelnau et Sr. Margaret Flinton, "Le Supérieur Général de la Compagnie des Filles de la Charité de Saint Vincent de Paul," *Bulletin des Lazaristes de France*, no. 46, octobre 1974, p. 4.

The same thinking is expressed by Louise in a letter dated July 5, 1651. The importance of its content must have prompted her to make a copy of it in her own handwriting before sending her message to Vincent. Both autograph copies of the letter are preserved in the Archives of the Daughters of Charity in Paris. In the above-mentioned letter Louise insists that

the Company must be established under the title of Company or Confraternity, so that it may continue to exist and give God the glory it appears capable of rendering him. Moreover, it must be entirely submissive to and dependent on the guidance of the Most Honored Father General of the Priests of the Mission, with the consent of their Company, so that association with them may give us a share in the good works they accomplish and that God, through the merits of Jesus Christ and the prayers of the Blessed Virgin, may give our Company the grace to live by the same spirit that animates the Company of the Priests of the Mission.<sup>28</sup>

In November of that year, Louise had had a little setback when Vincent questioned her as to whether or not she might have the Document of November 1646, which could be found nowhere. She answered him:

I couldn't find any document pertaining to the establishment, but I remember that one day you read to us the petition you had presented to his Excellency, the Archbishop of Paris, and then our Rule. Thinking that this should remain with us, I asked you for it, but I think it may not have been quite complete and that for that reason, we did not receive it.

In a postscript she further stated: "I think Brother Ducourneau could find the copy or the original of the petition that was presented, together with the Act of Establishment which, it seems to me, was never in our

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<sup>28</sup> LDM, No. 315.

possession.”<sup>29</sup>

Louise’s prayers and endeavors to obtain what she felt was the Will of God for the Company of the Daughters of Charity continued. In a spiritual writing referring to the Providential protection shown the Company on the occasion when a floor caved in without anyone’s being injured, she expresses her conviction that the accident was in reality a grace bestowed by God for “the solid establishment of this little family . . . and a warning to our Most Honored Father to establish an intimate union of our Community with his Institute, according to the Will of God, since their interests are the same.”<sup>30</sup> She further stated that she felt strongly that this grace had been granted “for a purpose unknown to us,” but that by this means God was asking something of both the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentians, and she trusted that “God in his goodness would make our Most Honored Father understand this.”<sup>31</sup>

Dirvin refers to this as a “very important reference in establishing the primacy of Louise’s role in the foundation of the Company,” and he calls the ‘intimate union’ she calls for “the heart and soul of the Company” . . . an essential means, recognized as such by the Sisters themselves, of preserving in the Company the spirit of Vincent de Paul . . . the extension in time of the vital rapport between him and Louise. It was Louise,” he tells us, “who conceived it, insisted upon it, and worked to establish it, often against the mysterious indifference of Vincent himself.”<sup>32</sup>

Louise’s untiring efforts would be rewarded on January 18, 1655, when Cardinal de Retz, Archbishop of

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 333.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 914.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Dirvin, pp. 218-219.

Paris, would decree in the Act of Establishment of the Company of the Daughters of Charity that he was confiding and committing to Vincent de Paul "the government and direction of the aforesaid Society and Confraternity for his lifetime, and after him to his successors the generals of the aforesaid Congregation of the Mission."<sup>33</sup>

The Daughters of Charity of the twentieth century recognize and appreciate the persevering endeavors of Louise to obtain that the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission be likewise the Superior General of their Company. Their recently edited Constitutions testify that "this disposition has existed since the beginning of the Company, at the explicit request of Louise de Marillac, who saw in it a privileged means of safeguarding the identity and vitality of the Vincentian spirit in every circumstance of time and place."<sup>34</sup>

## MARIAN INITIATIVE

In the Chapel of the Miraculous Medal in Paris, the last verbal message of Saint Louise de Marillac to her spiritual Daughters has been inscribed for posterity in the marble altar beneath her remains. It is most fitting that her recommendation, "*Priez bien la Sainte Vierge qu'elle soit votre unique Mère*" should be preserved throughout the centuries side by side with the entreaty she made to the Daughters of Charity that they ever be faithful to their service of the poor and to their union and love for one another.

Devotion to the Blessed Mother had always been prominent in Louise's personal spirituality and she wished

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<sup>33</sup> Coste, XIII, 569.

<sup>34</sup> *Constitutions*, C. 1. 14.

it to be so in that of her Sisters. From March 25, 1634, the feast of the Annunciation on which she gave herself entirely to God to serve the Company of the Daughters of Charity, until her agony and death on March 15, 1660, Louise encouraged her Daughters to love, imitate and honor Our Lady.

It was she who took the initiative of going on pilgrimage to Chartres in October 1644 to offer the Company to God and to recommend to the Blessed Virgin its guardianship and its needs. In the account she rendered to Vincent of the days she had spent at Chartres, she told him that the intentions of her prayers on Monday, October 17, were

to offer to God the designs of His Providence for the Company of the Daughters of Charity; giving the entire Company to Him and asking for its destruction should it undertake anything contrary to His Will; asking for it, through the prayers of the Blessed Virgin, Mother and Guardian of the aforesaid Company, the purity which it needs.<sup>35</sup>

In one of her spiritual writings she confides to Mary: “I am not wrong, Holy Virgin, in thinking that you will agree to be our only Mother. We can pretend to the status of being your daughters since you are the Mother of Jesus, Who is our brother, and we have vowed in a particular way to be like Him.” She concludes by asking the Mother of God to obtain for her Daughters the spirit of her Son so that “union might reign in our Company in the practice of the virtues of Jesus.”<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere she gives credit to God for having inspired her to choose the Blessed Mother as the only Mother of the Little Company.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> LDM, No. 111.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 838.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 837.

Her personal and intimate devotion to Our Lady communicated itself to those with whom she came in contact, but Louise wanted the Community as a whole to be placed definitively under the Virgin's guardianship. Thus, in December 1658, she expressed to Vincent the joy of the "entire Company of our Sisters" when they heard that he would place the Company under the protection of the Blessed Virgin during his celebration of Mass on the following day, feast of the Immaculate Conception. "I beg you, " she added, "to obtain for us the grace that we may always consider her as our only Mother."<sup>38</sup>

This first public consecration of the Daughters of Charity, desired and obtained by Louise de Marillac, has continued for more than three centuries. Each year, as the Church celebrates Mary's Immaculate Conception on December 8, the Daughters of Charity throughout the world renew their consecration to the Mother of God. In a similar manner, Louise's pilgrimage to Chartres is perpetuated. In October, the Superioress General, Louise's successor, sets out for Chartres to entrust again and again to the guardianship of Our Lady the Company of the Daughters of Charity and to thank her for her loving protection of it during the preceding year.

The Blessed Virgin figures prominently in Louise's writings and correspondence. Her biographers are in agreement that her deeply rooted devotion to Mary "must be credited with that singular devotion of the Daughters of Charity to the Mother of God, gloriously rewarded by her and her Son"<sup>39</sup> in the apparitions granted to Saint Catherine Labouré in 1830, and, through her, in the privileged mission entrusted to Louise's Daughters to propagate the Miraculous Medal.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 602.

<sup>39</sup> Dirvin, p. 71.

## EDUCATOR AND LEADER

A practical woman who knew how to face details, a personality which did not allow itself to be absorbed but which knew how to adapt itself to the needs of the hour, Louise gave evidence of being a true educator.

Intellectually prepared in the early years of her life at the Dominican Monastery of Poissy, Louise had studied Latin and had acquired a good knowledge of her native French language, which she handled as well as the lettered French women of her time.

In her spiritual writings and in the comments she expressed in some of the conferences held for the first Daughters of Charity, she manifests in a striking manner philosophical and stylistic trends of seventeenth-century classical French, such as: the use of maxims, methodic presentations which explicitly or implicitly make a one-two-three logical reasoning stand out, and ascending or descending progressions. An example of each may suffice for our purposes.

A typical maxim can be seen in her definition of "Anger" as "a passion which makes us speak loudly and audaciously, perform violent actions, and always makes us think that we are right."<sup>40</sup>

Louise's intervention in the Conference of June 3, 1653 on Fidelity to God demonstrates a methodic presentation which explicitly makes her reasoning stand out:

Out of many reasons we have for being faithful to God all our life, the *first* is . . . . A *second* reason is . . . a *third* reason . . . a *fourth* reason . . . . We can be faithful to God in many ways. In the *first* place . . . *secondly* . . . . As for means of acquiring fidelity . . . I thought I should frequently reflect on my need of it . . . that I should often ask God for it . . . . Another means is . . . .<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> LDM, p. 858.

<sup>41</sup> *Conferences*, pp. 556-557.

In a more implicit type of logical presentation, she concludes her treatise on 'The Singular Privileges of the Immaculate Conception of Mary' by writing that we should glorify him eternally for this masterpiece in a purely human nature, admire the purity of the Virgin's thoughts which were never useless nor sinful, make known how much the Virgin honored God by her words, ever truthful and just, and be attentive to the actions of Our Lady which were always performed in conformity with God's Holy Will.<sup>42</sup> How easily one could slip in the 1, 2, 3, 4 in the above paragraph as well as in many other extracts from Louise's writings!

One of the best examples of Louise's use of progression may be considered in a letter written in May 1644 to Sister Claude at Saint John's Hospital in Angers.

Understanding only too well that the emotional condition brought on by suffering prevents a person from either hearing or accepting the best-intentioned advice for immediate action, Louise begins her letter by placing herself very near Sister Claude. All the sentences of the first paragraph begin by the pronoun 'I.' "*I fully sympathize* with the affliction of soul you are suffering . . . . (The original French is even stronger with its use of "*je compatis*" = *I suffer with.*) "*I hope* that interiorly you are making good use of it." (Exteriorly doing so is not an immediate possibility for a deeply disturbed person). "*I beg this grace for you . . . .*" (Louise is praying for her.) "*I wish* you could send me your troubles and the thoughts they have aroused in you. *I shall try* to help you, having traveled the same road myself." By highlighting the initial subject and verb the progression or graduation is more obvious: *I fully sympathize, I hope, I pray or I beg this grace for you, I wish* you could send me your troubles, *I shall try* to help you.

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<sup>42</sup> LDM, p. 879.

Louise now senses that the moment has come when she may say to the Sister, "*Try to distract yourself . . .*" (It is not yet *distract yourself* but *try to*.) Only in a third paragraph does she feel ready to say: "I beg you . . . *to work very hard* to overcome this dangerous temptation." Finally, urging her to call on the Holy Spirit to bestow his joy upon her, she balances her spiritual advice with the very practical statement, "and keep as busy as you can."<sup>43</sup>

The above-quoted letter is but one example likewise of the sensitivity and understanding of an authentic educator and of a psychological approach to someone in distress, which is still valid for anyone in a position of authority who may be called on to offer sympathy and advice.

Besides a formal education, more advanced than was customary for women in seventeenth-century France, Louise manifested a keen native intelligence which she enriched by experience and which she used generously in educating others. Four years before the foundation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, Louise had been sent by Vincent to visit the various Confraternities of Charity established in villages in the environs of Paris. We are told that on those visits she would assemble the members of the confraternity, instruct them, stimulate their zeal and put new life into what was growing cold. She would visit the poor in their homes, nurse the sick, bring together the girls of the area to teach them the truths of faith, instruct the school mistress of the village in her professional duties, and, if there was none to be found, she would set about training one.<sup>44</sup>

Her pedagogical methods were adapted to each one. She could speak to children, to the first Daughters of Charity, who were mostly uneducated country girls, and to

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 102.

<sup>44</sup> Sr. Margaret Flinton, *Sainte Louise de Marillac: L'aspect social de son oeuvre* (Belgium: Desclée et Cie, 1957), p. 98.

the Ladies of Charity whom she guided during spiritual retreats.

The education of poor little girls was a priority for her because she saw in reading another way of loving God and because she feared that ignorance might prevent those little ones from profiting by the graces of God. In May 1641, she obtained authorization to open a free school for poor girls in the faubourg Saint-Denis in Paris. To simplify for them the presentation of the truths of faith, she composed a little catechism, and she personally trained catechists for them. Barbe Bailly, one of the first Daughters of Charity, gave testimony to this in her comments on Louise's personal efforts in teaching the Sisters.<sup>45</sup>

The educational formation of those first catechists was quite different from her own training. She was convinced that, besides being able to read and write, those catechists needed to know the essential elements of their faith<sup>46</sup> because they were destined to teach little ones to become good Christians rather than to become scholars.

Her correspondence reveals how faithfully she kept in touch with them, reminding them that the principal goal of their instruction should always be to inculcate in their pupils the knowledge and "love of God."<sup>47</sup> She longed for news of the Sisters engaged in teaching, and inquired about the number of pupils they had<sup>48</sup> and their particular methods of teaching.<sup>49</sup> She sent them words of encouragement as well as professional and spiritual advice.

<sup>45</sup> Nicolas Gobillon, *Louise de Marillac, Sa vie, ses vertus, son esprit*, reproduction textuelle de l'édition de 1676 (Bruges, 1886), I, 224.

<sup>46</sup> Flinton, p. 182.

<sup>47</sup> LDM, No. 529, No. 598.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 200, No. 646.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 171.

Her personal interest extended beyond the teaching of little girls. Because she saw Jesus Christ in every poor person she encountered, all places became catechetical centers for her: the coach in which she traveled, the inn where she had to spend the night, the village church where she stopped to pray, the ward of the hospital where she whispered words of comfort to the sick, the home of the poor where she would question the children about the mystery of the Holy Trinity and other truths of faith ever hopeful of reaching the parents through the answers of the children.<sup>50</sup>

## PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

Educator that she was, Louise was guided by a keen psychological understanding of her good, well-intentioned and robust *village girls* who lacked training. She made them understand that “it would be foolhardy to undertake something without knowing how to tackle it.”<sup>51</sup> Their desire to serve the poor was one thing, but they had to know how to do so. Thus, she would advise local Superiors or *Sister Servants* to teach the Sisters assigned to nurse the sick poor how they “should let blood, particularly how to avoid arteries, nerves and other vulnerable areas.”<sup>52</sup> No detail escaped her attention. Some of her recommendations, such as “not to go visit the sick before rubbing your nose with vinegar,”<sup>53</sup> make us smile today, but they reflect faithfully the medical mentality of seventeenth-century France. The professional obligations of a Servant of the Poor required of her the medical knowledge of her century.

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<sup>50</sup> Flinton, p. 196.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>52</sup> LDM, No. 352.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 620.

Louise was well acquainted with that knowledge and had had experience for many years at the bedside of the sick. As a young wife and mother she “visited the sick poor of the parish where she lived. She took them soups and medicine, made their beds, instructed them and comforted them . . . visited them in the hospitals, where she took them treats over and above the necessities they received there and rendered them with her own hands the lowliest and most demanding services.”<sup>54</sup> Gobillon further states that it was at the bedside of her sick husband that she acquired her best nursing experience, to which she brought tender affection, compassionate kindness and condescending love in an effort “to calm his state of mind and alleviate his suffering.”<sup>55</sup>

*Affection, compassionate kindness and love* are expressions that recur frequently in Louise’s words of advice. For Sisters setting out for Montreuil she has encouraging reminders for them to be sure to care for their sick “*affectionately*, serving them with pleasure, inquiring especially about their needs, speaking to them with *gentleness* and *compassion*.”<sup>56</sup> To other Sisters she recommends “*gentleness* and a holy *affection* for your poor sick,”<sup>57</sup> or “*great gentleness* and *charity*.”<sup>58</sup> Empathizing with a sick Sister, she tells her that she is rejoicing to know that by her suffering she will acquire an increase of “*compassionate love* for the poor sick.”<sup>59</sup>

Some Sisters lacked the ability to master the techniques and dispositions Louise endeavored to teach them. Aware of this, she would take the necessary

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<sup>54</sup> Gobillon, I, 8-9.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>56</sup> LDM, p. 980.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 116.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 25.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 136.

measures to prevent them from attempting to learn things beyond their capabilities or to expose anyone to their attempts.<sup>60</sup> Other Sisters were slow learners who, according to Louise, could eventually be prepared to serve the poor provided they were given simple work and sufficient time.<sup>61</sup> Unusual insight enabled her to discover those who could be trained to nurse the sick properly and prepare remedies for them or to teach catechism to little girls. She would place “beginners in the field” with more experienced Sisters who could lend a helping hand. Sister Henrietta, for instance, was to be assigned to the pharmacy at the hospital in Nantes “so that she can train Sister Claude for this work.”<sup>62</sup> Sister Jeanne Lepeintre was to receive a hasty request from Louise who wished to know “as soon as possible if you can train a Sister in the art of compounding herbs, one who already knows how to mix medicines and other remedies.”<sup>63</sup> Louise believed strongly that the training of the Sisters had to be pursued on the spot. When that was not possible, Louise did so by correspondence.

## ONGOING FORMATION OF LOVE AND SERVICE

In her ongoing formation program Louise ever put the love and service of the poor in first place. She communicated to her Daughters her own personal love of Christ in the poor, which love had led her to live with those humble village girls, to take on their lifestyle, and to share their poverty and hardships. She taught them to honor and imitate Christ in the person of the poor, having

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 614.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 349.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 161.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 246.

learned that He “taught us charity in order to make up for our powerlessness to render any service to Him personally.”<sup>64</sup> Because *to serve* was particularly meaningful to her, she stressed the need for the Servants of the Poor to acquire an attitude of respect and humility rather than one of domination or commanding authority. She trained them to be Christian women trying to live their lives according to the Gospel — poorly, simply and fraternally.

Her teaching was greatly appreciated by the first Sisters, who thanked God for having “willed to make use of her to teach the Company the way in which He wished it to serve Him.”<sup>65</sup>

## LEADERSHIP

Louise’s administrative and leadership qualities were recognized by Vincent, who delegated to her public acts which were the prerogative of men in seventeenth-century France. Thus, he wrote to her on January 11, 1640 concerning the contract to be signed with the administrators of the hospital at Angers:

In view of these gentlemen who wish to conclude the agreement in writing, you do it *in nomine Domini*. Have it done in your name as Directress of the Daughters of Charity, servants of the sick-poor in hospitals and parishes, under the good pleasure of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission, Director of the said Daughters of Charity.<sup>66</sup>

Louise had accompanied her Sisters to Angers, where for the first time they would assume responsibility for the

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 893.

<sup>65</sup> *Conferences*, p. 1267.

<sup>66</sup> Coste, II, 1.

care of the sick in hospitals. In January 1640, she had handled their establishment there, settled matters with the administrators, and requested also that the minutes signed by the Officers be sent to her.<sup>67</sup>

Six years later, she set out with the Sisters who had been requested by the Administration of the hospital at Nantes, negotiated with the administrators to allow the Sisters to supplement with homemade remedies because she had observed that “the patients were not well cared for with regard to drugs and dressings,” and she obtained their authorization to leave the service of the poor “entirely in the hands of the Sisters.” What had prompted the latter request was a man “living in the city who used to bring all the provisions, even the herbs for the soup.” She had realized that this was contrary to the contract and that if it were to continue, “friction would have ensued.” In her account of the proceedings, she assured Vincent that she had undertaken nothing “without telling them and getting their approval, regardless of the authority they had given us.”<sup>68</sup> The Act of Establishment was duly signed before she left the hospital.

In April 1650, Louise went to see the Procurator General to obtain civil approbation for the Company of the Daughters of Charity and to entreat him to give it a solid establishment. In his presence she upheld the secularity of the Company, which she considered essential for the service of the poor.<sup>69</sup>

Her good government was praised by Vincent during a Council Meeting of the Company in September 1655. He credited its excellence “to the good management of Mademoiselle.”<sup>70</sup> At the end of the same month, he

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<sup>67</sup> LDM, No. 12.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 159.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 283.

<sup>70</sup> Coste, XIII, 694.

eulogized her leadership once again during one of his conferences to the Daughters of Charity and he encouraged them to “give thanks to God for the good guidance and government you have had up to the present.”<sup>71</sup> In July 1660, her “wonderful gift for the guidance and government of the Company”<sup>72</sup> would likewise be proclaimed by her Daughters.

A study of the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul on the Virtues of Louise de Marillac, July 3 and 24, 1660, and a rereading of the Letters of Saint Louise de Marillac to her Daughters justify applying to Louise the qualities of a good leader, as outlined by a present-day American writer:

1. One who releases and fosters the potential in those being led,
2. One who affirms others,
3. One who listens well,
4. One who facilitates various persons working together,
5. One who lets others take the bows,
6. One who withdraws at times for the reflection needed to regain a perspective on life and renew a vision of the future,
7. One who has courage,
8. One who is scientifically sensitive to the people under her leadership,
9. One who goes beneath the surface in conversations, judgments or decisions about another's behavior and asks why,
10. One who makes each individual in the group feel he or she belongs, is cared for, heard and accepted.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Conferences*, p. 733.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1269.

<sup>73</sup> Joseph M. Champlin, “Leadership,” *The Catholic Standard*, Wash., D.C., July 16, 1981.

## FEMININE COLLABORATOR OF VINCENT DE PAUL

Due to the leadership of an extraordinarily humble person, a collaboration of exceptional fecundity resulted in the charitable works undertaken by Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac. Cited as Vincent's most successful achievement,<sup>74</sup> Louise owed a great deal to him but "took such care to express her debt and to walk in his footsteps, almost completely concealed, that she has gone practically unnoticed and her words have often been considered but the expression of his."<sup>75</sup>

Nevertheless, a study of her correspondence brings to light the originality, influence and leadership qualities demonstrated by Louise as collaborator. It is true that a reciprocal trust in the relationship of the co-Founders greatly enriched the Company of the Daughters of Charity and the personal and communal formation of its members. If the saintly priest welcomed the Superioress' initiative and management in governing and in the details of daily life, Louise strove continually to instill in the Sisters the spirit and the teachings of Saint Vincent.

From the time she welcomed the first Servants of the Poor into her home until her death, Louise's life was entirely dedicated to their material and spiritual welfare. Her thoughts, her undertakings and her involvement in establishing on a sound basis the various charitable works they became engaged in, all focused on 'her Daughters' and their service of the poor. It is interesting to note Vincent's frequent use of the expression "your Daughters" or "your Sisters"<sup>76</sup> in his messages to her. In reply to a request that he see a Sister who thought she would have no peace of

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<sup>74</sup> Jean Calvet, *Saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1948), p. 130.

<sup>75</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Saint Louise de Marillac par elle-même* (Paris: Aubier, 1960), p. 9.

<sup>76</sup> LDM, No. 48.

mind until she had a chance to speak with him, Vincent wrote: "I cannot possibly give my attention to *your* Daughters before the end of next week . . . . At that time I will talk to Sister Barbe."<sup>77</sup>

Again and again Louise would contact Vincent concerning the Daughters. Sometimes it was due to anxiety about a Sister's state of health, as in the case of Sister Charlotte, from whom nobody could seem to draw blood; an appeal was made that good Brother Alexandre<sup>78</sup> be sent. At other times, the difficulty of the Sisters' work would elicit a cry of distress. "The work of our poor Sisters here is almost unbelievable," she wrote to him from Bicêtre, "not so much because it is heavy but more so because of the natural repugnance one experiences in this type of work," and she pleaded that he both "help and encourage them and let them know the good they are doing and how meritorious it is before God."<sup>79</sup>

Requests for spiritual help brought a more direct approach. "Please let me know *when*"<sup>80</sup> concludes one of her pleas on behalf of Sisters wishing to see him during their retreat. In a similar manner, she wrote: "Yesterday I forgot to tell you that the little Du Pont girl wanted to go to confession to you when she made her short retreat, and I think she also wanted to talk to you about what her parents want." In her postscript she adds, "Please let me know at what time Little Du Pont can see you."<sup>81</sup> On another occasion, she tactfully reminded Vincent of a meeting scheduled for the following day by asking him "if it is after dinner tomorrow that I am supposed to

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 10.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 202.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 67.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 59.

accompany our four Sisters.’<sup>82</sup>

What was expected of those first village girls required something in writing so Louise worked out some basic Rules, which she sent to Vincent for approval. Although he had not yet had time to read them, he promised “to do so as soon as possible,” and added a few words of encouragement for Louise, who became discouraged at times in dealing with her girls. “As for what you tell me about them,” he wrote,

I have no doubt that they are as you describe them to me, but we have to hope that they will mature and that prayer will allow them to see their faults and encourage them to correct them. It will be well for you to tell them in what solid virtue consists, especially the virtue of interior and exterior mortification . . . . You will have to strengthen them . . . especially in the virtue of obedience and in that of indifference.<sup>83</sup>

It was not long before Vincent returned the Rules with an expression of his appreciation. “They are so good,” he wrote, “that I have no wish to change anything. Read them to them right away, unless you judge it necessary for me to be there; in which case, I promise faithfully that it will be one of the first things I do on my return, please God.”<sup>84</sup>

If Louise sent drafts of letters, memos or documents for Vincent’s approval, he acted in a similar manner because he relied on her judgment and advice. In 1656, having drawn up the draft of a letter for the Abbot of Melleray, Vincent submitted it to her asking “if Mademoiselle Le Gras would be so good as to peruse this projected letter for Nantes and decide whether it is appropriate. If not, will she please change, add or delete

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 28.

<sup>83</sup> Coste, I, 277.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

whatever she sees fit.”<sup>85</sup> Louise, on the other hand, disturbed by the disorders existing in the hospital at Nantes, contacted Vincent on Easter Sunday to let him know that she thought it “very necessary and beneficial” that he “write a letter to all the Sisters, if you think it appropriate, in order to scold them a little and to encourage them.”<sup>86</sup> Vincent not only acquiesced but asked her to enclose his letter in hers.

Frequently it would be merely a memo that Louise would send to keep Vincent informed of her decisions. Sisters had been requested for the parish of Saint Gervais in Paris, but Louise simply notified him that, although they had a good number of Daughters, she did not “see any who are sufficiently formed yet to begin the service of the poor at Saint Gervais.”<sup>87</sup> More frequently her decisions were submitted in a very respectful and humble manner with an insertion such as “with your approval,” or with a postscript in which she would humbly beg his pardon for expressing her thoughts so freely.<sup>88</sup> On another occasion she informed him that on “Tuesday, we began our little Council on the subject of the return of the Sisters from Nantes. We discussed how they should be received and proposed the names of those we thought should go to Chateaudun,” but she quickly added: “we stand in great need of your orders and your guidance in everything for the perfection of the work that seems to be progressing. I hope God in his goodness will inspire you in this guidance and give us the disposition to obey you.”<sup>89</sup> When informed of serious problems that had arisen during her absence

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<sup>85</sup> LDM, No. 495.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 173.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 73.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 428.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 456.

from Paris, she would urge the Sister Servant to “ask M. Vincent to see you; tell him the matter is urgent, and then tell him everything.”<sup>90</sup>

For decisions concerning matters that might influence the Company, she always deemed it necessary that the two Founders discuss the matter together. “Would you please give a half hour of your time to Sister Françoise tomorrow, Saturday,” she asked Vincent, “and delay the decision you are supposed to make regarding her until I can talk to you. This concerns not only her interest but that of the whole Company, which needs to be enlightened so as to act with prudence and discretion.”<sup>91</sup> Her usual manner of acting as his collaborator is described by Louise herself in a letter of January 1660, the last she would write to him. She tells him, “I will always be the same, with nothing more to say once I have taken the liberty, as I do now, to represent the reasons that present themselves to me.” However, on that last occasion, Louise deviated from her usual submission because she considered the matter being presented as the life or death of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. For that reason she insisted: “If I haven’t expressed myself clearly and you want to understand what I am trying to say, perhaps I could explain myself better through Father Almeras or someone else you may consider more appropriate.”<sup>92</sup>

## ESSENTIAL NEEDS OF THE COMPANY

The firm establishment of the Company of the Daughters of Charity was constantly before her. That explains her persistence and respectful manner of

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 256.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 410.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 655.

presenting to Vincent the needs she considered essential.

The basic Rules she had drawn up were no longer sufficient to meet their needs. Consequently, she persuaded Vincent that our “manner of life should be put down in writing . . . that every member of the Company be acquainted with it . . . that each article be accompanied by an interpretation of the intention with which each action should be performed.”<sup>93</sup> Later, she submitted to him a paper “concerning the spiritual means for completing the solid establishment of the Company of the Daughters of Charity.”<sup>94</sup> A few months before her death she shared with him her fear “that the Company may be degenerating in many ways” and her conviction that its preservation depended on the Sisters’ need “to live a poor, simple, and humble life” of service and on their fidelity to uphold the mobility and secularity of their Company.<sup>95</sup>

## CONFERENCES FOR POSTERITY

Louise’s feminine persuasiveness is especially evidenced in her repeated appeals to Vincent for spiritual conferences. She asks him: “May we hope for your conference on one of these feast days without causing you too great inconvenience?”<sup>96</sup> On another occasion she expresses the same desire by telling him: “We are waiting for Divine Providence to inspire you to give us a conference,” assuring him that they would not profit in the future without his solicitous help. To stress her point, she signs herself “a poor little Daughter . . . .”<sup>97</sup> At other

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 315.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 629.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 655.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 498.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 75.

times, she even indicates the day, "I wonder if you can give us a conference tomorrow, and let us know ahead of time."<sup>98</sup> In even stronger language she writes: "We must have the conference you promised for tomorrow, Thursday. Please be so good as to send the subject so we can notify all the Sisters."<sup>99</sup> The latter request was frequently made because Louise believed in giving the Sisters the opportunity to prepare themselves in prayer for the meeting to be held. The day and hour fixed were also sent so that the necessary arrangements might be made for the Sisters to be present without detriment to their service of the poor.

For Daughters unable to be present because of the distance from the Mother House, Louise would share some of the thoughts expressed. In a letter to Sister Laurence at Bernay, she refers to a practice Vincent had taught the Sisters in one of his recent conferences. "It is," she writes,

to seek God at the beginning of each of our actions and make an act of humility by declaring ourselves unworthy of performing it. We must make an act of love by undertaking to do it for His love and in union with any similar action performed by Him on earth. M. Vincent told us that if we practice this for a week we will make a habit of it and soon be doing it automatically. I am sure you will favor this practice, which we should believe was inspired by God for us.<sup>100</sup>

Because she considered the conferences fundamental to acquire and develop the Vincentian spirit, she had once made a proposal that weekly conferences be given, and reminded Vincent that "at that time you approved of the idea and even named a priest for that purpose."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 199.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 132 quater.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 461.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 124.

Circumstances having prevented the realization of that practice, Louise continued her appeals. In the postscript added to a letter to him, she wrote: "We are all beginning to feel the effects of being so long without the happiness of gathering for a conference with you. We are waiting for this with great affection and ask your blessing in preparation for it."<sup>102</sup> A stronger approach seemed necessary at times and she wrote: "Fearing that you were not told that I am notifying the Sisters to assemble tomorrow, Monday, for the conference you had promised, I feel prompted to send these few lines so that no other appointment may deprive us of this happiness."<sup>103</sup>

Aware of the needs of her Sisters, she would often suggest the subjects that she felt should be discussed at conferences. A study of the conferences given to the Daughters of Charity reveals that the dates of many of them follow closely the dates of Louise's letters offering suggestions. In 1646, for instance, she had asked Vincent to explain "what it means to be a Daughter of Chairty, . . . with what dispositions this life should be entered upon, . . . how much they should esteem their state of life and the poor," and Vincent's conference on "The Love of our Vocation and on Helping the Poor" bears the date of February 13, 1646. In that same letter she had urged him "to impress on the Sisters the fact that those who stay at home have just as much merit as those who actually serve the poor,"<sup>104</sup> and on May 1, 1646 Vincent gave his conference on "Indifference." In another of her letters on the conferences, she let Vincent know that she had told Father Portail "that you had led us to hope the assembly would take place on Sunday. He thought a good topic

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 110.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 129 bis.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 131.

would be for you to stress the importance of observing what is indicated in the account of what the life of a Daughter of Charity should be.”<sup>105</sup>

Vincent’s teachings were for her “one of the greatest treasures of our community,”<sup>106</sup> and she wanted them kept for posterity. After the conference, she would encourage the Sisters to help reproduce with the greatest possible fidelity what had been said. Those who had been questioned and who had brought notes were asked to submit them so that all might be recorded with the greatest exactitude. She even endeavored to obtain Vincent’s outline or notes. On January 25, 1643, she had expressed to him her hope that the Sisters would make good use of the instruction he had given on that day, and told him that their hearts were filled with a desire to do so and to remember it forever. Her request then followed, “This leads me to very humbly ask you to send us the little memo of your points. It seems to me that it will help me to remember a good part of what God has inspired you to say to us.”<sup>107</sup>

She guarded the manuscripts jealously, and her handwriting may be recognized in 20 of the 120 conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity that have been preserved, and which form part of the Vincentian heritage which has been handed down through the centuries.

## FRATERNAL LIFE IN COMMON

Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac were both convinced of the necessity of a fraternal life in

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 86.

<sup>106</sup> Gobillon, I, 250.

<sup>107</sup> LDM, No. 76.

common as “one of the basic supports of the vocation of the Daughters of Charity,<sup>108</sup> who had been chosen by God to serve him in the person of the poor.

Because she had suffered so much in her own life, Louise had no illusions about the difficulties and hardships of a life of genuine service and of the need her Daughters would have of mutual understanding, acceptance, support, encouragement, and love. She begged God to “give them courage to serve him as he expects in circumstances so painful to nature.”<sup>109</sup> Responding to the request of the Bishop of Cahors for Sisters to take care of children, she was well aware of the fact that the two they were sending “must take the place of more than four.”<sup>110</sup> To a Sister exhausted from nursing the wounded victims of war, she expressed great sympathy “because of the trials that seem to have come upon you from all sides . . . I can’t tell you, my dear Sister, with what joy we will welcome you. I think your poor body sorely needs this rest.”<sup>111</sup> “My greatest sorrow,” she confided to some nursing Sisters overburdened because of the large number of patients to be served, “is not knowing how to relieve you. Isn’t there anyone who . . . can make it understood how impossible it is for you to carry on without extra help?”<sup>112</sup>

Because overworked and exhausted Sisters needed one another, Louise watched carefully that no Sister be left alone in her service of others. Such an occasion arose when there was talk of sending Sister Marie Joly to nurse wounded soldiers. Tactfully Louise reminded Vincent of the resolution he had taken of never sending anyone alone. Calling attention to the Sister’s apprehensions “at the

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<sup>108</sup> *Constitutions*, C. 1. 6.

<sup>109</sup> LDM, No. 284.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 518.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 398.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 513.

thought of going off alone and being separated from her Sisters," she gave him as reasons for sending someone with Sister Marie the fact that "she might become ill on the way, . . . run into people who might get the wrong impression and try to harm her. Moreover, since no one is without feeling," she added, "and since it is no little matter that these good girls have given up everything, I fear that if she should become upset and unable to find relief, she might become discouraged." She likewise pointed out what a harmful effect this could have on others "who might think we take very little care of the Daughters since we let them go off alone." Prefacing her concluding statement by the expression "If you approve," she proceeded to say that she was thinking of sending the 'easy-going Sister Claire' as a companion and that she was sure they would get along well together. Persuaded that Vincent would be in agreement with her decision, she asked that he show his approval by letting her know the "day they should leave."<sup>113</sup>

## DIFFICULTIES OF A LIFE IN COMMON

Aware of the difficulties of a life in common, Louise warned newcomers that on entering the Community they would not lack petty annoyances, caused in part by the tempter of souls, in part by themselves, and in part by the world. "The devil," she told them, "will not fail to lay snares for you. To make them more formidable, he will present to you the most dreadful difficulties resulting as much from the changeable moods of your Sisters as from necessary and possibly frequent changes of mission. . . ."<sup>114</sup>

To a Sister who had taken offence and shown a slight

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 36 bis.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 843.

aversion toward a companion, she advised: “We must not be so sensitive as to be hurt if someone doesn’t speak to us or treats us coldly, but we must try to win her over by our forbearance and cordiality.”<sup>115</sup> To two Sisters living and working together at Bernay, she wrote:

If one of you is sad, let her overcome her feelings and take some recreation with her Sister; if the other is happy, let her tone down her exuberance in order to blend more with her Sister’s mood and to withdraw her little by little from her melancholy. May all that be done for the love of Our Lord and to avoid yielding to the temptation of seeking satisfaction by unburdening your heart elsewhere, which would completely destroy that holy friendship which should unite two Sisters.<sup>116</sup>

She would use similar language in writing to her Daughters at the hospital of Angers, from whom she found it difficult to conceal her sorrow on learning that their conduct left much to be desired. After asking them, “where is the fervent spirit that animated you in the beginning of your establishment?” she urged them to renew their first fervor and to acquire a true desire to please God. Then, reminding them that Divine Providence had brought them together that they might help one another acquire perfection, she offered her down-to-earth practical suggestions, which once again reveal her genuine understanding of human nature. “When you perceive a fault in someone else,” she wrote,

you must be ready to excuse it. That’s most reasonable because we are subject to committing the same fault and need to be excused in our turn. If a Sister is sad or slightly troubled, too fast or too slow, what can she do? She’s naturally that way. Although she often tries to overcome herself, she cannot prevent her natural inclinations from

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 105.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 425.

showing occasionally. At such times should a Sister, who is supposed to love her as she loves herself, be annoyed, treat her rudely, or look daggers at her? O my Sisters, you must not act that way, but pretend that you don't notice such things and don't hold it against her, remembering that you may soon want her to do the same for you.<sup>117</sup>

Similar practical suggestions were made to other Sisters, who were asked to "avoid noticing it should a Sister seem upset and embittered"<sup>118</sup> so that meekness and cordiality might be maintained and the danger of disunion avoided.

Ever watchful to prevent obstacles to unity, Louise not only stressed mutual support but reminded her Daughters of how necessary it is to support oneself. "What often causes our being unable to support the infirmities of others," she told them, "is because we cannot put up with ourselves. Sometimes we are sad and melancholic so that we do not know what we want nor what is the cause of our sadness. What should we do then, Sisters? Put up with ourselves. Oh! if we cannot put up with ourselves, how can we support one another?"<sup>119</sup>

## BONDS OF UNION AND LOVE

Charity being the end of their Company, Louise strove to make the Daughters understand that love had to be its bond. In training them for their service of the poor, she used every possible means to establish among them bonds of union and love. They were to love one another as sisters whom Jesus Christ had brought together through love in order to render Him one same service and they were to be but one body animated with the same spirit, looking upon

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 104 bis.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 52.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 957.

one another as members of that same body.<sup>120</sup> She encouraged a sincere affection of Sisters for one another because she believed strongly that it is love that sustains the union and support the Daughters of Charity should manifest toward one another and prevents insinuations and detraction.<sup>121</sup> The first Sisters acknowledged her endeavors in this regard and stated that she taught them how to bear with one another and gave them an example by bearing with them most charitably.<sup>122</sup>

Her letters to the Sisters abound with recommendations “to be perfectly united with one another,”<sup>123</sup> “to show great peace and cordiality in their dealings with one another,”<sup>124</sup> “to live harmoniously and cordially together, serving the poor with care and giving good example,”<sup>125</sup> or “to practice gentle cordiality and forbearance so essential to the union desirable in good Daughters of Charity.”<sup>126</sup> Faithful in keeping in touch with her Sisters, she would express the joy she had experienced on reading their letters, which enabled her to see “the great union of hearts and minds that prevails among you. This convinces me that Our Lord is pleased with you.”<sup>127</sup> A similar expression of joy is noted in a letter to another group of Sisters. “I rejoice,” she exclaimed, “in the hope that you are living in harmony, that your mutual support unites you as one heart and mind in Jesus Christ.”<sup>128</sup> Elsewhere,

<sup>120</sup> Gobillon, I, 127-128.

<sup>121</sup> LDM, No. 489.

<sup>122</sup> *Conferences*, p. 1274.

<sup>123</sup> LDM, No. 289.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 58 bis.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 540.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 116.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 647.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 548.

she tells them that “mutual support will make easy all that nature finds hard.”<sup>129</sup>

## SPIRITUAL MOTIVATION

It is spiritual motivation that is more constant in her advice. The imitation of the exemplary life of Jesus Christ, “not only as Christians but even more because we have been chosen by God to serve Him in the person of the poor,”<sup>130</sup> becomes a recurrent theme in her correspondence; the Trinitarian life becomes the motivating inspiration for the union of hearts that must exist among them. Questioning specifically how Sisters can honor the Holy Trinity in their life in common, she answered by stating that it is “in the union of hearts that must exist among you, deferring to one another’s opinions and so avoiding contention.”<sup>131</sup> To Daughters already serving the poor in Poland and to whom three more helpers were being sent, she wrote: “You have always assured me that the three of you are but one in heart. In the name of the Holy Trinity you have honored and should honor, I beg you to enlarge that heart so that our three Sisters may be included in that cordial union.”<sup>132</sup>

Louise believed that for the cohesion of fraternal life in common, meekness, cordiality and mutual support had to be practiced just like *humility*, *simplicity*, and the love of the holy humanity of Jesus Christ, that is, perfect *charity*, which virtues make up the spirit of the Daughters of Charity.<sup>133</sup> To heal the wounds which might be inflicted

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 513.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 217.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 429.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 447.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 377.

in the course of a life in common, reconciliation is needed, and Louise encouraged its practice in the lives of her Daughters. "If some little difference occurs," she wrote on one occasion, "all should be forgotten once you have asked forgiveness and become reconciled."<sup>134</sup>

Having to admonish Sisters herself for failures that she had perceived or which had been called to her attention, she urged the asking of forgiveness. On one such occasion, she told the Sisters whom she had to reprove that she offered "to God the act of reconciliation that I am sure you will both perform," and then asked: "Do you know what I expect from your reconciliation after you renew your mutual affection? That you trust each other and rarely be seen one away from the other."<sup>135</sup>

She gave the example to others. At the conference held after her death, some of the first Sisters stated that when they deserved to be blamed, Louise "took the fault on herself and spoke with great gentleness, and sought forgiveness when she thought she had given any pain."<sup>136</sup>

Community, for Louise, was to be a milieu of sharing, where the Sisters should live in harmony so that even if a Sister were placed somewhere for only a week, she should work as though she were to stay there her entire life.<sup>137</sup>

Inspired by her teachings, Louise's Daughters of today strive to live their fraternal life in common in "a milieu based on affection, esteem and respect as well as on equality among the Sisters, who are united in the firm belief of responding to the same call."<sup>138</sup>

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 489.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 11.

<sup>136</sup> *Conferences*, pp. 1268-1274.

<sup>137</sup> LDM, No. 200 bis.

<sup>138</sup> *Constitutions*, C. 2. 17.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH HER DAUGHTERS

Louise's early sensitivity and excessive vulnerability had become a strong point in her life. Because of her lifelong personal suffering, she could feel pity, tenderness, affection, and compassion for others. Her capacity for suffering had given her the strength to sustain the helpless and the needy and to shoulder the daily burdens of her Daughters.

If we desire to know her as the Superioress who showed herself approachable, gracious and affable in her relationship with her Daughters, we need only to reread the Conferences of July 1660. One Sister after another spoke of her smiling countenance full of kindly welcome and affection, of her endeavors never to let any Sister return home without having been able to see her, of her respect and graciousness in thanking them affectionately for services they had rendered her, of her affection and love which made her bear with them and excuse them, although she would admonish them severely whenever it was necessary.

Several Sisters were especially edified by her manner of making excuses for Sisters who happened to be absent, for those she thought she had annoyed, and for those whose faults might have been mentioned to her. Before giving an admonition, she would spend time in prayer, then seek information as to how matters stood exactly, make excuses for the Sister involved, and only then correct her but most graciously. She desired those in charge of others to act in like manner with their companions. To one she recommended:

When you have to give advice to a Sister, please do it privately; and be an example of gentleness and submission, consoling them in their little trials by your cordiality and forbearance. Be very patient and give them the little remedies they may need, the greatest of which is to

sympathize with their little difficulties.<sup>139</sup>

Louise loved and lived fully the title Sister Servant, “given to us by Divine Providence,” and which

obliges us to be first in the practice of true and solid humility, mutual support, hard work, and the faithful observance of the Rules and customs of the Company. We must be convinced that . . . we are obliged to serve our Sisters in both spiritual and temporal matters, and that prudence requires us to trust them and provide for their needs without showing preference for anyone.<sup>140</sup>

## INTEREST IN DAILY LIFE OF HER DAUGHTERS

Louise longed for news from Sisters at a distance from the Mother House and admitted that she worried if she did not hear from them personally.<sup>141</sup> Many of her letters enter into the practical details of their lives. “If you see wheat or flour for sale at a good price,” she advises on one occasion, “buy some. If it is expensive, I think you had better wait. I do not know if Sister Francoise remembered to tell you to send the cow, even if it should be a little costly, for fear that her time might slip by. I beg our Sister gardeners to work assiduously in the garden while God gives fine weather. Please ask them to take particular care of the chicory . . . .”<sup>142</sup> During an absence from Paris, she heard rumors of disturbance there and quickly suggested preventive measures to be taken: “Please work in the tapestried room in the evening or put a lighted candle there so it can be seen from the street. Be careful to have

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<sup>139</sup> LDM, No. 290 bis.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 523.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 501.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 259.

doors and windows securely locked; that applies to the stairway and to the small room as well.”<sup>143</sup>

Even a small detail like the proper seasoning of soup held importance for her. Having heard a complaint from a former administrator of the hospital at Nantes about the patients’ soup, she immediately took action to remedy the situation by warning her Sisters:

I think we should add some cloves since people there use this kind of seasoning. You should also prepare broths for the seriously ill who need such extra nourishment. The administrators also want you to prepare tasty stews and well-seasoned foods for the chronic patients; it doesn’t cost any more and they recover their strength faster. Often just a little thing can please even the most fastidious patients.<sup>144</sup>

She shared community news in her letters, asked for prayers for the needs of the Company, for Sisters in difficult situations, for others setting out for new establishments, and was always eager to receive news from them. “I am distressed,” she wrote to one of them, “that I cannot find a way to write to you, so I am sending this letter at the risk of losing it. If you get it, please write immediately. There are so many people sick everywhere that I worry about your health.”<sup>145</sup> To another Sister she wrote: “You do not mention your cold; it was probably only a slight one. In the midst of all your work, be careful of your health. Your desire to consume your life for God and the thought of the example you owe the Sisters should not be obstacles to the reasonable care you must take of yourself for the love of God.”<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 195.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 253.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 354 bis.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 194.

## CARE OF THE SICK

If any Sisters received a greater share of Louise's care and affection, it was those who suffered in body or mind. She took pleasure in visiting the sick Sisters in the infirmary and in rendering them any little service she could. If unable to visit them, on account of illness, she would send her Sister Assistant to see them for her and to transmit to them a few words of consolation. She was so tender-hearted that precaution had to be used when telling her of the death of a Sister. She had the gift of empathizing with the suffering and could write, "I have felt deeply all the sufferings I know you have had,"<sup>147</sup> "I am relieved to know that you are having a breathing spell,"<sup>148</sup> or else

God be praised that your health has improved! Take care of yourself for love of him, and remember that one of the best ways to be happy is to unite yourself completely to his holy Will, without worrying about anything. Ask very simply for anything you need, and do not be discouraged because your illness keeps you from an active life making you feel useless; you are the only one who sees it that way.<sup>149</sup>

She would encourage the Sister Servants to show a special care for their sick Sisters, urging one "to take loving care of Sister Marie Marthe, who is dedicated to charity,"<sup>150</sup> asking another "to please console Sister Perrette in her suffering,"<sup>151</sup> or else "I beg Sister Anne to take good care of you, although I know she is already doing so."<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 529.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 318.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 58 bis.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 121.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 287.

## DEFENSE OF HER DAUGHTERS

The affection Louise had for her Daughters impelled her to take action in their behalf and to be on the defensive when they had been unjustly maligned.

"I was sure that poor Sister Perrette was not as guilty as they tried to make her appear," she wrote to the Abbé de Vaux. "She is very broad-minded and shows that she really doesn't care about the accusations made against her because she doesn't feel her will inclined to evil."<sup>153</sup> To Vincent she explained that "in many parishes the Ladies are beginning to mistrust the Daughters of Charity. I can assure you that I do not know of any Sister who has given cause for this, unless perhaps those who in their zeal to relieve the poor accept alms from the Ladies and do not submit a record of their expenditures to the Officers of the Charity, who become offended."<sup>154</sup> To a Sister Servant she complained:

For heaven's sake, stop worrying about what you wrote me concerning Sister Elizabeth. Truly, she owed only ten francs to a girl, and a salesgirl named Marguerite was supposed to pay the debt. The money for the scalpel was placed in a box in good order. For the love of God, my dear Sister, when you have reason to suspect someone, do not let it appear so clearly and do not say a word about it to the Sisters . . . do not form a judgment for fear of aversion and scandal.<sup>155</sup>

Indignant on account of the humiliations to which her Daughters at Chars had been subjected by the priest, she spelled out the reasons why she was withdrawing them: "He threatened to require the Sisters to perform public

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<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 88.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 182 bis.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 655.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 460.

penance at the door of the church if they would not act contrary to the obedience they owe their legitimate superiors . . . . He told them they were subject to punishment because they refused his request to whip a twelve or thirteen-year-old girl before his eyes.”<sup>156</sup>

## CONCERN FOR THE FAMILIES OF HER DAUGHTERS

The interest and care shown her Sisters encompassed their families. Contact was established with the latter so that Louise’s Daughters could be kept informed of the welfare of their parents and relatives. “If you should see Sister Salomée’s mother or sister,” she asked one of the Sisters, “please give them her love and mine, and tell them that she is in good health.”<sup>157</sup> To two Sisters anxious about their families, Louise wrote:

I believe you were worried about your parents. Some time ago, Sister Carcireux, we received news of your father. He was well and wanted to go see you but we dissuaded him. He was at Beauvais with some relatives. One, who is President, has given him a job and says he is willing to go on helping him as much as he can. As for Sister Charlotte’s father and mother and her entire family, they are, I believe, in good health.<sup>158</sup>

To another Sister, whose family was well but not their business, Louise wrote, “I believe their mill was destroyed again. I have asked Sister Turgis to pay them a visit to get first-hand news and find out if they are in need. Do not worry, but entrust them to God. I will let you know what we find out, and we will take care of them.”<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 527 bis.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 141.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 277.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 64.

## WARMTH OF FRIENDSHIP AND LOVE

A short French poem, whose title in English reads 'The Warmth of Friendship,' seems to express in a very meaningful way the core of Louise's relationship with her Daughters.

Lord, how did you win over so quickly  
the friendship of the disciples of Emmaus?

You were a stranger to them,  
You didn't seem to be aware of what was going on, or  
to know the cause of their great sorrow.

Suddenly, you became so dear to them  
that they no longer wished to leave you!

Did you seduce them  
by the beauty of your countenance,  
by the sweetness of your voice,  
by the depth of your knowledge, or  
by the brilliance of your mind?

Lord, tell me your secret!

Sister, the secret is very simple.

They understood that I loved them.<sup>160</sup>

We may truly say that the first spiritual Daughters of Louise knew that she loved them. Their sincere expressions of appreciation and affectionate praise give proof of that knowledge and of reciprocal love.

May we not likewise state that her Daughters of the twentieth century have come to know and experience the love of their saintly Foundress and have grown in their appreciation and love for her and for the Vincentian spirit she devoted her life to inculcate in her spiritual Daughters of 350 years ago and of today.

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<sup>160</sup> Arsene Garnier, "La chaleur de l'amitie," *Calendrier Saint-Paul* (Paris: Editions Saint Paul), 14 avril 1982.



*It is God Who called the Daughters of Charity; it is He Who will maintain them. He never destroys His work, but perfects it; and, provided they remain steadfast in their vocation and faithful to their exercises, He will always bless them in their person and in their employments.*

St. Vincent de Paul

*If we wish to give satisfaction to Our good Good, we must not stop to consider what we would like to do, but rather what He wishes us to do. Our Lord will know where to find you when He intends to give you other work to do.*

St. Louise de Marillac