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**Louise de Marillac:  
The “Gentle Power” of Liberation**

by Margaret John Kelly, D.C.

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While “women’s liberation” and “feminist perspective” were not in the consciousness or the vocabulary of 17th century France, Saint Louise de Marillac (1591-1660) emerges as a prototype of the true feminine leader who promotes the cause of women and actively contributes to the humanization of both sexes. As the co-foundress of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, she proved that women living the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience could safely and effectively minister outside the cloister. As a pioneer social worker and educator, she developed a network of quality services and prepared workers for the relief of a wide range of human miseries. As an advocate, she motivated laity and clergy to recognize their obligation to serve the poor and to work for just social systems and structures.

In 1960 Pope John XXIII hailed Saint Louise as the “Patroness of all those who devote themselves to Christian social works,” but her personality and achievements have generally been eclipsed by those of her great collaborator, Vincent de Paul. However, many of our contemporary projects for the poor and organizations dedicated to service of the poor must trace their origin to both of these amazing persons who witness to the effectiveness of “team” and the necessity for and complementarity of the feminine and masculine perspectives. It seems appropriate then during this time when modeling is considered basic to formation and the contributions of women are being recognized that Saint Louise become better known by those who continue the ministries she pioneered. While she deserves deep and extensive study, this article provides only a brief sketch of her life and describes very broad strokes the basis of her spirituality and some of her specific contributions to social service.

**Lived Experience**

If it is true that actual experience prepares one for service more adequately than vicarious experience, Saint Louise had the edge on most of us. Her life experiences ran the gamut: riches and poverty, prestige and powerlessness, cultural/academic education and domestic training, family rejection and acceptance, ecstasy and de-

pression, affluent marriage and dependent widowhood, grass roots service and corporate management, etc.

Born in the summer of 1591, Louise never knew who her mother was, nor the place of her birth. Her father, the widowed and noble Louis de Marillac, acknowledged his “natural daughter” and provided for her monetarily. In his will prepared shortly before his death in 1604, Louis testified, “Louise has been my greatest consolation in this world. She was given to me by God to calm my spirit in the afflictions of life.”<sup>1</sup> It appears that many of these afflictions were caused by Marillac’s remarriage in 1595 to a rambunctious widow with several children. Although the date is not certain, it was close to the time of this remarriage that little Louise was sent to the Dominican Convent at Poissy for schooling. There she received a solid education in classical subjects as well as in the fine arts and was encouraged by the affection of a great aunt, another Louise de Marillac, who was a religious at this royal monastery.

Here at Poissy, Louise witnessed a scene which was to shape her spirituality and her service: the stained glass depiction of the great King Louis IX kissing the wounds of a leper. Her biographers assert that this loving and humble scene served as a paradigm for her own spirituality: Christ is truly present in all persons, particularly in His suffering members; Christ is in the poor and the poor are in Christ. Later in life, she adopted for her personal motto as well as that of the Daughters of Charity she founded in 1633, “The Charity of Christ crucified urges Us.”

At her father’s death in 1604, the teenager Louise left the convent to board with a woman who was to teach her domestic tasks. One of Louise’s biographers writes, “After the brilliant education of Poissy, Louise de Marillac was brutally initiated into the life of the poor who must work in order to live.”<sup>2</sup> However, others suggest that it was more of a trade school where Louise learned to make and merchandise clothing and to manage a household. Whatever the nature of this residence, it provided the experience which was to make of Louise a hands-on worker for the poor and a practical, credible educator.

Although she was very attracted to religious life and to several different communities, Louise’s frail health prevented her entering

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Dirvin, C.M., *Louise de Marillac of the Ladies and Daughters of Charity* (New York: 1970), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Regnault, *Saint Louise de Marillac* (Rockford, Illinois: 1970), 4.

a monastery. Thus on 15 January 1613 Louise chose the only alternative role and married Antoine le Gras, 32, secretary of the Queen, Marie de Medici. Again her humble origins surfaced when the petite bride (just 4'10") was identified as "a friend" of the Marillacs by her uncles who were in the service of the king. Only an insignificant supply of clothing and furniture was listed as her dowry in the marriage contract and she was always to be known as "Mademoiselle" le Gras rather than "Madame," the title of dignity. Their marriage, however, was happy and Louise graciously and competently entered the social life of the royal household. She rejoiced in her son Michel born in October of that year and easily assumed the maternal role.

In addition to managing her household and participating in the social activities of the court, the diminutive Louise helped the poor in her parish. This ministry was strengthened by a shared spirituality because she and her husband recited the office together and even received the extraordinary permission to read the Bible. In this post-Tridentine period, Louise was caught up in the theological and political currents and knew personally the great Bishop of Geneva, Saint Francis de Sales as well as the leading political and spiritual leaders of the day.

Louise intuited that her whole life "should be marked with suffering even from birth," and throughout the years she experienced great mental anxiety and spiritual scruples, as well as poor physical health. Health and security were seriously threatened when political intrigue and illness destroyed her husband. After a long illness, in 1625, when her son Michel was just twelve, Antoine le Gras died. During the period from 1623 to 1625 Louise herself suffered from serious despondency and depression, but she had also experienced the *lumière* of Pentecost, 1623. In her "illumination" she saw that she would one day live the vows of religion in a community where "there was much coming and going." She also "saw" Vincent de Paul whom she characterized as "repugnant" to her at the time, but she perceived that one day he would influence her greatly.<sup>3</sup>

From the time these two great collaborators actually met in late 1624 or early 1625, they motivated and inspired each other. Their relationship serves as a model for effective collaboration and mutuality. It was not until May of 1629, however, that Vincent seeking to draw Louise out of her melancholic self-preoccupation asked her to

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<sup>3</sup> Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*. Translated by Louise Sullivan. (Albany: 1984), 3.

do site visits of the confraternities he had established in the various parishes in the environs of Paris. The Confraternity Movement begun in 1617 provided for self-governing parish-based groups of volunteers to serve the poor on a regular basis. In these surveys, Louise revealed her tremendous leadership and organizational ability. In reality she was also gaining the opportunity to experience both the needs of the poor and the means of administering works in a broad range of milieux and with a variety of people. Although she herself had served as president of her parish confraternity at Saint Nicholas and was familiar with human service operations, she had not had such broad-based supervisory experience until this time.

A sampling of entries from her reports reveal the breadth of her observations as well as her penetrating knowledge of human nature.

- The Ladies are a little more coarse here than elsewhere, and there seems to be less charity among them.

- The treasurer is so goodhearted that she cooks the food for those who should be doing it that day.

- The superioress was willing to have the safe in her home and she had given both keys to the treasurer. (The rule mandated that the superioress and the treasurer each have a key and maintain separate financial reports.)

- There are six sheep and six lambs which are undernourished.

- There are also fifteen or sixteen sheep and ten or twelve lambs which are raised by local peasants for the benefit of the charity.

- The officers were replaced by election a long time ago but continue to fulfill their functions. It is to be feared that if they continue to do so much longer, it will be impossible to replace them and put others into their positions.

- Many of the ladies spend money on their appointed day according to their own whims and pay little attention to the rule.

- A priest records expenses but he does not enter revenue because he claims there are not enough to be significant.

- The treasurer has funds which she is afraid to invest profitably for fear of diminishing revenues.<sup>4</sup>

In her visits, Louise also had to deal with what has been referred to today as “premeditated pauperization:” the practice of old people spending down their resources to make themselves eligible for assistance. Because the confraternities were to serve the financially

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 49-54.

poor exclusively, these people manipulated the system to gain service.

There was a sick woman who had property which she gave in its entirety to her relatives before or during her illness without the knowledge of the Ladies, who now wonder if they should serve such persons under these circumstances since the time of the gift may have been deliberate.<sup>5</sup>

Louise dealt with this problem frequently and in several instances even gave specific advice about how “a sick person, who has assets which he cannot sell because of debts, should deal with the issue with his creditors.”

### **Gentle Power: Louise’s Spirituality**

Louise’s visits to the poor and her contacts with the spiritual motivation for social service. We have already mentioned that Louise saw Jesus in all persons and all persons in Jesus. While the teaching on the Mystical Body was not fully articulated at the time, she seems to have internalized well Paul’s conviction that we are all equal and one in Christ. Louise also had a firm conviction that each person is a steward of his or her talents and that all gifts must be used generously in the service of others in the Kingdom. These two central beliefs and her feminine acceptance of life’s rhythms gave her unbounded confidence in the Providence of God. They also allowed her to marvel “at the blessed state of the Christian which makes the soul no less than an associate of God.”

If one were to search for a phrase to capture Louise’s spirituality, one can find it in a prayer she composed to Saint Louis, the patron saint of France. Here she asked for the grace of “gentle power”. The yoking of these two words may at first appear paradoxical to those who see gentleness and power as antithetical. However, an etymological approach will show the linguistic and actual synergism of the two concepts which appear in her writings with marvelous frequency. The merging of the two qualities gave a distinctively feminine aspect to her leadership style.

“Gentle” derives from “gens” or “common clan” or “kin”. It connotes the ability to beget, to generate, to cause like to come into

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 55.

being. Vincent advised that when we see the poor as ugly, dirty, ungrateful, and uncooperative, we “must turn the medal and see Christ.” Louise encouraged all to “respect” or, as the word implies, “to look again and thereby see Christ,” the one who redeemed in time, but who lives in the present in all people.

“Power” derives from the verb “to be able” or “to have the capacity.” Again Louise’s achievements gave flesh to Vincent’s famous quotation, “L’amour est inventif jusqu’à l’infini.” Louise’s phenomenal work for the people of God could only have been achieved by a creative love which was indeed infinite. Her fertile imagination and spirituality did bear much fruit as they were relational and life-giving to the fullest sense. In combination, the two words capture the concept of “empowerment” which has characterized and driven the Christian movement since the Cadre study. In other words, she was able to unify the conservative and liberal concepts of reform. As a conservative, she saw the need for individuals to change their attitudes and activities. As a liberal, she could see the structural and environmental problems and sought to remedy them.

In summary, Louise’s spirituality was somewhat mystical, but also fully apostolic, and eminently practical. She was conscious of the seriousness of her ministry and admitted that the initial phase of a work is the most important. “Now since this is a great undertaking, it is important to lay good foundations so as to build it as perfectly as possible and to make it last.<sup>6</sup> In her first ministry notes, she advanced Vincent’s dictum to establish “honest and charitable criteria to discover true needs” and “to provide for these needs prudently.” As an organizational genius and an exciting innovator of any social services, Louise displayed that marvelously feminine gift of initiating and sustaining several projects even while she was conceiving others. This is what some have referred to as “the feminine art of project-juggling”. It seems appropriate then to begin a review of this woman’s ministry, her multitudinous and multifaceted projects, by looking at the manner in which she valued and promoted other women.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 163.

## Promotion of Women

In a period when many members of the French aristocracy and royalty could not write their names on the roster of the Ladies of Charity (a group of wealthy lay women founded by Saint Vincent to serve the poor), Louise de Marillac was a totally literate and articulate woman with great confidence in the abilities of other women as well. When she established the Daughters of Charity in her own home in 1633, she demonstrated great realism as well as vision as she developed instructional programs and motivated these young women to develop their abilities. Her model in this was the young shepherd girl, Marguerite Naseau, who is considered the first Daughter of Charity even though she died of the plague before the community was formally established. Marguerite had shown great initiative in getting an alphabet and primer and teaching herself to read even though she was ridiculed and calumniated for trying to get ahead in order to help others. Louise recognized that obstacles would be placed in their paths but that the quality of the women's convictions and abilities would prevail as had Marguerite's.

Louise lamented the lack of opportunity of poor women and the abuses and deprivations of young girls and adult women as a priority work of the Daughters if the social and moral conditions for women were to be improved. In the rules she developed for her school sisters, we read, "they shall take great care to learn well themselves what they have to teach others, especially all that concerns faith and morals." In the rules for the parish sisters, we see availability given high priority. "They shall also have the care of instructing poor girls, not only those who attend their school but also those of whatever age they be and at what time they may come, and they shall receive them, if they are unable to wait, even when they come during meals." All schedules should be subordinated to the needs of these women because both their needs and their potential were so great. Louise and her sisters started workrooms and technical schools so that these girls could learn a trade like lace or stocking making on their own time.

With regard to her own Daughters of Charity, who now number 33,000 spread over all five continents, Louise encouraged each sister, most of whom were of peasant stock, to develop her gifts and talents so that she could use them for the service of the poor. The variety of works the Daughters engaged in (education, care of children, home visiting, nursing, care of the elderly) provided a



broad range of options, and Louise set up specific training programs for each of the fields and mandated that preparation always precede service. Against Vincent's advice, Louise initially sent some Daughter-teachers to the Ursulines to receive professional training in education and then shortly thereafter established her own normal school for the sisters.<sup>7</sup> In addition, time for study was built into the initial daily program of the sisters and then into their formalized rule of life. Louise was quick to see ways to advance individuals but also women as a group.

Louise was a total realist about her sisters and matched their training to their talents. Of a Sister Charlotte she wrote, "I do not believe that you should try to teach our sister, nor allow that she learn to bleed. She is not capable of that and I should not like to expose anyone to her experiment."<sup>8</sup> The comment about bleeding is particularly interesting today when science is identifying the great medical value of an enzyme of the leech as a breakthrough in treating heart disease. Not only was Louise herself a competent nurse familiar with all the bedside techniques and procedures, including bleeding, she was also versed in hospital administration and was well recognized for her knowledge of medicinal herbs. Her correspondence, particularly that to Vincent de Paul and her sisters, is punctuated by medical advice and practical remedies.

Louise's success in forming her sisters was not limited to their acquiring charitable skills but they became articulate in the cause of justice as well. A commentary on Sister Joan Dalmagne who died in 1644 testifies to this. It was customary for the sisters to meet after the death of a sister to discuss her life. Such discussions served as therapeutic experiences and motivational exchanges. In the discussion of Sister Joan, one of her peers made the following observation:

She had great liberty of spirit in everything that concerned the glory of God, and spoke quite as frankly to the rich as to the poor, whenever she saw anything blameworthy in their conduct. One day, when she learned that certain rich people had evaded their taxes and had managed to transfer them to the poor, she told them quite openly that such conduct was contrary to justice and that

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<sup>7</sup> Dirvin, *Louise de Marillac*, 67.      \*

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Flinton, *Saint Louise de Marillac: The Social Aspect of Her Work*. Unpublished translation of *L'aspect social de son oeuvre* (1953), 29.

God would punish them for such extortions. And when I remarked to her that she had spoken out very bravely, she answered that when it was a question of God's glory and the welfare of the poor, one should never fear to speak the truth.<sup>9</sup>

Another sister who refused the invitation of the queen of Poland to stay with her but insisted on going to the poor who praised for speaking simply and directly to the queen.

Louise herself was particularly sensitive to issues of economic justice for women. Her experience with the foster mothers program provides an illustration. The mothers needed to be paid for their services even though charitable donations had ceased and Louise had no resources.

Louise wrote:

We can no longer, in good conscience, be unmoved by the plight of the foster mothers. They are asking only what is their due in recompense for their labor and for the personal money which they spend for the children. They are now faced with starvation. They sometimes have to come two or three times and each time they leave empty-handed.<sup>10</sup>

It was a challenge like this that led Vincent and Louise to hold the famous meeting with the Ladies of Charity, memorialized on canvas. Vincent, with his flair for the dramatic, told the women that if they did not give of their resources to assist the infants as good mothers, they would become the heartless judges of these children. The approach was successful and the wealthy women learned that what they did was "not an act of love but an act of justice." In a recent article in *U.S. Catholic Historian*, David O'Brien lamented that "the Church has never known what to do with its most affluent and successful members." Perhaps we could take a lesson from this leaf of Vincent's and Louise's history. They successfully engaged the wealthy in fund raising and also in actual service projects.

Again, it was concern for women that caused Louise to initiate hospital social work at the Hospital of Saint Denis in Paris. This

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<sup>9</sup> *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul*. Translated by Joseph Leonard. (London: 1979), 170.

<sup>10</sup> Regnault, *Saint Louise de Marillac*, 37.

service provides the first example of a social work function within the hospital setting. Before a young girl was discharged from the hospital there, the sisters assisted her to find suitable work so that she would have a means of support and would be able to live in dignity. Discharge planning was Christian and comprehensive. Louise used the same method for applicants unable to complete the formation program to become a Daughter of Charity. She would find appropriate employment for the girls, frequently in the homes of a Lady of Charity.

Imbued with respect for each person and a gentle concern for the poor, Louise promoted women both as the providers and recipients of service. She was not unaware that she and the women she collaborated with had a very special role to play in the evangelization of 17th century France.

It was very evident in this century that Divine Providence willed to make use of women to show that it was His Goodness alone which desired to aid afflicted peoples and to bring them powerful helps for their salvation.<sup>11</sup>

### **Work With Foundlings**

The works Louise initiated with the Foundlings demonstrates well her two foundational pillars of response to documented need and well planned beginnings. The Foundlings project, the first modern organized effort in child welfare, also illustrates the manner in which she combined works of charity with works directed toward economic justice. At the time in Paris, many infants were abandoned in public places because of the high rate of illegitimacy and the extreme poverty. When such infants were found, they were first taken to the Hôtel Dieu (a hospital in which the Daughters served with another religious community) and then were transferred to La Couche. Contemporary descriptions of La Couche are horrifying. It was managed by a matron who was assisted by two servants, who in addition to drugging the infants to keep them quiet, sold the children to beggars who by breaking their bones and inflicting other injuries could excite greater pity and increase their donations. Vincent himself testified that in fifty years, not one infant at La Couche had survived but the overall infant mortality rate at that time was quite

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<sup>11</sup> *Spiritual Writings*, 56.

high with one out of two children dying before the age of four. Many of the social problems stemmed from France's relatively high population of 20,000,000 and the fact that it was constantly at war.

When both the Ladies of Charity and the Daughters saw the tragic state of the babies brought to the Hôtel Dieu and knew of the horrors at La Couche, Louise began to organize a response to this need. Although there was some discussion about the sisters taking over La Couche, Louise saw the need to get a fresh start and after some difficulties, including litigation<sup>12</sup> Louise succeeded in having the Ladies agree to pledge economic support if the Daughters would staff the service. Louise began the work at the motherhouse at La Chapelle in 1638 with just twelve infants selected by lottery from La Couche and three wet nurses. Knowing that the nutrition of the wet nurses was important, and that they should be reimbursed appropriately, the administrative plan allowed for each nurse to receive eight ecus and three sols of bread while the Daughters and governess there only received two sols of bread. As the number of children increased, the shortage of wet nurses became acute. Despite the repugnance we may experience at the thought of babies sucking goats for their milk, such artificial milking was required at that time and is documented in several displays at the Museum of Public Assistance in Paris. Louise, a mother herself and psychologically astute, preferred breastfeeding so she saw the need to develop still another project. Placing children with foster mothers would give them a much better start in life from both the physical and psychological standpoints and would allow the babies to be placed outside of Paris where the supply of wet nurses was greater.

### Foster Care

In 1640, Louise developed a plan for foster care and was ready to begin her first pilot project in March. Again the beginnings were modest - four children placed in homes in the area. The success of the program was immediate and can be attributed largely to the rigorous selection process. Each foster mother applicant had to produce evidence from the pastor that she was of good moral character and a physician had to evaluate her general health, as well as the quality of her milk, and validate her age. Official declarations were issued when the children were actually placed in a foster home. The oldest of these documents, prepared in duplicate, reads as follows:

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<sup>12</sup> Louise de Marillac, *Letters*. Translated by Louise Sullivan. (Emmitsburg: 1972), 34-36.

On this day, March 30, 1640, we have entrusted for nursing Joseph Decheunin to Marguerite, wife of Pierre Hallard, residing at La Follye, called Goumet, for a hundred sols a month; she will be paid in advance this first month; the salary of the other month will be given her by M. \_\_\_\_ on bringing this present memorandum with a certificate of the Reverend Pastor of the place, giving assurance of the condition of the child and in case the child should die, he will be buried without ceremony. The nurse in that case will also be obliged to bring a certificate of the day of death with the clothes of the child.<sup>13</sup>

Comprehensive case records for each infant were developed and included the notes from the regular home visits conducted by the sisters or others. It is estimated that over 1200 infants were cared for in five years and extant reports indicate that “the 400 children in Normandy are much better cared for than the 232 in Picardy.” Correspondence also reveals how some children were removed from homes when the care was substandard. When one realizes the primitive travel available in the seventeenth century, we must marvel at the dedication and level of accountability required by Louise. Quality assurance perceived as both a charity and justice obligation was a high priority for her. Her ability to monitor the programs becomes even more impressive when one remembers that wars dominated the greater part of seventeenth century France.

### **Institutional Care for Children**

While the infant foster care program supplied well for the babies, a work had to be instituted for young children who needed residential care. In 1645, Louise established the first cottage style delivery center, a children’s institution where thirteen small residences were built around a common service are. Again the project was collaborative. The houses were built by Vincent and his Priests of the Mission and then leased to the Ladies of Charity to be administered by the Daughters of Charity. This situation was a great improvement over the accommodations at a previous emergency location where Louise had noted that the Ladies “are choosing for sleeping rooms, little rooms in which air will be quickly corrupted.” She knew well the

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<sup>13</sup> Flinton, *Saint Louise de Marillac*, 50.

value of a therapeutic environment as well as a therapeutic community. This type of service multiplied and successive institutions were built on this or a similar model throughout France.

In these institutions, educational programs for children five years of age and older were developed in sewing, reading, writing, knitting, lacemaking and even baking. The goal of preparation for life and a livelihood dictated all programs for the children. The sister administrator was advised that she “must take care to point out to the lady treasurer of the children the necessity of placing the children, particularly the boys, as soon as she sees that they are ready for domestic service or to learn a trade. She should try to recognize their inclinations and their desires without their noticing it”.<sup>14</sup> As the children grew older and more proficient in these activities, Louise was able to earn money by selling the work of the classes to the various merchants. In the rule for the sisters in this work, Louise warned them to follow the established regulations as they were presented and not to serve “according to their own fantasy.” Again, we see her conviction that standardization of a program would be the assurance of continuity in quality despite personnel changes. This consistency was necessary because it was her custom to have a sister establish a work well in one area and then move on to another area to initiate similar projects.

### **Prison Work**

If the situation of women and children was bad in seventeenth century France, the condition of male prison population was reprehensible and again attracted both Vincent and Louise. One of their first achievements was getting prisoners the very basic right to leave “their dens” for a few moments each day to breathe fresh air. Louise and the Ladies of Charity also managed to convince the authorities that the slaves should not be treated like animals and should at least have underwear and shirts given to them. Service to the prisoners must have had special appeal to Louise who had felt firsthand the effects of imprisonment. Changes in the French government caused her own uncle Michel, Minister of France, to die in prison in August of 1632 and her uncle Louis, marshal of France, to be imprisoned and then to be executed publicly in that same year.

Louise was frustrated by the terrible conditions, the brutality of the jailers, and the lack of food and health care for the prisoners who

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<sup>14</sup> *Spiritual Writings*, 80.

served as the “manpower” for the royal fleets and thus were referred to as galley slaves. In 1640 a benefactor gave Vincent de Paul, Chief Chaplain of the galleys, an annuity for the purpose of assisting the galley slaves and Vincent referred the project to Louise’s “adventurous mind.”

Louise as always responded creatively and with careful organization. Her writings reveal precise descriptions of the manner in which the food and nursing care was to be given to the prisoners as well as the manner in which the sisters were to conduct themselves in this very dangerous environment. They were warned not to converse needlessly with the guards, but to use the contact with the guards to encourage them to be less harsh. Knowing that the presence of the Ladies of Charity had a positive effect on the prisoners’ behavior, Louise also arranged that the Ladies and the Daughters go together in their service. Sensitive to the danger of the sisters being manipulated and conned by the prisoners, the rules written by Louise include the following very perceptive admonition: “The Sisters must never speak to any one galley slave in particular, nor give any credence to them when they try to justify their crimes. Likewise, the sisters must turn a deaf ear toward their pleas for help in escaping their predicament.”<sup>15</sup>

In a letter of 11 July 1654 to Vincent de Paul Louise described the problem of one of the Sisters working with the galley slaves. “She can’t get any more bread because she owes so much to the baker and bread is so expensive. She borrows and begs for them on all sides with great difficulty.” Louise also noted that the Duchess d’Aiguillon wanted the sisters to identify prisoners she thought should be released, but this disturbed Louise. Louise’s reasons are clear and cogent. “First, Sister can only guess from the way they treat her whether they insult or praise her; this being so, she could commit an injustice. Second, some bribe the captain and the porter who are already quarreling and accusing her of being the source of the disorder. Third, those who remain chained will blame her for it. And you know what these men can say and do.”<sup>16</sup> The sisters continued in this difficult and delicate work with the galley slaves until the end of the century when this form of incarceration was discontinued.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>16</sup> *Letters*, 407-408.

### Care of the elderly

Although the life expectancy in seventeenth century France was 30-35 years, there were enough elderly marginated by poverty and lacking social security to claim the attention of Louise. Once again when Vincent was offered a generous sum of money to do whatever good work he chose, he turned to Louise and asked her to develop a program for the elderly. This project, "The Hospice of the Holy Name" has been referred to by some commentators as the first institutionalized occupational therapy center. The concept was to provide housing for a group of elderly who could be self-respecting and productive by earning their keep through the work of their hands. In Louise's words, "It is essential that no one should feel useless."

Forty residents (twenty men and twenty women) were very carefully selected and placed in two homes apparently connected by a chapel. A board, (including a lawyer, a merchant and experienced service workers), heard each case, did social investigation, sought recommendations, and then made the intake determinations. Although in the first years of operation, only single persons were admitted, in later years, preference was given to the parents of the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. The apparent reason for this was to give the parents security and allow the children to continue in their ministry.

By providing such workrooms in this type of residence, Louise was able to preserve the dignity of the elderly and preserve them from that painful experience of "being a burden." In accord with their diminishing strength, the residents were able to work at various trades such as weaving, dressmaking, shoe-making, etc. The workrooms were well equipped because Louise never was parsimonious. She wrote, "Having secured a fairly good number of artisans to set the work on foot and keep it going, we must not stop to consider the cost necessary for purchasing the tools and materials nor is there need to be concerned about the difficulty of the skills involved nor the problems of securing a location (for sales) cheaply and easily. Divine Providence will not fail us in anything."<sup>17</sup> Each of the residents received one-quarter of the profit realized on the sale of their products, many of which were sold to shops in Paris. Because spirits were not provided the residents, it is recorded that the men tended to spend their earned commission on wine while the women were

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<sup>17</sup> Flinton, *Saint Louise de Marillac*, 104.



more conservative. In 1654 the project received the approval of the archbishop of Paris, and the king freed it from all taxes in exchange for a daily prayer by the residents. This hospice became the model for future projects for the elderly and understandably, most of them had lengthy waiting lists. Louise's correspondence reveals that beds were filled immediately after the deaths of occupants. Marketing of services was not necessary in seventeenth century France.

### **Beggars**

While in most projects, Louise and Vincent seemed to concur in judgments on service, their response to legislation on beggars diverged significantly. Begging was a major problem in France and an edict was issued in 1656 which forced all the able-bodied beggars to work and placed the others in hospitals. The objective was to remove the "undesirable poor" from view. It is said that of the 40,000 poor in the streets of Paris at that time, only four or five thousand, many of them old, entered the general hospitals and the rest went underground. When requested, Vincent refused to have his priests assist in the spiritual services to these poor because he could not condone the forced institutionalization by cooperating with the project. Louise had a different perspective, however, and did send two sisters to give assistance to the women who were interned. She provided services even while she worked actively to support the right of each person to self-determination. Some of these poor persons later found their way into the hospices which Louise was developing. One regrets that the full conversations between Vincent and Louise explaining their divergent positions are not available today.

### **Conclusion**

Emerson claimed that "every institution is the lengthened shadow of a man." In looking at the development of congregations of religious women and the historical expansion of social services, one has to feminize that statement because in Louise's shadow we see the marvelous array of religious congregations of active ministry as well as the broad range of social services. Louise de Marillac's ministry, which spanned her thirty-eighth to sixty-ninth years, encompassed every work given to the development and promotion of people. Her prolific correspondence and her spiritual writings are a reservoir of practical advice for planning, executing, and developing social works. In addition to the works already cited, Louise initiated "resettlement

programs” for war refugees; she organized “charitable warehouses” for merchants and guildsman to donate their products; she coordinated the recruitment and orientation of countless volunteers; she wrote policy manuals and quality assurance programs for services in health, education, and social service. She even coordinated soup kitchens in Paris where at three sites, her Sisters served over 7,000 persons each day. She advocated for the mentally ill and the handicapped. She managed investments and engaged in for-profit business ventures of wine making and sheep raising to gain revenues for her charitable enterprises.

Vatican II described well the current world situation. Chapter II of *Gaudium et Spes* summarizes Christian social teaching and then despite the exclusive language, succinctly presents the contemporary challenge to social ministers. “Today there is an inescapable duty to make ourselves the neighbor of every man, no matter who he is, and if we meet him, to come to his aid in a positive way, whether he is an aged person abandoned by all, a foreign worker despised without reason, a refugee, an illegitimate child wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a starving human being who awakens our conscience by calling to mind the words of Christ: “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, there can be no question that we in this 20th century hear the same cries of the poor as did Louise in the seventeenth century. Perhaps ours have become even more shrill and pathetic because of communications technology. Recognizing the parallels in need, we must ask ourselves if our present situation of reduced funding, widening zones of poverty, regulatory oppression and legislative/judicial challenges calls forth in us the commitment, the courage, and the stamina of a Louise de Marillac. As she prayed to her patron Saint Louis for the gift of “gentle power” may we seek Louise’s help and inspiration to lengthen and strengthen her shadow of feminine compassion and productive creativity. May persons know that the kingdom is truly theirs by the love and the justice, “the gentle power”, they experience through our services.

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<sup>18</sup> [Second Vatican Council] *The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*. Edited by Austin Flannery. (Collegeville, Minnesota: 1975), 928.

We cannot have peace with God, with our neighbor, and with ourselves, unless Jesus Christ grant it to us.

*Saint Louise de Marillac*

For what could we wish no matter where we are, since we have God with us?

*Saint Louise de Marillac*