
Fall 1991

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Recommended Citation

Gettemeier, Loretto D.C. (1991) "Louise: A Life in her own Words," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 2.
Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol12/iss2/2>

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Louise: A Life in her own Words

BY

LORETTO GETTEMEIER, D.C.

Introduction

This week we are all gathered here to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of Louise de Marillac. For years, even hundreds of years, Louise was hardly known, barely discovered, and humbly hidden behind the magnificent charity of Vincent de Paul.

It seems fitting in this age when women are called to claim equality and respect for their personhood that the woman, Louise, is emerging from the shadows and is claiming her just recognition. Even we, her Daughters, have been satisfied with a cursory acquaintance with Louise, though she has affected each of our lives. Indeed, she has influenced the lives of thousands of women throughout these 400 years.

The proud Marillac name perdured through these 400 years not because of the scholars they were, nor because of the diplomacy they waged in the royal court, nor because of the military strategy they devised. No, the Marillac name has persisted into our twenty-first century because of an orphaned, illegitimate child who became the woman, Louise.

Who was Louise? What were the forces in her life that led her to respond to the demands of the poor with fresh insight? What enabled Louise to be a dynamic and revolutionary woman, a woman who defined and charted social action? What wars did she wage within as she journeyed to that woman, fully alive, who gave glory to God?

To understand another it is often said we should try to “walk in her moccasins” or “get inside her skin.” Today let’s try to do just that. Instead of quoting biographers (although certainly all the information on Louise is from those biographers), let’s allow Louise herself to speak. In using the first person, perhaps we can better capture the pain, the passion, the candor, the faith — the spirit that was Louise.

Early Years

These are the years I'd like to skip over because they are so painful for me. You know I have no idea who my Mother was. Some say she might have been a maid in my father's house. His first wife died, and I was born in 1591 before his second marriage in 1595. The Marillacs were a well-known family in France; my uncles held important positions at the court of the king. There was no way they could hide my birth, and I always got the feeling they were ashamed of me. I think my father was too, because when I was three he remarried and sent me away to a convent school at Poissy. I never went home again. Although I did see my father now and then, I missed growing up with a mother.

My great aunt was a Dominican nun at this convent, and she and my father saw to it that I received a good education. I had a thorough religious formation and also learned to read and write, studied art, music, Greek and Latin. In fact, I knew Latin better than Vincent, but don't tell him that.

When I was thirteen my father died and I had to leave the school. My uncle Michel became my guardian, but I got the feeling he didn't want me around. He was always distant and aloof. He put me in a family boarding house. Was that ever different from the school at Poissy! It seemed awfully poor to me. There I had to learn to keep house, to cook, to sew — things I had never done before.

One day when I was about fifteen, I saw the most wonderful thing. The Capuchin nuns walked barefooted in a procession through the streets of Paris before they were installed in their Convent. After that I went over there to pray often. Eventually I made a promise to God that I would enter that cloistered community. I thought perhaps if I lived a life of penance in that convent, God would forgive the sin of my birth.

A few years later when I met with the provincial, he told me I was not called to the cloistered Capuchin life. He said, "God has other designs on you." Even though I remembered his words, I felt more guilty than ever. I had betrayed my promise to God. At the same time, I wondered if the provincial's refusal had anything to do with the fact I couldn't bring a dowry.

Married Life

You might find this strange, but in my day marriages were arranged. My uncle Michel arranged that I marry Antoine Le Gras, a secretary to the queen. He was not a member of the aristocracy, and because of that I would never be called "Madame," but only "Mademoi-

selle." All my aunts and uncles were at the wedding, but they signed the guest book as "friends" of the bride. That hurt. They were still ashamed of me.

Antoine and I grew to love one another. After a year of marriage our son Michel was born. We had a happy life and there was joy in our home. Antoine and I read scripture together. A few times we even entertained Francis de Sales, the bishop of Geneva, in our home. We also entertained other young couples in our home, friends we knew from the court. Even with all my entertaining, though, I always found time to visit the poor. In France in my time, there were only two classes, the very rich and the very poor.

Then everything in my life changed. After seven years of marriage, Antoine became sick. His illness affected his moods, and he became angry and depressed. Naturally, I was the one he took it out on.

I began to feel everything was my fault. After all, I was illegitimate. My birth was a sin. I didn't keep my promise to God to become a Capuchin. Was all my unhappiness God's way of punishing me? I prayed and prayed and prayed, but things got worse. I felt the blackness engulfing me. Perhaps I should leave Antoine and my son. Perhaps this miserable life was all there was. I doubted the immortality of the soul. I sought help from my director, Bishop Camus, but I was afraid to trust that help because I was so attached to him. Only if you've gone through something like this yourself, can you imagine the indescribable torment I was in from Ascension to Pentecost.

It was then that the good God took pity on me and did something so extraordinary that it affected the rest of my life. On Pentecost Sunday I was in parish church, Saint Nicolas des Champs, assisting at mass when suddenly all doubts concerning the immortality of the soul were taken from me. Can you imagine the relief I felt? But wait, there's more. God gave me a glimpse of what he expected. First, I was to stay with my husband. Later, somehow, I would be in a little community where assistance would be given to others. There would be much coming and going. Secondly, I was to take a new director. I didn't want to do this, but since God let me know I didn't have to change directors right away, I acquiesced. I felt like I was walking on air when I left that church.

As soon as I arrived home, I wrote everything down and always kept that sheet of paper with me. I didn't ever want to forget one bit of it. Later, when things got rough for me, I took this paper from my pocket and reread it. On the outside of the paper I wrote the word "light".

Three years after Antoine became sick, he died. He was a good man

and I always had mass said for him on the anniversary of his death, 21 December 1625. I was thirty-four at the time. Did you know that life expectancy in seventeenth century France was between thirty and thirty-five years of age?

My son Michel was twelve when his father died. What a problem that boy was to me! I guess I can't blame him too much because he lived with a sick father and a depressed mother for three years. Now, when I tried to love and guide him, he felt I was smothering him. What a failure I was as a mother.

Widowhood

Even after the "light" of Pentecost, I was still distraught. How was I to find God's will? Who would guide me? What would happen to my son? I prayed and sometimes got uptight because I couldn't fit in all the prayers I had determined to say. My director, Bishop Camus, got tired of hearing about my anxiety and appointed a new priest to be my director.

This new director's name was Vincent de Paul. I have to tell you right from the onset that I didn't like him. He was of peasant stock. I was a Marillac accustomed to the refinement of the court. Francis de Sales and I got along well, and Bishop Camus was a cultured man. But this simple priest? I didn't think it would work, but then I reread the little paper in my pocket and told God I wanted to do his will.

Not until years later did I find out that Vincent wasn't so keen on having me for direction either. From his experience with Madame de Gondi, he knew the demands of women of nobility and felt he had lots of other obligations besides. However, somebody must have put in a good word for me, because Vincent did accept this anxious, troubled widow.

Gradually, Vincent and I got to know each other better. He listened to my suffering and patiently helped me to accept it. I was troubled to know God's will. Vincent helped me there too. I was always in a hurry, lively and impetuous. Vincent took his time. "Do not go ahead of Providence," he said, "but be aware of events which are signs from God." That's always a good thing to remember.

Little by little, I regained confidence in myself. Joy returned to my heart. Vincent got me involved in visiting the Confraternities of Charity which he had established. One thing led to another. Soon I was visiting the poor in their homes, taking care of girls in distress and getting things organized. Vincent had some great ideas, but he never took care of

details. Sounds just like a man, doesn't it? I had to use my good judgment, and in the process, I developed some sound organizational skills, if I do say so myself.

In the Service of the Confraternities

Things began going great for me. I was thirty-eight, in the prime of my life, and busy as can be traveling all over the country to work with the Confraternities, the Ladies of Charity. Sometimes I went by horseback, sometimes by carriage, sometimes I just walked. But did I travel! On these trips I saw first hand the misery of the poor. It was my job to get the ladies organized to take care of them. I set up the books for their financial accounts, gave them talks to encourage them, and did follow-up work. One time a couple of pastors refused to let "that missionary woman" speak in their parishes. Can you imagine! It's a man's world, I thought.

When I told Vincent about the incident, he said that it is difficult to do any good without conflict. Then he told me to eat humble pie and go to those pastors and apologize. Vincent said I would honor the humility of the Son of God. That was a struggle, but I did it. Do you know I won those priests over completely! Afterwards, I couldn't help laughing to myself about the whole incident.

During these years, 1629-1633, when I worked with the Confraternities, the relationship between Vincent and me changed. It was no longer that of director-directee, but was one of collaboration. Vincent now called me "Mademoiselle" instead of "my dear daughter." Our personalities complemented each other. Where Vincent was slow, sure, I was intuitive, quick. Where Vincent had ideas, I had precision. I always wanted to attack a situation and get the job done, but Vincent reminded me to serve Our Lord with common sense. "The opposite," he said, "is indiscreet zeal".

Evolving Events

The confraternities were moving along, but some of the Ladies of Charity didn't like doing menial tasks and sent their maids to do these services. This worried both Vincent and me for the poor weren't being well taken care of. That was when Marguerite Naseau entered the picture. What a delight she was! Vincent sent Marguerite to live with me, and I taught her to care for the sick. Caring for the sick was one of the things I learned along the way and did a pretty good job of it, if I do say so myself. I frequently mixed concoctions and sent them to Vincent.

Mon Dieu, without my looking out for him, that man would have been on his deathbed years earlier.

But, back to Marguerite. I admired her faith, her docility to the Spirit and love of the poor. Because of this tenderness for the poor, Marguerite contracted the dreaded plague and died within a few days.

However, Marguerite's example inspired other peasant girls and soon my little house was bulging at the seams with five girls who wanted to serve the poor. I gave them a retreat, taught them their catechism, instructed them how to care for the sick, and assigned them to work in parishes. You know what was in my mind: The "light" of Pentecost — a community where there would be much coming and going.

In 1630, I presented my idea about this community to Vincent. It was pretty radical, I admit. He probably wondered what this crazy, impetuous woman wanted to get him into now. He did have a point. In my day any woman who wanted to serve God had to go to a cloister. She also had to have a considerable dowry which only the wealthy could afford. To take peasant girls with no education, no dowry, and have them walk the streets and go into homes was pushing Vincent a bit far, I admit.

I waited. A year passed. I mentioned it to Vincent again. He remained firm. "Once and for all, I beg you not to give it a thought until Our Lord makes it evident he wishes it." I knew Vincent remembered what had happened to Francis de Sales' Visitandines and was afraid that visiting the poor in their homes would be eliminated if a community were formed. Yet, wasn't my inspiration from God obvious evidence? Vincent told me to remain in peace. I prayed for him. I waited two more years. Finally, in 1633 Vincent began seriously to consider my project. We talked it over after his retreat and the decision was made!

I could hardly contain my excitement. As soon as I arrived home I called the girls together and told them about the new adventure of living a consecrated life in the midst of the world. They were invited to do something unheard of until now. Were they willing to take the risk? Was I? All kinds of doubts came into my mind. What if the adventure failed? What if the girls rejected it? What if the people wouldn't accept them? What if, what if, what if ...? Again, I took my piece of paper from my pocket, reread it and was assured of God's Will. My heart was at peace.

Not all the girls chose to accept the invitation. However, some did. On 29 November 1633, I welcomed five or six girls into my home to live

in community and to serve the poor. And thus was born the Daughters of Charity.

Early Beginnings

More girls came, sometimes a widow, sometimes one from another community. Mostly, the girls who came were illiterate peasant girls. I have to admit, some were a real trial to me. Their backgrounds were so different from mine; I wondered if I could continue to have them in my home, much less teach them. But I did teach them. I helped them learn their letters, taught them catechism. When they were ready to teach others, I sent them to Ursulines to be trained. Vincent didn't agree with me on this, but I sent them anyway.

I drew up a schedule for the girls, but when Vincent wanted to give me all the responsibility for their direction, I reminded him the girls were his daughters, too. My biggest fear was that the bishop or someone would take over the little community, and that would be the end of the service of the poor. Honestly, I did pressure Vincent over and over to be the superior. Knowing him, you know he resisted. Knowing me, you know I persisted. Mon Dieu, sometimes his slowness exasperated me to death and I told him so. Then, I would ask him to warn me of my faults.

Expansion of the Company

Our little company grew and the girls were asked to go to more and more places. But something happened to the relationship between Vincent and me. For two years, between 1640-1642, there was a coolness between us. Vincent told me over and over he would talk to the girls, but he didn't come. It seemed we, the little company, were always second. I expected him to treat the Daughters with as much respect as he gave the queen. It took a ceiling to fall in, literally, and for me to be almost killed before Vincent and I renewed the good relationship we had. I guess that showed we were human, but that falling ceiling helped us to recognize God's Providence and put our priorities straight.

Official Approval

After ten years we still didn't have a rule and this bothered me. The official recognition of the Church was necessary for the survival of the Company, but recognition was fraught with danger. At my persistent urging and in accord with my suggestion, Vincent wrote the first rule and brought it to the archbishop of Paris for approval.

Can you imagine my consternation when Vincent gave me the

approved document to read and it mentioned that the Company was to be placed under the authority of the archbishop of Paris! I was so distressed that I couldn't even tell the girls about it. However, I knew the arguments that would win Vincent and, admittedly, I used those arguments over and over. I told him this was not the will of God and that one day the sick poor would not be helped. Eventually, Vincent came around, but do you know I had to wait *nine* years for that modification! God certainly fine-tuned my impetuous nature.

Meanwhile, there was a lot of background work I had to do. I'm not above a little feminine finagling and can't give you all the details, but I'll tell you this much. In seventeenth century France, the document placing the Daughters under the archbishop of Paris had to be confirmed by royal approval. Strange as it may seem, the letters giving royal approval seem to have gotten lost. Stranger still, some "anonymous person" suggested to Queen Anne of Austria that she petition the pope to have the Daughters of Charity depend in perpetuity on the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission. You would think that would have taken care of things, but I waited in vain for a response.

One of the things I had to do was help the vicar general understand that we were nothing more than a secular family. I went to see him three or four times about this. One time when I returned from a visit I gave a verbatim account of our conversation to Vincent. This is how it went: "He [the vicar general] asked me if we claim to be regulars or seculars. I made him understand that we claim to be the latter. He told me this was without precedent."

Vincent and I both felt this secular character was essential for the service of the poor. From the start I didn't want the girls to get wrong ideas so I told them they were in a little company, not a great community; they were to live in a house, not a convent; they were to address each other as "sister," not "mother." The ordinary dress of the country girl, not a religious habit, was to be their garb. Their lives had to be poor, simple, and humble so that they could be free to leave everything and serve the most abandoned. This kind of lifestyle required that each sister have a deep relationship with Jesus and a constant concern to live according to the spirit of humility, simplicity, and charity.

The girls didn't agree with me all the time, but I told them that we can't call the poor our lords and masters unless we agreed to live poorly for the love of the poorest of the poor, Jesus our Lord.

It seemed to me there were three points that touched on the very foundations of the Company: poverty, humble employment, and secu-

larity.

The long-awaited day finally arrived on August 8, 1655, when Vincent called the Daughters together and officially erected the Company. The direction of the Company was entrusted to Vincent and to his successors, the superiors general of the Congregation of the Mission. I signed the document first, then all the Daughters who were present. Some marked the place with a cross because they couldn't write their names. Vincent, in his humility, signed last.

Can you imagine my joy! I had fought for years for these structures, not because they were important, but because of the assurance they provided that the poor would be served by the little company. I did my best to transmit with my whole being the flame that was alive in me, a love for the poor urged on by the love of Jesus crucified.

Epilog

Five years after this official recognition, God knew my work was finished so he called me to Himself on 15 March 1660. Certainly my relationship with God, my friendship with Vincent, my encounters with the poor and with the girls were events in my life which shaped my identity. Indeed, they were the tools that provided my vision. I leave you now with the same words I addressed to the sisters who were gathered around my deathbed.

My dear sisters, I continue to ask God for His blessings for you and pray that He will grant you the grace to persevere in your vocation in order to serve Him in the manner He asks of you.

Take good care of the poor. Above all, live together in great union and cordiality, loving one another in imitation of the union and life of our Lord. Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only Mother.

Adieu ...

The spirit of the Company consists in giving itself to God to love Our Lord and serve him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor, in their own homes or elsewhere, to teach young girls and children and, in general, all those whom divine providence sends you.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
9 February 1653).*

The love of Daughters of Charity is not only tender, it is effective, because they serve the poor effectively, both in body and soul.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
9 February 1653).*

I beg all our sick Sisters to take heart in spite of their weakness, and to consider themselves to be as God wants them to be, giving Him the greatest possible glory because they are doing his will.

*(Saint Louise de Marillac to Sister Jeanne Lepintre,
22 November 1650, letter 293).*