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A Woman Named Louise: 1591-1633

BY

KIERAN KNEAVES, D.C.

Louise de Marillac was a wife, a mother, a teacher, a nurse, a social worker and a foundress. Louise was an organizer and a radical thinker who lived life intensely and enthusiastically. Louise was a woman who loved and who was loved deeply. Louise was a woman whose quest in life was to do the will of God, and who had a deep faith in Divine Providence. Louise was a woman who knew suffering. And Louise was a woman who became a mystic in action.

But this is the Louise de Marillac that we are only beginning to discover, for she has often been portrayed as a neurotic, anxious and melancholic woman. It is incredible that it has taken nearly 400 years to discover this dynamic, holy woman, but the fact is that she has lived in the shadow of Vincent de Paul, her guide, her co-worker and her friend. Father Joseph Dirvin, CM, who wrote the first fully documented biography in 1970, states that throughout these centuries, it was assumed

that the dynamic Vincent de Paul had taken a weak woman and made her an automaton in carrying out, obediently, humbly, and without a thought of her own, his charitable plans. Such an assumption does little honor to Vincent, who grasped the potentialities of this woman from their first meeting, or to God who had prepared her for that meeting by an exquisite refinement in the furnace of suffering. ... The greatness of Louise de Marillac will never be understood until the false image of a timid, dour, drab, and cheerless woman has been put aside. Essentially, we need to exorcise this disagreeable mythical creature and call up the real Louise.¹

Sr. Elizabeth Charpy from her recent research and biography states that, "in her writings, Louise reveals herself as a woman profoundly

¹Joseph Dirvin, C.M., *Louise de Marillac* (New York: 1970), ix.

affected by her background — her birth and social milieu, a woman involved in the political and religious events of her epoch, a woman full of life, who loved to laugh."² Louise is also described as charming and witty, and this is indeed a new insight into Louise. We are also discovering today the delightful affection, intimacy, and friendship of Louise and Vincent de Paul. Over the centuries, we have always known that without Vincent there would have been no Louise, and now we are beginning to realize that perhaps, without Louise there would have been no Vincent.

The portraits of Louise also have not done her justice. Louise was petite, but her head was large and together with the heavy veil she wore essentially to protect herself from the cold, projected her to be a larger woman. These portraits also were from her late years, when she had lost some of her teeth, and therefore did not smile, which gave her this image of a sad, melancholic woman. But Louise was actually attractive, with very large, penetrating eyes. Jean Calvet in describing Louise says, "Her expression was one of vivacious originality. The mouth is small, the lips thin, the chin prominent and firm ... and her eyes beautiful, clear, luminous, the mirror of an impassioned soul. Yes, we may say that she was beautiful."³

In the providence of God, we are here today in 1991 in celebration of the 400th anniversary of the birth of Louise de Marillac, and we are called to discover Louise, and in many ways to give birth to her, and to rediscover the charism of collaboration that is at the heart of our Vincentian Family. So let us together continue to find the REAL LOUISE.

"The de Marillac family came originally from the Haute-Auvergne region of France, where the head of the family owned a castle or stronghold near the town of Mauriac".⁴ In the thirteenth century they were already known "and in the fifteenth century, the head of the house, Guillaume de Marillac, definitely brought the family to the front ranks. Two of his sons became famous. Charles, a diplomat, was ambassador at Constantinople, in London, and in the Low Countries, and eventually he became the Archbishop of Vienna."⁵ Therefore, De Marillac family were longstanding and important members of the class of the

²Elizabeth Charpy, D.C., "Come Wind or High Water: Louise de Marillac," *Echoes of the Company* (Paris: 1987), 1:18.

³Jean Calvet, *Louise de Marillac: A Portrait* (New York: 1958), 4 trans. G.F. Pullen.

⁴Alice Lovat, *Life of the Venerable Louise de Marillac*, (New York: 1917), 1.

⁵Calvet, *Louise de Marillac*, 13.

Noblesse de Robe, a group of powerful old families whose class stood between the nobility on the one hand, and the rising bourgeoisie on the other. They held in their hands the effective administrative power of the country.

The first mention of the de Marillacs at the court of France was in 1550, "when Guillaume II, to distinguish him from his father, was appointed to a minor post of confidence in the royal court, and became an eminent financier who rose to be controller general to the king by 1569."⁶ Perhaps it was from her grandfather, Guillaume II, that Louise inherited her financial ability.

"This Guillaume II, married twice, in 1560 and 1571. By his first wife, Renee Alligret, he had eight children among them Louis de Marillac, the father of Louise, and Michel who rose to be Keeper of the Seals and eventually Chancellor of France. By his second wife, Genevieve de Bois-Leveque, Guillaume had four sons. One of these, who was also named Louis, entered the army and eventually became Marshal of France. A daughter by this second marriage, Valence, married Doni d'Attichy, Superintendent of Finances to Queen Marie de' Medici."⁷

The father of Louise, Louis, known as the lord of Ferrières and Farinvilliers, was born in 1556, the eldest son of Guillaume II. Apparently, his mother died when he was about thirteen or fourteen years old, as his father remarried when he was fifteen. Louis was handsome and intelligent, and was by profession a soldier and a captain of the guard in the royal household. In 1584, when he was twenty-eight years old, Louis married Marie de la Rozière, who died childless five years later. Then six years after his first wife died, Louis married Antoinette Le Camus on 15 January, 1595.

Louise was born on 12 August, 1591, when her father was 35 years old and a widower. Who was her mother? No one knows, and no one will ever know, as the baptismal records from 1590 to 1595 have mysteriously disappeared from the archives. To fill this blank, historians have suggested a marriage between Louis and one Marguerite Le Camus in 1590. But of this woman and this marriage no trace can be found.

Therefore, in the present state of our knowledge of the de Marillac family, it is evident that Louise was born out of wedlock, and that she was, by law, illegitimate. It is probable that her mother was a servant in

⁶Ibid., 13.

⁷Ibid., 14.

the de Marillac household, and therefore by social custom not allowed to marry. These circumstances surrounding her birth have given us a greater understanding of Louise, her personality, her sensitivity, and her insecurity.

"The place of birth of Louise is not known, but it is most likely that her mother lived in Paris and that during her pregnancy, she had to undergo the privations of a long siege of the city ... which brought about a great famine. This might explain the fragile health of Louise and her frequent migraines."⁸

Perhaps her mother died in childbirth, we do not know. But it appears that Louise was deprived of a mother's care during her infancy. Although deprived of maternal affection, Louise was dearly loved by her father. He chose to recognize her, and to give her his name. The only legal penalty attached to her birth was that she had no title of inheritance to her father's lands and money. Louis provided for her adequately and cherished her with fatherly affection. In an official document Louis recognized Louise, "*ma fille, ma naturelle*" my daughter, my natural daughter.

Before the undersigned, Toussaint Gleaume and Claude Trouve, notaries of our lord and King, in Le Chatelet at Paris, there appeared in person Louis de Marillac, knight, resident at Paris on the rue St. Antoine in the parish of St. Paul, who recognized and acknowledges, and by these presents acknowledges to have given ... to Louise de Marillac, his natural daughter, being absent ... eighty-three and one-third ecus in payment of an annual and perpetual pension ... The said ... renunciations being made for the good friendship which he has always had, and has, for the said testatrix, and so that she shall have the better means to support herself after the death of the said testator, and to provide for her marriage.⁹

And so Louise was a de Marillac, and "from her family, she inherited a keen sense of honor, a love of work, a certain impetuosity, and the soul of a mystic,"¹⁰ The Marillacs were handsome and proud people.

It is speculated that Louise was placed in a monastery immediately after birth, as this would provide a home for the infant that was as discreet as it was honorable and safe. Such disposition of wellborn little girls was common at the time. It is recorded that

⁸Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water," 1:19.

⁹Calvet, *Louise de Marillac*, 15-16.

¹⁰Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water," 1:20.

On October 10, 1591, when Louise was 2 months old, Louis de Marillac made a donation to the Dominican monastery at Poissy, of about 10 acres on the land of Ferrieres-en-Brie, and sent a letter to his aunt who was a religious in the monastery. She also was named Louise de Marillac. This little data makes us understand that Louise arrived at Poissy before she was even one year old.

"This hypothesis that Louise spent all of her childhood from infancy within the convent at Poissy would answer a host of questions: why, for example, she never mentioned home or family life, and why she seems not even to have known her step-mother or her three stepsisters."¹² There is therefore, little doubt that, throughout the most impressionable years of childhood, the monastery was her home.

Poissy was a magnificent monastery along the river Seine beside the forest of Saint Germain-en-Laye some six miles from Paris. It was built in honor of King Louis IX, at the time of his canonization, as he had been born and baptized at Poissy. The convent chapel marked the actual site of his birth.

The Dominican nuns at Poissy were known for their regularity, their genuine virtue, piety, and mysticism. They had a reputation for learning, they translated the Greek and Latin classics, and turned the Scriptures and liturgical books into poetry.

"The [Dominican] nuns, among whom the memory of Louis IX, Saint Louis, still lived, also taught their young charges their first lessons of charity toward the poor and the poorest among them — of which the king had given the example by serving them himself, washing their feet and even kissing a leper."¹³ All this, of course, had occurred centuries earlier, but the young Louise saw it pictured in the stained glass windows and learned it in her history of France, where her teachers were faithful to point out that the king had acted thus because he saw Christ present in the poor. The Dominicans would have also taught the girls the spirituality of the great Dominican mystic, Saint Catherine of Siena. And for Louise, as for Catherine, the love of God and the love of neighbor became inseparable.

Therefore, at Poissy, Louise received a solid education in philosophy, theology, and literature, and she was also initiated into painting and music. She studied Latin, and perhaps Greek. Latin became a part

¹¹Benito Martinez, C.M., "Saint Louise de Marillac — First State of Her Life," trans. Audrey Gibson, D.C., *Vincentiana* 34 (1990): 5.

¹²Dirvin, Louise de Marillac, 10²

¹³Vincent Regnault, D.C., *Saint Louise de Marillac* (Rockfords, Illinois: 1983), 3, trans. Sister Louise Sullivan.

of the architecture of her mind, and gave her language a robust precision. Also at Poissy, she experienced the strong and deep affection of her aunt, Dame Louise de Marillac, whom Coste places among the outstanding women of the early seventeenth century, declaring that she was "a woman renowned for her wisdom and especially her piety, and possessing a great love for literature and art."¹⁴

When Louise was four years old, her father married Antoinette Le Camus, a widow with three children. This marriage was not a happy marriage, and Louise seemed to be the only source of comfort in her father's life. Gobillon states that her father

discovering in her, a mind capable of all kinds of instruction, cultivated it with every imaginable care. He had her learn philosophy to form her reasoning and to give her entry into the higher reaches of knowledge. This gave her such a love of reading that it was the most ordinary of occupations for her, and her father had no greater pleasure than to talk about it with her, and to see in writing the reflections and remarks she made about it.¹⁵

When Louise was ten years old her half-sister Innocente was born. Being at this vulnerable age, there must have been fear in the heart of Louise as she wondered if Innocente would take her place in her father's life. But, the fear was unfounded, as Louis always maintained a strong bond with Louise.

Louise remained at Poissy for nearly twelve years, and during these very formative years she received a very complete and advanced education and formation. She was immersed in the spiritual tradition of the Dominican School, and this spirituality of the mystics, of prayer and the Divine Office, of meditation and contemplation remained with Louise all her life. In the spiritual atmosphere of the seventeenth century, mysticism held an important place, and "in France, mysticism prolonged the influence of the Rheno-Flemish mystics. Because of its taste for metaphysical abstraction and its aspiration towards a direct union with the divine essence, the French group merits the name of the abstract school."¹⁶ It is this school of abstract mysticism that influences Louise.

¹⁴Ibid., 3.

¹⁵Monsieur [Nicolas] Gobillon, *The Life of Mademoiselle le Gras* (London: 1984), 3.

¹⁶José M. Ibáñez Burgos, C.M., "Voluntarism of St. Vincent de Paul," trans. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., *Vincentian Heritage* 6, no. 2 (1985): 144.

Suddenly, when she was about twelve years old, Louise had to leave this convent that she loved. Her father, unable to continue to pay her tuition at Poissy, was forced to withdraw her and to place her in a family boarding school. It was here that Louise had her first experience of real poverty. Gobillon tells us that, "He [her father] placed her in Paris, in the hands of a capable and virtuous woman, who would give her suitable training in household skills."¹⁷ The lifestyle of this boarding school was completely different from Poissy; here Louise received a practical education, learning cooking, housekeeping, sewing, essentially all the tasks that would be appropriate to her state in life. It was perhaps here that Louise began to know that she was not really a de Marillac by law, but only in name, for this education was preparing her for a far different future than the other girls who remained at Poissy. But this diversified education, in the Providence of God, would prepare Louise for her future as educator and foundress of the Daughters of Charity. But she did not know, nor did she understand all of this then.

While Louise was in this boarding school her father continued to visit her, but then, at the age of thirteen, Louise had to face the loss of her father, the one who had loved her so deeply. Louis de Marillac died at the age of forty-eight, on 25 July, 1604, and he declared in his will "that she [Louise] had been his greatest consolation in the world, and that he thought she had been given him by God for his peace of mind in the afflictions in life."¹⁸ Louise must have felt a great loneliness and abandonment.

Louise remained at the boarding school in Paris, and her uncle Michel de Marillac was named her guardian. Michel de Marillac was the Chancellor of France and was known for his involvement with the mystic school of Madame Acarie. Thus, in the Providence of God, Louise was placed at the heart of the spiritual renewal in France, that was centered in Paris. For, as Calvet tells us, "the years in the beginning of the seventeenth century were for the Church in France, and especially for the devout laity, a time of spiritual renewal and opportunity. Louise, being a young girl who was both pious and cultivated could not remain indifferent to the many manifestations of a new spiritual life which she was exposed to on all sides, in which her family was directly involved."¹⁹ The Jesuits had returned to Paris in 1603. And in 1605, the

¹⁷Gobillon, *Life*, 3.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Calvet, *Louise de Marillac*, 26-27.

arrival and installation of the Carmelite nuns of Saint Teresa of Avila in Paris became the occasion of ceremonies and processions in which all the devout of Paris took part. Michel de Marillac, the uncle of Louise, was one of those who met the Spanish nuns and headed the joyful procession into Paris. It was he who handed them the keys of their new home in the name of Queen Marie de' Medici. "Madame Acarie, who was at the center of this spiritual reform, named Michel de Marillac the temporal founder of Carmel and Berulle its spiritual father in France."²⁰

The next year, in 1606, when Louise was fifteen, another event in the Church of France occurred in which the Capuchin nuns, the Daughters of the Passion who followed the Franciscan rule of Saint Clare, were solemnly installed in their convent. "They walked through Paris, barefooted, preceded by a procession in which the Archbishop himself participated. These Capuchins brought with them an example of the greatest asceticism and radiated the influence of Franciscan piety."²¹ The well known mystic Benet of Canfield was connected to this convent, and his spirituality greatly influenced Louise's life. "There is a wonderful lucidity to Canfield, in that he summarizes perfection in the single point of the will of God. For Canfield the center of the Christian life consisted essentially in not having any other intention in all of one's life and in all of one's actions other than the accomplishment of the Will of God."²² This becomes the absolute driving force of Louise.

Louise was very influenced by all of this excitement and religious renewal, and this awakened in her the desire to consecrate herself to God. "Louise was attracted by the life of prayer, manual labor and great poverty [of the Daughters of the Passion]. Often she went to pray in the Chapel of these Capuchin nuns ... and, it was at this period that she promised (or made a vow) to give herself to God in this rigorous cloistered life."²³

At this period in history, entrance into a convent, a monastery, required a rather substantial dowry, which Louise knew she would need in order to enter the Capuchins. But, unfortunately for her, the provisions of her father's will had not been carried out, and so at the age of nineteen, she was obliged to sue in order to obtain the money her father had left her". A verdict issued at Chatelet, 7 September 1610,

²⁰Ibid., 26.

²¹Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water," 1:20.

²²Burgos, "Voluntarism," 146.

²³Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water," 1:20-21.

ordered her uncle Michel de Marillac, then tutor and guardian to her half sister Innocente, to pay her 300 pounds pension, a thirty pound annuity and back payments."²⁴ It was only through this lengthy court battle that she would finally obtain what was rightfully hers.

So, at the age of twenty, Louise, being of age and finally having the financial ability, asked permission to enter the Daughters of the Passion, but her request was denied. Father Honoré de Champigny, the provincial of the Capuchins, rejected her, as he felt that because of her precarious health she would not be able to endure the austerity of the Rule. "And, whether to console Louise, or whether inspired by God, the priest concluded his advice with these words: 'God has other designs on you.'"²⁵ This rejection caused a tremendous pain in Louise's heart, and down deep she wondered if the denial was perhaps really based on the fact that she was illegitimate. But in faith, the words "God has other designs on you" burned into her heart.

Louise, being of age, left the boarding school and since she had been denied entrance into the cloister and having no other place to go, went to live with Valence d'Atticy, her aunt, to help care for her family of seven children.

Following the custom of the time, Michel de Marillac, Louise's guardian, had the obligation of arranging a marriage for Louise.

The choice of a husband for Louise became Antoine Le Gras, one of the secretaries of the queen, Marie de Medicis. Antoine Le Gras was also an assistant to Octavien Doni d'Attichy, the Minister of Finance of France, and husband to Valence. It was perhaps the d'Attichys who first introduced Louise to Antoine.

Antoine was a simple squire, belonging to the bourgeoisie not the aristocracy. Because Louise was illegitimate, her husband could not be from the noblesse, for as Dirvin points out, "no nobleman could be expected to marry beneath himself; but a man could be expected to marry above himself."²⁶

The Le Gras family were long-time residents of Paris and they were of substantial fortune. They were an old and honorable family, "and like the Marillacs, from Avergne region of France, a point doubtless in his favor. Antoine's relations and forebears had been distinguished for their charity and generosity to the poor, a hospital at Puy having been

²⁴Regnault, *Saint Louise de Marillac*, 4.

²⁵Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water," 1:21.

²⁶Dirvin, *Louise de Marillac*, 23.

built by them, and this was a strong recommendation doubtless in the eyes of his future wife."²⁷

In the marriage contract it is recorded that Louise de Marillac was the natural daughter of her father, but her aunts and uncles who were present for this official act signed themselves "friends" of the future bride, thereby not claiming her. Louise, felt once more all of the suffering and loneliness of her youth. Also, Louise, "was forced now, in the proclamation of her marriage banns, to advertise her tainted birth to the world. The title of Madame, was reserved for women of the nobility, but Louise had to bear henceforward the inferior title of Mademoiselle, instead of the noble Madame, which was her familial right."²⁸

The marriage took place on 5 February 1613, in the church of Saint Gervais, Louise was twenty-two and Antoine thirty-two years old. Even though "Antoine and Louise did not choose one another, a true love would be born between them. Near her husband, Louise found the joy and warmth of a family home."²⁹

By her marriage Louise became a member of the household of the queen mother, as Antoine had his place at court and Louise was received there. Although they were not wealthy, they moved into the fashionable rue Courteau-Villain in the parish of Saint Sauveur. As did all women in Parisian society, Mademoiselle Le Gras met and received into her home young wives whose husbands worked in the court.

This happy period in the life of Louise was brightened by the birth of a son on 18 October 1613, whom they named Michel Antoine. Louise now had a family to belong to and to whom she belonged. These were happy years for Louise, she loved Antoine and she loved her son Michel, through whom she came to know the profound joy of motherhood. But another wound, another painful cross would soon become apparent to Louise as Michel was a premature baby, he had difficulty in developing and learned slowly, and in an age lacking medical skill, this seems to account for his subsequent dull and often erratic behavior, behavior which was to cause his mother many heartaches.³⁰

Louise participated fully in the spiritual and cultural life of her epoch. At this time, her spiritual director was "Monsieur Jean Pierre le

²⁷Lovat, *Life*, 8.

²⁸Dirvin, *Louise de Marillac*, 23.

²⁹Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water," 2:66.

³⁰Dirvin, *Louise de Marillac*, 30.

Camus, the Bishop of Belley and nephew to Louise's step-mother."³¹ In her desire of finding God, Mademoiselle Le Gras asked for permission to read the bible in a French translation. Camus granted this permission to Louise, as well as her husband, and this was a rare permission given at that time. Together, Antoine and Louise meditated on the Word of God and they also prayed compline together at night.

Louise also read the writings and absorbed the spirituality of Saint Francis de Sales, who was also a personal friend of her uncle Michel and her director. When Francis de Sales came to Paris, he visited Louise in her own home, as she was ill and could not come to hear him speak. Francis de Sales seemed to understand Louise in a special way, and he was a source of grace and support to her. Louise would have also been familiar with the Spanish mystics, Saint John of the Cross and Saint Theresa of Avila and she was also steeped in the spirituality of Bérulle. Therefore, the foundation of her spiritual attitudes are always the blend of contemplation and action.

Mademoiselle Le Gras, supported by her husband, often visited the poor and rendered them many services. One of the servants in the Le Gras household, gives this testimony:

She had a great piety and devotion for serving the poor. She brought them sweets and preserves, biscuits and other delicacies. She brushed their hair, washed away their scabies and vermin, and prepared them for burial. Often at table she would seem to be eating, but she was not. She got up at night to place the food in her closet, and for prayer, as soon as Monsieur was asleep.³²

When Louise and Antoine had been married only four years, they were affected by the deaths of Louise's uncle and aunt, which occurred within a few years of one another. Octavien d'Attichy had died in 1614, and so when his wife Valence died in 1617, they left seven orphaned children. The d'Attichys were very dear to Louise as they had opened their heart and home to her, in her time of distress and they had been instrumental in her marriage to Antoine. Valence had also been the godmother of their son, Michel. And so the d'Attichy children found devoted protectors in Louise and Antoine, and they moved out of their own home and into the d'Attichy home for a while in order to care for them. "Michel de Marillac had been named their guardian, but he

³¹Calvet, *Louise de Marillac*, 38.

³²Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water," 2:66.

confided the management of their goods to Antoine Le Gras. This management of the orphans' inheritance was difficult. Antoine spent much time with it and even used a part of his resources to avoid bankruptcy."³³

Besides this added burden, Antoine also was personally affected by the political events of the time. "As secretary to the Regent, Marie de Medicis, he felt keenly the consequences of the serious dispute between the Queen Mother and the future King Louis XIII. In 1617, after the assassination of her favorite, Concini, she went into exile in Blois. It was apparent that Louise XIII intended to reign alone. The question remained concerning the fate of the household of the Regent. It was a time of anguish for those whose fortunes were tied to her."³⁴

And so it was in 1620, when Louise was twenty-nine years old, a shadow of another suffering, another cross began to appear as Antoine's health began to deteriorate. It was hard to define his ailment, "but it seems to have been some form of tuberculosis."³⁵ Antoine's illness affected his behavior, and his mood would become angry and despondent.

Louise cared for her husband with much affection, but his mood changes and frequent bouts of impatience became more and more disturbing for her. She took his anger personally, fearing that she was the cause of his anger and distress. The correspondence of Louise during these years reveals her spiritual anguish caused by the slowness of her son, and the illness of her husband. Was this not all her fault? Had she not promised God to become a Capuchin? "At a period when Divine Justice was a major theme, Louise turned to anxious introspection: death, illness, loss of fortune — was it all a punishment from God for her failure to keep her adolescent vow to enter the cloister?"³⁶

The bishop of Belley, her director, did all he could to calm her. He wrote: "I am still waiting, my dear daughter, for serenity to return to you after these clouds which prevent you from seeing the beautiful light of joy which there is in the service of God ... turn your gaze away from yourself a little and fix it on Jesus Christ."³⁷

³³Ibid., 2:67.

³⁴Regnault, *Saint Louise de Marillac*, 8-9.

³⁵Dirvin, *Louise de Marillac*, 40.

³⁶Regnault, *Saint Louise de Marillac*, 9.

³⁷Gobillon, *Life*, 6.

Her uncle Michel wrote to her and spoke of abandonment: "It is well, Mademoiselle, to learn from experience that God is not attached to our plans or designs, and that those who find Him are those who seek Him as He wishes to communicate Himself ... the poor in spirit, who recognize and peacefully accept their poverty, receive everything from God as it comes. They are happy to surrender themselves to Him and do not seek to prescribe what He should do. They accept what comes, make use of everything with humility and gratitude, and remain always poor in spirit, content to do their best without being troubled by their deficiencies and weaknesses."³⁸

But despite this spiritual encouragement, Louise sank into a state of depression. In anguish Louise writes, "I fell into a state of depression, I experienced discouragement, annihilation of myself, and desertion by God, which I merited because of my infidelities. My heart was so depressed that the force of my emotions sometimes resulted in physical pain."³⁹

She thought of nothing but her dejection and misery. Ever fearful that her trials were a punishment from God for her infidelity to God, the young wife promised the Lord, on 4 May 1623, that she would never remarry should her husband die. But this did not prove sufficient, and her anguish continued. Louise, plunged into a torment of self-searching, wrote:

The following Ascension Day, I had a great depression because of the doubt I had as to whether I should leave my husband, as I wanted to do in order to make good my first vow, and have liberty to serve God and the neighbor. I also feared that the attachment I had to my director might prevent me from taking another one, fearing I might be obliged to leave him, and I suffered a great deal of doubt about the immortality of the soul, all of which caused me incredible anguish from Ascension until Pentecost.⁴⁰

Louise was entering her dark night of the soul and she was afraid. In the mystic journey, one must walk an inner journey where there is darkness, emptiness and silence. There comes a time in the mystical life when all props fall away, all securities collapse and the mystic is naked and helpless. In the Dark Night of the Soul, the mind does not understand, but it is then that the inner eye, the eye of the heart can be filled with light. To Saint John of the Cross, the mystical experience is a "living

³⁸Regnault, *Saint Louise de Marillac*, 10.

³⁹*Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac: Correspondence and Thoughts*, ed. and trans. Louise Sullivan, D.C. (New York: 1984), 8, A.13 (c. 1621) (An interior Trial).

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 3. A.2 Light.

flame of love" that burns in the heart and that tenderly wounds the soul. He describes the divine love that burns in his heart, as paradoxically giving pain and joy-wounding and yet strengthening. "When Saint John of the Cross, the mystic poet, turns the theologian, he writes, that the Flame of Love is the Holy Spirit. The burning flame — this love — guides and points the way when we are lost in the dark and groping for light."⁴¹

Only love, only the Holy Spirit can enlighten the darkness of night, and during mass on the feast of Pentecost, in the church of Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs, Louise received her *Lumière*, her light of Pentecost. She herself describes the experience:

In an instant my spirit was cleared of all its doubts. I was advised that I should remain with my husband; that a time would come when I would be in a situation to make vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; and that I would be with other who would do the same thing. I understood that I would be in a place where I would be able to help my neighbor, but I did not see how this could be since there would be much coming and going. I was also assured that I should be at peace concerning my director, that God would give me one whom He seemed to show me. I found it repugnant to accept him; nevertheless, I acquiesced. It seemed to me that this change would not take place immediately. My third doubt was removed by the assurance I felt within me that God was speaking to me and that since there was a God, I could not doubt the rest.⁴²

With much precision, Mademoiselle Le Gras wrote down this "Light" on a piece of paper which she folded carefully and kept in her pocket, and whenever fear or doubt would penetrate into her heart, she would read her *lumière*, and remember God's grace.

Upon examination of the manuscript, we see a yellowish paper covered with rapid handwriting front and back, owing that it has often been opened and refolded. Around a dozen deep folds have made the paper very fragile. On the back, on what served as a cover for the little booklet, we read the word "Lumiere" — Light.⁴³

When Louise returned home, nothing was changed on the outside, but she was changed on the inside, there was now a flame that gave light to the darkness. Antoine's illness continued to evolve, insomnia kept him awake most of the night, and frequent hemorrhages weakened

⁴¹William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love* (San Francisco: 1978), 22.

⁴²*Spiritual Writings*, 3-4 A.2 Light.

⁴³Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water," 2:69.

him. Louise surrounded him with vigilant and affectionate care, and during these months and years of long days and long nights, there grew a strong bond of love between them. Gobillon writes "This charitable and faithful wife showed her husband a more tender affection, a more compassionate goodness, and a more condescending love, trying to calm his spirit and soften his pains and sorrows."⁴⁴ For over two years, Louise remained constantly at her husband's side, and finally, she was with him at his last agony. In the middle of the night, just a few days before Christmas, 21 December 1625, Antoine suffered a violent hemorrhage and died.

Louise wrote, " I was alone with him to help him on this all-important passing. He showed great devotion until his last sign. His spirit was entirely attached to God. He repeated over and over to me, 'Pray to God for me since I can no longer do so.' These words will be forever engraved on my heart."⁴⁵ All her life Mademoiselle Le Gras remembered her beloved husband, his memory was engraved on her heart, and she taught Michel to always to honor the goodness of his father.

After Antoine's death, Louise's grief was severe, and at the age of thirty-four, she once again felt a terrible loneliness and abandonment. As a mother she suffered and was anxious about her twelve year old son and his future. Louise surrounded Michel with an excessive love that was overcautious. Michel was a difficult child, but she knew that for almost four years he had lived between a sick father and a depressed mother, and she felt responsible for much of his instability.

Antoine had left his widow and young son with very limited financial resources, and so with her funds insufficient to support the way of life to which she had become accustomed in the fashionable Marais district, Louise was obliged to move to a smaller apartment, away from the life and the social circle of which she had been a part. Often, when moments of quiet came to her, they were claimed by thoughts of self, rather than God. She would then become caught in fears and worries and anxieties. Louise wrote, "God made me realize that his holy will was that I attach myself to Him by the Cross which his

⁴⁴Gobillon, *Life*, 8.

⁴⁵Regnault, *Saint Louise de Marillac*, 12.

goodness willed me to have even from my birth, almost never leaving me without times of suffering at each stage of my life.”⁴⁶

Once again, Louise wrote to Bishop Camus, her director, and explained to him the darkness in which she found herself and the trouble that invaded her soul. From his house in Belly, he wrote:

Mademoiselle, my dear sister, I do not know why your spirit is troubled and thinks itself to be in darkness and abandoned. For what reason? You are no longer divided. Now you belong wholly to the heavenly Spouse having nothing more to do with earthly things. For a long time now you have desired only him, and now that he has broken your bonds and that you must offer a sacrifice of praise in the Host, you are astonished? Daughter of so little faith, why do you doubt?⁴⁷

This rather harsh letter shows that he understood this tormented and anxious young widow very poorly. But it was about this time that Bishop Camus, whose house was far from Paris, appointed Vincent de Paul to be the spiritual director for Louise. Louise was hesitant and felt very little attraction for Vincent; the simplicity of this priest was far removed from the refinement of Bishop Camus. But, Mademoiselle remembered her light of Pentecost, her lumière. Vincent, for his own part, was reluctant to accept the spiritual direction of this young widow. He had had the experience of spiritual direction with Madame de Gondi, and he knew the demands made by women of nobility and was therefore very hesitant. Also, Vincent had just established the Congregation of the Mission for the evangelization of the poor, and the missions to the country made great demands on him.

But in obedience to the will of God, Louise accepted being directed by Vincent, this priest so filled with good sense and so close to God and the poor. And Vincent accepted this anxious, worried woman and would help free her from her anguish and find peace in God. And so it was that in the providence of God, Vincent was sent to Louise to be her guide and her friend. Vincent was ten years older than Louise, he had made the journey, had been tried by fire, and had a heart burned clean. Vincent listened to her suffering and he understood.

Beginning with her first letter in 1626 we see Louise very exacting of her director. She wrote often, and Vincent could not respond to all her letters. She was concerned and worried whenever her director left Paris

⁴⁶*Spiritual Writings*. 35. A.29 on Charity.

⁴⁷Charpy, “Come Wind or High Water,” 3:111-12.

for a mission in the country. What would become of her? Vincent patiently reassured her, writing that [Our Lord] Himself will act as your director. Yes, He will surely do so, and in such a way that He will lead you to see that it is He himself."⁴⁸

Much of Louise's anxiety was caused by her worry over her son's future, and one of every two letters she wrote during this time was about Michel. Vincent was always fond of Michel, and took a personal interest in him. When Michel was fifteen years old Louise placed him as a boarder at the seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet. But his work was very irregular, and he had much difficulty progressing in his studies that were supposed to bring him to the priesthood, which was the hope and desire of Louise.

Louise, now living alone, drew up her Rule of the Day, in which she gave herself structured time for prayer, meditation, spiritual reading and service, a schedule based very much on her experience at the monastery.

As Vincent grew to know Louise he discovered how much she had been marked by the harshness of life. Vincent also discovered in Louise her great desire to know and to accomplish the will of God. Often, he would write, "Be then ... quite humble, submissive, and full of confidence, and always waiting patiently the manifestations of his holy and adorable will."⁴⁹ Vincent believed that one should not go ahead of Providence, and so he waited for events, for signs from God. Louise kept wanting to get on with her life, to get busy, but Vincent knew the necessity to waiting, of watching, and of listening. And so Louise, always obedient to God and to her director, waited, watched, and listened.

As Louise and Vincent became friends, Vincent taught her trust in God and trust in herself. Vincent was indeed a sacrament to Louise and Louise to Vincent. As Vincent listened to Louise, Louise seems to bring out a gentleness in Vincent.

In 1627, Vincent writes to Louise, "What shall I say to you, now, of him whom your heart cherishes so dearly in Our Lord?" he asked unabashedly in the third person." He then goes on to tell her of his

⁴⁸Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, letter 12, 30 October 1626, in *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Confessions, Document. I. Correspondence (1607-1639)*, ed. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., trans. Helen Marie Law, D.C., John Marie Poole, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik, C.M., annotated by John Carven, C.M. (Brooklyn: 1985), 1:24.

⁴⁹Ibid.

health, and ends the letter with "you will not speak of this matter to anyone, because nothing may come of it, but my heart could not conceal it from yours."⁵⁰

At another time, he writes to Louise, "I do not ask you to remember me in your prayers, because I have no doubt that, after little Le Gras, you put me in the first place."⁵¹

In her frequent contacts with Vincent, Louise soon discovered his activities in favor of the poor, and the existence of the Confraternities of Charity, which were begun by Vincent in 1617, in the parish of Châtillonles-Dombes, in response to the needs of a family who needed food, clothing and assistance during a time of illness. Vincent organized these women of the parish in order to meet the continuing needs of the poor. Then as his missionary activities spread throughout the countryside of France, Vincent would organize groups of women to help alleviate the misery of the poor in the parishes, and these confraternities were the beginnings of the Ladies of Charity. For Vincent, the entire work of these confraternities was placed under one guiding principle: The poor are Jesus Christ. Vincent instilled into the Ladies of Charity a compassion for the poor, and everywhere he required personal service to the poor, service that was given with gentleness, respect, and devotedness.

At first, Vincent called upon Louise principally for the preparation of clothing for the poor and having it sent to the different confraternities, but then he began to ask other services of her visiting the poor in their homes, and receiving and finding accommodations for girls in distress. Vincent became sure of her judgement and her sense of organization, and he relied on her more and more. Little by little, Louise regained confidence in herself. During these years the mystic journey of Louise continued, and the tiny flame of love burned quietly in the depths of her heart. Deep down, a healing process continued to mend the shattered heart and restored faith. Saint Theresa of Avila had used the butterfly to symbolize this mystery of the inner journey where healing is experienced in union with God. The butterfly images the fresh and beautiful, but fragile, life which appears just when the cocoon of darkness appears to be a permanent state. Theresa speaks of the time in the darkness of the cocoon as necessary for the interior process of transformation. These years of waiting for Louise is indeed the time of

⁵⁰Dirvin, *Louise de Marillac*, 61.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 72.

her being formed in the cocoon of God's love. Also, it is true that the cocoon cannot be removed before the necessary time, or the butterfly will not be able to fly as the wings will not be completely developed. Vincent seemed to understand instinctively the demand of time for growth, by grace and by the experience of his own journey.

It was then in 1629, four years after the death of Antoine, that an appeal came to Vincent and he felt it was from God. He wrote to Louise, "Father De Gondi has asked me to go at once to meet him at Montmirail. It will, perhaps, prevent me from the honor of seeing you, for I must leave tomorrow morning. Does your heart tell you to come also, Mademoiselle? If so, you must leave next Wednesday."⁵²

And Mademoiselle's heart, indeed, told her to go. Vincent knew that this journey was an important event. With solemnity, he sent her "on mission."

Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and in cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil, and finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works."⁵³

This journey to Montmirail was the beginning of an intense collaboration between these two missionaries of charity. Louise is now thirty-eight years old, and a new Louise had been born. There is a tremendous joy in her heart, and she begins to realize all the creative potential enclosed in her personality. She has grown to a new freedom, a new independence and a new security within herself. The butterfly had emerged from the cocoon.

Vincent will never again call her "my dear Daughter," he now calls her "Mademoiselle." She now calls him "Monsieur." They are now partners, collaborators, friends, and instruments of God grace in carrying out the mission of service to the poor.

It is interesting to note that "Louise resumed her maiden name after her husband's death, as was commonly done in France when the husband was of inferior rank."⁵⁴ Louise signed every letter Louise de Marillac, but Vincent addressed every letter and always called her

⁵²Ibid., 78.

⁵³Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, letter 39, 6 May 1629, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, 1:64-65.

⁵⁴Lovat, *Life*, 22.

Mademoiselle Le Gras. Furthermore, it is curious that the Church canonized her Louise de Marillac, not by the name which was hers by marriage, but by that name which had been given her by her father.

As Louise went to visit the confraternities, she was received as the official visitor sent by Vincent, and she assumed this responsibility with dignity and efficiency. Over the years, when Vincent and his priests returned to the places where they had preached missions and established the confraternities, they saw that the zeal of the members had to be rekindled. The passage of time caused good will to weaken and abuses to creep in. Therefore, as Louise goes out to countryside of France to visit the confraternities, there are many that she must reorganize, there are others where she corrects the financial state or the breakdown of necessary structures. Always, she breathes new life into the rules and into the spirit of the confraternities. Listening to Louise, the members were filled with fervor to serve the poor because she instilled in them the love of God. The missionary ability of Louise was known to all, her cordial attitude, her manner of speaking and of encouraging, gave people back their confidence and aroused enthusiasm. Louise possessed an extraordinary talent for organization coupled with prudence and good judgment. She was educated and had the ability to relate to all levels of society, the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate, men and women, the peasant and the aristocrat.

Vincent wanted Louise to go everywhere. Without sparing herself, she would come and go, riding many miles on horseback, in a coach, by boat, or going on foot along the dirt roads of France. In 1630, we find her in Saint Cloud, northwest of Paris, then two months later at Villepreux in the west, then back at Montmirail which is east of Paris, and finally in December, we find her in the north at Beauvais. During this year, she also established a Charity in her parish of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet, becoming its first president.

There developed a true teamwork between Vincent and Louise, they discovered and appreciated their complementarity. Louise was quick, lively, and always ready to go to the fore. She was an organizer, efficient, and an independent thinker. Vincent was a Gascon, intuitive, and with an instinctive common sense, he had a wit and a sense of humor. Perhaps we can see Louise being an ISTJ and Vincent an ENFP, on a Myers-Briggs scale.

From 1629 on there is a persistent change in Louise. Vincent is guiding her, and the poor are teaching her and leading her to a God that is more human. In her correspondence between 1625-1633, Louise

refers to "God," in the spirit of the Rheno-Flemish abstract God, while Vincent refers to "Our Lord." But, as God leads Louise to the poor, she gently discovers her life becoming centered in Jesus, and in the ordinary, everyday life.

On 5 February 1630, Louise wrote in her journal, "At the moment of Holy Communion, it seemed to me, that Our Lord inspired me to receive Him as the Spouse of my soul, that this Communion was a manner of ESPOUSAL. I felt myself more closely united to Him, and felt moved to leave everything to follow my spouse."⁵⁵ Saint Theresa of Avila speaks of the spiritual marriage in the sixth and seventh dwelling place of the Interior Castle and states that few mystics ever reach this end of the journey. It is also said that, "mysticism has led to the most dynamic and revolutionary action the world has known, because the heart of the mystic is awakened by the love of Jesus, so that their eyes can see the sufferings, the injustices, the inequality, the sin of the world, and this drives them into action."⁵⁶

Louise is being led on a mystic journey that will drive her into action. And yet, Louise's prayer is so natural, and she speaks in such an ordinary way, that it seems strange that prayer so sublime can be spoken so simply.

While Vincent was preaching a mission in 1630, a woman named Marguerite Naseau came to him and ask to serve the poor. Marguerite was a peasant woman, about thirty-two years old, who had taught herself how to read and who had then gone about the countryside teaching young girls to read, as there was no opportunity for education for peasant girls in that day. Charpy states that, "At once Vincent was struck by her appearance of depth and aliveness, radiant with joy and reflecting the love of God living within her."⁵⁷ Marguerite was of the same stock as his mother and his sisters. Something exploded inside Vincent, this is what Mademoiselle had been talking about. And so he sent Marguerite to Louise.

Louise sent her to work with the Ladies of Charity in the parish of Saint Sauveur in Parish. Marguerite's example was contagious, and soon other girls came; there was Marie, Michelle, Barbe, and Martha, and they went to work with the Ladies of Charity in other parishes in Paris. But Louise knew that these girls would need a strong formation,

⁵⁵*Spiritual Writings*, 27. A.50 Visit to the Confraternities of Asnieres and Saint Cloud.

⁵⁶Johnston, *Inner Eye*, 11.

⁵⁷Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water," 5:192.

rooted in prayer, in order to persevere in their service. Louise knew that it would only be in faith that they would be able to find God in the poor and the poor in God. She also knew that they needed each other for support and encouragement.

In 1631, when Louise was forty years old, an event occurred that distressed her, as someone started a rumor that she had promised to marry him. As there was no truth in the rumor, Louise was bewildered and angry, and she must have poured out her heart to Vincent. We do not have her letter, but we have his famous response to her, “J'ai peine de votre peine” — I have pain of your pain, Vincent simply shared her suffering. In true compassion and honesty, heart spoke to heart, and healing took place. Dirvin brings out the real tenderness in Vincent in his friendship with Louise, he comments, “It is interesting to contrast the deference of his approach to Madame de Chantal, for example, with the brusque intimacy, the honest affection and indeed, at times the frank and manly tenderness of his rapport with Louise. This brusque intimacy is the language of friends.”⁵⁸

As Louise read and prayed about her light of Pentecost of 1623, she knew there would be a time for vows, for a complete dedication of her life to God, and that there would be a community where there would be much coming and going, in order to serve the poor. As she watched the girls in the parishes, Louise's intuition became clearer and clearer in her mind and in her heart. She once again submitted her thought to Vincent, but he remained firm. “As for the rest, I beg you, once and for all, not to give it a thought until Our Lord makes it evident that He wishes it, and at the present He is giving indications to the contrary. ... You are trying to become the servant of those poor young women, and God wants you to be His own.”⁵⁹

“What should she do when an inspiration that seemed to come from God and to be an obvious fact, received nothing but opposition and refusal? Louise waited, prayed and asked for clearer signs for those who must make decisions. Her project, or rather, God's project, she did not abandon. She allowed it to mature in her heart, AND BEGGED GOD TO ENLIGHTEN VINCENT.”⁶⁰

During her retreat, Louise wrote:

⁵⁸Dirvin, *Louise de Marillac*, 59.

⁵⁹Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, letter 71, before 1632, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, 1:111.

⁶⁰Charpy, “Come Wind or High Water,” 5:196.

By great and total dependence on the Providence of God, ... I shall await the time when He shall be pleased to reveal what He is asking of me. I must perseveringly await the coming of the Holy Spirit, although I do not know when that will be. I must accept this uncertainty as well as my inability to clearly perceive at this time the path which God wishes me to follow in His service. I must abandon myself entirely to His Providence so as to be completely His. In order to prepare my soul for this, I must willingly renounce all things to follow him.⁶¹

Then, it was in February 1633 that Marguerite Naseau took a poor sick woman home with her, to nurse her back to health. She thus contracted the plague and died. This was a terrible loss to Louise and to Vincent. Vincent always told the Daughters of Charity, that "Marguerite Naseau, of Suresnes, was the first Sister who had the happiness of pointing out the road to our other Sisters, both in the education of young girls and in nursing the sick, although she had no other master or mistress but God."⁶²

In May Vincent made a retreat and asked Louise to pray that his mind might be enlightened to the will of God in regard to the formation of the village girls. And it was during this retreat, that Vincent came to the conviction that Louise's request to join the girls together in order to form them in the spirituality of the service of the poor was, indeed, the will of God.

And so, on 29 November 1633, ten years after her light of Pentecost, Louise welcomed into her home five or six of these girls, who with hearts on fire with the love of God came together to live in community, in order to serve the poor. Thus, imperceptibly, as in the manner of things divine, the Company of the Daughters of Charity was born.

This date marks a new stage in the life of Mademoiselle Le Gras, at the age of forty-two, she begins to share her home, her life, and her prayer with these village girls who had the same desire to consecrate their lives to God and to serve Him in the poorest of the poor. In collaboration with Vincent and the priests of the Congregation of the Mission, and together with the Ladies of Charity in the parishes and at the Hôtel Dieu, Louise and the Daughters of Charity walked out the designs of God in meeting the needs of the poor in France.

Louise, together with Vincent, taught the sisters that they had "for monastery only the houses of the sick, ... for cell a rented room, for

⁶¹*Spiritual Writings*, 43-44. ^ε

⁶²*Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul to Daughters of Charity*, ed. and trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M. (London: 1979), 71.

chapel their parish church, for cloister the streets of the city, for enclosure obedience, ... for grille the fear of God, for veil holy modesty, and making use of no other form of profession to assure their vocation than the continual confidence they have in Divine Providence and the offering they make to God of all that they are and of their service in the person of the poor."⁶³

If it can be said that to Vincent was granted the vision of the service of the poor, it must also be said that for the most part, it was Louise with her care for detail, and the dedication of her daughters, who transformed the vision into reality.

Through suffering Louise came to know the love of Jesus crucified, and that love urged her to go to the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the downtrodden, the imprisoned, the uneducated, and the underprivileged. It is not the poor who led Louise to God, it was Jesus who leads her to the poor, and the love of Jesus Crucified that burned in the heart of Louise can be best expressed in her own words:

Henceforth, let there be no further resistance to Jesus, no action except for Jesus, no thoughts but in Jesus! May my life be solely for Jesus and my neighbor so that, by means of this unifying love, I may love all that Jesus loves."⁶⁴

And now, let us together continue to discover this woman named Louise, this MYSTIC IN ACTION.

⁶³Ibid., Conference 111, 24 August 1659, 1213.

⁶⁴*Spiritual Writings*, 152. A.23 Thoughts on Baptism.