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Richard McCullen C.M.

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The Gifts of Saint Louise de Marillac The Future of the Legacy

BY

RICHARD McCULLEN, C.M.

In the large community dining room of the Vincentian Motherhouse in Paris there hang on the end of the wall of the wooden paneled room two sizeable portraits. One is of Saint Vincent and the other of Saint Louise. Both were painted in the last century by a brother of the Community who was endowed with considerable artistic talent. In the portrait of Saint Vincent, who then was already more than a hundred years canonized, he is depicted as standing in a warm glow of bright colors, holding in his hand a crucifix on which he is gazing intently.

Saint Louise is presented as a slight figure, dressed in widow's weed and without a halo. She sits demurely with a book in her hand and wearing an expression of sadness tinged, however, with a certain serenity. The twin portraits are a study in contrasts: Saint Vincent stands as a man of action, Saint Louise sits as a woman of patient waiting. Perhaps it is the background of Louise's portrait, which is that of a parlor or waiting room, that lends the impression of patient waiting to the entire picture. So let me imaginatively suggest that Saint Louise is waiting to be interviewed by a board of men who in seventeenth century Paris are seeking a director for a number of social projects.

The applicant will be expected to initiate and supervise projects for the care of prisoners, infants of one parent families, schools for the handicapped and poor, the staffing of hospitals, day centers for the elderly, and residential homes for low income groups. The projects are multiple, but one executive director is being sought. Although it is not explicitly stated, the interviewing board expects that only men will apply. To their surprise a woman comes forward and she is a widow. During the interview she comes across as a quiet and decidedly introspective character. She seems to be excessively absorbed in the welfare of her only child. The panel of interviewers confer. No, not the person

for the post. To begin with, she is a woman. She would not have the required energy and organizational ability. Besides, how could a woman who seems to be so over-anxious about her only son be capable of transcending herself to be of assistance to the dozens of social workers whose work she will have at least indirect, and sometimes direct, contact. The board expresses their regret to the applicant.

You might well ask me when the imaginative interview that I have just described took place. Let us say shortly after Christmas 1625. It had been a sad Christmas that year for Louise for only four days before the feast, her husband, Antoine, had died, leaving her with a twelve year old son, Michel. She had presented herself for the interview because, although she was assured of a modest income, she still had her son Michel to think of, and of his future. Besides, she was aware of her capacity to give service to others. Her husband's illness had been long and debilitating, and she had devoted her energies to caring for him. Now there was a void in her life.

In the course of the interview she had been asked what previous experience she had of working in the social services. She rather embarrassingly had to admit that she had none. What interests had she, apart from being a wife and mother? She could truthfully say that she liked to do a little portrait painting, for she had had the good fortune before the death of her father, of receiving for a few years the benefit of an education in a rather high-class convent school where, especially from her great aunt, a member of that particular religious community, she had been tutored in art and literature. The questioner was surprised when Louise had dropped the word "literature," for women were not generally conversant with literature. Rather bashfully Louise explained that she liked to read some of the well known modern spiritual authors, like Francis de Sales, who had died three years earlier, and the works of Benedict of Canfield, and the *Imitation of Christ*. "The *Imitation of Christ*," remarked the interviewer. "So you know Latin?" Louise replied simply that she could read it with a certain facility, and then she was silent.

When she left the room, the interviewing board agreed among themselves that Louise had indeed received an education in the arts and humanities that was rather exceptional for any contemporary woman. They could see that the cast of her mind was more speculative than practical, and that consequently she was not suited for the rough and tumble life among what the board rather smugly described as the "lower classes." "A tearful widow," remarked one of them patronizingly, "with aspirations to be a mystic."

That she was a tearful widow in the early months of 1626 was evident, but that she had aspirations to be a mystic was a judgment that was not so evident. Her aspirations were to do the will of God, for the teachers of the school of spirituality which she had frequented stressed over and over again that the fulfillment of the will of God was the central and indispensable condition of all sanctity. Her aspirations were to sanctity and not to mysticism. Certainly her present confessor and spiritual director, Monsieur Vincent, did not speak of mysticism. Coming from the plains of the Landes district, he was a man who was content to point out to people fields which had rich soil and then would leave them to open the furrows themselves, according as the Divine Landowner might through his grace and inspiration suggest.

To come back to the Saint Lazare portrait of Saint Louise and the impression of patient waiting that it communicates, it must be said that it is not the parlor or waiting room background that imparted the gift of patient waiting to Saint Louise. The deeply spiritual experience which Saint Louise had on Pentecost Sunday 1623 in the church of Saint Nicolas des Champs had at once tranquilized her spirit and school her to waiting patient for the Kairos of God's providence in the future. "I was advised," she wrote years later, "that a time would come when I would be in a position to make vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and that I would be in a small Community where others would do the same ... I was also assured that God would give me one whom he seemed to show me."¹

Ten years were to pass before that design of God was to be realized, and Louise was blessed in having as director a man who held it as a cardinal principle that one must always walk a pace or two behind the providence of God on the road of life, and that to overtake providence on that road was to risk collision with forces beyond one's powers. It was during that ten year period that Monsieur Vincent, writing to Saint Louise, had remarked that "one beautiful diamond is worth more than a mountain of stones, and one virtuous act of acquiescence and submission is better than an abundance of good works done for others."²

¹*Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac: Correspondence and Thoughts*, ed. and trans. Louise Sullivan, D.C., (Brooklyn: 1984), 3.

²Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, April 1630, letter 46, in *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents. 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., ann. John Carven, C.M. (Brooklyn: 1985); II. *Correspondence (January 1640-July 1646)*, ed. Jacquelin Kilar, D.C., and Marie Poole, D.C., trans. Marie Poole, D.C., Esther Cavanaugh, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik C.M. (Brooklyn: 1989), 1:75.

Diamonds are not found on the surface of the ground. Their beauty is hidden in the darkness of the earth. So one could easily understand why an interviewing board in 1626 might have missed perceiving the deeper and more precious qualities of mind and will that lay hidden behind the features and demeanor of the young widow, Louise de Marillac. Had the interview taken place five or six years later, some of the qualities of a diamond would have appeared more easily. The board would have learned how Louise had in the course of a little over a year not only visited but had established and organized in a number of parishes the Confraternities of Charity. The journeys she had undertaken and her calm reaction to opposition, which she on occasion had encountered, revealed a diamond-like quality of hardness in her personality that was at once resistant and attractive.

Those years 1630 and 1631 brought Louise into contact with a wide circle of people. There were those passengers in the sometimes uncomfortable coach journeys which she was now taking. Not all of them were as educated and refined as Louise, and as for the coachmen, their language was not always that of the convent at Poissy where she had received a lady's education. There were, too, in the different parochial centers she was now visiting the ladies of middle and upper class society whom she was grouping and quietly organizing in the service of the poor and to whom she was patiently explaining the at once spiritual and practical directives which the Parisian priest, Monsieur Vincent, had drawn up. Then, there were also the sick poor in their homes, some of whom in company with the ladies, she would visit, suggesting practical advice on how the service could be best offered. "Would to God," wrote Monsieur Vincent to Louise when she was in the city of Beauvais, "that good Madame de la Croix would follow your advice! It would be worth as much to her as a good religious order would be. As for the drugs, you have done well to deliver them, but your treasurer should not have bought them; she does not realize where that may lead."³ In another letter, "You will be talked about at the Saint-Benoît meeting. Mademoiselle Tranchot is relating wonders about you. I do think it would be a good idea for you to take the trouble to visit the good woman in order to stabilize her spirit so that she can easily strengthen the others!"⁴

³Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 7 December 1630, letter 58, *ibid.*, 1:93.

⁴Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 1630/1631, letter 59, *ibid.*, 1:96.

This gift of leading others, or rather of collaborating humbly with others and thus unobtrusively helping them to develop their talents of service, must have given Louise a certain sureness of touch when on 29 November 1633 she gathered into her own house a small group of young girls. To these girls, coming in the main from rural France, she would impart a basic spiritual formation that would motivate them to give themselves fully to God for the service of the poor.

The work of forming the village girls in her house was time consuming and might well have given Louise a good excuse for remaining at home. Not so. Her delicate sense of responsibility led her to travel to the various parochial centers throughout France, where the sisters had been placed. The little communities needed consolidation. Much certainly could be done by letter, but her meditations on the Incarnation led her to appreciate the value of personal presence among those whom she wished to confirm in their vocation of serving Christ in the poor. What modern executives and personnel managers are now discovering about the importance of personal contact with employees if the efficiency of a firm is to be improved, Louise de Marillac had adopted as normal practice more than three centuries ago. She could have enlightened and astounded our imaginary board of interviewers with her insights, but then they did not pose the question to her because it was beyond the horizons of their minds.

Traveling was costly for Louise, not so much in financial terms as in the expenditure of physical energy. On 2 February 1640 Louise took the coach from the city of Angers to Paris. It would be several days before she would reach Paris. She had already spent three months in Angers where she had been negotiating the terms of a contract with the secular administrators of the hospital there. Only the day previously she had signed the contract according to which the Daughters of Charity would undertake the nursing of the sick poor in the hospital. It was winter time, and throughout the weeks she had spend in Angers Louise's health had caused some concern. Back in Paris Monsieur Vincent was aware of the fact and somewhat worried about the effect which the rigors of the return journey would have on Louise's health. Monsieur Vincent contemplated hiring a special coach in Paris and sending it to Angers, or if not, he suggested that Mademoiselle should travel "business class."

Three letters of his within ten days touched on the matter. He wrote, "With regard to your return, I ask you to let it be as soon as possible. Hire a stretcher and rent two good strong horses. I would have sent you a

litter, but I do not know which you need, a litter or a stretcher. I entreat you, Mademoiselle, to spare nothing and, whatever it may cost, to get what will be the most comfortable for you."⁵ Six days later he writes again, "If you take a stretcher, as I wrote you to do, because the coach — especially on the cobblestones — from Orléans to Paris would be too hard on you, it will suffice to have one sister with you. You can have the others come by water as far as Tours and by coach from there to here."⁶ Three days later the subject is raised again. "But what are you saying about coming back by water, Mademoiselle? O Jésus! You must do no such thing! Please have a stretcher hired and rent or, rather, buy two good horses — we will pay here what they cost — and come home that way."⁷

The sisters at Angers might well have offered themselves to our board of interviewers as guarantors of Louise's ability to formulate clearly the theory and practice of good interpersonal relations. Four years after her return to Paris in 1644 she wrote to the sisters there:

If a sister is sad, if she is rather annoyed, if too quick or too slow, well, what would you have her do? It's her disposition. And though often she tries to overcome herself, nevertheless, she cannot prevent these inclinations from often appearing. Should a sister who ought to love her as she loves herself be angry with her, bully her, scowl at her? O sisters, take good care not to do this. Do not pretend to notice, do not dispute with her, remembering that soon it will be your turn when you will need her to do likewise for you.⁸

It is not surprising that a woman with such penetrating psychological powers should have had a facility of collaborating easily with others. Indeed it can be said that one of Louise's outstanding gifts was precisely that of collaboration. She herself would undoubtedly put forward Monsieur Vincent as her great collaborator in her projects for the needy, the destitute, and the sick poor of her day. To collaborate with one of Monsieur Vincent's intellectual caliber and sensitive compassion, not to mention his holiness, may not have been difficult. Clearly Louise had profound confidence in his judgment on spiritual as well as on administrative and temporal matters. What, perhaps, may easily escape

⁵Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 22 January 1640, letter 420, *ibid.*, 2:11-12.

⁶*Ibid.*, 2:12.

⁷Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 31 January 1640, letter 422, *ibid.*, 2:15.

⁸Sainte Louise de Marillac, *Écrits spirituels* (Paris: 1983), 112.

observation are Louise's powers of thinking independently of Monsieur Vincent and of taking on occasion a longer view of a question. Such independence of thought served to complement and enhance the collaboration between the two saints.

Let two incidents suffice to illustrate the point. First, the project for the care of the foundlings in the Bicêtre. It would seem that Louise saw more clearly than either Monsieur Vincent or the Ladies of Charity the impracticality of placing the foundlings in a large rambling castle which had long been vacant and which in Louise's words had become "the haunt by day and by night of all sorts of evil persons,"⁹ and which would entail enormous expense to make it properly habitable.¹⁰ Louise's letter to Monsieur Vincent on this occasion sets out clearly and compellingly the reasons for not acquiring the castle. Either Monsieur Vincent or the Ladies did not see the force of her arguments, for the Ladies pressed ahead and the transfer of the foundlings was made, a move which was later recognized to have been a very costly mistake. One happy consequence of the mistake, however, for us anyway, was that it provided Monsieur Vincent with the occasion of making, after being strongly prompted by Louise, one of his most moving appeals to the Ladies of Charity. He begged them to give generously and without counting the cost, so that the lives of the foundlings might be saved.¹¹

A second example of Louise's tenacious independence of judgment can be seen in her determination to have the Company of the Daughters of Charity placed under the authority of Monsieur Vincent and his successors rather than under that of the local bishops. Louise saw this arrangement as the best means of assuring unity of spirit and direction in the Company. What was her dismay, then, when in November 1646 Monsieur Vincent seemed to acquiesce meekly in the decision of the archbishop of Paris that the Company be subject to him. Almost nine years would pass before Louise would secure what she had long desired, prayed, and worked for. It was 18 January 1655 that Cardinal de Retz, archbishop of Paris, signed the document committing to his "dear and beloved Vincent de Paul ... the care and guidance of the

⁹Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul, 19 August 1643/1644/1645?, letter 770., *Saint Vincent de Paul*, 2:596.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 2:597.

¹¹Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Conférences, entretiens, documents*, 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), (hereinafter cited as Coste, CED), 3:408-11.

aforesaid Society and Confraternity, during his life and after him to his general successors of the said Congregation of the Mission."¹²

Louise's ability to collaborate with people was a grace she shared with others. Barbe Angiboust at Fontainebleau is offered some advice on how she should relate with the queen,¹³ while Julienne Loret is counseled on how she might cope with a difficult pastor on Jansenist leanings.¹⁴ Perhaps the most delicate tribute of all to Louise's powers of collaboration was something that happened a few hours after her death on 15 March 1660. She had expressed a wish in her testament to Monsieur Vincent that she be buried close to the Priests of the Mission.¹⁵ He agreed, but her wish was set aside when the pastor and people of the parish of Saint Laurent, where she had lived and where she was known and loved, expressed their strong desire that her remains be interred in their parish church. And so it was done. A deft finishing touch, so to speak, to the portrait of one who was an artist of collaboration.

The spiritual gifts of Louise de Marillac were many and neither a portrait in oils nor the probing questions of an interviewing board could fully reveal them to us. "No one comprehends what is truly God's," wrote Saint Paul, "except the Spirit of God."¹⁶ A remarkable feature of Louise's life's pilgrimage is that as she advances along the way, she becomes more aware of the guiding presence of the Spirit of God in her own life and in that of the Company. The feast of Pentecost became for Saint Louise a very significant landmark in her pilgrimage to God. It was on Pentecost Sunday, 4 June 1623, that she emerged from a dark night of spiritual purification. Twenty-one years later on the eve of Pentecost, 1644, she and a sizeable group of Ladies of Charity were providentially saved from death or serious injury when the floor of a room, where they should have been present but were not, collapsed. The coincidence of that event with the vigil of Pentecost was not lost on Louise. In a new way she became conscious of the overshadowing and protective wings of him who is traditionally represented by a white dove. It was, however, in the final decade of her life that her sensitivity to the presence and role of the Holy Spirit is most marked. The Spirit of God in the thought of Louise is the prolongation of the presence and

¹²*La Compagnie des Filles de la Charité: Documents*, ed. Elizabeth Charpy, D.C. (Paris: 1989), 676-78.

¹³*Écrits spirituels*, 187-88.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 347-48.

¹⁵*La Compagnie*, 997.

¹⁶1 Corinthians 2:11.

action of Christ in the Church. One must, following the spirit of the final injunction of Christ, keep oneself, as did Mary and the first disciples, in a continual state of readiness for a fresh descent of the Holy Spirit. Such an attitude calls for an elimination of all resistance to the will of God in one's life, as well as a total and trustful surrender to the designs of God as they unfold themselves in the pattern of each day's events. "Souls that are truly poor and desirous of serving God should place their trust in the coming of the Holy Spirit within them believing that, finding no resistance in them, he will give them the disposition necessary to accomplish the holy will of God which should be their only preoccupation."¹⁷

A charming portrait of the spiritual gifts of Louise emerges from the reflections which Monsieur Vincent, along with the sisters of the motherhouse, made on two days during July 1660. Let us eavesdrop for a moment on what is being said by the sisters gathered around the now aged and fragile Vincent in the community room of the sisters' motherhouse.

"Father, I noticed that she was most careful and ardently desired that the Company should preserve the spirit of poverty and humility and often used to say, 'We are the servants of the poor; therefore, we should be poorer than they. ...'"

"Your remark about her, sister, is in my opinion, most true, when you tell us that she loved poverty greatly. You saw how she was dressed, clad in the poorest fashion, and she loved this virtue so much that she asked me long ago that she might live as a poor woman. She always urged that the Company should preserve this spirit which is certainly a sovereign means for its preservation, ..." "And you, sister?" "Father, I remarked that her letters were written in a very humble style. ... She had great charity for the sisters and was afraid of annoying them. She did her best not to displease anyone and always excused the absent. This did not prevent her from correcting faults, but she always did so most skillfully and patiently. She always urged us to take great care of the poor and looked on whatever was done for them as done to herself. She often advised us in her letters to observe the rule and to live in great union with one another."

"And you, my daughter?" "I have noticed, Father, all that our sisters have said is quite true. Moreover, she had the patience of a saint, great charity, and wonderful humility."

"Ah! Sisters, what a picture does God place before your eyes and painted by yourselves! Yes, it is a picture which we possess and which we should regard as a prototype that should animate us to do likewise, to acquire her humility, charity, forbearance, firmness in all her government, and that should also animate us to remember how in all her actions she tended to

¹⁷*Spiritual Writings*, 173.

conform them to those of Our Lord. ... This, sisters, then, is a picture which you should gaze on, a picture of humility, charity, meekness, patience in infirmities. Behold what a picture! And how are you to make use of it, my dear sisters? By striving to form your life on hers. ...

"A beautiful picture, O my God! This humility, faith, prudence, sound judgment and always an anxiety to conform all her actions to those of Our Lord."¹⁸

Perhaps it would be timely to commission another artist to present our motherhouse in Paris with a new portrait of Saint Louise.

A double title was suggested to me for this talk: "The Gifts of Saint Louise. The Future of the Legacy." I must confess to have been puzzled by the second title and to have been at a loss about what I should say about the future of the legacy. Moreover, I experienced a certain reluctance to don the prophet's mantle and would prefer instead to heed Thornton Wilder's dictum that "the future is the most expensive luxury in the world." Perhaps I should, then, plead my poverty and this point bow out.

I hope that you will excuse me, then, if what I have to say about the future of the legacy is more in the nature of a simple postscript to what I have presented rather than a full treatment of the topic. That we have received a spiritually rich legacy from Saint Louise is certain. Perhaps we have not been fully aware of the size and value of that legacy she has left us. One is reminded of the poor man who for years took up a certain spot on the road every day to beg. It was only some years after his death that it was discovered that there is a gold mine under his feet of which he was unaware. More than three centuries have passed since Saint Louise died, and perhaps it is only in this decade, and more particularly during this year, that the Vincentian Family is discovering fully the gold spirituality that Saint Louise has left us as a legacy.

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 service 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.

¹⁸Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 3 July 1660, Coste, CED, 10:713, 727-30.

This spiritual testament was recorded by the sisters who attended Saint Louise during her final illness. We are indebted for this text to Nicolas Gobillon who in 1676 wrote the first biography of Saint Louise. The testament of Saint Louise is more than a testament. It could be said to be a succinct spiritual autobiography and a summary of the principal themes on which she spoke and wrote to the sisters during the almost three decades she guided the Company.

"To serve him in the manner he asks you." Discovering the will of God moment by moment and a faithful and loving fulfillment it was the pivot around which all Saint Louise's actions turned. "Courage, then, my sisters," she had written in June 1642, "let us dream of nothing but pleasing God through the faithful fulfillment of his holy commandments and the evangelical counsels."¹⁹ "Take good care of the poor." It was a counsel that Saint Louise had lived herself. "I have seen her," remarked a sister after her death, "gathering poor people round her who were coming out of prison; she washed their feet, dressed their sores, and took great pleasure in serving them."²⁰

"Above all, live together in great union and cordiality." In the vision of Saint Louise, the sisters were to warm themselves at the fire of mutual charity within the community before going out to offer a spark of that fire of love to the poor through their services of caring, teaching, supporting and comforting. And all that humble and loving service was to be inspired by the example of Christ with whom they should remain intensely united at all times.

"Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin that she may be your only mother." The phrase "only mother," had been used on a number of occasions by Saint Louise before she uttered it in her final testament. Saint Louise, who had not known her natural mother, had clearly found a mother in the Immaculate Virgin Mother of God. Clearly Saint Louise wished that the sisters would experience something of that love and tenderness which she over seven decades of her life found in Mary, "the only mother."

The biographer, Gobillon, records that after Saint Louise had left her testament to her sisters, she said that "if I were to live a hundred years, I would make the same recommendations to you."²¹ Thus we

¹⁹*Écrits spirituels*, 75.

²⁰Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 3 July 1660, Coste, CED, 10:710.

²¹Nicholas Gobillon, *La vie de Mme. Le Gras*, (Paris: 1676), 175.

who this year commemorate the four hundredth year of her birth have from Saint Louise herself a firm assurance that her testament is still valid today, and indeed for the future for

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.²²

²²T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," in *Four Quartets*.