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Louise Sullivan D.C.

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## “God Wants First The Heart And Then The Work:”

### Louise De Marillac And Leadership In The Vincentian Tradition

BY

LOUISE SULLIVAN, D.C.

On 6 May 1629, Vincent de Paul sent out on mission the woman who was to be the first Vincentian leader formed at his school—Louise de Marillac. On that day, he sent her to Montmirail to visit, on his behalf, one of the early Confraternities of Charity. These confraternities, which had flourished and expanded since their foundation in 1617, had fallen on hard times in many areas. The spirit of their origins was threatened. Someone had to visit them, study their activities, and revive in the members the zeal that had characterized the beginnings. No one, in the eyes of Vincent de Paul, seemed better suited to undertake this delicate and demanding task than Louise de Marillac. Thus with joy in his heart and uncharacteristic lyricism on his lips, borrowed from the prayer of itinerant monks, the *Orationes Itinerantium*, he wrote, “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 cold, your soft bed in weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works.”<sup>1</sup>

Vincent then went on to give her some advice of his own as well as a warning that the role of servant leader, that she was undertaking, brings with it joy and suffering, success and failure, as it had in the life of Christ, their model. He continued, “Go to Communion the day of your departure to honor the Charity of Our Lord, the journeys He undertook for and by this same Charity, and the difficulties, contradictions, weariness, and labors that He endured in them. May He be pleased to bless your journey, giving you His spirit and the grace to act in this same spirit, and to bear your troubles in the way He bore His.”<sup>2</sup>

On that May day, neither Vincent nor Louise was aware of just

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Coste, C.M., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents. Volume I*. Ed. by Sr. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., (New York: New City Press, 1985), 64-5.

<sup>2</sup> Coste, *Volume I*, 65.



Saint Louise de Marillac. Portrait.

how far that journey of service leadership would take her nor of its ramifications for the Church and for the service of generations of persons in need. What they surely realized, however, was that Louise de Marillac had reached a turning point in her life and that her heart was now ready to begin the work to which God had called her and for which he had formed her through the dramatic often traumatic events of her life. She was thirty-eight.

Looking back to their first encounter some five years earlier, in late 1624 or early 1625, Vincent must have reflected, as he so often did concerning the successes of his lifetime, "I never thought of it...it was God."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, who would have believed that the frail, scrupulous woman whom he had first met was destined to become his friend and closest collaborator for thirty-six years and that Vincentian works would, as Louise's biographer, Jean Calvet, put it, "become what they

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Leonard, C.M., *The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, (Great Britain: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1979), 184.

were because Louise de Marillac put her hand to them?"<sup>4</sup>

In hindsight, we are aware that Calvet was right. The initial contacts, however, would prove to be difficult. There seems to have been reluctance on both sides to enter into a spiritual direction relationship. Ironically, Madame de Gondi, who had played such an important role in bringing Vincent to the realization of his vocation, who had opened doors, along with her purse, to him for his work with the Confraternities of Charity, and who, by her financial support, would help to found the Congregation of the Mission, 17 April 1625, may well have been the cause of his hesitation. While Vincent was fully aware of the debt he owed this woman of great faith and generosity, she also placed considerable demands on him as her spiritual director. Dealing with her scruples took the time and energy he now wanted to devote to evangelization and to the service of the poor. One can legitimately suppose, therefore, that he did not welcome the prospect of the responsibility for the spiritual direction of another woman of similar character.

Louise's initial reluctance, however, is clear. She herself tells us, in her account of her Pentecost experience of June 1623, of her "repugnance" to accept any change in spiritual director.<sup>5</sup> It must be admitted that, for this aristocratic, intellectual woman, who had been directed by Michel de Marillac, Jean-Pierre Le Camus, and possibly Francis de Sales, Vincent de Paul, the peasant priest from Gascony, would indeed be a radical change. Moreover, at the time, she was struggling to cope with the terminal illness of her husband and the burden of being essentially a single parent for a difficult child. Fortunately, they decided to try. We are not exactly sure why but the day would come when, moved by the Holy Spirit, they would set aside their own desires and hesitations to enter fully into the divine plan.

The friendship between these two widely differing personalities, which began so inauspiciously, was to prove to be of incalculable significance for the Church and for the poor. Many difficulties had to be overcome but both Vincent and Louise soon became conscious of the need each had for the other as they combined their considerable gifts of nature and grace for a work as yet undefined except in the mind of God. The formation of Louise de Marillac, the Vincentian leader, had begun in earnest.

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Calvet, *Louise de Marillac: A Portrait*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1959), 46.

<sup>5</sup> Louise Sullivan, D.C., ed., *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 1.

As one reflects on the early life of the young Louise de Marillac, one is hard pressed to envisage such an outcome. Indeed, many, when studying Louise, have stopped with the image of the anguished woman who first met Vincent and conclude that he was somehow a master puppeteer who guided her every move with extraordinary results. Nothing could be further from the truth as we will hopefully discover. Louise de Marillac would always place a high value on Vincent de Paul's advice and support. They were friends and collaborators in the strictest sense of those words. Yet neither her spirituality nor her leadership style was a carbon copy of his. Thus, to understand fully the Vincentian concept of leadership, one must look closely at the fashioning of Louise de Marillac as a leader and her manner of fulfilling that role.

What do we know, then, of Mademoiselle Le Gras, as Vincent would always call her, when the two met? At the age of thirty-four, she had borne more than her share of pain. Life had already taught her that her vocation was to unite herself to Christ dying on the Cross. In a very early spiritual reflection she wrote, "God, who has granted me so many graces, led me to understand that it was His holy will that I go to Him by way of the Cross. His goodness chose to mark me with it from my birth and He hardly ever left me, at any age, without some occasion for suffering."<sup>6</sup> Later, when forming the first Daughters of Charity for the service of the poor, she would inculcate in them the necessity for *gentle compassion* no matter how trying the situation might be.<sup>7</sup> By suffering with as well as serving those in need, they were uniting themselves to their Redeemer dying on the Cross. In addition, in 1643, when Louise designed and began using the seal that would become the seal of the Company, it bore the image of Jesus Crucified, surrounded by the words of Saint Paul as she had modified them, "The Charity of Jesus *crucified* urges us."

Thus a life from which pain was never totally absent and which was sustained by union with the suffering Savior, was to become a motor for a vast network of services for those in distress. Accompanied on her spiritual and human journey by Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac transformed a spirituality of the "I", of her own deep relationship with God, into a spirituality of the "we" or as Calvet would call it, a "mysticism of the group."<sup>8</sup> In so doing, she became a

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<sup>6</sup> Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 711.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 773.

<sup>8</sup> Calvet, *Louise de Marillac*, 194-5.

spiritual leader in her own right creating in the works she later organized and administered what the late Cardinal Joseph Bernadin of Chicago spoke of as “families of faith.”

But Louise de Marillac, the servant leader, was the product of multiple influences and events. God surely wrote straight with crooked lines in developing in her the qualities, both human and spiritual, that her future life of service would demand. He prepared and won for Himself her heart through suffering but also through an admixture, often bitter sweet, of gifts and circumstances. Let us turn our attention briefly to these. In so doing, it will become apparent that her background and life experiences were the antithesis of Vincent de Paul’s. Her leadership style will, therefore, evolve differently and bring complementary qualities and values to what we call today Vincentian leadership.

Born on 12 August 1591, the “natural” daughter of Louis de Marillac and an unknown mother, Louise de Marillac never experienced the love and security of family life. Although she would live well beyond the average life expectancy of the era—to the age of 70—her health was always delicate due, in no small measure, to the conditions in war-torn France at the time of her birth. Her later ability to devote herself to the care of the sick, to be compassionate with them, and to encourage them, where possible, to overcome their physical limitations and to go on to lead productive lives had its roots in her own constant battle with recurring illness. And for those who did not fully recover, she gave the example of a woman who, through courage and deep faith, turned adversity into positive energy.

Louis de Marillac officially recognized his infant daughter shortly after her birth. She thus became a member of the illustrious, if ill-starred, Marillac family which held positions of power and influence in the court of the Queen Mother, Marie de Medici, and of her son, Louis XIII. If outstanding leaders, like excellent teachers, are born, not made, it might be well to mention one member of the Marillac clan whose talents and genius she seems to have shared, namely her uncle Michel de Marillac, Keeper of the Seals. After her father’s death, he became her guardian and later her spiritual director. Political intrigue would lead to his death in exile. Nonetheless, this man, who had played a vital role in the reestablishment in France of the major religious orders during the period of the Catholic Counter Reformation, succeeded in blending profound personal spirituality with immense organizational skill. Long after the politics of the day have been

forgotten, his *Code Michau* remains a valued document in French jurisprudence.

Much of Michel de Marillac can be found in his niece as she formed the first Daughters of Charity to balance contemplation and action in their service; worked out the minute details of hospital contracts with civil and ecclesiastical authorities; obtained authorization to establish a free school for poor little girls from the Canons of Notre-Dame de Paris; negotiated with the Ladies of Charity to have Bicêtre remodeled for the Foundlings; and explained the "secular" nature of the new Company of the Daughters of Charity to a skeptical Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Paris. With all the acumen of the Marillac that she was, she grew up to organize and administer a broad spectrum of works in health, education, and social welfare which continue to our day on five continents.

Perhaps the only Marillac whose name is still widely remembered, Louise was, ironically, considered an outsider, even an embarrassment, by most of them. There can be no doubt that her father loved her dearly and considered her the greatest gift in his life but he could not bring her into his home when he married Antoinette Le Camus. Thus she was placed, possibly as an infant, but certainly by the age of three, at the Royal Monastery of Saint Louis at Poissy where her aunt, another Louise de Marillac, was a Dominican nun. This setting, while not unique to Louise, was hardly an ideal atmosphere for a growing girl. The lack of a mother's love marked Louise and produced a sense of disconnectedness that lasted well into her adult life.

On the other hand, Poissy provided her with a rich spiritual and intellectual environment in which her gifts of nature and grace could flourish, preparing her, when the time came, to educate and form peasant girls to serve the sick, to teach children, and to heal a vast array of society's wounds. Under the direction of the Dominican nuns, Louise and other little girls of her social class encountered the arts and the humanities, as well as liturgical prayer, spiritual reading, and the responsibility of the rich to the poor. This experience later enabled her to deal with equal ease with the rich and with the poor country girls who were to become the first Daughters of Charity. It also instilled in her what was to be an essential attribute of all Vincentian service—the awareness of what Bossuet referred to as "*the eminent dignity of the poor.*" Poissy also gave rise in her to the desire to enter the cloister.

The establishment of the Daughters of the Passion in Paris in 1606, with which her uncle Michel was closely associated, seemed to pro-

vide Louise an ideal setting for living the life she felt called to by God. It is not difficult to imagine how devastated she must have been when Father Honoré de Champigny, provincial of the Capuchins, refused her request for admission. His reasons are not clear, but his words proved prophetic. He told Louise that "God had other designs on her."<sup>9</sup>

Louise de Marillac never speaks of her reaction to this unexpected rejection. Her spiritual crisis of 1623, however, shows the extent to which she had been marked by it.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, her desire for a life dedicated to contemplation and spiritual reading perdured well into her widowhood. Events, Providence, and Vincent de Paul would alter but never eradicate this. Thus, her heart would be ready, when the time came, for her to become a spiritual and servant leader in the new form of consecrated life that would come into existence in seventeenth century France in which women would be called to serve outside the cloister and to balance in their lives, as she would ultimately learn to do, contemplation and action.

But the years of preparation were not as yet complete. Poissy had provided Louise with a solid spiritual formation and had developed her considerable intellect so that she was educated well beyond the vast majority of women, even of the aristocracy, of the era. But one has to wonder, since there were few if any existing models, where in the education process she learned all those practical things that later enabled her to organize, in their operational detail, works in health, education, and social welfare and, in addition, to prepare the first Daughters of Charity to serve in them. While we cannot answer that question with certitude, it seems likely that it was in the humble boarding house of Paris where she was sent for an indeterminate period sometime after the death of her father in 1604. Be that as it may, Louise de Marillac, the servant leader, would prove to be an intellectual, a mystic, and a skilled practioner. Her education had prepared her well for her life's work.

Denied admission into the cloister, marriage was the only option open to Louise. The Marillacs, more for their interests than for hers, arranged for her to marry Antoine Le Gras, personal secretary to the Regent, Marie de Medici, on 4 February 1613. Nonetheless, the union seems to have been a happy one especially after the birth of their son,

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<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Gobillon, *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, (London: Sisters of Charity, 1984), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 1-2.



Michel. Although Antoine's family was not of the aristocracy (the circumstances of Louise's birth precluded her from marrying into the nobility) it was highly respected and, as Louise's first biographer, Gobillon, tells us, "noted for its love for the poor and for having founded a hospital in Le Puy," in Auvergne.<sup>11</sup>

During the first years of her married life, Louise found joy, love, and security. She devoted herself to her little family while at the same time taking an active part in the social life of the court and of the fashionable Marais district in which she lived. She had not, however, forgotten the lesson of Poissy. She visited the sick in their homes, bringing them food, remedies, and spiritual and psychological comfort. She also visited the patients at the Hôtel Dieu Hospital. Her service, however, was not strictly personal. Foreshadowing the organization of health care which would be a major part of her life's work, she motivated other women of her social class to collaborate with her to alleviate the misery of the sick poor.

This period of happiness was to prove short-lived for Louise. Michel began to show signs of the problems that would make him a permanent source of anxiety for her. Then, in 1621-1622, Antoine Le Gras became chronically and eventually terminally ill. Through some four long years she devoted herself to caring for him personally. She watched in dismay the change in personality wrought by disease in this man she had grown to love deeply. Her apprenticeship as a health care provider began in earnest. She learned the importance of holistic care that sought to relieve the physical, spiritual, and emotional distress of the patient and the need to support the family. Antoine Le Gras died 21 December 1625, leaving his thirty-four-year-old widow physically exhausted and emotionally and spiritually drained.

Despite this, the worst of Louise de Marillac's "dark night of the soul" had passed prior to her husband's death. On Pentecost Sunday 1623, her doubts and fears dissipated and she felt assured that she would one day be able to give herself entirely to God in a community where there would be "much coming and going."<sup>12</sup> This was certainly a foreshadowing of the Company of the Daughters of Charity that she would co-found. Moreover, the spiritual director she had foreseen at the time had become a part of her life. He was Vincent de Paul.

Their first contacts, as has been mentioned, were tentative. As Louise opened her heart to him, Vincent responded with quiet wis-

<sup>11</sup> Gobillon, *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 1.

dom and gentleness. It was a time for slow, tiny steps to bring balance, measure, a degree of spontaneity, and even quiet joy into a life that already had deep spiritual roots and was given to the service of Christ in the poor. It was also a time to involve her gradually in Vincentian works and to help her to grow in the confidence necessary to reach her full potential. The results surely surprised both of them. The woman, whose spiritual direction he had undertaken with considerable misgivings, was revealing the signs of the friend, collaborator, and leader that she was to become. Some four years after their first meeting, she was ready to set out on her own and to “put her hand” to the Vincentian enterprises that were just taking form.<sup>13</sup>

The next four years of intense activity worked a cure in the heart, mind, and even the body of Louise de Marillac. She had found a work in which her human and spiritual gifts flourished. Even the tragic events affecting the Marillac family did not distract her from her task. She had, at last, broken the fetters that bound her. She could function as a free woman, confident in herself and in God’s love for her and desirous of bringing that love to those in need. It is to be noted that Louise brought to those in distress love in its particularly feminine form, that is in tenderness and devotedness. It is a form of love that was nurtured in the cloister at Poissy and in the Le Gras household. It is the love of the contemplative, the wife, the mother, and the widow. Combined with the Marillac traits of leadership and organization, the heart of Louise de Marillac had been well fashioned by the Providence of God. Moreover, it had been totally given to Him. And so she set out. She would be successful, indeed. Her reports to Vincent of her visits to the confraternities show her ability to renew the zeal of the beginnings and to correct abuses.<sup>14</sup> They also reveal her powers of observation and her practical creativity. The confraternities were for the care of the sick in their homes. Louise’s visits to them drew her attention to another urgent need, education for poor children. And she responded by finding and even training a schoolmistress for them.

Events would move quickly now as the collaboration between Vincent, Louise, the Ladies of Charity, and the village girls trained by Louise to assist them grew closer. On 27 November 1633, a few of these young women would gather in Louise de Marillac’s home. The Company of the Daughters of Charity, co-founded by Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, was born. From this simple beginning, major

<sup>13</sup> Calvet, *Louise de Marillac*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 704-06, 720-25.

undertakings in health, education, and social welfare would evolve, spread, and endure throughout the world until this eve of the Third Millennium.

Let us turn our attention now, not to the works themselves, but to Louise de Marillac's leadership style which, to a large measure, fashioned them. It is well to point out from the outset that, like the Trinity for Saint Augustine, it is something that can be more easily described than defined. Moreover, it is essential to recognize that for her, as for Vincent de Paul, leadership is service. It never seeks its own advancement or that of the institution itself. It is gratuitous. It has nothing to do with power, a word that Louise de Marillac employs only when speaking of God. As such, it becomes what the hospital historian, Collin Jones, describes as "non-threatening." Such leadership bridges gaps between groups and, focused always on the well-being of those to be served, through "gentle persuasion" leads to collaboration.

Let us look first at the areas in which Louise de Marillac exercised leadership, namely the Company of the Daughters of Charity, the Ladies of Charity, Civil Authority, and finally Ecclesiastical Authority.

First, the Daughters of Charity. While the Daughters of Charity have been officially known, since their restoration after the French Revolution, as the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, it largely devolved on Louise de Marillac to form spiritually and professionally the country girls who came together in her home to give themselves to God for the service of the poor. There can be no doubt that Vincent de Paul's conferences to these young women provided a rich source of spiritual guidance for the infant community but it must be pointed out there are only 120 of them (although others may not have been preserved), covering a period of twenty-six years. Moreover, fifty-five of them are from the last five years of Vincent's life, 1655-1660. Other responsibilities certainly prevented Vincent from more direct involvement with what must surely have been his most consoling undertaking. He also very likely felt that the time had come for Louise de Marillac to plumb the depths of her own spiritual and human resources and to assume the leadership role to which she had been called and for which she was now ready.

Second, the Ladies of Charity. As we mentioned earlier, Louise de Marillac's first experience as a Vincentian leader was with the Confraternities of Charity. The collaborative leadership style that she developed as she visited the confraternities in the French provinces would



A morning table discussion. From left: Louise Sullivan, D.C., Dale Whitten, Edward Udovic, C.M. Our thanks to Mrs. Charlotte Casserly, President, Ladies of Charity, Baltimore, Maryland, for her generosity in sharing the symposium photos included in this issue with the Vincentian Studies Institute.

stand her in good stead later on, particularly after the founding of the Daughters of Charity, since most of their initial works were with and under the supervision of the Parisian Ladies of Charity. These latter women were unlike those whom she had encountered in the confraternities outside the city, in that they generally came from the nobility and the rich bourgeoisie. Their social position, it is true, provided them with great financial resources, but it also frequently limited their availability and occasionally their willingness for direct service. Thus Louise trained the first Daughters of Charity to prepare the food and medicine, which, along with the Ladies, they brought to the sick poor in their homes. This collaborative effort soon spread beyond the homes of the sick to hospitals and child care institutions. Under Louise's leadership, a social chasm was bridged, in a highly hierarchical society, between these very wealthy and influential women, many of whom were Louise's friends, and the peasant girls who served at their side.

Third, Civil Authority. As the works of charity spread, so did the network of collaboration required to establish and maintain them. Collaboration with government began for Louise de Marillac as early as 1639 when she accompanied the sisters going to Angers to assume the management of the nursing care at the Hospital of Saint Jean the Evangelist. The nearly five-hundred-year-old establishment, which had rendered effective service to the sick for many years, had fallen

into complete disorder. In desperation, the city officials took over the administration and, encouraged by a Lady of Charity, Madame Goussault, requested the Daughters of Charity. Since the original intention of Vincent and Louise was that the sisters go to Angers for "a period of experimentation," no thought had been given to a contract.<sup>15</sup> However, the city officials, who wanted the sisters to stay, insisted upon having one. Thus Louise de Marillac, the emerging leader, became Louise de Marillac, the negotiator. And she could be a "hard-nosed" one when the situation called for it. So well did she succeed in this new role, that this contract became the model for all subsequent hospital contracts until the suppression of the Company in 1792.

Fourth, Ecclesiastical Authority. Vincentian institutions developed within a civil context but they were primarily extensions of the charitable mission of the Church. As such, they were always established with the support and approval of the bishop of the diocese and, where needed, the pastor of the parish where they were founded. These negotiations were equally complex and delicate. Vincent's confidence in Louise's ability to handle them is evidenced by the fact that he sent her, rather than going himself, to explain the "secular" nature of the Company of the Daughters of Charity to the Procurator General of the Archdiocese of Paris, although the concept was essentially unheard of for consecrated women. The clarity of her report to Vincent on the meeting shows that his trust was well placed.<sup>16</sup>

All negotiations, however, were not equally successful. But, when they were not, as was the case with the pastor in Chars,<sup>17</sup> they nonetheless reveal Louise's ability to deal with all involved justly and firmly but also with sensitivity, humility, and charity.

Having examined the areas in which Louise de Marillac fulfilled her role as a Vincentian leader, let us turn our attention now to her leadership style. While the characteristics of that style can be found in Vincent as a leader, her personality and education as well as her life and faith experience give it a coloration that is uniquely hers and complete the portrait of the Vincentian leader which, combined, they present to us. What then are the essential attributes of Louise de Marillac's leadership style?

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 553, 558-61.

First, Spiritual. Louise was first and foremost a spiritual leader. She and Vincent shared a vision, that of Jesus Christ to be loved and served in the person of those who are poor. It was that vision that enabled them to set aside their initial differences in order to collaborate to try to relieve the human misery of their day. This is the vision that they transmitted to the men and women, religious and laity, with whom they worked.

Louise's role was essentially to mentor her collaborators, particularly the Ladies of Charity and the Daughters of Charity, helping them to grow spiritually, personally, and professionally. Above all, she sought to enable all those who shared the Vincentian mission to maintain their focus, to keep ever before their eyes the 'why' and the 'who' of their service.

But, if Louise's leadership was primarily spiritual, it also had a distinctly human dimension. While I was convinced of this, for years I had difficulty defining just what that was. Then, one day, the answer came from an unlikely source: a student at Niagara University. Heather was a young woman from Brooklyn, an out-of-wedlock expectant mother, who, at the age of twenty-two, had seen it all and was impressed by very little. She was a student aide in the Foreign Language Department and her contact with Louise de Marillac came from typing the manuscript of the translation of her correspondence.

One day as I came into the office Heather looked up, pointed to the manuscript, and said, "You know what, Sister, she's one cool lady!" Since coming from her that was high praise indeed, I asked why she thought so. Her response seemed to me to capture the essence of the human side of Louise's spiritual leadership. She said, "She's the most caring person I have ever known. She cares about everyone and everything. She does not just care how holy the sisters are, though she pushes them to holiness. She does not just care about their work, though she wants it done well. She cares about **them**, about who they are and how they are. And where in the world does she find time to learn about their families and to write to tell them how they are doing?"

Louise de Marillac had touched this young woman's mind and heart by her admixture of spiritual and human leadership. Such leadership can only operate in a fraternal setting.

Second, Fraternal. Louise de Marillac tried to foster "families of faith" among those who shared the common Vincentian mission. The Vincentian institution, whatever its form, was to be a place where each individual felt respected and valued and where every task, big or

small, was important. The *Rule of the Hospital of Angers* illustrates this.<sup>18</sup> By spelling out and stressing the significance, for the whole, of each person's role she created a climate favorable to personal fulfillment while, at the same time, forging common bonds and ensuring integrated, quality service. Closely linked to this attribute, and essential to its realization, is trust.

Third, trusting. Louise de Marillac was a highly organized, gifted leader with a strong personality. She was also keenly interested in all her collaborators and in their work. This could easily have led her to micro-manage, which she, indeed, did on occasion. She also lived in a hierarchical society where all power was vested at the top. Despite this, her correspondence reveals another approach, namely subsidiarity in an era when the concept as well as the word were virtually unknown. Without the trust that such a leadership style implies and a willingness to allow other strong personalities to develop their potential, the works in distant places, at a time when communication was difficult, could never have flourished.

Subsidiarity requires people prepared to assume responsibility which, in turn, demands mentoring. Louise's mentoring of Sister Cécile Angiboust is a case in point. Sister Cécile was sent to Angers as local superior which, at that time, meant that she also supervised the nursing care. She had little experience. The twenty-four letters that we have to her from Louise offer practical suggestions and encouragement. They also challenge Cécile and call her to fulfill her potential. She was, thus, able to become a Vincentian leader in her own right.

On another occasion, Vincent, Louise, and the Council of the Company planned to send a sister to a distant mission. Before selecting the sister, Louise wrote to ask the sisters to meet to draw up a job description for their future companion, adding that the decision could not be made from her end. Elsewhere, when she was worried that the opening of a hospital in a town would be detrimental to the work of the Confraternity of Charity there, she expressed her concern and then concluded that she was confident that the sister would "see to it that this [did] not happen."<sup>19</sup> In such a climate the works generally thrived. But it was not easy. Creativity was needed.

Fourth, Creative. Vincentian works for the service of those in need began in an era when there was little church or governmental support.

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<sup>18</sup> CED, 247-252.

<sup>19</sup> Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 525.

To maintain them, and to put them on some kind of a stable financial footing, required creativity and risk taking. When the Ladies of Charity wanted to purchase the dilapidated former prison of Bicêtre to house abandoned children, Louise strongly opposed it, judging the building unsuitable. When it became apparent that it would be Bicêtre or nothing, she mobilized her considerable network of resources, for example calling upon the expertise of the Ursulines for the school. She then drew from her own ingenuity and developed the first organized foster care program. This same creativity led to occupational therapy for the elderly at the Hospice of the Holy Name of Jesus, as well as numerous services that could not otherwise be provided in a wide range of Vincentian institutions.

Creativity always involves a certain amount of risk. It is sometimes difficult to imagine the highly organized Louise as a risk taker, and even harder to believe that she said and meant that the service of those in need called for "more confidence than prudence."<sup>20</sup> But she did. It was risk taking, however, accompanied by detailed organization involving collaboration and negotiation with all parties involved: ecclesiastical, civil, lay, and religious.

Louise de Marillac was a successful leader but she was also a realist. "Families of faith" depend on good human relations and, from time to time, these break down. Recognizing this reality, she developed a method of conflict resolution.

Fifth, Relational. A letter of 26 October 1639, addressed to Sisters Barbe Angiboust and Louise Ganset, illustrates this method. It is to be noted, first of all, that Louise writes to both sisters in the same letter, rather than just to the superior as might have been expected. She begins by telling them of the good that she knows they are accomplishing. Then, in her usual direct style, she addresses the problem head on. She says, "However, I have learned what I have always feared. Your work, which has been succeeding so well...has done nothing for your advancement in perfection." She then speaks to them individually, pointing out the failings and suggesting possible remedies. After this, she looks at herself, and the responsibility that may be hers for what has happened, since she was not always as available to them as she might have been. Following this, Louise expresses her confidence that, together, they will work things out. Louise also acknowledges that the process is a painful one for both of them and she

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 519.



concludes, "True humility will regulate everything."<sup>21</sup>

At the school of Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac developed into a Vincentian leader in her own right. It has been said, however, that the great test of leadership is the capacity for the works to continue and flourish when the leader is no longer there. By that litmus test, Louise de Marillac, by the force of her example, remains a challenge and an encouragement for all of us who, in one way or another, follow in her footsteps in giving to God first our hearts and then our works. And when things get difficult for all of us, as they inevitably do, she says to us as she did to her collaborators of yore, "...arise each morning with new courage to serve God and the poor well."<sup>22</sup>

**May His Will be done always in us and in all that concerns us!"**

*(Saint Vincent de Paul,  
letter to Fermin Get, 20 September 1658)*

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 18-20.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 225.