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# Saint Louise de Marillac: Woman of Substance, Woman of God

BY

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## *Introduction*

What is the good purpose in reflecting about a woman who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, born just about 100 years after Columbus landed in America, after the Reformation and the Council of Trent, just before the period known as the Enlightenment, in Europe, and specifically in Paris, France? Aside from historical interest, what possibly could Louise de Marillac have to say to us who live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, just a little more than thirty years after Neil Armstrong landed on the Moon, during the period known as postmodern, in North America, specifically in Chicago, one of the major cities in the United States? These two periods might seem at first to be 180 degrees from each other. Yet, our Vincentian tradition began in the one and seeks to remain vital in the other. What, then, can Louise de Marillac teach us that will not only cross the historic chasm but also link these two ages in an organic way?

## *Learning from the Saints*

We might take several approaches in thinking about the saints. One approach is like that of many museum-goers. On occasion, our attention might be drawn to this saint or that for some reason or other. We glance at them, act appropriately impressed, perhaps, and then move on to more interesting things. Or we look at the saints (if we have to) as historical curiosities, remarkable folks perhaps, but so out of the ordinary that there is little we can do except wonder at them, or admire them, or, occasionally chuckle at their idiosyncrasies. Sometimes, we might even seek the expert help that some particular saint is said to have. We might pray to St. Anthony to find a lost article, or to St. Jude for some intervention in a seemingly impossible case, or "Little Flower, show thy power in this hour!"

Another approach tries to make the saints relevant to our times, and at first appears to take the saints seriously. But it does so in a curious way: this approach tries to insert the saint into our own times and situations and show how obviously this saint or that was not only just

like us, but would have had the same opinions, attitudes, and made the same choices as we are making at this moment. Often, we use our founders in this way. If we find something in their lives or teaching that contradicts us, we easily dismiss it as a cultural overlay constricting the founder, who, of course, was just like us! This is a kind of “they’re okay, we’re okay” approach in thinking about the saints. Here, the saints become guarantors of our way of thinking, doing, being.

Both approaches err. The first approach perceives the saints as totally other than us. It has the merit, however, of recognizing the saints as hinting at alternative ways of being in the world. The saints’ perceived quaintness and idiosyncrasies might even give us pause occasionally, and prompt us to ponder if there might after all be something deeper there. Using the second approach, on the other hand, we tame the saints and use them to confirm our status quo. Thus we prevent them from doing what the Church intended by naming them saints in the first place, namely, to be “a witness of light and grace and genuine compassion for others.”<sup>1</sup> To witness means to authenticate, to vouch for, to attest to. The active presence of God’s love in the world – this is what the saints witness, authenticate, vouch for, and attest to, not some specific political, economic, or social policy or action.

To be worth our time, the continuity we draw between a saint of any generation and ourselves must be authentic, not contrived. There is nothing to be gained in simply applying an airbrush to certain features of the portrait so that we can promote an image that is “just like us.” We can only learn from, be challenged and / or inspired by a saint who was a believable human being. What is “just like us” is that the saints, too, lived at a particular historical moment, within specific life situations, among certain other men and women who affected and shaped their lives. All of these factors – historical setting, life situations, other people – had both nurturing and limiting impacts on the saint’s life, just as they do on ours. These factors are also what make the saint’s life different from our own. Where, then, can we find the relevant continuity between the saints and ourselves that can advance us along the path of holiness?

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<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, *Simone Weil. Writings Selected with an Introduction by Eric O. Springsted* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 11.



Louise de Marillac, whose experience of "La Lumiere" brought insight into God's will for her.

*Courtesy Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois*

### *Louise de Marillac: Woman of Substance*

Both approaches described above have been taken in the case of Louise de Marillac. For about three hundred years, Louise dwelt in the shadows of the Vincentian story, a figure hidden and virtually unknown. In the preface of his biography, *Louise de Marillac of the Ladies and Daughters of Charity*, published in 1970, Father Joseph Dirvin notes that up to the time of his writing, no fully documented biography of Louise had yet been done. He writes:

To compound this injustice, what has been written of Louise has contributed to the making of a somewhat false 'image.' Many factors have been involved: her faceless childhood, the arbitrary assumption that her adolescence was unhappy and frustrated, the abominable portraits, and especially the very real morbidity that characterized her young adulthood into the thirties. All in all, the young Louise seemed a poor candidate for the role of spiritual heroine. It was easy to assume 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.<sup>2</sup>

If Louise was thought about at all during the centuries Dirvin describes, her image as a weak automaton of a woman could have encouraged only those for whom holiness implies passive interpretations of humility, obedience, sacrifice, and so on. Other than that, however, we might have passed her by with perhaps a sympathetic nod, seeing nothing to challenge us.

In recent years, however, more unbiased research has caused Louise de Marillac to come bounding onto the stage of our consciousness. More fully documented biographies and the publication of her own letters and other spiritual writings allow us to see the whole person – woman, wife, mother, as well as companion and cofounder with Vincent de Paul in the great work of Charity. For us, Louise no longer stands in Vincent’s shadow; we see her as a founder in her own right. Interestingly enough, however, these new images of Louise can lead us to fall into the temptation of approaching her as that mirror of our own time. It is easy now to identify her with our own busy, efficient, pragmatic, blunt – oh so American! – way of moving in our world.

Reading a newspaper several days ago, I noted an ad placed by a local college inviting women to their programs. The ad addressed itself to those who want to become a “world ready woman,” one who is “confident, assertive, knowledgeable, articulate, responsible, creative, passionate. She leads through strength. But more than anything, she is taken seriously.” It struck me that Louise de Marillac could be an alumna of that college! In my own mental picture of the Louise I have come to know, she carries a cell phone and whips off messages by e-mail. Few saints take so poorly to the pious but static pose of the holy picture or plaster statue than do Vincent and Louise. They were constantly on the move! This energy jumps out from a passage of Dirvin’s:

Plans for the renewal [of the local confraternities of charity] having been outlined, Louise proceeded to put them into effect by force of her own example. Now she was the superioress of the Charity, selecting the

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph I. Dirvin, *Louise de Marillac of the Ladies and Daughters of Charity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1970), X.

poor and the sick to be visited, assigning tasks, keeping records, examining the books. Now she was the treasurer, buying food, dispensing linen, making entries, preparing reports. Now she was the visitor of the day, sweeping the hovels of the sick, cooking their meals, feeding them, urging them to a more Christian life. She taught by doing.<sup>3</sup>

In the several biographies of Louise now available, we find a woman of tremendous energy and insight, full of both practical and intellectual virtues. She was a natural to be named the patron saint of social workers. Louise's gifts and skills matched Vincent's conviction that the works of charity, to be effective, had to be organized. Her gifts of initiative, personal authority, organization, efficiency, common sense, sensitivity, and compassion blossomed in the number and variety of activities and projects which she carried out on behalf of the poorest of the poor. It is no wonder that, although she lived many centuries before anyone even thought of naming such a profession, social workers have no problem recognizing her as an archetype of their profession.

But to say that Louise was a social worker in our understanding of the word would be to seriously limit what the words "social service" implied for her. Louise did not think in terms of a work or a profession; in fact, she did not think about herself at all. She thought in terms of human beings whose destitution endangered even their personhood. When her trips throughout the countryside brought to her attention the deplorable ignorance of poor little girls, she established educational programs for them. In the city, in one of the poorest and most extensive parishes of Paris, she established what was called a "Little School," just one of many similar projects.<sup>4</sup> The service of the sick poor – in their homes and later in hospitals – this work, too, was first grounded in Louise's love of the person. Her incredibly broad range of knowledge and know-how served her Christ-centered love for persons and shaped the needed work. And finally, for Louise, "social service" might include the formation of the Daughters of Charity, whose corporate energy would sustain the work of Charity. One might say that she devoted the last twenty-six years of her life to "succession planning."

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<sup>3</sup> Dirvin, *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Flinton, *Louise de Marillac. Social Aspect of Her Work* (New Rochelle: New City Press, 1992), 90.

Louise certainly was a woman of substance. Even a brief account of her accomplishments is impressive, but it gives only a hint of the prodigious record of her achievements, projects, programs, and commitments which must have featured in the groundwork for her canonization in 1934 (two hundred years after Vincent was declared a saint in 1737). From this vast array, it is easy to select some particular dimension out of her life to encourage any of a large variety of possible audiences: children who never knew their mothers; widowed mothers; mothers struggling with recalcitrant or unpromising children; wives striving to build faith-filled marriages; teachers, social workers, catechists, nurses, formation directors. Louise's life is relevant to them all! Still, we must probe more deeply in order not simply to understand Louise the woman, wife, mother, founder and organizer, but Louise the saint, Louise the woman of God.

### *Sainthood: A Journey of a Lifetime*

For centuries, the work of Christian life was usually talked about as a matter of "saving one's soul." (We were big on saving other people's souls as well!) Inspired by the teachings of Vatican II, however, we now prefer to talk about the "universal call to holiness." "Saving one's soul" can suggest something I am able to achieve. The "universal call to holiness" has a different connotation and seems to imply a condition or state of being into which we are invited, not one into which we have to fight our way. "Saving one's soul" could be the label heading a list of difficult activities one must undertake to accomplish it. By contrast, the "universal call to holiness" has a dynamic feeling about it. It seems to refer to a process of some kind, something sent forth – a call – which wants a response.

What is holiness? It might be described as the end state of the process of being drawn by grace into God's very life. The call is from God and the end is God. To become holy means to allow love to bind the multiplicity of one's being into inner unity and to dedicate the whole to God. Karl Truhlar says, "Love alone is the full answer due to God as person." The many dimensions of what we might call a person's spirituality, the various virtues such as justice, humility, virginity, love of neighbor, the activities of prayer, of sacrifice – all of these only come to their full perfection in love. Although it seems that these dimensions imply *at once* a total commitment, this total commitment is, in fact, only *gradually* achieved. "It is only in personal action that all human faculties and domains are integrated according to the potentialities of

the individual. From this point of view, love is always pressing forward to a stage beyond what it has achieved at a given moment. The individual is called by God in [the person's] uniqueness, and cannot know beforehand what God may demand from [the person] in the future. The more love has found itself and informed the other virtues, the more perfect is holiness."<sup>5</sup>

*Louise de Marillac: Woman of God*

"Love is always pressing forward to a stage beyond what it has achieved at a given moment." Truhlar's words provide a perspective from which to look at the multiplicity of events, circumstances, and situations in Louise de Marillac's life. From this perspective we see not simply a breathtaking panoply of activities but "love pressing forward to a stage beyond what it has achieved at a given moment." We do not then have to sort out the "before and after" snapshots of Louise: "Before" (1591-1623) — a nervous, anxious, somewhat scrupulous young woman, worried about her husband, her son, and the state of her soul, overly concerned about having a spiritual director she felt comfortable with; "After" (1623-1660) — a truly valiant woman, courageous, in charge, creative, selfless, untiring in her efforts, universal in her compassion. Seeing the whole of Louise's life as love pressing forward to a stage beyond what it has achieved at a given moment allows us to grasp and appreciate the developmental integrity of her life. This view offers us insight into how her life might challenge and confront our own.

It is essential that we not disconnect Louise's own spiritual maturation from her emergence as an apostolic leader of consequence. Not only must we not disconnect these two dimensions, we must, in fact, see how they relate to each other in a profound and integrated wholeness. To see and to serve Christ in the person whose poverty is physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, or social is not a capacity simply of the will.

Coincidental with my preparation for this paper, I was reading some of Simone Weil's reflections on the love of God. Weil, a controversial philosopher, mystic, and activist, was not a Christian. Her thoughts about human affliction, God's care for us, and the mystery of the Cross seem to offer remarkable insight into the apostolic energy of

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Vladimir Truhlar, "Holiness," in *The Encyclopedia of Theology. Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 635-639.



both Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul. Consider this passage in which Weil describes not only the afflicted person but also how the quality of one's service must correspond to it:

Affliction is essentially a destruction of personality, a lapse into anonymity. Just as Christ put off his divinity for love, so the afflicted are stripped of their humanity by misfortune. In affliction, that misfortune itself becomes a man's whole existence and in every other respect he loses all significance, in everybody's eyes, including his own. There is something in him which would like to exist, but it is continually pushed back into nothingness, like a drowning man whose head is pushed under water. He may be a pauper, a refugee, a Negro, an invalid, an ex-convict, or anything of the kind; in any case whether he is an object of ill usage or of charity he will in either case be treated as a cipher, as one item among many others in the statistics of a certain type of affliction. So good treatment and bad treatment will have the same effect of compelling him to remain anonymous. They are two forms of the same offense.

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To project one's being into an afflicted person is to assume for a moment his affliction, it is to choose voluntarily something whose very essence consists in being imposed by constraints upon the unwilling. And that is an impossibility. Only Christ has done it. Only Christ and those men whose whole soul he possesses can do it. What these men give to the afflicted whom they succor, when they project their own being on to them, is not really their own being, because they no longer possess one; it is Christ. Charity is like a sacrament, a supernatural process by which a man in whom Christ dwells really puts Christ into the soul of the afflicted.<sup>6</sup>

Weil's words seem to illuminate Saint Vincent's directive concerning effective and affective love. The work of Charity is so much more than

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<sup>6</sup> Weil, *Writings Selected*, 62-63.

merely helping the poor. It is, as Weil suggests, a sacrament. This, I believe, is the essential connection between the holiness of Louise de Marillac and her apostolic zeal. Christ possessed her soul. "It is easy to understand that only Christ's presence in a soul can put true compassion in it," says Weil, and "he who gives from true compassion gives Christ himself."<sup>7</sup>

The response to the call to holiness is the work of a lifetime. It might be helpful to consider a metaphor different from the auditory one of "call." We might rather think of the invitation not as something heard but as something God plants like a seed within the human spirit. Just as a seed begins its maturation process out of sight, so the developmental process of awareness grows within the soul.<sup>8</sup> This process gradually takes into itself the wholeness of the person: her natural gifts, talents, capacities; the situations and events of her life, her background, her times; the challenges, demands, threats at various moments in her life; the persons she has met and known and loved; the persons who have known and loved her.

There is much more work to be done, I believe, to plumb the depths of Louise's holiness. Another insight I had in reading Weil, while thinking about this topic, came from Weil's description of affliction as dramatizing the distance between God and created beings. She notes that on the Cross Christ both experienced this dreadful distance and also closed it. We find a similar understanding of Christ's experience of the Cross in a reflection Louise wrote during Lent:

The admirable work which took place at the moment  
of the Redemption of the human race is manifested in

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> Simone Weil also uses this image of a seed and elaborates it beautifully. "Over the infinity of space and time the infinitely more infinite love of God comes to possess us. He comes at his own time. We have the power to receive him or to refuse. If we remain deaf, he comes back again and again a beggar, but also, like a beggar, one day he stops coming. If we consent, God places a little seed in us and he goes away again. From that moment, God has no more to do; neither have we, except to wait. We have only not to regret the consent we gave, the nuptial Yes. It is not as easy as it seems, for the growth of the seed within us is painful. Moreover, from the very fact that we accept this growth we cannot avoid destroying whatever gets in its way, pulling up the weeds, cutting the grasses; and unfortunately they are a part of our very flesh, so that this gardening amounts to a violent operation. On the whole, however, the seed grows of itself. A day comes when the soul belongs to God, when it not only consents to love but when truly and effectively it loves. Then in its turn it must cross the universe to go to God." Weil, *Op.Cit.*, 53.

the words of Our Lord, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' *This cry shows us that His divine Person suffered, at that moment, from an extraordinary sense of separation which led him to address his Father as 'My God.'* By the infinite merit of this instant, the human race is in full possession of the power to be reunited with its God if it will but make use of the means to do so. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' *Jesus no longer says, 'My Father.'* Thus he reveals the suffering of the Son of God and the sense of abandonment of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. The Father forsakes his son so as to welcome back the human race.<sup>9</sup> [Italics mine.]

Louise would resonate with Weil's saying, "Therefore it is only by looking upon the Cross that we can love God." Perhaps Louise's devotion to Christ Crucified is more central to her spiritual maturity than we have considered it to be and requires deeper study.

A special experience on Pentecost in 1623 has been marked as pivotal in the spiritual development of Louise de Marillac and is referred to as "La Lumiere," a deep and illuminating insight into God's will for her. Louise describes how this experience resolved a period of anguish and doubt about the direction her life needed to go. "I felt," she wrote, "that it was God who was teaching me these things and that, believing there is a God, I should not doubt the rest."<sup>10</sup> But this moment did not come out of the blue, as it were. It was not a single "high experience" of a once-in-a-lifetime retreat.

This moment is possible because throughout Louise's whole life there is the conviction that who she is, and what she does, matter not just to herself or to her loved ones but to God. Louise searches for God expecting to find God, and she does. The seed planted germinates and creates a longing. Gradually, but not magically, the germination becomes the implantation and eventually the bloom and the fruit. Prayer, meditation, spiritual direction, reflection on the Scriptures and participation in the sacraments, nurture this as a life process in Louise. These spiritual practices are not simply additional activities in an already

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<sup>9</sup> *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac. Correspondence and Thoughts*, ed. and trans. Sr. Louise Sullivan, D.C. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 701-2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

busy life. Rather, spiritual practices create the illuminating thread that connects and gives meaning to everything that happens. She sees her spiritual life not as something independently private, but as receiving direction from God through her relationships with others. From being dependent on her spiritual director, Vincent de Paul, Louise grows to become a partner, a collaborator, a colleague who trusts the integrity of her own giftedness.

Louise's written works include not only letters but also personal notes, meditations, and reflections. To get a better picture of Louise, one must read not only Louise's letters, which are full of the many concerns related to the numerous works of charity which she supervised. It is equally important to read her retreat notes, her reflections on spiritual reading, the numerous acts of consecration and oblation that she drew up many times throughout her life, and her meditations on the Passion and Cross of Jesus Christ, if we are to plumb the depths of Louise. We must not set these writings aside as simply reflecting an outdated piety. Rather, these writings reveal the consistent, persistent, and cumulative action of love shaping, leading, challenging and bringing into one intense unity the multiplicity of this remarkable life. Here we find Louise, woman of God.

### *Finding Ourselves In the Story of Louise*

One has only to visit any bookstore today to recognize that there is much spiritual searching going on in our time. Yet, too often one finds that much of what goes under the label of spirituality has nothing transcendent about it. The interest in spirituality often does not lead to holiness, to being drawn by grace into the life of God for the sake of the world. A great deal of it, unfortunately seems to end up only with the self. Many spiritual practices have lost their connection with God; they have little to do with love, mercy, justice, compassion and a lot to do with relaxation and finding stress-free moments in life. Without discernment, it is possible for Christians and even for religious to become enamored of these popular approaches to spiritual growth and to lose touch with the rich treasury of spiritual wisdom found in our own faith tradition. This forgetfulness of our heritage causes us to discard, as part of a historical period no longer relevant to our own experience, the critical lessons the saints have to teach us.

You will not find much in Louise's life to recommend a relaxed and stress-free existence. You will find, however, that Louise can teach us something about how to arrive at genuine holiness. What spiritual

theologians theorize about, Louise demonstrates in concrete, day-to-day ways. It is this deeper insight into the spirit of Louise that can demonstrate continuity with our own lives. Here are a few insights arrived at from pondering this remarkable woman:

1. God has to be a given in my life, not simply a question, a theological interest, a possible option. I must know God, not only as the center of gravity in my life, but also as the environment of my life and as its solar energy. It is not enough to assert theologically that God is that whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. I must throw myself into that mystery. I must interpret all the events of my life through this mystery and not the other way around. I can grow in this awareness and conviction through prayer, reflection, reading, and through dialogue with others and openness to direction from them. In the end, however, only the facts of my life will demonstrate that this is the central truth of my life.

2. The more I can grow in awareness of, and commitment to God as Center, the less I will make myself the center of my life and my world. Generosity, selflessness, and social concern will begin to manifest themselves not as struggles but as gifts. Some words from Simone Weil seem to me to summarize a truth that Louise lived: "Praise to God and compassion for creatures. It is the same movement of the heart. . . . Humility is the only permitted form of self-love. . . . Praise for God, compassion for creatures, humility for oneself."<sup>11</sup>

3. The authenticity of my apostolic zeal, my capacity for effective and affective love will only grow in proportion to the degree that I allow Christ to possess me. Louise said, "I can only desire to serve God if his love draws me."

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<sup>11</sup> Weil, *Writings Selected*, 142-143.

4. To grow in holiness means to deal with many dialectical tensions: self-development along with the crucifixion of the ego; renouncing the world and yet remaining committed to the renewal of the world; self-respect along with self-denial; freedom and obedience; resistance and patience; total confidence and trusting effort; the prudence of the serpent and the simplicity of the dove. To grow in holiness is to embrace the mystery of the Cross. All of these dimensions created the dynamic spiritual stability of Louise's life. Probing more deeply how she went about embracing all of these dimensions in her life allows Louise to become a guide for my own apostolic life.

And so there we have it: Louise, woman of substance, woman of God. At the end of her life, she is able to say, "No desires. No resolutions. The grace of my God will accomplish in me whatever he wills."<sup>12</sup> Louise's service of others was the infinite, always expanding, work of Love. Love had indeed pressed forward to a stage beyond what it had achieved throughout her life. Louise: rooted in her times, yet timeless in her roots. Accessible yet still ahead of us. Outstanding in the seventeenth century; still challenging us in the twenty-first.

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<sup>12</sup> From a reflection made on the feast of Saint Genevieve in 1660. *Spiritual Writings*, 833.

**Try to live content among your reasons for discontent and always honor the inactivity and unknown condition of the Son of God. That is your center and what He asks of you for the present, and for the future, forever.**

*(Saint Vincent de Paul,  
letter 29, To Saint Louise, Between 1626 and May 1629)*