Sister Rosalie Rendu: 
A Daughter of Charity On Fire 
with Love for the Poor

Sister Louise Sullivan, D.C.
Sister Rosalie Rendu: A Daughter of Charity
On Fire with Love for the Poor
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By
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In loving memory of
Sister Barbara McEnaney, D.C.
In gratitude for thirty years of friendship and support
And for teaching so many of us during her long battle with cancer
How to live and how to die.
PREFACE

I am delighted to present to you this new English-language biography of Rosalie Rendu. Coming just after her beatification, it will introduce many readers to this amazing Daughter of Charity whom all Paris mourned at the time of her death in 1856. They mourned her because they loved her. For over 50 years, she ministered to the poor in one of the most deprived neighborhoods of the city, while raising the consciousness of society to their needs.

She ran a school, a day-care center, a nursery school, an orphanage, a home for the elderly, a center for the distribution of food, a pharmacy, and a clothes dispensary. She organized the Children of Mary and the Ladies of Charity. She helped Frederick Ozanam in the founding of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. She cared for the sick and the dying during three cholera epidemics. She ministered to the wounded during two revolutions. No Daughter of Charity was better known in her lifetime than she.

Rosalie was very concrete and effective in the service of the poor. To use a modern term, she was an extraordinary “networker.” Rich and poor, clergy and lay, men and women, the young and the elderly knocked on her door. She enlisted the poor themselves to serve the poor. She asked the askers to do something for others.

Rosalie’s prodigious works were the fruit of her enormous faith. She believed that Christ lives in the person of the poor. She trusted that God’s love conquers all. Her faith radiated out in her tenderness, in her fearlessness, in her small, practical efforts at helping individuals, in her larger, creative, structured forms of serving the whole neighborhood. Her faith was transparent to others. They saw it. They admired it. They were drawn to it.

I congratulate Sr. Louise Sullivan, D.C., on the preparation of this book. It is the latest of a number of rich contributions that she has made to the study of our Vincentian heritage. I am certain that it will serve not only to inform readers already interested in Rosalie Rendu, but will also attract newcomers to the story of this wonderful woman.

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General
Congregation of the Mission and
Company of the Daughters of Charity
24 April 2004
FOREWORD

"By serving those who are poor, you are serving Jesus Christ.... A Sister will go ten times a day to see those who are sick, and ten times a day she will find God there.... You will go into poor dwellings but you will find God there."

The publication of Sister Louise Sullivan’s book on Sister Rosalie Rendu recalls for me the great family feast we celebrated at her Beatification in Rome in November 2003. Members of the Vincentian Family came from the four corners of the world to gather together in Saint Peter’s Square for this occasion: Daughters of Charity; Vincentian Priests and Brothers; the International Association of Charities; the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul; as well as the Vincentian Marian Youth Groups; not to mention members of Sister Rosalie’s family; and of course, the Church from the dioceses of Paris and Belley. Our large family had already had the occasion to be honored in Rome in 1947 at the canonization of Saint Catherine Laboure, a contemporary of Sister Rosalie, to whom the Virgin Mary communicated the extraordinary message of the Miraculous Medal. Then there was the canonization of our American saint, Elizabeth Ann Seton. In 1984, there was the beatification of our Sisters of Angers who were among the many Christians martyred during the French Revolution. More recently three priests of the Congregation of the Mission, Fathers François-Régis Clet, Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, and Marcantonio Durando were canonized or beatified with other missionaries and several lay people.

It therefore seems opportune now that this study on Sister Rosalie’s influence on society, prepared carefully and prayerfully by Sister Louise Sullivan, should be made available to the public. It is a call to rediscover the secret of Sister Rosalie, and to find the essential attributes characterizing this simple country girl who became a symbol of Our Lord’s loving mercy toward those who are poor, so that we can all live in this way during these early days of the 21st century.

I would particularly like to emphasize three of these attributes:

**Her rootedness in God**, which led her to draw from prayer and contemplation of Jesus as Servant, the strength and courage required to serve those most in need. This close union with Our Lord colored all her social activity. She served Christ by assisting those who were poor in the Mouffetard district.

**Her influence on society**, her concern to bring together the rich and the poor, her success in guiding and inspiring lay people, the ease of her relationship with the powerful of her time, her closeness to those who were most deprived.

**Her joy in living in community**, her kindness to the older Sisters with whom she lived, her concern for the formation of young Sisters confided to her care, her faith in the witness given by the Sisters’ life of sharing.

This book on the life of Sister Rosalie invites the Company to share with the world the special gifts it has received from God which have enabled it to serve those who are poor. I thank Sister Louise Sullivan for bringing this fine work to its conclusion with perseverance and enthusiasm.

May Sister Rosalie, who served both those who were Rich and those who were Poor, be a guide and inspiration for all.

Sister Evelyne Franc, D.C.
Superioress General
Sincere gratitude to all those who, by their collaboration, have made the publication of this biography possible during this year marking the 150th Anniversary of the death of Sister Rosalie Rendu:


To Sister Louise Gallahue, D.C., Vistatrix, Province of New York, when work on this project began, and Sister Mary Francis Martin, D.C., present Visitatrix, who enabled me to bring this book to completion by their sisterly encouragement and support;

To Sister Claire Herrmann, D.C., Archivist, Sister Blandine Delort, D.C., former Archivist, and Sister Marie Joseph Barheille, D.C., of the Archives, and Sister Catherine Pelou, D.C., of the Secretariat, all of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, Paris, for research assistance;

To Claude Lautissier, C.M., Archivist, and Paul Henzmann, C.M., former Archivist of the Congregation of the Mission, Paris, for making materials relative to Sister Rosalie available and for their research assistance;

To Sister Barbara McEnaney, D.C., for her assistance with copy-editing, indexing, and footnoting, as well as moral support for this and everything else I have written;

To Sister Francine Brown, D.C., for her research, editing, locating of appropriate illustrations and incorporating them into the text, and numerous other tasks essential to bringing this book to publication, and to the Province of Evansville and the directors of her ministries for affording Sister Francine the time required for the completion of the biography;

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To Georges-Albert Boissinot, S.V., for sharing his writings, including the *Positio* on Jean-Léon Le Prevost, and his expertise concerning the origins of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul;

To Raymonde Dubois, who while translating the manuscript into French brought her professional skill and enthusiasm to improve the overall quality of both texts;

To the International and U.S. Society of Saint Vincent de Paul for their assistance and encouragement;

To the administration of Niagara University for authorizing research on this project under their sabbatical leave program;

To the Vincentian Studies Institute for supporting this endeavor by a Research Grant and for including the biography among their publications;

To Nathaniel Michaud, Executive Director and Publications Editor for the Vincentian Studies Institute for his able editorial assistance, and Brian Cicirello, Office Coordinator, for his help with illustrations;

To the Daughters of Charity with whom I shared my community life throughout this undertaking, especially the: Sisters of St. Joseph Residence, Holbrook, MA; Sisters of Charity Hospital, Buffalo, NY; DePaul Provincial House, Albany, N.Y.; Sisters’ Houses of Montréal, Québec; St. Joseph Residence, Chicago, IL; and House of Providence, Farmington Hills, MI, for creating a climate of fraternal charity and support favorable to the completion of this task;

To the ill and retired sisters of Saint Louise House, Albany, NY, who sustained me by their prayers and affection;

To all those friends and collaborators who have contributed the inestimable gift of their prayers and support.
INTRODUCTION

Sister Rosalie Rendu, a seventy-year-old Daughter of Charity who had spent nearly her entire religious life within the narrow confines of perhaps the poorest area of Paris, was buried with all the trappings of a state funeral from the church of Saint-Médard on 9 February 1856. The government laid aside its prohibition against the public display of religious symbols as those who were rich as well as those who were poor, those who were powerful as well as those who were voiceless, joined the silent procession behind the crucifix leading her remains to Montparnasse Cemetery. Religious and government officials, who frequently had little in common, forgot their differences for a few hours to pay tribute to this humble woman. The mighty and the downtrodden wept together. The following day Parisian newspapers of widely diverse and opposing political and religious persuasions described the singular event and paid tribute to the woman who had occasioned it.¹

During this year, 2006, we celebrate the 150ᵗʰ anniversary of her death. A steady flow of visitors continues to come to her grave. Many leave flowers or small marble plaques expressing gratitude and testifying to the truth of the inscription on the tomb, “To our good mother Rosalie, her grateful friends, the poor and the rich.” An avenue in the area of the French capital where she labored bears her name. The occasional newspaper article still recalls her accomplishments. A recent book on the XIIIᵃʳᵗarrêtissement, which in Sister Rosalie’s day was part of the administrative district where she devoted her life to the service of those in need, is dedicated quite simply “To Sister Rosalie.”²

On 21 August 1997, Pope John Paul II beatified Frédéric Ozanam, the principal founder of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul,

¹ Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis Sanctorum Officium Historicum, Parisien. [Beatiicationis et] Canonizationes Servae Dei, Rosaliae Rendu (in sacc.: Iornae Mariæ), Societatis Puellarum a Caritatis (1786-1856). Positio Super Virtutibus et Fama Sanctitatis (Rome, 1993). [Within this document there are three separate paginations: Positio Biographie Documentée, 1-318; Exposé des Vertus, 1-61; Sommaire du Procès Ordinaire de Paris (1953), contains the testimony of witnesses, Examen des Écrits, 1-93.] Positio, 256-271. Note: Throughout this text we will try to use more personal expressions for “the poor” such as “those who are poor” or “persons who are poor” where syntax permits, or, unless the origin of the expression, such as Sister Rosalie’s “beloved poor,” dictates otherwise. There can be no doubt that Sister Rosalie saw all those who came into her life as persons.
at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. In his homily, the Holy Father evoked Sister Rosalie's name. He stated, "The bonds among the members of the Vincentian Family have been strong since the origin of the Society because it was a Daughter of Charity, Sister Rosalie Rendu, who guided the young Frédéric Ozanam and his companions toward persons who were poor in the Mouffetard section of Paris."

But who exactly is this woman who was herself beatified on 9 November 2003? What does her life have to say to men and women of our era who, regardless of their socio-economic status, seek to reach out to those in need?

Sister Rosalie's first biographer, Viscount Armand de Melun, declares, undoubtedly with exaggeration born of admiration, that his friend and collaborator of nearly 20 years was "at the origin of all of the major social welfare undertakings" of the first half of XIX\textsuperscript{th} century France.\textsuperscript{4} Indeed, the mere cataloguing of her accomplishments in modern social works reveals a woman of extraordinary creativity and energy. Through her tireless service to those whom society in general had seemingly abandoned and her ability to involve youth and elders, wealthy benefactors as well as those in need in this work, she proved herself a worthy daughter of the founders of the Daughters of Charity, Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac. However, as with Vincent and Louise, there is the danger of losing the person behind the actions, of being so dazzled by the magnitude of their achievements that the spiritual and human motor that drove them disappears.

Such has often been the case with Sister Rosalie. The numerous texts that have appeared since her death portray her heroic deeds on the barricades during the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 or at the bedside of the sick during the cholera epidemics of 1832, 1849, and 1854. They also recount in detail the numerous works that she founded for those who were poor. But Sister Rosalie, the woman, is far more and far less than the sum of her actions. If she has something to say to the men and women of today, it is precisely because of the person she became by the grace of God and by her response to that grace.

\textsuperscript{3} Discours du Pape et chronique romaine, "Béatification de Frédéric Ozanam," Notre-Dame-de-Paris, 22 août 1997 (Paris, 1997).
\textsuperscript{4} Armand de Melun, Vie de la sœur Rosalie, Fille de la Charité, 13\textsuperscript{e} édition (Paris, 1929), 118.
Sister Rosalie's service of persons who were poor is certainly of major importance and is the reason she continues to be remembered. Nevertheless, the woman behind the works is the person we must come to know if her life is to have any lasting meaning for us and for our epoch.

Such is the purpose of this new biography. While acknowledging the debt owed to previous works, particularly that of Armand de Melun, which is the essential basis of all subsequent texts, because of its historical accuracy and eyewitness accounts, the present work will attempt to draw a spiritual and human portrait of this extraordinary woman. To that end, considerable emphasis will be placed on Sister Rosalie's correspondence. Previous biographies have made little or no use of her letters. These writings, however, provide valuable insight into the character and personality of this humble woman who spent almost her entire life as a Daughter of Charity in the Mouffetard district in Paris' Latin Quarter. The response to her Beatification, both in Rome and in Paris, demonstrates that her example and message continue to reverberate in the minds and hearts of those who are seeking to relieve the plight of those who are poor and abandoned at the dawn of the XXIst century.

With that in mind, we now turn to the places, people, and events that formed Sister Rosalie and to her own words as found in her correspondence or cited by those who knew her well. Using all available documentation, it is our hope that we can weave a tapestry that will reveal the true portrait of Sister Rosalie Rendu, the woman, the Daughter of Charity, and the servant of all who needed her assistance, be they persons who were rich or persons who were poor.