CHAPTER XIII

LIMITATIONS ON SISTER ROSALIE'S APOSTOLIC ACTIVITY

HER TWILIGHT YEARS AND HER DEATH
(1851-1856)

One of the more moving texts of Vincent de Paul is a letter of 3 March 1660 to Mathurine Guérin, superior of the Daughters of Charity at La Fère. His personal sense of loss is evident as he informs her of the recent death of Antoine Portail, his earliest confrère and the sisters’ first spiritual director, as well as of the impending death of Louise de Marillac, his friend and collaborator for thirty-six years. Vincent urges Mathurine to be at peace and to resign herself to the will of God in what is about to happen. He assures her that God will be her strength and consolation, and finally the recompense of her love, as she and her companions throughout the Company face the loss of their foundress. The letter, however, also contains a poignant note revealing how keenly Vincent felt his coming separation from Louise. He tells Mathurine, “...certainly it is the great secret of the spiritual life to abandon to [God] all that we love by abandoning ourselves to all that He wills.... Pray for me.”

Yet Louise’s death was not unexpected. Her health had always been frail due, in no small part, to the conditions caused by war and siege in France at the time of her birth in 1591. She had frequent bouts of illness and was often confined to bed by tertian fever. Vincent jokingly reminded her that she “had been dead” for 10 or even 20 years. Nonetheless, Jean Calvet was correct when he stated, in his 1959 biography of Louise, that Vincentian works “became what they were because Louise de Marillac put her hand to them.” Despite her physical limitations, her seemingly boundless energy and determination, as well as her exceptional organizational ability, enabled her to form the first Daughters of Charity spiritually and for the service of those in need in the yet uncharted works of health, education, and social welfare. Along the way, however, she discovered, as Vincent had, the “great secret of the spiritual life,” as she experienced the inevitable call “to abandon to [God] all that [she

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(63) CED, 8:255-256.
(64) Jean Calvet, Louise de Marillac: A Portrait (New York, 1959), 46.
loved] by abandoning [herself] to all that He [willed].” This gradual “stripping” enabled her to be more fully united with her God, her sisters, those who were poor, and all those she loved. In the end, she could exclaim with the psalmist, “The Lord has been my strength; He has led me into freedom. He saved me because He loves me.” 665

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We do not know how familiar Sister Rosalie was with the life of the foundress, as Louise was not a central part of the formation of the Daughters of Charity until recent years. Moreover, Sister Rosalie’s accomplishments, while extraordinary, were generally restricted to the Mouchetard district, while Louise’s influence spread throughout France and even to Poland. Notwithstanding, parallels can be drawn between the two women.

In 1851, Sister Rosalie was 65 years-of-age. From childhood her health had been frail, but this never deterred her from giving herself totally to God, her “beloved poor,” the Daughters of Charity with whom she shared her community life and apostolic activity, and the many devoted collaborators to whom she imparted the Vincentian vision of service to those who were poor. Her energy and zeal more than made up for her delicate constitution. Moreover, the years following the Revolution of 1848, and particularly the cholera epidemic of 1849, brought relative calm to the capital. Most of the works of the little house on rue de l’Épée-de-Bois – with the exception of the Shelter for the Elderly (1852) and the Day Shelter for Children (1854), of which

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665 Psalm 18, 19-20.
we spoke in Chapter VIII – were established and running smoothly. The number of sisters increased from 8 to 12 during this period, thus lightening the burden for all. At the same time, Sister Rosalie’s health began to further deteriorate. As a result, her service with and for those in need became increasingly more limited. Simultaneously, her reputation at all levels of society, from her “beloved poor” of the Mouffetard district to the circles of the rich and powerful of the capital, continued to grow. As we have seen, it was during this painful period of Sister Rosalie’s life that she was awarded the Cross of the Legion of Honor (February 1852), and Emperor Napoléon III, accompanied by his wife, Empress Eugénie, visited the Day Nursery of rue de l’Épée-de-Bois (March 1854).

In his 1959 history of Saint-Médard parish, Marcel Broginard, pastor at the time, speaks of this phenomenon in the chapter he dedicates to Sister Rosalie:

In recounting the life and actions of Sister Rosalie, we have the history of the quarter during this period.... [After 1848], Sister Rosalie’s reputation was astonishing. During the last years of her life, the little parlor on rue de l’Épée-de-Bois was never empty. A crowd of people came to her from all over Paris because they needed assistance or consolation. And it was not only persons who were poor. She used to say, “A Daughter of Saint Vincent de Paul is a milestone on which those who are tired have the right to lay down their burden.”

...The poor of the parish of Saint-Médard remained the beneficiaries of this vast influence because the number of persons who owed her gratitude knew to whom and how to repay their debt. Sister Rosalie had become a universal minister of charity.666

Armand de Melun, who, as we pointed out earlier, had been Sister Rosalie’s close collaborator and friend since they first met during the winter of 1837-1838, is well placed to describe the changes that had come to pass in her “diocese” by the last years of her life. He

had walked these streets for nearly two decades when he described them in his biography of Sister Rosalie:

Soon the Saint-Marceau district came forth from its obscurity and abandonment. Visitors traversed its streets to reach Sister Rosalie’s [house]. As they came to know her, they became familiar with the misery of her quarter. They took pity on it. They worried about its fate. The wealthiest arrondissements sent her a little of their surplus. They had collections taken up for her ["beloved poor"] in the churches and salons of the Saint-Germain district.667

The extent of Sister Rosalie’s influence is apparent here because these wealthy and generous people, like Armand de Melun before them, gave not only of their resources but of themselves in personal service, which Sister Rosalie had a genius for calling forth from all who approached her. They joined her other dedicated collaborators to try to improve the lot of the inhabitants of the Saint-Marceau district. Melun described their concerted effort:

A great number of charitable persons shared the [quarter’s] streets and sometimes even its housing. Often in these large buildings, filled from cellar to attic with poor persons, there would be a Sister of Charity dressing a wound on the ground floor, a [Lady of Charity] on the second floor reciting last prayers with a dying person, while a young man from the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul comforted a poor family [living] in the attic by bringing a week’s supply of bread and teaching catechism to a child.668

Based on his close personal observation and experience, Melun, whose social legislation had had a huge impact on the conditions in which the working classes lived and worked, was able to depict the changes in their lives. He acknowledged that the Saint-Marceau district was “still the poorest... in Paris... and that it was beyond

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667 Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 152.
anyone's power to [change] that.” But thanks to the combined efforts of the Daughters of Charity from the little house on rue de l'Épee-de-Bois, and the individuals who made up Sister Rosalie’s network of charity:

...its poverty was less extreme; most of its families had a bed, a stove, and a chair; their children were better clothed, more polite, and better instructed; Christian practices appeared among the population [which grew more]... attached to order and work.669

The inhabitants of the Mouffetard district had direct contact with the committed volunteers who served them, and were certainly grateful to them. However, they recognized that the improvement in their quality of life was due to Sister Rosalie. Under her influence and guidance, class barriers began to crumble. Again it was Melun who explained this extraordinary occurrence taking place in one of the most class-conscious capitals of nineteenth-century Europe:

...[the population] loved very tenderly the [person] to whom it owed its progress; ...Sister Rosalie became the intermediary of reconciliation between society and the Saint-Marceau district. She dissipated the prejudices that existed against it, and defended it... by making it better known.... When some reproach was voiced against it in her presence, she vigorously stood up for it and energetically protested against the injustice.

She often used to say, “It is calumny; [the quarter] is far better than its reputation; its poverty reveals less depravity and malice than many rich quarters conceal under their luxury and wealth.”670

By the final years of her life, Sister Rosalie had become the voice the inhabitants of the Mouffetard district always listened to; the authority they always respected; the hand they always blessed. In

669 Ibid., 153.
670 Ibid., 153-154.
other words, “Throughout her life, [the population] was ever under her influence and paid homage to her authority.”

While Sister Rosalie’s stature continued to grow, her body was finally showing the effects of nearly half-a-century of tireless dedication. Her zeal and enthusiasm could no longer compensate for her frail health. However much she loved the needy surrounding her, she could no longer go out to them as she had always done. Like Vincent and Louise before her, she was discovering the “great secret of the spiritual life” as she too was called upon “to abandon to God all that [she] loved by abandoning [herself] to all that He willed.” The final “stripping” had begun.

Let us now turn to those who intimately shared this arduous journey toward eternity with Sister Rosalie – the sisters of her house, the poor inhabitants of the district, and her longtime friends and collaborators, particularly Armand de Melun. We have seen, mostly in her letters to Mélanie Rendu and Cyprien Loppe, that, throughout her life, Sister Rosalie was no stranger to illness or fatigue. She suffered from the cold; experienced palpitations of the heart even after minor exertion; and like Louise de Marillac, she had annual bouts of tertian fever which confined her to her bed for prolonged periods of time. Moreover, her highly sensitive nature, the death of a companion, family difficulties, and misunderstandings within the Company, caused stress to exacerbate her already delicate health. None of this, however, was permanently debilitating. During the last years, 1854-1856, however, it would be.

What precisely, then, was the nature of this progressively incapacitating illness? Sister Rosalie’s apostolic zeal had enabled her to remain active in the service of her “beloved poor” despite her physical limitations. This was different, however. During the final two years of her life, Sister Rosalie lost her sight. While she was not completely blind, her inability to distinguish faces or see things around her on the street restricted her direct service. Her failing sight was caused by cataracts.

For the first time, Sister Rosalie, who had always rushed to the aid of others, needed assistance to carry out her daily activities. Nonetheless, this did not prevent her from fulfilling, albeit in a more restricted way, her vocation as servant of those who were poor. Each

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671 Ibid., 154.
672 CED, 8:255-256.
day she went to her little parlor to support all those who still came to her in their hour of need. At this point in her life, however, she had to be accompanied by a sister of the house; find her chair with an uncertain hand; and, once seated, remain there. She had always moved about, greeting each visitor and bringing them help and consolation. Now though, the visitor had to be identified for her. The inability to see the faces of her “beloved poor” was a cruel suffering. Moreover, the fearless Sister Rosalie saw the approach of death with trepidation. In 1855, the superioress of the Visitation Convent of Paris, Mother Séraphine Fournier, was dying. She and Sister Rosalie were close friends. When the end was near, Mother Séraphine summoned Sister Rosalie because, according to Melun, “she wanted an angel at her side.” After their final farewell, she told Sister Rosalie, “Courage, my Sister. You will soon follow me.” Melun writes that his friend was shaken by these words and repeated them to her sister companions. She added, “I don’t know why this good mother spoke to me in this way. If God wants to leave me on this earth for a few more years, I will not ask to leave it.” She, who had faced powerful government officials and warring forces with unshakeable calm and determination, feared appearing before the judgment seat of God. In her testimony for Sister Rosalie’s Cause of Beatification, Sister Tissot spoke of this painful period in her Sister Servant’s life. She wrote:

[During] the last two years of her life, her health, which was already frail, noticeably worsened. She grew resigned. She would say, “Our Good God wanted to create a space between my life and my death so as to give me time to prepare myself. I greatly fear death.” She often asked us to read to her on confidence in God.

Sister Rosalie’s blindness provided her with the time she felt she needed to prepare to meet her Maker, but she sorrowfully endured the forced inactivity. On one occasion, a young sister told her that a holy priest had said her blindness was a great grace and a sign of divine mercy. Her response reflected the indomitable Sister Rosalie of

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673 Melun, Vie de la sœur Rosalie, 242.
674 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Summaire, 60.
yore. She said that, if she dared, she would ask God to show her His
goodness in another way.675

In the meantime, she continued to serve those in need as best
she could. In her testimony for Sister Rosalie’s Cause of Beatification,
Mademoiselle Marie Baccoffe recounts her experience in the little
parlor of rue de l’Épée-de-Bois during this period. In Chapter IX
we recounted the events surrounding Sister Rosalie’s rescue of her
father, an officer in the Civil Guard, during the fierce fighting of the
Revolution of 1830. Included, also, were the charming reminiscences
of the 80 year-old Mademoiselle Baccoffe concerning her first visit to
the little parlor in 1838, when she was a child of six. At that time,
the little girl had promised Sister Rosalie that she would assist her
when she grew up. She was still faithful to this promise in 1854. In
her testimony, she told of her contacts with Sister Rosalie at the time.
The First Maid of Honor at Court had given her 500 francs for Sister
Rosalie’s works. She brought the money to her. When she arrived,
she was appalled by what she found. “Alas, it was in February 1854.
[Sister Rosalie] was in her little parlor. She was almost blind but she
recognized me very well. I gave her the money....”676

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675 Melun, Vie de la sœur Rosalie, 236-237.
676 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire, 70.
It would be a year before Mademoiselle Baccoffe returned to visit Sister Rosalie. By then her health had visibly deteriorated further. In her testimony, Mademoiselle Baccoffe spoke of the encounter with this woman whom she had admired since childhood:

When I returned in '55, at the end of February, I did not find her very well but [she was] still courageous and still engrossed in her works. When I told her that she should allow herself to be replaced so she could rest, I thought she was going to get angry. I told her that I loved her very much. [She responded], “I know you love me. I also love you. You know this, my little one. So, embrace me.”

Mademoiselle Baccoffe left Paris for the south of France on 15 August 1855. Before leaving, she made another vain attempt to persuade her friend to take better care of herself, this time suggesting she leave her “old house.” During her travels, she wrote to Sister Rosalie. The response to her letter came from one of Sister Rosalie’s companions, Sister Angèle. She did not find it very reassuring. She concluded this episode, “How heavy my heart was to be so far away.”

Sister Rosalie resisted any attempt, however well-intentioned, to remove her from her companions, collaborators, and, especially, her “beloved poor.” She knew that her time with them was short so, on occasion, she even went to visit the homes of those whom she had served for half a century. Obviously, she could not do this alone. When she felt strong enough to venture out, she called upon a girl from the ouvroir to accompany her on her mission of charity. The young girl in question, Félicie, later Madame Petit, was the daughter of a woman who had also been a pupil of Sister Rosalie. The written testimony about her experience was the product of a conversation she had with a Daughter of Charity, Sister Marie Delaage, in 1913, when she was 72 years-of-age. Félicie clearly remembered the scene when Sister Rosalie came looking for her. Sister Delaage transcribes it thus:

...[Sister Rosalie] would open the door slightly and call, “Félicie, are you there?” [The answer came],

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
"Yes, my Good Mother." [Sister Rosalie would then say], "Come." The young girl would grab a cloak, "a very large one trimmed with leather," and... this pair, that was so touching to behold, would walk up and down all the streets of the quarter without being deterred by the greatest distances.

When Sister Rosalie returned home, she would go to a little "treatment" room next to a poor office that her companions called "her salon," and care for the poor who were there.... Félicie said that [Sister Rosalie] seemed to regain her sight so as to recognize the ailment of these poor people. And she scolded them like a mother if their sores were worse because they had not come often enough....

Sister Rosalie’s blindness and her failing health also deeply affected her sister companions. Among them was Sister Saillard. Once her former superior had lost her sight, the young sister frequently visited her. As Sister Rosalie’s condition worsened, she spent more and more time in her bedroom. Sister Saillard recounts her time with her:

...I often found her alone, thinking only of God who was closing her eyes to the light of day and who would soon manifest Himself to her soul in the splendor of eternal light. She would be reciting her rosary. She received me kindly and would say, “Now, my little postulant, read me a chapter of the *Imitation* [of Christ]. She happily listened to the words of the Divine Master and would say, “That is so beautiful. What happiness to abandon oneself to Him!”

When Sister Rosalie first started to go blind, she was often heard to say, "God has rendered me blind because I took too much pleasure in seeing my poor." Indeed, this time of physical suffering

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681 Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 193.
was also a time of spiritual dryness. Sister Costalin, who was very close to her, understood this. In her testimony she tells us:

A sister told [Sister Rosalie] that Our Lord filled her with [spiritual] consolations. She responded, "You are very blessed. I have served Him for 40 years and I still do not know what spiritual consolations are. I always see God in His holiness and realize that my sins deserve the punishment of His justice."

The last two years of Sister Rosalie's life were difficult spiritually and apostolically. She struggled to find peace as she prepared for death. She also had to further limit her ministry of service. Confined more and more to her room, Sister Rosalie still attempted to maintain contact with her "beloved poor" by remaining, to the end, interested in the service of the sisters and her collaborators with them. Melun confirmed this:

On the eve of the day when she became [so] ill that she would never again leave her bed, the sister in charge of the soup kitchen had noticed an old man, who looked healthy, draw as near as he could to the oven and remain [there] throughout the distribution [of the soup.] Asked if he was ill, he admitted that he stayed near the fire for such a long time because he did not have a stove or wood to warm him at home. The sister invited him to come back each morning and promised him a place near the oven and a better portion [of soup]. When the Superior learned of this... she scolded her daughter for having been so inflexible as not to have asked the poor man for his name and address. She could not rest until he was found and she could send him a stove and a small stock of wood.

Melun continues on to say that the next day, when the fever that would take her life had struck, a single thought tormented her because,

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88 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire, 53.
89 Melun, Vie de la sœur Rosalie, 238.
probably for the first time, she had forgotten a request that had been addressed to her the evening before. She spoke of it in the wee hours of the morning and begged one of the sisters to make up for her forgetfulness. She told her companion, “I beg of you, before [doing] anything else, bring this poor man a blanket. He must be very cold because I am shivering in my bed.” Melun concluded his account of this episode on a poignant note, “She was, indeed, shivering from her fever. This was her final act.”

Earlier, in February 1855, Sister Rosalie’s friends, Melun surely among them, wanted to make a novena to Saint Germaine to obtain her cure. When they sought her permission to do so, she categorically refused saying:

Don’t do anything! I would be terrified to be the person chosen by God for a miracle. I would think that He was asking extraordinary things of me. I would be troubled by this. Moreover, people would think I obtained this because of my virtue.

Under continued pressure from her friends who were loath to lose her, Sister Rosalie later relented but refused to join in the novena. She told them, “I would rather entrust myself to the will of God. Besides, I would spoil everything by mingling my prayers with yours.”

Despite growing limitations, Sister Rosalie still carried out her duties as Sister Servant while asking her companions to take responsibility for the tasks that she could no longer do herself. She wanted anyone who came to the house desiring to see her to be allowed to do so. Melun was surely relating his own experience during this sorrowful time, when he wrote, using the masculine form of friend:

When a friend was announced, she would have him sit near her; look at him with the eyes of her heart; and soon, because of the vivacity of her conversation, the freshness of her ideas, and the interest she took in

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684 Ibid., 239.
685 Melun, Vie de la sœur Rosalie, 237.
686 Ibid., 237.
everything, you forgot that you were seated next to a blind person.\textsuperscript{687}

In October 1855, when the cataracts were sufficiently "ripe," a skilled surgeon, who was very fond of Sister Rosalie, performed the operation on her. At first it appeared to be successful. She was able to discern a bit of light and some facial features. She could also distinguish some shades of color. There was hope for continuing improvement. Then, the feeble light vanished and Sister Rosalie was once more plunged into darkness.

Novenas and traditional medicine having been found wanting, an alternative method was tried. It was a form of hydrotherapy in which a burst of cold water was sprayed into Sister Rosalie's eyes every five minutes in the hope that it would produce a positive reaction and bring them back to life. From all reports it was an excruciatingly painful and ultimately futile procedure. Yet Sister Rosalie never complained nor became impatient. When the sisters caring for her expressed astonishment at this, she would calmly reply, "It isn't possible for me to get impatient... when all of you give me admirable examples of patience when you are taking care of me."\textsuperscript{688}

In January 1856, there was hope a second operation would improve Sister Rosalie's vision. It was scheduled for early spring. At the same time, her deteriorating health seemed to improve. Was this a sign of better things to come? Alas, no. Her condition rapidly worsened. The night of 4 February was the turning point. Sister Rosalie was assailed by severe chills. She endured them alone as she did not want to disturb the "well-merited sleep" of the sister in a nearby room, there so she could attend to any of the patient's needs that might arise during the night. In the morning, she found Sister Rosalie with a very high fever and a sharp pain in her side. Dr. Dewulf was hastily summoned. He arrived without delay and immediately recognized the symptoms of pleurisy, or inflammation of the lungs. Two days of aggressive treatment followed. At the time, the remedy of choice for lung inflammation was to apply a vesicatory, that is, a plaster containing organic matter to draw out the infection by producing blisters which would then drain. It could be a painful procedure and Sister Rosalie did suffer during it. Melun explains:

\textsuperscript{687} Ibid., 238.
\textsuperscript{688} Ibid., 225-226.
...the sister responsible for tending [Sister Rosalie's] wounds noticed that the covering of the [plaster] had doubled over on itself and was pressing on the blister. It was covered with blood. Astonished to hear no complaint or see any emotion on the... patient's calm face, despite what had to be severe pain, she was afraid paralysis was setting in so she cried out in alarm, "Mother, didn't you feel anything?" As Sister Rosalie remained silent, she loudly repeated her question. Then the patient [responded] with a tender smile, "Yes, I felt it, but it is a nail from the cross of Our Lord, so I wanted to keep it."

The treatment may have alleviated the symptoms, at least for the moment. The sisters were encouraged. They had not been informed that this episode was potentially fatal. Moreover, Sister Rosalie remained calm. She even spoke of the tedium of convalescence. When those around her expressed pity for her suffering, she would reply, "The poor are not as well off as I am." So it was that at this difficult time, as it had been throughout her long life of service, her concern was for others. She worried about the fatigue she was causing the sisters caring for her. Melun tells us that a sister, who had stayed up with her the first night, got up in the middle of the following night to see how the patient was doing. Without saying a word, she gave her something to drink. Sister Rosalie recognized her companion by the way she was caring for her and said, "My child, how you worry me... [by] sparing yourself no trouble on my behalf...."

As mentioned earlier, Sister Rosalie, who had fearlessly faced the dangers of revolution and disease, awaited her own death with apprehension. Now, however, when it was imminent, her fears were dissipated and she united her suffering to Jesus Crucified. As it was for Louise de Marillac, this was the center of Sister Rosalie's spirituality. She allowed those around her to apply the treatments they judged best no matter how painful or unpleasant they were. Despite her numerous bouts of illness, she had generally avoided medications.

\[89\] Ibid., 241.
\[90\] Ibid., 240.
\[91\] Ibid.
Now she accepted the medicinal drinks she found the most repugnant in honor of the drink offered to Jesus Christ during his passion. By the morning of 6 February, Sister Rosalie’s most severe symptoms had abated. At 11 o’clock, she even took a little bouillon. All rejoiced at her recovery. Then at one o’clock, the violent pain in her side reappeared and her pulse became very rapid. Nonetheless, she continued to speak of what was dearest to her heart, her “beloved poor” and her sister companions. As the end approached, she exclaimed, “My children, my dear children, my Poor. When I am no longer here, O my God, You will not abandon them.” Shortly thereafter, Sister Rosalie took a turn for the worse. Her speech became incomprehensible. Then she slipped into a quiet state, occasionally interrupted by unintelligible sounds, which announced the approach of the end. The pastor of Saint-Médard, Abbé Jean-Joseph Falcimagne, arrived to administer Extreme Unction and recite the prayers for the dying. Sister Rosalie made the sign of the cross and murmured a few words which those around her could not hear but which seemed to be “an echo of an interior prayer.” Then she fell into a coma. The next day, 7 February, at 11 o’clock, she died “without agitation or agony, as if she were passing from a light sleep to a more profound repose.”

Thus ends Melun’s account of the death of his beloved friend and mentor. What we know of Sister Rosalie’s last illness essentially comes from him. While it is evident Melun shared in the grief and deep sense of loss of all those who loved her, in his account he is fulfilling his role as her biographer. Sister Costalin, who read his manuscript, noticed this and commented, “Monsieur Melun’s book is perfectly true but his style is cold.” His Mémoires, as we have already seen, are much more revealing. He tells us:

During her last years, blind and ill, she always received me with the same cordiality.... Infirmity and suffering did not interrupt our relationship.... Thus she was my mentor, my light, and my support until her last moments. [On that day,] I ran just as hurriedly and with the same thoughts [in mind] to...

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692 Ibid., 240-241.
693 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio, Sommaire, 66-67.
694 Melun, Vie de la sœur Rosalie, 242-243.
695 Ibid., 240-241.
discuss my work of the preceding week with her. Knocking on her door, I learned she was going to die very soon from chest congestion. She was entering her [last] agony at the very moment I arrived in her parlor. I saw the sisters weeping and praying and I wept and prayed with them. I returned [home] with the certainty that, if there was one less angel on earth, there was one more saint in heaven.\(^{66}\)

Looking back at the loss of Sister Rosalie, Melun recounts in his memoirs what she had meant in his life and even utters a prayer to her:

I can never recall these memories without strong emotion and profound gratitude to Divine Providence which sent me, as mentors and protectresses, these two extraordinary souls in the domain of piety and charity, Madame Swetchine and Sister Rosalie. May you, who are now receiving in heaven the full recompense for all the good you have done on earth, receive me at the end of my career with the same goodness with which you welcomed and guided me [when I was] young, inexperienced, and starting out in life.\(^{67}\)

As for Sister Rosalie’s sister companions, they remained kneeling around her bed. As they contemplated her remains, they reflected on the holiness of her life. They hesitated to pray for the forgiveness of her sins until one of them exclaimed, “Maybe she still needs to expiate the excessive tenderness she had for us.”\(^{68}\)

Word spread quickly that the “Apostle of the Mouffetard district” had died. A seemingly endless procession of those who were rich and those who were poor, those who were lowly and those who were powerful, came silently and in tears to pay their tribute to the Daughter of Charity who, in one way or another, had profoundly touched their lives and the lives of their loved ones. It was perhaps Madame Mallet, with whom, as mentioned in Chapter IX, Sister

\(^{66}\) Le Camus, Mémoires de Melun.
\(^{67}\) Ibid.
\(^{68}\) Desmet, Sœur Rosalie, 279.
Rosalie collaborated to place children orphaned during the cholera epidemic, who best described the scene around her remains. She had learned from one of the sisters the night before that her friend was dying. The next day a messenger arrived to inform her that the end had come and that “the entire street and the area around the sisters’ house were filled with a crowd in tears.” At 4 o’clock she went to the little house on rue de l’Épée-de-Bois to pay her respects and to comfort the “poor Sisters who had lost... a true mother.” In her journal entry, dated 10 February 1856, she records what she found:

...[The Sisters] welcomed me with open arms and great affection and led me to the holy deceased [who was] sleeping so peacefully. Her room was connected to the chapel. Through a large open doorway, you could see a small bed, surrounded by tall candles, facing the altar. On it, dressed in the habit of a Daughter of Charity, her hands folded on a small crucifix, the blessed Sister [Rosalie] rested from her labors. Her face was unaltered; her coloring was only as pale as usual. I knelt to pray, not for her, but for her afflicted daughters, the continuation of her works, and my dear ones.

Sister Rosalie and Madame Mallet were close friends who shared their hopes and fears. In her journal, Madame Mallet recalls one such confidence:

Ah! How sweet to contemplate such a calm and serene death! What a subject of envy! But let us fear nothing. The Lord is faithful, “He will watch over our departure.” This dear sister was afraid of death. Many times she said to me, “I fear my weakness. I am frightened that suffering will shake my faith.” Several times she expressed the desire not to be told that her last moment was approaching “because,” she used to

700 de Witt, Une belle vie, 125.
701 Ibid.
say, “a Daughter of Charity should always be ready to confess her sins, abandon all, and die.” Her sisters also thanked God because her illness led quickly to delirium, thus, the administration of Extreme Unction was the only ceremony that could take place. The good... pastor of Saint-Médard rejoiced with them saying, “Be at peace! She is leaving for Paradise.”

I returned from the district very moved but feeling myself more in communion with this holy daughter in heaven than I had been on earth.\(^{702}\)

Once again, we turn to Melun, this time in his biography where he describes the crowd that came for two days to pay their respects to the deceased. He writes:

The entire Saint-Marceau district headed for the... house on [rue de] l’Épée-de-Bois. Laborers left their work to join the procession. Mothers brought their children. The elderly and the sick were brought there. They wanted to see, one more time, the [woman] who had been the protectress of all their families, and utter a prayer of gratitude. They kissed her hands and feet. They touched her body with books, rosaries, and handkerchiefs. They argued over pieces of her clothing as if they were relics.... Each person wanted to bring home, as a blessing and a protection, something she had used or [something] that had touched... her earthly remains.\(^{703}\)

Perhaps an even greater phenomenon was the religious silence that pervaded the usually boisterous district. Moreover, the inhabitants had a single preoccupation, to pay homage to their benefactress. During the two days between Sister Rosalie’s death and her funeral, not one person came to the sisters’ house seeking assistance.

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\(^{702}\) Ibid., 124-125.

\(^{703}\) Melun, \textit{Vie de la sœur Rosalie}, 244-245.
In addition to the inhabitants of the Mouffetard district, a large number of persons came from all over Paris to pay tribute to her. There were her former pupils and collaborators; priests from the parishes of the city; religious men and women; bishops who mingled with the crowds of poor persons to bless her remains, among them Cardinal Louis-Jacques-Maurice de Bonald, Archbishop of Lyons, ordained at Saint-Sulpice (1812), who prayed over her body and expressed his regrets that another commitment would prevent him from presiding at her funeral; and the Archbishop of Rouen, Louis-Marie-Edmond Blanquart de Bailleul, one of her oldest collaborators, also ordained at Saint-Sulpice (1819), who touched his pectoral cross to her body as to the relics of a saint.  

This outpouring of respect and affection, from all levels of society and a broad spectrum of political and religious views, speaks to Sister Rosalie's great gift, her ability to unite all those who shared her Vincentian vision of the service of those who were poor. She died on 7 February 1856, the seventy-first wedding anniversary of her parents, Jean-Antoine Rendu and Marie-Anne Laracine, who were married in the church of Lancrans on 7 February 1785. Moreover, her mother preceded her in death by three days. Marie-Anne Laracine was the earliest and arguably the most significant influence in Sister Rosalie's life. She planted and nourished the seeds of the love of God and those who were poor in little Jeanne-Marie Rendu's heart. These would one day bear fruit in Sister Rosalie, a Daughter of Charity on fire with love for the poor and the "Apostle of the Mouffetard district," to whom thousands would come to express their gratitude and pay their final
tribute. Sister Rosalie’s funeral would be the first decisive act in her growing reputation for sanctity which culminated in her Beatification by Pope John Paul II in Rome on 9 November 2003. Let us now turn to the nearly 150 year process leading to that day.

THE CHARITY OF JESUS-CHRIST URGES ME (S.P.)

Jeanne Marie in Religion
Rendu, Sister Rosalie
Died 7 Feb. 1856 70th Year
She was the eye of the Blind
the Foot of the Lame
Mother of the Poor
Support of the Orphan

She saw only God and Charity in everyone and everywhere!

Death card of Sister Rosalie Rendu.
Archives, Congregation of the Mission, Paris