CHAPTER VI

AT THE SERVICE OF THE POOR OF THE MOUFFETARD DISTRICT

CARE OF THE SICK POOR IN THEIR HOMES

On 1 August 1617, a then little known French priest, Vincent de Paul, took up his duties as pastor of the church of Saint-André in the tiny village of Châtillon in southeastern France, near the Swiss border. On 21 August of the same year, the seminal event for the Vincentian mission of service to those who were poor took place there. At first sight, nothing appears to be out of the ordinary in the incident. It would, however, have far reaching consequences. It proved to be the first act in Vincentian health care - the service of the sick poor in their homes.

The story has become well known since Vincent, himself, recounted it. On Sunday morning, 21 August, while he was vesting for Mass, he was informed that there was a family in the parish in great misery because they were all poor and sick and had no one to care for them. His immediate reaction was to preach, and he obtained the desired result. Some fifty women of the parish rushed to the aid of the family, as did Vincent himself. The very amplitude of the response caused him to consider the efficacy of this outpouring of generosity. Louis Abelly, Bishop of Rodez and the Saint’s first biographer, offers us Vincent’s personal reflections on the experience:

This undoubtedly shows that these people have great charity, but it is not well organized. The poor sick family will be overwhelmed with so much in such a short time, most of which will spoil. Afterward they will be no better off than before.

That very evening, the notoriously slow acting Vincent had laid the foundation for home health care. At the end of his account of the incident he relates what he did the following day, “I proposed

180 CED, 9:244; see also CED, 9:209.
to all those good ladies, who had been animated by charity to visit these people, to group together to make soup, each on her own day, and not only for them but for those who might come afterwards.”

Vincentian health care – home nursing – was initiated.

The beginnings were humble. Little by little the Confraternities of Charity, as they would be called, spread throughout the French provinces. Then, as Vincent’s influence expanded to the Court of King Louis XIII, they were begun among the most wealthy and prominent women of Paris. Here the groups became known as the Ladies of Charity. They would reach out to those who were poor in the capital. What would prove to be a very different undertaking was the service of the sick poor of the countryside. The Ladies soon realized that they needed help. It was to come in the person of Louise de Marillac and the country girls that Vincent sent to her to be trained to work with these Ladies. On 29 November 1633, a few of these village girls grouped together in Louise de Marillac’s home and the Company of the Daughters of Charity was born.

The service of the sick in their homes would expand to hospitals and hospices, but this initial thrust would remain. At the time of the death of the founders in 1660 the Daughters of Charity were in “houses of charity,” which combined home nursing and the education of little girls of meager means, in Paris and throughout the provinces. Their number would continue to expand until 1789. Then, in 1793, some houses were forced to close as the sisters were dispersed, but some, such as the Maison Saint-Martin where Sister Rosalie went

Families receiving assistance of bread and firewood at a "Maison de Secours."

Public domain

\[182\] CED, 9:244; see also CED, 9:209.
in 1802, would remain open and continue their service to the sick poor and to children.

The “bureaux de bienfaisance,” created by the Napoleonic government following the Revolution, brought in lay administrators, but the essence of the service provided by the Daughters of Charity did not change. Louise de Marillac had begun the tradition of close collaboration with lay and civil authorities when, in 1639, she drew up a contract with the city officials of Angers for the Daughters of Charity to take over nursing care at the Hôpital de Saint-Jean-l’Évangéliste. Thus, when the “maisons de secours” were established, the Daughters of Charity moved into the system without too much difficulty and sometimes with considerable success. An increase in meaningful collaboration occurred when Sister Rosalie became superior of the house on rue de l’Épée-de-Bois. The works of the “houses of charity,” as conceived by the Napoleonic government, were similar but not identical to those of the era of the founders. The sick poor were visited in their homes and assisted “corporally and spiritually” as they had been since the beginning. Under the new regime, the sisters’ role was to deliver the medicines, visit the sick, and distribute assistance in conjunction with the administrators of the Bureau of Public Assistance.

Early on, the administrators saw that they faced a dilemma: how to keep the list of clients up-to-date, adding those who found themselves suddenly in need either because of illness or unemployment, and eliminating those who were not from the neighborhood or who no longer needed assistance. The aftermath of the Revolution of 1848 furnished them with a useful example of potential abuses inherent in administration from afar. Eager to assist the indigent families of the Mouffetard area that had been particularly devastated by the conflict, the administrators generously provided all who presented themselves with assistance. Things got out of hand quickly as all the needy and less needy of Paris descended upon their distribution centers. But the administrators had much earlier discovered the benefits to be derived from close collaboration with religious women and volunteers who knew these families well and could readily and reliably attest to their changing conditions. Sister Rosalie, the sisters,

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184 CED, 13:423.
185 Melun, Vie de la sœur Rosalie, 39.
and their lay collaborators filled this role extremely well. Some of the sisters who were involved in this service were paid by the Bureau of Public Assistance, as were the school teachers. We do not know exactly when Sister Rosalie stopped teaching and began devoting most of her energy to the service of those who were sick or indigent. It was certainly her principal activity once she became superior of the house in 1815. It seems, however, to have happened before that as her reputation is based largely upon it and that reputation was already well established in 1815. Melun tells us:

> When, at the age of twenty-eight [or twenty-nine, depending on the month she was appointed, which we do not know], she was named superior, the quarter celebrated her appointment as a feast. To express their joy, the administrators [of the Bureau of Public Assistance] gave her a gift of a complete set of clothing.

It is interesting to note here that, as with other significant community events in Sister Rosalie’s life, there is nothing in the Archives of the Daughters of Charity in Paris concerning her appointment as superior. The only reference to this is the paper wrapper around a community publication of January 1816 that is addressed to, “My dear Sister RENDU, Daughter of Charity, at the “Maison de Bienfaisance” [House of Charity] Parish of Saint-Médard, rue des Francs-Bourgeois, Faubourg Saint-Marceau, near Scipio in Paris.” Community publications were customarily sent in the name of the superior of the house. There is no reference to Sister Rosalie on the wrapper of the same publication in January 1815. She was most likely appointed sometime in 1815. [The wrappers, which have since disappeared, were in the archives of the house of the Daughters of Charity in the Parish of Saint-Médard, later transferred to 32, rue Geoffroy-Saint-Hilaire, known today as the “Maison Sœur-Rosalie.”]

Whatever the date, it is this Sister Rosalie whom we must come to know not only for her accomplishments but also as the person behind those deeds. Let us look first at the work itself, and then let us try to discern something of the character of the woman who became the “Apostle of the Mouffetard district.”

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186 Ibid., 181-82.
187 Ibid., 41.
As mentioned previously, the house of the Daughters of Charity on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois was one of the four designated "maisons de secours" in the XIIth arrondissement. As superior of the house after 1815, Sister Rosalie also had full charge of the work. She was the liaison with the civil administration and she directed the work of the sisters involved in the services provided.

Providing for the needs of those who are poor.
_Archives, Daughters of Charity, Paris_

It must be pointed out from the outset that Sister Rosalie herself had no professional formation for the care of the sick. Neither did the other sisters of her house who served the sick. As in the early days of the Company, they distributed food and medicine and performed some basic health procedures, particularly one that continued to be widely used, bloodletting. As with the first sisters, Sister Rosalie and her companions were trained by those sisters already skilled in this admittedly dangerous treatment. We learn from Sister Tissot, who was a school teacher, how this training was done:

Sister Rosalie insisted that all the young sisters who taught school learn how to let blood and to prepare dressings... Every morning from 7:00-8:00 A.M., and on Thursdays and Sundays, we were expected to go, each of us in turn, to the treatment room as soon as we learned that there would be a bloodletting. We
were expected to hold the basin and to watch the sister performing it very carefully. Our good Mother also came to let blood, a procedure that was very common at the time. She explained how we should go about it. She told us, “I will not have you read a treatise on bloodletting. If you realized the danger, you would be too afraid. Place your confidence in God, make the sign of the cross, ask your guardian angel to guide your hand, and pay strict attention to the explanations you are given. This is the training all our sisters have received and nothing has ever gone wrong for them here.”

Sister Rosalie had been attracted to the Daughters of Charity by the care of the sick poor she had witnessed, and in which she had participated, as a postulant in their hospital in Gex. Moreover, as a young teacher, she had visited the sick poor on Sundays and during school vacations. Thus, she was as prepared as she could have been to assume responsibility for this vital work in an area of Paris where the sick would otherwise receive no assistance at all.

Sister Rosalie also had the rare gift, for such a strong personality, of knowing her limitations and engaging in the collaboration she needed to assure quality service. None were more important in this service than doctors. One such collaborator and advisor was a Doctor Jarroilhet. It appears that, in 1828, he was criticized to the administration of the Bureau of Public Assistance for not leaving his office often enough to care for the sick. His letter to Monsieur Colette de Baudicour, Administrator of the 16th division of the Bureau of Public Assistance and Sister Rosalie’s close collaborator and friend, reveals not only his contributions to the assistance of the sick in this miserable quarter, but also those of Sister Rosalie and her companions. He wrote:

...it would be impossible to see all the sick clients of the “bureau de charité” and to follow up on their illnesses which, ordinarily, present no danger.... It is enough for me to see them when they are seriously ill and to tell the sisters what needs to be done. Moreover,
I have always been called whenever the case merited it and [the sisters] have followed my instructions exactly. I can only be satisfied with the manner in which they act toward the sick poor. Moreover... I provided three periods for free medical consultation for the poor and for workers in the neighborhood. One was on Wednesday at 1:00 P.M. at the sisters’ house... I am pleased here to pay justice once again to the Sisters of Charity who have always seconded my [work] with all the zeal of which they are capable.188

Sister Rosalie had an even closer medical collaborator, Doctor Dewulf, whom she first met in 1835 when he was a medical student and lived in the Mouffetard district. François-Albert Chappoteau, C.J.M., a Eudist priest and Doctor Dewulf’s grandson, testified to this during the Cause of Beatification. He said that her memory had remained alive in his family because of “the very great influence” she had upon his grandfather.190 She had cared for him during a period of serious illness when he was a student, and later supported him by her advice. Early on, she brought him to visit the sick and the indigent of the Mouffetard district. These lessons never left him and once he became a doctor, as he practiced medicine in the quarter, he continued to respond to Sister Rosalie’s appeals.191 A letter to Doctor Dewulf reveals how much she had come to rely upon him for the care of the sick poor. During the summer of 1838, the young doctor had gone to Calais to visit his mother who was ill. The number of seriously ill patients in the district must have increased because Sister Rosalie urged him to return to Paris. She wrote:

You are often asked for... I believe that it is wise to recommend that you not prolong your absence more than two weeks. Do all that you possibly can not to go beyond that time frame... Let us know the time of your departure and be exact in the details.192

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188 Letter of Doctor Jarret to Monsieur Colette de Baudicou, 23 December 1828, AFCP; 8J2 - Ro - SM, XXXV.
190 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rend., Positio; Sommaire, 11.
191 Ibid.
192 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Doctor Dewulf, 22 August 1838, ACMP, Chappoteau papers.
This collaboration was to continue for a lifetime. Doctor Dewulf eventually became Sister Rosalie’s personal physician, and it would be he who would care for her during her last illness. According to his grandson, so great was Doctor Dewulf’s veneration for her that when he was "called to her bedside shortly before her death for a bloodletting, ...[he] collected a few drops of her blood on a cloth that he piously preserved." This remained in their family until fall of 2003, when they presented it to the Company of the Daughters of Charity just prior to Sister Rosalie’s Beatification on 9 November.

Sister Tissot’s testimony and Doctor Jarroilhet’s letter show that not only did the sisters visit the sick in their homes, but also that the ailing came to the “treatment room” in the sisters’ house on rue de l’Épée-de-Bois for care. And, remarkably for a poor area of XIXth century Paris, they even sought and received preventative care. Again it is Doctor Jarroilhet who tells us:

...to prove, in a yet clearer way, that the indigent population has always called forth my zeal, I have only to urge you to look into the number of children who have been vaccinated since I have been associated with the “bureau de charité.” You will see that our quarter is one of those where vaccinations are the most commonly given.

Nevertheless, Sister Rosalie’s great joy was to seek out the sick poor in their homes. The truth of this and the impact that it had on the people of the Mouffetard district is, perhaps, best summed up by a descendant of these very people, a humble newspaper merchant who testified during her Cause of Beatification. The 66-year-old Albert Billaud knew of Sister Rosalie from his grandfather, from workers of his parents’ generation and had heard of her from people of every class with whom he chatted as he sold them the evening paper. He responded with great simplicity to the questions addressed to him about her, telling the Tribunal:

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193 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire, 12; see also Ibid., 72-74, for the testimony of Doctor Dewulf’s daughter on the same subject.
194 Letter of Doctor Jarroilhet to Monsieur Colette de Baudicour, 23 December 1828, AFCP, 8J2- Ro - SM, XXXV.
195 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire, 20.
Sister Rosalie’s charity for the poor was limitless. Day and night, she gave of herself for them and for their children without counting the cost. One might say that she never took any rest. She went into homes to visit the sick and the suffering. She did the cleaning and gave them the care they required. She usually brought along some little delicacy for their meal in her basket. The old people used to say, “When they beatify her, we want to see her with her basket on her arm.”

Melun also speaks of Sister Rosalie’s devotion to the sick poor and her fidelity in visiting them in their homes and obtaining assistance for them:

As soon as Sister Rosalie learned that one of her clients was ill, she hastened to the bedside. If other duties obliged her to leave the sick, she constantly sought news of them, was preoccupied about them, and shared her concern for them with all around her. The doctors, themselves, for whom the great number of [sick] left so little time for personal involvement or emotion, could not withstand her entreaties. She implored with such fervor, she beseeched them with such consternation, that they took special care of her... clients. Their respect, their admiration, and the desire that she called forth in all of them to share in her works... led them to increase the number of their visits and to make every effort to save her “beloved poor.”

Melun tells us of the beneficial effect of Sister Rosalie’s visits on the sick themselves and on their families. She brought peace and resignation for the dying and calm and courage for those who would be left behind. The family would not be abandoned. For those who would recover, she brought little delicacies to facilitate the process: a warm bathrobe, a comfortable chair, some fruit that had been given

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186 Ibid., 21.
187 Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 51.
to her. Thus, the physical care of the sick and their families was never separated from spiritual assistance. In this, Sister Rosalie was continuing the tradition of Vincentian health care that dated from its origins.

The sisters' house itself, however, was to become a magnet drawing all types of persons needing assistance. They came to the little "dispensary" for medicines and for treatments, where a doctor was available for the more serious cases on a weekly basis, but they also came for spiritual and material assistance. Frequently all these aspects of poverty - physical, material, and spiritual - combined to produce misery in individuals and in whole families. The collaboration between Sister Rosalie and Monsieur Colette de Baudicour is revealing in showing the people served and their needs.

"Dispensary" at rue de l'Epée-de-Bois.
Archives, Congregation of the Mission, Paris

In her testimony during Sister Rosalie's Cause of Beatification, Marthe-Jeanne Colette de Baudicour speaks of the value that her great-great-uncle, who was Administrator of the 16th division of the Bureau of Public Assistance in the Saint-Marcel district when Sister Rosalie became the superior of the "house of charity" there, placed on their collaboration. Although his role was that of an administrator with general responsibility for the "house of charity," he preserved all 403 letters that he received from Sister Rosalie between 7 August 1841 and 14 February 1849. Mademoiselle Colette de Baudicour inherited them from her grandfather who had "put them into a packet with

\[198 \text{ Ibid.}, 51-52.\]
explicit instructions to his descendants to take great care of them in
the hope that someday the cause of the Servant of God would be
introduced."

Presenting all these letters here would, of course, be out of the
question. Nonetheless an examination of them, underlining certain
relevant points, will be useful in determining the type of persons in
need that Sister Rosalie and the sisters served; her manner of dealing
with civil authority; and something of the woman behind the action.
Before beginning this examination, it would be well to point out
that these "letters" were essentially notes recommending clients for
various forms of assistance.

Let us turn now to the first point, namely the type of client
served. It is certain that all types of persons in need came to the little
house on rue de l'Épeé-de-Bois and were welcomed and served by
Sister Rosalie and the sisters. Nevertheless, she seems to have had
a special predilection for one of the most vulnerable segments of the
population of the Mouffetard district, namely, the elderly. The vast
majority of Sister Rosalie's letters to Monsieur Colette de Baudicour
seek assistance for them. She speaks of the elderly who are lame, blind
or infirm. She pleads for those who suffer from the cold. Each client is
listed by name, address, age, and infirmity. She specifies the amount
of money that each one needs and one has the clear impression, as the
administrator of public assistance must have had, that she knew each
of them personally.200

Sister Rosalie's concern for the aged of the quarter is also
seen by an unusual request to Monsieur Colette de Baudicour. On 4
December 1828, she wrote to him:

I come to you to ask for the authorization to distribute
to the elderly, who cannot come to your office without
aid, the assistance that your charity so kindly gives
them each month. They are all good and excellent
people in need. I will be careful to note any deaths
because, at their age, these are days of grace....

O, Monsieur, how grateful we are for the good you
do for these unfortunate people! We join our prayers.

199 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio: Sommaire, 23.
200 See Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio, 53-60, where 24 letters are
reproduced.
to theirs that God may reward you, even in this life, for your good works. I assure you that your aid is well used and that all these people deserve your kind attention.

With my respect and profound gratitude,

Your very humble servant,

I assisted nine infirm octogenarians for the month of December. I will give out letters only with your permission.\textsuperscript{201}

It would appear that her request was granted. When one reflects on the tension, even animosity, that often existed between Church and State, particularly since the Revolution of 1789, this kind of relationship with civil authority was extraordinary. Nor was Sister Rosalie afraid to speak of spiritual matters to those who, in principle at least, assisted persons who were poor for social and/or political reasons rather than religious ones.\textsuperscript{202} That Monsieur Colette de Baudicour saved her letters, which he could have looked upon as only business correspondence, indicates the extent to which Sister Rosalie touched his life and added a dimension to his civil service.

\textsuperscript{201} Letter of Sister Rosalie to Monsieur Colette de Baudicour, 4 December 1828, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Bi.

\textsuperscript{202} Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio, 53-60.
This brings us to our second point, namely, Sister Rosalie's dealings with civil authority. Monsieur Colette de Baudicour was surely the civil administrator with whom she dealt for the longest period of time and with whom her personal relationship appears to have been the closest. He responded favorably to her requests for vouchers for the people whom the sisters served. In her notes, she repeatedly thanks him for his devotedness to all in need. He appears to have been her superior as an administrator, but he was also her collaborator and her friend who hoped, that one day, she would be declared a saint.\footnote{Ibid., 23.}

But he was not the only civil administrator with whom Sister Rosalie dealt. There is a letter dated 10 March 1820 to Monsieur Hucherard, Administrator of the Bureau of Public Assistance on rue d'Enfer.\footnote{Letter of Sister Rosalie to Monsieur Hucherard, 10 March 1820, Departmental Archives, Tarn-Garonne, Dossier Hucherard.} On 10 April 1836, Sister Rosalie wrote to another lay administrator, Monsieur Chaurent, Commissioner of the Poor of Paris, on behalf of two young men. One had already been placed in a public institution and she was seeking a place for the second. The tone of her letter seems to indicate that this is not her first dealing with the Commissioner. It also reveals how well she knew her clients and how eloquently she could plead their cause. She concludes, "If I am indiscreet in my requests, forgive me and find me guilty only [of trusting] in your immense charity which never tires of doing good." She then goes on to add a list of her clients for his consideration.\footnote{Letter of Sister Rosalie to Monsieur Chaurent, 10 April 1836, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 18.}

We also have three letters of Sister Rosalie to Monsieur François, Secretary of the Town Hall of the XII\textsuperscript{th} arrondissement. This time she is writing on behalf of two men needing employment, and she urges Monsieur François to find work for them in the upcoming census. She evidently obtains this favor so she urges him to find additional work for one of them because of his difficult family circumstances.\footnote{Letter of Sister Rosalie to Monsieur François, 7 July 1836 and 16 July 1836, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 24 and Le 25.}

While we possess only three letters to him, the conclusion of the third would seem to indicate a closer collaboration. Sister Rosalie writes:

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It has been ages since you have given me the opportunity to do something that would please you. Please do not forget me. I would be delighted if you thought of me if you had some poor person whom you wanted to place in a hospice. I know that you have more resources than I do but I would be very grateful to share in your good works since this is the only way I have of showing my deep gratitude. 207

In addition, in the Archives of the Bureau of Public Assistance in Paris, there are two letters of Sister Rosalie to Monsieur Breton, who was treasurer of the work for victims of the 1849 cholera epidemic. 208 Thus, it is evident that Sister Rosalie collaborated closely with the civil authorities responsible for the assistance of those who were poor.

In his biography, Melun speaks at length of this collaboration and of the influence that Sister Rosalie exerted on the administrators whose "advisor" and "friend" she became. He tells us:

...[the administrators] chosen solely for the common good, with no preoccupation with political parties or systems, quickly discovered that no one understood better than Sister Rosalie the true situation of those living in poverty. From the beginning, they recognized her deep knowledge of the evils [besetting the indigent] and the remedies [for them]; the needs and the assistance [required]. She had a satisfactory response to all their questions, a solution for every difficulty. The aid that they confided to her for distribution multiplied in her hands and produced a hundredfold. Since, at the same time, she rejoiced in attributing to them the joy and the honor of her good works, she quickly became their advisor and their friend. Everything was carried out in keeping with her advice, or rather, by her hands. She was at one and the same time their commissioner and their Lady of Charity. 209

207 Ibid., 16 July 1836, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 25.
208 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Monsieur Breton, two letters, AAPF, Dossier œuvre du choléra.
209 Melun, Vie de la sœur Rosalie, 40-41.
The Revolution of 1830 would bring about renewed hostility between Church and State. Clergy and religious were removed from the administration of hospitals and hospices. Public “assistance” replaced “charity” in official communications and documents. Many of the administrators with whom Sister Rosalie had collaborated so successfully were removed and replaced by those who were openly anticlerical and determined to undermine the influence of the sisters in the assistance of those in need. According to Melun, who was working with Sister Rosalie during this period, she was untroubled by this and continued to seek to collaborate with them as she had in the past, humbly and gently sharing her expertise and, in the end, like their predecessors, they too “fell under the amiable yoke of her charity.”

It was this singular ability to collaborate with the existing political structure - as did Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac before her - that enabled Sister Rosalie to accomplish all that she did for the benefit of those weighed down by poverty. With the admiration and perhaps the exaggeration of a friend, Melun summed up how the recipients of Sister Rosalie’s charity viewed her role in the services they received:

Under successive regimes and until the end of her days, Sister Rosalie was, in the eyes of those who were poor, the representative of all the good that was accomplished in the Saint-Marceau district.

For Sister Rosalie, as for Saint Vincent, “the poor [were her] burden and [her] sorrow.” Where did she get the energy to carry out this potentially overwhelming task for nearly a half century in probably the most miserable area of Paris? Where did she get her strength - physical, human, and spiritual - to face the challenges that the onerous needs of the poverty stricken inhabitants of the Mouffetard district presented on a daily basis?

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210 Ibid., 42.
211 Ibid.
Thus far we have spoken only of Sister Rosalie's work with schoolchildren and the sick poor. Many other works will come to expand or complement these. So the question remains: "How did she do it?" Moreover, we must address here the question raised by her critics — and there are critics — "Did these marvelous deeds come at the price of her own spiritual growth and of her responsibilities to the sisters with whom she lived, and to the Company of the Daughters of Charity of which she was a member?" We shall now attempt to address the first of these concerns, that is "Did Sister Rosalie's tireless service of those who were poor interfere with that union with God to which she was called by her vocation as a Daughter of Charity?"