CHAPTER VII

THE WOMAN BEHIND THE WORKS

SOURCES OF SISTER ROSALIE'S ENERGY FOR
THE SERVICE OF THOSE WHO WERE POOR

Just as it is in the case of Vincent de Paul and his collaborator, Louise de Marillac, it is easy to lose the person behind the amazing catalogue of Sister Rosalie's accomplishments in the service of those who were poor. The mystic tends to disappear behind the person of action. Apostolic zeal clouds the examination of other equally important qualities and virtues. Moreover, for the founders of the Daughters of Charity, achieving the necessary balance between prayer and action, within the context of consecrated life lived in community, was a constant challenge, albeit a struggle, because of the crushing needs of those whom they were called upon to serve. Yet attaining this balance was the essential quality of their vocation. Late in her life, Louise de Marillac wrote a somewhat disconcerting letter in this regard to the early sisters who shared her vocation of service. In the very last letter that we have from her, dated 2 February 1660, five weeks before her death on 15 March 1660, she told Sister Jeanne Delacroix, Superior of the Hospital of Châteaudun:

I am sure that you are very busy and also that you take great care to help our sisters to strive for holiness... You realize that, without this, external actions, although they are for the service of those who are poor, cannot be very pleasing to God, nor can they merit a recompense for us because they are not united to those of Jesus Christ who always worked in the sight of God, His Father. You are well-rooted in this practice, my dear Sister, and thus you experience the peace of a soul that is dependent upon her Beloved.213

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213 Sullivan, Spiritual Writings, 678.
Elsewhere Louise had stressed this same point. In 1645, she warned the sisters of the Hospital of Angers that service without personal holiness was “useless” to them. She wrote:

…it is not enough to be engaged in the service of the sick... although this is a blessing you will never be able to esteem enough. What is necessary is to have true and solid virtues which you know are essential to carry out well the work in which you are so happy as to be employed. Without that, my Sisters, your work will be almost useless to you.214

While daunting, the task of discovering how Vincent and Louise attained this necessary balance and found the spiritual energy to serve such a large sector of suffering humanity is facilitated by thousands of pages of their own writings, as well as by the numerous biographies and studies that have been written on them these past three hundred years. We are less fortunate with Sister Rosalie. We possess only 322 letters written by her, plus the aforementioned notes requesting assistance for individual clients. Moreover, the biographies that have appeared tend to stress Sister Rosalie’s social works or her extraordinary activity during the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848 and the cholera epidemics of 1832, 1849, and 1854. Furthermore, they are largely a retelling of Armand de Melun’s biography.215 This latter text is of inestimable value for any work on Sister Rosalie and we cite it extensively. Guillaume-André de Berthier de Sauvigny, C.J.M., and Léonce Celier, both of the Historical Commission for Sister Rosalie’s Cause of Beatification, support this view as does Father Beaudoin, who prepared the Positio.216

Despite the unquestioned importance of Melun’s work, however, it too fails to reveal the consecrated woman behind the social action. In his biography, Le Vicomte de Melun d’après ses Mémoires et sa Correspondance, the Church historian, Monseigneur Louis Baumard, points out this deficiency when he writes:

214 Ibid., 129-130.
215 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio, 306-311.
216 Ibid., 307-308.
Some may have wanted such a work to have gone beyond the surface and the author, rather than being satisfied with painting the Servant of God’s outpouring of charity, to have been able to penetrate [Sister Rosalie’s] interior spiritual and religious life where the love of neighbor bursts forth from the brilliant flame of the love of God. We have seen enough of Sister Rosalie, the servant of those who were poor. We have not seen enough of the Spouse of Jesus Christ.

Let us now try to discern, beneath the cornette of the servant of those who were poor, the visage of the “Spouse of Jesus Christ,” and determine the source of the seemingly inexhaustible energy that enabled Sister Rosalie to serve the poorest and most abandoned inhabitants of the Mouffetard district of Paris for more than half a century. To do this, we will rely primarily on Sister Rosalie’s correspondence and on the testimony of those who knew her best. Since we, like Monseigneur Baunard, believe that her energy was rooted in the love of God, we shall seek to discover how this love manifested itself.

Vincent de Paul told the first Daughters of Charity that they were to be totally “given to God for the service of persons who are poor.”

Before all else, they were called to unconditional commitment – the gift of their lives and of their whole being to God. The Vincentian scholar, André Dodin, C.M., points out that Vincent de Paul, in his writings, repeats some form of the expression, “Let us give ourselves to God,” 573 times. This *sine qua non* of the life of the Daughter of Charity, Servant of the Poor, is reflected in the evolution of the Rule of the Sisters of the Hospital of Angers, the first hospital staffed by the Daughters of Charity and, as such, the prototype of those that would follow. This foundation dates from 1639, six years after the establishment of the Company. Vincent and Louise had learned from experience just how difficult it is to keep one’s priorities straight.

There are three copies of this rule preserved in the National Archives in Paris. It is evident that one of them was a draft as it contains

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218 CED, 9:534.
numerous additions and corrections. Initially Vincent de Paul had written that the Daughters of Charity were going to Angers “to assist the sick poor” and “to honor Our Lord, Father of the Poor.” He then crossed out the sentence and reversed the order, placing the spiritual motivation, “to honor Our Lord, Father of the Poor,” first, thus giving us the text as it appeared on 1 February 1640. The change is not stylistic. It recognizes the spiritual basis necessary for all effective service of those who are poor.

This is the tradition in which Sister Rosalie was formed as a servant of those who were poor. Did it remain the basis of her prodigious accomplishments, or did the very magnitude of the misery that surrounded Sister Rosalie cause her, on occasion, to lose focus? What does she, herself, tell us of this perennial struggle and how did those around her perceive her?

As a child in Confort, Sister Rosalie had been attracted by prayer. She found an environment favorable to the expression of her piety when in boarding school with the Ursulines in Gex. Because of this, she was drawn to their semi-cloistered way of life. At the same time, she was attracted by the service of the sick that she had witnessed among the Daughters of Charity at the hospital in the same city. She seems to have been able to discern, even at the age of fifteen, that the vocation of the Daughters of Charity combined the two great loves of her life: love of God and love of persons who were poor. All her life, she continued to repeat a canticle she had heard at the time, describing the spirit in which the Daughter of Charity was called to serve all those in need. Thus Sister Rosalie knew, from the very beginning, that the energy required to devote herself to the service of those who were poor and abandoned came only from God.

In 1807, when she sealed, by vow, the gift of herself to God to serve Him in the person of those who were poor, she again expressed her awareness that the strength to persevere in so difficult a vocation came from God. It seems appropriate to cite it again here:

...the duties of my holy state give me little time because the service of those who are poor requires continual care from the Sisters of Charity who have taken as their heritage this honorable task – which is

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\item \footnotesize Filles de la Charité, Dossier Angers, AN: S.6160.
\item \footnotesize Cantique de la Compagnie des Filles de la Charité, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Doc. 28.
\end{itemize}
a great satisfaction for me – to be employed in the service of these poor ignorant persons who do not know the One who created them.

Oh, yes, my dear Aunt [Jeanne Laracine], every moment of the day makes me discover the happiness I enjoy of having been called to a state which affords me all that I need to work out my salvation with confidence.... Please, my dear Aunt, pray to Our Lord for me so that He will grant me the grace to accomplish His will as I should.  

But these are early texts we have already cited when speaking of the beginnings of her vocation and her first steps as a Daughter of Charity. What do we know of Sister Rosalie once the demands of the service of persons who were poor became such that they could have become all-consuming? Let us look first at her correspondence with her family and see what it reveals on this point.

The 39 extant letters of Sister Rosalie to members of her family show clearly her preoccupation with the overwhelming needs of those whom she, and the sisters of the house on rue de l’Épée-de-Bois, served. Indeed her correspondence with her cousin, Eugène Rendu, while expressing her love of family, frequently includes requests for this man of considerable influence to intervene on behalf of persons in need. Over and over she advances the needs of those whom she is called to serve as her reason for not writing to her family or not being able to visit them. On one occasion she told her mother, “I am ashamed, my dear mother, for having gone so long without writing to you. You will forgive me because of our incessant work.”

222 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Jeanne Laracine, 28 April 1807, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 1 JL 1 Ro - La 1.
223 See: Letters of Sister Rosalie to Eugène Rendu, AFCP: 1 October 1848, 8J2 - Ro - Le 221 ER 1; 12 December 1849, Le 236 ER 2; 5 March 1850, Le 241 ER 3; 8 July 1850, Le 243 ER 4; 28 October 1850, Le 245 ER 5; 27 March 1853, Le 265 ER 6; 14 August 1854, Le 277 ER 8; 18 March 1855, Le 287 ER 9; 23 June 1855, Le 288 ER 10; 9 August 1855, Le 290 ER 11; 9 August 1855, Le 291 ER 12; n.d., Le 299 ER 13; n.d., Wednesday, Le 300 ER 14; 12 June, Le 301 ER 15.
224 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Madame Veuve Rendu, 22 November 1848, AFCP, 8J2 Ro - Le 224; See also Letter of Sister Rosalie to Madame Veuve Rendu, 14 April 1851, Ro - Le 250; Letter of Sister Rosalie to Monsieur Chaplun, Pastor of Confort, 13 July 1852, Ro - Le 259, Ro - La 26.
On the other hand, Sister Rosalie’s letters to her mother, to her cousin, Mélanie Rendu, to her aunt, Jeanne Laracine, and to her cousin, Abbé Philibert Neyroud, reveal her great affection for her family, for “all those who are dear [to her],” and the pain that separation from them caused her. In 1828 she wrote to her friend and confidant, Mélanie Rendu, who lived in Lancrans, “We must make sacrifices to separate ourselves from those we love.” This sacrifice became particularly acute for Sister Rosalie when her mother became ill. While she knew that Madame Rendu was being well cared for by family living in the area, it pained her not to be able to look after her personally. She wrote to the Pastor of Lancrans urging him to visit her mother as often as possible. Then she added, “Oh, how painful it is for me not to be able to assist her myself. I am making a real sacrifice to [our] Good God to be separated from her.” She also expressed her pain to her mother:

I certainly share in your suffering. I am infinitely afflicted not to be able to tell you this in person. Yes, my dear and tender mother, know that I am making a great sacrifice. It costs me a great deal.

Coupled with the pain of separation was a certain sense of guilt for leaving to others the care of her mother, whom she longed “to hold in [her] arms.” She regretted seeing her sister fulfilling a “duty” that she herself could “not fulfill.” But this feeling of guilt was overcome by her profound gratitude and constant prayer for those who reached out to her family in her stead. A letter to Mélanie Rendu sums up these often repeated sentiments. She wrote:

A thousand and another thousand times thank you for all that you have done for my dear relatives.

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225 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Mélanie Rendu, 19 March 1832, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 9; See also Ro - Le 53; Ro - Le 197.
226 Ibid., 18 May 1828, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 5.
227 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Monsieur le Vicaire de Lancrans, 26 February 1850, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - La 25.
228 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Madame Veuve Rendu, 9 September 1853, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 267.
229 Ibid.
230 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Monsieur le Vicaire de Lancrans, 2 February 1847, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 206.
They have received and continue to receive from you abundant proof of your good and charitable heart which, after the example of your honorable parents, is always open to those in need. Continue to extend your goodness, your wise advice, and your consoling care to them. You have a right to our gratitude. It can never be properly expressed. Know, my dear and true friend, that the memory of it will be in my prayers for the remainder of my life.231

By Sister Rosalie’s own admission, the pain of separation from her family was compounded by her great “sensitivity.”232 She made the joys and sorrows of those she loved her own. The death of her cousin, Sister Victoire Neyroud, Daughter of Charity, was a source of anguish to her. She wrote to her cousin, Abbé Neyroud, pastor of the church in Saint-Geney:

I have put off writing to you because I am indisposed due to my grief at the death of my dearly beloved Sister Victoire. I suffered from this and am still doing so. I cannot get used to this loss. It is leaving a huge void in my heart. In your prayers for her, do not forget me. I have great need of them.233

Sister Rosalie expresses the same grief at the loss of Sister Victoire in a letter to Monsieur Chaplux, pastor of the church in Confort. “I am sad and afflicted to no longer have her among us. She has left a great void in my heart.”234

It is clear that separation from those she loved was painful for Sister Rosalie. Yet in her pain we find her clinging to her vocation that she understood could “come only from God.”235 In suffering, which seemed to increase rather than diminish with the passage of time, she found strength in her love of God, particularly the suffering Christ. After the death of Sister Victoire she wrote:

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231 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Mélanie Rendu, 14 July 1841, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 53.
232 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Monsieur Neyroud, 5 February 1852, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 256.
233 Ibid.
234 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Monsieur Chaplux, 13 February 1852, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 257.
235 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Mélanie Rendu, 24 May 1829, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 6.
Pray to our Good God to grant me the spirit of faith which will strengthen me in my weakness and give me the courage to make the sacrifices that He asks of me. They are never-ending. The means to grow in virtue are not lacking.\textsuperscript{236}

Elsewhere, in a letter to her cousin, Mélanie, she spoke of the need to remain united to Jesus Crucified. She said:

Let us support one another on the way of the Cross and let us walk in the footsteps of our Divine Master. Following His example, let us carry [our Cross] with courage and confidence in His infinite Mercy.\textsuperscript{237}

By 1855, Sister Rosalie was fully aware that not only would she never see her loved ones in Confort again, but that she could not even write to them herself because she was losing her sight. A note that she added to a letter to her mother, written by one of her companions, Sister Vincent, reveals both her anguish and her recognition that the strength to bear this trial came only from union with God. She told her mother, whom she had seen only once since she left Confort at the age of fifteen:

My dear Mother,

I am sending you a few lines which will show you the extent of my infirmity. How keenly I feel the deprivation of not being able to tell you more! I do not need to ask you to pray for me so that [God] will grant me patience and resignation.

Your affectionate daughter,

Sister Rosalie\textsuperscript{238}

\textsuperscript{236} Letter of Sister Rosalie to Monsieur Neyroud, 5 February 1852, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le - 256.
\textsuperscript{237} Letter of Sister Rosalie to Mélanie Rendu, 8 October 1850, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 7.
\textsuperscript{238} Letter of Sister Rosalie to Madame Veuve Rendu, 18 July 1855, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 289.
By uniting her sufferings to those of Jesus Crucified, Sister Rosalie was imitating the foundress of the Daughters of Charity, Louise de Marillac, who, in 1643, had begun using the seal that was to become the seal of the Company. It bore the image of Jesus Crucified surrounded by the words of Saint Paul as she had modified them, “the Charity of Jesus Crucified urges us.” Life had taught Louise that her vocation was to unite herself to Jesus on the Cross. A text in her Spiritual Writings, dating from the period prior to the founding of the Daughters of Charity in 1633, is revealing. She wrote:

God, who has granted me so many graces, led me to understand that it was His holy will that I go to Him by way of the Cross. His goodness chose to mark me with it from my birth and He has hardly ever left me, at any age, without some occasion of suffering.²³⁹

Late in her life, in a conference to the sisters entitled “On the Pure Love We Have Vowed to God,” Louise de Marillac asked her Daughters, and those who would follow them, to respond unreservedly to the call of Christ on the Cross. She urged them:

Let us take the first step in following Him which is to exclaim, “I desire it thus, my dear Spouse, I desire it thus. As proof thereof, I am going to follow You to the foot of Your Cross which I choose as my cloister. There, I shall leave behind all earthly affections because Your voice has called me and urged my heart to forget my people and my father’s house so as to be

²³⁹ Sullivan, Spiritual Writings, 711.
open to Your great love. Therefore, at the foot of this holy, sacred, and adored Cross, I sacrifice everything that might prevent me from loving, with all the purity that You expect of me, without ever aspiring to any joy other than submission to Your good pleasure and to the laws of Your pure love."^{240}

While Sister Rosalie had never read these lines, since the writings of Louise de Marillac were not published until the late XIXth century, she had certainly absorbed the teaching and made it the central element of her own spirituality, as it had been for the foundress and for those first Daughters of Charity. Sister Rosalie found the courage to separate herself from the family she loved so deeply and devote her life to the service of those who were poor in her union with Jesus Crucified. Moreover, her seemingly boundless energy in this service derived its sustenance from her vision of Jesus Crucified, loved and served in each person weighed down by misery that she encountered.

What else do we know of this “brilliant flame of the love of God” that burned in Sister Rosalie’s heart and sustained her energy in the service of those who were poor?^{241} First, it was rooted in her great confidence in the mercy and providence of God in her life, and in the lives of all those with whom she came in contact.

Sister Rosalie’s love of God was a humble, confident love. She considered herself an unworthy instrument. It appears that the more her reputation and influence grew, the more she believed that she needed divine mercy. It is appropriate to note here that, at the time, it was very unusual and, perhaps in the case of Sister Rosalie, unique, for a religious woman to be held in such high regard by virtually all sectors of society. Guillaume-André de Berthier de Sauvigny, C.J.M., of the Historical Commission for Sister Rosalie’s Cause of Beatification, pointed this out in his testimony. He declared:

I have been asked what I think about Sister Rosalie’s reputation for sanctity in the society of the era. I consider such a reputation to be truly exceptional at this time for a religious woman placed in the circumstances in which the Servant of God found

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herself. There are preachers, founders of religious orders or of works who have enjoyed a comparable renown but few, if any, religious women. What strikes me is this unanimous concert of praise coming from all classes of society and the full spectrum of opinion. In the eyes of her contemporaries, Sister Rosalie appeared as the incarnation of Christian charity in its purest and most unquestioned form.242

In all that she did, Sister Rosalie attributed the good that was accomplished to God and any shortcomings or failures to herself. In a letter to Cyprien Loppe, she wrote, "There is a void in my soul when I realize what I do not accomplish. And what I do is so imperfect. I am sad that this is so despite my hectic life."243

Sister Rosalie considered herself a sinner and the cause of the misery that surrounded her. When, in spite of all that she and her collaborators tried to do, she learned that in the Mouffetard district there still remained persons in need who were not served, she used to exclaim:

See what blame I deserve.... God will rightly hold me responsible for all these failures, for all this suffering. Great God, when will you give this quarter a more worthy and devoted servant so that you may bestow more blessings on these poor people?244

When she was praised for the good that she had achieved or reminded of the recompense that she would one day receive from God because of it, she was embarrassed and sought to contradict it. On one occasion, when she was doing just that, the oldest sister in the house, Sister Mélanie, responded, "You are perhaps right, Mother, but God, in seeing you, will say, 'Here is an old servant who has been in her house for fifty years, I must not leave her outside.'"245

In 1880, Claude-Philibert-Édouard Mounier, who had been a cabinet minister in the French government after the Revolution of

242 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire, 28.
243 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Cyprien Loppe, 12 February [1836], AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 16 L3.
244 Melun, Vie de la sœur Rosalie, 213.
245 Ibid., 214.
June 1848, wrote to Sister Rosalie's cousin, Eugène Rendu. He said that he had been sent to Sister Rosalie on behalf of Alphonse de Lamartine, Chief of the Executive Branch, to thank her for all that she had done for so many during this troubled period. He added that he still remembered her surprise, calm, and serenity in listening to him, and her response, “Sir, I thank you for what you are saying to me but I did not do what I believed to be my duty to receive expressions of gratitude. I serve God. It is from God that I await my recompense.”

Nevertheless, Sister Rosalie's conviction that she was an unworthy servant did not lead to discouragement because it was allied to an unshakable confidence in the mercy and providence of God. The resources of the house on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois were extremely limited and the needs of those whom the sisters served limitless. There were even times when there were no funds at all but, according to Father Desmet, Sister Rosalie did not worry. She had learned over the years that Providence never failed her. She would say to the sisters, “Let us accept... all that comes our way. God will send us enough money and enough goods, provided we use them well.”

It is in this same context that Desmet quotes another saying attributed to Sister Rosalie, but without indicating his source. He writes:

...She also used to say, “Fear nothing, Sisters, you will never be without assistance so long as your two hands are like this.” She would then stretch out one hand in the gesture of giving and extend the other to receive. She then added, “If one hand closes, it will be useless for the other to reach out.... Give with measure.... Manage well the goods of the poor and God will give to you in abundance.”

Sister Rosalie was quick to acknowledge the role of Divine Providence in the service the sisters rendered. After the particularly
rigorous winter of 1838, she wrote to Cyprien Loppe, “Providence assisted us. The resources were beyond what we had hoped for.”

Nor did she limit her confidence in Providence to material things. She trusted in it also, and perhaps more so, in the spiritual domain. When a niece was considering the consecrated life she wrote, “...all is subordinate to the designs of Divine Providence. She is asking God to make known His will to her.”

Allied to confidence in the goodness and mercy of God was a sincere desire to unite her will to the divine will. Sister Rosalie had many occasions throughout her life to submit her will to that of God. This was never easy for her, particularly when, as we have seen, it involved separation from those who were dear to her, be they family, sisters in community or collaborators. Indeed, it would be here that Sister Rosalie’s weakness might be found. It appeared very early as manifested in her suffering when Sister Tardy left the Maison Saint-Martin and in her emotional attachment to some things that her beloved first Superior left behind.

Later on, Sister Rosalie herself would acknowledge this weakness to her friend, Armand de Melun, who described the circumstances in his biography. He wrote:

Upon her arrival in the Saint-Marceau district, [Sister Rosalie] had developed such affection for Sister Tardy that, when the [superior] left the house of charity to go to the Hospice des Ménages, she was inconsolable. She admitted that, for years, she found it difficult to forgive the sisters of the Ménages for having taken her beloved superior away from her. Anything that [Sister Tardy] had left behind became sacred for her. The new superior wanted to combat this excessive attachment so she determined to remove any reminders of Sister Tardy. Poor Sister Rosalie was desperate. Age and the practice of overcoming herself had not yet brought her to the fullness of resignation. All that she could salvage from the process was a shoe that had belonged to this person whom she missed so much. She preserved it very carefully.

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249 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Cyprien Loppe, 18 February 1838, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 57 L15.
250 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Mélanie Rendu, 18 May 1828, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 5.
251 Melun, Vie de la sœur Rosalie, 199-200.
Giuseppe Guerra, C.M., who was the second theologian to examine Sister Rosalie’s writings during the Process of Beatification, found a similar weakness in a letter which Sister Rosalie wrote on 13 February 1844. In it, she confided to Mother Renée-Caroline Le Chasseur, Superioress of Bon-Sauveur in Caen, the chagrin that the sickness and death of two sisters of her community had caused her. She wrote:

It has been forever since I have had the honor and the pleasure of communicating with you. For the last six months I have had many sources for grief and great sacrifices to make. Two of my dear companions have succumbed to long and painful illnesses. My heart... has been broken under the weight of the cross. They suffered greatly but with admirable resignation and patience. They experienced peace and calm which gave them supernatural strength. They enjoyed all the riches of the Church, and their gratitude to God and to us deeply moved them.

Yes, my good Mother, I have lost two holy daughters. My heart felt some movements of revolt against the hand that struck us. However, I am confident that these two angels will obtain mercy for me. They will pray for me so long as I strive to imitate them. I am secure in this belief. You will sometimes pray for me, will you not, my good Mother? You have compassion for the weak and for all sorts of infirmities, remember me in your fervent prayers.

But more than these manifestations of “extreme sensitivity” which appeared during times of great trauma, Sister Rosalie realized that, in the long run, self-seeking could blind her to the designs of God in her life. She warned the sisters against losing sight of their place in the divine plan, and of falling into self-absorption. She
Saw preoccupation with personal needs and desires as “our most dangerous enemy.”

Sister Rosalie frequently reflected upon the struggle required to place the will of God before one’s own, and she insisted that both she and the sisters of her house strive to eradicate “self-love” from their lives. When warning them of its dangers, she spoke passionately, using expressions that were “so opposed to the moderation of her language.”

On one such occasion, when speaking of the insidiousness of self-seeking, she told them, “Look for it and you will find it at the bottom of everything. It disguises its appearance to trick us and to bring about our ruin. We must grab it by the throat and strangle it.”

It is, perhaps, this simplicity, this seeking of the will of God rather than her own in all things, that explains Sister Rosalie’s ability...

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254 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire, 35, 53.
255 Ibid., 35.
256 Ibid.
to relate to all sectors of society from the most elevated to the most humble. She appears never to have put herself forward but to have spoken to all who approached her with humility and respect. Sister Costalin tells us:

In her admirable naïveté, she was surprised that people came to seek her advice. "I don’t understand, Sisters, why these individuals come to ask for my opinion, but the Parisians are like that. I make it clear to them, nonetheless, that I am a poor country girl, lacking in education, intelligence, and common sense and that I tended animals in my native village." Then, despite her characteristic seriousness, she would start to laugh and add, "Our Good God is well aware that it is not my fault." And then she would go on, simply and seriously, to edify and to impress her multitude of visitors.  

In displaying this attitude, Sister Rosalie was imitating the founder of the Daughters of Charity, Vincent de Paul, who spoke to the great ones of his day in similar terms. Both were equally comfortable with those who were rich and those who were poor. Both kept their eyes fixed on God and sought to encounter and serve Him in all whom they met. Again, it is Sister Costalin who describes Sister Rosalie’s manner in greeting the "multitude of visitors" who came to the little parlor on rue de l’Épée-de-Bois. She tells us that her superior used to say:

"I derive what I can from [these visits]," she said one evening, when the crowd had been particularly large. "I point out the misery of my poor, so that [my visitors] may think of giving me something for them." She added, "There are people who come expecting to see an important person but when I approach them their expression clearly says, 'Is this all there is?'" The less polite they were, the more imperious or demanding,

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257 Ibid., 35-36.
the more cordially they were received. In her mind, it was an attitude of profound justice which made her act this way.\textsuperscript{258}

It was on occasions such as these that Sister Rosalie would go on to reiterate to the sisters Father Emery's counsel to her when she was very young. This counsel became a guiding principle in her attitude toward the rich, as well as toward those who were poor in whom she saw the face of God. She would say “Sisters, we are \textit{magnanimous}. All have the right to lay their burden upon us without our having the right to complain about it.”\textsuperscript{259}

It is apparent from all that has been said, and all that could be added, that Sister Rosalie's “love of neighbor burst forth from the brilliant flame of the love of God.”\textsuperscript{260} This, however, is invariably not enough to silence her critics. They are quick to point out that she lived her life as a Daughter of Charity and that, as such, she had specific obligations with regard to her spiritual life. These were clearly outlined in the Rules and tradition of the Company. Yet Sister Rosalie does not seem to have always been faithful in strictly observing them. The unrelenting demands of serving the desperately poor inhabitants of the Mouffetard district occasionally caused her to follow to the letter the adage of Saint Vincent “to leave God for God,”\textsuperscript{261} that is, to leave the God she found in prayer in the chapel to encounter Him present in those whom she served. Even her great admirer, Armand de Melun, admits this. He states:

Her numerous occupations often prevented her from devoting a lot of time to meditation and prayer. However, as soon as she was alone for an instant, her sisters would find her on her knees, in deep recollection. She rejoiced at her long periods of sleeplessness because, in this way, God granted her the time to pray.\textsuperscript{262}

\textsuperscript{258} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{259} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{260} Baunard, \textit{Le Vicomte de Melun}, 437-438.
\textsuperscript{261} CED, 9:319; 10:3, 95, 226, 541, 595; 13:556, 565.
\textsuperscript{262} Melun, \textit{Vie de la sœur Rosalie}, 217-218.
Moreover, Sister Rosalie was the superior of the house and therefore had the obligation of providing a good example to her companions. Sister Thérèse Deschaux, who was Superioress General of the Company from 1804-1809, composed a manual for local superiors. In it she wrote:

The principal preoccupation of the Sister Servant [local superior] must be the observance of the Rules, especially four-o’clock rising, fidelity to mental prayer, repetition of prayer, Friday Conferences, and respect for silence in appointed places and at appointed times. She should give example herself to her sisters and let them know, from time to time, that this exactitude is the best means for acquiring the spirit of the community and of persevering in it.  

How did the sisters of her house, to whom she owed this example of exactitude to the Rule, and who were likely to model their own lives and service on hers, perceive Sister Rosalie? Sister Costalin recounted that even toward the end, when Sister Rosalie was ill, she “rose faithfully at four A.M.” to make her meditation and that she “left mental prayer with her countenance illuminated by a holy expression.”

Sister Costalin goes on to say that Sister Rosalie was “very vigilant in preserving the time of prayer for her companions,” however, circumstances would arise that would force them “to leave God for God” and accompany their superior on a visit to someone needing their assistance. When this occurred, Sister Rosalie would say:

“Sister, let us begin our prayer!” She would then outline the subject and divide it into points in a few simple and clear words. She assumed a stance of holy recollection, with her eyes cast down, and she observed absolute silence. If we were in a carriage, the shades were lowered and nothing could distract her.

It is incontestable that these times for “leaving God for God” occurred
in Sister Rosalie’s life and that, according to Sister Cécile Maurin, the fifth witness in the Process of Beatification, she sometimes “arrived late at the sisters’ refectory [because] her charitable visits did not allow her always to be on time.”\textsuperscript{266} However, we learn from Sister Saillard that her superior performed her spiritual exercises “with great exactitude [and] that she was the first one [to arrive] in the chapel.”\textsuperscript{267}

More significant, perhaps, is the fact attested to by many that Sister Rosalie, in the midst of constant activity, sought to remain united to God or, as Saint Vincent would put it, “always to walk in the presence of God.”\textsuperscript{268} Again it is Sister Costalin who tells us:

The presence of God was familiar to her. We would often find her on her knees between visits or business matters. “I am trying to put myself once again in the presence of God,” she would reply in response to our indiscreet inquiries.\textsuperscript{269}

Armand de Melun, Sister Rosalie’s close collaborator in much of her activity, also testifies to this. He writes:

In the midst of the crowd, on her errands and on her visits, her heart prayed. While she was fulfilling her charitable duties, everything around her became a subject of meditation and of pious reflections. She said to a sister whom she was sending out, “Never do I make my meditation so well as I do on the street. Passersby for me are no longer anything but trees in a forest. I agree with the saint who compared the world to a large woods where the soul must never let itself be distracted by the underbrush.”

When she went out with one of her sisters, either on foot or in a carriage, she remained silent, responding to the questions or remarks addressed to her only by

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{267} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{268} CED, 9:180; see also CED, 9:291, 340, 422, 479; 10:730.
\textsuperscript{269} Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio: Sommaire, 34.
a word. She was in conversation with God.\textsuperscript{270}

While, as mentioned above, Sister Rosalie tried to preserve the time set aside for prayer for the sisters of the house, they too found themselves in situations where this did not seem possible. Melun tells us of the advice given by Sister Rosalie on one such occasion:

Like Our Lord, [Sister Rosalie] took the most ordinary events, the most commonplace facts as images of the spiritual life and made them the subject of her teaching. The sisters, detained by other obligations, had not been able to take care of the laundry until quite late. They complained that they did not have time to make their mental prayer. Their superior told them, “You can make it right here, without leaving your work. Reflect that your souls should be as white as these soapsuds and as light so that they can mount toward God; and that you will succeed in making your consciences as white and pure as this linen only by washing them in the waters of repentance.”\textsuperscript{271}

Sister Rosalie’s solution did not meet with universal approval within the Company of the Daughters of Charity. From the testimony of those who knew her well, this combining of work and meditation dictated by Rule appears to have been the exception rather than ordinary practice. Reflecting upon the great charitable activity Sister Rosalie was involved in from her earliest days in community, Sister Saillard said:

These exterior works, far from being detrimental to the young sister’s piety, united her daily, more and more, to Our Lord who had chosen her as his spouse. Humble and hidden, she drew from his Divine Heart, the source and model of all charity, an ever more tender compassion for his suffering members. They represented for her the One who had taken

\textsuperscript{270} Melun, \textit{Vie de la sœur Rosalie}, 218.
\textsuperscript{271} Ibid., 218-219.
upon Himself our weaknesses, who had borne our sorrows.  

Sister Saillard adds that Sister Rosalie also saw God in her sister companions, whom Jesus had likewise “chosen for his spouses.”

In the midst of her hectic life Sister Rosalie nourished her capacity to remain in the presence of God through spiritual reading. According to Melun, her preferred works were the *Imitation of Christ*, the writings of Saint François de Sales, whom she called her “dear friend and compatriot,” since he also was a native of the Jura, and especially the life and thoughts of Vincent de Paul. She sought to model her life on that of the founder and frequently quoted his maxims.

She also knew and loved Sacred Scripture well. Sister Costalin said that Sister Rosalie “had great devotion to the Epistles that were read every Saturday and she told [the sisters] to consider them as letters coming from heaven.” Moreover, she had them memorize 1 Corinthians 13 in which Saint Paul sets forth the attributes of charity.

If Sister Rosalie tried to remain constantly in the presence of God, whom she saw in the persons who surrounded her, she also lived in the company of the Blessed Virgin and the angels. Her devotion to Mary dated from her childhood. She grew up close to the chapel of Notre-Dame-du- Réconfort, and she used to bring her sisters and playmates to pray there to reward them for their good behavior.

As noted earlier, when Sister Rosalie entered the Company of the Daughters of Charity in 1802, her godfather, Father Emery, Superior General of the Sulpicians, was the spiritual guide for the newly re-established congregation. In her testimony concerning him in 1830, she stated, “He also powerfully exhorted us to have devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin. He recommended that we never fail to recite our rosary each day.” This devotion to Mary lasted her entire life. During the last years, as her sight failed and her activity was

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272 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 62.
273 Ibid., 65.
275 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 40.
276 Ibid., 38.
277 Ibid., 43.
278 Ibid., 81-82.
more limited, the rosary became her constant companion.279

Moreover, devotion to Mary had been a characteristic of the Daughters of Charity since their origins. In 1644, Louise de Marillac made a pilgrimage to Chartres where she consecrated the young company to Mary.280 Furthermore, in her Spiritual Testament, recorded by the sisters who attended Louise de Marillac during her final moments on earth, the foundress told her companions and their successors, “Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only Mother.”281

Sister Rosalie was certainly aware of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin who appeared in 1830 to Sister Catherine Laboure in the chapel of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, at 140, rue du Bac in Paris.282 Although she does not speak directly of them, she, like all the local superiors of the houses in Paris, went there each month for a conference given by the Director General, Jean-Marie Aladel, C.M. She must have gone to the chapel to pray to Mary as well as to Jesus, her Son. She also occasionally visited other Parisian sanctuaries dedicated to Mary, such as Notre-Dame-des-Victoires and Notre-Dame-de-l’Espérance in the nearby church of Saint-Séverin.

As a result of the apparitions of 1830, a medal was struck in

![Jean-Marie Aladel, C.M.
Director General of the Daughters of Charity.
Archives, Congregation of the Mission, Paris](image)

279 Ibid., 66.
280 See Sullivan, Spiritual Writings, 121-122.
281 Ibid., 835.
honor of Mary Immaculate. It was widely distributed and quickly became known as the "Miraculous Medal." Given the difficult situations that Sister Rosalie and her companions faced on a daily basis, it is probable that they too distributed the medal to those whom they served in the Mouffetard district. However, we have only one documented case indicating Sister Rosalie had done so. This comes to us from Marie-Théodore Ratisbonne, S.J., whose brother, Alphonse, had suddenly been converted from Judaism to Catholicism after having received the medal from the Baron Théodore de Bussières.

It seems that Sister Rosalie had discovered, in the district, a certain family that was poor. The mother was dying and would leave two young daughters, aged 11 and 14, behind. The father showed little interest in his children and he willingly agreed with his wife to confide them to Sister Rosalie, whom the couple asked to take responsibility for the girls' instruction. Since the family was Jewish, Sister Rosalie thought of Father Ratisbonne’s recently established work for the conversion of Jews to Christianity. She, therefore, spoke to Father Aladel and asked him to approach Father Ratisbonne. In the meantime, she gave the children Miraculous Medals and confided them to a pious woman of her acquaintance.

Marie-Théodore Ratisbonne, S.J. (right) – 1802-1884, and his brother Alphonse Ratisbonne (left) – 1814-1884.

Public domain

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283 Laurentin, The Life of Catherine Labouré, 79-81; 259-261.
Years later, Father Ratisbonne wrote of his meeting with Father Aladel:

The Sister of Charity, who was the organ of the Blessed Virgin in this matter, was Sister Rosalie Rendu, the same [sister] who, from her poor house on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois, in Paris, was for many years the force behind a very powerful movement of Christian charity.²⁸⁵

And in a letter to his brother, Alphonse, Théodore said:

The first two catechumens were sent through the intermediary of Father Aladel and a Sister of Charity. What a good omen! The Miraculous Medal is following the same pathway. Courage, courage! Neophytes will soon multiply like the medals. They will attract one another for the greater glory of God and of our good Mother.²⁸⁶

The great misery of the people to whom Sister Rosalie devoted her life could, at times, seem insurmountable. She derived her strength

²⁸⁵ Ibid., Volume I: 279.
²⁸⁶ Ibid., Volume I: 284.
to continue the struggle from her union with Christ, whom she served in each victim of poverty who came into her life. The horrors of the material world that surrounded her did not separate her from the spiritual reality in which she also moved. Melun states:

...in the midst of this perpetual contact with humanity, [Sister Rosalie] never lived separated from God, his saints [or] his angels. While exterior occupations seemed to tear her away from her interior [life] and to precipitate her outside of herself, her soul was in communication with the divine will, with the sufferings of Jesus Christ, and with the prayers and merits of the celestial spirits. From this perspective and this association, she gained the strength to master her human nature, devotedness to her brothers [and sisters], the love of mortification, and detachment from transitory things.\(^{287}\)

Sister Rosalie saw the service of those who were poor as a sharing in the work of the guardian angels. When she taught the young sisters the dangerous task of letting blood she would tell them, “Make the sign of the cross and ask your guardian angel to guide your hand.”\(^{288}\)

Desmet, who once again fails to cite his source, tells us that when Sister Rosalie and her companions were to distribute soup to the elderly, she would say, “Sister, let us greet these good elders’ angels. The angels are proud to guide the poor in whom God dwells. We are going to share in their ministry.”\(^{289}\) However great or small the task called for in the service of persons who were poor, Sister Rosalie remained united to God, His mother, and His angels. From this, she derived the energy to remain faithful to God in the total gift of herself in service to those in need.\(^{290}\)

In the Positio, Father Beaudoin points out another, “often forgotten,” aspect of Sister Rosalie’s spiritual life, namely her devotion to the Holy Spirit.\(^{291}\) Here again, perhaps unknowingly, she was imitating a key element of Louise de Marillac’s spirituality.

\(^{287}\) Melun, *Vie de la soeur Rosalie*, 232.
\(^{288}\) Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu*, Positio; Sommaire, 57.
\(^{289}\) Desmet, *Soeur Rosalie*, 310.
\(^{290}\) Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu*, Positio; Sommaire, 62, 65.
The feast of Pentecost, celebrating the coming of the spirit of love into the Church and the world, held special meaning for the foundress. To prepare herself, Louise de Marillac made a retreat each year between Ascension and Pentecost. The feast was also a reminder for her of the special graces she had received from God at the time of Pentecost. It had been on Pentecost Sunday, 4 June 1623, that she had received the light which revealed her vocation to her.\(^{202}\) In 1642, on the eve of Pentecost, a floor of the Motherhouse suddenly collapsed. There were no casualties. Once again this feast marked Louise's spiritual journey toward union with God. She saw in the accident a sign of the special protection of God for the Company, but she also saw it as a call to her to sacrifice everything and everyone to Him.\(^{203}\) In 1651, she wrote to the sisters of Nantes, "Pray for us, my dear Sisters, that Our Lord Jesus Christ may bestow His Spirit upon us... so that we may be so filled with His Spirit that we may do nothing or say nothing except for His glory and His holy love."\(^{204}\)

It was in this tradition that Sister Rosalie was formed as a Daughter of Charity. We find it echoed in her correspondence and in her instructions to her sisters. She concludes a letter to Mélanie Rendu in 1830, in which she tells her that the sisters may be obliged to leave Paris because of the insurrection, "May the gift of peace and joy of the Holy Spirit super-abound in your soul."\(^{205}\) On another occasion, when one of her nieces was considering a religious vocation, Sister Rosalie wrote, "I am praying for her and that her parents may be enlightened by the Holy Spirit."\(^{206}\)

From Sister Tissot's testimony we learn of the advice that Sister Rosalie used to give her companions when she sent them to the rich and powerful of the day to seek assistance in providing service for those in great need in the Mouffetard district:

These gentlemen do not need lofty phrases. On your way, you will pray to the Holy Spirit to favorably dispose their hearts. You will begin by thanking

\(^{203}\) Ibid., 768.
\(^{204}\) Ibid., 351.
\(^{205}\) Letter of Sister Rosalie to Mélanie Rendu, 8 October 1830, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 7.
\(^{206}\) Ibid., 19 March 1832, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 9.
this gentleman or that lady for the service they have already rendered me. Then you will make my little request. You are not the one who will make the matter succeed; it is the Holy Spirit to whom you are going to pray. It is the Holy Spirit who touches hearts and inclines them to good.\footnote{297}

All of these reflections on Sister Rosalie’s interior life, based on her own correspondence and on the testimony of those who knew her well, would seem to substantiate Sister Saillard’s appreciation of her superior. In her testimony, she stated that the love of God pushed Sister Rosalie “to belong only to Him... and to consecrate herself to [Him] in the person of those who were poor.”\footnote{298} It was her union with God that enabled her, as a true Daughter of Saint Vincent, “to give herself to God to love Our Lord and to serve Him in persons who are poor.”\footnote{299}

It is certainly true that there were times when she left God in the chapel to reach out to Him in the suffering humanity around her, or through her multiple duties to obtain assistance for them. She, likewise, on occasion, encouraged her sisters to do the same. In this she was imitating the founder, for whom those who were poor were his “burden” and his “sorrow.”\footnote{300} If she did, momentarily, lose her focus, then we must agree with the opinion expressed in the “votum” of Philippe Roche, C.M., the first theological censor for her Cause of Beatification, and with which Father Beaudoin seems to be in accord.\footnote{301}

Father Roche states:

"Because of the motive!" At last, there it is, the expression which says it all concerning Sister Rosalie. It is the pearl of great price that suddenly shines forth in these humble writings. At the end of this letter to the Superioress of Caen,\footnote{302} it moves us for the first time. But it goes to high places as we find it again in one

\footnote{297 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire, 58.}
\footnote{298 Ibid., 62.}
\footnote{299 CED, 9,592; see also CED, 9,43, 62, 270, 534; 10,126, 336, 475.}
\footnote{300 Collet, La Vie de St. Vincent, 1,479.}
\footnote{301 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio, 205.}
\footnote{302 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Mother Le Chasseur. 1 March 1840, AFCP, Ro-Le 131 BS 70.}
of her candid letters to her Archbishop, Monseigneur
[Denis-Auguste] Affre, [S.S.] to whom she dares to
send her very awkward advice, couched in timorous
compliments, but “because of the motive.”

For Sister Rosalie, “the motive” for all of her actions, indeed for her
life, was love: love of God and love of persons who were poor and in

whom she saw God. For half a century she found, in the love of her
God, her spiritual, human, and emotional energy to serve those living
under the crushing burden of misery. It is perhaps fitting to allow her
friend and collaborator for much of this time, Armand de Melun, to
have the final word on this subject:

Her charity was drawn from the highest and purest
source. It came directly from the heart of Jesus Christ.
It had all the conditions required by the Apostle,
Saint Paul; but it was human as well as supernatural.

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303 Archives of the Archdiocese of Paris, 4 R 17. Hereinafter cited as AAP; Sacra
Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio: Sommaire, 92.
Sister Rosalie loved the poor in God, as the suffering members of the Savior. She also loved them as a mother loves her children, with her heart and with her blood, with her emotions and with her tears. She practiced holy abnegation and supernatural devotedness. She possessed the exquisite delicacy and sublime weaknesses of a woman.\textsuperscript{104}