Louise de Marillac

Social Aspect of Her Work
LOUISE DE MARILLAC

Social Aspect of Her Work

Margaret Flinton, D.C.

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To
the Company of the
*Daughters of Charity*
to which
I Have the Honor and Happiness
of Belonging
Translated from the original French edition
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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Service of the Poor</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Abandonment of Infants</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 3</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ignorance of Poor Little Girls</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 4</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Misery of Galley Slaves</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 5</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Isolation of Elderly People</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 6</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Suffering of the Insane</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviews and Publications</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FOREWORD

For close to 40 years now the French reading public have had access to Sister Margaret Flinton’s doctoral dissertation entitled: *Sainte Louise de Marillac, L’Aspect Social de Son Œuvre* which she presented to the University of Paris. It is a joy for me to welcome a translation of this painstaking and careful study which has never lost its relevance.

It is particularly appropriate that Sister Margaret Flinton’s work should be offered to the English reading public a few months after the celebration of the fourth centenary of the birth of Saint Louise de Marillac. A prominent feature of those celebrations was the effort made by many to come to know more deeply this remarkable woman—a wife, a mother, a foundress, a pioneer in social assistance, a competent administrator of a host of projects for alleviating distress in the world, and a Saint. The fact that Saint Louise de Marillac was proclaimed patroness of all Christian Social Workers by Pope John XXIII in 1960, was not sufficiently known. One of the most valuable results of last year’s celebration has been the emergence into clear light of this valiant woman whom Pope John Paul II has described in a letter to the Daughters of Charity as “an example to follow and one to propose to others” (Letter to the Superioress General, August 1991).

Sister Margaret Flinton throws into relief one of the most striking facets of the many-sided achievements of Saint Louise de Marillac, her ability to restore the damaged or diminished good in the human person. The loneliness of old age, the sense of alienation experienced by immigrants, the loss or ignorance of higher values by youth, the struggles of one-parent families—these and a host of other modern social problems speak to us of the damaged or diminished good in human personalities. Saint Louise, spiritual artist that she was, delicately and sensitively set about restoring that pristine beauty which the Divine Artist lovingly intended for his human creatures and which shines forth in the crucified and risen humanity of Jesus Christ.

While expressing my thanks to Sister Margaret Flinton for her work, I can assure readers that they will in the words of Pope John Paul II, “draw
from the teachings of Saint Louise material for profound and substantial reflection.”

*Feast of Saint Louise de Marillac, 1992*  
*Richard McCullen, C.M.*  
*Superior General*
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INTRODUCTION

Social Service is a common topic of conversation in today’s world. As the name indicates, this Service is intended not only for individual persons but also for society itself, which suffers from many evils stemming from moral weaknesses at least as much as from physical languor and the lack of education of the masses.

The expression is more recent than the activity itself because as early as the seventeenth century, Saint Vincent de Paul set up a genuine Social Service. This fact cannot be overlooked since we are considering particularly the social aspect of Saint Louise de Marillac, and it is impossible to separate Vincent and Louise in their struggle against suffering in every form.

To bring help to an entire nation, the good “Monsieur Vincent,” scarcely sustained by a financially ruined country, was able through private initiatives, in which Louise de Marillac played a major role, to establish a true network of magnificent works whose principles are still valid in our century.

Assistance through job training, night shelters, soup kitchens, visits to prisoners, care of the sick in their homes—the most modern inventions of our “social and humanitarian” spirit were already at work without however being thus labeled. At that time, the Christian religion had a term rich enough and comprehensive enough to be applied to all those works—charity.

Truly, the entire history of social progress in the world blends with the history of charity in souls. Consequently, it did not exist before Jesus Christ. Although the Greeks had a strongly-developed social spirit, it was predominantly concern for others. It was the Son of God who spread the doctrine of the love of one’s neighbor. It was only then that Christianity was able to replace that sentiment of pity in relieving the poor, which prevailed in antiquity, by that fundamental teaching of Christ, “Love one another.”

Stimulated by that doctrine, the Early Church gave a place of honor to poverty. Each one’s home became a house of charity. Goods in common
rendered all the members of the Christian community supportive of one another. Later on, the “houses of charity” were replaced by establishments to help various age groups and to respond to the many needs of those years.

During the Middle Ages, nursing Orders cared for the sick and welcomed pilgrims. The clergy distributed charitable alms. Monasteries multiplied, and ignorance, misery and sickness each found relief. The generous gifts of a Christian society were to be abolished by the Renaissance and the Reformation. The former, by glorifying man and his faculties, re-established the personal ambition of serving others through self-interest rather than to render true service. The latter, while pillaging churches, convents and asylums, did away with both the resources and the servants of the needy.

* * *

And, the Seventeenth Century?

Since the Hundred Years War, misery had never been so great in France as it was at that time. The country was in a lamentable condition both physically and morally. As a result of religious and civil wars, complicated by wars with other countries, villages and countryside were abandoned after having been devastated by the armies. Cities were overflowing with the unemployed and vagabonds of every kind. Hospitals were unable to care for those who succeeded in being admitted. In the French capital the old Hôtel-Dieu had become too small.

According to the French historian, Hanotaux, the patients were piled on top of one another, as many as four or six in the same bed, poisoning one another and dying like flies so much so that the entire neighborhood had become an epidemic area which decimated the Parisian population on a regular basis.¹

In the Provinces people were dying of hunger as well as the Parisians. Contagious diseases desolated entire regions. Very heavy taxes brought about real jacqueries. Feelings of revolt were stirred up against all authority.

* * *

Confronted with this misery, the first Servants of the Poor, guided by Monsieur Vincent and “Mademoiselle Le Gras,”² endeavored, in their
small way, to render help to the refugees on the move and to the sick in their homes and in hospitals. They took in abandoned elderly people as well as foundlings and even took remedies and words of consolation to the most despised of human beings in dungeons. They gave to the multitudes, repulsed by both civil and foreign wars, a sense of true community based on the principles of Christian fraternity.

The domain of their apostolate increased throughout the centuries to embrace mankind of all ages and places in their struggles with every type of suffering. Thanks to their founders, they learned that the good of soul and body must be worked out together.

If those social works existed in the seventeenth century, not as a social function but as combined individual and cordial efforts, it is nonetheless recognized that Vincent de Paul, assisted by dedicated colleagues, was at the root of all that organization of Public Welfare, which the following centuries would carry out. Doctor Gaudeul, for example, attributes to him, and rightly so, the title of "Precursor of Public Welfare." A talented orator in speaking of Vincent has proclaimed that

Among all great men, it is to his unique glory that charitable organizations can neither conceive of anything nor attempt anything that he has not already in some way undertaken in the immensity of his initiatives.

* * *

The question arises: What was Monsieur Vincent's efficacious method? It was truly a very simple one. He made an appeal to persons of good will and then trained them. In 1617, he established, in the small French village of Chatillon-les-Dombes, the first Confraternity of Charity, where each of the women who enrolled had her designated assignment. It was a wise procedure of the saintly man, who made it clear from the beginning of an avalanche of charitable works that "to be fully effective, charity must be organized." Furthermore, he realized that the most efficacious power for the relief of human miseries was practically unused: to the world seeking help, he pointed to women. Henceforth, parochial authority would receive "the help of lay women." The example of that first Confraternity of Charity was to influence others, for very soon similar associations were established on the properties which belonged to the de Gondi family: Villepreux, Joigny, Montmirail, Folleville... 1629 — Paris would have its first Confraternity of Charity established
in the parish of Saint-Sauveur. The following year, Louise de Marillac would found and organize the second Parisian confraternity in the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, with the approval of its pastor and the help of several ladies. Shortly afterwards, confraternities were set up “in almost all the parishes of the city and of the suburbs of Paris.”

A change, apparently minor but really quite major, was to be introduced into the working of the Parisian confraternities. The first volunteers from the villages had been women used to work from their childhood, but in Paris the ladies were “from that parliamentary bourgeoisie, endowed with solid virtue and active faith . . .” who were prevented at times from performing personally the services needy persons required, because they were taken up with their own household and their influential connections.

Girls or women of humbler birth were needed, women lovingly drawn to the poor and ready to do for them the “most menial and abject services” which were not suitable for persons of rank, such as “to prepare food for the poor, to carry it to them, to nurse the sick, to clean their garrets . . .”

Monsieur Vincent himself told how the first good country girls became the helpers of the Ladies of the French capital. He wrote:

Some ladies of Paris brought about, through their pastors, the establishment of the aforementioned Confraternity in their parishes . . . But, because the ladies who are members of the Confraternity belong, for the most part, to a social class that does not allow them to perform the most menial and abject services which are proper to the work of the said Confraternity, such as carrying the soup pot through the city, doing the bleedings, preparing and giving enemas, dressing wounds, making beds and watching at night over the sick who are alone and near death, they have associated with them some good country girls to whom God has given the desire to assist the sick poor, who attend to all these little services, after having been trained for this purpose by a virtuous widow named Mademoiselle Le Gras. They have been supported, while living in the house of the above-mentioned lady, by the assistance of some virtuous widows and other charitable persons who have contributed alms in such a way that in the 13 or 14 years since the work was begun, God has so blessed it that at present there are in each of those parishes two or three girls who work daily assisting the sick poor and even instructing poor girls when they can.
The Company of the Daughters of Charity officially came into existence in 1633. However, since 1630, France had known in the person of a poor cowgirl of Suresnes, the first Daughter of Charity, Servant of the Sick Poor. She was Marguerite Naseau. She had learned to read and write by herself as she watched over her cows, and she had taught other young girls in the neighboring villages. But, in the midst of a mission preached by Monsieur Vincent, the holy priest had spoken of a project he had in mind by which he would provide volunteer nurses for the sick poor. This good girl from Suresnes let herself be persuaded. Vincent accepted her and entrusted her to Louise de Marillac to be trained for the service of the sick poor.

Marguerite Naseau arrived in February 1630. Soon, another “good girl” and then others presented themselves in order to “serve” so that by April 1633, “Mademoiselle” had a little group at her side. The time was approaching when Our Lord wanted to make use of her “for something that pertained to His glory.” That would be her assuming the direction and formation of the Daughters of Charity for the service of the poor.

From 1633, Louise de Marillac would exist only for the Daughters of Charity, her spiritual children. Her thoughts, her undertakings, her share in the organization of the works, all centered on “her Daughters” and their Service of the Poor. The sisters have never forgotten her. Their traditions in this regard have been faithfully kept. They continue to honor their first “Mother” as well as their “Blessed Father.”

Mother, widow, founder, educator, hospital and home nurse at a period in history when the former custom of caring for the sick poor in their homes had been abandoned for so long a time that even the thought of such a service did not seem possible; Lady of Charity, who adapted herself to the life of good country girls in order to dedicate herself more completely to the poor; a woman of action practicing in the world the virtues of a religious, Louise de Marillac is of great interest, both by her life and her work, to an age in which the apostolate of the laity is most popular.

We do not intend to study Louise de Marillac’s biography, already well studied and written at different epochs. Gobillon, the first of her biogra-
phers, 1676, had the inestimable advantage of having known her. His book, published scarcely 16 years after Louise's death, is by that very fact one of great interest. Nevertheless, it contains but a short summary of the saint's life. The author expressed his regrets at not being able to give "a more considerable" account but had been unable "to discover all the matter needed for such a composition."16

In 1769, Father Collet revised, corrected and increased Gobillon's work but produced a new edition of the former story with only "some slightly different phrasing."17

In 1883, the Countess of Richemont succeeded in replacing in their historical setting a good number of facts in the life of the servant of God.18 The happiness of being able, more than all others, to draw from a collection of the Writings of Mademoiselle Le Gras was granted to Monseigneur Baunard in 1898. His biography to which we must refer, in spite of some deficiencies, and while awaiting the historian of the Saint, was made possible thanks to the work of classification of a Daughter of Charity, Sister Marie de Goeffre de Chabrignac.19

The life of Louise de Marillac blends with that of Saint Vincent in admirable unity, and their collaboration of extraordinary fecundity would have been less productive had it been less confident. To a great extent the pupil of Saint Vincent, Louise was to become "his greatest success."20

* * *

Born on August 12, 1591, at the end of that greatly tormented sixteenth century and on the eve of that seventeenth century, so marvelous for its faith, Louise would take her place in that phalanx of heroes and heroines eager for self-sacrifice and inspired by divine ideals. However, it would only be in 1629 that she would personally enter history.

In February 1613, she married Antoine Le Gras, secretary to Queen Marie de Medici. In October of the same year, she gave birth to a son whom they named Michel-Antoine. At the end of 1624 or during the first months of 1625, Louise placed herself under the direction of Monsieur Vincent.

A few years previously, she had had the happiness of being in contact with Saint Francis de Sales, who had entrusted her soul to His Excellency Pierre Camus, bishop of Belley. After having guided her for several years, the latter found himself more and more unable to go frequently to Paris. Therefore, he directed Mademoiselle Le Gras to the one whose faithful collaborator she would become.
A widow in 1625, Louise was initiated by her director in a variety of works of charity. Little by little she was learning the Service of the Poor.

In 1629, her vocation was strengthened. She set out in order to establish, visit and organize Confraternities of Charity. In 1633, she undertook her principal work, the creation of a lasting service for the poor by founding with Saint Vincent de Paul the Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor. From that time on her life blended entirely with her works so numerous and varied that her biographer Gabillon was astounded and wrote:

It is humanly difficult to understand how this Servant of God was able to accomplish so many offices of charity, to perform, and still more seek out so many works of charity.\textsuperscript{21}

All her works should be presented at the same time in somewhat of an overall tableau in order to be considered simultaneously. Since this was not possible because of the limits of our study, we were obliged to make a choice.

Setting aside in an organized apostolic life all provisional works, we chose those which, although aimed at relieving the distress of seventeenth century France, bear a lasting character and are adaptable to the needs of every century—those works which are still pursued by the Daughters of Louise de Marillac, not only in France and in Poland, as they were in the lifetime of their Founders, but by a veritable army of about 42,000 Servants of the Poor spread throughout the world.

What interested us especially was Louise de Marillac working at this organization of charity as seen through her correspondence and writings.

In the first chapter we have tried to outline the principles underlying the organization of the Service of the Sick Poor. The following chapters are devoted to its functioning in the relief of: the abandonment of infants, the ignorance of poor children, the misery of the galley slaves, the isolation of elderly people, and the suffering of the insane.