Chapter 1

IN THE SERVICE OF THE POOR

A true Daughter of Charity
belongs to God for the service of the poor.
St. Louise de Marillac

"Support, my brethren, as far as you are able, this confraternity which is devoted to the service of the unfortunate. Help these charitable Daughters, whose great glory is that of being the servants of the sick poor." Thus, spoke Bossuet, who on November 1, 1657, was preaching at Metz to an audience, in which some Daughters of Charity, surrounded by their poor, were present.

Three centuries later, on the eve of the canonization of Louise de Marillac, the Sovereign Pontiff, Pius XI, evoked the virtues of the Servants of the Poor, as a testimony of primary importance to the holiness of their saintly founder and mother. "Her work," he affirmed, "has been continued by her Daughters like a true heritage and almost like a prolongation of her very life."

The entire organizing genius of Louise de Marillac in her charitable action is synthesized indeed in the work of the Daughters of Charity. The latter owe her the spirit and the motivating impulse which enabled "that tiny snowball," to which St. Vincent compared their budding company, to become a real avalanche, so prodigious has its development been.

The poor and rich alike recognized the classic silhouette of the Daughter of Charity, who cared for the poor. She was the one who crossed the city "laden with a soup pot," or a basket on her arm. For believers and unbelievers that silhouette was a sign of the mission which Divine Providence had confided to her.

A black bag was to replace the soup pot or classic basket. Filled with syringes and hypo needles, as well as sweets for the sick poor, it became a safeguard. It permitted a Servant of the Poor to circulate peacefully in the most miserable parts of the city and, at times, to enter dwellings of a somewhat shady reputation, for it made known the reason of her visit. People would exclaim: There must be suffering therein, a sick person
needing care, an old person seeking consolation, children to be fed or clothed.

That spectacle which appears to be a very normal thing today was judged quite otherwise by the Christians of three centuries ago. Consequently, the task which fell to Louise de Marillac in 1633, in founding the Company of the Daughters of Charity, operated a real revolution. She gave to the world those whom we may call, and justly so, the first "social workers."

**The Work of Louise or of Vincent?**

It was an understood thing that Vincent de Paul or "Monsieur Vincent" would ever be available when Louise or "Mademoiselle Le Gras" needed him, and would never refuse her the advice she asked of him for the perfection of the work that was beginning to take shape. He would advise the Superioress, he would give instructions to the sisters on their rule of life, on the service of the poor and on the virtues of their vocation. Even absent from Paris, or when sick, he would encourage by correspondence. A reciprocal confidence so marked their relations that the organization and government of the Daughters of Charity, as well as their personal and collective formation, would greatly benefit by it. If the holy priest left the initiative to the Superioress in most cases and especially in the thousand little details of daily life, she watched vigilantly that the spirit, the doctrine and the manner of acting of St. Vincent penetrate the Company. For that reason, it has been said that "the Company of the Daughters of Charity is such as St. Vincent wanted it to be, and as Mademoiselle Le Gras fashioned it."5

**Louise**

As early as the Feast of Pentecost 1623, the young wife of Antoine Le Gras had had a vision of a work to be created and of the director whom God was about to give her. "I was warned," she wrote, that a time would come when I would be permitted to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience; that I would be with persons some of whom would do the same. I then understood that I would
be in a house where I might render service to my neighbor, but I could not understand how that might be possible for there was much coming and going of sisters.\(^6\)

Ten years were to pass before that vision was fulfilled. Ten years of formation at the Vincentian school would be necessary before Louise de Marillac would be ready to undertake her great creative and reformative work.

A brief sketch of that preparation may make us better understand the dominant ideas which inspired her in her formation of the Servants of the Poor.

From her very childhood, Louise manifested a marked sympathy for the needy. By her marriage, she associated herself to a family which was particularly outstanding in its love for the poor. The upkeep and the management of the household of the young wife contrasted singularly with the folly of the moment which was mostly concerned with luxury and dress. In spite of the exhortations of preachers and the indignation of moralists, people ruined themselves in the purchase of fabrics, embroidery and jewels. Mademoiselle Le Gras, on the contrary, protested by example. She dressed simply, but beneath her garments she wore a hairshirt. "At table," testified one of the servants of her household, "she pretended eating, but did not eat. At night when she believed that everyone in the house was asleep she would get up in order to withdraw to her oratory."\(^7\)

Her hours of leisure were spent near the unfortunate. Having since childhood frequented a milieu of souls profoundly religious but who gave her only the rigid aspect of an austere piety, devoid of the joyous realities of the love of God, Louise became hypersensitive. A great depth of melancholy dominated her. Worries about the past, torments about the future, numerous doubts and discouragements paralyzed her.

Wife and mother, she had an extremely mortified life but was not developing as a well-rounded person. The health of her son worried her; very soon her husband became ill without hope of recovery. The vow which, in an outburst of youthful enthusiasm she had made of entering the cloister, but which she had not been able to keep because of the weakness of her constitution, seemed to her the cause of all those trials which she regarded as a punishment.
It was then, feeling very strongly the need of a constant and firm direction, that she placed herself under the direction of Monsieur Vincent, who first knew how to discover in this tormented and restless soul all the resources to be utilized in making Louise the instrument of a great work.

Widowed on December 21, 1625, she was disturbed once again by scruples and doubts. But the director whom Providence had given her, had for an entirely different motive experienced similar torments. Vincent de Paul did not forget that it was from the day on which he had promised to consecrate his life to Jesus Christ in the person of the poor that peace had been restored to him.\(^8\) It would likewise be, by the poor, that he would restore peace to Louise.

With an experienced psychology, he directed her once again away from the cloistered life in which she wished to take refuge, and before thrusting her into an active life, he obliged her to control herself and to check her impetuous nature. "Imitate the passivity of the Son of God"\(^9\) he would repeat constantly to his penitent who, during more than three years busied herself with the obscure tasks of charity, compatible with her family and domestic occupations.

Vincent, however, encouraged her to continue her visits to the poor, in an effort to teach her, troubled and tormented soul that she was, that it was in poverty, shared, consoled and alleviated, that she would find the secret of serene joy which she so greatly needed. In this contact with the poor, Louise learned that to be happy for others when one has reason for being sad for self, to know how to give oneself when one would like to ruminate over one’s own thoughts, is a form of charity. In this contact, she would learn also, to understand well the suffering of others. And when later on, numerous souls would confide to her their inquietudes and troubles, she would know how to compassionate.

Her round of visits completed, Louise returned to her home, where it was still for the poor that she worked, at the request of Monsieur Vincent. "The work which your charity gave me is finished," she wrote to him. "if the members of Jesus Christ need it and you so desire, Father, that I should send it, I shall not fail to do so."\(^10\)

Louise sometimes gave alms which she had collected, for instance,
"the sum of 50 livres" for the Confraternity of Beauvoisis.¹¹ For Villecien near Joigny, it was "a dozen shirts" which Vincent had asked her to send while he felt that "two or three shirts" were sufficient for the Confraternity of Gentilly.¹²

A short time later, Vincent asked her to "perform a charity for two poor girls" in order to find them some position with "honest ladies who might need them."¹³ That charity must have been accomplished without delay, for Louise soon received a letter of thanks for having lodged one of the girls in her own home. It was thus that Vincent by very small tasks was forming Louise for bigger ones he envisioned. Vincentian passivity did not however signify inactivity.

**To Conquer Self in Order to Serve the Poor Better**

This restrained activity no longer satisfied Louise whose desires to serve others more completely became ever stronger. However, Vincentian direction made her be patient, while recommending that she keep her eyes open to needs around her. "Be then, very humble, very submissive, and full of confidence, and always wait patiently."¹⁴ The evidence of this holy and adorable Will of God, this counsel of the director, was repeated a little later: "If His Divine Majesty does not make known to you in a manner which cannot deceive that He wishes something else from you, do not think of it, and do not busy your mind with this other matter."¹⁵

Vincent, however, broadened her field of action. In 1629, he would make use of the good will of this faithful helper, for the Confraternities of Charity being established in Paris.

"She was not satisfied," Gobillon tells us, "to assist the sick in their homes, she went to visit them in the hospital, in order to add some sweets to the other food given them, and in order to perform for them personally, the lowest and most painful services."¹⁶ She saw the poor, their misery, their hunger, their lack of cleanliness; she encouraged other people to visit them, to relieve them, to understand their sufferings. And, little by little, as she was serving them, she felt the human sympathy in her heart evolve into a disinterested and supernatural love. This progress did not go unnoticed by her director.

Ever impatient for activity, she suffered from the imposed delay. But, by dint of keeping her desires in check she learned to be completely mistress of herself. Monsieur Vincent rejoiced over that progress. He had
had the time to study his penitent and to observe the intelligence and devotedness she brought to her activities in Paris. He was then ready to put her to work at an activity which would not depend on herself alone. A more delicate and more difficult mission was to be hers.

Too absorbed himself by multiple work, he could not give to the Confraternities of Charity in the provinces, the time, the devotedness, the advice, and the supervision which they needed.

Visit of the Confraternities of Charity

On May 6, 1629, Vincent confided to Louise the visit of the Confraternities of Charity of the Provinces. “Go then, Mademoiselle, go, in the name of Our Lord.” And the first social visitor of France set out. Her previous occupations had merely been a prelude.

In 1629, she made her definitive entrance into the history of Charity. Her work had begun.

In spite of her very frail health, the new Provider of the Charities made preparations to board the coach. Vincent gave her a rule of life for the members of the Confraternities of Charity, as well as a statement of the manner in which to establish and visit the confraternities. She assumed responsibility for clothing and remedies. She paid all expenses from her personal account, and she limited them to the bare necessities in order to share more fully in the misery of the poor.

Accompanied by a servant or by a pious lady, she would set out over rough roads, lodge in poor dwellings, and travel in wretched coaches or sometimes in a wagon or on horseback.

The first place which saw Mademoiselle was Montmirail, the first stop on the journey. St. Vincent wrote to her:

It will be sufficient on your first visit to spend a day or two in each place, with the idea of returning there the following summer, if Our Lord lets you see that you might render Him some other service there. Although I say two days, your charity may take more time if the need is felt, but let me know.

The gaps which exist in the correspondence of Louise do not permit us to follow her in all her trips. From the accounts that do exist, we know she was traveling to Asnières, on December 19, 1629; then, in the direction of Saint-Cloud, where she remained until February 19, 1630. Worried about her health, Vincent begged her to let him know if “her
lungs were not being affected from speaking so much, and her head from so much worry and from so much noise."20

If Louise’s mind was a model of balance and of solid organization, her body was never spared. That is why this worry about her health is constantly repeated in the correspondence of the director to his penitent. When in 1630, Louise was working whole-heartedly in the service of the poor people of Villepreux, St. Vincent admired the devotion of her charity, but he believed it an obligation for him to send her a golden rule of conduct by way of warning: “I fear very much that you are trying to do too much. Our Lord wishes us to serve Him with good judgment, and the contrary is called indiscretion.”21

At the end of that same year he renewed his counsels of moderation with greater insistence with regard to her work at Beauvais; he wanted her to watch her health.

Oh, do take care of it, he advised her, for the love of Our Lord and of His poor members. And watch that you do not try to do too much. It is a snare of the devil by which he deceives good souls, by enticing them to do more than they are able, so that they may be reduced to doing nothing. The spirit of God incites one gently to do the good which reasonably one can do so that it might be done perseveringly and for a long time.22

Vincent did not want her to exhaust herself by making efforts out of proportion to the resources God had placed at her disposition. He wanted her to organize her daily life in such a way that she might accomplish a limited number of actions with the intention of progressing from the easier to the more difficult ones.23

Numerous would be the visits of the Confraternities of Charity made by Louise. Besides those at Montmirail, Asnières, Saint-Cloud, places already mentioned, there would be others at Sannois, Argenteuil, Franconville, Herblay, Conflans, and elsewhere. She traced a real map of charity, where from day to day, Vincent allowed her greater liberty in regulating, reforming or even founding new confraternities.

How much tact and perspicacity those visits demanded on the part of the visitor. But, from the Vincentian mold there was now stepping forth a practical woman who knew how to face details, a personality, which did not allow itself to be absorbed but which was learning how to adapt itself to the needs of the hour.

During her visits, Louise would assemble the members of the Confraternity. She would observe, she would question, she would examine the
account book, then she would give instructions, stimulate the zeal of the members, revive fervor that had grown cold, and bring to further perfection what had been established. That was not all! She would visit personally the poor in their homes, would care for the sick, would assemble young girls of the village in order to teach them the truths of the faith. In order to keep Monsieur Vincent informed about her activities she would jot down her observations.

**Judicious Reports**

At Sannois, for example, the burden of preparing the food for the poor sick was left entirely to the care of the treasurer. If she was too tired, she would replace this service by a monetary gift. Charity and personal contact were thus lost. Louise was justly grieved over that state of affairs. Her reaction was identical when she discovered the same abuse at Franconville. "An abuse to be corrected," she noted, "for it is detracting from the true service of the Poor." At Herblay, "the ladies are still in their first fervor," but Louise deplored the absence of any kind of account book. Details held great importance for her, and nothing escaped her vigilance.

The Confraternity of Neufville-Roy had another kind of problem. There "little enmities" separated the members of the Confraternity. According to Louise, some ladies did not wish "to be accompanied in their visits to the sick by those against whom they held some repugnance." A different conflict plagued the Gournay Confraternity, where the people were angry and murmuring because their alms were being used in order to have Masses offered.

The visitor's knowledge of the world and her experience of life permitted her to judge quickly and surely. The ladies of the Confraternity and the simple village girls recognized that quality in her and did not hesitate to ask her advice. By her contact, and under the impulse of her zeal, hearts were animated with a new flame.

Little by little, Louise discovered herself and conquered her personality. She showed greater initiative. The more she realized the lamentable ignorance of poor little country girls, the more she worked at establishing some sort of educational program for them. She assigned school mistresses to the villages. That initiative was one of the most original contributions of her work.

However, her action ever remained submissive. She communicated all
undertakings of a certain importance to Vincent. He knew the difficulties involved in her work and the joys she experienced. Through his collaborator he knew the miseries of body and soul of the poor, and his intervention contributed to great success in every domain.

He also followed the spiritual progress of his Visitor. He directed her in her devotions as well as in her activities. He oriented her towards a full life based on the Gospel. A minute devotion of “33 acts in honor of the Holy Humanity of Jesus Christ” was to be replaced by simpler acts of devotion.

“Read,” he advised her, “the book on the Love of God, notably the one which treats of the Will of God and Holy Indifference. As for the 33 Acts in honor of the holy humanity and others, do not trouble yourself when you miss them. God is love and He wishes that we go to Him through Love. Do not hold yourself obligated to all those good proposals.”

Her becoming more perfect was but the first result of these visits. Her keen intelligence, refined by great culture, was strengthened by trials and suffering. Her judgment and constancy of character, rare enough in a feminine soul, and her discretion were endowments not only Vincent appreciated, but which made Louise’s presence felt by all those with whom she came in contact. The tactful way in which Louise handled the Ladies of Charity is not the least worthy characteristic of her work in the apostolate of the laity.

Louise and the Ladies of Charity

Some of the Ladies were regular callers at Louise’s house, and placed themselves under her direction in the practice of spiritual exercises. Among those, Madame Goussault was one of the first. Every year she would be the guest of Mademoiselle Le Gras. One of her companions of the Hôtel Dieu, Mademoiselle Lamy, accompanied her. Other retreatants soon added their names to the list: Mademoiselle d’Atry, related through her mother to the de Marillac family, an actress who decided to change her way of life after one of those retreats, a young girl preparing for marriage, Madame de Miramion who, after a retreat made at the Mother House of the Daughters of Charity, would bind herself by the vow of chastity on February 2, 1649.

Louise had kept numerous contacts, who felt it a duty to help her. Reciprocally they addressed themselves willingly to her for help and
advice in their apostolic endeavors. Vincent also introduced her to other Ladies of Charity. Certain names turn up constantly in the writings of Louise. Madame de Miramion, Madame Goussault, Mademoiselle Lamy have already been singled out. Others were added: Mademoiselle Pollalion, Mademoiselle Viole, Mademoiselle duFay, the President de Herse, Madame Seguier, wife of the chancellor, Madame Fouquet, mother of the superintendent, the Duchess of Ventadour, and the Duchess of Liancourt, before her open profession of Jansenism had obliged Louise to break with her. The charitable elite of those times owed very much to Louise de Marillac.

Lady of Charity—Then Daughter of Charity

Lady of Charity, herself, the hour was approaching in which, not without some repugnance, she was going to bring about the union of classes in perfect charity by adapting herself to the life of country girls. In this new milieu whose manner of life she shared, she would give the example of a perfection comparable to that of cloistered nuns.

In 1630, Louise expressed the desire to make a vow to devote her entire life to the service of the poor. For a long time her director had been awaiting this day. “Yes, at last, my dear Mademoiselle,” he approved, “I will it. Why not? Our Lord has given you that holy sentiment, and my heart longs ardently to know how this happened. But I shall mortify myself for the love of God, with Whom I hope that yours is occupied.”

Henceforth, the letters of Vincent to Mademoiselle Le Gras offer a striking contrast. The saint now addressed himself to a wise collaborator, on whom he felt he could lean more and more. He confided to her his impressions, good or bad about the confraternities, and sometimes asked her to remedy the situations:

They need you here at the Charity of St. Sulpice, where they have made some kind of beginning, but things are going badly, according to what they tell me, and it’s a pity. Perhaps God is reserving this as an occasion for you to work there.

Vincent seemed less inclined to establish new Charities in the absence of Louise. He preferred to await her return before doing so. Thus he wrote, “I feel pressed to use the alms given us by Madame, wife of the guardian of the seals, to do what is necessary in order to establish a Charity at St. Laurent, but I shall wait until you are here before working on that.”
Prevented by some circumstance or other from seeing the officers of the Charities who asked for a meeting, he would have himself replaced by the one in whom he placed entire confidence. “Here is Madame Brou, treasurer of St. Bartholomew’s,” he wrote. “I do not have the opportunity of talking with her because I am in a hurry. I beg you to do so, and to look upon her as a good servant of God, worthy of some employment for His greater glory.” Another time it was a letter from Madame de Villegoublin, about which Monsieur Vincent wrote, “We shall speak about its contents after your exercises of retreat.”

The presence of Louise in the capital was felt more necessary than ever on account of the Confraternities of Charity which were multiplying. Consequently, her trips in the provinces had to become less frequent although the Confraternities still needed periodic visits in order that fervor be maintained or rekindled when relaxation had crept in. Certain failures had already been manifested, and Louise had tried to bring a remedy. She had, for example, set up a few school mistresses, but realized that the villages needed at least one permanent mistress in each place.

Obstacles of another kind were interfering with the good functioning of the Charities of the capital. Both Vincent and Louise foresaw that one of the best solutions would be to bring together a few good girls from the country in order to put them at the disposition of the Ladies in their service of the sick poor.

The First Daughters of Charity

The first of those helpers, who has already been mentioned, was only a poor, uninstructed girl who kept watch over her cows, but who will remain for centuries the ideal type of Daughter of Charity, Servant of the Sick Poor. She had presented herself personally to Monsieur Vincent to be placed in the service of the sick poor in spite of her affection for the instruction of youth, because she judged that exercise of charity “more perfect and necessary.” One of St. Louise’s biographers commented, “God, who places the oak in the acorn, had already placed the Daughter of Charity in this humble ancestor of the Company,” Marguerite Naseau, who signed her life of charity with her blood by dying a victim of her devotedness near a plague-stricken victim. As if she had foreseen her death, she asked to be taken to St. Louis Hospital in order to end her life in the common ward of the poor. There she expired in the midst of them,
leaving a first and supreme example of what must be a Servant of the Poor. St. Vincent described her action in his Conference of July, 1642: "Struck with this malady, she said goodbye to the sister who was with her, as if she had foreseen her death, and went to the St. Louis Hospital, her heart full of joy and of conformity to the Will of God."42

Another good girl was presented to Monsieur Vincent by Madame Goussault. It was Marie Joly, about whose background we know nothing. Mademoiselle Le Gras ever honored her with her confidence. Monsieur Vincent was charmed by her from their very first meeting and wrote thus to Louise:

Marie answered me very affectionately and humbly that she was ready to do what you wished and in the manner that you wished. She is sorry that she lacks the necessary judgment, strength and humility to render service but is confident that if you tell her what she should do, she will be exact in following your directions. Oh, what a good girl she seems to me! Without a doubt, Mademoiselle, I think that Our Lord has given her to you Himself to make use of her through you.43

Other young girls having heard of the need of benevolent servants for the sick poor in Paris had presented themselves to Louise in the course of her tours of inspection. Scattered in the parishes of the capital, these good girls lodged either with Ladies of the Confraternity or in convents. Some succeeded, others became discouraged and abandoned the parish when it was a matter of doing some hard, down-to-earth work. The need of an organization less fragmentary was soon felt. The union of all these girls into a community under the direction of Mademoiselle Le Gras offered incontestable advantages.

The First House of Charity

On November 29, 1633, three or four of these good girls were placed under the direction of Mademoiselle Le Gras in her little house near the church of St. Nicholas du Chardonnet.44 A work was born. It was the Company of the Daughters of Charity. It did not seem necessary in 1633, to ask permission of the Bishop or of the King for a few servants to place themselves at the disposal of the Ladies of the city in order to help them in the service of the sick poor. It was only ten years later that steps were taken to obtain an authorization. Remembering the humble origin of the
Company, Monsieur Vincent took pleasure in saying that it was neither he nor Mademoiselle Le Gras who had thought of it.

"Do not deceive yourselves," he told the sisters, "God alone established your Company. We never had a formal design of doing so. Oh my Daughters, I never thought of it. Your Sister Servant, Mademoiselle Le Gras never thought of it either. It was God, then, Who thought of it for you; we may say it is He Who is the author of your Company." 45

"Who then," he asked one day, "would have had the thought of forming in the Church of God a Company of Charity made up of women and girls in secular dress? That would not have seemed possible." 46 In conclusion, he said to them: "If then, my Daughters, you are asked how the Company was formed, you can answer with truth that you do not know." 47

Be that as it may, the first glimmer of light foreseen by Louise in 1623, was beginning to become quite bright. She had asked to be able to make Jesus Christ known and loved to the poor and to little ones and to serve them. This grace was granted to her, and the additional one of preparing others for this service.

**Permanent Service of the Poor**

To become a Servant of the Poor was an extremely difficult task. In Louise's thinking, to serve was quite a different thing from a hasty or occasional visit to render some needed care, to say a good word or to offer some gift, in money or in kind.

"A true Daughter of Charity," explained Louise, "belongs to God for the service of the poor, and for that reason she must be with the poor much more than with the rich. She has rules to observe, by which she cannot lose time. When she is not engaged in the necessary visiting of the poor, she must love the company of her sisters." 48

**Availability**

Readiness or availability was the keyword she gave to the Servants of the Poor. "It suffices that God knows that we are always ready to work when it will please Him to use us." 49 They had to be ready to give and to give of themselves, ready to receive instructions, ready to make them their
own. They must be ready to stay day and night at the service of the sick poor, ready to help them in all their needs, ready to go out continually in search of the poor sick in different places, regardless of the time, the place and the weather. Behold what comprises the keyword of the service which is being organized. And Louise pointed out other virtues required.

"You must always consider yourself as subject to all others, the least and last of all, and realize that you have no authority and act accordingly. As for the Ladies of Charity, you should not consider who they might be before showing them respect. It is enough that you know that they have been received into the Company in order to honor them as Mothers of your Masters the Poor, even though they do not contribute their share."

According to Louise, to serve the poor demands an effort which cannot be intermittent; it must be constant.

Quality Rather than Quantity of Subjects

For Servants of the Poor it would be necessary to endure a hard and mortified life, much hard work, physical labor, and little human satisfaction. Although the conditions of admission were flexible enough, Vincent and Louise showed themselves to be rather strict concerning the qualities of soul and the physical strength of prospective candidates.

Louise’s correspondence shows clearly how practical she was in the matter of recruitment. She set more value on the quality of the subjects who presented themselves than on their number. It was essential that they be “good girls” desirous of serving the poor through a supernatural motive.

"We are convinced of her firm resolve to serve God and to observe the rules exactly, and she knows how to write," wrote Louise, concerning one of the new sisters. About another one she wrote to Monsieur l’Abbé de Vaux at Angers: “The desire that I have that there be with us only those who are truly called and who have no temporal interests in mind, makes me hesitate very strongly with regard to that subject."

You know, Father, how important it is not to admit into a community persons who are not suited to such a life. It seems to me that I would mistrust a subject who, for one reason or another, had no misgivings as much as one who, through human prudence, would like to know a little bit about everything, provided she would be willing to give in. Please be sure that they are not
motivated to take this step by a desire to see Paris nor for reasons of personal security. See that they are strong and healthy . . .

On the occasion of sending away a girl from Angers who "still had the desire of seeing and tasting the world," Louise repeated to the good priest the necessity of having girls "who are completely filled with the desire of their perfection."  

Conditions for Admission

Gradually conditions for admission were becoming more precise. They were a prelude, as it were, to the medical examinations, background inquiries, psychological evaluations and curriculum vitae, which are required of today's social workers. A few extracts from the correspondence of Louise announce these.

1644—
We need only those who are suitable for the Company, be it both for strength of body and of soul. Get more information about them; then write to me. They should not be over 30 years of age. Try to find out about their background, from birth if possible.

1646—
We have great need of them, but they must be very good.

1648—
It might be well for them to come to present themselves before having them come to stay.

1649—
Not to allow ourselves to be as much impressed by the testimony given verbally by the girls that they wish to remain in the Company as by the evidence of their corporal dispositions and contradictory actions, of which they may have given proof over a long period of time . . .

1651—
We want neither lazy ones, nor chatterboxes, nor those who think they can use the pretext of being Daughters of Charity in order to come to Paris, but have no desire to serve God or strive after perfection, so that we end up by having to dismiss them or they leave us.

1653—
As for those two girls, try them out very thoroughly both in body and mind because you realize that a girl with a weakness in either
is not suitable to us. Let me know what house they come from and what sort of life they have led.\textsuperscript{60}

1654—
With regard to the two girls you mentioned, if you are well informed about their background and manner of life and have told them what will be expected of them and what the Rules of the House are regarding both body and soul, and if you think them suitable, let them come. . . . Impress on them that they are coming to try out our way of life and to be tested. Please have them bring enough money to cover the expense of their first habit and of their trip here and back home, if necessary.\textsuperscript{61}

1658—
. . . It's extremely important that theirs be a true vocation because we have learned through experience that some girls use this pretext as an opportunity to come to Paris in the hope that if they are without home, they'll find a good job.\textsuperscript{62}

1659—
I had asked you to tell me the age, the state of mind and body of those good postulants, and what they know how to do. I need to know all that before I can give you an answer.\textsuperscript{63}

1659—
With regard to that girl, you need to give us a little more information. Don't be in a hurry to accept her but give her a thorough testing.\textsuperscript{64}

1660—
We need girls with good dispositions and with a genuine desire to acquire the perfection of true Christians. They must wish to die to themselves by mortification and renunciation so that the spirit of Jesus may abide in them and give them perseverance in this completely spiritual life. Although they may be continually employed in exterior works, which appear lowly and despicable in the eyes of the world, they must be convinced that these works are glorious in the sight of God and His angels.\textsuperscript{65}

This manner of looking at things was shared, if not inspired by St. Vincent. In a famous conference he could find nothing better than to remind the sisters of the spirit of good village girls, "simple, humble, without ambition, sober, pure, poor, and obedient,"\textsuperscript{66} a spirit typical of their vocation. That conference is one of the most famous of the Saint, and should, according to the testimony of Monsignor Calvet, "figure in
an anthology dedicated to the glory of the French peasant woman, who remains close to nature, that most marvelous of educators.”

The admission of postulants was the object of numerous letters of Mademoiselle Le Gras to Monsieur Vincent for advice and ultimate decisions. No admission was considered final before having been decided in common. Here are a few examples taken from a multitude of others which give evidence of that:

“Here is a good girl who comes from a distance of 32 leagues in order to see if she might be suitable for the Confraternity of Charity,” wrote Monsieur Vincent, “I beg you to consider her.”

“As for that good girl from Argenteuil who is melancholic,” he wrote on another occasion, “I think that you are right in making it rather difficult to accept her, for melancholy is a very strange thing.”

Louise wrote to him in her turn: “Good Sister Jeanne from Saint Benoît has just brought me three girls from Colombe, of very good dispositions, who have a great desire to serve the poor wherever we may send them; I believe they will be seeing you soon.

Just as the Superioress refused those who did not show the requisite dispositions, she did likewise with regard to girls who were too young. She wished to be assured of their motives. With great regret she had to send some away in 1641, although she found them “very good girls, but not ready to render all the services which the poor need.”

Elsewhere she wrote, “We are dismissing little Elizabeth, having judged for her good that it would not be suitable to receive her as one of our sisters on account of her youth, of body and mind.” By way of exception she admitted having received a girl who was quite young, on the recommendation of one of the sisters, but she could not refrain from confiding to the latter “what makes me fear a little is that she is very young.”

The ideas of Louise on this point, like those of Vincent, were opposed to the practice popular at that time. We see for example, Jacqueline Arnaud made responsible for the abbey of Port-Royal when she was only 11 years of age. It must be remembered that the power which parents exercised over their children with regard to their choice of cloister or husband played a great part in that practice.
Non-Acceptance

The judicious choice of members of the Company on the part of Louise often obliged her motherly heart to suffer greatly but her love of the Company triumphed over her natural inclinations. When a girl was judged too young for the service of the poor but who showed a good spirit, Louise made efforts to find a good position for her: "When she will have worked three or four years, if God gives her the will and the desire to serve among us, we shall accept her. It will be better if she expresses her desire when she is of age to do so than to come now when she doesn’t yet know what she wants."75

Given to God in Full Activity

The need for careful screening of those who sought admission was all the greater because theirs was not the life of religious protected from the world by a cloister grating. On the contrary, public opinion had to be formed about these women from among the common people who, while living in community, moved about freely through the streets of the capital and the environs, taking care of the sick poor in their homes and bringing relief to all kinds of misery. At that epoch, to say religious was to say cloistered. The prejudices of the century did not tolerate any deviations from that. Experience gave proof to that fact.

Other Religious... All of Them Cloistered

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, six or seven foundations of Ursulines were established in France. However, the "Seculars" of Angela Merici, after having been "the Congregates" of Charles Borromeo, became in Paris, as early as 1612, cloistered nuns in the strictest sense of the word.76

When St. Francis de Sales founded the Daughters of the Visitation a few years later, he had in mind a community devoted principally to the visiting of the poor in their homes. He had to renounce that project when Archbishop de Marquemont of Lyons opposed it because he feared that disorder might come about with time. The Visitation was established in 1617, but also "on condition of a perpetual cloister."77

It is true that as early as the fourteenth century there were in the
northern part of France some religious of the Third Order Regulars of St. Francis of Assisi, such as the *Soup Sisters* or Grey Nuns, and the *Celle Sisters* or Black Nuns, who cared for the sick in their homes as well as in the hospitals, without any other motive than "the pure love of God and the spiritual salvation of their neighbor." It seems, however, that the same current of radical claustration manifested itself in the seventeenth century with both hospital congregations as well as teaching orders. Helyot cites the example of the Hospitaliers of the Third Order of Franciscans of Beauvais being cloistered in 1627, and that the Hospitaliers of Laval met the same fate a few years later.

Those communities had then ceased their exterior ministry or else they were so little known that they were ignored. That is why the foundation of the Daughters of Charity destined for the service of the Sick Poor was considered an innovation. St. Vincent himself believed it to be so, if we are to judge from his conferences to the Daughters of Charity. He attributes to them, "The happiness of being the first called to this holy exercise, you, poor village girls and daughters of artisans. Since the time of the women who served the Son of God and the apostles, no such establishment has existed in the church."

Another day he asked them: "Who has ever heard of such a work until now? Many religious orders have been seen, hospitals have been founded for the assistance of the sick, religious have devoted themselves to their service, but never until now have there been any for the care of the sick in their own rooms. If in a poor family someone was sick, it was necessary to separate the husband from his wife, the wife from her children, the father from his family. Until now, dear God, you had not provided for their care, and it seems that Your adorable Providence which watches out for everyone had not been concerned for them."

**Religious or Seculars?**

St. Vincent was not alone in affirming this fact. The Procurator General to whom Louise addressed herself in order to obtain approbation for their Institute, which had already been functioning for 17 years, called it "one without precedent." However, he told the Superioress that he did not disapprove of their plans.

In fact, bishops, pastors and magistrates had in their experience no category in which to place this new work. Therefore, a word of explanation and approbation was necessary each time that a new establishment
was being considered. As proof of this we have a letter of Mademoiselle Le Gras in which she asks, “Would it not be suitable to propose to the administrators that they ask the Bishop of Angers if he would approve the service and the dwelling of our sisters at the hospital . . . so that the priests might not decide to make religious of them.”

To sisters sent to the provinces, Monsieur Vincent gave the answer which they could give to the bishop were he to ask if they were religious:

You will tell him that you are not, by the grace of God, and that it is not because you do not esteem religious very highly, but that if you were, it would be necessary for you to be enclosed and that consequently it would be necessary to say: ‘Farewell to the service of the poor.’ Tell him that you are poor Daughters of Charity who have given yourselves to God for the service of the poor, and that it is permissible for you to withdraw and also to be sent away.

Louise manifested the same solicitude and care in protecting their “secular family.”

Please warn me, she wrote to Monsieur de Vaux, if in this first article of the rules of our sisters there is something which indicates a regular community different from that of Angers, for that was never my intention. On the contrary, I saw Monsieur the Vicar two or three times in order to make him understand that we are but a secular family and that bound together by the Confraternity of Charity, we have Monsieur Vincent, Superior of these Confraternities for our director. He then made the Archbishop of Nantes understand the nature of our establishment, which the latter approved so greatly that he signed the approbation with the gentlemen of the city.

Three months before her death, Louise wrote to Monsieur Vincent:

A few delicate spirits in the Company show some repugnance regarding the word *Confraternity* and would prefer society or community. I took the liberty of saying that that word was essential to us and could greatly help to strengthen our position so that there would be no innovation for us because the expression means *secularity*. Since Providence willed that we add Society or Company, it was to teach us that we must live a regulated life by observing the rules we received when our Confraternity was established, and in the manner they were explained to us.
More than 20 years of efforts had been necessary in order to triumph over the resistance of public opinion, over the objections of parliament and over the worries of the clergy. Finally, thanks to the wise and strong precautions taken by St. Vincent and St. Louise, a new form of religious life was becoming established without weakening or dulling traditional forms. What seemed essentially contradictory was being realized, i.e., an interior life for those engaged in uninterrupted exterior activity. Louise did not, however, think of exulting over the prodigious advance she was assuring to the apostolate of women; on the contrary, she continued to dedicate herself to others.88

For some years now the Holy See has shown a great interest in certain Catholic associations founded for various purposes but which are neither religious congregations nor societies living in common. Their members live in the world, practice the evangelical counsels of perfection and devote themselves entirely to an apostolate in the world.89 It is interesting to note that three centuries before the Secular Institutes, Louise de Marillac had begun a form of life in which the members were entirely given to God for the service of the poor in the midst of the world, from which she did not separate her Daughters. She launched them, as it were, "in full battle" because there existed "everywhere discord, everywhere hatred, everywhere war, everywhere misery, everywhere hunger, and everywhere death."90

To those who pointed out the dangers of this new society, which the walls of monasteries no longer protected, Vincent replied that the Sisters would have to be more virtuous than religious in their cloisters. Nor did he lose any opportunity of speaking to the sisters about the dangers which might weaken their interior life as well as about the ways of avoiding them. He told them:

Whoever says religious says cloistered and the Daughters of Charity should go everywhere. That is why, Sisters, although you are not enclosed, you must be as virtuous as, and even more than, the Daughters of Saint Marie. And why? Because they are enclosed. When a religious would like to do something wrong, the grille is closed; she cannot; the occasion of doing wrong is removed. But there are none who go about the world as much as Daughters of Charity and who have as many occasions of doing evil as you, Sisters. That is why it is most important for you to be more virtuous than religious. And if there is one degree of perfection for persons living in a Religious Order, Daughters of
Charity need two, because you run a great risk of losing yourselves if you are not virtuous.91

At another time he said to them: "Well now, Sisters, take the resolution of never allowing men to enter your rooms, which are a place of delight. God takes His pleasure in looking at a Daughter of Charity who keeps to her room, and He takes pleasure in being alone there with His spouse."92

Vincent upheld that idea against everything and everyone, and he imposed it. Louise, who always seconded his efforts, wrote to the sisters at Richelieu:

Do you remember frequently the reminder that our Most Honored Father gave us in one of his conferences that we have a cloister as well as religious, and that it is as difficult for souls faithful to God to withdraw from it as for religious from theirs? Although our cloister is not built of stones but of holy obedience, it should regulate all our desires and actions. I beg Our Lord, whose example has enclosed us in this holy cloister that He might give us the grace of never being unfaithful to it.93

Louise objected to a proposition for semi-cloister as "a manner so very dangerous for the continuation of the work of God, which, Most Honored Father, your charity has upheld with so much firmness against all opposition."94

Louise was untiring in her work for the formation of the sisters. She was as solicitous for their practice of the Christian virtues proper to their salvation as for their competence in professional duties. She contributed greatly in converting the Vincentian formula:

"The Daughters of Charity will have:
for monastery the homes of the sick,
for cell a rented room,
for chapel the parish church,
for cloister the streets of the city or wards of the hospitals,
for enclosure obedience,
for grille the fear of God,
and for veil holy modesty . . ."95

Since restraints of an exterior discipline were lacking, the daily practices of the Daughters of Charity were all the more essential. Clothed like the women of the lower class, they did not yet wear the imposing cornette that was to become a familiar sight. A simple white toquois that hid their hair was the habitual headgear. It was only in 1646, that Louise suggested to Vincent that "the sisters wear a cornette of white cloth which might
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protect the face against the inclemency of the great cold and the great heat."96 The white cornette with wings falling over the shoulders was permitted but not imposed for uniformity until the year 1685.97

A Rule Which Lasts throughout the Centuries

The absence of cloister required a number of instructions destined to safeguard the virtue of the sisters. There was no question of definite rules—that would come after years of practice for one must go about it "very simply."98 What was needed were simple suggestions and prescriptions tailored to the needs of good country girls.

The Daughter of Charity was to be recognized less by the rules she kept than by the spirit which animated her, a Christian spirit drawn from the Gospel. Louise carefully pointed out to her sisters what the aim of their service should be:

"We must have continually before our eyes our model, which is the exemplary life of Jesus Christ. We are called to imitate Him not only as Christians, but as having been chosen by God to serve Him in the person of the poor."99

To serve the poor is to serve God! Behold the foundation of the formation of a servant of the poor. Vincent had taught this to Louise, who in her turn wished to engrave that ideal in the heart of her Daughters before sending them forth into their fields of activity.

"Oh, my dear Sisters," she said, "it is not enough to be Daughters of Charity in name, and it is not enough to be in the service of the poor sick ... you must possess the true and solid virtues which you know are essential if you are to accomplish well the work in which you are so happy to be employed. Otherwise, Sisters, your work would be practically useless."100

She expressed the great desire of her heart to see them "all saints in order to be able to work effectively for God. It is not enough to go and to give, but we must have a heart purged of all self-interest. We must never cease practicing mortification of all our senses and passions."101

Louise could speak thus since she was given over to prayer and convinced of her own nothingness. That is what explains the power of her words and of her works. If she had not been a woman of deep interior life, a saint, her work would have preceded or accompanied her to the grave. It was then the union of the interior and the exterior life, until then distinct, at least with women, that she asked of her Daughters.
The audacity of that innovation is difficult for us to conceive today. Therefore, that they might be equal to the task required of them, Louise tried to make the sisters conscious of the greatness of their vocation which, when lived in a spirit of faith, would give them patience in every trial and help them to see the smallest details of each day through the lens of charity.

Employment of the Day

A daily horarium was drawn up. It took into account the needs of the sisters and the works in which they were employed. It was not a rigid structure since their golden rule was to “prefer the Service of the Poor to every other exercise, corporal or spiritual.” Monsieur Vincent reminded them that “Charity takes priority over all rules.” To that effect, the sisters were to subordinate even prayer if it were necessary. Louise would repeat to them the Vincentian formula: “You leave God for God when you leave one of your spiritual exercises to go to serve the poor.”

Mademoiselle made them understand that they must not use that maxim as an excuse to indulge any kind of whim. Leaving God for God had to be motivated by well-regulated charity. She wrote, “We must be most exact to our little rules without slighting the poor, whose service must be preferred to all else, but in an orderly way and not as whims dictate.”

Cult of the Poor in Whom God Lives

At the school of Service of Louise, the Love of the Poor was a science which headed the curriculum. It was a science par excellence for those who, in the name of Jesus Christ, are concerned about the whole human person.

First of all, she communicated to her Daughters the fire of her own love of the poor, a love which had its profound source in the Love of Christ. It was that love which enabled her to mingle with humble village girls with whom she must have had difficulty in finding common interests. It was that love which made her follow their way of life, share their poverty and their fatigue. It was that love which in detaching her heart
little by little from the world and from herself, taught her the cult and understanding of the poor. It was the admirable maxim of the Apostle St. Paul, “Caritas Christi urget nos,” (II Cor. v. 14) that she wished to take as example and as rule of her entire life and of all her works, and which she gave as motto to her Daughters. The remains of sealing wax on her letters and of wax which served to close them reveal that she had begun, as early as 1644, to imprint what was to become the traditional seal of the Company: a heart surrounded by burning flames, in the midst of which is a figure of Jesus Christ crucified, and around which is the inscription: “Caritas Christi urget nos.”

Inspired by her great charity, as Bossuet was by his genius, Louise taught her Daughters the same doctrine as the great orator did on the eminent dignity of the poor. She referred to them as their Lords and Masters.

Scrupulously Careful with Regard to Money

Numerous are Louise’s exhortations on the necessity of managing well the goods of the poor. On one occasion she wrote, “In the name of God take care of the goods of the poor to the best of your ability and see that the sisters do this with affection. I am sure that you must keep an account of your receipts and expenses as exactly as possible.”105 To a sister who replaced another one in the hospital she wrote, “I think you will find sister’s papers because she knows how important order is in a hospital. I would be greatly mistaken if she failed to write the name, country of origin, date of entrance and discharge, and death of the patients, as well as receipts and expenses.”106 In her instructions, as well as in her letters, Louise advises, “To wrap the clothing and money of the poor, if they have any, in the place destined for that purpose. Enter all contents in the register and mark them well in order to return everything to them, if they should get better.”107 Already we have what will become a current listing of clothing and inventory of hospitals.

An extract from her “Advices” gives the reason for her multiple references to the scrupulous care of money:

As most of those who enter the Company are not accustomed to conversing with people of condition or people of rank, and to have the handling of money and of the many little things now at their disposal, it is to be feared that they might begin to get used
to being with people of rank to the extent that they might abuse this privilege. They will then lose the respect they owe them, even so far as to make themselves insupportable. The handling of money might make them decide to appropriate it to themselves and to make use of it according to their curiosity.\textsuperscript{108}

Louise counseled them to excuse themselves from the task, “if others wished to charge them with the administration of the temporal goods of the poor, and to exempt themselves, as far as they were able, from touching any money at all to be distributed to the poor, but to encourage benefactors to distribute it themselves.”\textsuperscript{109}

\textit{Management of Time}

She included the time of the Servant of the Poor among the goods of the poor. By her vocation a sister was obliged to give it entirely. A loss of time is a failure in service: “You must work, not only in order to earn your living, as your Masters do, but also to help to nourish them.”\textsuperscript{110} And Vincent added, “You have a right only to food and clothing; the surplus belongs to the service of the poor.”\textsuperscript{111}

\textit{Poverty}

If it was so important for St. Vincent to maintain the Daughters in a spirit of service and of poverty, it was a concern shared by Louise. Through her own experience she had come to know that only poverty can relieve poverty. She applied herself to make the sisters understand that, as well as the true meaning of charity.

“You bear the quality of servants of the poor,” she told them, “it would not be just that the servants become wealthier than their masters.”\textsuperscript{112}

When they were looking for living quarters for a new establishment, she encouraged them “to choose a lodging suitable for poor girls.”\textsuperscript{113} The instructions which she sent to an architect are inspired by her devotion to holy poverty:

Monsieur, she wrote, it is absolutely necessary that the building appear rustic and as simple as possible . . . if you reflect on the need for the Company to continue to thrive, you will see that it
must appear poor and humble in all things. You will clearly see that it is God's work.\textsuperscript{114}

In order to perpetuate that spirit of poverty in the community, she pointed out to St. Vincent "that it seemed necessary that the rule should oblige the sisters to live always a poor, simple and humble life, for fear that if they were established in a way of life that required great expense, they would be obliged to seek ways of maintaining that life style."\textsuperscript{115}

Poverty became then a prerequisite condition for a Servant of the Poor to participate in the apostolate of charity. "If you preserve that spirit," St. Vincent assured them, "charity will flourish."\textsuperscript{116}

Thanks to the spirit of poverty and of Christian simplicity that Louise inculcated in her Daughters, strong and lasting bonds were forged between vice that degrades and the purity of "good girls," between poverty and the social condition of the Ladies of Charity. The union of classes was being brought about at the bedside of the sick poor.

A woman of prayer and a woman of action, Louise had great experience of souls and of material things. Guided by her innate psychological sense, she understood the mentality of her girls. Good, sincere, robust, and of good will, they were for the most part uninstructed.

"It would be temerity," she made them understand, "to undertake anything without knowing how one should go about it in order to do it well."\textsuperscript{117} It is good to love the Service of the Poor, but one must also know how to serve.

\textit{Professional Formation}

A professional formation, rudimentary at first, became gradually more developed under her guidance. She understood the requirements and qualifications of a nurse of the seventeenth century. Those can in no way be compared with modern standards. Bleedings, purgations and poultices constituted the ordinary practice of the period. Molière's satirical "Saignare, purgare et clysterium donare!" seems in no way to exaggerate reality according to the testimony of Dr. Gaudeul, who saw therein "the A.B.C. of the official seventeenth-century therapeutic methods."\textsuperscript{118}
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Home Nurse

The correspondence of Louise, from which we extract a few excerpts, was a faithful mirror of the medical mentality of the period. It also shows her very capable of instructing others.

"I beg of you, Sister," she wrote, "to teach our sister how to bleed. Teach her especially how to avoid arteries, nerves and other vulnerable areas. Remember that should you suspect that you have opened an artery, draw forth a great quantity of blood and place a coin in the compress in order to make the ligature."119 A letter written in 1658, states "that the best time for a blood-letting for older people is during the full moon. For laxatives, the waning moon is best, so that the evacuation won't be too violent."120

As a hygienic precaution against the plague epidemic, to which were exposed the sisters who were caring for the wounded soldiers at Calais, she ordered that "a few roots of chicory with a little bayberry be boiled. It is a quick-acting remedy but very distasteful to the taste if not accompanied a little by the thought of the bitter beverage offered to Our Lord on the cross."121 To another sister Louise advised her "not to go to visit the sick without rubbing her nose as well as her temples with a little vinegar."122

Among her recommendations for the sisters employed in the villages, we cite the following passage:

They will take care not to bleed or to purge without need, for fear of the dangers that might result. For that reason, as soon as they are called to go to visit the sick, they should greet them cordially and approach them in a joyful manner and with good will. They should then inquire about the length of their illness, and begin their remedies by enemas or by bleeding, when they observe some repugnance. If the fever continues, they should repeat their remedy three or four times. When there is a persistent chronic fever, they should bleed the foot and then bleed the arm again until the fever goes down. When the fever is intermittent and alternates with chills, they should administer a laxative potion. However, they should guard against giving any remedy during the time of chills or perspiration, except a glass of water in which they have dissolved a small amount of theriac, and which they should administer shortly before the chill takes over.123

Louise always indicated very minutely the method of employing the
medications she sent so that they might obtain the best results. "It's a little licorice from which we make the tisane. I'm sending you a few small pieces of it to make it a little easier for you to use. It must be fresh, so cut only what you need because it blackens quickly."\(^{124}\)

For one of the sisters who was sick, Louise felt that there would be no danger "in making her take some of that water, but not the strong kind, in case her illness is not from the lungs. I believe that a half a glass of that water with the juice of an orange will do her a great deal of good after she has fasted. Add a little sugar, and in the evening serve it like a julep."\(^{125}\)

She recommended Cornachin powder as being especially good for "children and older persons. It does not upset the stomach and it draws off fluids without dehydrating the body."\(^{126}\)

Her attention to detail is noteworthy in the following prescription in which she limits to "24 grains of Cornachin powder or senna, about the weight of two coins, or an infusion of our good peach blossom syrup."\(^{127}\)

The care of the sick in their homes being the principal work of the Servants of the Poor, it was necessary that they know something about the medical remedies of their time in order to be effective in their profession.

Unfortunately, all the sisters were not able to acquire the needed aptitudes. Louise's letter gives evidence of that: "I do not believe that you should try to teach our sister, nor allow that she learn how to bleed. She is not capable of that, and I would not like to expose anyone to her attempts."\(^{128}\)

There were others of the same caliber, for instance Sister Charlotte, "a good girl for work but rather simple. It would require several years to make her capable of serving the poor."\(^{129}\) Elsewhere Louise excused herself for not having "a person suitable"\(^{130}\) to send to relieve an overburdened sister. Again she remarked having great difficulty in choosing even a few for the establishments."\(^{131}\)

There were others who could learn but a part of the necessary knowledge. They were rather a source of annoyance to the Ladies and provoked strong remonstrances as they clamored for "girls who knew how to serve and prepare the medications and remedies."\(^{132}\)

Theoretical instruction was certainly not neglected, but no teaching in the professional formation of the Servant of the Poor was so profitable as the visit to the poor. Visiting the poor in their homes was the method adapted from the very beginning, if we are to judge from the following account given by Monsieur Vincent:
About that time the Ladies of St. Savior, because they were women of rank, were looking for a girl who might be willing to carry the soup pot to the sick. A poor girl came to see Mademoiselle Le Gras, was asked what she knew, where she came from, and if she was willing to serve the poor. She accepted willingly. She came then to St. Savior’s. They taught her how to administer medicines and to render all necessary services, and she succeeded very well.133

Moral Formation

Beginners were initiated little by little in the manner of approaching the sick poor while helping older members. By dint of necessity they learned how to “support one another, to be cordial and submissive, while maintaining a spirit of kindness and charity.”134 That was necessary in order to help them exercise “great gentleness toward the poor and great respect toward the priests, doctors and Ladies of Charity. If we didn’t act in that way, I warn you that we would become so insolent that the Ladies would be forced to get rid of us.”135

Respect and obedience “to each one according to his office,”136 was a constant reminder. According to Louise, that respect was due not only to those in office but to everyone. She commented, “to the poor because they are our masters; to the rich because they provide us the means of doing good to the poor.”137

Actual experience in caring for the sick was the pedagogical method most frequently used. Louise put her sisters on guard against the dangers of “a little knowledge” which might lead them to undertake too much. She wrote, “Do not let the habit of taking care of the sick, nor what you have learned from the doctors make you become too forward and independent to the point of not carrying out the doctor’s prescriptions or of obeying the orders given . . . What do we have that has not been given to us? And what do we know that has not been taught us?”138

Habits, however, are only acquired slowly, and work cannot wait. It was necessary to place sisters at the bedside of the sick before the end of their professional training. When that was necessary, Louise would assign the unexperienced one to assist a well-prepared sister-nurse. She would ask the latter to “train the sister in the act of compounding herbs as she already knows how to prepare the medications and other remedies. We
would find it difficult to train anyone on such short notice."139 To another sister she entrusted the supervision of the sisters who served the sick in the parish of Saint Laurent. “They are to render an account to you of the manner in which they serve the poor, of their conduct toward the Ladies, if they are careful to give the latter an account of their work, and especially if they prepare their medicines carefully and take care of their drugs.”140

The education of the sisters continued thus, on the spot and by correspondence, daily and over the years. Everything served as matter of instruction.

Louise followed closely the progress of the sisters in the provinces. She was filled with solicitude for them. “If you need scalpels, please let me know,”141 she wrote. Another time, she let them know that she was sending them “syringes by the duchess.”142

Louise would encourage and give advice, for her motherly heart understood “that changes are always difficult and that it takes time to learn new customs and the manner of serving the poor well and properly.”143

Her discreet but active supervision followed her Daughters throughout the various stages of their development, in such a manner as to prevent deviations and to correct errors. Counsels such as the following are frequently given in the saint’s writings:

As for your conduct with the sick, oh, let it never be in an acquired manner but rather in a very affectionate one, speaking to them and serving them wholeheartedly. Inquire very particularly about their needs and speak to them with kindness and compassion. Procure for them whatever they need without being importunate or hasty, especially in what concerns their eternal salvation. Never leave a poor person without having said a kind word to him.144

To the sisters in villages where there were no doctors, she recommended to them, “go see for yourselves the needs of the poor,” and according to their illnesses to apply the appropriate remedy such as, “bleedings, enemas or medications.”145 The sisters of the parishes, on the contrary, were to administer remedies “in the manner and at the times ordered by the doctor.”146

Obviously, the sisters visited their sick regularly since they were responsible for following exactly the orders given by the doctor and for rendering an account of any complications that might have resulted. They were required to watch their sick in a manner similar to that of nurses working at a hospital.
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Hospital Nurse

The transfer from service of the poor in their homes to service of the poor in hospitals was then quite natural.

Although hospital work did not seem to have been envisioned in their foundation, it devolved on the Daughters of Charity to a certain extent at the Hôtel Dieu of Paris in 1634, and completely in Angers in 1640.

The contract which was signed by Mademoiselle Le Gras in the Hospital of Angers was "a masterpiece of reason and feeling." By it the Daughters of Charity, until then the helpers of the Ladies of Charity, accepted to take over the entire charge of a hospital. That action had a much greater influence perhaps than either Louise or Vincent had foreseen.

Even today throughout the world, thousands of hospitals are entrusted to the Daughters of Charity and prosper by the application of the rules and principles implemented by Louise de Marillac at Angers.

When the administrators of the establishment had asked for sisters to serve the hospital, neither Louise's illness nor the warning she heard about the pestilence that ravaged in the city and its environs could deter her from undertaking the journey to Angers. She knew that a complete reform was necessary there where "Many deficiencies and disorders existed in the service of the poor and the management of their goods."

A Memoir of 1675, preserved in the National Archives of France, refers to that situation:

"There were then about thirty or forty sick, at the arrival of the sisters, and three dozen shirts in all. There were very few poor; those of the city would not allow themselves to be brought to the hospital. . ."

After having spent about twenty days there, Louise was able to return to Paris because the work of the hospital was organized. But from the capital she and Saint Vincent would watch all that was happening in that foundation.

An excerpt from Louise's rule suffices to show the Christian and maternal manner in which the Servant of the Poor was to greet her masters, the sick poor:

The one in charge of putting the sick to bed will receive them, after they have seen a priest, and she will receive them in the spirit indicated in the rule, with the thought in mind that she is their servant and they are her lords and masters. She will keep some hot water in the little kitchen which she will use to wash
their legs. Then she will change their gowns and give them little caps when there are any at the hospital. She will take care when they are sick in bed, to lock up their clothing and money, if they have any, and then she will prepare some broth for them as soon as possible.  

At the St. Marie of Angers hospital, 3,000 sick are still cared for by the Servants of the Poor, who continue to render respectful and diligent care.

Following charity wherever it led them, the Daughters of Louise saw their field of activity widen considerably. At the time of the Fronde, at Chalons, at St. Menehould, at Calais, and at Arras, the wounded soldiers also became their "lords and masters." The spirit of the Daughters of Charity was formed in actual service. In spite of the variety of works to which they devoted themselves, the sisters, thanks to their Foundress, knew how to preserve essentials while modifying the accessories of established customs and precepts. Their apostolate has ever been inspired by the circumstances of time and of places.

**Definitive Rules**

Louise saw to what the spiritual life of unexperienced young sisters was exposed. She further recognized that they would be more faithful to the observance of Rules, whose value and necessity they understood. That, in part, explains why written rules were drafted only after years of faithful observance. Even today details of the rule are adapted to necessities as they arise. Based on the overall needs of the poor, these Rules aim at fostering a practical and effective devotedness, which is none other than the fruit of the supernatural affection which every Daughter of Charity should have for her lords and masters.

**Unity of Direction**

To guarantee the perpetuity of the work and its stability, there only remained the drawing up of constitutions and regulations for the proper functioning of the Institute. Frequently Louise remarked to Vincent that the unity of the Company would be ruined if the spirit of the foundation
was subjected to the influence of persons of divers points of view. She saw but one solution: that Monsieur Vincent should be the Superior of the Daughters of Charity for life, and that after his death the Priests of the Congregation of the Mission, who would preserve his spirit, should take charge of their direction. Louise saw this as the means of giving to the body of the Institute a soul capable of vivifying it throughout the centuries, in spite of the profound upheavals and persecutions that beset society in every age. Through her undertakings and her perseverance in attaining that end, Louise de Marillac assured to her Daughters the same help and counsels they needed and to the Company the survival of the same spirit.

*Louise's Last Words: "Take Good Care of the Service of the Poor"

The thought of improving and of perpetuating the Service of the Poor preoccupied Louise to the very last moments of her life. The last of her letters is dated February 2, 1660. Two days later, she was forced to go to bed, never to get up again. In all probability then, the advice she addressed to Sister Jeanne of the Cross is the last of her writings. It is permeated with the predominant thought of her life. She was to repeat for a last time, "Our exterior actions, although they may be performed for the service of the poor, cannot be very pleasing to God nor merit reward for us if they are not united with those of Our Lord, who always worked in the presence of His Father."

On March 15, 1660, between eleven o'clock and noon, Louise de Marillac rendered her soul to God. Scarcely able to speak, she nevertheless found the strength to bequeath to her Spiritual Daughters the supreme desire of her heart, "Take good care of the Service of the Poor." Her obsequies were carried out according to the wish she had expressed in her will. She wished no other expense than that which was incurred for the burial of every Daughter of Charity. She had protested that "if they acted otherwise, it would be to declare her unworthy of dying as a true Sister of Charity and servant of the members of Jesus Christ, although she esteemed nothing more glorious for herself, than that title."
Many pages would be necessary to evoke, even in a little way, the life of the first Daughters of Charity formed in the school of Louise and Vincent. The devotedness, heroism, sanctity, and other virtues of those "good girls" contain something which surpasses our admiration. Monsieur Vincent himself was overjoyed to see to what an extent they associated the feeling of privilege and honor with their service of the poor. He often quoted to the Ladies of Charity the words little Sister Andree had uttered on her death bed. "I told the Ladies of Sister Andree's reply to a question I asked her: 'I have no regret, no remorse, other than perhaps having taken too great pleasure in serving the poor.' And when I said to her, 'But, Sister, isn't there anything in your past which frightens you,' she replied, 'No, Sir, nothing at all, unless I felt too much satisfaction when I used to go through the villages to see those dear people. I used to fly, so full of joy was I in serving them.'"

On another day, it delighted Monsieur Vincent to relate the adventure of one of the good girls whose life had been endangered, when one of the walls of a house she was visiting crumbled and crushed about forty persons. The onlookers shouted to her to jump into their arms, but the sister "first of all handed down her soup kettle which they grasped with a hook at the end of a fair-sized pole. Then, relying on the mercy of Divine Providence, she threw herself down on cloaks which were stretched out for her." Out of danger, what did she do? ... 'Trembling all over, she set out to serve the rest of her poor." What a sublime act!

Servants of the Poor, that was their title. Their time and their devotedness belonged to the needy. Saint Vincent and Saint Louise insisted strongly on that duty, which one day was to become the first article in their Common Rules.

Richelieu's niece, the Duchess of Aiguillon, had used all her influence in order to have a Servant of the Poor in her service. Monsieur Vincent and Louise deliberated a long time before sending her one, but on condition that the sister might devote a part of her time to the poor of the parish. Choice was then made of little Marie Denyse, but the latter could not resign herself to accepting. "I left my father and mother in order to give myself to the service of the poor," she replied, "nothing will change my decision. Excuse me if I am not able to place myself at the service of that great lady."
IN THE SERVICE OF THE POOR

cheeks; that was her only answer.” However, she left with the assurance that she would be in the company of a person who loved the poor very much and that “if after four or five days, you continue to desire to return to Saint Nicholas, you will be taken back.” To the Duchess asking why she was not happy in her employ, Barbe replied, “Madam, I left my father’s house in order to serve the poor, and you are a great lady, very powerful and rich! If you were poor, Madam, I would serve you willingly.”

She had to be recalled. Vincent and Louise rejoiced to see how much the love of the poor filled the hearts of their Daughters. “What do you think of it,” he wrote. “Are you not overjoyed to see the strength of the spirit of God in these two poor girls and the scorn which, thanks to Him, they experience for the world and its grandeur? You have no idea what courage this has given me for the Confraternity of Charity.”

There was also Sister Jeanne Dalmagne whose heart was overflowing with charity. Sent to Nanteuil, she set about cleaning and dressing the wounds of a severely-stricken poor girl. Those wounds exuded an odor so offensive that no one else dared to approach her. Sister Jeanne would feel nauseated and sometimes would even lose consciousness, but as soon as she recovered, she would courageously resume her work of mercy.

How can we refrain from citing also the admirable devotion unto death of a sister named Marie-Joseph? When she was in her agony, she was told of a poor person who had need of being bled. “She arose from her deathbed, bled the patient, fell herself after having done that, and died shortly afterwards.”

Had Saint Vincent been wrong in calling those Daughters “martyrs of charity?” Louise de Marillac had known how to attract them, form and sustain their devotedness. Wasn’t that for Louise the characteristic of a “social vocation?” That vocation is all the more extraordinary because, after more than three centuries and on every continent, the Servants of the Poor continue their mission, be it in preventing misery as educators or in relieving misery as nurses and social workers.