Chapter 4

THE MISERY OF GALLEY SLAVES

Keep in mind those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them; and those who are being badly treated, since you too are in the one body.

Heb. 13:3

Saint Vincent de Paul had a very special respect for the Daughters of Charity, and their title of “Servants of the Poor” touched him deeply. In his last conferences to them he would repeat frequently, “Oh! What a beautiful title! It is as if one were to say ‘Servant of Jesus Christ’ since He claims as done to Himself all that is done to His members.”

In October 1655, speaking to the sisters about the service rendered to the galley slaves, he suddenly paused and then exclaimed:

Oh! Sisters, what happiness it is to serve those poor galley slaves abandoned into the hands of people who have no pity for them. I have seen those wretched men treated like beasts. God was touched with compassion at the sight. He had pity on them, and as a result, His goodness did two things in their favor. First, He had a house purchased for them; secondly, He wished to arrange things in such a manner that they might be served by His own Daughters, since to say Daughter of Charity is the same as saying Daughter of God.

More perhaps than any of the unfortunate ones helped by the Daughters of Charity, the galley slaves had a claim to the solicitude of the saintly old man, whose interest and charity in their regard had been manifest for more than thirty years. The news of the marvels which he had accomplished in their regard had reached the court, and the king appointed him General Chaplain of the galleys on February 8, 1619. This assignment permitted him greater personal initiative and facilitated his entrance into the prisons of the Conciergerie and into the other prisons of the capital, where the galley slaves awaited the departure of the chain gang to man the galleys at Marseilles.

Those condemned souls, worn out by the weight of heavy chains,
suffering from fever and deprived of all spiritual and corporal assistance, had so touched his heart that he petitioned the Procurator General, under whose authority were all the prisons, to better the condition of the galley slaves, especially that of the sick ones. Yielding to Vincent's plea, the Procurator General brought about their transfer from the cells of the Conciergerie to a house in the faubourg Saint-Honoré near the church of Saint Roch.³

Since that good work had no resources, Cardinal de Retz appealed to his clergy on June 1, 1618, to recommend those unfortunate creatures to the charity of the faithful. According to Collet, that appeal resulted not only in generous gifts but encouraged "pious and charitable persons to enter the prisons in order to instruct and console the galley slaves."⁴

As Early as 1632 Louise Visited the Galley Slaves

It is quite possible that Louise de Marillac was numbered among those charitable persons who visited the prisoners. After her marriage in 1613, she lived in the parish of Saint Merry as a devoted wife and mother. In spite of her very busy days, her hours of leisure were reserved for the unfortunate. One of her servants who had observed her good works testified that she took them sweets and jams, biscuits and other good things. Besides, "she would comb their hair, clean their infected wounds, wash away the vermin, and even prepare the deceased for burial."⁵

She also counted among her happiest moments those spent with the Daughters of the Passion, who welcomed her to share their poor meals and to unite with them in their prayers and religious exercises. Their life had so attracted her that she had expressed the desire of becoming a cloistered religious, but the Reverend Honoré de Champigny, a Capuchin priest, judged her too weak to bear the austerities of that kind of life. Louise had resigned herself to that refusal, seeing in it the Will of God, but continued to frequent the company of those holy souls. Those visits brought her very near the house in the faubourg Saint Honoré, recently rented for the galley slaves.

It is very likely, knowing the zeal which devoured Louise for all those who suffered, that as early as 1618, she may have belonged to that noble group of ladies of whom Bourdaloue said:

You go down, Ladies, into those dens where the justice of men exercises its full rigor. You try to pierce the darkness of those
miserable abodes. If you can, open your eyes and behold in the midst of that darkness a wretched creature weighed down by his chains, his whole person but an image of death itself. To those torments of mind you must consider the sufferings of the body: a den of infection for a dwelling, measured portions of crude bread for food and straw for a bed.\textsuperscript{6}

Louise’s biographers and her writings furnish no details concerning her early visits to the galley slaves. The first indication we have of her personal service to those poor prisoners is taken from a letter which Saint Vincent addressed to her in 1632. He makes it quite clear that her devotion toward those poor prisoners had begun at an earlier period: “Charity toward those poor galley slaves is of incomparable merit before God. You have done well to assist them and you will do well to continue doing so in whatever way possible.”\textsuperscript{7}

Whether or not Louise was one of those very first visitors to the galley slaves, she remains worthy of our admiration and of our praise for what she accomplished for those poor unfortunate ones from this period on. She placed her Daughters in their service and stimulated the Ladies of Charity to visit them in a very close-knit collaboration with the sisters.

\textit{The Galley Slaves at La Tournelle}

The Saint Roch prison, wherein the galley slaves had been imprisoned since 1618, was in such a dilapidated condition that any possibility of repairs and improvements needed to guarantee the health of the prisoners had to be dismissed as futile. Furthermore, visits by “pious and charitable persons” in a very unorganized manner had led to great abuses. Women of ill repute had joined the group and “made of a place of suffering and grief an abode of prostitution and scandal.”\textsuperscript{8} Those disorders worried Vincent from whose thoughts the galley slaves were never absent. He wanted to remedy the situation but the prisons of Paris did not come under his jurisdiction. If he had already taken care of the galley slaves of Paris, it was at his own expense.

It is very probable that he strongly upheld the decisions made by the Company of the Blessed Sacrament, of which he was a member, when in 1630 it engaged in a vigorous struggle against the deplorable practices going on in those infected and badly aired dens, where criminals “rotted alive”\textsuperscript{9} according to Count René de Voyer d’Argenson. The Company accomplished much good. At its own expense it hired four additional guards in
the last months of that year. The galley slaves were able to leave their dens for a few moments each day in order to breathe a little fresh air. Either at the instigation of the Company or on his own initiative, Vincent solicited and encouraged others to solicit King Louis XIII "to agree to converting the former tower standing between the Saint Bernard gate and the river into a shelter for those poor galley slaves. This request was granted to him in the year 1632, and the prisoners were taken there, where for several years they remained dependent upon the alms of charitable persons.”

In 1633, the Company of the Blessed Sacrament was forced to discontinue its ministry in the prisons of Paris because of objections set forth by some pastors who considered this interference “an insult to their pastoral dignity.” Religious assistance to the convicts fell by right to the parish priest. Father George Froger, pastor of the parish of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet, addressed himself to the Archbishop to obtain on September 2, 1634, an authorization for religious services to be held in the tower of the galley slaves. A member of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament was chosen as chaplain, a task facilitated by the constant support of his confreres who ever favored help to the galley slaves. No one perhaps showed them as much interest as Vincent who wanted to assure them material, moral and religious assistance.

Spiritual help to prisoners was one of the obligations stipulated in the contract that gave birth to the Congregation of the Mission. Vincent also appealed to the priests who attended the Tuesday conferences to preach missions to the convicts before their departure for the galleys in Marseilles. He felt that the poor men needed to be prepared for the reception of the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist and for the strength to support in a Christian manner the hardships of the journey.

In highlighting Louise de Marillac’s service to the galley slaves there is no intention of minimizing in any way the great amount of good that Vincent de Paul did for them. It was he who in 1632, requested of Louise, at that time Superioress of the Charity established in the parish of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet, to include the galley slaves in the distribution of alms made to the poor of the parish by the Ladies of Charity of the Confraternity. “Consider for a moment,” he wrote to her, “whether or not your Confraternity of Charity of Saint Nicolas might not wish to take charge of this for at least some time.” Louise and the Ladies gave as much as they could but their alms did not suffice, so an appeal had to be made to the Ladies of Charity of the Hôtel Dieu. In their turn, they brought to these poor victims consolation and alms.
Vincent Suggested to Louise to Send Her Daughters to Serve the Galley Slaves

Vincent had in mind a more effective and more lasting good. He turned to Mademoiselle Le Gras and closely observed her Daughters, who beneath their rustic manner concealed treasures of virtue and love. They had become a fervent little group ready to undertake any task for the Lord of Charity. Courageously, Vincent suggested to Louise to train them to become “servants of the galley slaves.” As a result, in 1640, these simple, humble and pure women began their service of the unfortunate prisoners at La Tournelle.

For eight years Louise had had numerous opportunities of studying at close range the intense physical and moral distress of the galley slaves. She had seen those poor unfortunate ones maltreated by brutal jailers eager for personal gain. She saw them obliged to buy their food at prices far higher than the ordinary prices, and she knew that they were deprived of all care. Her heart had become more and more touched, especially at the sight of the sick ones, to whom the administration only allotted the same portion of bread and water as the well received. Once again Divine Providence was training her at the school of experience. After having given herself personally to this work for a long time, she was qualified to organize the service of the galley slaves. Vincent was aware of this and he relied on her wisdom and common sense to put into practice what only his great love of God could have dreamed of.

1640: The Service of the Galley Slaves Begins

January 1640: Louise was in Angers establishing her Daughters at the Saint-Jean hospital. Seven letters from Vincent reached her one right after the other. His great desire for her return to Paris repeated itself like a refrain. On January 17, he wrote to her: “Oh, how necessary is your presence here for the affairs of the Charity.”14 Five days later he pleaded, “As for your return, I beg you that it might be as soon as possible.” To assure this he recommended that she “rent a carriage and two good, strong horses.”15 His letter of February 10, revealed his unbounded joy at the thought that she would soon be back. “Blessed be God,” he wrote, “that you are returning so soon. Oh, how welcome you will be and with what
great desire we await you.”16 That very day he was awaiting Mr. Cornwell’s daughter. Her father had willed ”an income of six thousand livres for the good of the galley slaves, to be used in their assistance.”17 There is almost a sigh a relief in his words of a few days later, “You will arrive just in time to settle the matter of the galley slaves.”

By the end of the month, Louise was finally back in Paris helping him settle several matters before the legacy destined for the galley slaves could be obtained. Vincent was forced to entreat the Procurator General Mathieu Molé to take action that funds sufficient enough to assure an income of six thousand livres might be placed in his hands and administered by him and his successors. It was that gift which would provide corporal relief for the galley slaves by devoted servants placed at their disposal.

Vincent had recognized as a difficult task the organization of the visits to the galley slaves. In 1632 he had suggested it to Louise with a reminder “that it is the very difficulty of the work which causes me to present this thought to your adventurous mind.”18 How much more difficult was his appeal of 1640 for her to organize the service of the galley slaves.

**Difficulties of the Task**

Louise must have shuttered, in spite of herself, at the very thought of placing untrained servants of the poor in the prison life of those infernal dens of the seventeenth century. She, who never went blindly into anything, must have considered this project under every possible aspect. Would the galley slaves refuse to respect uncouth and uneducated country girls? Would she be exposing her Daughters to imminent danger among those criminals? Louise’s zeal was not to be stopped by obstacles. Faced with a mission in which the poor were considered repugnant and greatly neglected, Louise could not hesitate. On the contrary, she rejoiced in having the occasion of sending her Daughters to take care of those poor unfortunate ones, convinced that God would guard them as He had protected the three young men in the fiery furnace, since it was out of charity and obedience that they were going there. That was her firm theory!

It is worth noting that it was at this period of history when Louise’s action in favor of the galley slaves was at its height, that the general adoption of the foundlings had just been inaugurated, that new Charities
were being formed, and that a new Motherhouse was being established. It was to the latter that each of her Daughters would come to be filled with the love of God and of the neighbor, and from where Louise’s maternal interest would follow them to their fields of action, as she had so recently done for her good Daughters whom she accompanied to the Hôtel Dieu of Angers. Although her overburdened days left her few free moments, she felt she must find time for the new service destined to reach down to the lowest levels of human misery.

Firsthand Formation

For other works, Louise had at times been able to rely on methods already established and could provide a formation by correspondence. Her general method of forming beginners by placing them with others in an established service or in collaboration with them did not apply here. The Daughters destined for the service of the galley slaves, where all was to be organized, would need an in-training formation. If she accepted the responsibility of sending her Daughters to such a place, she would point out to them in advance the dangers to which they would find themselves exposed and the precautions which they would have to take. She would not conceal in the slightest way the dangers of their corrupted surroundings. For lack of experienced workers in this employment, it seems most probable to us that Louise herself accompanied the first “Daughters of the galley slaves” to the prison of La Toumelle. There she would have seen the conditions in which they would be rendering service.

Knowing so well from her own formation that experience is the best guarantee against error, she doubtless spent some time there in order to watch them at work. Her presence at La Toumelle is further affirmed by a request from Vincent that she draw up the regulations for the Daughters of the galley slaves, adding: “But for that, it is good to know what they do there and to include it.” In order to know that, Louise must have gone there.

Louise Draws Up the Regulations

The main idea which inspired all Louise’s social action is evident in these regulations. In the first place she indicated the double end of the
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new enterprise, "to serve corporally and spiritually the poor galley slaves who are detained in prison until they are conducted to the galleys, whether they are able-bodied or sick." Before thinking of saving the soul of the galley slave, must not the sisters give them a life which will permit them to become conscious of having a soul? For that reason the corporal service with its concern for food, clothing and the care of the sick must occupy first place.

To Procure Good Food for the Galley Slaves

The first abuse which Louise tried to correct was to substitute appetizing and well-prepared food for the poor allotment of food and water which was given to the prisoners. The humidity and the lack of cleanliness in the prison, not favoring its preparation, she prescribed that her sisters prepare "their food every day in their house, buying themselves the meat and other things required for their nourishment." Prescriptions full of delicacy on the part of Louise and well carried out by her Daughters! Was it not one of those Daughters who, according to the testimony of her companion in the service of the galley slaves, "arose around three o'clock in the morning in the summer, because meat could not be kept a long time, and went to the butcher's from where she would return ladened with seventy-five livres of meat."

To be able to prepare the food, it was necessary first of all to buy it. Its purchase by the sisters spared the galley slaves the worry of messengers who would deceive them as to the quality and quantity of the food which they brought. It also spared them the brutality of their guardians, who gave them repulsive food and undertook shameful speculations in the sale of food and other objects of necessity. Louise gave the sisters an important recommendation in pointing out to them that the food was the property of the poor, therefore it was necessary to manage it well. The regulations would then state "not to take any of their food directly or indirectly and not to favor merchants who furnish it to the detriment of the said poor."

Experience proved that the lesson was well understood. Meat becoming very rare, the sisters themselves renounced their portion in favor of the galley slaves "not to give them subject of complaint or of murmur." The rule would also stress that "the ones who make the purchase will keep an account of the same in order to render an account, whenever necessary,
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to those to whom it should be made." How full of wisdom was this recommendation to poor country girls exposed to the danger which the handling of money ever presents. Saint Vincent, in his turn, would add: "It is very necessary for the Daughters of Charity to be upright and to appear so in their accounts."26

Resources at their disposal were however very limited and often lacking. It was on those occasions that the Daughters showed themselves worthy of their spiritual mother. For "their Poor" they did not hesitate to beg from charitable persons. Unfortunately, days were to come, even entire years, during which the latter were not able to contribute the desired alms, for the wealthy and the most powerful themselves had difficulty in subsisting even to save their lives.27 Miracles of economy were necessary for the sisters to be able to feed the galley slaves. A letter addressed to Vincent during the war of the Fronde gives evidence of this. With what solicitude his co-worker expressed therein her anxiety for their voluntary beggar who no longer had resources for her poor prisoners. "Our sister in the service of the galley slaves," she wrote, "came to me yesterday all upset because she no longer had bread for her poor, both because of what is due to the baker as for the high price of bread. She has been borrowing and begging everywhere for that purpose but with great difficulty."28

Once the food was bought, it was necessary to prepare it with care and in such a way as to make it appetizing. Louise's advice to each sister placed on duty in the kitchen was "that the meat be well cooked, neither overdone nor rare."29 But if the quality and quantity of meat was very necessary to better the state of health of the poor galley slaves, weakened by their life of inactivity at La Tournelle, punctuality seemed even more essential to Louise in order to satisfy those poor prisoners. It was thus that the sisters were required to take the kettle to them "at the exact hour." True service had begun for the "Daughters of the galley slaves" but in what a place! Louise's maternal concern could not conceal itself.

To Treat the Galley Slaves with Respect and Mildness

She acquainted the sisters with the surroundings in which they would be placed. Those men of filth and mire, to borrow the language of the century, would be receiving services which they should be rendering themselves. Therefore, they would not receive them with good grace and would doubtless tell the sisters that they were their servants and that it
was they who enabled them to earn a living. Often they would treat them as vile servants. However, inspired wisdom would dematerialize, so to speak, that infected milieu for in spite of their blasphemies and crude language, in spite of their uncleanliness, in spite of all their ugliness, the galley slaves “were nonetheless members of the One who had become a slave.” Louise would tell the sisters:

You are doing very little by carrying kettles, if you do not propose to yourselves Jesus Christ as the object of your ministry. Should we forget in the slightest way that the poor are the members of Jesus Christ, we will inevitably lose some of the love and sweetness which we must ever have for our dear masters. On the contrary, this thought will enable us to have no trouble in serving and respecting them, in relieving them, and in never complaining of them.

Thanks to the lessons which they received from their virtuous foundress, the sisters understood the importance of “never speaking to them rudely or of reproaching them for their disagreeableness.” They even went further and redoubled their attention and kindness toward those who maltreated them the most. One among them, Barbara Angiboust, was outstanding for her great charity and unalterable patience. Sometimes the galley slaves were displeased with what they were served and would become angry with her to such a point that they would throw both the soup and the meat on the ground, yelling at her whatever impatience suggested to them. According to the report of Jeanne Luce, who helped her in this service, “Barbara suffered all this without uttering a word. She would pick up the food, clean it, and give it once again to the galley slaves, showing as kindly an expression as if they had neither done nor said anything.”

**Dealings with Guards**

The regulations stated also that “if the kettle should be too heavy, they should get assistance from the guards.” Another contact, another danger! Louise was ever on the watch. Many were her prudent advices to the sisters concerning all their dealings with the guards. Louise, as a mother, watched jealously over the purity of her Daughters, who must never let the guards “enter their rooms except at the hour when they shall come to fetch the kettle.” On those occasions the sisters were not to separate
themselves from each other. This union was necessary because there were only two of them placed at La Tournelle except in the year 1642, epoch at which Louise sent a third sister to help Sister Barbara who had become weak and sickly. Louise foresaw that if the guards "had a need of speaking to them at any other time, it would be at the door located at the foot of the steps." Otherwise, she warned the sisters "not to have any contact with the guards of the galley slaves."

Louise showed the prudence of a mother who is on the alert to preserve the purity of her children but also the wisdom of a legislator who aims at avoiding any action which might destroy the work! She feared especially the infiltration of favor, the downfall of so many good works. There was to be no kind of conspiracy between the sisters and the guards, who also had laws to obey. The established law at the prison must be observed at any cost. Furthermore, Louise reasoned that if the sisters were prudent and patient in their dealings with the guards, the latter would feel obliged to treat the convicts less harshly. Their personal conduct was to be a powerful influence for good. It was thus that Sister Barbara "on five or six occasions was able to prevent the guards from striking prisoners." When the sisters' charity did not effect the desired result, they did not hesitate to follow the example of Sister Farre of Saint-Roch who "would fall on her knees in front of the convicts in order to spare them from receiving the blows."

Well-Regulated Charity

Louise ever encouraged the charity of her Daughters but showed them that it must nevertheless be well regulated. On one occasion, for example, she made one of the sisters understand that she had done wrong for an apparent good. She had lessened the portion of some of the galley slaves so that others might be provided for, without having previously notified the Administrator, who saw in this action an interference in his powers and who threatened to dismiss the sisters. For the few extra prisoners the sister might have helped, the sisters might have had to abandon the greater number. Would that have been true charity? No, according to Louise who was trained by Saint Vincent to understand that "Our Lord wishes us to serve him with judgment; all else is indiscreet zeal."

For that same reason she would remind the sisters that they were at the Tournelle Prison for the relief of the misery they found there, not to
establish regulations, which depended on the administrators. They were not to interfere in the slightest way even by delivering a letter or accepting any errand whatsoever from the convicts without proper authorization. They were their servants, yes, but must ever be mindful to respect the decisions of authority.

How much wisdom Louise manifested in her analysis of a request made by the Duchess d'Aiguillon that one of the sisters draw up for her a list of the galley slaves who should be freed. Louise felt this to be the responsibility of the administration. She immediately pointed out three serious difficulties she could foresee:

"First, the sister can only glean her information from the prisoners' manner of acting toward her, whether they bestowed insults or praise upon her. This being the case, she might commit an injustice.

"Another difficulty is that some prisoners offer money to their captain and to the concierge, who will then blame the sister for being the cause of their misfortune.

"The third difficulty is that those who must remain will believe that the sister is responsible for their condition. You know what such people can both say and do."41

Louise, who would have wished all to share in this benefit, thus communicated her thoughts to Vincent. She assured him that she had asked the sister "to delay drawing up the list until I should hear from you." Documents do not disclose Vincent's reply, but the continuation of the work makes one conclude that he agreed wholeheartedly with his collaborator in maintaining a distinction between "a charitable work" and a "responsibility of the police."

Sanitary Reforms

Vincent agreed also with her suggestions for sanitary reforms which she deemed necessary day by day on her visits to the prison. She was convinced that relief without hygienic care threatened to run into great difficulties. That is a very natural consideration for our century, in which hygienic concern plays such an important role, but Louise belonged to the seventeenth century! What endeavors she exerted to establish cleanliness everywhere! How carefully she watched to make sure that the clothing of the prisoners should be clean!

When they arrived, it was Louise's Daughters who would remove their
soiled and tattered shirts to replace them with clean ones. The sisters were also reminded by their rule to take great care “to give the convicts clean clothes every Saturday and to wash the soiled ones.” That service, though repugnant to nature, was for them a corporal work of mercy greatly appreciated by God. That same service was to be repeated “when the chain gang was ready to set out” so that the convicts might have “clean shirts and other clothes” for the length of the voyage.

That delicate task, which Louise asked her Daughters to perform, remained throughout her life one of the services which in spite of her numerous occupations, she loved most to render whenever the occasion presented itself. One of the first sisters testified that sometimes “poor discharged prisoners who were wearing rotted shirts on their back and whose legs were eaten away” would come to the sisters’ house. Louise would “give them some of her son’s shirts and socks, instruct them and give them an alms.”

Another sister, who witnessed her performing similar services to prisoners, added that Louise “would wash their feet, treat their sores, and give them some of her son’s clothing.”

Louise showed the same concern for order, economy and cleanliness in every detail dealing with material care. Far in advance of her century, she was well aware of the close bond which exists between morality and hygiene.

The sisters were constantly reminded to air and clean the convicts’ cells at the departure of the chain gang. At that time their work increased considerably because theirs was the task of “emptying and refilling straw mattresses and cleaning the cells.” Sometimes, in spite of their precautions, other galley slaves arrived before the work of cleaning was finished. At those times, the Sisters gladly gave up their own mattresses so that their “Lords and Masters” might be provided for.

Louise’s recommendations as to the manner of approaching the galley slaves, of caring for them and of showing interest in their spiritual welfare were characterized by the most tender charity, for to Louise and her Daughters corporal assistance was but a means. Spiritual help was the end. In this respect they conformed to the charitable motivation of the century, which was “essentially religious” in its endeavor “to lead back or to preserve souls in the faith.” Therein, contrary to Mr. Cohen’s viewpoint, there was a great concern for saving the body as well as selfless spiritual service on the part of generous souls.

Considering the sick prisoners more abandoned than all others, she urged the sisters to show them “even greater care than the sick of the
parishes." Visits, medications, better prepared food, special broths, nothing was too good for them.

All in the sisters’ daily routine was to be subordinated to the service they rendered those poor creatures. The lesson of “leaving God for God” whenever necessary was constantly instilled in the sisters. Louise ever came back to it in their formation. One of the sisters was especially outstanding in this holy practice. Her companion described her as being very devout “but her devotion was not misdirected—of all her devotions she preferred the service she was obliged to render to the poor.”

It was in rendering countless services to the sick that the sisters were encouraged “to urge them to lead a good life in the future” and to inquire discreetly into their dispositions for making the Mission.

Collaboration with the Ladies of Charity

Directed by a keen psychological sense, Louise understood that two overburdened sisters could not assure the convicts the spiritual assistance they would have liked to give. Why not solicit collaboration of the Ladies of Charity whom she had personally initiated in visiting the galley slaves? Louise felt that their presence at meal time would not only be of spiritual help but would also lighten the corporal service of the Daughters. Their social rank, an important factor in the seventeenth century, would oblige the convicts to show greater respect while they were present. Thus considered, the ninth article of the regulations would read:

Since experience has given proof that the presence of some Ladies of Charity has been a great means of ensuring the respect of the convicts, they will endeavor discreetly to see that some come occasionally at the hour of the meals.

Because the Ladies failed at times in regularity and exactitude in those visits, Louise chose the day of a large assembly of the Ladies of Charity to ask Vincent to remind them of the “great spiritual good they might accomplish in visiting the galley slaves when our sisters bring them their dinner, which is an hour convenient enough for them to be back home in time to take care of their household duties. They are served at ten o’clock.”

Once again love was to bring to the same level classes of society otherwise quite far apart. It was in the service of abandoned convicts that the Ladies of nobility of the seventeenth century and those of the bourgeois class were to associate with village girls.
**To Choose Carefully the Sisters to Serve the Convicts**

The Superior’s task didn’t limit itself to placing her Daughters at the Tournelle Prison. Once there they were to keep her posted so that she might continue directing the work. To encourage her Daughters to take good resolutions was one thing but it was another matter to see that they were carried out. Their devotedness in caring for the convicts demanded virtues not easily lost by contact with criminals.

Thus, the choice of sisters for this work was a delicate one. Vincent and Louise combined efforts. A few months after they had been sent there Vincent sent Louise a word of warning concerning “Sister Jeanne in her service of the galley slaves. . . It seems most necessary to change her just as soon as possible. . .”50 Again at the Community Council of October 25, 1646, a similar problem concerning sisters placed in the prisons was discussed.

However, these were exceptions. The devotedness of the sisters placed in the service of those poor derelicts was truly heroic. One among them never failed at the departure of the chain gang “to give to each poor galley slave one or two écus, which she had begged for them from charitable persons.”51 She had truly adopted them and followed them with a mother’s solicitude.

**Not to be Discouraged**

The very nature of the work led the sisters engaged in this work to be easily discouraged. It was on those occasions that Vincent would show them how the basest employments in the opinion of the world were great in the light of faith.

“Who had pity on poor criminals abandoned by everyone?” he asked them in 1655. “Poor Daughters of Charity! Is that not to do what we have already said: to honor the great charity of Our Lord, who helped the most miserable of sinners without considering their crimes?”52

The Daughters would draw from his words the strength needed not to become discouraged. Louise, for her part, would point out to them the inestimable grace which God had bestowed on them when He chose them to be the servants of convicts, and she would encourage them to “renew themselves in the spirit of purity and modesty” so necessary in their
employment, in order to be "like the sunlight which shines constantly on
filth without becoming tainted in the least." 53

Obliged to absent herself from Paris in 1646, Louise named her
Assistant Sister Elizabeth Hellot to visit the sisters in the service of the
galley slaves every eight or ten days. 54 In that manner, she assured a
follow-up of the formation she had personally given to the "Daughters of
the Galley Slaves." In fact, she always showed a special predilection for
this work. Once while visiting the Procurator General, she had the
delicacy to thank him very specially for the kindness he always showed
our sisters when they appealed to him in their needs for "the poor galley
slaves as well as the foundlings." 55

Since Then?

La Toumelle remained a prison until 1790. But for more than a century
the field of action of the Daughters of the Galley Slaves had been
spreading. Until 1660, the Ladies of Charity had only cared for the galley
slaves in Paris. At that time they were encouraged to help the unfortunate
convicts of other prisons, and the Daughters of Charity accompanied
them. Until the Revolution, the Ladies of Charity kept two Daughters in
service at the Conciergerie to prepare broth for the sick and remedies
needed by prisoners. 56

Work in the prisons, the modified form of that of the galley slaves, was
becoming stabilized. To be trained properly, "the servants of the prison-
ers" of the eighteenth century drew inspiration from the same regulations
drawn up so prudently by Louise for the first sisters placed in the service
of the convicts of the Tournelle prison.

Among those, Sister Marie Gulhès of Rennes, has often been cited for
the example she gave. For her the first care to be given to the prisoners
was "to clean them of filth." After changing their clothing, she would
provide for them all the relief their condition required. Thus occupied,
she would speak to them of their crimes and try to prepare them for death,
when she foresaw no possibility of preventing this. And, like Barbara
Angiboust, she always showed a smiling countenance to those convicts
who "were cruel enough to maltreat her in a brutal manner." 57

Had Louise foreseen to what heroism her Daughters would be led in
their endeavors to observe faithfully her recommendations? Faithful to
that eighth article of the rules: "Nor will they reply in order to justify
themselves when falsely accused," one of the Daughters of the nineteenth century verified to the letter the words of Saint Paul: "Remember those who are in chains as if you yourself were in chains with them." After having devoted herself with great charity to prisoners for forty-one years, she was obliged to spend a year in prison because of her faith. "This did not hinder her from continuing to obtain spiritual help for innocent victims condemned to death in spite of the dangers to which she was exposing herself in so acting."

This field of action soon spread beyond France. Prisoners of other countries were to profit by the devoted service of the Daughters of Charity. In the United States, the slaves—other galley slaves—were to know charitable servants. One of them seeing those poor Negroes "treated like beasts of burden obtained a lessening of brutality on the part of the guards." Other Barbaras—other Nicoles—other "Servants of convicts." Each century and each nation claimed them. Those of the twentieth century still enroll in the school of their foundress. Her advice guides them in their undertakings and preserves them from contamination in their frequent visits to dangerous surroundings.

Moral assistance of prisoners has replaced corporal assistance since governments, understanding their duty, have procured the necessaries of life for the inmates. Since then, the Daughters of Louise, ever faithful to adapting their action to the needs of the century, direct their efforts more toward moral relief.

The following report from the Ministry of Prisons in Cuba indicates a current trend:

Each Thursday two sisters go to the Central House of Detention. On arrival each one goes to her section as two large assembly halls have been placed at their disposal. There the prisoners, who wish to do so, gather to listen to them. Each sister has an audience of 150 to 200 men each time. No jailer is in the hall. It was decided that after the sister had talked, if any point needed to be made clearer, the questions would be asked in the yard. There, too, they enjoy perfect liberty. The two sisters are then together, and prisoners who wish to do so approach them one after the other without being prevented by their jailers.

This is a means of becoming better acquainted with each one, and from religious topics the conversation passes to family matters or vice versa. They know that the Daughters of Charity are at their service and also at the service of their dear ones...
All the good that can still be said of the Daughters of Charity placed in the service of prisoners only increases the praise and glory of their Spiritual Mother!