Chapter 6

THE SUFFERING OF THE INSANE

Yes, my Sisters, it is God Himself who wished to make use of the Daughters of Charity to take care of the poor insane. Oh! All of you, what a great favor it is for those who are in their service, to have such a beautiful means of serving God and Our Lord, His divine Son.

Saint Vincent de Paul

The service of the poor insane was one of the last gems in the crown of Saint Louise de Marillac. Saint Vincent loved to remind the first sisters that it was like the fruit of their fidelity in the discharge of their previous duties. He said to them: “God, seeing that they so carefully assisted the poor, seeking them and caring for them in their own homes, as Our Lord did most often, said: ‘These girls please Me; they have discharged that duty well; I wish to entrust another one to them.’”

This second one was the care of abandoned children and Saint Vincent added: “As God saw that you fulfilled this with so much charity, He said: ‘I want to entrust them with still another employment.’”

And then came the assisting of poor criminals or convicts. Next, the care of the poor old people of the Holy Name of Jesus. Finally, was added the very last, that of “poor people who had lost their mind!”

Saint Vincent Had Been Interested for a Long Time in the Insane

In 1632, when Saint Vincent moved to Saint Lazare, to live there with his young community, he found several demented persons who were kept locked up. They immediately attracted his sacerdotal heart and he took them under his wing. In no time he discerned which among them had been placed there as intentionally dangerous to society, and who belonged in reformatories, and on the other hand, those who were mentally ill and required medical attention, being either partially or totally irresponsible for their offensive actions.
Let us pray to God, that He may bestow upon the priests of the Company, the spirit needed to act rightly in these sorts of employments, when called upon to do so. May He strengthen our poor brothers, so that with His grace, they may endure the difficulties and the labor encountered daily with these inmates, some of whom are sick in body, and the others sick in mind. Some are stupid and others giddy; some are insane and others are vicious. All are affected in mind, but some through infirmity, and the others through malice. The former are here to regain their health, the latter to amend their evil lives.3

Saint Vincent, who loved every one of the poor people with the very Heart of Christ, endeavored, after having probed their moral wounds, to cure them, imparting to his priests and to his brothers who were more directly engaged in assisting them, his optimism and his supernatural manner of viewing their state.

It is not something as unimportant as some may think, to be employed in the relief of the afflicted; for by doing so, one gives pleasure to God. Indeed, to take care of the insane, is one of the works most pleasing to Him, and one so much the more meritorious as nature finds no satisfaction in it. It is done without glamor and for persons who show us no gratitude for it.4

He loved them so dearly that one day he declared that were he obliged to leave Saint Lazare, the thing that he would regret the most, would be to leave behind those poor afflicted people.5

But his zeal did not stop there, that zeal which as ever exceeded the scope of his personal activity, in order to pour itself out wherever some distress had been brought to his attention. The Great Bureau of the Poor possessed at that time a large hospital in Paris known as Les Petites Maisons. In that hospital more than four hundred poor persons of both sexes were housed, including old people, victims of ringworm and the mentally afflicted.6

As early as 1639, Saint Vincent went to preach a mission to those poor people, and in order to impress more deeply upon their minds the principal truths of religion and the most common prayers, he compiled a leaflet entitled “The Exercise of the Christian.” After having been used at Les Petites Maisons7 this leaflet was later printed in great numbers. It could be understood by the most simple and the most uninstructed.8

As ever, Vincent did not stop at introducing a good work. He followed it up, if not always personally, at least by means of others to whom he
had communicated the flame that burned in his heart. The priests of the Tuesday Conferences, following in his footsteps, went to catechize those unfortunate people, and some years later, the Daughters of Charity were permanently installed in their service.

Louise de Marillac Accepts Placing Her Daughters at les Petites Maisons

Saint Louise was not the last one to share the sentiments of Vincent with regard to the poor insane.

From the human viewpoint, that work had nothing attractive about it. Saint Vincent had himself drawn a realistic sketch of it:

At Les Petites Maisons, the patients are insane; they are extremely hard to handle, and always cranky. Fighting is constant among them. Oh! it is so beyond description that I can give you no idea of it. Sociability is at such a low ebb that they cannot live even two together, and it was found necessary to separate them. Each one attends to his own cooking.

Nevertheless, the Daughters of Charity were asked to staff the infirmary of that hospital by the Grand Bureau of the Poor, the equivalent of the Catholic Charities Bureau of today. Les Petites Maisons stood on the site presently occupied by the department stores of the Bon Marché. Originally the Saint-Germain-des-Prés Hospice for the sick, it had been transformed into a hospital by Cardinal de Tournon in 1557. Later, it was sold to Guillaume Gellinard, secretary to the Duke of Orleans. It finally became the hospital of the poor under the direction of the gentlemen of the Grand Bureau. According to the statutes, there were received therein, “old and decrepit men and other incorrigible and chronic cases, crippled persons, sick women and the insane.”

Such a mixture seems strange in our twentieth century, but it must be remembered that there was no legislative measure concerning the insane before September 7, 1660. By that decree of the Parliament, the Hôtel Dieu of Paris was to assign a hall for the insane to whom a special treatment was to be dispensed. Their recovery was generally considered impossible. Saint Vincent was indeed a real pioneer in the field of psychotherapy by his endeavors to improve the condition of the insane as he did for the poor “idiots” locked up at Saint Lazare. For them he procured a special building and placed them in the care of his missionar-
ies, who were to provide wholesome recreations for them and religious exercises in keeping with their malady. Official medical opinions of the period were divided by verbal struggles, and therapeutic procedures often remained quite sterile. These were set aside by Saint Vincent, who was recognized as "director of the first hospital in France which was devoted to the treatment of the insane." Socially, his efforts were of great importance, for they inaugurated a new type of assistance, a hospital based on the therapeutic belief in the possibility of improving mental illnesses and disorders.

Neither he nor Saint Louise was appalled by the task each was asked to assume at the Petites Maisons. Together they prepared their Daughters for the beautiful mission.

To See in the Insane Incarnate Wisdom

That apostolate was accepted with joy and a certain supernatural pride at the thought that among the communities of women, none up to that time had performed this particular work, which recalls Our Lord's desire "to pass for a scandal to the Jews and a folly to the Gentiles." One of the sisters, who had been among the first sent on duty with the poor insane, remarked in her deposition for the beatification of Saint Vincent, that when they were sent to the Hospital of the Petites Maisons, which up to then had been badly organized, Saint Vincent "instilled into them such a high idea of the grace which God bestowed upon them, that they felt inflamed with zeal and encouraged for having given themselves to the service of the poor insane, in spite of the troubles and difficulties involved."

The soul of Saint Louise, so well prepared for hearing the call of God in all His suffering members, shared his sentiments. In one of her letters she announced the enterprise of that work to Sister Barbara Angiboust, expressing the hope "that we shall soon have our sisters at the Petites Maisons to care for the insane and the poor sick women in whatever way possible." The choice of the personnel being incumbent upon her, Louise thought it over and invoked the help of the Holy Spirit, before entrusting the responsibility of such a mission to Sister Anne Hardemont, who hesitated. However, Saint Louise assured Saint Vincent in a letter that "she is not far from favorably accepting the proposal of going to the Petites Maisons." Encouragement was needed, and Louise asked Vincent
"to kindly give a talk to the sisters that would make them recognize the
good that can be accomplished and the manner of going about it."22

Saint Vincent Speaks to the First Sisters

September 29, 1655—An informal "meeting" like preceding ones, took
place on that day when the sisters had come from various parishes. Vincent
was to read the Holy Rules, but beforehand he wanted to say something
about the obligation of giving oneself to God to observe them well. Speaking
from the abundance of his heart, he gave for a first reason: the goodness of
God, the Will of God, the pleasure and the joy of God. Then he told them
that everything goes well when one is faithful to observing the Rules and
that they are easy, coming from God and tending towards Him.

After reading the first article, he exclaimed:

Ah! my Sisters, I am telling you once more, never has there been
a Company who gave greater glory to God than yours. Is there
any that looks after the poor insane? You won't find any, and
that happiness is yours. The Gentlemen of the Grand Bureau
thought that in order to succeed in managing properly that large
hospital of poor insane it was necessary to appeal to the poor
Daughters of Charity. In fact, they persisted in pressing us, until
we complied with their wishes and sent the sisters. Ah! my
Daughters, how greatly you are indebted to God!23

Three weeks later he again took up the subject:

You must consider, my Sisters, that Our Lord willed to experi­
ence in His own Person, all afflictions imaginable. Holy Scrip­
ture states that He willed to pass for a scandal to the Jews and a
folly to the Gentiles, in order to show you that you are able to
serve Him under any form in the poor afflicted. This is why He
vouchsafed to assume that state, in order to sanctify it like all the
others. It is in that conviction that you must wait on them, and
rejoice when you approach them, saying within yourselves: 'I
am going to these poor in order to honor in their person, the
Person of Our Lord; I am going to behold in them the incarnate
Wisdom of God, Who willed to pass as such, though only in
appearance. You must know that He is in those poor creatures
bereft of reason just as much as He is in all others.'24
The Sisters at "Les Petites Maisons"

Encouraged by Faith, our first sisters entered upon their new field of action. As everywhere else, very lowly duties were waiting for them: the clothes room, the kitchen duty, the infirmary. But all their actions were permeated with a supernatural spirit: the love of God and of the neighbor.

And in time order was gradually established. According to the account of Abelly: "The Administrators rendered the testimony that those good girls had eliminated a number of disorders which tended to offend God, to ruin the property of the house and to effect those poor insane, so that all were greatly edified at the conduct of the sisters and greatly satisfied with them."

The house remained ever filled, so that even Saint Vincent had at times difficulty in finding room for more. He expressed regret about this to Sister Marguerite Chétif, in a letter of June 22, 1658, as he was not able to procure for her the consolation of "securing admittance to Les Petites Maisons for that good man, mentally afflicted, about whom you wrote to me, because there is never a vacancy, since reservations are made a long time before there is an opening."

The sisters occasionally had the joy of seeing Vincent coming in person to visit them and to follow up the patients whom he had been able to have admitted there. At his process of beatification, a Daughter of Charity reported that she recalled in particular,

... a lady, who had become so violent that she had to be watched by four men, and a young girl, afflicted with the same insanity, both having been placed there by the Servant of God. One of them remained nearly two months and the other, six weeks. The sister on duty considered as a blessing granted by God through the merits of His Servant, that both these women were cured. The lady made a general confession before being discharged and afterwards directed her family and household with great prudence, and the young girl became a religious.

In spite of the ever-increasing work, the sisters afforded great joy to Saint Vincent and Saint Louise by their fidelity to meditation twice a day, that exercise of mental prayer without which "it is impossible for a Daughter of Charity to live." "When all have not the time to stop for making it in the afternoon, we read the point, and then each one tries to make her meditation coming and going," one of them related when she was questioned by Saint Vincent at the Conference of November 17, 1658 about their exactitude in making mental prayer.
A record of that time relates that at the beginning of the foundation, there were six sisters who cheerfully went about their work in the sight of God. There were from sixty to seventy insane and the infirmary had 18 beds: four for men, 14 for women. That infirmary grew rapidly larger. To the reader accustomed to read that in Paris before 1789, the sick slept four or six in the same bed, it is interesting to learn that in the Petites Maisons, at that epoch, the infirmaries had 150 small beds.

The fidelity of the sisters was rewarded by the continuation of their work during the years of the Revolution. Only putting aside their religious habits, they continued to give to the poor their care and their consolation.

**Solicitude of Louise**

Her personal suffering had made Louise meditate in a very particular manner upon the divine significance of sickness. The advice, which she addressed to her Daughters serving the suffering, was filled not only with a supernatural spirit but also with a very practical one, which we like to call today “modern.” Once again we see in it the importance which she attached to cleanliness: “I do not know if you are accustomed to wash the hands of the poor,” she wrote to one of the sisters. “If not, I beg you to acquire the habit.” To another, she asked if she kept towels at the bedside of the sick and if she kept them clean.

In her own account of the establishment of the hospital of the Daughters of Charity at Nantes, where she led them, Louise affirmed having asked that the sick should receive “what was needed and what was clean.” After her death, her Daughters testified that no detail referring to the relief of the sick ever escaped her solicitude.

Although her correspondence does not furnish the details of the installation of the sisters at the Petites Maisons, it is very possible that Louise’s advice was the same or very similar to that which she gave to the first nurses in the service of the insane. What is certain is that she had been thinking of the misery of those poor afflicted creatures for a long time. About ten years before placing her Daughters there, she was heard to say that at the very thought of the establishment of the Petites Maisons, she would have liked “to devote herself to that work.”

If documents are also missing concerning her visits to the sisters who cared for those poor afflicted ones, we know that Louise was well informed about all that took place there. All her efforts tended to maintain
in the house the peace and union necessary among all who shared its
service.

As a result of a misunderstanding concerning the sick between the
pastor of the parish, who was also Chaplain at the *Petites Maisons*, and
Sister Anne Hardemont, Superior of the sisters, the latter wrote to Vincent
asking for a change of confessor. The saint granted her desire but only
after requiring that she offer her apology, which he took the trouble of
having the pastor accept. Several gentlemen of the *Bureau* having learned
of the affair, made known that at the next meeting they would let the pastor
know how displeased they were with him. Louise however clarified the
matter with the administrators.

In the name of God, Sir, she wrote to Mr. Beguin, member of the
*Grand Bureau* of the Poor, I beg you very humbly not to let that
happen because of the respect that we owe to the character and
virtue of the Reverend Pastor who has so frequently edified our
sisters. I beg your very humble pardon, Sir, that I should take this
liberty. While writing to you, I realize that you know him better
than I and that all the gentlemen know too well the need they
have of maintaining his authority for the glory of God and the
good of the souls entrusted to his care. Louise concluded by
affirming, that should there arise the slightest disgrace to this
person whom you must honor, we shall be forced to withdraw
our sisters.37

Experience proved, however, that Vincent judged it necessary to
withdraw the Superior. The position was not an easy one. We learn some
details about it in an interesting biography of a Sister Nicole, who was
one of the pillars of the establishment.

*One of the First Sisters of Charity on Duty with the Insane*

She did not arrive at *Les Petites Maisons* in the flower of youth but on
the contrary in order to end her days among those poor whom she had
loved so tenderly.

Sister Nicole was the daughter of Jean Boquet and Madeleine
Lequin, who lived in the city of Créque in the diocese of Lyons,
where Nicole was baptized on March 24, 1626. She was wel-
comed into the Community of the Daughters of Charity by the
Foundress herself on June 25, 1649 and received her Habit on
August 14 of the same year. She pronounced her Holy Vows for the first time on September 17, 1654. She died in the service of the poor insane, at the Hospital of Les Petites Maisons in Paris on February 17, 1703.38

Advanced in years when she was placed in the service of the poor insane, she discharged this duty perfectly, according to the testimony of the Superioress, and with more zeal and fervor than might have been expected from a person of her age. Wounded several times and greatly maltreated, very far from showing any resentment, she was delighted to receive those ill-treatments and often expressed the desire of dying in rendering service to those poor afflicted creatures.

From the very first year that she was in their service, God offered her an occasion for exercising charity towards a poor insane man who was brought to us. One of his legs was half eaten away and filled with maggots. He had been afflicted with this trouble for a very long time. For three years he had been boarding with someone who saw that he received treatments from surgeons, who applied every imaginable remedy to his sores but without results, for he was judged incurable. When he was brought to Les Petites Maisons, he was shown to the surgeon who, like the attendant, soon tired of caring for him because of his infection and of the very offensive odor. Both abandoned him with no intention of approaching him again. On seeing this, Sister Nicole took it upon herself to care for him, and did it with so much affection and trust in God, that with some simple remedies which she had in her use, she cured him perfectly in no time.

We saw her perform several other similar cures, for it was always she who dressed the sores of those poor afflicted, although she was advanced in years. From the very beginning, she took her turn in staying up at night with the sick, just like one of the youngest, doing so to relieve her sisters. She delighted in instructing her companions, gave them object lessons in dressing wounds, and preparing remedies. She endeavored to impart to them all the knowledge she possessed in order to make them competent servants of the poor.39
And Since Those Days?

How many hundreds of Daughters of Louise de Marillac have thus sanctified themselves and sanctified their poor sick in all parts of the world? That is God’s secret. However, a random selection is revealing.

In the eighteenth century, a Sister Jeanne Lévêque was on duty in the Hospice Saint Nicolas in Metz, where she spent the 43 years of her community life, and where she died. She devoted 22 of those years “to the care of the insane confined to jail, wretched creatures of ungrateful character and bad conduct, which rendered their service most painful. In addition, they were often afflicted with the most disgusting diseases, some with scrofula, epilepsy and other incurable maladies. All these trying contacts never ruffled her, so that she never lost her peaceful expression, her evenness of temper, her invincible patience, her insuperable meekness. She spoke of God to those poor afflicted in such an eloquent way, that the Reverend Chaplains, who secretly listened to her words, declared that it was only at the school of the Holy Spirit that any one could have received such light.”

In the nineteenth century in the United States, Sister Mathilde Coskerey likewise earned a rich treasury of merits in the service of the insane.

“In her youth she had received solid lessons from Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton and Reverend Bruté de Rémur. A young inexperienced sister told her: ‘I am young, but I am most willing to learn how to take care of the insane.’ Sister Coskerey smiled graciously and said: ‘Nothing more is necessary, my dear Sister, I shall teach you.’ Before assigning anything to me, she would kindly explain the duty in detail, telling me what to do and what to say. Her advice ordinarily ended with these words, similar to those of Louise de Marillac two centuries previously: ‘Do your actions for God alone; accustom yourself to see Him in all your patients and do not consult your likes and dislikes.’ As she walked through the wards, she always had some kind words to say. Seeing me busy preparing what was needed for the patients, she would say to me: ‘Take pains with that beverage, remembering that it is for Our Lord you are doing this.’”

In the Twentieth Century

The hospital for the insane in Baltimore, where Sister Mathilde had devoted herself more than a century before, was renamed Seton Institute in 1949. A course for the formation of Catholic psychiatrists was inaugu-
rated. The hierarchy of the United States, frightened by the materialistic philosophy, underlying the formation of psychiatrists in secular schools, addressed itself to the Daughters of Charity for the establishment of this center of psychiatric study. The history of 1655 repeated itself on another continent and the words of Saint Vincent were still applicable: "The gentlemen of the Grand Bureau have thought that in order to conduct this large establishment for the poor insane, it was necessary to appeal to the poor Daughters of Charity."42

The service of the poor insane continues to be practiced after the manner of the Holy Foundress in various parts of the world. Thus, a young girl, who had recently returned from the Holy Land, was relating her impressions: "Sister, do you know what impressed me most after the sight of the Holy Places? Well, it was the sister on mission with the insane at X. Like a mother weeping for her children, she never stopped lamenting her patients killed during the bombing."43

And how deep and encouraging is this comment of a good sister on her sick bed in the infirmary, who offers her sufferings and prayers for her companions and their patients: "You see, there is no more beautiful duty than the service of the insane, for they are victims; they are making reparation for human pride. To serve them is likewise making reparation."44

Worthy Daughters of Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul, they can repeat with them:

Let us bless the Lord and let us thank Him for calling us to take care of these poor people bereft of their mind and unable to guide themselves, for by serving them we see and realize how great and varied are human miseries. By this knowledge, we shall be better qualified to labor usefully for our neighbor. We shall discharge our duties with greater fidelity as we shall better know through experience what it means to suffer.45