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Louise de Marillac: Come Winds or High Waters

Élisabeth Charpy D.C.

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Louise de Marillac: Come Winds or High Waters

ÉLISABETH CHARPY, D.C.

TRANSLATED BY CLARA ORBAN, PH.D., AND MARY JO STEIN, D.C.

Edited by Miranda Lukatch, with additional assistance from Nathaniel Michaud.


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Louise de Marillac:
Come Winds or High Waters

ÉLISABETH CHARPY, D.C.

TRANSLATED BY CLARA ORBAN, PH.D., AND MARY JO STEIN, D.C.
PORTRAIT OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC.
OIL ON CANVAS. MOTHERHOUSE, CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION, PARIS.
ST. VINCENT DE PAUL IMAGE ARCHIVE ONLINE
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In 1985, Saint John Paul II told the Daughters of Charity at the close of their General Assembly, “Come winds or high waters, hold fast to your identity.”ⁱ

During her entire life, Louise de Marillac had to contend with “winds and high waters.” Firmly anchored in her faith, however, Louise set her course for Christ, the Son of God and Son of Mary, the Christ who was present in the poorest members of his mystical body. Above all, Louise wanted to be faithful to God’s will and providential plan for her life. She often wondered how she was to navigate safely to this goal when so many obstacles arose and threatened to overwhelm her fragile boat. In October 1655, she wrote to Vincent: “If this is the key that will soon release me from this world, then I truly need to learn how to prepare for it. It is for this reason that I turn to your Charity so that I will not be shipwrecked as I arrive at port, because of my own navigation, but will be guided solely by your directives and the orders of Divine Providence.”²

Louise’s surviving letters and meditations enable us to chart her spiritual progress and see how, through the lights and shadows, joys and sorrows of her life, she steadily grew closer to the Lord. In her writings, Louise reveals herself as a woman profoundly influenced by the circumstances of her birth and her family relationships; a woman attentive to the signs of her times; a woman intensively attentive to each person and situation in her life.

Louise also formed keen theological insights as she reflected on her mystical experiences that revealed God’s complete and abiding love for every person. In one example of these insights, Louise noted, “My mind recalled the thought that I had had: that the design of the Blessed Trinity from the creation of man was that the Word should become flesh so that human nature might attain the excellence of being that God willed to give to man by the eternal union that He willed between Himself and His creature, the most admirable state of His exterior operations.”³
The childhood and adolescence of Louise de Marillac were marked by suffering that affected her deeply. Louise never knew the gentleness of a mother. Neither did she experience the warmth of growing up in a family home. Her father, Louis de Marillac, born in 1556, was a widower at the time his daughter was born. Who was her mother? No one knows, and no one will ever know. Louise's baptismal records have never been found, as many seventeenth-century records have disappeared. Louise’s father remarried on 15 January 1595. His new wife was Antoinette Le Camus, a widowed mother with three children. At that time, no doubt foreseeing future difficulties, Louis de Marillac signed a legal document providing an income for his daughter. Louise was placed in the convent of Poissy; she would never return to live with her stepmother. In her writings, Louise spoke of her Marillac and Attichy cousins, but never referred to her half-sister Innocente, who was born in 1601.

Louise de Marillac was born on 12 August 1591. Her place of birth is not known, but it is most likely her mother lived in Paris and that during her pregnancy she suffered the privations caused by the long siege of the city. In 1590, Paris had been besieged by Henry IV’s troops. Henry had succeeded to the French throne after the assassination of Henry III. As a Huguenot, the new king was not acceptable to many of his Catholic subjects, and he had to capture Paris by force. The siege resulted in a great famine in the city. All this might help to explain Louise’s fragile health and frequent migraines.

At the age of thirteen, Louise felt the sorrow of her father’s death on 25 July 1604. Louis de Marillac loved his daughter, even if his affection could not be expressed fully because of the circumstances of her birth and his remarriage. He wrote in his will “that she had been his greatest consolation in the world and that he thought she had been given him by God for his peace of mind in the afflictions of life.” At her father’s death, Louise again felt a great loneliness and sense of abandonment. Her uncle Michel became her guardian, but he remained a rather distant and aloof figure.
In spite of the sufferings that left their mark on her youthful personality, Louise would attain sanctity. Isn’t this a lesson God is giving to us, demonstrating how even a child so wounded by life can blossom, do good, and arrive at true sanctity?

The education Louise received, while bringing her much joy and enrichment, was also a source of additional suffering. While still very young, she was entrusted to the Dominican nuns of the royal convent of Poissy. Founded by Saint Louis IX, this convent took in young noble girls as boarders to provide them with an education corresponding to their rank in society.

Louise de Marillac belonged to one of the great French families who occupied important posts in the army and royal administration during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Her uncle and guardian, Michel de Marillac, became keeper of the seals, the most important position in the kingdom after the monarch. Her uncle Louis was a marshal of France, holding the highest rank in the army. Her aunt Valence’s husband would become the minister of finance. From her father’s family, which had its origins in Auvergne, Louise received the heritage of a keen sense of honor, a love of work, a certain impetuosity, and the soul of a mystic. It was also said that the Marillacs were a handsome and proud people.

At Poissy, Louise received an excellent education and a thorough religious formation. She learned to know Jesus Christ, to love him, to pray to him, and to serve him by serving the poor. Her daily life in the convent was punctuated by prayer and participation in the sacramental life of the Church. The Dominican nuns gave their students a solid humanistic education. Louise learned to read and write, and studied Latin and perhaps Greek. She also learned painting and music. At Poissy, she experienced the deep affection of one of her aunts, a learned nun named Mother Louise de Marillac.

Suddenly, Louise had to leave this convent she loved. Was it her father who, unable to pay her expenses at Poissy, withdrew her? In 1602, Louis de Marillac sued his wife, charging her with squandering his money. Louise was then placed in a boarding house similar to a finishing school. According to her biographer Nicolas Gobillon, “[Her father] placed her in Paris, in the hands of a capable and virtuous woman, who would give her suitable training in household skills.”

At this juncture, Louise had her first experience of real poverty. In this boarding house, daily life was very different from that at Poissy. Louise received a practical education here, learning cooking, housekeeping, and sewing, all the skills thought necessary for a woman to possess.
Through these varied educational experiences, God prepared Louise for her future role as educator of the sisters and foundress of the Company. Isn't this an example of how God invites us to discover the evidence of his love in each event of our lives?

In 1606, a religious ceremony took place in Paris that awakened (or reawakened) in the fifteen-year-old Louise a desire to consecrate herself to God. A community of Capuchin nuns was solemnly installed in a new convent on Rue Saint-Honoré: “The nuns entered Paris in procession, barefooted, the archbishop of Paris in person at their head. The nuns set a striking example of the strictest asceticism and radiated the light of Franciscan devotion.”

The young Louise felt a strong attraction to the nuns’ life of prayer, manual labor, and great poverty. She often went to pray in their chapel. It was at this time that she vowed to give herself to God by joining this rigorous cloistered convent. Given the attitudes of the time, one might wonder whether Louise saw this vocation as a way for her to “appease God’s justice” and atone for her father’s sin that had led to her birth.

Some years later, Louise told her guardian of her desire and asked for his permission to enter the Capuchin order. He advised her to meet with the provincial of the Capuchins, Honoré de Champigny. The provincial’s response was firm and clear: Louise, whose health was precarious, would not be able
to endure the austerities of the Rule. She was therefore not suitable for entry into Capuchin life. Finally, whether to console the young woman or whether inspired by God, the priest “declared to her that he thought God had some other design on her.”

For Louise, this rejection was yet another profound disappointment. She now felt she had failed to keep her promise to God. Was this refusal also perhaps linked to her inability to bring a sufficient dowry to enter the cloister? She again felt the sting of her poverty and loneliness. The words of Father de Champigny, “God has other designs on you,” were engraved on Louise’s heart. But what did God want of her? She returned to this question often in her prayers.

During her retreat in 1632, Louise was still asking this question. She wrote: “I must perseveringly await the coming of the Holy Spirit although I do not know when that will be. I must accept this uncertainty as well as my inability clearly to perceive at this time the path which God wishes me to follow in His service. I must abandon myself entirely to His Providence so as to be completely His. In order to prepare my soul for this, I must willingly renounce all things to follow Him.”

To distract Louise, her uncle Michel sent her to live with her aunt Valence, where she was kept busy helping with her seven cousins. The Marillac family would now try to find a husband for this woman, soon to be twenty-two years old.
PLAN OF THE CITY OF PARIS CIRCA 1615.
ENGRAVING BY MATTHÄUS MERIAN.

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Following the custom of the time, Michel de Marillac looked for a husband for his niece. Marriage for love did not exist in the seventeenth century; parents arranged and negotiated their children’s unions.

The Marillac family chose the thirty-two-year-old Monsieur Antoine Le Gras, one of the secretaries of the Queen Mother, Marie de Medici. It was while serving in this position that he became known to the queen’s intendant of finances, Octavien d’Attichy, the husband of Louise’s aunt, Valence de Marillac. Antoine Le Gras was a simple squire, not a nobleman. He thus belonged to the bourgeoisie rather than to the aristocracy. Louise would not have the title of Madame, which was reserved for women of the nobility. Rather, she would be called Mademoiselle.

On 4 February 1613, a marriage contract was drawn up before a notary in the home of the Attichy family. Louise had been living there for some time helping to take care of her cousins. The marriage contract recorded that she was the “natural daughter” of her father. Her aunts and uncles who were present as witnesses signed as “friends” of the future bride. Once again, she felt the suffering and loneliness of her youth. The next day, the marriage was celebrated in the church of Saint Gervais in Paris. Louise de Marillac now became Mademoiselle Le Gras. The Marillac family thus had provided for the future of the illegitimate daughter of one of their own.

Although Antoine and Louise did not choose one another, a true love would develop between them. With her husband, Louise finally found the joy and warmth of a family home. The newlyweds settled on rue Courteau-Villain. They began work on remodeling the house and even had a little turret added. Because she was a member of Parisian society, Louise’s circle of friends included other young wives whose husbands worked at court: Mademoiselle
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Rousselet, Mademoiselle Foras, Madame Ménard, Madame de Villesbin, and others.

Louise also participated fully in the spiritual and cultural life of her age. She read the works of the bishop of Geneva, Francis de Sales, including the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, (published in 1609), and the *Treatise on the Love of God* (published in 1616). She welcomed the holy bishop of Geneva into her own home in 1618. She was also familiar with the spirituality of Pierre de Bérulle, who had just founded the Oratory of Jesus (1611). In her yearning to draw closer to God, she asked for permission to read the Bible in French. Bishop Jean-Pierre de Camus, her spiritual director, granted it to her and her husband. Every evening Antoine and Louise prayed and meditated on the Word of God, and prayed Compline together.

In her free time, she visited and served the poor. A woman of the court who visited the Le Gras home gave this testimony: “She had a great piety and devotion for serving persons living in poverty. She brought them sweets and preserves, biscuits, and other delicacies. She brushed their hair, washed away their scabies and vermin, and prepared them for burial. Often at table she would seem to be eating, but she was not.” Louise’s visitor continued, “She got up at night to place the food in her closet (and for prayer) as soon as Monsieur was asleep. She had hair shirts and disciplines.”

This happy period in Louise’s life included the birth of her son, Michel, on 18 October 1613. But the parents’ joy soon faded. The child had developmental challenges and learned slowly.

Antoine and Louise were also affected by the deaths of her uncle and aunt. Octavien d’Attichy died in 1614, and his wife, Valence, in 1617. They left seven orphaned children who were still very young. Michel de Marillac was named their guardian, but he confided the management of their estate to Antoine Le Gras, who gratefully accepted since the Attichys had been in favor of his marriage to Louise.

Managing the orphans’ inheritance proved difficult and time consuming. Antoine Le Gras even used a part of his own resources to avoid bankruptcy for the estate. The oldest of the Attichy children blamed Antoine and Louise for this situation and wrote them hurtful letters. Louise told her uncle Michel about it, and he simply encouraged her to have patience. She thus had firsthand experience of ingratitude. Serving others can be a source of joy, but it also makes our souls vulnerable.

New trials now befell Louise. Around 1621–1622, Antoine became ill. His long and painful illness affected his behavior. He became increasingly angry and despondent. Louise lovingly cared for her husband, but his mood...
swings and frequent bouts of impatience became more and more disquieting for her. The warmth of her family life was disappearing. She panicked. Wasn’t this all her fault? Hadn’t she promised God to become a Capuchin? Wasn’t all this a punishment from God for her broken promise?

Despite receiving letters of spiritual encouragement from her uncle Michel and her director Bishop Camus, Louise was consumed by her feelings of dejection and misery. At the time she wrote: “On the Feast of Saint Thomas, I fell into a state of depression which lasted all day. The sight of my own abjection led me to consider myself as a mass of pride and self-love. I experienced discouragement, annihilation of myself and desertion by God which I had merited because of my infidelities. My heart was so depressed that the force of my emotions sometimes resulted in physical pain.”

“To make God’s justice triumph” (using her own expression), Louise tried to appease God by multiplying her pious prayers and spiritual exercises. But her anguish only increased. On the feast of Saint Monica, 4 May 1623, she made a vow of widowhood. She thought this promise would bring her peace, but it did not. She felt as though her life were falling apart.

Louise later wrote:

On the following Feast of the Ascension, I was very disturbed because of the doubt I had as to whether I should leave my husband, as I greatly wanted to do, in order to make good
my first vow and to have greater liberty to serve God and my neighbor.

I also doubted my capacity to break the attachment I had for my director which might prevent me from accepting another, during his long absence, as I feared I might be obliged to do.

I also suffered greatly because of the doubt I experienced concerning the immortality of the soul. All these things caused me incredible anguish which lasted from Ascension until Pentecost.\textsuperscript{18}

It was then that the great “Light of Pentecost” shone upon her. On Sunday, 4 June 1623, Louise went to pray in her parish church, Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs. She later recalled, “On the Feast of Pentecost, during holy Mass or while I was praying in the church, my mind was instantly freed of all doubt.”\textsuperscript{19}

God also gave her a glimpse of what he expected of her. And, although obscure, God revealed to her his future plan for the Company of the Daughters of Charity:

I was advised that I should remain with my husband and that a time would come when I would be in a position to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and that I would be in a small community where others would do the same. I then understood that I would be in a place where I could help my neighbor but I did not understand how this would be possible since there was to be much coming and going.

I was also assured that I should remain at peace concerning my director; that God would give me one whom He seemed to show me. It was repugnant to me to accept him; nevertheless, I acquiesced. It seemed to me that I did not yet have to make this change.

My third doubt was removed by the inner assurance I felt that it was God who was teaching me these things and that, believing there is a God, I should not doubt the rest.\textsuperscript{20}

Louise recorded all the details of this “Light” on a piece of paper that she then folded carefully and always kept on her person, either in her pocket or in a little bag. In difficult moments, when she would wonder what it was God
wanted of her, she would reread the text.

An examination of this extant manuscript, a yellowed paper covered front and back with rapid handwriting, shows it has become quite fragile through frequent unfolding and refolding. On the back, on what served as a cover for the little booklet, we can read the single word “Lumière”—“Light.”

If this “Light of Pentecost” brought profound peace to Louise, it did not resolve all her difficulties. Antoine’s illness continued to grow worse: insomnia kept him awake most of the night and frequent hemorrhages weakened him. Louise’s care of her husband was constant and loving. On 21 December 1625, she was alone with him when he suffered a violent fatal hemorrhage in the middle of the night. In a letter to her cousin, Father Hilarion Rebours, she recounted her husband’s last moments: “I was alone with him to help him, at this important transition, and he gave proof of so much devotion that it was evident till his last sigh that his spirit was attached to God.”

For the rest of her life, Louise remembered her husband with great fondness. She always marked their wedding anniversary, and in 1630, in the journal of her visit to the confraternities of Asnières and Saint-Cloud, she wrote: “God permitting, I wanted to have a Mass celebrated on that day because it was the anniversary of my marriage. I abstained, however, wishing to perform an act of poverty and to depend solely upon God in the action I was about to undertake. I had not expressed my wish to my confessor who celebrated the Mass at which I received Holy Communion. However, as he came out on the altar, the thought came to him to celebrate it for me as an alms and to say the nuptial Mass.”

In her last will and testament written in 1645, Louise recalled her husband’s virtues, exhorting her son to remember “how [Antoine] greatly feared God and was scrupulous in keeping himself irreproachable, especially recalling his patience in the great sufferings which were sent to him in his last years, and in which he practiced very great virtue.”

Thus at the end of 1625, Louise found herself alone with her twelve-year-old son. Seeing Michel deprived of his father’s affection, Louise recalled her own suffering at the death of her father; she had been the same age. As a mother, she was filled with anxiety about her son’s future. She surrounded Michel with smothering affection instead of responding to his need for understanding and direction. Michel was a difficult child; for three years he had lived with a sick father and a depressed mother. He was also an unstable youth, lacking energy and a work ethic. His mother wanted him to become a priest, but he did not know what he wanted to do. Over the years, many
conflicts would take place between mother and son.²⁴

Louise freely admitted her failures as a mother, but despite these difficulties, she made peace with herself. This is a profound lesson for us: sanctity is not connected with human success. Failure can help us to understand and appreciate the apparent failure of Christ on the cross. Failure thus can be a source of renewal and of redemption.
ANTOINE LE GRAS, WEARING THE STAR OF THE ORDER OF SAINT MICHAEL. THE ONLY KNOWN PORTRAIT; ORIGINAL AT THE VINCENTIAN MOTHERHOUSE, PARIS.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
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Now that she was widowed, Louise was increasingly distraught. She wondered what would become of her and her son now that they were alone. She also wondered who would help guide her soul in the midst of the storm she felt was rising again. How could she come to know God’s will in her life?

In the depths of her heart, Louise still felt an intense desire to give herself completely to God. To try to discern God’s will, she intensified her prayer and devotional exercises. She recited the rosary and the little office of the Blessed Virgin every day. As often as possible, she meditated on the presence of God, and in addition she tried to meditate thirty-three times daily in honor of the thirty-three years Jesus Christ spent on earth. She attended daily mass and read the gospel and the life of the saint of the day. Louise also tried to fulfill all the devotions required by the numerous religious confraternities to which she belonged: the Confraternities of the Five Wounds of Our Lord, of the Blessed Sacrament, of the Rosary, of Saint Monica, and of Saint Francis.

Together with these spiritual exercises she fasted on Fridays, on the eves of feasts of Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin, and during Advent and Lent. She also used the discipline regularly. This demanding life of prayer became another source of stress for her; it was sometimes very difficult to be faithful to the demands of all these practices. Each failing, however involuntary, reinforced her anguish.

Vincent de Paul, who had by then become her spiritual director, helped her to seek God in a more relaxed and realistic manner. At one point, he advised: “As for all those thirty-three acts to the holy humanity and the others, do not be distressed when you fail to do them. God is love and wants us to go to Him through love. Therefore, do not hold yourself bound to all those good resolutions.”

Still feeling tormented, Louise tried to find comfort and support among her friends and relatives. For example, she shared her search for God and the obstacles she encountered with her cousin, Father Hilarion Rebours: “Is it not reasonable that I should be all for God, after having been for so long for the world? I tell you then, my dear cousin, that I want this with all my heart, and in the way it pleases Him. But I have much reason to doubt my ability to persevere in this holy desire, because of the continual obstacles which oppose the designs God has on me. So then, my dear Father, help my poor soul, and by your prayers break those bonds which attach me so strongly to all that is not God.”
Louise also wrote to Bishop Jean-Pierre Camus, her former spiritual director. She shared with him her spiritual darkness and the state of her troubled soul. He responded:

Mademoiselle, my dear Sister,  
What I heard about you through Monsieur Chappe indicated that you wrote two letters, of which I have received only one, that you said you wrote since the affliction of your widowhood. Now, my dear sister, I do not know why your spirit is troubled and thinks itself to be in darkness and abandoned. For what reason? You are no longer divided. Now you belong wholly to the heavenly Spouse having nothing more to do with earthly things. For a long time now you have desired only him, and now that he has broken your bonds and that you must offer a sacrifice of praise in the Host, you are astonished? Daughter of so little faith, why do you doubt? You must say what Our Lord said to Mary at the resurrection of Lazarus: If you have more confidence, you will see the glory of God coming upon you. But what is it? It is what I do not see clearly, but what I believe most assuredly.

Belley, 26 March 1626. 30

Bishop Camus did not understand this tormented and anxious young widow well. During her husband’s illness she had made a vow of widowhood, and now that she was a widow, she still had not found the peace she was seeking. What exactly was she seeking? Overcoming her depression, the pain of losing her husband, and her anxiety about the future were not things that could be easily or quickly done, even with all the good will in the world. What she needed was time.

Bishop Camus, whose diocese was far from Paris, appointed a new spiritual director for her. Louise was hesitant and at first felt little attraction for Vincent de Paul. The rustic simplicity of this priest was far different from the aristocratic refinement of Bishop Camus or Bishop Francis de Sales. But Louise remembered her “Light of Pentecost” in which God had revealed she would receive a new spiritual director, and, despite her “repugnance,” she went to speak with Vincent. She desired to know and follow God’s will, and to follow this “Light of Pentecost” that had come to illuminate the darkness in which she found herself.
In her “Light of Pentecost,” she wrote, “I was also assured that I should
remain at peace concerning my director; that God would give me one whom
He seemed to show me. It was repugnant to me to accept him; nevertheless, I
acquiesced. It seemed to me that I did not yet have to make this change.”

Vincent, for his part, was reluctant at first to accept the spiritual direction
of this young widow. He had provided spiritual direction for Madame de
Gondi. He knew the demanding nature of women of the nobility and was
very hesitant to undertake this responsibility again. At this same time, the
foundation of the Congregation of the Mission to evangelize poor persons and
to give missions to the countryside was making great demands on his time.

Who finally convinced Vincent to accept the role of spiritual director for
Louise? Was it Monsieur de Bérulle? Was it perhaps their common friendship
with Bishop Francis de Sales, who had died in December 1622? Perhaps it was
simply an inspiration from God. Several years later, Vincent wrote to Louise,
who was constantly sharing her problems with him: “Understand once and for
all, Mademoiselle, that a person whom God in His plan has destined to assist
someone else is no more overburdened by the advice that the other requests
than a father is by his own child.”

In obedience to God’s will, Louise accepted Vincent as her spiritual
director and found him to be a priest filled with good sense who was close to
God and to the poor. Vincent accepted this anxious woman and helped her
free herself from her anguish and find God’s peace in her life.

Louise was now living close to Vincent’s residence at the Collège-des-
Bons-Enfants in Paris. At the beginning of 1626, she moved from her house
on rue Courteau-Villain to a new residence on the rue Saint-Victor in the
parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. Her decision to move was doubtlessly
related to the lessening of her resources following her husband’s death. She
seemed to have moved frequently. In her correspondence, we see that she lived
in the house of a Monsieur Tiron, then that of a Monsieur Guerin, and next
that of a Monsieur Veron.

Vincent’s first encounters with Louise seemed to confirm the reasons for
his hesitancy to undertake this relationship. Beginning with her first extant
letter to him in 1626, we see how exacting she could be of her director. She
wrote often, and Vincent could not respond to all her letters. She worried
whenever he left Paris to give a mission in the countryside. What would
become of her during his absence? Vincent tried to reassure her: “Our Lord …
Himself will act as your director. Yes, He will surely do so, and in such a way
that He will lead you to see that it is He Himself.”
These first letters between directee and director are reverential in tone, and marked by a tenderness of expression that reflects the language of a spiritual friendship in the seventeenth century. Louise writes to Vincent, “I hope that you will excuse the liberty I am taking in telling you how impatient I have become because of your long absence, troubled as I am about the future and by not knowing where you are or where you are going.”34 Vincent responds in the same manner: “Forgive my heart if it is not a little more expansive in this letter.”35 Later he writes, “Kindly assure your own heart that, provided it honors the holy tranquility of that of Our Lord in His love, it will be pleasing to Him.”36
Through their meetings, and letters that became more and more frequent, Vincent and Louise grew to know each other, discovering both their similarities and their differences. Vincent discovered Louise to be an ultrasensitive woman who had been marked by the harshness of life. He listened to her suffering and patiently helped her to accept it. On a day of a violent storm in Paris, he wrote to her: “Do not think that all is lost because of the little rebellions you experience interiorly. It has just rained very hard and it is thundering dreadfully. Is the weather less beautiful for that? Let the tears of sadness drown your heart and let the demons thunder and growl as much as they please. Be assured, my dear daughter, that you are no less dear to Our Lord for all that. Therefore, live contentedly in His love.”

In his many letters, Vincent encouraged Louise to turn her attention toward the Son of God: “Try to live content among your reasons for discontent and always honor the activity and unknown condition of the Son of God.” He told her: “Honor … the Blessed Virgin’s sorrow when she saw her Son suffering. Honor as well the eternal Father’s acceptance at the sight of His only Son’s sufferings. I hope that He will make you see and understand how much you are obligated to His Divine Majesty for His having honored you by associating your sufferings with His.”

Much of Louise’s anxiety was caused by her worry over her son’s future. Every other letter she wrote (up until the foundation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity) spoke of Michel. From the beginning, Vincent seemed to understand this young man. Was he perhaps moved to pity for this mischievous orphan, alone in the world except for his anxious mother? While Louise’s letters refer to Michel as “Monsieur, my son,” Vincent often would use a more affectionate term. For him, Michel was “the little one.”

Louise frequently asked Vincent for advice concerning her son: “About three weeks ago, while I was at Mademoiselle du Fay’s, I had an opportunity to write to you. I am afraid that my letters have been lost. They dealt principally with the advice which I was asking of you concerning my son.” Vincent reassured her, moderating the excessive worry of a mother’s heart. In 1628, he wrote, “I praise God because [your heart] has freed itself from the excessive attachment it had to the little one and because you have made it correspond to reason.”

At that time, the “little one” was now fifteen years old and living as a boarder at the seminary of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet directed by Monsieur Adrien Bourdoise. The adolescent’s schoolwork was very inconsistent, and he had great difficulty with the studies that were supposed to lead him to the priesthood. Would he ever succeed if he did not work, his mother kept asking him.
Vincent early on discovered in Louise a great yearning to know and accomplish God’s will. He supported her in these efforts, but whereas Louise was hurried, lively, and prone to act quickly, Vincent was slow and methodical. He believed that one should never anticipate Providence. Vincent patiently waited for events to reveal God’s will. Louise expressed her concerns: “These past days I have greatly desired you to remember to offer me to God and to ask of Him the grace of accomplishing His holy will in me despite the opposition of my misery.”

Vincent knew how rich Louise’s spiritual life was, and how firmly she desired to be united with God. He simply invited her to seek God’s will with confidence and joy: “Be quite cheerful in the disposition of willing everything that God wills.” He said, “Oh! what great hidden treasures there are in holy Providence and how marvelously Our Lord is honored by those who follow it and do not try to get ahead of it.”

Louise, for her part, soon learned of Vincent’s many activities in service to poor persons, especially through the work of the Confraternities of Charity. It was natural for her to begin to participate in this work together with her cousin Mademoiselle du Fay. On 5 June 1627, she wrote to Vincent: “The work which your Charity gave me is finished. If the members of Jesus need it and you want me to send it to you, Father, I shall not fail to do so. I did not want to do this without your authorization.”

Vincent called upon Louise to collect clothing for the poor and to send it to the different Confraternities. But very soon, he also asked her to visit poor persons in their homes and to care for girls in distress by finding them safe places to live. Vincent appreciated Louise’s availability as well as her sure judgment and talent for organization, writing, “These few lines will be to thank you for having taken that good young woman into your home, for the twelve shirts that you sent me.”

Gradually, helped by Vincent’s support and advice, Louise regained confidence in herself. Vincent relied on Louise more and more, and eventually she would become involved as his collaborator in all the activities of the Confraternities of Charity.
ETCHING OF VINCENT DE PAUL WRITING LETTERS AT HIS DESK.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.depaul.edu:8181/
Both Vincent and Louise were very attentive to the unfolding of events in their lives, believing that God used these to reveal his will. When they received a request for assistance from Father Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi, they believed it God’s will that they respond. This became the starting point of an intense collaboration between these two missionaries of charity.

Father de Gondi, former general of the galleys of France, had become an Oratorian priest in 1627 after the death of his wife. In April 1629, he asked Vincent to meet him at the town of Montmirail. This little town in the Brie region was situated on the property of the Gondi family. Vincent had visited it several times previously and in 1621 had established a Confraternity of Charity there. Before his departure, he informed Louise, “Father de Gondi sent me word to come by coach to see him in Montmirail. That will perhaps prevent me from having the honor of seeing you, because I am leaving tomorrow morning.” As the letter continued, he invited her to travel to Montmirail to visit the various Confraternities of Charity in the region: “Do you feel like coming, Mademoiselle? If so, you would have to leave next Wednesday on the coach to Châlons, in Champagne…. And we shall have the happiness of seeing you in Montmirail.”

Louise’s response was quick. She had a fervent desire to serve the poor. Vincent knew this journey would be an important one for her. He sent her off with a solemn blessing. The text was inspired by the traditional travel blessing for clerics: “Go therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that His Divine goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil, and finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and full of good works.”

Vincent thought a stay of one or two days with each confraternity would suffice. But he left Louise free to use her own judgment: “Although I say two days, take more, if need be, and do us the kindness of writing to us.”

This journey to Montmirail was the beginning of a great ministry assisting the Confraternities. Louise was in the prime of her life. She was soon to turn thirty-eight years old. The depression that had overcome her following her husband’s death had now dissipated. Her seventeen-year-old son Michel was a boarder at the seminary at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. Louise’s time was now her own.
She would travel constantly without sparing herself, riding many miles on horseback, in a coach, or even going on foot if necessary. In February 1630, she visited the Confraternities at Asnières and Saint-Cloud, northwest of Paris. In May, she was at Villepreux in the west. October found her at Montmirail east of Paris, and December, at Beauvais in the north. In subsequent years, her visitations were frequent.

On each visit, Louise would meet with the local Ladies of Charity. She would review the functioning of the confraternity, its finances, and the role of each of its members. She would also ask about the members’ spiritual life. If there was a need, she would make changes to their rules. Moreover, she would visit the local poor, take an interest in the little girls, and try to find them a schoolmistress.

After each visit, she would write Vincent a detailed report as below:

For the past year there has been no Procurator for the Confraternity of Sannois. Nevertheless, a good man has continued to keep a written record of revenues and expenditures and he is now willing to accept this position, if elected to it. The Ladies of the Charity have let their zeal cool a bit. Often they do not visit the sick on the days for which they are responsible because the Treasurer is so good-hearted that she cooks the food for those who should be doing it that day. Also, she and the Superioress are sometimes satisfied with giving money to the sick. …

These Ladies, or at least the majority of them, go months without receiving Holy Communion. They need to have their zeal rekindled by a sermon.

At Franconville, for example, Louise noted the difficulties that existed in the relationship between the Ladies of Charity and the local treasurer who was “very autocratic.” At Herblay, the confraternity still enjoyed its usual fervor. However, in Conflans, “no Procurator was ever elected for the Charity. Because of illness, the service of the sick stopped a long time ago.” Seeing the effectiveness of her visits, Vincent wanted Louise to go everywhere. While she was staying with her niece in Attichy, he wrote, “You must not go so near the Charities of the Beauvais diocese without paying them a visit at your convenience.”

During a visit to Villepreux, Louise received this message: “Please find
out how the Charity in Crosnes is doing…. If you had a horse to go there, you would not lose any time.”56 Wherever confraternities were ineffective or experiencing conflicts, Vincent relied on Louise to know how to bring them back to life. He wrote, “They really need you here at the Charity of Saint-Sulpice. They have made some beginning but, according to what I have been told, things are going so badly that it is a real pity. Perhaps God is reserving for you the opportunity to work there.”57

A short time later, as noted by Vincent, it was Mademoiselle Tranchot, the president of the Charity of Villeneuve-Saint-Georges who asked for Louise: “Mademoiselle Tranchot really wants you in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges where the Charity is going badly. I think Our Lord is reserving the success of that good work for you.”58 The organizational savoir faire of Louise de Marillac was obvious to all. Her cordiality and her manner of speaking and encouraging restored members’ confidence and their zeal. Even local men came in secret to listen to her.

Louise shared her reflections and questions with Vincent, who was in admiration of this woman’s sure judgment. He said, “Would to God that good Madame de la Croix could follow your advice! It would be worth as much to her as a good religious order would be. As for the drugs, you have done well to deliver them.”59 Later he wrote, “I am satisfied with everything you told me about the Charity [in Montreuil]. Please propose to the sisters whatever you find appropriate in that regard, and draw it up, as much according to what you have written me as to what you will consider best.”60

Whenever he thought it necessary, Vincent did not hesitate to offer his opinions, but he gave his collaborator full freedom to act according to her own judgment: “You want to know whether you are to speak to the assembled members of the Charity. I would indeed like that very much, they would profit from it, but I do not know whether it is opportune or advisable. Speak to Mademoiselle Champlin about it and do what Our Lord inspires you to do.”61

Around 1632, moved by the misery of the convicts incarcerated in the Saint-Bernard Tower close to her house in Paris, Louise explained her desire to do something to relieve their suffering. Vincent responded, “Charity towards those poor convicts is of incomparable merit before God. You have done well to assist them and will do well to continue in any way you can.”62

But Vincent knew that the actions of an individual would have limited impact. He asked Louise if it would not be better to undertake a collective action, such as having the Confraternity of Charity of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, of which she was president, assume responsibility for the convicts: “Give a little
thought to whether your Charity at Saint-Nicolas would be willing to take on the responsibility for them, at least for a time. You could help them with the money you have left. Indeed, it is difficult, and that is what makes me suggest the idea casually.”

Between 1629 and 1633, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac developed a close working relationship. Vincent no longer used the term “my dear daughter” in his letters to Louise, suggesting a director-directee relationship, but instead he now used that of “Mademoiselle,” recognizing Louise’s leadership in this common mission. Both of them discovered a complementarity to their personalities. In Louise, Vincent found a woman who was intuitive, quick-witted, lively, and always ready to jump into action. Often, he was obliged to remind her to moderate her excessive zeal and limitless activism: “I am really afraid that you are doing too much …. Our Lord wants us to serve Him with common sense, and the opposite is called indiscreet zeal.”

Again he cautioned, “Be careful not to do too much. It is a ruse of the devil, by which he deceives good people, to induce them to do more than they are able, so that they end up not being able to do anything. The spirit of God urges one gently to do the good that can be done reasonably, so that it may be done perseveringly and for a long time. Act, therefore, in this way, Mademoiselle, and you will be acting according to the spirit of God.”

Vincent often relied on Louise’s keen and organized mind, and her concern for precision, especially in writing the regulations for the Confraternities: “I shall send you … the rules for the Charity which I have adapted to the needs of Montreuil. Look them over and, if anything should be deleted or added, please let me know.” He wrote, “You are a skillful woman to have adapted the [general] rule of the Charity [for Saint-Nicolas] in this way; I think it is fine.”

Louise knew she could rely on Vincent as well. In him she found a sure and prudent adviser, a solid support, and an attentive spiritual director. In her letters to Vincent, she spoke of the satisfaction she enjoyed in her missionary work, and with a certain humor, he responded, “After that, will you say that you are of no use to the world?”

Nevertheless, Louise was concerned about the effect of the many compliments she received everywhere she went. Was she not in danger of succumbing to this flattery? Her spiritual director reassured her: “Be at peace. When you are honored and esteemed, unite your spirit to the mockeries, contempt, and ill treatment that the Son of God suffered. Surely, Mademoiselle, a truly humble spirit humbles itself as much amid honors as amid insults, acting like the honeybee which makes its honey equally well from the dew that falls...
on the wormwood as from that which falls on the rose.”

Louise also shared with Vincent any difficulties she encountered in her work. At Villepreux and Mesnil, the pastors refused to give “that missionary woman” permission to speak in their parishes. Prudently, Vincent advised her to withdraw, saying, “It is very difficult, Mademoiselle, to do any good without conflict. And because we must relieve other people’s distress as far as it is in our power, I think that you would be performing an action agreeable to God by visiting the Pastor and apologizing for having spoken without his knowledge to the sisters of the Charity and the girls. Tell him that you thought you could act in Villepreux just as you did in Saint-Cloud and elsewhere…. Our Lord will perhaps draw more glory from your submission than from all the good you could do.”

Vincent later wrote, “Honor in this way of acting the humility of the Son of God in his.” This act of submission on Louise’s part won the complete trust of the pastor of Villepreux.

Louise set to work with such ardor that she often became ill. Her health would often serve as a check to her enthusiasm. Frequent migraines would oblige her to stop, and the many conferences she gave caused her to lose her voice. Vincent said, “It seems to me that you are killing yourself from the little care you take of yourself,” and further implored, “Please take care of your health. It is no longer yours since you destine it for God.”

In 1630, political events in France would have a profound effect on Louise. On 10 November, a coup d’état tried to overthrow Cardinal Richelieu, the first minister under Louis XIII. This day, later called the Day of the Dupes, was a failure.
The leaders of the attempted coup were imprisoned, one of whom was Michel de Marillac, the keeper of the seals and Louise’s uncle. Some months later, Louise’s other uncle, Marshal Louis de Marillac, was arrested as well. The whole family was distraught. Madame Marshal de Marillac died of grief on 15 September 1631. The Marshal was executed on 8 May 1632 in the square in front of the city hall of Paris, before a frenzied crowd. At the end of the same year, Michel died in prison at Châteaudun. Louise shuddered at each new sorrow. Vincent tried to comfort her after Madame Marshal de Marillac’s death, writing, “Although the interior is upset, it will soon be quieted. The Son of God wept over Lazarus; why should you not weep for that good lady? There is no harm in it so long as, like the Son of God, you conform yourself in this matter to His Father’s Will.”

Around 1631, another event would distress Louise. Someone spread the rumor that she had promised to marry. Louise, completely bewildered, confided her feelings to her spiritual director. Only his response has been preserved: “How sorry I am about your suffering! But, such being the order of Providence, what can you do? And truly, what real harm do you have to fear from this? So, there is a man who says you promised to marry him, and it is not true. You are being falsely accused. You are suffering interiorly, unjustly, and without cause.”

Vincent’s response showed how much Louise was troubled by this gossip. At forty, Louise knew that she was still attractive to men. Was this all that was bothering her, or could it have been that there may have been a temptation deep in her heart that threatened her vow of widowhood? The end of Vincent’s letter allows us to wonder about this: “Rest assured that [unjust suffering] is one of the greatest means of conformity with the Son of God that you could have on earth. You will thereby acquire victories over yourself that you could never have had. Oh! how much vain complacency is being destroyed in this way and how many acts of humility are being brought forth by this means!... So, strengthen yourself within against the feelings of nature, and the day will come when you will bless the hour in which Our Lord tried you in this manner.”

Perhaps Louise had the experience that a vow of chastity needed to be reinforced daily by vigilance and prudence. Experiencing a temptation should not be surprising. Christ warned his disciples, “Be on guard, and pray that you may not undergo the test.”

And so, come winds or high waters, Louise de Marillac continued her journey. The “Light of Pentecost” had given her the spiritual understanding that she would one day be part of a little community that would serve the poor.
She thought about this insight often in her spiritual meditations and retreats. In one of these meditations she wrote, “I must accept this uncertainty as well as my inability clearly to perceive at this time the path which God wishes me to follow in His service. I must abandon myself entirely to His Providence so as to be completely His. In order to prepare my soul for this, I must willingly renounce all things to follow Him.”

Louise sensed that God would be asking something more of her, a more complete commitment. She waited in peace for God to manifest his plans more clearly.
PORTRAIT OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC’S UNCLE, MICHEL DE MARILLAC.

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Her Great Intuition

Even while Louise was immersed in her work with the Confraternities of Charity, she continued to reflect on the illumination she had received at Pentecost in 1623. One day she would live in community and make vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. While she had no idea of how or when this all would come about, she made the effort, following Vincent’s advice, to live in peace and joy and to remain open to God.

For his part, Vincent continued his missionary activity in the countryside. In 1630, in the course of a parish mission, he saw a peasant girl approaching him. He was immediately struck by her appearance; she was full of life and seemed radiant with a joy that reflected the love of God that filled her.

Marguerite Naseau briefly told Vincent her story. He later often repeated it in his conferences to the Daughters of Charity:

She was just a poor, uneducated cowherd. Moved by a powerful inspiration from heaven, the idea came to her to teach young people so she bought a primer and, since she was unable to go to school for instruction, went and asked the Pastor or the Assistant to tell her the first four letters of the alphabet.

On another occasion, she asked about the next four, and so on for the rest. Afterward, while minding the cows, she would study her lesson. If she saw a passerby who looked like he knew how to read, she would ask: “Monsieur, how is this word pronounced?” In this way, she gradually learned to read, then taught other girls in her village. Next she decided to go from village to village to teach the young people, accompanied by two or three other young women she had instructed.

Marguerite had just heard Vincent describing the work of the Confraternities of Charity and the many sick persons who were being helped by them. She wondered whether she was being called to dedicate herself to this new service. It struck her that the girls she had been teaching could now teach other girls.

Vincent was full of admiration for this young woman. Providence had been guiding the development of the Confraternities for some time, but he had been worried. The women who were members of the Confraternities of
the parishes in Paris were all ladies of “condition” (that is, belonging to the aristocracy or upper bourgeoisie). While they had a great desire to assist poor persons, problems had arisen, as Vincent later described: “When it came to carrying out the project, they were greatly hindered in rendering [the poor] the lowly, difficult services.”80 He added, “They were often inconvenienced by carrying this soup pot, became disheartened, and talked of finding some servants who would do it for them.”81 The Ladies gave all of these unpleasant tasks to their servants.

Vincent asked himself, was this charity? These servants obeyed their mistresses and did the work, but they did not serve the sick poor with the affection and tenderness they needed. Would this not turn charity into cold and impersonal work? Filled with emotion, Vincent accepted Marguerite’s offer to serve. He observed, “Because the Ladies of the Charity of Saint-Sauveur were women of quality, they were looking for a young woman who would be willing to carry the soup pot to the sick.”82 Marguerite began her service in the parish of Saint-Sauveur in Paris. Louise and Marguerite would meet each other several times. Vincent told Louise, “Let me know also whether that good young woman from Suresnes, who visited you before and who spends her time teaching girls, has come to see you as she promised me last Sunday when she was here.”83

Louise taught Marguerite about caring for the sick. Marguerite, for her part, shared her years of experience teaching little girls with Louise. Both marveled at how Providence had guided them, and both came to a heightened consciousness of the needs of the most abandoned: the sick poor who had no one to help them and the poor little girls whom no school would accept. Louise observed Marguerite’s profound faith, a faith marked by a docility to the Holy Spirit, a genuine humility, and a sense of joyfulness. She admired Marguerite’s kindness toward all the poor, even those who were, by human standards, the most repugnant.

One evening, Marguerite welcomed a poor sick woman and offered her own bed for the night. Some days later, Marguerite fell ill. Her symptoms pointed to the plague, an illness which often led to a rapid death in the age of epidemics. Vincent asked Louise to try everything possible to save the life of this servant of the poor: “As for Marguerite, it would be well to have the surgeon from the Santé [Saint-Anne Hospital] visit her…. I think it would be wise to have that done as soon as possible.”84
In spite of the care she received, Marguerite’s condition worsened, and she was taken to the Saint Louis hospital, which was reserved for plague victims. As Vincent recounted, “She said good-bye to the Sister who was with her, as if she had foreseen that she was going to die, and went off to the Saint Louis [Hospital], her heart filled with joy and conformity to God’s Will.” Marguerite died toward the end of February 1633; she was thirty-nine years of age. The memory of Marguerite Naseau remained important to Vincent and Louise. After all she “was the first Sister who had the happiness of showing others the way, both to teach young girls and to nurse the sick poor.”

Marguerite’s example was contagious. Very quickly, other peasant girls came to help in the Confraternities: Germaine, Jeanne, Jacqueline, Michèle, Marie. Normally Vincent welcomed them, and then sent them to Louise. He wrote, “Marie has replied to me quite earnestly, lovingly, and humbly that she is ready to do what you wish and in the way you wish. She is only sorry that she does not have enough common sense, strength, or humility to be of use for it; but, if you tell her what she has to do, she will follow your instructions completely.”

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Louise instructed these young women, teaching them the basics of care and explaining how a confraternity of charity was supposed to function. In addition, she had them make a short retreat and pay close attention to their spiritual growth. As their numbers grew, Louise divided up the work and chose the parishes where it was most needed. Vincent provided advice, but left all of the leadership decisions to his collaborator.

During the visit to the Confraternity of Mesnil, Louise informed Vincent that she had found a schoolmistress, but that she was still quite young. He answered, “If that good eighteen-year-old girl has common sense and an intelligent mind, do not scruple about letting her take care of the girls. A good mind is better at that age than a poor one at the age of fifty.”

During a new outbreak of the plague, Vincent wanted Louise to be prudent. He could not help but think of the sudden death of Marguerite. He wrote, “Allow me to tell you that you should not send your young women to the place you mention without finding out from the doctor if there is any danger.”

Louise now had daily contact with these peasant girls. She appreciated their desire to serve poor persons and to live their lives as Christians to the fullest. This all suggested the possibilities of something more to Louise. Hadn’t her “Light of Pentecost” revealed to her a future non-cloistered community “in which there would be coming and going”?

It seems that around 1630, Louise began to speak with Vincent about this intuition of hers. His response was very restrained: “I am delighted with the employment of those good young women [in one of the Confraternities in Paris] … but not your giving way to concern over the matter. You belong to Our Lord and His holy Mother. Cling to them and to the state in which they have placed you until they make it clear that they wish something else of you.”

When Louise asked again, Vincent responded by asking her to adopt an indifference that honored the hidden life of our Lord: “Cling to it, Mademoiselle, and courageously resist any feeling you get that is contrary to it. Rest assured that by this means you will be in the state God requires of you in order to have you advance to another for His greater glory, if He so sees fit.”

As the months passed, it seemed this idea was becoming clearer and clearer in Louise’s mind. Perhaps she shared her inspiration with Marguerite Naseau. Around 1631–1632 Louise again humbly submitted her idea to Vincent, but he remained firm, saying, “As for the rest, I beg you, once and for all, not to give it a thought until Our Lord makes it evident that He wishes it, and at
present He is giving indications to the contrary.... You are trying to become the servant of those poor young women, and God wants you to be His own."94

In Vincent’s view, Louise’s request to become the servant of these daughters of the Charities and form a new community seemed opposed to the designs of God. Hadn’t the Visitandines of Bishop Francis de Sales been obliged after all to adopt the cloister? It seemed impossible to form a community that would still be free to visit the poor in their homes. In addition, these young women whom Louise desired to unite into a community were only simple country girls, without dowries and without personal refinement. How could it be possible to found a community at a time when religious life seemed to be reserved for daughters from “good families”? It seemed there were obstacles at every turn to Louise’s vision. Vincent invited her to remain at peace: “The kingdom of God is peace in the Holy Spirit; He will reign in you if your heart is at peace. So, be at peace, Mademoiselle, and you will honor in a sovereign way the God of peace and love.”95

What should she do when an inspiration that seemed without doubt to come from God was met with nothing but opposition? Vincent’s advice was that Louise should patiently wait, pray, and ask for clearer signs to be made apparent to those who would have to make decisions about such a proposal. This exactly what Louise did. She did not abandon her project, or rather, what she believed to be God’s project. She allowed her plan to slowly mature in her heart and begged God to enlighten Vincent.

Around May 1633, it seems that Vincent first began to seriously reflect on the merits of Louise’s proposal. He wrote, “With regard to your employment, my mind is not yet enlightened enough before God concerning a difficulty which prevents me from seeing whether it is the Will of His Divine Majesty. I beg you, Mademoiselle, to recommend this matter to Him during these days in which He communicates more abundantly the blessings of the Holy Spirit, rather, the Holy Spirit himself. Let us persist, therefore, in our prayers, and may you remain quite cheerful.”96

Slowly and prudently, Vincent tried to discern the signs that would reveal God’s will about this proposal to him. Louise would have liked a more rapid decision and manifested some impatience. Vincent responded, “What shall I say to you except that … what I think He is asking of you is that you honor His holy Providence in your conduct by not hurrying or bustling about?”97 In another letter, he added, “Permit me to add to this the recommendation of holy indifference, although nature grumbles against it. I tell you that everything is to be feared until we succeed in this, since our inclinations are so wicked that they
seek themselves in all things.” The conclusion of this letter shows to what extent Vincent had come to make the project presented by his collaborator his own, and how much he desired that it would also be revealed to be in accordance with God’s plan. He wrote, “Courage! May Our Lord be in our hearts, and our hearts in His, so that they may be three in one and one in three and that we may wish only what He wills.”

In August 1633, Vincent took full advantage of his annual retreat to ask for enlightenment from God about the timeliness of bringing these young women together. He knew these women were as capable of exercising the highest Christian virtues as were cloistered nuns. Marguerite Naseau had been an example of this. He had seen all these young women animated by a profound love of God serving the Charities without pretense, unafraid to suffer with the sick. If they were to be united in a little confraternity, wouldn't this be a means of aiding and supporting them, and of “perfecting” their service in the Confraternities?

At the end of his retreat, Vincent with great simplicity shared the results of his prayerful discernment with Louise: “Four or five days ago, [your good angel] communicated with mine concerning the Charity of your young women. It is true; he prompted me to recall it often and I gave that good work serious thought. We shall talk about it, God willing, on Friday or Saturday, if you do not write to me sooner.”

Some weeks later, the decision was made. Louise would speak to the young women and propose this new experiment of living a consecrated life in the midst of the world. Not all of them were interested. For example, Germaine, the schoolmistress of Villepreux, never came to join the group. At the end of October, Vincent, ever prudent and careful, wrote to Louise, “We must surely meet before making a firm decision about the girls, and it can only be toward the end of the week. In the meantime, please send them away for the next twelve to fifteen days, at which time you can notify them.”

Finally certain of the will of God, on 29 November 1633, Louise de Marillac welcomed five or six young women into her home near the church of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, so that they might live in community and serve the poor. Thus the Company of the Daughters of Charity was born.
BELGIAN HOLY CARD PICTURING MARGUERITE NASEAU,
IN AN EARLY HABIT OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, CARRYING A SOUP POT AND LADLE.

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The Beginning of the Little Company (1633–1636)

On 29 November 1633, Louise received “a few girls into her house to live a community life” according to Gobillon, her first biographer. This date marked the beginning of a new phase in the life of Louise de Marillac. From then on, she would no longer have servants. Rather, she would share her own home, her life, and her daily work with these few peasant girls who had the same desire she had: to consecrate their lives to God and to serve him in the poor. Louise became the superior of this little group, or “confraternity,” as it gradually emerged.

Marie Joly, Jeanne, Marguerite, Nicole, and Michèle were soon joined by others. Arriving from the areas around Paris, they came on their own or were sent by the Ladies of Charity. Some had heard about this little group of “servants of the sick poor” through Vincent’s priests in the course of missions in their villages. By 31 July 1634, there were twelve of them at a conference given by Vincent. Barbe Angiboust, from Serville near Chartres, had just arrived. Louise quickly took note of her strong and rich personality.

Élisabeth Martin of Argenteuil, Henriette Gessseaupe of Villers-sous-Leu, Madeleine Mongert of Sucy-en-Brie, little Barbe Toussaint of Suresnes, Cécile, Barbe Angiboust’s sister, Geneviève Poisson, Marie-Denyse, and many others came to offer themselves to the ministry of charity. Vincent and Louise naturally examined their motivations for coming to Paris and the authenticity of their vocations. The letters they exchanged reveal their concerns.

Louise had just met with three women from Colombes. Pleased with the results of the interview, she gave an account of it to Vincent: “Good Sister Jeanne from the parish of Saint-Benoit has just brought me three girls from Colombe [sic] who seem very promising and who desire to serve the poor anywhere that they are sent.” Often these young women who desired to serve in the Confraternities of Charity would address Vincent directly. He wrote, “Yesterday three fine girls from Argenteuil came to offer their services for the Charity at the suggestion of the priest to whom I had someone mention it. He is supposed to come and see me tomorrow concerning the matter. I did not send them to you because it was too late when they arrived but, according to what they told me, they will come to see you on Friday.”

Vincent and Louise wrote to each other frequently to share their impressions about the girls and reflect on the decisions to be made. For example, Vincent wrote:
I have seen that good young woman, Madeleine. I think you will have to work with her a little as her passions are rather strong. So what! When these young women have the strength to overcome themselves, they work wonders afterwards. Accept her, therefore, please ....

As for that good young woman from Argenteuil who is melancholy [sic, melancholic], I think you are right in raising objections to taking her, for it is a strange disposition, that of melancholy.105

One young woman who had lived for a time in a monastery and had left it presented herself to Louise. What should she do? Vincent was reluctant to admit her: “That entering and leaving religious life indicates some instability; you will have to be careful about that.”106 Louise, who had seen and talked with the young woman, asked Vincent to meet with her. After the interview, he wrote, “That good young woman seems to have a fair amount of common sense and good will. The only problem is that she has been in a religious community. However, she told me that, although she was persuaded to enter that community, her heart was with the Charity. Therefore, I do not think there is any harm in letting her try.”107

Some widows also asked to be admitted. It seems that Louise had a little more difficulty in rejecting them. It seems that in these cases, it was Vincent who made the decision: “I really wish that widow from Colombes could read; please have her see us. Well! I just noticed, on rereading your letter, that she has two children; if that is so, how could we admit her?”108 A short time later, Vincent advised sending away a widow he thought unsuitable to serve poor persons. “As for the good widow … she strikes me as uncouth, very gloomy, and vulgar. I think we shall have to send her away very gently and tell her that we shall have to think it over for a long time.”109

When circumstances did not allow for this type of pre-screening with a “postulant” who presented herself for admittance, she was observed for a trial period instead. Vincent wrote, “But what shall I tell you about Mademoiselle Laurent? She appears to have good judgment but her age worries me. Nevertheless, if you think it advisable to have her come to the Hôtel-Dieu, spending two or three days with her, and after that to have her come and go from one house to the other … then do so. She can observe and you can observe her. But make it quite clear to her that this is just an experiment.”110
On another occasion, Vincent wrote, “I saw that young woman and do not know what to tell you, except that I think your plan to see her three or four days before she enters is a good one. With that in view, I gave her half an écu to live on.”¹¹ The reason for this prudence is self-explanatory. Some of the young women seemed more interested in coming to Paris and discovering its pleasures rather than serving the poor.

One girl from Normandy caused a scandal at the Hôtel-Dieu. Vincent informed Louise, who was visiting the Confraternity of Charity at Gournay, that “Mademoiselle Viole’s girl … is scandalizing [the other sisters] because of the way she behaves with some young men who come to see her…. I sent for her yesterday to tell her not to bring young men into the house, but she did not take it well and told me she would rather leave. We must remain at peace after we have done all we can in such cases.”¹¹² Some months later, it was Louise who described to Vincent the behavior of another girl with some young men: “She has been seeking advice for a long time from everyone, especially a bachelor club known as the Gentlemen of the Corner from whom she receives delicacies, bottles of wine and pâtés.”¹¹³

These examples were exceptions to the rule. Most often, Vincent was impressed by the generosity and fervor of these first Daughters of Charity. He shared his feelings of admiration with Louise, who too often concentrated on what was going wrong and blamed herself. He wrote, “I thank our Lord … for the blessing He is granting your Sisters of being so good and generous.”¹¹⁴

In May 1636, the Duchess of Aiguillon asked Vincent for one of these young women to live with her and help with her good works of charity. Vincent dared not refuse this generous benefactress; Marie-Denyse, the young woman who was asked to undertake this service, did. As Vincent reported, “She had left her father and mother to give herself to the service of the poor for the love of God, and she begged me to excuse her if she could not change her intention in order to go and serve that great lady.”¹¹⁵ Barbe Angiboust accepted at first, but, as Vincent said, “she was startled to see such a grand court...she could not live there, and begged me to take her away. She said that Our Lord had given her to the poor and she entreated me to send her back to them.”¹¹⁶

Vincent was moved by the reactions of these two young women. He told Louise, “Are you not delighted to see the strength of the spirit of God in those two poor young women and the contempt that He has given them for the world and its greatness? You could not believe the ardor that this has given me for the Charity.”¹¹⁷
Louise also needed courage, patience, and savoir faire to be effective in teaching these peasant women how to care for the sick, to support the sisters in their spiritual formation, and to help them learn how to live together in community. There were, after all, great differences in class, culture, and education between Louise and these first Daughters of Charity!

The majority of these young women coming from the country were illiterate, as were most women of the seventeenth century. They had to learn to read and write, so they could teach the little girls in the parishes and villages. In her free time, Louise patiently taught them the letters of the alphabet. She also composed a little catechism with simple questions and answers to facilitate their catechetical efforts. Vincent encouraged this: “Mon Dieu! How I wish your Sisters would make an effort to learn to read and that they might really know the catechism you are teaching!”

Knowing how to read is one thing; teaching others to read is very different. Vincent and Louise researched the best teaching methods together. Vincent wrote, “We must reflect a little on some way of preparing the Sisters to teach school.” Louise prepared a plan and submitted it to Vincent for his consideration. Some Daughters of Charity could be sent to learn how to teach from the Ursulines who educated the children of the wealthy classes. Vincent said, “I do not expect much from the Ursulines’ way of communicating with your Sisters. Please send them there, nevertheless.”

There was honesty between Vincent and Louise, with each freely giving their opinions to the other without any fear. Their differing views on matters did nothing to weaken their collaboration. Louise prepared a rule of life and submitted it to Vincent. The attention of the sisters was to be continually oriented toward Jesus Christ, the Son of God, living in their midst. It was in contemplating Jesus and healing the sick, the blind, and the lame that the sisters would learn to serve poor persons with meekness, respect, cordiality, and compassion. It was in meditating on the hidden life of the Son of God at Nazareth and in his public ministry that the sisters would discover the beauty of humility, the importance of personal asceticism, and the importance of obedience. According to the first Rule, “When they have all returned to the house … they shall read a passage of the Holy Gospel so as to stimulate themselves to the practice of virtue and the service of their neighbor in imitation of the Son of God.”

Louise asked Vincent to come and speak to the sisters. In 1634, he gave three conferences dedicated to the explanation of the Rule (only the third has been preserved). Vincent taught them that the service of the poor was a continuation of their prayer. It was an act of love toward God and toward their
neighbors: “To serve those who are poor is to go to God, and you should see God in them.”

Community life was not easy. Louise witnessed the difficulties the sisters experienced in living together and in accepting and supporting one another. There were instances when these tensions led some sisters to strike their companions. Louise was concerned about preserving charity in community life. She asked to meet with Vincent to discuss the means that could be taken “to perfect” community life. He replied, “I find quite appropriate … discussing with you at length some means of establishing perfect charity among your Sisters.” Louise insisted on cordiality, mutual support, and sincere affection among the sisters. The Rule of Angers, drawn up in 1640, invites the sisters to form strong friendships: “They shall cherish one another as sisters whom He has bound together by the bond of His love.”

Louise often asked Vincent to provide formation for the sisters, but he was seldom available: “I am involved up to my ears with a large number of retreatants, an appointed bishop, a First President, two doctors, a professor
in theology, and M. Pavillon, in addition to our exercises. All that, I must say, prevents me from coming to see you.”

Through their letters from this period, we see that, little-by-little, Vincent urged Louise to assume full direction of the Daughters of Charity: “Exercise your authority,” he said several times. Vincent made it clear to the Ladies of Charity that Louise was the superioress of the Daughters: “The entire company [of the Ladies of Charity] considers it essential for that house [for the foundlings] to depend on the superioress of the Daughters of Charity.” And, each time Vincent wrote to Louise, he used the phrase “your Sisters” (or “your Daughters”) when speaking of the Daughters of Charity. For example, he wrote, “I received your letter yesterday and your outline of the rules for your Daughters,” or “I shall see your Daughters individually and then all together,” or “Your Sisters at the Hôtel-Dieu are doing fine.”

Louise did not want to have the sole responsibility for the little Company. With her usual delicacy, she would sometimes write Vincent in turn concerning “your Daughters.” On one occasion, she wrote, “Monsieur, all your daughters take the liberty of recommending themselves to your charity.” Through these exchanges, perhaps one can see the reflection of Vincent’s initial resistance to the idea that he and his successors should serve as superior of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, and Louise’s determination that this would come to pass.

From the start, the Ladies of Charity valued the work of these first servants of the poor. They all wanted to have Daughters like Marguerite Naseau serving the Confraternities of their parishes. When a sister did not give satisfaction, these Ladies often requested that she be changed. They usually addressed these requests to Vincent, since he was the person in charge of the Confraternities. He would then tell Louise and ask her to intervene: “Mademoiselle de la Bistrade and Madame Forest are supposed to come and ask you to relieve them of Nicole because of her many health problems and because Marie, who is bearing the whole burden, cannot go on unless you send them someone to replace Nicole.” When Louise was preparing to replace Nicole, the Ladies changed their minds; they wanted to keep Nicole after all: “Madame Forest came here to thank us for the good stout young woman you wanted to send them, because their Nicole is better.”

Even though collaboration is indispensable, it is not always easy. This is why Vincent recommended a spirit of indifference to Louise: “It’s a virtue…. to accept whatever God may send us.” He later wrote, “I am like you, Mademoiselle; there is nothing that bothers me more than uncertainty. But I do indeed greatly desire that God may be pleased to grant me the grace
of making everything indifferent to me, and to you as well. Come now, we shall make every effort, please God, to acquire this holy virtue.”

Together, Vincent and Louise took responsibility for the Daughters of Charity; together they reflected on all the requests and difficulties that presented themselves. But they also shared a common desire to belong totally to Jesus Christ. Louise asked Vincent not to hesitate in warning her of her faults. He wrote to her quite simply, “Above all, try not to rush around, but do everything gently as you can imagine the good Bishop of Geneva did.”

In her letters (which have not been preserved), Louise must have told Vincent he was a little slow in making his decisions. His response shows how much he appreciated how their personalities complemented each other: “This slight indisposition will give me the means to reflect a little more on our concerns about the Charity. Afterwards, if Our Lord grants me life, we shall work at it in good earnest. Your letter the day before yesterday let me see some slight reluctance in your mind about it. Mon Dieu! Mademoiselle, how fortunate you are to possess the antidote for eagerness.”

The prudent slowness of Vincent de Paul was complemented by the ardent vivacity of Louise de Marillac. The acceptance of their differences and complementarity assured that the work of God they accomplished would be balanced and harmonious.
VINCENT DE PAUL, LOUISE DE MARILLAC, AND THE LADIES OF CHARITY. PAINTING BY JEAN ANDRÉ, O.P. MUSEUM OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE, PARIS.

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The First Expansion of the Company (1636–1642)

The number of Daughters who committed themselves to the service of the sick poor in the parishes of Paris continued to grow. From five or six sisters in 1633, they grew to twelve by July 1634 and around twenty at the beginning of 1636. Louise’s house was becoming too small for them. It was time to think of moving. But where would they find a large house? How would they cover the cost of rental or purchase?

Since they had to move anyway, Louise wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to move closer to Vincent. Since 1632, the Congregation of the Mission had been headquartered at the Priory of Saint-Lazare, just north of Paris on the rue Saint-Denis. Louise wanted to find a house nearby to make it easier to consult with Vincent and more quickly resolve the many problems related to the Daughters’ community life and service in the parishes.

Vincent did not think it was appropriate for the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity to be located near Saint-Lazare. Although such a move would have been more convenient, he was concerned about what people would say seeing the frequent contacts between the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity:

> You may perhaps think that I have some reason which involves you on account of which I think it unwise for you to live in this neighborhood. Oh! no, that is not the case at all I assure you. The reason, rather, is this: we are among people who watch everything and pass judgment on everything.

> They would not see us go into your house three times without finding the opportunity to talk, to draw conclusions, which they ought not to draw, and to repeat them wherever they go. It is not that we have been watching them, but only the one who has the power to do so.¹³⁸

Fearing that he might have saddened Louise by his refusal, Vincent added, “When I have the happiness of seeing you, I will speak to you about the matter in greater detail.”¹³⁹

Louise accepted Vincent’s decision since she considered him to be the superior of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, and she looked for another location for the new house. Madame Goussault, the president of the
Ladies of Charity at the Hôtel-Dieu, assisted in the search. Two rental properties were examined: “The house to which Madame Goussault was referring is not the one I mentioned to you. The first is more beautiful and is priced at forty or fifty thousand livres; the second costs about seven or eight. The first one would be scandalous for poor girls and the second is too far from the Church [sic]. You will see.”

Vincent had confidence in Louise’s prudence and simplicity. In the end, neither of the two houses was chosen and the search continued. A vacant house was located at La Chapelle, a little village situated between Saint-Lazare and Saint-Denis. Madame Goussault spoke to Vincent about the property, and he invited Louise to go see it: “I wrote Madame Goussault, the President’s wife, that I think you would be wise to go and see the house in La Chapelle and find out how much rent they want for it. That will give you a diversion as well. She feels, as I do, that the country air is good for you. Meanwhile, remain cheerful and take care of your health.”

The house proved to be suitable and was rented. However, Louise could not sign the contract since the Company of the Daughters of Charity did not yet have legal recognition. Madame Goussault could sign since the Confraternities of Charity had legal standing, and it was thus she who would take care of these legal requirements. “Madame Goussault told me that she signed the contract for the house,” wrote Vincent. It is probable that the Ladies of Charity also provided the funds for the rental since the Daughters of Charity had hardly any resources of their own in the first years after their foundation.
The move took place in May 1636. Some Daughters remained in the house in the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet to continue their service of the sick there. The choice of which sisters would move to La Chapelle and which would stay in the first house was a mutual decision between the two founders: “You will have to see us in order to decide whom you will take there.”

In the midst of all of the challenges experienced in the move, it is probable that Louise proposed to the sisters that they use this opportunity to reflect on the occasion when “Jesus and the Blessed Virgin … moved from Bethlehem to Egypt and then to other places.” She had made this meditation at the time of one of her own moves around 1632. She now shared it with the sisters:

To go to my new home with the motive of honoring Divine Providence which is leading me there. To place myself in the disposition to do all that this same Providence will permit to be accomplished there.

By this change of residence, to honor the changes made by Jesus and the Blessed Virgin when they moved from Bethlehem to Egypt and then to other places, not wanting, any more than they, to have a permanent dwelling here on earth.

Louise always remained confident in the guidance of Divine Providence. Within a few years, God would broaden the field of action of the Daughters of Charity. The sisters did not stop with their work to relieve the misery of the sick poor in their homes, but would also extend their care to little children, galley convicts, and the sick poor in hospitals. The charitable efforts of the sisters would no longer be limited to Paris, but would reach the nearby suburb of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, as well as cities much farther away: Richelieu, Angers, and Sedan.

Louise carefully chose the sisters who would be sent to these new ministries and foundations, and would adapt the Rule to guide them in their new work. She mentored the sisters with her advice, letters, and personal visits.

The Foundlings

The work of the foundlings was the result of collaboration among Vincent, Louise, the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, and the Priests of the Mission. This collaboration proved to be demanding for all concerned. Working
with others requires patience and humility; it requires knowing one’s own limitations and failures and the acceptance of others’ weaknesses. Collaboration of itself is an act of charity that reveals the presence of the Lord: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

In seventeenth-century Paris, 300 to 400 infants were abandoned each year in the streets of the city or on the porches of churches. Each district had a superintendent who took charge of the infants and brought them to a house called La Couche to be cared for. As Vincent noted, “Those poor little creatures were receiving very little assistance,” and he added, “In fifty years, not one of them has lived.”

There were not enough wet nurses: only one for each four or five infants. To keep them from crying at night, they were given laudanum pills. Some of these babies were sold for eight sols to beggars who broke their arms and legs to attract the pity of passers-by. Others were given to women who wanted to be recognized as mothers. All this trafficking in infants supplemented the meager resources of La Couche.

The chapter of Notre Dame Cathedral was responsible for this house. Was it they who asked Vincent to come to the aid of others?
of these little children, or was it Vincent who, overwhelmed by the children’s suffering, proposed that something be done? The Ladies of Charity spent a long time considering their possible response to this situation. Vincent summed this reflection up in the course of a conference: “Our Lord has called you to be their mothers; and here is the sequence followed for that: [1] For two or three years He had the priests at Notre-Dame seek you out; [2] you held various meetings for this purpose; [3] you prayed fervently to God concerning it; [4] you sought the advice of wise persons; [5] you gave it a try; [6] And, in the end, you made the decision to accept it.”

On 1 January 1638, Vincent informed Louise of the Ladies of Charity’s decision: “At the last meeting, it was the general opinion that you be asked to experiment with the foundlings to see if there is a way of feeding them with cow’s milk, and to get two or three of them for that purpose. I am consoled that Providence is turning to you for this work.”

The Ladies could not take on the service of the foundlings by themselves. Louise was moved by the suffering of these innocent little children. Her heart lovingly embraced them all. Three of them were received into the house at La Chapelle. At the end of January, the first efforts seemed to be going very well, and the Ladies expanded their scope. Vincent wrote, “Let us talk…. About the little foundlings…. Would there be any objection to your buying a goat and continuing your experiment further?”

There were differences of opinion among the Ladies of Charity about what should be done next. Some thought they should proceed very carefully and not accept more infants than they had resources to support. Others wanted to proceed quickly and boldly and take over entire responsibility for La Couche. Vincent asked Louise’s advice:

Mademoiselle Hardy is still urging me to call a meeting of the Ladies who promised her they would contribute. If I do not do it, I shall hurt her feelings; if I do it, it will be against my better judgment. I doubt that it will succeed the way things are. She expects those Ladies to go the foundling home and would have everything done right there according to the order prescribed. I think it would be better to give up the capital of the established house rather than be subject to rendering so many accounts and overcoming so many difficulties, and to set up a new institution, leaving the former as it is, at least for some time. What do you think?”
Louise approved of Vincent’s thoughts. When the Ladies met, Mademoiselle Hardy’s proposal was rejected. They agreed to rent a house for twelve infants on the rue des Boulanger, outside Saint Victor’s gate. Vincent wrote to Louise, “The entire company considers it essential for that house to depend on the superioress of the Daughters of Charity, as I wrote you, and for you to go and spend a week or so there, if your health permits.”

The direction of the house was confided to a Daughter of Charity, Madame Pelletier. Louise prepared a rule of life for the house, and it was reviewed by Vincent and the officers of the Ladies at two meetings. It specified the role of Madame Pelletier, her obedience to the Ladies “for purely temporal matters” and to Louise for “the direction of the sisters, the wet nurses and the little runaway children.” But shortly after she arrived at the institution, Madame Pelletier schemed with ecclesiastical authorities and lawyers to dismiss Vincent and the Ladies of Charity from the work of the foundlings and to take it over herself. For several months Louise endured the activities of Madame Pelletier, who finally left the Company of the Daughters of Charity. The house of the foundlings was entrusted to another sister, Élisabeth Turgis, whom Vincent always called Madame Turgis.

Soon difficulties of another kind arose. Louise informed Vincent of what had happened: “Sister Turgis is greatly upset because the Sergeant of the Company of Monsieur de Castillon came to tell her that he would be sending soldiers to be billeted in the quarters at the front and in the ones where the children are housed.”

Louise was very worried about this situation. She suggested that Vincent appeal to the Duchess of Aiguillon, Cardinal Richelieu’s niece, or Madame Seguier, the chancellor’s wife. “Nothing is certain concerning things that depend upon the great,” admitted Vincent.

Two years after the beginning of the work of the foundlings, the Ladies of Charity thought that the time had come to undertake responsibility for all the abandoned infants. They made this decision at their meeting on 12 January 1640. As the house on rue des Boulanger was not large enough, a number of children were sent to the motherhouse at La Chapelle. Upon their arrival on 30 March, Louise sent the healthiest infants to be cared for by wet nurses. She drew up a precise list of these arrangements: “A girl named Simonée was placed with a wet nurse in Villars called Saint-Sépulcre, to one Marie Parsin, the wife of Jacques Prévault. The same day, a girl named Madeleine Lebon was given to be wet nursed to Thomasse Patrice, wife of Denis, a butcher, residing in Drinville near Montfort-L’Amaury.... The second day of April, Charles
whom people say is a gentleman and little Catherine were both given to a wet nurse of the house of faubourg Saint-Victor.”

In three weeks, twenty infants were entrusted to wet nurses who were carefully chosen by Louise and the Ladies of Charity. Some sisters visited the children to check on the quality of their care. In 1649, because of the civil war of the Fronde and the subsequent dangers on the roads, a brother of the Congregation was sent.

Always concerned about the children, Louise helped the sisters to overcome the contemporary prejudice that considered the foundlings to be “children of sin.” In the course of the conference of 7 December 1643, one sister summed up this negative outlook: “Father, these children, who in all probability are doubly conceived in sin, represent to us a very thorny plant that God is unwilling to throw into the fire, but from which He wants to gather roses; and these roses are their rational souls, which He has created and redeemed by the blood and death of His Son. This thought has given me a great desire to serve them.”

The founders would always emphasize the dignity of these children. Louise wrote in the Rule for the sisters serving the foundlings: “They shall … offer to God all the services that they are going to render to the childhood of Our Lord in the person of His children.”

Vincent concluded the December 1643 conference in this way: “When you serve these little children, when you nurse the sick poor, when you seek them out, you render to God the greatest service that can be given Him; you do your utmost so that the death of the Son of God might not be in vain for them; you honor the life of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who often did the same things as you do.”

This service demonstrated the “eminent dignity of the poor,” (according to an expression of Bishop Bossuet), illustrating again how the Church has been attentive to the lowly and the abandoned throughout history, and that it has concern for all people.
Richelieu

Cardinal Richelieu had built a town on his lands that bore his name. Many Protestants lived in this region, and the Cardinal asked Vincent de Paul to establish a house of the Priests of the Mission in his city. The contract was signed on 4 January 1638, and ten priests were sent to Richelieu. Upon arriving, Monsieur Lambert, the superior, wanted a Confraternity of Charity to be established in the city and asked for the Daughters of Charity. The Duchess of Aiguillon, Richelieu’s niece, supported the request, and on 20 February, Vincent decided to send Barbe Angiboust. He wrote to Monsieur Lambert, “I hope to send you an excellent Daughter of Charity for that purpose. She does bloodletting, administers medicines, and gives enemas. She is the one who preferred the service of the poor to that of the great lady whom I mentioned to you.”\(^{161}\)

Was it Louise who put off the departure, hesitant to send sisters so far from Paris (Richelieu is 320 kilometers away, a journey of several days)? Who would follow them and support them when they encountered difficulties?

For several months, Vincent repeated his promise to Monsieur Lambert. In September 1636, he wrote to Louise inquiring about the delay: “The Charity in Richelieu really needs Sister Barbe now because of the great number of sick people. What do you think, Mademoiselle, of sending her to help those good people in this necessity? Their illnesses are not contagious.”\(^{162}\)

Vincent tried to convince Louise by stressing the needs of the poor, but at the same time he tried to reassure her that there was no danger whatsoever for the sisters. Louise finally agreed to Vincent’s plans for this departure. Barbe was accompanied by Louise Ganset. On 1 October, Vincent wrote of his joy to Monsieur Lambert: “Here are two Daughters of Charity coming to see you about relieving the Ladies of the Charity and assisting the sick poor. Both of them know how to teach little girls.”\(^{163}\)

Louise gave advice to the two sisters as they prepared for their departure. She asked Vincent to bless the two travelers. In his response (perhaps to calm Louise who was still worried about sending sisters so far from Paris), Vincent praised the vocation of the Daughters of Charity: “\textit{Bon Dieu,} Mademoiselle, what happiness for those good Sisters to be about to continue the charity Our Lord exercised on earth in the place where they are going! And who would think, seeing them together, those two headpieces, in the coach, that they are departing for a work so admirable in the eyes of God and the angels that the God-Man found it worthy of Himself and of His holy Mother?”\(^{164}\)
In December, Vincent paid a visit to the house at Richelieu and saw the good work that the sisters were accomplishing: “The Charity is doing very well. It has treated sixty sick people since Easter without any of them dying except one young woman; before, there was no escaping it. The two sister servants of the poor whom we sent from here are working wonders there, one with the sick and the other teaching the girls.”

But in October 1639, Louise learned of some difficulties between the two sisters. In a somewhat severe tone, she asked them to examine their souls. She wrote, “I have learned what I have always greatly feared. Your work, which has been succeeding so well for the relief of the sick and the instruction of girls, has done nothing for your advancement in perfection. On the contrary, it seems to have hindered it.”

Louise invited each sister to examine her behavior with regard to her companion; Barbe, for her lack of support and cordiality, and Louise, for her lack of acceptance of her sister servant and her attachment to money. She entreated the two sisters to turn their eyes toward Christ, “to act with great gentleness and charity as the Son of God recommended when He was on earth” and instructed them to “cultivate a love for poverty in imitation of the Son of God. By so doing, you will obtain the graces necessary to be a true Daughter of Charity.”

She concluded, “True humility will regulate everything.”

When he passed through Richelieu at the end of November, Vincent saw the beneficial effect of the letter. He calmed Louise by sharing what he had seen: “Your letter worked wonders for your Daughters; they are happy at present and content, provided they see you.”

Angers

Madame Goussault had repeatedly asked Vincent to send some Daughters of Charity to the hospital at Angers, which was in a state of chaos. On 20 September 1639, she died without seeing her request fulfilled. The aldermen of the city of Angers delegated the Abbé de Vaux to negotiate for the sisters’ services, thus bringing about the fulfillment of Madame Goussault’s dream.

At the end of November 1639, Louise left Paris with three sisters and arrived in Angers on 5 December, the eve of the feast of Saint Nicholas. During the journey, bad weather aggravated Louise’s bronchitis from which she had been suffering before her departure. She fell ill and had to be nursed herself. The Abbé de Vaux generously welcomed her into his home, beginning a long friendship between them. The Abbé de Vaux would prove to be a vigilant director and counselor for the sisters.
The plague was raging in the hospital when the sisters arrived there. Fearlessly, they set to work. Louise realized the immense task that was facing the sisters and asked Vincent for more assistance. He sent three other sisters “the day before Christmas Eve on the Orléans coach.”

The arrival of the Daughters of Charity would mean an end to the chaos that characterized the hospital of Saint-Jean. The hospital administrators asked that a written contract be drawn up. Louise relayed the request to Vincent, who had not foreseen this and had thought a verbal agreement would be sufficient. Louise received a response dated 11 January 1640: “Seeing that those Gentlemen want to communicate in writing, do this, in nomine Domini, and have it drawn up in your name as Directress of the Daughters of Charity, servants of the sick poor of the hospitals and parishes, under the authority of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission, Director of the aforesaid Daughters of Charity.”

Vincent knew that the Company of the Daughters of Charity still had not received legal recognition, and he added, “If they ask you for the letters of establishment of this body, you will say that they have no other than the power that has been given to the said Superior, Director of the Charity, as is done everywhere, especially in that diocese, in Bourgneuf, on Madame Goussault’s estates, I believe, although I am not very sure about it, [and] in Richelieu, in the diocese of Poitiers.”

This somewhat vague response did not satisfy Louise, who liked clarity and precision. With his usual careful approach to all things, Vincent had long hesitated to seek recognition for the little Company. His delay was explained by his fear that such recognition might lead to the sisters being transformed into a religious order. Perhaps because of Louise’s reaction to this letter, Vincent reconsidered the issue in two other letters dated 17 and 22 January. On 28 January he said again, “I told you my opinion concerning the stipulations and the status you should assume in them.”

In her humility, Louise did as Vincent requested and signed the contract between the hospital administrators and the Daughters of Charity on 1 February. Louise returned to Paris in March and threw herself into her usual work: the formation of the sisters, receiving new recruits, distributing assignments, and receiving the foundlings at the motherhouse (the Ladies had just decided to remove all of the children from La Couche). Moreover, Vincent was waiting to discern with her on what assistance might be given to the galley convicts.
The Galley Convicts

Convicts sentenced to service of the king’s galleys were imprisoned in the Saint Bernard Tower, near the church of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, while awaiting their departure for Marseille. Their living conditions there were inhumane. In 1630, the Company of the Blessed Sacrament had paid for four additional guards so that the prisoners could at least take a walk in the courtyard each day. In 1639, Monsieur Corneul bequeathed an annuity of 6,000 livres to improve their conditions.

Some considered it the height of folly to even consider sending the Daughters of Charity to minister to the galley convicts. Vincent, who had visited the prison, had great compassion for the prisoners: “I’ve seen those poor men treated like animals.”

Because she lived nearby in the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, Louise had also seen the unfortunate prisoners. The Ladies of Charity of this parish had tried to help. For both Vincent and Louise, serving the galley convicts was an opportunity to honor Jesus Christ himself. Vincent often told the sisters, “How true, Sisters! You are serving Jesus Christ in the person of the...
Louise agreed with Vincent about the importance of this new ministry, and prepared a rule to guide the sisters: “The ministry of the Sisters of the Charity with the galley convicts is one of the most difficult and dangerous they can have.... Those who have been called by God to this holy ministry must ... encourage one another and have great confidence in Our Lord Jesus Christ, keeping in mind that, by assisting those poor persons, they will render Him a service as pleasing or more pleasing to Him than if it were done to His own person.”

The sisters needed prudence, simplicity, and patience. Barbe Angiboust experienced this once while serving a meal. Convicts overturned her soup pot, and the broth and meat spilled on the ground. She cleaned it all up “without saying a word ... looking just as pleasant as if they hadn't said or done anything to her,” one of her companions said. To try to avoid scenes such as these, Louise asked the Ladies of Charity to visit the galley convicts at meal times. She always demonstrated great concern for the sisters’ safety.

**Sedan**

The foundation at Sedan, requested by the Duchess of Bouillon, raised some problems. “It is a newly Christianized area,” wrote Vincent, “The Duc and the Duchesse have been Catholics for just a little while. Heresy established its throne in that principality ninety years ago.”

Under the circumstances, it would be necessary to send a Daughter who was mature and solid in her vocation. Vincent’s choice fell on Marie Joly, who had served poor persons in the parishes of Paris since 1632. But withdrawing her from her work in the parish of Saint-Germain was a delicate matter for she had to be replaced by a sister who was just as competent. These negotiations proved difficult. Wishing to hasten the sister’s departure for Sedan, Vincent intervened with Louise: “I think, Mademoiselle, that I did not make myself well understood concerning the Sister we must send to Saint-Germain. I wrote you that these Ladies are requesting the one you took from there and placed at Saint Etienne. It is up to you to see if you can give them that one or some other who comes near her in experience.”

This letter touched a nerve in the always sensitive Louise. Two days later, on 9 February, she wrote, “The resolution that I thought you had taken never to send a sister out alone is so deeply rooted in my mind that I find it necessary to send someone with her [Marie].” Louise proposed sending the sister Claire who knew how to read and would be able to teach school to poor little...
girls. Vincent approved the proposal, but not without expressing his doubts about Claire’s abilities: “I approve of your idea with regard to sending two Sisters, provided the second knows how to teach school, and that is something I doubt.”

As can be seen, the tone of the letters between Vincent and Louise changed as time went on. Their collaboration had highlighted the differences in their personalities. The differences had proved to be complementary: Vincent’s slow discernment had been compensated for by Louise’s vivacity, and her severity had been lightened by his great kindness. But, slowly, their differences were becoming more difficult to reconcile. Their sanctity was rooted in their humanity. Between 1640 and 1642 their relationship, which was subject to the same interpersonal dynamics of every collaboration and friendship, experienced a crisis that would become a source of growth for them and others.

Louise, whose mind was very logical and organized, wanted the Company of the Daughters of Charity to be recognized by the civil and religious authorities. We have seen her misgivings at the time of signing the contract for the hospital at Angers, and this problem arose again at the end of 1641 when a new motherhouse was purchased. The Congregation of the Mission had to sign the bill of sale.

The choice of location for this new motherhouse was also a source of tension between Vincent and Louise. The house in La Chapelle had become too small, and Louise had always wanted to be closer to Saint-Lazare. Vincent did not agree. A house was available in La Villette, a little village halfway between Saint-Lazare and La Chapelle. Vincent proposed it to Louise, who turned it down. They looked elsewhere, but finding a large enough house was not a simple task. After some months, Vincent finally gave in to Louise and looked for a house in the faubourg Saint-Denis, in the parish of Saint-Laurent, near Saint-Lazare. Louise was impatient and thought matters were not proceeding quickly enough.

In February 1641, Vincent was ill, and Louise expressed her worry at the fact that a house still had not been found. Vincent wrote her a letter that was quite severe: “I still see a little of the human in your feelings as soon as you see me ill. You think all is lost for want of a house. O woman of little faith and acceptance of the guidance and example of Jesus Christ!… For a handful of girls that His Providence has manifestly raised up and brought together, you think He will fail us!”

In September 1641, two houses adjoining one another and situated across
the street from Saint-Lazare were rented and then purchased. The Ladies of Charity helped with the expenses by establishing an annuity on a capital of 45,000 livres. Some repairs were needed, but on 29 May 1642, the sisters occupied their new motherhouse.\textsuperscript{186}

Louise expected the young women in formation to make rapid progress and became impatient with Vincente Auchy, a young woman from Richelieu whom Vincent knew well. He was astonished at her severity: “She is a very fine young woman, with a good reputation in her own region and has perseveringly served her mistress for seven or eight years. That poor woman is inexpressibly pained by her absence. There are some persons that do not adjust at first to every little rule. Time takes care of everything. I experience that situation every day among ourselves.”\textsuperscript{187}

Vincent made the same appeal for patience with Jeanne Lepintre, who wanted to wear a coiffe different from the other sisters: “I told Jeanne not to think of that kerchief for the coiffe when going to church. I think we will have to bear with her in this attachment. She will be able to get over it in time.”\textsuperscript{188}

There was another source of tension between the two founders. Vincent, who was overwhelmed with work, always promised to visit but never did. Twenty-eight letters from March 1640 to June 1642, about one per month, expressed either a promise to come, or an excuse for not having been able to come, or for having completely forgotten the meeting. Several times it was necessary to tell the sisters than a planned conference would have to be canceled.\textsuperscript{189} Louise was not happy about this situation. Sisters traveled from all of Paris only to learn that the conference was canceled. Wasn’t this taking time away from the service of the poor?

In her transcriptions, Louise made note of Vincent’s excuses at the beginning of his conferences (which he occasionally gave during that period). On 16 August 1640, Vincent was very much in a hurry: “I was nearly unable to come at all today because I had to go far into the city; therefore, I won’t have much time to talk to you.”\textsuperscript{190} On 16 August 1641, one year later (and there had not been a conference between those two dates), Louise noted Vincent’s excuses: “I should have brought you together long ago but was prevented mainly by my own wretchedness and my business affairs. Well, Sisters, I hope that God’s goodness itself has made up for what I should have done for you.”\textsuperscript{191} At the beginning of the conference of 9 March 1642, she even wrote, “Because of urgent business, M. Vincent was unable to be present at the beginning of the conference…. M. Portail began [it].”\textsuperscript{192} When Vincent finally arrived, she noted the hour, five o’clock, and the conference had begun at two o’clock. The
following 16 March, Louise noted with a touch of sarcasm: “M. Vincent did us the honor of being present from the beginning.” Only the conferences given between March 1640 and March 1642 bear such annotations.

Vincent’s letters in which he provides excuses for his absences show that he gave priority to the Ladies of Charity, the archbishop of Paris, and the queen. The Daughters of Charity always came second. Louise accepted this situation with difficulty, and this was reflected in her communications with Vincent:

… I very humbly supplicate you to do us the charity which your goodness leads us to expect and which we greatly need [a conference had been planned]. The occasions which have prevented you from doing so will continue to arise as always unless you do us the honor of postponing them. Pardon me for taking this liberty.

For Louise, the Daughters deserved to be treated with as much honor as the Ladies or the queen.

During these years from 1640 to 1642, in spite of these relational difficulties, the life of the little Company went on: sisters were sent to Fontenay-aux-Roses and Nanteuil, and above all, the members of the Company prepared to take vows for the first time. On 25 March 1642, Louise de Marillac, Barbe Angiboust, Élisabeth Turgis and two other sisters, whose names are unknown, gave themselves completely to God through the four vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and service of the poor. This was a profound joy for Louise.

Suddenly, on the eve of Pentecost 1642, an event occurred that upset both Vincent and Louise. On this Saturday afternoon, the floor of one of the rooms in the motherhouse collapsed. There were no fatalities. However, Louise had only left the room a few minutes before the accident, when a sister had warned her that a beam had just cracked. If Vincent’s conference that day had not been delayed, he would have been in the room with all the Daughters.

Vincent, who was always most attentive to events, was deeply struck by this providential occurrence. Reflecting on what had happened from the perspective of faith brought him to a new resolution. On Pentecost morning, he wrote to Louise:

You have in this encounter a new reason for loving God more than ever. He has preserved you as the apple of His eye in
an accident in which you ought to have been crushed under the ruins, had not God averted the blow by His gracious Providence. We have given thanks to God for doing so, and this afternoon, God willing, I hope to have the happiness of seeing you here in this house, if you come to Vespers, or at your house. I am sending you these lines, meanwhile, to greet you and wish you a good day in advance.\textsuperscript{195}

These lines from Vincent are filled with kindness. What a difference in tone from the preceding letters! Louise was also transformed by this event. Some years later, she wrote in her meditations: “The day and the season when God permitted us to recognize His Divine Providence by the remarkable events surrounding the fall of our ceiling reminded me once again of my profound interior conversion at that time when His goodness gave me light and understanding concerning the great anxieties and difficulties which I was then experiencing.”\textsuperscript{196}

Vincent and Louise were aware that Providence was challenging them to surmount the relational crisis they had just gone through. In giving them this new insight, God again revealed how he was the founder of the Company, over which he would always show a particular care. What God asked was that they continue their work together for the good of poor persons and for his glory. Vincent and Louise would several times recall the event of the falling ceiling as a tangible sign of the love of God for the Company.

The next month, as if to rediscover the dynamism of the “breath of the origins,” Vincent gave a conference to the Daughters on the virtues of Marguerite Naseau, the “first Sister who had the happiness of showing others the way.”\textsuperscript{197}
SAINT-DENIS-DE-LA-CHAPELLE; LOUISE DE MARILLAC’S PARISH DURING HER TIME IN LA CHAPELLE.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
STAINED GLASS WINDOW, ST. JOSEPH SEMINARY, PRINCETON. NOTABLE FOR ITS DEPICTION OF VINCENT AND LOUISE WITH THE FOUNDLINGS (AT LEFT), AND LOUISE OFFERING AID TO THE GALLEY CONVICTS (AT RIGHT).

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
THE CHURCH OF SAINT-NICOLAS-DU-CHARDONNET.
AUTOCHROME PHOTOGRAPH CIRCA 1925. MUSÉE CARNAVALET.

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The providential event of Pentecost 1642 demonstrated God’s love and protection of the Daughters of Charity and strengthened Louise in her mission. The year 1643 began with Vincent’s famous conference on “Imitating the Conduct of Country Girls.” The evening of the conference, Louise thanked Vincent for it: “I hope our sisters will make good use of the instruction your charity gave us today. Their hearts are filled with the desire to do this and they would really like to remember it forever. This causes me to entreat you most humbly to send us the little memorandum of the points you had in it. It seems to me this would help me recall a large part of what our good God said to us through your mouth.”

After having received the outline of the conference, Louise carefully reconstructed the text, highlighting each virtue necessary for a Daughter of Charity through these words:

The spirit of true village girls is extremely simple—no slyness, nor words of double meaning; they’re not opinionated nor obstinate because in their simplicity they believe quite simply what they’re told. Daughters of Charity should be like that … not attached to your own ideas, but accepting of those of others; if you’re candid in your speech, and if your hearts aren’t thinking one thing while your lips say another.…

True country women are noted for their great humility; they don’t boast of what they have, don’t talk about their relatives, and don’t think they’re clever, but act in a straightforward manner. And even though some have more than others, they don’t put on airs but live just like everyone else.…

[For] true Daughters of Charity … your only concern is the service of the poor.”

Louise had a definite role model in mind for the Daughters, writing, “If you want to be true Daughters of Charity, you should take the example of the Blessed Virgin.”

In June 1643, a sister working in a parish asked for a copy of the “practices observed in the [mother]house.” Until this point, no rule had been written...
for the community. This request led the founders to ask themselves whether the
time had come to do so. At the beginning of her transcription of the conference
of 14 June 1643, Louise noted: “Most Honored Father had not yet made up
his mind whether to have a written text; from this we have reason to believe
that Divine Providence has reserved to itself the guidance of this work, which
it advances and holds back, according to its pleasure.”202

Vincent was aware that “works pertaining to the service of God come
to an end ordinarily with those who begin them, if there is no spiritual bond
among the persons involved in them.”203 He finally agreed to write a Rule
for the Daughters of Charity and submit it to the archbishop of Paris for
his approval.

Louise was happy with this decision but realistic about potential difficulties
in obtaining the approval. Would the Church agree to recognize this new type
of “secular” confraternity of servants of the poor? Wasn’t there a risk of the
community facing the same fate as the Visitandines: namely, the imposition of
the cloister? If the archbishop of Paris refused to allow women consecrated to
God “to come and go” in the streets and villages, how could their service of the
poor continue?

On the other hand, the Church’s official recognition was necessary for the
continuance of the Company, so Louise thought of undertaking a pilgrimage
to Chartres to ask for the help of Our Lady. She explained the goal of her
journey to Vincent, who was absent from Paris at the time: “I beg you most humbly to allow me to make a pilgrimage to Chartres during your absence so that I may entrust all our needs and the suggestions I have made to you to the care of the Blessed Virgin. The time has surely come for me to reflect on myself in the sight of God. I must tell you that I am convinced that the good of our little Company requires it.”

In October 1644, Louise set out on the journey and arrived in Chartres on Friday, 14 October. On Saturday, she went to the cathedral to pray to Our Lady. On Monday, she solemnly confided the burgeoning company to Mary, the humble servant of the Lord, and asked her to become its mother so that it could maintain the mission God had confided to it.

In taking this step, Louise was motivated by her profound desire to be faithful to God’s will by continuing the service of poor persons that he had confided to the Company. Louise saw in Mary the example of a woman who, in the face of many difficulties, had adhered fully to the plan of God throughout her life: “May your beautiful soul be forever triumphant, elect among millions, because of your faithful accomplishment of the designs of God.”

Louise’s account of the consecration of the Company to Mary expresses the motivations for the choice of Mary as mother and guardian of the Company:

On Monday, Feast of the Dedication of the Church of Chartres, I offered to God the designs of His Providence on the Company of the Daughters of Charity. I offered the said Company entirely to Him, asking Him to destroy it rather than let it be established contrary to His holy will. I asked for it, through the prayers of the Holy Virgin, Mother and Guardian of the said Company, the purity of which it stands in need. Looking upon the Blessed Virgin as the fulfillment of the promises of God to mankind, and seeing the fulfillment of the vow of the Blessed Virgin in the accomplishment of the mystery of the Incarnation, I asked Him for the grace of fidelity for the Company through the merits of the Blood of the Son of God and of Mary. I prayed also that He might be the strong and loving bond that unites the hearts of all the sisters in imitation of the union of the three Divine Persons.

Louise saw God’s plans for the Company as the fulfillment of his promises to humanity. Mary played an essential role in the mysteries of the Incarnation.
and Redemption. It was Mary who gave Christ his human life, that life which
would be delivered up for the salvation of humanity; it was Mary who gave
him his blood, that blood which he would pour out on Calvary:

Most Holy Virgin, have pity on all souls redeemed by the Son
of God, your Son, Jesus Christ. Offer to the Divine Justice
your pure body which furnished the blood which He shed
for our Redemption so that His merits may be applied to the
souls of the dying and effect in them complete conversion.
Procure for us, through your intercession, all that we need to
give glory to God in the fullness of heavenly beatitude and to
enjoy the blessedness which your dear presence imparts to the
saints who are now with you in glory.²⁰⁷

Louise asked Mary to grant the Company fidelity to the vocation God
had confided to it. She admired Mary’s complete adherence to God’s design;
the Incarnation of the Word and, consequently, the Redemption of humanity
depended on her saying “yes.” Louise also required of all the Daughters of
Charity this same adherence to God’s will manifested in their vocation and
this same availability to serve suffering humanity, so they would be the humble
servants of Christ in the poor.

Mary also participated in a privileged manner in the mystery of the Blessed
Trinity. Louise delighted in glorifying her with her titles of “beloved Daughter
of the Father, Mother of the Son, and worthy Spouse of the Holy Spirit.”²⁰⁸ As
Louise wrote, “Throughout my life, in time and in eternity, I desire to love and
to honor her to the best of my ability by my gratitude to the Blessed Trinity for
the choice made of the Holy Virgin to be so closely united to the Divinity. I
wish to honor the three Persons separately and also together in the unity of the
divine essence.”²⁰⁹ Louise asked Mary to animate the life in the community so
that it would resemble the relationship of the persons of the Trinity.

In the purity of her love, Mary had placed no obstacle between herself and
God. Louise asked the Company to make its love of God as pure as Mary’s,
so that it could be just as faithful to the mission it had received. By accepting
her indispensable role in the Incarnation of the second person of the Blessed
Trinity, Mary also committed herself to participating in the salvific mission of
her son. Thus, in faith, she also agreed to follow him in his suffering. This first
“yes” of Mary was followed by many others. Mary advanced step by step in the
understanding and accomplishment of her mission. Louise recognized how
much Mary had immersed herself in the mystery of the Redeemer: “Your dear Son, my Redeemer, is the source of the heroic virtue of which you gave the example during your life on earth.”

On Calvary, Mary welcomed the words of her dying Son, extending her motherhood to the beloved disciple John, to the Church, and to all humanity. In his encyclical, “The Mother of the Redeemer,” Saint John Paul II noted: “Mary’s motherhood of the human race … emerges from the definitive accomplishment of the Redeemer’s Paschal Mystery.” Louise admired how Mary had made herself totally available for her new mission toward all those whom her Son had confided to her from the cross: “the Blessed Virgin accept[ed] to be deprived of her Son and remain[ed] on earth for the good of Christians.”

Mary brought to humanity all her womanly tenderness, and all her motherly kindness. According to Louise, “Everything is comprised in her title of Mother of the Son of God. How admirable are her deeds! With good reason the Church addresses her as the Mother of Mercy.”

Mercy has its source in a mother’s heart and womb as a manifestation of a love that is faithful and full of care and compassion. Meditating on these virtues of Mary, Louise reflected on the following:

Her complete detachment and the sweet tranquility of her soul during the passion and death of her Son.

Her renunciation of all things and her willingness to remain on earth after the Ascension of her Son because of her pure love of God and her zeal for the salvation of souls, for which she labored for the remainder of her life, thereby
imitating perfectly the Spirit of her Son.\textsuperscript{214}

In establishing Mary as mother of the Company, Louise asked her to guide each sister and the entire Company toward the full acceptance of the vocation that is given to them. She asked her to direct each sister and the entire Company toward the recognition of Christ in all those they meet. Louise confided to Mary’s care and guidance this corporal and spiritual service of the poor, and this humble participation in the loving mystery of the Redemption. For each Daughter of Charity and for the entire Company, to accomplish the design of God means to live as a humble servant dedicated to God for the liberation and salvation of the poor whom Christ loves with a preferential love.

On her return to Paris, Louise continued to work with Vincent on the petition that would be submitted to Jean-François de Gondi, the archbishop of Paris, around September 1645.
THE HOLY FAMILY.
A PAINTING SAID TO HAVE BEEN DONE BY LOUISE DE MARILLAC. IT WAS USED BY VINCENT FOR PART OF THE FRONTISPIECE
OF THE VINCENTIAN COMMON RULES; ORIGINAL IN THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY MOTHERHOUSE, PARIS.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
HOLY CARD
PICTURING LOUISE DE MARILLAC, THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, MARY, AND THE INFANT JESUS.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
The Stormy Years (1645–1649)

Shortly after her return from her pilgrimage to Chartres, Louise was faced with numerous difficulties. Her son’s conduct upset her deeply. The Company of the Daughters of Charity was shaken by the departures of sisters who had been members for a long time. Louise would emerge from these crises mature, calm, and at peace with God.

The Problems with her Son, Michel

On 2 December 1644, six weeks after the pilgrimage to Chartres, Louise wrote Vincent a letter filled with anguish. Her son had disappeared and no one knew where he was. Louise wrote, “I am extremely anxious about my son.... You know that my sorrow and my apprehensions are not slight” and she added in the postscript, “I cannot get help from anyone else in the world, and I have almost never had any except from your charity.”

What, then, were the fears Louise had for her son? Why such anxiety? After all, at the age of thirty-one, was not Michel old enough to lead his own life? Michel Le Gras had a difficult childhood. From the ages of nine to twelve, he lived with a sick and irritable father, and a depressed mother. After his father’s death in 1625, he had the opportunity of meeting Vincent, who took responsibility for his education.

Michel’s time at college was difficult. He did not work very hard and was indecisive about whether he should become a priest. Michel was twenty when his mother brought the first Daughters of Charity home. What was his reaction to the occupation of his home by young women he did not know and with whom his mother was very involved? At this time, he was a boarder with the Jesuits while he studied to become a priest. During vacations, he was taken in by Vincent at Saint-Lazare.

Relations between Michel and his mother seemed to be often tense and even conflictual. One day, no doubt upset about something that had happened, Michel told Vincent about a discussion he had with his mother. Vincent reported, “Your son ... told me very calmly and soberly that he had seen you and that you had been feeling somewhat ill.” What could the son have said to cause his mother to feel ill? Louise’s pain seems to have been comparable to that of Saint Monica over her son Augustine.
As time passed, Michel became more and more hesitant about a vocation to the priesthood. He wanted to take off the cassock he had worn since the minor seminary. Louise was filled with anxiety. Wouldn’t such a choice break a promise made to God? Vincent was firm: “I have never seen a woman such as you for feeling so guilty about certain things. Your son’s choice, you say, is a proof of God’s dealing with you according to your deserts.... I have already asked you at other times not to talk that way anymore.” Two years later, Vincent advised Louise to respect her son’s freedom to choose his own vocation. Such a choice could not be dictated by a mother’s desire. God alone would receive such a decision.

Vincent’s guidance permitted Michel and his mother to see things more calmly. Eventually, Michel abandoned the idea of the priesthood and tried to figure out what to do with his life. He fell in with a group of young men his own age and led an irresponsible life. Louise was often worried about his conduct, and his disappearance in December 1644 upset her more than it surprised her, because she had no doubt that he had left with a girl.

Some months later, the young couple was found, and the girl was placed with the Daughters of the Madeleine, a monastery founded for delinquent girls. Michel was brought back to Saint-Lazare. In July 1645, the chaplain of the monastery acted as intermediary for the girl, who now wanted to return to her home after having shown signs of a true conversion. Louise had little trust in this conversion, because she knew her son had but one desire: to be reunited with his beloved. Again, she confided to Vincent all her motherly anguish:

>[Michel’s] intention is to associate himself, after their marriage, with this girl’s parents who are wine merchants, or to go to that region to live there in peace but in idleness. So, her thought of leaving is, to all appearances, because she thinks that as soon as she is out, he will go join her.

I most humbly ask your pardon, Monsieur, for speaking to you about such an affair, still as fresh to me now as it was in the beginning and at certain times more painful than I can express.

The months passed, and Michel seemed to be no longer interested in this girl. But his behavior remained an ever present source of worry for his mother. One day, she decided to discuss the situation with him. Michel, taking his mother’s words badly, disappeared again. Louise wrote, “How great my pain is!
If God does not help me, I do not know what I will do. Help me to keep myself strongly attached to Jesus Crucified.”

For Louise, the years 1645 to 1658 were years of torment. Apparently, there was also some scandalous incident that involved her son at Saint-Lazare. Her letters at this time reveal how much she suffered and how concerned she was over her son’s salvation. In March 1646, she sent a painting of the Blessed Virgin to Saint-Lazare and told Vincent: “It was not my intention that the painting of the Blessed Virgin be either for our oratory or for the Foundlings, but that it might serve as an adornment for an altar dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, to make reparation in some way for my son’s faults. I used some rings I still had to have it made. That is why, Monsieur, I most humbly entreat you to allow it to remain in your church, that this reparation be made since it was, unfortunately, in one of your houses that the misdemeanor of that son of mine occurred.”

In April 1647, Louise spoke of the pain and suffering that Michel’s behavior again had caused her: “Mon Dieu! how my pride causes me to suffer because of it, and what a great relief it would have been had I been spared it! The most holy Will of God has not permitted this. May He be forever blessed for it!”

Louise’s suffering at this time certainly was enhanced by the unconscious memories of all the suffering of her own childhood and adolescence. In Michel,
who was aged thirty-two to thirty-five years, did she not see her own father who, at the same age, had conceived her outside of marriage? Did she not fear, above all, that a child might be conceived, who would be, as she had been, in danger of suffering throughout his or her life because of illegitimacy?

In 1649, to try to provide some stability for Michel, Vincent gave him a job as bailiff, that is, the role of officer of justice on the lands of Saint-Lazare. Louise wanted her son to marry and settle down but was worried about his prospects. On the evening of Ascension Day, Vincent comforted her: “In the name of God, Mademoiselle, do not worry about the bailiff [Michel]. Do you not see the extraordinary care Our Lord is taking of Him [sic], almost without you? Let His Divine Majesty act; He is quite capable of showing the mother, who takes care of so many children, His satisfaction in this, by the care He will take of her child, and that she could never anticipate or surpass Him in goodness.”

A short while later, Madame de Romilly, a friend of Louise’s, suggested a possible wife for Michel, Mademoiselle Portier, whose parents lived in Saint Paul’s parish. A meeting of the two families was necessary to determine what each party would contribute to the wedding contract. As Louise was on a visit to Liancourt, she was represented by Vincent, to whom she recommended a certain prudence and discretion in the negotiations: “Under such circumstances, it is better not to declare too openly what one has because that can be prejudicial if things do not materialize.”

Three days later, Vincent reported on the meeting: “[Madame de Romilly] says that fifteen thousand livres will be given to that good girl, and she can expect the same amount after the death of her father and mother. I gave her the particulars of the bailiff’s estate in the presence of Madame d’Aiguillon who, like you, thought that only the broad outline of things should be given.” Vincent knew he had acted contrary to Louise’s advice, and that is why he relied on the opinion of the Duchess of Aiguillon. This incident demonstrates again the difference in viewpoints and trust that existed between Vincent and Louise!

Because Mademoiselle Portier’s father wanted a “good match” for his daughter, the marriage never took place, and it was necessary to begin the search once more. The choice then fell on Gabrielle Le Clerc, the daughter of Lord de Chennevières. Negotiations between the two families took place quickly and without difficulty. In December, Louise told Vincent of her joy at meeting her future daughter-in-law, who came, accompanied by her uncle, to settle the final marriage details.
But Louise was obliged to take another step that was much more difficult and delicate to arrange. To provide a firm financial foundation for her son's marriage it was necessary to buy, as was customary at that time, the position as councillor at the Ministry of Finance, then held by Monsieur de la Rochemaillet, Gabrielle's uncle. Louise was poor and found herself obliged to ask her family for aid. She wrote to the Count de Maure, husband of Anne d'Attichy, one of her cousins, “As a Christian I must embrace the scorn which normally accompanies poverty.”

Louise explained that she had little in the way of goods and money to give her son, and she humbly reminded him of the aid she and her husband had given to the Attichy children at the death of their parents. Louise sent a similar appeal to Marie Angélique d’Atry, the daughter of another one of her cousins, Geneviève d’Attichy. It seems these requests were honored.

The date of 18 January 1650 was one of rejoicing for Louise. On that day, the marriage of Michel and Gabrielle was celebrated in the parish church of Saint Sauveur. On the evening before, she had received a short note from Vincent: “I beg our Lord to bless the newlyweds and give you the dispositions He gave the Blessed Virgin when she was present with her Son at the wedding of Cana.”

At the beginning of the following year a daughter, Louise-Renée, was born. To the great joy of her grandmother and the sisters, the parents often brought the little girl to visit the community. Louise-Renée was nicknamed “the little sister.” Michel, his wife, and his daughter were present at Louise’s death and received her blessing. Michel died in 1696, and Louise-Renée, who had become Mademoiselle d’Ormilly by marriage, seems not to have had any descendants.

In 1631, Louise, who was always seeking to do the will of God, questioned how she could reconcile her life as a mother and as the formation directress of the servants of poor persons. With his usual good sense and a bit of humor, Vincent answered her: “Our Lord most certainly did well not to choose you for His Mother, since you do not think you can discern the Will of God in the maternal care He demands of you for your son. Or perhaps you feel that that will prevent you from doing the Will of God in other matters. Certainly not, because the Will of God is not opposed to the Will of God. Honor, therefore, the tranquility of the Blessed Virgin in such a case.”

During her times of suffering over Michel, Louise must have looked to the example of Mary whose heart had suffered so because of her son: his birth in a stable, exile in Egypt, the anxious search in Jerusalem, the mockery from his hometown of Nazareth, and his death on the cross. Like the Blessed Virgin,
Louise de Marillac had experienced the words of Jesus to his disciples: “If anyone comes to me without turning his back on his father and mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters, indeed his very self, he cannot be my follower. Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

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A MINIATURE OF THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH, PAINTED BY LOUISE DE MARILLAC. ORIGINAL AT DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY MOTHERHOUSE, PARIS.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
Louise and the Virgin Mary. The text reads:

"My dear sisters, I beg you to take the Holy Virgin as your only mother."

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
After fourteen years of existence, the Company of the Daughters of Charity was shaken by a crisis that challenged the sisters in general and worried Louise. This crisis did not come about suddenly. Toward the end of 1645, there were certain warning signs that indicated the zeal that had animated the first sisters was weakening. Some sisters refused to leave the parish where they were working when asked; others took issue with the leadership of their sister servant. There were complaints and grumbling: Why should we live so poorly, couldn't we have a few more comforts in life? Even poor persons were no longer being served with the same degree of love.

Louise, concerned about the fidelity of the entire Company to the charism it had received from God, suggested to Vincent that he give a conference on the love of vocation. On 13 February 1646, he explained to the sisters gathered at the motherhouse the origins of the Company: the event at Châtillon-les-Dombes and the foundation of the Charities. He spoke at length about Marguerite Naseau. Throughout his talk, perhaps as a way of responding to some sisters’ criticisms, Vincent was emphatic that it was God who was the author of the Company: “God wanted there to be a Company of Sisters who would be specifically for the service of the sick under the guidance of those Ladies.” Vincent said, “From all eternity God had chosen and elected you for that [the service of persons living in poverty].”

Vincent spoke with insistence about the poverty that was indispensable for a Daughter of Charity to serve the poor. He noted that “the first of these Sisters was a poor young woman from the country; I have to tell you this, Sisters, to let you see the Providence of God, who willed that your Company be composed of poor women, either by birth or by the choice they would make of poverty; yes, Sisters, I say poor women because you must be so in reality.”

Concluding his account of the history of the Company, Vincent affirmed once more God’s agency in its foundation and the necessity of “voluntary poverty.” He then proposed the means for loving one’s vocation, to live in fidelity to God’s call: “One means of doing as God wills is to do it in charity—in charity, Sisters.”

Then Vincent considered in turn the various difficulties that one could expect in day-to-day community living. He suggested to the sisters that they carefully identify anything that was harmful to mutual charity and try to remedy it: for example, to avoid becoming “attached” to any of the Ladies of
Charity, to avoid criticism and complaining among the sisters, to strive to overcome natural aversions between sisters, to always speak with kindness and gentleness, and above all to deepen their love of Jesus Christ, and their love for the poor.

Vincent noted:

In serving persons who are poor, we serve Jesus Christ. How true, Sisters! You are serving Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as that we are here. A Sister will go ten times a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day she’ll find God there....

So then, I entreat you to be very devoted to persons who are poor and take great care to teach them the truths necessary for salvation.

This conference gave the sisters much food for thought. Monsieur Antoine Portail, their spiritual director, who was following these developments in the life of the Company very closely, wrote the following to Louise from Le Mans: “I praise God for the mercy he has granted to your Company in purging it of bad temperaments in order to make it healthy and holy.”

Sister Anne, who heard Vincent’s words, felt she did not agree with the vocation that he described. Suddenly, on 19 March, she left the motherhouse. Louise shared her grief with Monsieur Portail, who had known this sister in Richelieu: “The tall Anne from Richelieu likewise fled when she discovered that we wanted to remove her. That happened yesterday and we do not know where she went. You see, Monsieur, that we need the help of your holy prayers. I, in particular, need them because of all the evil I cause, and I beg you to ask God’s forgiveness for me.” Did Louise have an idea that this would mark the beginning of a long series of departures?

During his stay in Le Mans, Monsieur Portail negotiated the arrival of the Daughters of Charity with the local hospital administrators. He was hoping that Louise could bring the sisters there herself, as she had done in Angers. On 23 March, Vincent responded that this would not be possible: “If Mademoiselle Le Gras’ health permits and the weather is better and it is after Easter, she could make the journey from Le Mans. Before then, there is no likelihood of this.”

Louise’s letter, written a few days later, gave different reasons that reflect on her humility and suffering. She noted:
It would be most presumptuous of me to consider myself necessary for the establishments of our sisters in the localities to which God calls them, especially the one where you are. Rather, I should truly fear spoiling everything. I think that what leads me to visit various places is the mistrust I have of the qualifications of our sisters caused by my bad example and the little effort I put into their guidance. Since my words surpass my deeds one hundred-fold, it seems that in giving detailed advice to these little establishments I am only repairing the faults I have committed earlier.241

She was actively involved in the preparations for the sisters’ departure. The choice of sisters was made with the help of Vincent and Monsieur Portail. Jeanne Lepintre, the sister servant, was accompanied by three other sisters: Claude Brigide and Genevieve Caillou, who had hospital experience in Angers, and Andrée. They departed on 4 May 1646.

The joy of beginning a new mission was quickly offset by difficulties that arose at the hospital in Le Mans. Those who had been running the hospital refused to accept the arrival of the Daughters of Charity. Louise blamed herself for this state of affairs. On 25 May, she wrote to Monsieur Portail: “If your Charity had not recognized our troubles a long time ago, I would say that our good God is causing you to experience them in the difficulties that He wills you to have in negotiations on the matter on which you are working so generously for the service of His poor. This is a great embarrassment for us, to think that it is only our laziness and bad dispositions which are causing so much trouble concerning our employment.”242

After three weeks of negotiations, it became clear that this new hospital foundation was a failure. Two of the sisters returned to Paris, and the two others set out for Angers to reinforce the community there. Moreover, while all this was going on during May, Louise received a letter from Monsieur Ratier, the Abbé de Vaux’s assistant, notifying her of the death of Marie Despinal and of the departure of Catherine Huitmill.

Marie Despinal, who had been in Angers for two years, was well-loved in the hospital for her simple joy, her great goodness, and her deep love for God and for poor persons. The Abbé Ratier wrote, “I have never seen more obvious indications of predestination than in this soul; but I am very amazed to see so much suffering with so much innocence.”243

Louise was very distressed by this sister’s death, which took place so soon
after the deaths of two other young sisters: Marie, who was in Saint-Denis, and Jacqueline Midy. Of Jacqueline, Louise said, “She patiently accepted being admonished of her faults. Although she had considerable difficulty in overcoming her self-will, she submitted to others very peacefully.”

The departure of Catherine Huitmill was difficult for the community in Angers. Catherine had entered the Company at the invitation of her brother who was a Priest of the Mission. When she arrived at Angers in May 1644, she made it known that she did not like nursing the sick. She soon made no secret of her desire to leave the hospital. She made plans to leave in disguise so she would not be recognized. However, she did not want to return to Paris, fearing the reaction of her brother and Louise. Monsieur Ratier, who pitied this poor young woman, did not know how to resolve the problem. He wrote to Louise, “She has no intention of wrong-doing or of losing her salvation … She said that she never had a vocation and that her brother did her an injustice by bringing her to you.”

Louise quickly sent a message to Madeleine Mongert, the hospital’s sister servant: “Assure her [Catherine Huitmill] that she will be welcome and that we will take particular care in placing her if she wishes to withdraw to a servant position. That is why she must truly avoid committing the fault of withdrawing as would a vagabond.”

Subsequent letters make no further mention of Catherine. She most likely returned home to her parents.

Difficulties were arising almost everywhere. For several months, the motherhouse had been disrupted by the behavior of Jacqueline, who had been present at the Company’s foundation on 29 November 1633. She had been complaining about everything in the community, and she sought out young sisters to hear her complaints. She refused to accept any correction. Any such attempt made her behavior unbearable.

During the Council meeting of 28 June 1646, Vincent suggested dismissing this sister whose behavior had become so disruptive. The issue was extensively debated, for Jacqueline had worked diligently to serve the poor. However, it seemed that by this point she was only staying in the community grudgingly. Louise thought that Jacqueline should not remain in the Company. She was trying to find some work for her and had already contacted Madame de Lamoignon.

At the same Council meeting, six sisters were chosen to make up a community for Nantes. Louise would accompany them there at the end of the following month. Élisabeth Martin was named sister servant.

Louise’s absence from Paris lasted two months. Prior to her departure, she
organized everything so that the Company would not suffer in the interim. Jeanne Lepintre, who had returned from Le Mans, was named sister servant of the entire Company. Every two weeks, she was to meet with the two officers (councilors) to examine the various problems that arose, and on a regular basis they would seek the advice of Vincent or Monsieur Lambert. Each sister’s office was confirmed: the sister responsible for the infirmary, the sister responsible for hospitality, the sister who was the cook, and so forth. Several of the older sisters, Henriette Gessaume, Geneviève Poisson, Barbe Angiboust, and Élisabeth Hellot, were assigned to visit regularly with the sisters who worked in the parishes in Paris.

During July, Louise also took the time to re-read and edit the text of the Rules of the Company, which were going to be submitted to the archbishop of Paris.

On 26 July, Louise, accompanied by Françoise Noret, set out with the six sisters going to Nantes and with Élisabeth Turgis, who was going to Richelieu. The account of the journey that Louise kept at Vincent’s request allows us to follow the travelers’ progress. The journey was long: fourteen days, first overland to Orléans, then traveling on the Loire River. The account is filled with delightful details: “We all boarded the coach for Orléans and travelled most gaily without, by the grace of God, failing in our observances except during the hours of prayer and silence when we were overwhelmed by sleepiness. This we occasionally blamed on the heat.”

At Ponts-de-Cé, not far from Angers, the sisters were put out of the inn where they were supposed to stay the night: “We arrived quite late. That happened because we did not want any chickens killed, putting us in danger of eating meat on Friday.” Fortunately, the wife of the surgeon took them in, for as Louise noted, “We also had great need of rest.”

In Nantes, the sisters were welcomed with great enthusiasm by the Ladies of Charity, some clergymen, and a crowd of people who had come to meet them. They were brought by carriage to the hospital, amid the applause of all the townspeople.

Louise remained in Nantes for a month. She met with the administrators to prepare the terms of the contract. She visited the mayor of the city, as well as the vicar-general of the diocese. She met with Monsieur des Jonchères, the chaplain of the Visitation convent, who agreed to be the confessor and adviser of the new community. While Louise was staying there, many people sought to meet with her, interested in supporting the sisters’ work and serving the sick with them. Louise complained, with a touch of humor, to Vincent: “[God
allows great difficulty] to humble me. I attribute some of the honors which we receive here to your charity. In God’s name, do not mislead anyone with regard to me. They think me a great lady. I think nearly all the socially prominent women came to see us, and some even came from the country just for that. Oh, how I will burn one day (for that)! How greatly embarrassed I shall be! The will of God be done.”

In early September, Louise expressed herself similarly to Jeanne Lepintre: “I praise God with all my heart for the graces that He has bestowed on our little Company, and for the blessings that His goodness gives to your guidance. Oh, how I love our dear sisters for giving so many proofs of faithfulness to their vocation!”

Louise’s joy was tempered by her son’s adventures with the Count de Mauny. When she returned to Paris, the superioress of the Company was caught up once more in the community’s day-to-day problems. Perrine, who had left, wished to return to the Daughters of Charity: “Now she is doing all
she can to re-enter and is prepared to throw herself at the feet of the Queen.”

At the motherhouse, Marguerite de Turenne refused to work. She complained about everything: the sisters, the work, and the food. At the Council meeting of October 1646, Louise proposed sending her home. Vincent gave his opinion: “I, for one, can tell you that, from what I know of her temperament, she must have made her parents very happy not to have her with them. Living as she does, I don’t think she’ll ever do anything with us, but she will be able to do something and work out her salvation in the world.” Louise would have the delicate task of writing her parents and to Monsieur de Mondion, the pastor of Saché who had sent her to the Company.

The winter of 1646–1647 was marked by the illnesses and deaths of many sisters. At the end of March or early April, Louise wrote to Élisabeth Turgis, “We had so many ill for six months that our infirmary was always full.” Since the beginning of November, Mathurine had died at Saint-Denis, then Perrine Fleury, Françoise de Montargis, Florence (a sister originally from Saintonge), and the tall Michelle from Richelieu.

The Act of Establishment that placed the Company under the archbishop of Paris’s direction was signed early that winter, to the great disapproval of Louise (see chapter 11).

In March 1647, Louise had hardly recovered from a prolonged illness when she received five letters in succession from the hospital in Nantes: from Monsieur des Jonchères, the sisters’ confessor; from a priest at the hospital; from the sister servant; and from two other sisters. All the letters described serious community conflicts. Some blamed Élisabeth Martin, the sister servant: “She is too controlling and arrogant with the Sisters, and whenever she asks them to do or not do something, it is always in an ill-tempered, bizarre, melancholy way that is spiteful and too haughty. She constantly needles them for trifles, which is so discouraging to them.”

Other letters accused the hospital chaplain of interfering too much in the daily life of the community and of taking sides with a group of sisters against the sister servant. “I notice that some of our Sisters are so familiar with the chaplain that I see them together constantly, either in our attic or in our bedroom, at which I have been deeply mortified. However, when they are together and they see us, they go somewhere else.”

The atmosphere of mutual suspicion that existed among the eight sisters led to silences, criticisms, and gossip from outside the community. The service of poor persons suffered from this situation; the patients were neglected, and some died without having received the last sacraments.
Louise was appalled by the “immense” disorder that reigned in Nantes.\(^{257}\) Her first response was to request a meeting with Vincent. Monsieur des Jonchères suggested sending an extraordinary confessor, either the Abbé de Vaux from Angers or one of his friends, the Abbé d’Annemont. The arrival of the latter was poorly received by the group of sisters who were opposed to the sister servant. Louise then suggested that Vincent himself intervene: “Another thing I find most necessary, and of great use, is that your Charity, if you think it appropriate, take the trouble to write a letter to all our sisters, which shows a bit of dissatisfaction with them, and which encourages them.”\(^{258}\)

Sharing the sisters’ suffering, Louise was overwhelmed by this situation and took the weight of it upon herself: “Just as true, my Most Honored Father, is the fact that this poor little Company is truly suffering under my wretched guidance! I also think that God will soon deliver it from this captivity, which is such a great obstacle to the perfection of His work.”\(^{259}\)

Nothing seemed to be able to settle the conflicts in Nantes. Vincent and Louise decided to send Jeanne Lepintre to make an assessment of the situation. Louise notified the sisters of this upcoming visit:

> Sister Jeanne Lepintre is coming to visit you on behalf of Monsieur Vincent. I believe his Charity would have sent me if I had recovered sufficiently from my serious illness.

> Do you know why, my dear Sisters? In order to learn from your very mouths your frame of mind, the source of the little troubles showing up in your Company, and how weeds were sown which seem ready to choke out the good seed.\(^{260}\) O my dear sisters, what great reason I have to fear that it was my bad example which placed unfortunate impressions in your minds.\(^{261}\)

While she was making arrangements for Jeanne Lepintre to depart for Nantes, Louise was also organizing the departure of Anne Hardemont and Marie Lullen, who were going to Montreuil-sur-Mer to serve the sick in the hospital at the request of the Count de Lannoy. Jeanne Lepintre left Paris around 20 June, and the two sisters for Montreuil on 26 June, after receiving advice from Vincent and Louise.

The months of July and August were equally marked with disturbing and painful events. Louise asked herself how she could help the sisters to recover and to be at peace during this difficult period.

The conference of 22 September 1647 gives a clear perspective on the
situation. Guided by Vincent, the sisters reflected together on temptation and on perseverance in their vocation.

Temptation against one’s vocation can be a test of one’s fidelity to God, and temptation can also arise after a time of negligence in the practice of the rules. All of the sisters shared their thoughts and reflections:

“Well, Sister, what should a Sister do who feels troubled, tempted, and driven to abandon everything?”

“I think she should mention the fact to our Superiors as to persons given us by God to guide us in our vocation.”

“Do you think that’s a means of overcoming the temptation? Yes, it certainly is, and it’s an infallible one, provided it’s used sincerely and with the intention of following the advice that will be given us; for nothing wards off the blows of the devil so surely as to mention them ….”

The conference continued: “And you, Sister, what should we do when we feel tempted? What means do you think we can use to resist?” The Sister replied that it would be well to reread the resolutions taken during retreats. “Oh! Sisters, what an excellent means! For these were thoughts that came to us from God when we were conversing very familiarly with Him; they’re provisions that He gave us for our time of need.”

In concluding the conference, Vincent repeated to the sisters that they should never be surprised when they were tempted. He noted that even the saints and the apostles had been tempted. Nevertheless, the sisters were to take means to resist temptation. He said, “Love your Rules, dear Sisters; keep them as the path by which God wants to lead you to himself, and rest assured that as long as you follow them, God, who has prescribed them for you, given them to you, and placed you on the road to practice them—rest assured, I repeat, that He won’t allow you to go astray.”

With time, calm returned to the whole Company. In 1648, only one sister left and only one was dismissed. In Nantes, the community life was restored by the exercise of charity. Louise wrote to Élisabeth Martin, who was in Richelieu: “If we walk in the presence of God in this way, we will be rid of the trials we bring upon ourselves when we seek and inordinately love our self-satisfaction. I would like to believe that you practice this since I know that you truly want to love God and to serve Him your entire life, and I ask His goodness to give you this grace.”
These months of crisis caused each sister to become aware once more of the vocation that God had given her, a new vocation in the Church, a vocation that was controversial in their society. In November 1647, to ensure the Company’s future authenticity to this vocation, Louise implored Vincent to accept that he, along with his successors, would serve as the superior general of the Daughters of Charity (see chapter 11).

Throughout these long months, Louise let God’s grace fill her soul. Convinced of her personal responsibility for the Company’s crisis, she slowly discovered the Lord’s purification: the pruning that comes with all growth. The survival of the Company, after all these challenges, was proof that God was watching over it. Louise confided her deep conviction to Jeanne Lepintre, the new sister servant in Nantes: “Let us always adore and love the guidance of Divine Providence, the true and only security of the Daughters of Charity.”

Sometime between 1647 and 1650, on 24 August, the eve of the feast of Saint Louis, her patron saint, Louise wrote a letter to Vincent that demonstrates her complete attachment to the mystery of God’s love: the Incarnation on which she meditated so often. She said, “My heart is still overflowing with joy on account of the understanding which, I believe, our good God has given me of the words, ‘God is my God.’”

*God is my God:* Louise de Marillac exulted in God’s gift to humanity. God chose to become one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. Humanity is great in the eyes of God.

*God is my God:* Louise recognized God’s presence throughout her life. She knew with all certainty that God loved her with a boundless love.

*God is my God:* Louise proclaimed with joy the greatness of the vocation she had received: to serve God, her God, in the person of the poor.

*God is my God:* Louise could not hold back the immense joy of communion she felt with this love. She would prepare herself with great emotion to encounter her God in the eucharist.

*God is my God:* Louise responded to this Divine Love by the gift of her entire being, to be the servant of her God and the servant of all the sisters God had confided to her care.

Now totally freed of selfishness and at peace in God, Louise de Marillac was ready for the work of strengthening the Company during the final years of her life.
96 Louise de Marillac: Come Winds or High Waters

THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, SERVANTS OF THE SICK.

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BACK TO CHAPTER
A DEVOTIONAL IMAGE PICTURING LOUISE TENDING TO JESUS SICK IN BED.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
The Approbation of the Company in 1646

For some time, Louise had recognized the necessity of having the little Company legally recognized by the civil and religious authorities. At Angers in 1640, she had experienced some difficulties signing the contract with the hospital in the name of the Company since it did not yet have legal existence. In 1641, the Congregation of the Mission had to undertake the purchase of the new motherhouse.

Vincent did not seem to be in any hurry to obtain this official recognition. Perhaps he may have feared that this confraternity of young women, coming and going in public on the streets, might come to be considered a religious order through this process and that the obligation of the cloister would then be imposed on it. This is what had happened to the Visitandines of Bishop Francis de Sales.

In 1645, the time seemed to have come to take the necessary steps to receive this approbation. Vincent prepared the first document. After describing the establishment of the Confraternities of Charity in various parishes of Paris and many villages of the archdiocese by the Priests of the Mission, the text recounts how the Company of the Daughters of Charity had come into existence:

But because the ladies who make up the Confraternity belong, for the most part, to a social class that does not allow them to perform the most menial and abject services proper to the work of this Confraternity, such as carrying the soup pot through the city, doing the bleedings, preparing and giving enemas, dressing wounds, making beds and watching at night over the sick who are alone and near death, they have taken some good country girls to whom God had given the desire to assist the sick poor, who attend to all these little services, after having been trained for this purpose by a virtuous widow named Mademoiselle Le Gras.²⁶⁹

The various types of poor persons whom the Daughters of Charity
served in Paris are named: the sick of the parishes and of the Hôtel-Dieu, the foundlings, and the convicts. Next, the cities in which they were found in France were named: Angers, Richelieu, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Sedan, and Saint-Denis. As it was not possible to name all the villages in which the Daughters of Charity had been established, the text simply said “and other places in the country.”

The text explains that through her service, the Daughter of Charity devotes herself completely to suffering humanity: “And what is still more noteworthy in the work of these poor girls is that, besides the corporal services they render to the sick poor, they try to contribute to their spiritual welfare, as best they can, particularly by saying some good word to them from time to time and giving them little reminders about their salvation, both to those who are going to die, that they might leave this world in a good state; and to those who will recover, in order to help them to lead a good life.”

The text ends with the Rule of the Daughters of Charity, the very first draft of their future Constitutions. The beginning of this Rule concerns the government of the Company: “The Confraternity will be composed of widows and unmarried women. Every three years they will elect four of their number, by a plurality of votes, to be their officers, of which the first will be the Superioress or Directress; and they may have another term of office.”

After laying out the sisters’ daily schedule, the final section of the text
explains the spirit with which the Daughters of Charity conduct themselves in their service:

And to give greater honor to Our Lord their patron, they will have a straightforward intention to please Him in all their actions and will strive to conform their lives to His, especially in His poverty, humility, gentleness, simplicity, and moderation. . .

They will be mindful that they are called Daughters of Charity; that is, Sisters who make profession of loving God and the neighbor; consequently, besides the sovereign love they should have for God, they should excel in love of the neighbor, especially of their companions.  

Louise reviewed this long draft document, and the following notes show how much she prized precise wording and how important it was for her that the Community live in humility. She observed, “The number of Sisters employed in the service of the foundlings is greater and should increase around All Saints’ Day when a number of children will be brought in.” Regarding the daily schedule, Louise wrote, “The two o’clock reading and silence are not specified, nor at the other time either; perhaps this is not necessary.”

It seemed to her that the text also praised the Daughters of Charity too highly. She asked: “Is it necessary to be so lengthy in the praises of the above-mentioned Sisters which begin with the words: ‘And what is more worthy of consideration’? Would it not suffice to say that, ‘in addition to the corporal service they render to the above-mentioned sick poor, God is blessing the little reminders they give them for their salvation, both to those who are going to die and to those who are going to recover, in order to help them to live well, which is producing very good results.’” The draft was rewritten as Louise suggested. The petition, signed by Vincent, and the copy of the Rule were sent to Jean-François de Gondi, the archbishop of Paris, around September 1646. Louise may not have seen the final draft since she was absent from Paris from 26 July to the end of September. She had gone to Nantes to accompany the first Daughters of Charity who were going to staff the hospital there.

On 20 November of that same year, the coadjutor of Paris, Jean-François Paul de Gondi, the nephew of the archbishop, signed the act of approbation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity:
By authority of the Archbishop, we have erected and do erect by these present letters the conference of the unmarried women and widows in this diocese in the form of a separate Confraternity under the title of Servants of the Poor of the Charity. We will and ordain that those already admitted to it and those who will henceforth be received into it may freely do whatever can relieve and console the sick poor, on condition that the Confraternity will be, and will remain in perpetuity, under the authority of and dependent on the Archbishop and his successors and in the exact observance of the attached Statutes, which we have approved and do approve by these present letters.\(^278\)

When Louise read the official text, she expressed her disapproval to Vincent: “I did not think to ask you if I should share this with our Sisters, and I have not done it.”\(^279\) She did not like the name that the archbishop gave them, Servants of the Poor of the Charity. She wanted to keep the name of Daughters of Charity, which had been used in the Rule. She continued, “Allow me to tell your charity that the explanation given in our Rule of Daughters of Charity causes me to want to retain this title, which has been left out, inadvertently perhaps, in the text of the terms of the Establishment.”\(^280\)

Louise’s most important objection was that the document placed the Company under the authority of the archbishop of Paris and his successors. She queried, “Could not this uncompromising wording ‘dependence on the Archbishop’ be harmful to us in future, by the liberty it gives to draw us away from the direction of the Superior General of the Mission? Is it not necessary, Monsieur, that by this Act of Establishment your charity be given to us as perpetual Director?”\(^281\)

She was well aware that the archbishop of Lyon had imposed the cloister on the Visitandines when they established themselves in his diocese. She feared that the community would face this risk if they were placed under the authority of the bishops. The end of the letter has a tone that is both solemn and pleading: “In the name of God, Monsieur, do not let anything happen that would, even in the slightest, draw the Company away from that direction God has given it, because you can be sure that immediately it would no longer be what it is, and the sick poor would no longer be assisted, And thus, I believe that God’s Will would no longer be done among us.”\(^282\)

Louise continually used these two arguments, the service of the poor and the will of God, to convince Vincent to seek a revision of Company’s act of
establishment. She knew how attentive he was to the will of God and how concerned he was for the service of poor persons, but she would have to wait nine years before obtaining the desired modifications.

Even though Louise did not wish to tell the sisters about the approbation of the Company, Vincent did. He waited for a favorable moment and did so in the course of the conference he gave on 30 May 1647 (six months after the approval of the text). The subject of his talk was the importance of the exact observance of the Rules. He took out a copy of the Rules and said, “This is the petition presented to [the archbishop]; here are the Rules, then here’s the approval. I’ll read them for you one after the other.”

In the report she wrote on this conference, Élisabeth Hellot noted that Vincent read the entire text “even though there was a lot of writing in them.” When Louise heard the passage about the election of the community’s officers, she went on her knees and begged the sisters to immediately adopt the provision that the superior general be elected for a term of three years. Vincent replied with much kindness: “Your Sisters and I, Mademoiselle, have to ask God to give you many more years of life…. It’s God’s usual method of acting to preserve by extraordinary means those who are necessary for the accomplishment of His works; and if you think about it, Mademoiselle, you really haven’t been alive for more than ten years now—at least in the ordinary way.” Louise would continue as superior of the Daughters of Charity for another thirteen years.

After Louise had arisen, Vincent continued to read the text accompanied by his commentary. Louise expressed her regret that the name Daughters of Charity had not been retained. Vincent paused when he read the article that said “it will be a Confraternity and will bear the name of ‘Confraternity of Sisters of the Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor.’” Élisabeth Hellot noted: “Having said this, he exclaimed softly, ‘What a lovely title, Sisters! Mon Dieu! What a lovely title and what a beautiful designation! What have you done for God to deserve it? Servants of the Poor is the same as saying Servants of Jesus Christ, since He regards what is done to them as done to himself, for they are His members.’ As he continued his reading, Vincent remembered that Louise had asked that the rule on silence be noted in the Rule, so he paused and said, “I urge you to observe this, Sisters. Honor at that time the hidden life of the Son of God.” At the end of the reading, Vincent emphasized to the sisters the importance of an exact observance of the rules, and quickly noted that the Rule made the Company dependent on the archbishop of Paris. He said, “You should consider these Rules as coming to you from the hand of God himself, since they’re given by order of the Archbishop, on whom you depend.”
The account of the conference does not mention Louise’s reaction to this announcement. She prayed and reflected, and when she felt at peace, she wrote to Vincent in November 1647. Six months had passed since his conference. Louise said: “It seemed to me that God gave my soul great peace and simplicity at prayer, which I made very imperfectly on the necessity for the Company of Daughters of Charity always to be uninterruptedly under the guidance which Divine Providence has given them, both for spiritual and temporal matters. I think I have understood that it would be more favorable for His glory, if the Company were to fail completely than to be under any other guidance, since that would seem contrary to God’s will.”

It seems that Vincent did not answer. There is no extant letter in reply and Louise certainly would not have failed to carefully preserve such a response.

Louise knew that an episcopal approbation would normally have needed to have been confirmed by royal approbation. The royal approval, called Letters Patent, would take effect after being registered by the Parlement of Paris. The Letters Patent for the Company were drafted and sent to the procurator general, Monsieur Méliand. And what happened next? The letters were somehow lost. It is impossible to know how this happened.

Moreover, Anne of Austria, at the suggestion of an unknown person, drew up a petition to the pope to have the Company of the Daughters of Charity depend in perpetuity on the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission. The queen’s request read: “The Queen entreats His Holiness to name as perpetual Directors of the Confraternity or Society of Servants of the Poor of the Charity the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and his successors in the same office. In so doing, there is reason to hope that this good work will continue to flourish, the Church will be edified by it, and those who are poor better relieved.”

Papal approval of this request would forever prevent any difficulties with bishops. Louise, who certainly must have known about this petition, never brought the topic up again while awaiting a response from the Holy See. It was not until April 1650 that, having received no response from Rome, she began to act.

During this period, there were many other concerns that occupied her time and attention: her son, Michel, the violent crisis that was shaking the Company, and the extreme difficulties being encountered with the work of the foundlings.
HOLY CARD OF LOUISE AND THE DAUGHTERS COMING TO THE AID OF SUFFERING CHILDREN.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
After the stormy years and the crisis that had so seriously shaken the Company, Louise felt the need to affirm each sister in her vocation. The various conferences Vincent gave to achieve this end included the importance of prayer in May 1648, the love of vocation in December of the same year, the love of God in September 1649 and of work later that November, and the importance of obedience in August 1650.

The three conferences held in February 1653 represent a magnificent synthesis of the spirit of the Company, developing the three characteristic virtues of a Daughter of Charity—humility, simplicity, and charity—expressed in the love of God and the poor.
In her letters to the sisters, Louise stressed the importance of fidelity to the spirit of their vocation and fidelity to the Rule. In particular, she helped the sister servants to fulfill their role as animators of the local community. In all of this, Louise showed herself to be an excellent formator. God had used the many events of her life to prepare her for this role.

At Poissy, Louise had acquired a basic classical education that was Christian, humanist, and philosophical (as her first biographer, Gobillon, notes). She studied Latin, the Bible, music, painting, and other subjects. In the home of “the capable and virtuous” woman of whom Gobillon speaks, Louise was introduced to more mundane housekeeping skills. She also experienced poverty.

In her married and family life, she discovered the love of a husband and a child. She also experienced financial difficulties and learned the necessity for careful household economy. She pursued her education by reading the spiritual authors of her day, such as Louis de Grenada, Pierre de Bérulle, and Francis de Sales. It is not known if she had any contact with the worldly Parisian circles where intellectual life flourished under men of letters such as Malherbe, Maynard, Corneille, and Descartes. Her uncle Michel certainly was part of this world.

Louise de Marillac, whose personality was forged by her particular life experiences as a woman, and who was imbued with the love of Jesus Christ, found a natural fulfillment as an educator. Her pedagogy was simple and rested on three points:

Louise personalized the formation she gave.
Louise began with the realities of life.
Louise naturally transmitted the dynamism that was within her.

Attention to the Person

In reading the letters of Louise de Marillac to the first sisters, it is striking to note how attentive she was to each one of them. The style and tone of the letters varied according to the recipient. As a woman of her time, Louise took into account the cultural level and social background of each sister.

The letters to Élisabeth Hellot and Françoise Carcireux reveal that these women came from the bourgeoisie and that they had a certain degree of
refinement. On the other hand, with Barbe Angiboust and Anne Hardemont, the language Louise uses is much more concrete. In this case, she is addressing young peasant women and placing herself on their level: she uses a simple, direct style.

For Louise, accommodating herself to her correspondent was a sign of respect for that person. She was attentive to the personality of each sister. The way in which she pointed out an error or gave a reproach varied a great deal according to the personal knowledge she had of the sister.

With the Daughters of Charity who possessed a “strong temperament,” such as Barbe Angiboust, Anne Hardemont, Julienne Loret, and Madeleine Mongert, Louise was very direct and could sometimes even seem a little harsh. For example, she wrote, “I thought that I had told you very clearly that Monsieur Vincent had said that you were to discontinue the practice of ringing the bell for your exercises, for many reasons which are too lengthy to spell out here…. Would this not be proclaiming your action to the world when Our Lord teaches us to pray in secret when only our personal interests are involved?”

The sister servant at Saint-Denis (probably Barbe Angiboust) received a letter strongly urging her to reflect on her unacceptable conduct: “Well now, here you are failing seriously once again! And you interpret our sister’s fault other than it really is. This sister became impatient at seeing the two of you surrounded by so many cats during times of meditation. You even admit that another sister dislikes them. My God, Sister, how amiable the truth is! I have told you over and over to get rid of these animals and you pay no attention to me and then you complain that a sister does not obey you promptly!”

With sisters who were shy, such as Claude Brigide and Geneviève Doinel, Louise was milder and more benevolent. She tried to avoid upsetting them. Geneviève Doinel had sent a beautiful fish to the motherhouse. Louise wrote, “I thank you very humbly, my dear Sister, in the name of the entire community, for the excellent fish.” Then, however, came a mild rebuke: “If I could have sent it back to you promptly, I would have asked you to prepare a treat with it for your poor patients, because you are well aware that our Company does not indulge in such delicacies.” But to soften the reproach that would have upset Geneviève, who was only trying to show her affection for the sisters by this gift, Louise added, “However, since this could not be done, your charity provided for several of our sick sisters, of which I was one.”

Louise knew that the purpose of criticism was to educate and not to tear someone down. Writing to Claude Brigide and Geneviève Doinel, who were together at Chantilly, Louise began by praising their good work among poor
persons. Then she contented herself with a suggestion about fraternal charity: “Am I not wrong in recommending this virtue to you, my dear Sisters, because without it you would be unable to be not only good Daughters of Charity, but even good Christians?”

Louise was very thoughtful and kind toward sick sisters, especially if they were far away. Often unable to go herself, she would send a sister to visit them. Élisabeth Martin went to the deathbed of Jeanne Dalmagne in Nanteuil and brought her a touching letter. Louise wrote, “[God] knows how much I regret not being able to assist you in this final act of love which I am confident you will make by willingly offering your soul to the Eternal Father, desiring thereby to imitate the moment of death of His Son.”

Anne Hardemont went to visit Barbe Angiboust, who was in danger of dying at Fontainebleau. Some years later, it was Barbe who was sent to Marguerite and who had to bring her back to Paris to receive better care. Louise was upset at not having been told of the grave illness of Élisabeth Turgis. She wrote: “You can imagine our sorrow and surprise at the news of our very dear sister’s death, which we did not expect at all. I have no doubt that your charity took great care to provide her with every kind of assistance and consolation. I am also sure that you feel the grief of her loss as keenly as we do. However, my dear Sisters, we have great reason to complain about you for not having sent us word that her condition had worsened. If you had, we would have been sure to send someone to visit her.”

Louise had learned from Monsieur Gauthier, a Priest of the Mission at Richelieu, that Élisabeth Martin was suffering more and more. She wrote to her: “Our good God is truly making you a participant in His sufferings by permitting you to be seriously ill.... I beg His goodness to give you the consolations that He usually gives to souls He wishes to sanctify in this way.” Louise asked Élisabeth’s companion to take great care of the patient, and told Élisabeth, “I also urge you to ask her [Sister Anne, her companion] with great confidence for all the help you need. If you feel afflicted by all the submission to which your illness reduces you, you must in that as well, my dear Sister, discover and love the will of God.”

Louise told the sister servant at Angers to take special care of Marie Despinal, who was ill, and she added for the benefit of the latter: “I greet her with all my heart. Her illness increases my affection for her because I believe her to be in close union with the most holy will of God, which I beg
her to love greatly.”

As these letters to sick or dying sisters demonstrate, Louise was attentive to the spiritual growth of each sister. She knew that God was reached by different routes and that it was necessary to respect that the “pathways of God are strewn with roses and thorns.”

The sisters had left their previous lives to draw closer to God. Louise helped them on their spiritual journeys. The sisters of Angers were becoming lax in their service to the sick poor of the hospital. Louise told them how sorry she was to hear this and she questioned them closely: “Where are the gentleness and charity that you must preserve so carefully when dealing with our dear masters, the sick poor?” After this commentary on their attitudes, Louise invited them instead to model their service on the gospel example of Christ: “If we deviate in the slightest from the conviction that they are the members of Jesus Christ, it will infallibly lead to the weakening of these beautiful virtues in us.” Louise shared with Marguerite Chétif the depth of her own spiritual experience: “I trust, my dear Sister, that Our Lord has let you taste the sweetness reserved for souls filled with His love amidst the sufferings and anguish of this life.” She used a completely different tone with Jeanne Lepintre. In her case, Louise attempted to challenge but not to alienate this sister, who was easily worried and possessed a complex disposition.

Louise knew from experience that growth in the spiritual life followed the laws of all personal growth. She paid careful attention to young sister servants and educated them with much love. For older sister servants who knew the spirit and rules of the Company, her style was much more direct.

Louise’s care extended to each sister’s whole family. Travel was difficult and costly, and communicating via mail was often impossible since many parents did not know how to read or write. Whenever she could, Louise shared news of their families to the sisters who were far away. Through these letters, it is possible to follow the life of the Angiboust family, the Ménage family, and the Carcireux family, with their marriages, deaths, and other events.

Louise also often asked sisters to visit the families of other sisters. She sent the sisters of Nanteuil to visit the parents of Laurence Dubois. The sisters of Brienne were asked to pay a visit to Barbe Bailly’s family who lived in the area. In this way, the sisters usually came to realize how much Louise cared for them, but not all of them did. Charlotte Royer spoke of “the wicked Louise” who had sent her far away to Richelieu. Anne Hardemont and Avoie Vigneron were upset in their new house at Ussel and felt lonely and isolated. They sent such harsh letters to Louise that Vincent was obliged to ask them to be more polite.
toward their superior.

Louise based her formational efforts on her knowledge and respect for each sister, which allowed them to share a true and valued relationship.

**A Knowledge of the Realities of Life**

Louise de Marillac never relied on an abstract lesson plan. In many letters, one can see she possessed a detailed knowledge of the situations in which the sisters lived. She kept herself informed through the sisters’ letters or by the visits she paid to the various community houses. Louise also was aware of what went on in the lives of the local communities through the reports she received from the Priests of the Mission, letters from the Ladies of Charity, and from hospital administrators.

Louise often referred to events of daily life to educate the sisters. The community at Chantilly submitted an order for all the materials they needed for house calls: a pot for the distribution of soup, pills, oil for treatments, and so on. Louise began by teaching them that it was necessary to be precise in their requests. She noted, “Here is a part of what you requested because we do not know what you need in the way of a soup pot. We do not know the size or whether it should be made of iron or copper. When you let us know, we will buy one with a ladle to go with it.”\(^{313}\) The delivery was accompanied by the reminder that these materials were designated for the service of the poor and not for personal use.

Always kindhearted, Barbe Angiboust sent some beautiful linen cloth to Paris that had been made in the factories of the Bernay region. Louise, who knew Barbe well, was not afraid of questioning the appropriateness of her gift while thanking her for it at the same time. She explained to her that it was “a bit too elegant and too expensive” for the Daughters of Charity.\(^{314}\) Barbe could learn from the sentence written to her companion Laurence: “I beg her to continue to love holy poverty, not only abstractly and in her words, but by practicing its many aspects.”\(^{315}\) Louise knew that her comments would in no way diminish Barbe’s affection and trust. She wrote, “Your heart always shows its deep affection for the Company which also loves you tenderly.”\(^{316}\)

Louise frequently suggested to the sisters that they reflect together on their way of life. At Angers, community life had become less fraternal. The sisters were invited to look at how they were conducting themselves: the aggravation brought on by the faults of one, the lack of acceptance of another’s mood, and so forth. In a straightforward fashion, Louise explained feminine psychology:
If our sister is depressed or forlorn, if she is too quick or too slow, what in the world do you expect her to do about it? This is part of her character. Although she often tries to overcome herself, nevertheless, she cannot prevent these inclinations from frequently appearing. And should her sister, who is supposed to love her as herself, become annoyed with her, be rude to her or frown upon her?

O my dear Sisters, be on your guard against acting like this. Instead, pretend that you do not notice it and do not criticize her, bearing in mind that it will soon be your turn and you will want her to act this way toward you.  

Then Louise directed their reflection to their shared vocations as sisters: “This, my dear Sisters, is what it means to be true Daughters of Charity, for the mark of charity in a soul is, among all other virtues, this ability to put up with everything.”

Louise reminded them of the importance of the call from God that had united them to serve Him in poor persons: “Renew then, my very dear Sisters, your first fervor. Begin by a true desire to please God, recalling that His Providence has brought you to the place where you are established and has united you so that you can help one another to grow in perfection.”

The sisters at Richelieu told her they did not have enough time to do all they needed to do. They may have even asked that another sister be sent. In her response, Louise suggested that the sisters first look carefully at their daily lives and see how they actually used their time. What time did they rise and go to bed? Were the visits they made or received really necessary? Did they waste time in useless conversations? Were meals taken outside the house unavoidable in their service of the poor?

Next, Louise invited the sisters to compare the local community’s actual use of time with the ideal vocation of the Daughter of Charity. What was the spirit that animated their actions? What priority did they give to community life? How did they live obedience, the cloister of the Daughter of Charity? She asked them to submit a written account of their community reflection: “How happy I am when you send me detailed news of yourselves. Once and for all, I would like to know all about your manner of acting in the areas I have asked you about.”

Louise knew that the sisters faced many difficulties, and she did not hesitate to speak honestly about them. She knew that facing a problem was the
best way to define it and discover its causes, and it was often a means to make it lose its intensity.

Some of these difficulties were linked to the newness of the Company. The sisters needed to learn how to affirm their distinctive identity, and to defend their service of poor persons in their homes in the face of doubting Ladies of Charity and bishops. Louise encouraged even the most timid to express themselves: “If you are asked for your opinion, give it only to explain how the poor are served in Paris. If it is for a hospital do not forget to represent the needs of the bashful poor who would receive no assistance because they would never go to the hospital no matter how much pressure was put on them. For this reason the establishment of the Confraternity of Charity is absolutely essential.”

Other problems arose from the difficulty of maintaining a balance in all matters of life. The sisters at Chantilly served the poor very well, but they allowed themselves to be completely absorbed by the work, and they neglected their prayer time. Louise reminded them of the importance of meeting God in prayer to serve him well in persons who were poor: “I also believe that you are as exact as possible in the observance of your little Rules without detriment to the poor since their service must always come first. However, it must be carried out properly and not according to your own will.”

At Bernay, Laurence Dubois did not know how to reconcile the freedom every sister had to write to her superiors with the confidence she should have in her local sister servant. Louise explained how this should be done. She wrote: “However limited your ability to write may be, if you have a private matter to share with me, write the letter yourself. Although you are under no obligation
to show your letter to Sister Barbe [Angiboust], nevertheless courtesy requires you to tell her that you are going to write to us. Fear not; she will not ask what you want to tell us nor will she look at it since she knows that would offend God.”

Difficulties also arose due to an inadequate understanding of the recommendations of the founders or an excessive zeal in putting them into practice. For example, hygiene and cleanliness are indispensable for all community life, but under this pretext some sisters went overboard and forgot the poverty necessary for all servants. Louise counseled, “Likewise, if we are not careful, we fail to see the vanity which may exist under these poor habits and ugly headdresses. Under the guise of cleanliness and neatness many serious faults are committed in this regard.” At La Fère, Julienne needed to study to teach catechism well, but this led her to undertake a grim resolution for study that almost brought her to reject the more humble services of her vocation.

Louise showed herself to be attentive to all these life experiences to help each sister grasp the true meaning of her vocation and, through them, grow in her love of God, the poor, and her companions.

**A Contagious Dynamism**

In all of her teaching and with every fiber of her being, Louise de Marillac transmitted the flame that was alive in her, a love for humanity drawn from a love for Christ Incarnate. In her meditations, Louise expressed her admiration that God so loved the human beings that he had created that he himself wanted to become human to redeem humanity. She observed, “God … who had said: ‘Let us make man to our image and likeness,’ now resolved to create him anew by redeeming him.” Another time, to share this insight with her sisters in a conference, she noted, “We should ponder the excellence of the being which God has given to us.”

Louise often reflected on the theme of freedom. Human free will was a gift from God that allowed each person to make free decisions. It was then up to each person to choose between good and evil, between life and death. As she observed, “Free will enables man to bring about his own damnation by following his evil inclinations and the temptations of the devil, or to earn his salvation by grace which applies to him the merits of the Son of God.”

She always reflected on how the Incarnation of the Son of God had given persons back the grandeur of their humanity. During her retreats, she often contemplated the holy humanity of Christ. Meditating on the Nativity, she wrote, “I shall calmly adore the divinity in the Infant Jesus and imitate, to the
best of my ability, His holy humanity, especially His simplicity and charity which led Him to come to us as a child so as to be more accessible to His creatures.”

During a retreat made between Ascension and Pentecost, she spoke of her desire to honor the glorious humanity of Christ by “keep[ing] my mind as fully occupied as possible in honoring the glory which the holy humanity of our Lord receives in heaven.” Her meditation continued on in the same spirit of the words of Christ in the gospel: “Whatever you have done for these, the least of my brothers, you did it for me.”

In every poor person, Louise discovered Christ. She once said, “My meditation was more reflective than reasoning. I felt a great attraction for the holy humanity of Our Lord, and I desired to honor and imitate it insofar as I was able in the person of the poor and of all my neighbors.”

Animated by this powerful love of the Son of God made fully human, Louise believed in every person’s possibilities, however poor or deprived he or she might be. She recognized the inherent human dignity of foundlings, galley convicts, persons with mental illness, and of all those whom society rejected. Louise shared with the sisters this strong conviction that dwelt within her. She insisted on respect, esteem, and love for every person, rich or poor: “Our vocation of servants of the poor calls us to practice the gentleness, humility and forbearance that we owe to others. We must respect and honor everyone: the poor because they are the members of Jesus Christ and our masters; the rich so that they will provide us with the means to do good for the poor.”

Louise went into further detail and recalled that meekness and amiability were signs of respect and love: “Above all, be very gentle and courteous toward your poor. You know that they are our masters and that we must love them tenderly and respect them deeply.” A cordial reception of others was a sign of this same respect: “Continue to welcome warmly the ladies and gentlemen who visit the hospital.”

Louise lived what she taught her sisters. Her respect for each sister was expressed by her desire to bring out what was good within her. Her affectionate and friendly concern was always valuable to others. With Julienne, who at first did not even know how to keep apples from spoiling, Louise recognized and encouraged her talents as a baker. The next time, Louise marveled at the beautiful apples that arrived in such good condition, but she reminded Julienne that she should not get carried away with her baking. If Barbe Angiboust did not choose linen cloth with enough concern for poverty, Louise could still
praise her love for the Company. For the sister servant of Saint-Denis, Louise did not point out a single quality, but rather she stressed that self-knowledge is an excellent thing to possess, since recognizing a fault is a source of progress.

In her life and in her teaching, Louise desired to share this reconciliation between humanity and God. She discovered and contemplated the holy humanity of Christ as she served the suffering humanity of persons who were poor. Louise asked the sisters to reflect on the life of the Son of God on earth to be filled with his love and imitate his attitudes toward serving poor persons. Louise noted, “It is only reasonable that those whom God has called to follow His Son should strive to become holy as He is holy and make their lives a continuation of His.”

In her daily prayer, a Daughter of Charity is called to discover and contemplate in Jesus his love, his gestures of respect, and his faith in humanity. Louise commented, “We must try to meet often in the presence of Our Lord, contemplating His practice of charity toward the neighbor.”

Louise de Marillac had her favorite scripture passages. She liked to quote Matthew 11:29. She wanted the sisters to allow themselves to be transformed gradually by these words of Christ, “the instruction which the Son of God gave us when He told us to learn of Him to be gentle and humble of heart.” She liked to propose the example of Christ the Servant to the community’s sister servants: “Do we think, my dear Sister, that we should never be contradicted? Do we think that everyone must give in to our wishes, and that they are obliged to find everything we do and say good? Do we think we can do as we wish without being held accountable? Is this not against the obligation we have of imitating the way Our Lord lived and acted? He always subjected Himself to others, saying that He did not come upon earth to carry out His will. He came to serve, not to be served.”

Louise taught that to immerse ourselves in the gospel is to open ourselves to being invaded by the spirit of Christ, which is the spirit of the Company. On 10 January 1660, Louise said this once more to Marguerite Chétif. This message, written two months before the death of the foundress of the Company, is marked by a certain poignancy: “Blessed be God for everything! May He grant the Company the strength and generosity to maintain within itself the primitive spirit that Jesus instilled in it through His Spirit and by His holy maxims. Let us often give ourselves to God so as to obtain from His goodness the generosity needed to advance His glory by fulfilling His designs on the Company.”
One must belong to God to belong entirely to the poor: this sums up the formation that Louise gave to the first sisters. Her message was echoed by that of Saint John Paul II on 13 August 1983: “To give God back to humanity; to give humanity back to God is to give humanity back to itself, to help it find once more its resemblance to God.” Isn’t this the goal of all formation, isn’t this the goal of the service of the poor, and the goal of every Daughter of Charity’s consecration to God?
MINIATURE PAINTED BY LOUISE DE MARILLAC: THE GOOD SHEPHERD; PRESERVED AT THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY MOTHERHOUSE, PARIS.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
MINIATURE PAINTED BY LOUISE DE MARILLAC: WOMAN WRITING TO HER LOVE (JESUS, THE NAME SHE HAS WRITTEN ON THE PAGE). PRESERVED AT THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY MOTHERHOUSE, PARIS.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
THE ATTIRE AND HEADDRESS OF A DAUGHTER OF CHARITY.

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From 1648 to 1653, France was torn by civil war. The revolt had been brewing in the kingdom for several years. Taxes were continually increasing to pay for the long war with Spain. The burden of these taxes aggravated the very precarious situation of the peasants. The Fronde was primarily a revolt of members of the Parlement of Paris, the nobility, and others against royal authority exercised by the first minister, Cardinal Mazarin.

The revolt began in May 1648. The crown demanded an advanced payment of four years of pledges from the royal officials. The members of Parlement refused and united against Mazarin. Despite the arrests of some of the heads of the opposition, the revolt soon reached the provinces. Parlement demanded control of the budget.
On 20 August at the battle of Lens, Louis II Bourbon Prince de Condé defeated the army of Ferdinand III, the Holy Roman Emperor. Following this victory, Mazarin believed the moment had come to move against Parlement. On 26 August, he ordered the arrest of Pierre Broussel, a councilor in Parlement and a popular figure. Immediately, Paris rose in revolt and barricades were erected in the streets. Anne of Austria and the young King Louis XIV fled to Rueil.

News of the revolt in the capital spread rapidly. Louise, who was then at Liancourt, learned of it that evening, or the next morning at the latest. She wrote an anguished letter to Julienne Loret, the directress of the seminary in Paris: “I am very troubled by a rumor which went around the countryside that there was unrest and murder in the streets of Paris. In the name of God, my dear Sister, send me news as soon as you can about Monsieur Vincent, my son and our sisters.”

The following day, 28 August, having received no news, Louise wrote to Élisabeth Hellot, her secretary: “In the name of God, send me news of Monsieur Vincent, Monsieur Holden, Monsieur de Marillac and my son, and I urge you to keep nothing from me. I am so greatly distressed that I would return today if I had a way.” Another letter from the day after that shows how much Louise was suffering from being separated from her sisters during this difficult and dangerous period: “It is a great trial to be far from one’s friends when one believes them in danger.”

For three days, violence in Paris escalated, taking its toll of victims. Cardinal Mazarin decided to release Pierre Broussel, and a relative calm returned to the capital. But Parlement, believing itself to have the upper hand, continued its opposition to new taxes. Tensions mounted in the capital once more during December 1648. Mazarin and the court fled Paris secretly during the night of 5–6 January 1649. The cardinal’s plan was to besiege the city and starve it into submission.

Vincent was distressed by these events, and he tried to bring about peace. On 14 January, he went to the palace at Saint-Germain-en-Laye to meet with Anne of Austria and Cardinal Mazarin to plead for peace. It was a perilous journey. He was stopped by soldiers at Clichy, but luckily one of them recognized him and allowed him to pass. Vincent’s mission was a failure. It also aroused the anger of the Parisians, who misunderstood his mission and considered him to be an ally of Mazarin. Under the circumstances, Vincent thought it prudent not to return to Paris. Instead, he set out to visit the houses of the Priests of the Mission and Daughters of Charity at Le Mans, Angers, and Saint-Méen.
On 22 January 1649, he wrote to Antoine Portail from Villepreux: “I left Paris on the fourteenth of this month to go to Saint-Germain with the intention of rendering some small service to God, but my sins rendered me unworthy of this. After a stay of three or four days, I came to this place, which I shall be leaving the day after tomorrow to go visit our houses. It is God’s will that I be of no use now for anything else.”  

Louise found herself in Paris in the midst of more and more difficult conditions. On 27 February, mobs attacked the Great Chamber of Parlement and ransacked the houses of the tax collectors. Civil war was on the verge of breaking out in the capital, and the royal army’s siege prevented supplies from being delivered to the inhabitants. Louise was very worried about the safety of the sisters and foundlings at Bicêtre, which had been requisitioned by soldiers. She wrote them a letter filled with affection: “I beg the Blessed Virgin to be your protectress and to obtain for you from her Son the generosity you need. I also beg your guardian angels to be in accord with the angels of the gentlemen sent to you by God so that they may be helped to live in a manner which will glorify God eternally.”

Louise feared the possibility of violence and brutality from the soldiers and gave wise advice to Geneviève Poisson, the sister servant: “You would do well to keep our sisters together and to take great care to watch over the older girls or to keep them in the school even when they are not helping you.” In her letter, Louise expressed her great confidence in her sisters who were exposed to these dangers: “I am sure that He gives all of you the courage to die rather than to offend Him and that your modesty will clearly show that you belong to the King of Kings to whom all powers are subject.” Even as she was writing this letter, she was looking for a way to evacuate them to the motherhouse. She was successful. Soon afterward some of the children were received at the Treize Maisons near Saint-Lazare and some at the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity.

Some hope for peace appeared in March. Negotiations took place between Mazarin and Parlement. These talks resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Rueil on 11 March. Louise wrote to Vincent:

We are most anxious to know your whereabouts and the condition in which you are. I beg God in His goodness that your health and your Community business will allow you to come home soon. You are sorely needed for the works of charity in Paris. Madame de Lamoignon, the President’s wife,
especially begs you to return soon.

I shall let other persons tell you the news of the peace, since all I know is that it causes us to join the people in praising God for it.  

Thinking that Vincent was at Angers, Louise wrote that same day to the Abbé de Vaux trying to get some accurate news: “I have the honor of writing to you to ask you to give us any news of Monsieur Vincent that you might know. We are extremely worried because we have not heard anything since March 14 when he was in Le Mans. I know that he was also in Angers, but since then we have heard nothing of any sort. The last news we did receive came neither from him nor from anyone close to him. Please, Monsieur, make an effort to let us know what you know about this.”  

Did Louise know that while on his way to Angers, Vincent had fallen from his horse into a small river? He was rescued just in time by the priest who was accompanying him.  

While Louise anticipated Vincent’s return, she remained active. Many poor persons were in the capital, and there was no bread. The Ladies of Charity and the sisters organized assistance, and in April, Louise shared some news from the motherhouse with Jeanne Lepintre, the sister servant of Nantes: “During these times of affliction... our sisters are safe and... they never stopped serving the sick poor. In Paris you would not believe the amount of alms given to the poor who had no bread. I believe that this has drawn down God’s mercy upon us so that we might have peace.”  

Obtaining supplies was difficult, and wheat was very expensive. Since there were many sisters to feed, as well as the children and the poor, Louise urged the sisters to watch their resources carefully: “I hope that our sister gardeners are hard at work while God is giving us beautiful weather.”  

She wrote in another letter, “I beg you not to let the pigs out together so much. Especially do not let them go into the garden so that we may see it growing. I hope you are making sure that the cow and the other animals are not overfed.”  

The milk, eggs, and vegetables went a long way toward feeding the starving poor.  

Finally, Vincent returned to Paris on 13 June 1649. Louise rejoiced to see him after these long months of absence. There were so many things to do together, so much business to be attended to: “I deeply sympathize with your troubles, but because Monsieur Vincent has just arrived and is weighed down by more business and difficulty that you can imagine, he has not yet been able to turn his attention to this matter. As soon as time and business allow him, he will give you instructions.”
Normal life seemed to be resuming. The Parlementary Fronde ended. On 18 August 1649, Anne of Austria and the young Louis XIV, age eleven, returned to Paris amid great popular rejoicing. Mazarin and Condé, the commander of the royal forces, accompanied them. If the political situation had improved, the economic situation was still disastrous. Seeds had not been sown in time for the season. Soldiers had pillaged everything as they passed through the countryside.

In November 1649, Louise was alarmed; there was no more money for the foundlings. The Ladies were no longer giving donations. There were no more linens. There were no resources to buy wheat. The wet nurses returned their babies because they had not been paid in several months. Louise wrote: “I am too insistent, but we have absolutely reached the point where we must get help without delay or abandon everything. Yesterday we had to use all the money in reserve here—nearly fifteen to twenty livres—to buy wheat for the children at Bicêtre, and we had to borrow some to have at least four setiers. Furthermore, no income is in sight for the next month.”

Some days later, Louise shared her sorrow as a mother responsible for her many hungry children: “Do us the charity, Most Honored Father, of telling us whether, in conscience, we can watch them being put in a situation in which they will die, for the Ladies attach no importance to giving us any relief.” Louise spoke to anyone who would listen. She begged Vincent to appeal to the Ladies of Charity, whom she judged severely in this period of crisis: “It is shameful that the Ladies are going to so little trouble. They must think we have more than enough to live on, or else they want to force us to abandon everything. For these reasons I think they have made up their minds to do nothing at all.”

These were very harsh words coming from Louise de Marillac, but she could not accept the suffering of these children, who were so loved by God. She then suggested that influential figures such as the Princess de Condé and the first president be approached for assistance. She wrote to Chancellor Séguier, asking him to come to the aid of the one hundred little children who were in danger of spending Christmas without any bread.

Vincent, who was also moved by the distress of the children, convened an assembly of the Ladies of Charity. Louise quickly prepared a memorandum on the situation of the foundlings: “Enclosed also is a short report I have done. If you see fit, you might take the trouble to talk about it at the meeting.” Vincent used this memorandum in preparing his presentation for the assembly. In it, he noted that a child could be killed in two ways: either through a violent
death or through refusing it food. Now the foundlings were in great need because there was only enough food to last for six weeks.

Reviewing through the history of the work of the foundlings, Vincent encouraged the Ladies to continue the work that they had begun. The following famous text comes from this conference:

Well then, Ladies, compassion and charity have led you to adopt these little creatures as your own children; you have been their mothers according to grace since the time their mothers according to nature abandoned them. See now whether you, too, want to abandon them. Stop being their mothers to be their judges at present; their life and death are in your hands. I’m going to take the vote; it’s time to pass sentence on them and to find out whether you are no longer willing to have pity on them. If you continue to take charitable care of them, they will live; if, on the contrary, you abandon them, they will most certainly perish and die; experience does not allow you to doubt that.  

The women were very moved and each gave Vincent a little purse, a ring, a necklace, or a gold coin. The children would not die.

In 1650, however, political events led to new civic strife. The Prince de Condé had saved royal authority, and he had counted on an appropriate reward by being recognized as the young king’s guardian. He had great scorn for Mazarin, whom he insulted publicly. At the beginning of 1650, Mazarin had Condé arrested.

This time it was the nobles and princes who revolted and carried the provinces along with them. Confusion reigned throughout the country. The marshal of Turenne, who at one time had allied himself with the Spanish, now found himself at the head of the royal forces. Condé, the onetime enemy of the Fronde, now joined the enemies of France. Louis XIV’s cousin the Great Mademoiselle supported Condé, who wanted to defeat Mazarin once and for all.

In December 1650, fighting devastated the Ardennes region. After the battle at Rethel, 1,500 dead soldiers remained unburied, exposed to vultures. Vincent sent some missionaries to bury the dead. Two Daughters of Charity, Jeanne and Guillelmine Chesneau, went to take care of the sick, the starving, and the homeless. Louise encouraged them in their hard work: “All our
sisters ask to be remembered to you, and they praise God for the courage His goodness gives you to serve these poor afflicted people. Oh what a grace, my dear Sister, to have been chosen for this holy employment! It is true that it is extremely difficult, but it is because of this that the grace of God acting in you is more evident. You have every reason to trust in God and to abandon yourself to his Divine Providence. God will never fail to let you know how agreeable this manner of acting is to Him.”362 In a letter Vincent wrote to the Daughters performing this work, which would have included the Chesneau sisters, the same recommendations appear. The sisters were advised to draw the strength they needed for their difficult service from prayer.363

The so-called Fronde of the Princes grew, and Mazarin became so unpopular that he was obliged to flee. In Germany, where he took refuge, he raised an army and led it against France. The Civil War raged everywhere. Everywhere there was misery, revolt, and confusion.

At the beginning of 1652, Louise fell dangerously ill with “double tertian fever.” For weeks, she remained feverish and tired. On 20 April, she wrote, “I am struggling to regain my strength, and I am always having little relapses.”364 In spite of her very poor health, she remained attentive to the sisters who were in the midst of difficult situations.

In February 1652, the armies ravaged the region around Angers. More than 200,000 poor from the countryside took refuge in the city and had to be housed and fed. Louise shared her sisters’ suffering and helped them to understand the events from the perspective of their faith: “Your account of all the afflictions and losses that have occurred at Angers is a source of great sorrow to me because the poor will suffer as a result. I beg the divine goodness to comfort and assist them in their needs. My very dear Sisters, you have indeed suffered great trials. However, have you stopped to consider that it is only right that the servants of the poor should suffer with their masters?”365

On 22 May, Vincent described the situation in Paris to one of his confreres: “We have more troubles here than ever. Paris is swarming with poor persons because the armies have forced the poor country folk to seek refuge here. Meetings are held daily to see how they can be helped.”366 On 21 June, he described to another confrere the role the Daughters of Charity were taking in the assistance of refugees and of poor persons: “The poor Daughters of Charity are more involved than we in the corporal assistance of the poor. They prepare and distribute the soup daily for thirteen hundred bashful poor at the home of Mademoiselle Le Gras, and for eight hundred refugees in the faubourg Saint-Denis. In Saint-Paul parish alone four or five Sisters make the distribution to five thousand poor persons, in addition to the sixty to eighty patients they have
Barbe Angiboust, who was at Brienne in devastated Champagne, expressed her distress at not being able to come to the aid of all the poor persons she encountered. Louise sympathized with her pain: “In fact, you will see a great amount of misery that you cannot relieve. God sees it as well and does not want to give those who suffer greater abundance. Share their trials with them; do all you can to provide them with a little assistance and remain at peace. Perhaps you share in this need; in that is your consolation because, if you had plenty, your hearts would be troubled to use it while seeing our lords and masters suffering so.”

Everywhere the sisters were themselves sharing the suffering of the poor. As servants, they were sharing the insecurity and privation with their masters. The Étampes region had been occupied by enemy troops for two months. After the lifting of the siege of the city on 23 June, a picture of desolation met the eye. The fields were ravaged, the villages were pillaged, and many peasants were killed. Starving children wandered about looking for food and shelter.

The sisters of Valpuiseaux, a little village close to Étampes, had followed the inhabitants into exile. Having returned to their post, they were comforted by a long letter from Vincent: “It must be acknowledged, Sisters, that you have really had a hard time but, consequently, you will be amply rewarded for this. Not only will your reward be great because of what you have suffered, but also because of the good you have done by serving the sick and the wounded in the hospital, and for the good example you have given there. I ask God to be His own praise and thanks for all this.”

Vincent and Louise wanted to send other sisters to assist in the care and education of the many orphans, but the roads were still dangerous. Brigands were robbing travelers, and wild animals wandered throughout the countryside, attracted by the many corpses. Three women had been devoured by wolves in the Étampes region. The sisters’ departure was delayed. Their wait was even longer than had been foreseen because troops were again marching toward Paris. On 1 July, Condé’s army, made up of Spaniards, was near the Saint-Denis gate. During the night, looters entered Saint-Lazare, threatened Monsieur René Alméras, and pillaged all they found.

It was feared that soldiers would also attack the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity across the street. Louise was worried and wondered how they should conduct themselves: “Most of the people are leaving this faubourg and stripping their homes; should we not follow their example? This, however, would be a major undertaking for us. If there were something to fear for our young Sisters, we could send them here or there to various parishes and, if we
could, send them some food. As for me, I feel as if I am awaiting death and cannot prevent my heart from jumping every time there is a call to arms.”

On the advice of Vincent and the older sisters, Louise, who was not fully recovered from her recent illness, agreed to take refuge in Paris with the youngest sisters. The others remained at the motherhouse with the wet nurses and the children. The Priests of the Mission remained at Saint-Lazare. On 2 July, the royal troops won the battle at the faubourg Saint-Antoine. Soldiers were everywhere, making demands on the population. Gradually, calm returned. Everyone was weary of war. On 24 August, Louise echoed public opinion, writing, “I am truly astonished that you have gone so long without receiving our letters. It must be the war which prevented them from reaching you because I have been faithful in writing to you very often. May God be blessed! His goodness leads us to hope for calm in the belief that He will soon give us peace.”

Louis XIV, who had come of age, entered Paris on 21 October 1652. He was received to great acclaim. France recovered slowly from its devastation. Vincent appealed to public charity to come to the aid of the most needy: the peasants of Champagne and Picardy who had to rebuild everything, the wounded soldiers at Châlons, the many orphans in Étampes, the beggars of Angers and Paris. Daughters of Charity were at work everywhere. Louise continued to accompany and support them. She wrote to Jeanne-Françoise, who was responsible for the orphanage of Étampes, “I am also certain that you will find great pleasure in teaching, as best you can, these little creatures, redeemed by the blood of the Son of God, so that they may praise and glorify Him forever.”

Through Anne Hardemont, Louise sent this message to the sisters who were working in the various villages of Champagne: “The sisters must often renew their purity of intention which causes them to perform all their actions for the love of God. This will enable them to preserve the spirit which true Daughters of Charity must possess.” She told the sisters over and over again that whatever work they accomplished, whichever persons they might meet, their service was and should always be “putting love to work.”

The war with Spain would continue for another ten years. Vincent and Louise had seen the great distress of the wounded soldiers who were abandoned and without nursing care. They did not hesitate to send Daughters of Charity to the battlefields. Two of them, Françoise Manceau and Marguerite Ménage, died at Calais in 1658 as victims of their devotion. Many sisters offered to replace them. In every instance, the Daughters of Charity served their most disadvantaged brothers and sisters.
THE BAKER’S CART BY JEAN MICHELIN. OIL ON CANVAS. 1656.
NOTABLE FOR ITS DEPICTION OF THE DIFFICULT LIFE PEASANTS FACED ON THE STREETS
OF PARIS DURING LOUISE AND VINCENT’S TIME.
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK, N.Y.

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Louise de Marillac emerged from her experience of these difficult and stormy years detached from herself and finally at peace in God. She made herself totally available to God so that he might use her as his instrument to found the Company. This work, which began in the course of the crisis, continued through Louise and Vincent’s final years. After the first years of the community’s existence and its initial experiences, the need to develop formal community structures was obvious.

The Councils of the Company

Beginning in June 1646, a council was established with membership chosen from among the sisters. The founders’ plan was to gradually prepare the sisters to assume the full direction of the Company. Louise’s health continued to be frail and precarious, and Vincent commented on this fact in a letter to one of his confrères on 13 December 1647: “You are almost like Mademoiselle Le Gras, whom I consider as dead, according to nature, for ten years now. To see her, one would say she has just stepped out of the tomb because her body is so frail and her face so pale. However, God knows the strength of spirit she possesses.”

During the first Council meeting held on 28 June 1646, Vincent said, “By the grace of God, dear Sisters, the establishment of this little Council is a beginning of the order and foundation Providence is laying in your Company.” Three sisters were present besides Louise de Marillac: Anne Hardemont, the sister servant in the parish of Saint-Paul in Paris; Jeanne Lepintre, who would serve as the person responsible for the Community during Louise’s long visit to Nantes from July to September of that same year; and Élisabeth Hellot, Louise’s secretary, who would take the Council minutes. Monsieur René Alméras sat in for the sisters’ director, Monsieur Antoine Portail, who was visiting the houses of the Mission in western France.

Vincent began by explaining the purpose of the Council: “We have met here to give some thought to certain needs—as is done in all well-regulated communities.” A variety of issues were addressed in the course of the Council meeting: the dismissal of Jacqueline, who was the cause of much disorder by her words and conduct; the admission of a young sister named Catherine, who was
very good, but in poor health; the choice of a sister servant for Saint-Paul parish to replace Anne Hardemont; the choice of the sisters to be sent to serve at the hospital of Nantes; and whether there was need for a parlor at the motherhouse.

Vincent carefully explained to the sisters how the meetings should be conducted. Louise, as the Company’s superioress, would present each item to be discussed and would explain fully the factors to be considered in making the decision. Then each Council member was invited to state her opinion as simply as possible. Vincent emphasized that opinions could and would differ, and that they should not be afraid to express their views. However, each person should refrain from trying to impose their perspectives on the members. Louise would make the final decision; she could make it immediately or she could delay it to better “think it over before God.”

During this first Council meeting, each sister freely expressed herself. Sometimes the discussion was long because opinions differed, and some decisions were postponed. Eight days after this first Council meeting, the second took place. It is difficult to know whether succeeding Council meetings took place weekly. Only twenty-nine sets of minutes have been preserved from between 1646 and 1660. These documents, which reveal how the founders undertook their discernment and came to decisions, are an important resource for the community.

The Seminary

On 30 October 1647, Vincent began the Council meeting by addressing the need for continuing to establish the community’s internal structure:

Sisters, we have to deal with certain needs that Mademoiselle has noticed in the Company; if action has to be taken concerning them, it’s better to do so now than later on. Things haven’t yet gone too far. Mademoiselle Le Gras is still alive. What we do at present will remain forever; but, if we let things become outdated, when, later on—thirty, forty, or fifty years from now, if the Company lasts that long—someone might try to correct them, it will no longer be possible. People will say, “That was done at the beginning; that has always been; M. Vincent was there, so was Mademoiselle Le Gras,
and they approved of doing things that way.” That’s why, Sisters, if there’s something to be done for the perfection of this Company, it must be done as soon as possible.379

An important issue discussed at this meeting was the question of how to provide for the formation of newcomers to the Company. Up to that time, Louise had received the postulants who came from the houses and discerned their vocations with them while explaining the mission of the Daughters of Charity. Each new sister had been entrusted to the guidance of an older one and learned how to serve the poor in one of the parishes in Paris, or at the Hôtel-Dieu. After some time, problems with this approach became apparent. Some young sisters became too attached to their teachers, whom they called “aunts.” Small cliques were formed, bringing about disorder in some community houses.

Louise thought it best to have one sister specifically put in charge of all the “novices.” She submitted her plan to Vincent, who approved it and recommended it to the Council. Julienne Loret was named first directress of the seminary. Vincent explained her role as formator: “O sister, what do we want to do with you? This is the first and most important responsibility after that of the Superioress. It’s a question of forming young women who can serve God in the Company, helping them to put down deep roots of virtue, teaching them submission, mortification, humility, and the practice of their Rules and of every virtue.”380

When the seminary was first begun, the young sisters were fully integrated into the life of the motherhouse: having their prayer, meals, and dormitory together with the older sisters. It was not until the generalate of Mathurine Guérin that a separate building was erected for the seminary.

The Rules and Constitutions of the Company

From the foundation of the Company in 1633, Louise had established the daily schedule, and she wrote a simple Rule for the first sisters. Around 1639–1640, she had prepared a draft of the Rules that Vincent read and commented on during the conference of 19 July 1640. He noted: “Providence has permitted that the very first words of your Rule read as follows: ‘The Company of the Daughters of Charity is established to love and serve God, and to honor Our Lord their Patron and the Blessed Virgin.’ And how will you honor Him? Your Rule tells you, for it goes on to make known to you God’s plan in establishing
your Company: ‘To serve the sick poor corporally by supplying them with all they need; and spiritually by seeing that they live and die in a good state.’ After having explained this article, Vincent continued, “The second article tells you to love one another like sisters whom Jesus Christ has united by the bond of His love.”

There is no extant copy of this text, which was only a rough draft by Louise. However, it served as the basis for the Rule for the sisters at the hospital of Angers. Louise wanted a definitive version of the Rule to be adopted so that each sister could read it or hear it read. On Easter 1647 Louise, reminding Vincent of the subject of the next conference, ended her letter with this request: “Can we not hope for the benefit of a conference to complete the instruction on the duties of Sisters toward their Sister Servants and the guidance and support of Sister Servants with regard to their companions? If this were well understood and practiced, I think it would prevent all the little disorders in the Company, as would having our little Rules, so that we could read them from time to time in the Company.”

The Rule that Louise wanted so much to be completed had been approved by the archbishop of Paris, but she would not accept it because it placed the Company of the Daughters of Charity under his authority, and thus under the bishops of the various dioceses where the community was located.

Refusing to be discouraged, Louise persisted in her efforts to see to it that Vincent and his successors were recognized as the superiors of the Company.
In April 1651, she met with the procurator general of Parlement with whom the Letters Patent had been filed after having been drawn up in 1646. The original letters could not be found. During her visit, Louise had insisted on preserving the secular character of the Company. The procurator general in turn praised the work the sisters had accomplished with the foundlings and the galley convicts.

On 15 July, Louise told Vincent directly that the Company’s establishment could not be brought to completion without a decision as to its governing authority. She said:

It would seem that weak and fickle persons need to be aided by the prospect of a solid establishment to assist them in overcoming temptations they may encounter against their vocation. Without the basis of this establishment, it would seem impossible for the Company to subsist or for God to derive from it the glory He seemingly wants rendered to Himself in it. This basis is the need for the Company to be erected under the title of either Company or Confraternity, entirely subject to and dependent on the venerable guidance of the Most Honored Father General of the venerable Priests of the Mission.\(^ {385} \)
Louise’s insistence rested on two unshakable convictions. The superior general of the Congregation was the spiritual rock on which God had founded the Company. It must be he who would sustain the faith of this Company. Since the first superior general of the Mission had given the Company its spirit, his successors, formed in the same spirit, would alone be able to maintain it within the Daughters of Charity.

Vincent, however, saw obstacles to this provision. In his humility, he did not want to be recognized as the founder of the Daughters of Charity: it was God who had done everything, and it was God who was the author of the Company. Vincent also did not want to distract the Congregation of the Mission from its goals, the evangelization of the country people and the reform of the clergy. Was it possible, or even necessary, for the superior general of the Congregation to be responsible for the direction of the Daughters of Charity? Moreover, Vincent had always manifested a great respect for the Church’s own organizational structure. In each diocese, it was the bishop who was responsible for the life of the Church. Should the Daughters of Charity not be subject to this rule? They were simple laywomen consecrated to God, not nuns.

Patiently, Louise waited for God’s providential guidance. In September 1651, Vincent wrote to her after the deaths of several of the sisters, and seemed to respond indirectly to her repeated requests: “God has instituted and guided this Little Company; let us allow Him to act and let us adore His divine and loving guidance.” Gradually, however, Vincent allowed himself to be convinced to the contrary. With the help of Monsieur Portail, he prepared a new request for the archbishop of Paris. On 18 January, Cardinal de Retz again approved the Company of the Daughters of Charity. From that time on, its guidance and direction were entrusted to Vincent for life, and after him, to his successors, the superiors general of the Congregation of the Mission. Louise was happy, not because of her success, but because the Company would now always be able to pursue the ministry it had begun according to the design of God. With the help of the Priests of the Mission, the Company would be faithful to the charism confided to it. “May our Lord in His goodness continue to realize His plans for the Company under your holy guidance for many years to come,” Louise wrote to Vincent.

On 8 August 1655, an important ceremony took place at the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity in the faubourg Saint-Denis. In the presence of Louise de Marillac and all the sisters who had come for the conference, Vincent officially instituted the Company. He told the sisters: “I want to read to you the approval of your establishment by the Archbishop of Paris and its confirmation by his Coadjutor, Cardinal de Retz. I also want to read your Rules to you.” After this
reading, Vincent reminded the sisters that they had been chosen by God to be the “foundation” of the Company and so they should be faithful to their vocation.\textsuperscript{389}

The Rules provided for the nomination of the superioress and her Council. Louise had asked Vincent that the nomination of a new superioress take place in conformity with the newly-approved Rules. Acting as superior general, Vincent begged Louise to continue her responsibility as superioress of the Company. Three officers were elected on that day: Julienne Loret was the first assistant, Mathurine Guérin was second assistant and treasurer, and Jeanne Gressir was the disburser of funds.

To commemorate this important event, each sister present placed her signature at the bottom of a large parchment on which were stated succinctly the origin of the Company, its approbation by the archbishop of Paris, and the nomination of the councillors. Louise signed first, carefully leaving a blank space for the signature of the superior general. Next came the signatures of the three officers and the thirty-seven sisters who were present. Some were very moved. Marie Joly made a large ink stain before slowly writing her name. Others made a cross because they did not know how to write, and the secretary wrote in their names. Vincent, in his humility, wanted to sign last.

The document also carefully recorded “the names of all the other Sisters who have been received since the first institution of the Confraternity and Society until today, August 8, 1655.”\textsuperscript{390} The order in which the names
were written is in the approximate order of their date of entrance into the Company. For the older ones who had entered between 1634 and 1640, the order was not followed exactly. The sisters were asked to try to recall the names of those who had made their seminary at the same time as they had, but memory failed, and some names were forgotten. At least fifteen sisters whose names are well known or whose obituaries were preserved were not mentioned; among them were Marthe Dauteuil, Jeanne Delacroix, Françoise Manceau, and Jeanne Ceintereau. The sisters who had died during the first twenty-two years of the Company also were not mentioned.

Vincent concluded the ceremony with a prayer to Mary and her divine son:

“Let’s ask the Blessed Virgin to pray to Her Son for all of us…. Holy Virgin … these good Sisters and I entreat you to assist this Little Company. Continue and complete a work that is the greatest on earth; I ask you this on behalf of those present and absent. And to You, my God, I make this request, through the merits of Your Son Jesus Christ, that You will complete the work You have begun. Continue Your holy protection of this Little Company … grant the grace of final perseverance to these good Sisters … who are faithful in their vocation.”

On 29 September, Vincent began a systematic explanation of the Common Rules. Twenty-four conferences are dedicated to this purpose from 1655 to 1658. These conferences were followed by the explanation of the daily schedule and the particular Rules for the sisters in the parishes.

Even though the establishment of the Company required certain official structures, these were of secondary importance to Louise. Structures were established only to help each sister to live as a Daughter of Charity. What appeared to her to be most important was fidelity to the gift of one’s vocation, and adherence to the will of God and to the mission confided to the Company.
During one of Vincent’s conferences on the explanation of the Rules, Louise expressed what was close to her heart: “God wants to be glorified in us in every way…. but He wants us to cooperate with His Will.”

She frequently invited the sisters to remain faithful to the vocation they had received from God: “Go then courageously, advancing moment by moment on the path on which God has placed you in order to reach Him.” The Company could only be maintained and persevere in its service if it shared in the mission of Christ the Redeemer.
VINCENT DE PAUL PRESENTS THE RULES OF THE COMPANY TO LOUISE DE MARILLAC. OIL ON CANVAS. ORIGINAL IN THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY MOTHERHOUSE, PARIS.

 Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
 http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
Louise de Marillac, Damoiselle Le Gras, touchée des malheurs des pauvres galériens de la Tour, proche la porte St-Bernard, leur procurait toutes sortes de secours et de consolations. (Gobillon.)

LOUISE DE MARILLAC AND A DAUGHTER OF CHARITY ASSISTING THE GALLEY PRISONERS.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
Louise de Marillac: Come Winds or High Waters

ITALIAN HOLY CARD PICTURING VINCENT DE PAUL AS HE OFFICIALLY INSTITUTES THE COMPANY OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY ON 8 AUGUST 1655.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
Louise de Marillac had never been in good health. Chronic migraines and bronchitis often forced her to stop her activities and undertake the standard treatments of the time: purges and blood lettings. At the beginning of May 1656, she took to her bed and her condition suddenly worsened. Vincent hastened to her sickbed, and seeing that her death was a possibility, he questioned, “Mademoiselle, have you decided on any of your Sisters to replace you?”

Louise seemed to be asleep. Then her lips moved, and she seemed to be going through the names of sisters. Opening her eyes, she said, “Monsieur, since you’ve chosen me by Divine Providence, it seems to me that for the first time it’s advisable that this not be done by a majority of votes, but that you should name her—just this once.” After a prayerful silence, she humbly added, “I think Sister Marguerite Chétif would be very suitable. She is a Sister who has shown wisdom everywhere and has been successful everywhere.”

For several days, Louise was in agony. All of the sisters prayed for her recovery. They were kept informed of her condition by letters, and one of them, which was sent by Vincent to Françoise Ménage on 17 May, has been preserved: “Mademoiselle Le Gras thought she was going to slip away from us; she has been very seriously ill and is still not completely out of danger, although she is better, thank God. I do not recommend her to your prayers, knowing that you do not fail to offer them to God for her preservation.”

Louise’s health was slowly restored. On 10 June, she dictated a letter to Françoise Ménage: “It did not please the divine goodness to remove me from the face of the earth, although I have deserved it for a long time.” On 19 June, she herself wrote to Barbe Angiboust: “In His goodness He continues to give me new strength. Help me, my dear Sister, to make better use of it for His glory and for the service He wills me to render to the Company.”

On 25 June, Louise’s health had improved to the point that a Council meeting could be held. The last one had been on 29 April, just before her illness. The agenda for the meeting reflects the concern Vincent felt as he considered the impact of Louise’s eventual death. Mathurine Guérin, who wrote the minutes, noted how he spoke with great solemnity on the Company’s obligation to remain faithful to God. He especially stressed the only virtues that could maintain the Company and allow it to serve the poor everywhere: those of poverty and purity.
Indeed, many appeals for sisters arrived in the course of 1656. The Ladies of Charity of Arras asked for sisters to support the establishment of the Confraternity. Anne of Austria wanted sisters to care for the wounded soldiers in the hospital at La Fère. The bishops of Cahors and Narbonne also wanted Daughters of Charity in their dioceses. Where could a sufficient number of sisters be found to respond to all these appeals? On 29 July 1656, Marie-Marthe Trumeau and Élisabeth Brocard were sent to La Fère, and on 30 August, Marguerite Chétif and Radegonde Lenfantin left for Arras. It was necessary to wait until November 1658 to send two sisters to Cahors, and until September 1659 to respond to the request of the bishop of Narbonne.

One morning in September, while Louise was still recovering, she injured herself. On 27 September, Vincent informed Nicole Haran, the sister servant of Nantes, of what had happened: “Mademoiselle Le Gras is sick in bed with a slight fever caused by a pain in her side. She hurt herself ten or twelve days ago as she was trying to get up; she fell out of bed to the floor and is not better yet. Still, we hope this will not amount to anything.” Louise would suffer from a rib fracture for several weeks.

At the end of 1656, during her monthly retreat, Louise reflected on the long months of her illness and the time remaining to her on earth. On 30 December, she wrote, “After I had recovered from my most recent serious illness ... I asked Monsieur Vincent, our Most Honored Superior and Founder, with what dispositions I should once again take the resolution to live.” What is striking in these brief retreat notes is Louise’s insistence on patience:

His Charity told me that we must put up with a great deal and rely more on God than on our own means.... I should serve souls in their needs by another practice, that of turning to God by an interior act of confidence and trusting Him ....

... Direction is a gift which must be obtained through patience.  

Louise de Marillac possessed a lively, impetuous temperament that was revealed in all her behaviors and attitudes. She admitted:

I had been hasty in my zeal ... my own passions had sometimes come into play....

... We must ... be careful not to allow ourselves to yield to sudden emotion.
Even her handwriting was rapid. Often, her thoughts raced much faster than her hand, and she skipped words, which makes it difficult to read some of her letters and meditations.

During the first years of the Company, Louise often reacted strongly to sisters who forgot the responsibilities of their vocation. For example, she wrote to two sisters in Richelieu who were having difficulty living with each other: “How will you dare one day to appear before God to render Him an account of the use you have made of the great grace which He gave you when He called you to the state in which He has placed you? He had expected to derive glory from your works but you have usurped it.” The sisters at Nantes, who also were experiencing serious community conflicts, received a severe letter: “And what have we given him [Vincent], barren earth that we are? Nothing but discontent, barren earth that we are, through our infidelities to God, for whom he wishes to win us.” If she felt that the service of poor persons had been neglected, Louise would sternly challenge the sisters: “Where are the gentleness and charity that you must preserve so carefully when dealing with our dear masters, the sick poor?”

Louise manifested this firmness in defending the Daughters of Charity when they were publicly criticized. At Angers, Perrette was accused of stealing the goods of the poor. Louise reacted, writing to the Abbé de Vaux, “It would be one thing if our service were no longer satisfactory and we were warned of it early on, but to suffer these suspicions and calumnies ... I beg you, Monsieur, to consider whether that is bearable.” She continued, “You will see, Monsieur, that I am being carried away by this point of honor. I beg you, for the love of God, to remedy in some way the beginning of this great evil.”

Vincent acknowledged Louise’s lively temperament. In the conference on her virtues that he gave to the sisters after her death he noted: “If, through human weakness, she sometimes was a little hasty, there’s no reason to be surprised at that; the saints point out that everyone has imperfections. We see this in what happened with Saint Peter and Saint Paul. God allows that to draw His glory from it..... Thus, little acts of hastiness were sometimes seen in Mlle Le Gras. That was nothing, and I’m far from thinking that there was any sin in it.”

Louise would struggle her entire life against this tendency to vivaciousness that often provoked such passionate reactions, this hastiness that too quickly pointed out the least fault, this vehemence that could sometimes wound. Reading her letters and meditations permits us to discover how, step by step, she walked the road to humility.
Two motivations led Louise to undertake this journey: her desire to conform herself to Jesus Christ and her role as servant of the poor. In her prayers, she contemplated the humility of Jesus. The mystery of the Incarnation held her rapt attention. She resolved “to love abjection since God is to be found there. Jesus teaches us this by His birth. He wanted us to know that this abjection filled heaven with astonishment and gave glory to the Father. However, I must unite my miserable, weak self-abnegation to His glorious abjection.” Louise saw the humility of the newborn Jesus as an act of love for humanity. It made him so close to us: “I shall calmly adore the divinity in the Infant Jesus and imitate, to the best of my ability, His holy humanity, especially His simplicity and charity which led Him to come to us as a child so as to be more accessible to His creatures.”

The contemplation of Christ, the Son of God made man, led Louise to discover the humility that characterized his entire life on earth. During her retreat in 1633, she noted, “I must bear in mind the fact that the humility which our Lord practiced at His Baptism is not only a source of humiliation for me but it must also serve as an example which I must imitate.” She continued her meditation on Jesus’s washing of the apostles’ feet at the Last Supper: “Nothing should keep me from humbling myself. For this, I have the example of our Lord who had a legitimate interest in advancing His glory and in reminding His Apostles of their obligation to honor Him, yet He did not shrink from humbling Himself to the point of washing the feet of His Apostles immediately before His passion.”

In her letters to the Daughters of Charity, we again find evidence of Louise’s meditation on the humility of Christ. What did the Son of God do when he came to earth for the salvation of the world? “He thereby accomplished the will of God by toiling for many years at the humble tasks of a carpenter’s shop.” His example was an invitation to each sister to work in the service of the poor without any public commotion or attention. How did the Son of God react to false public accusations? Did he try to defend himself or to prove his innocence? Louise said, “I truly shared in your suffering in all the matters you mentioned to me. However, we must not find it strange that lying persons utter calumnies against us because we are Christians and Daughters of Charity as well. The fact obliges us to put up with everything as we have been taught by this great lover of suffering, Jesus Christ.”

One sentence might sum up Louise’s meditation on the humility of the Son of God, the Incarnate Word: “This thought came to me after a long period during which I prayed for a great love for the humanity of Our Lord as a
means for moving me to practice His virtues especially gentleness, humility, forbearance and love of my neighbor in order to overcome the sins which I so often commit against them.”

As a servant, the Daughter of Charity recognizes poor persons to be her “lords and masters.” A servant of the poor must not expect to be treated better than her masters, who are so often humiliated, mistreated, and unrecognized. Louise frequently shared this meditation with the sisters: “Our vocation of servants of the poor calls us to practice the gentleness, humility and forbearance that we owe to others.”

This title of “servant of the poor” is not an honorary one, but rather it is a challenge to live exactly what it signifies: “Although ... all our sisters consider themselves fortunate to be servants of the poor, nevertheless very few can endure the slightest word addressed to them in a manner that is too authoritative or abrupt.”

How did Louise try to live out these deeply felt meditations? Through her writings, it is possible to see the concrete means she took to grow in the practice of this humility. First of all, she endeavored to know herself: she looked honestly at her life and compared what she saw with the ideal of the gospel. She acknowledged her frequent impatience, her stubbornness in defending her opinion, the pride that prevented her from being simple. She accepted the assistance of her spiritual director and the sisters with whom she lived in coming to this self-knowledge. As she explained to Cécile Angiboust, the reactions of sisters living in community are sometimes to be linked with the behavior of their sister servant: “In so far as we are able, we must console our dear sisters who will always have sufficient difficulty in putting up with us, sometimes because of our moods and at other times because nature or the evil spirit makes us repugnant to them.” During Vincent’s conference on the virtues of Louise de Marillac, one sister told of how Louise had asked her if she thought she had spoken too harshly to another sister after that sister left her presence in anger.

During her retreats, Louise was specific in her resolutions. In 1628, she wrote with respect to humility: “I must practice interior humility by a desire for abjection and exterior humility by willingly accepting all the occasions which occur for humbling myself. I shall do this in order to honor the true and real humility of God Himself in whom I shall find the strength to overcome my pride, to combat my frequent outbursts of impatience and to acquire charity and gentleness toward my neighbor. Thus I shall honor the teaching of Jesus Christ who told us to learn of Him to be gentle and humble of heart.”
In 1632, she carefully explained her reasons for trying to live humility more completely: “Pride and all its effects are great obstacles to the action and plan of God in the soul. Since I recognize this to be true in my case, I shall strive to simplify the workings of my mind and to keep it humble.” Later on, these same resolutions were repeated: “I must practice great humility and mistrust of myself.” In December 1656, she emphasized the importance of patience, a virtue that permitted one to remain calm in the face of difficulties and contradictions, a virtue drawn from the merciful love of God. She wrote that she was “turning to God ... and trusting Him to accomplish ... all that I could not do.”

After Louise’s death, the sisters pointed out how careful she had been to ask pardon for her failings. They remembered that “she was the first to accuse herself of her faults and would ask pardon of all the Sisters.” She did not hesitate to publicly admit her faults during the conferences. On 7 August 1650, after having noted the means to live obedience well, she added, “I’ve been deeply ashamed, seeing how often I’ve failed in all those practices though my arrogance and obstinacy. I’m sorry for this and ask pardon of all my sisters who may have remarked it.” This request for pardon was carefully written on the small paper of thoughts that Louise had prepared for the conference.

During the community’s early years, Louise was troubled by her faults and shortcomings. She thought she was giving a bad example to her sisters by her conduct and she feared she was “spoiling everything” in the work of God.
steadily, she found the humility that calmed her soul, and she could truthfully write to Vincent: “O bon Dieu, what reason I have to admit and recognize that I do nothing worthwhile! My heart is not embittered by this, however.”

Louise allowed herself to be led by the Spirit of God on this arduous road to humility. It was for this reason that she was able to guide the sisters along the same journey, toward a resemblance to Christ, meek and humble of heart, toward this conformity to the humility of the poor. Louise penned this reflection: “Souls that are truly poor and desirous of serving God should place their trust in the coming of the Holy Spirit within them believing that, finding no resistance in them, He will give them the disposition necessary to accomplish the holy will of God which should be their only preoccupation.”

She helped the sisters to accept their errors and faults in peace and to use them as a means to make progress in virtue. This was also a means of avoiding self-pride. “God sometimes permits us to commit many faults in order to humble us. Otherwise, we would be damned by the mortal sin of pride.”

Louise also knew how indispensable humility is for the mutual charity that is essential for community life: “Mutual support … is our dearest virtue. I recommend this … as something which is absolutely necessary since it leads us never to see the faults of another with bitterness but rather always to excuse them while humbling ourselves.” She concluded her letter to the sisters at Richelieu with this simple advice: “True humility will regulate everything.”

In December 1659, a few months before her death, Louise reminded Françoise Carcireux that the spirit of the Company was a spirit of humility and simplicity and that every action of a Daughter of Charity must be guided and animated by this spirit: “That is also why I give you all the advice I believe it is my duty to give and which I hope will be beneficial for those sisters whom I foresee God wants to use to maintain the Company in the spirit of humility and simplicity of Jesus Christ.”

Because she sought neither glory nor honors, and because she allowed the Spirit to transform her, Louise de Marillac became an instrument God used to accomplish an immense work in the Church for the relief of all those who suffer. On 30 December 1656, she wrote, “[Vincent said,] ‘Pray tell, who are we to think that we can undertake such a difficult and important task?’... Turning to God.... seemed to be a more efficacious means.”
ITALIAN HOLY CARD PICTURES LOUISE DE MARILLAC BEING RECEIVED IN HEAVEN.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
LOUISE’S OLD TOMB, IN THE CHAPEL OF OUR LADY OF THE MIRACULOUS MEDAL, DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY MOTHERHOUSE, PARIS.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
LOUISE’S NEW TOMB, IN THE CHAPEL OF OUR LADY OF THE MIRACULOUS MEDAL, DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY MOTHERHOUSE, PARIS.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
The final hours of New Year’s Eve are a natural time to reflect on the year that is coming to an end. This exercise can anticipate that time when, approaching the end of life, people naturally reflect on the accounts of their lives that they must render to God.

On 31 December 1658, Louise sent her New Year’s greetings to Vincent and told him, “The last hours of the year are upon us. I throw myself at your feet to entreat Your Charity to obtain mercy for me, since I await only the one when God will call me to render an account to Him.”

Louise reflected for a long time on the Company. She wondered if she had done all she could to help the Daughters of Charity remain faithful to God’s plan for them. She would have liked to have had the opportunity to speak at length with Vincent about the difficulties she was experiencing. However, since she did not know when she would meet with him, she wrote out the different points that still needed to be decided with respect to the Company’s approval.

She noted, “I think something still remains to be done for the spiritual strengthening of the Company. If Your Charity would allow me to send you a report on this, I would do so even if I should have to blush for shame because of it.” The next morning, she continued, “My ailment prevented me from finishing this letter yesterday, and I am beginning the year with great weakness and suffering of mind and body.”

Louise spent several months composing her memorandum. In October 1659, she finally sent it to Vincent: “I am sending you, Most Honored Father, the document I mentioned to Your Charity concerning the spiritual means for consolidating the establishment of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Please do not show it to anyone else for fear lest they ridicule it. This memorandum has not been preserved, but several other texts written in the last years of her life permit us to form an understanding of her worries with regard to the future of the Company.

For some time, conflicts had emerged within the Company. Some sisters opposed certain of its structures and directions, and wanted them to be changed. To Louise, such a course of action appeared dangerous: “Another thing which would contribute to the ruin of the Company would be, first of all, a desire to alter its customs, because this would, in a way, be to prefer one’s own judgment to the guidance of God who knows well enough its future needs.” Three
points which touched on the very foundations of the Company were being called into question: poverty, humble employments, and secularity.

For several years, Louise had noticed changes in the behavior of some of the sisters. The first Daughters of Charity, for the most part, came from humble backgrounds. Through their contact with the Ladies of Charity in the Confraternities, they were introduced to the lifestyle of the nobility. In addition, the sisters received from the Ladies sums of money with which they purchased medicines and food for the poor. For these country girls, who were not used to handling money, there was great temptation:

Since the majority of those who enter the Company are not in the habit of conversing with persons of rank, nor are they used to handling money or to possessing little things which are now freely obtainable, there is another danger which is greatly to be feared, namely, that as they become accustomed to working with the rich and the influential they may take advantage of the situation .... Moreover, the management of money gives them the opportunity to appropriate some of it for themselves or to use it as their impulses dictate by purchasing useless objects because they have seen others with them.445

The availability of funds led some of the sisters to live in relative comfort, no longer having to worry about working to earn their living.446 The founders put a great deal of emphasis on the necessity of manual labor to remind the sisters of their identity as servants rather than as Ladies of Charity living securely off their income. In 1649, during a conference on work, Vincent explained, “When our Sisters are comfortably established and don’t have enough to do, they’ll neglect the work they do have and won’t bother going to visit the poor. Then we’ll have to say good-bye to the Charity; it’s no longer the Charity; it’s buried; then we’ll have the funeral of the Charity.”447

Vincent was saying that a life that was too easy and comfortable would prevent the sisters from being attentive to those who were suffering and from being creative in searching out new forms of poverty. In 1648, Louise had reminded Élisabeth Turgis of the importance of manual labor:

Remember well this practice of ours of earning our living through work.

Lately we have sisters around Melun. Oh, how they spare
nothing of themselves! God did not relieve us of the need to earn our bread simply to give us a life of ease. He did so in order that we might work even harder in imitation of His Son.\textsuperscript{448}

This reminder was continued in the following letter with an invitation for the sisters to open their eyes: “My God, how I fear places where we are more comfortable than our condition indicates!... Are there no sick in any of the small neighboring villages?”\textsuperscript{449}

The manual labor the sisters performed to earn their living was the work typically done by most peasant women in the country or the city: sewing, spinning, washing clothes, raising livestock, making preserves, and so on. This work always needed to be done in addition to serving the poor. Louise was firm in her belief that if the sisters lost the habit of working for their living and if they imitated the lifestyle of upper class women, they would no longer be able to persevere in their vocation as servants of poor persons: “Another thing which could cause the complete destruction of the Company would be for the sisters to forget what they are, and on account of their long collaboration with the Ladies, which gives them the opportunity to handle the money donated for the poor and to live comfortably without worrying about earning their livelihood, to become complacent. This could lead to vain satisfaction and the desire to accumulate

\[\text{ENLARGE}\]

\textit{ENGRAVED PORTRAIT OF LOUISE TITLES HER AS THE MOTHER OF THE POOR.}

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
goods. Forgetting the obligations of their vocation ....”

In Louise’s view, a Daughter of Charity could not call the poor her “lords and masters” unless she chose to live simply “for the love of the Poorest of the poor, Jesus Christ Our Lord.” She could not be content with beautiful resolutions and mere words, but she must choose to live in poverty: “I beg her to continue to love holy poverty, not only abstractly and in her words, but by practicing its many aspects.”

Louise also noticed that some sisters tried to draw attention to their abilities and to be personally recognized for the way that they taught catechism, taught the little girls, or prepared medicines in the pharmacies. She was concerned because these sisters always wanted additional education and were not interested in performing the more humble tasks required by the service of the sick poor. She noted:

Now since this method of instruction [used at La Fère] is brilliant and sophisticated, if those sisters who have great capabilities were permitted to undertake it but were not dispensed from more lowly tasks, they might, after having been well trained for it, seek dispensations from several exercises and expect better treatment than that given to those in more humble duties. If contradicted in this matter, they would soon leave the Company.

Other sisters would turn to avid reading. In the desire to appear capable, they would devote their attention to learning without taking into consideration other necessary work.

These sisters, who liked being placed on a pedestal, looked down on sisters who were less gifted or capable. Their conceit led them to form a clique in the midst of the Company. For Louise, these developments would inevitably lead to the total destruction of the Company:

However, to turn this into an essential function in the Company of the Daughters of Charity would be to enter on the pathway to its destruction. At the very least, it would divide it into two bodies. Those who would judge themselves capable of this employment would be the dominant group and, in their illusions of grandeur, they would fulfill the functions of Saint Mary Magdalen [the sister of Martha and
of Lazarus]. They would compromise and they would lord it over those employed in visiting the sick. Little by little, poor girls would be prevented from entering the Company and the others would soon become ladies. This is already the pretense of several sisters.454

Louise foresaw that these sisters who considered themselves like “new Ladies” would experience the same difficulties as the Ladies of Charity, even though they thought they were full of ardor for serving the poor. Vincent observed that the Ladies “were often inconvenienced by carrying this soup pot, [and] became disheartened.”455

Louise asked, Who, then, would be left to undertake the difficult services to the sick and the poor that were so essential to their vocation? Who would be willing to perform the many needed small, humble services that were not spectacular and which were so often scorned in the eyes of the world?

On 10 January 1660, she wrote to Marguerite Chétif, whom she had chosen, at the request of Vincent, to assume leadership of the Company after her death. She explained again the choice made to serve the poor by simple means and humble tasks. This choice required the foundation of a solid and deep Christian life:

So you have not found any girls who want to give themselves to the service of Our Lord in the poor as members of the Company?... This requires strong characters who desire to reach the holiness of true Christians and who want to die to themselves by mortification and a veritable act of renunciation, which they already made at the time of their holy Baptism, so that the Spirit of Jesus Christ may abide in them and grant them the strength to persevere in this way of life which is totally spiritual, although they will be employed in exterior works which appear lowly and despicable in the eyes of the world but which are glorious in the sight of God and His angels.456

The sisters who questioned the Company’s direction also questioned a point that, to Louise, seemed essential to maintaining the service of poor persons. In January 1659, she informed Vincent of a discussion she had had with some of these sisters: “Some sensitive persons in the Company have a
repugnance for the term Confraternity and want only Society or Community. I took the liberty of saying that word [Confraternity] was essential for us and could be very helpful in remaining firm against innovation. I also said that it signified secularity for us."

These sisters would have liked the Company of the Daughters of Charity to have the public status and renown of one of the great religious orders or monastic communities. They found living in a simple confraternity deprived them of the status and attention given to nuns. For them, the dress of a simple country girl did not have the glamor of a religious habit, and the head covering they wore seemed to attract scorn. They thought that the contemplative life, lived in a cloister, was superior to a life of service in the streets.

These sisters would have supported having the Company of the Daughters of Charity become a religious order of elite cloistered nuns (who would be addressed with the title of “Mother,” as was the custom at that time). The service of the poor would be delegated to a group of sisters outside of the cloister, or extern sisters. Louise explained all this to Vincent in January 1660: “My fear is that, if they were to settle into a lifestyle which required greater expenses and had customs tending toward ostentation and partial enclosure this would oblige them to seek means of maintaining it. It would also cause them to turn in on themselves, become inactive, and live separated from those who go out and are poorly clothed because certain Sisters say to one another that ‘this person who wears a poor headdress, this Sister in name only, is not respected but causes people to despise us.’"

It must be remembered that at the time the secular character of the Company was revolutionary, and it surprised and astonished those who encountered the Daughters of Charity serving in the streets. Throughout their lives, Vincent and Louise continued to explain and justify it. In 1649, Louise wrote to the Abbé de Vaux, “I met with the Vicar General two or three times to explain to him that we were just a secular family.” One year later, while telling Vincent about the visit she had just made to the procurator general, she described what she had explained: “He asked me if we claimed to be regular or secular. I explained to him that we claim to be only the latter. He told me that this was unprecedented.”

For Louise de Marillac, as for Vincent de Paul, the secular character of the Company was indispensable for the maintenance of effective service of the poor, and for the mobility necessary to be able to serve the most abandoned wherever they were to be found: in the city, in the country, in hospitals or prisons, on the battlefields, or in regions devastated by war. This vocation
required each sister to have a profound personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a great esteem for the Rules of the Company, and a constant desire to live according to a spirit of humility, simplicity, and charity. Louise commented, “Gentleness, cordiality and forbearance must be the practices of the Daughters of Charity just as humility, simplicity and the love of the holy humanity of Jesus Christ, who is perfect charity, is their spirit. That, my dear Sisters, is a summary of what I think I should tell you about our Rules until such time as Divine Providence permits you to have the entire text.”

For Louise, living a life that was “poor, simple, [and] humble” was fundamental for the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

It was only in this way that the sisters would be able to serve the most abandoned and “those who are destitute in all things,” and through their service, receive an opportunity to lead a more fully human life.

At all times and in all places, the Daughters of Charity have tried to be faithful to the inspiration of Louise de Marillac, so that they may respond with ever-renewed fidelity and availability to the contemporary needs of the poor.

A few hours before her death, Louise addressed some final words to the sisters gathered around her bed. She spoke of the uniqueness of the Company:

My dear Sisters, I continue to ask God for His blessings for you and pray that He will grant you the grace to persevere in your vocation in order to serve Him in the manner He asks of you.

Take good care of the service of the poor. Above all, live together in great union and cordiality, loving one another in imitation of the union and life of Our Lord.

Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only Mother.

On Monday of Passion Week, between eleven o'clock and noon, Louise de Marillac, aged sixty-eight, passed to her eternal rest and returned her soul to the Lord. It was 15 March 1660.
ENGRAVED PORTRAIT OF LOUISE TITLES HER AS THE MOTHER OF THE POOR.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
For thirty-five years, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac worked together in the mission God had confided to them. A reading of the numerous letters that have come down to us (more than 600) helps us discover the astonishing and marvelous record of their friendship.

Sanctity was not innate in either Vincent or Louise. It rested on their humanity. Their relationships with God and the poor and their friendship with each other would gradually transform, enhance, and perfect their entire personalities. The friendship that would unite this seventeenth-century man and woman emerged from a series of encounters in which each became aware of their own identities, discovered their mutual complementarity, and helped each other to grow in humanity and holiness.

The first meeting between Louise and Vincent was a difficult one. Reticence, hesitation, and incertitude on both their parts marked the beginning of their relationship. Louise noted how she had found accepting her new spiritual director “repugnant.” This word “repugnant” is a strong one, but it accurately indicates Louise’s initial feelings of distaste for her director. For his part, Vincent hesitated a great deal in taking on the responsibility for the spiritual direction of this widow, who was the niece of the former keeper of the seals and a tormented woman.

Vincent and Louise were also different from each other in every way: their social origins, their educations, their life experiences, and their temperaments. Nevertheless, through obedience to her “Light,” Louise opened her soul and her conscience to this forty-four-year-old priest. Vincent, for his part, responded to the needs of his thirty-four-year-old directee and helped her to free herself from her anguish and to calmly redirect her attention toward God and the poor.

For the first two years (1625–1627), the tone of their letters was very polite and formal. The letters also reveal how different each of their expectations were. Louise wanted to see her director frequently and worried when he was absent. Vincent did not want his regular activities to be impacted by the excessive demands of his directee. He said: “Our Lord ... Himself will act as your director. Yes, He will surely do so, and in such a way that He will lead you to see that it is He Himself.”

Progressively, the tone of their letters changed, and by the beginning of 1628 their relationship was on an even keel. Vincent expressed this in several
letters: “If it were not so late as it is, I would come and see you to find out from you the details of the matter you wrote to me about. However, that will be for tomorrow with God’s help.”470 “If I come early this evening, I shall have the happiness of a word with you.”471 A more frequent correspondence was now gratefully received. Vincent expressed this very simply: “Mon Dieu, my dear daughter, how your letter and the thoughts [you] sent to me console me!”472

More frequent meetings permitted Vincent and Louise to discover the richness of each other’s personality. In Vincent, Louise discovered a priest of sure judgment who was dedicated to leading souls to God and preoccupied with the poor. In Louise, Vincent recognized a woman of great sensitivity who was sometimes overzealous in her desire to do God’s will. If Vincent slowly and methodically walked like a peasant guiding his plow through the field to be planted, Louise, who was hasty, already looked forward to reaping the harvest. In this period of mutual discovery, Vincent played the dominant role. It was he who directed Louise to restore her confidence. Humbly, she allowed herself to be guided.

By 1629, Vincent decided the moment had come to invite Louise to be a part of his charitable activities. When he sent her on a mission to Montmirail on 6 May 1629, they had reached a genuine turning point in their relationship.473 They then established an intense and effective collaboration working together on behalf of the same mission, which continued to grow through their efforts. The scale of their activities was enormous. Both of them were in the prime of life.

They studied the problems they encountered, either when they met or through letters. They shared their opinions with each other and took responsibility for resolving these issues. Their complementarity is obvious. Vincent considered Louise to be his collaborator, and in his letters, he no longer addressed her as “my dear daughter.” This term more appropriately described the relationship of a director with a directee. By now using the term “Mademoiselle,” Vincent recognized Louise’s full participation in shaping their common mission.

In Louise, Vincent encountered a woman who was intuitive and always ready to forge ahead; a woman with a great sense of organization and a concern for precision; a noblewoman who was at ease among the Ladies of Charity. In Vincent, Louise found a priest dedicated to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, a person full of common sense, a wise adviser, and a peasant who understood the need for growth.

Louise and Vincent were often called from Paris by the needs of the missions in the countryside and the Confraternities of Charity. During these
times their correspondence intensified, and regular letters (sometimes one per week) kept each other up-to-date on the joys and difficulties of the mission, the problems they encountered, and proposed solutions. These letters served a purpose for their missionary work, and the two correspondents also took the opportunity to inform each other about little news items from their daily lives, as in these examples from Vincent: “The horse’s falling on top of and under me was quite dangerous and the protection of Our Lord most extraordinary.... The fall left me with a slightly sprained ankle which, at present, gives me little pain.”

“We have no water at all. I am sending to Monsieur Deure for some.”

They very comfortably shared their reflections on different events. Louise expressed the difficulty she felt when she encountered situations that were unclear and imprecise. Vincent shared the same point of view: “I am like you, Mademoiselle; there is nothing that bothers me more than uncertainty. But I do indeed greatly desire that God may be pleased to grant me the grace of making everything indifferent to me, and to you as well. Come now, we shall make every effort, please God, to acquire this holy virtue.” Their apostolic collaboration brought to light similar spiritual needs; in these instances, Vincent would use the word “we.” In another circumstance he wrote to Louise, “Remember our spiritual needs.”

In his letters, Vincent did not hesitate to share his own reflection on his actions: “It will be well for you to contact Madame Goussault and Mademoiselle Poulaillon to ask their opinion about Germaine. Just two days ago I became aware of that way of acting, which seems cordial and deferential to me. I may perhaps have offended them by having you make the final decision about your work without telling them.”

The friendship that was forming between Louise and Vincent caused them to worry about the other’s state of health, especially during the plague epidemics that ravaged Paris from 1631 to 1633. Vincent told Louise, “Please take care of your health. It is no longer yours since you destine it for God.” For her part, Louise prepared medicines for Vincent, which he gratefully accepted.

The collaboration and friendship did not erase the differences that existed between Louise and Vincent, and it should not be surprising that a few misunderstandings arose. After the failed coup d’état against Cardinal Richelieu, Louise’s uncles, Michel de Marillac, the keeper of the seals, and Louis, the field marshal, were arrested and imprisoned. Louise suffered over the family tragedy. Vincent, doubtlessly trying to distract her from her grief, proposed that she go
to visit the Confraternities of Charity in the region of Montmirail. Louise’s reaction was unexpected. She thought Vincent was sending her away because he no longer wanted to see her. Astonished by this reaction, Vincent wrote of his pain: “Banish from your mind the reason you advanced to me for taking this trip. You could not imagine how that has saddened my heart. Oh no! I am not made that way, thank God; but God knows what he has communicated to me with regard to you, and you will understand in heaven.”

For a long time, Louise and Vincent had very different opinions on the future of the young country women serving the Confraternities. Louise had the intuition that it was with these women that she would somehow fulfill the “Light” she had received on the feast of Pentecost 1623: “A time would come when I would be in a position to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and that I would be in a small community where others would do the same. I then understood that I would be in a place where I could help my neighbor but I did not understand how this would be possible since there was to be much coming and going.”

But at first, Vincent did not see the need to organize them into a group distinct from the Confraternities of Charity. Although they still worked together to discern and judge the vocations of new sisters, Vincent left most of the responsibility for their formation to Louise: “Allow me to tell you that you should not send your young women to the place you mention without finding out from the doctor if there is any danger.”

However, as we have seen, Vincent gradually allowed himself to be convinced by Louise’s insistence. After all, what if God was speaking to him through her? After having prayed and reflected for a long while during his retreat, Vincent invited Louise to see him so they could study more closely the advisability of bringing the girls together in a small Community. On 29 November 1633, Louise welcomed the first young women from the Confraternities into her home to live in community and better serve God and poor persons.

The rapid increase in the number of young women who joined the community and their dispersal to many places led Vincent and Louise to determine the distinctive spirit that should animate the members of this new confraternity. Louise drafted the daily schedule and the rules. Vincent edited them and explained them in conferences given to the young women. On a daily basis, Louise helped the sisters form their prayer life, learn how to live together in charity, and learn how to love and respect the poor whom they served.
Louise and Vincent helped each other face challenges as they arose: the many requests of the Ladies of Charity for sisters to serve in their parishes or villages, the sickness and death of some sisters who were victims of their devotion, and the problems created by the behavior of some of the immature sisters. Louise, who was somewhat wounded by the attitude of one girl, received these words of encouragement from Vincent: “Do not be astonished at seeing the rebellion of that poor creature. We shall see many more like her, if we live on; and should we not suffer as much from our own as Our Lord did from His? Let us be truly submissive to His good pleasure in the situation of the moment.”

Vincent’s enthusiasm often helped Louise to recover her serenity in the midst of her concern with so many daily problems. He often commented on the beauty and the grandeur of the vocation of a Daughter of Charity. Upon the death of one of the sisters, he wrote, “I trust, Mademoiselle, that she is very happy, seeing that she died in the practice of a virtue with which she could not be lost; for she died in the exercise of divine love since she died in that of charity.”

The deaths of sisters upset Louise a great deal. She wondered why God was taking his workers. Vincent intervened once more:

You seem depressed. You are afraid that God is angry and wants none of the service you are rendering Him, because He is taking your Daughters away from you. Far from it, Mademoiselle, His acting that way is a sign that He cherishes it, for He is treating you as His dear spouse, the Church. At its beginning, He not only had the majority die by natural deaths, but also from torture and torments. Who would not have said on seeing that, that He was angry with those holy young plants? Therefore, do not believe that any longer, but rather the contrary.”

This attentiveness to the other person in a relationship brings with it personal support when it is needed. However, there are also times in such close relationships when tensions and conflicts naturally arise. This is what happened during a difficult time in Vincent and Louise’s relationship between 1640 and 1642. During this time, the differences in their personalities caused a distance to grow between them, and even their complementary aspects provoked different reactions in them. The relationship between this very committed man and woman became reserved and cool.
A shared mission first brought Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac together. The first years of getting to know one another were followed by a time of mutual discovery and then by a period of intense collaboration. This was followed by a period that was rather more difficult, but from which they emerged with a better knowledge and esteem of each other as they moved forward. The magnificent friendship they would share for eighteen additional years would radiate both humanity and sanctity.

The spontaneity and authenticity of their sharing reveals the absolute freedom which existed between them. Faced with the many problems that needed to be resolved and decisions that needed to be made, their friendship moved beyond mutual assistance and arrived at a profound sharing. The strength that flowed from their friendship was even more unshakable because it was rooted in their faith in God and in Jesus Christ who died and rose again for the salvation of humanity.

**A Friendship of Freedom**

The basis of the relationship between Louise and Vincent was freedom from timidity, fear, or prejudice. It allowed them to share their thoughts and opinions in all simplicity and truth, certain of the other’s openness. This freedom emerged
from the recognition of their responsibilities and mutual trust.

Louise, who was often afraid of bothering Vincent, wrote to him in 1644: “The confidence our good God has given my heart towards your charity overcomes the fear I should justly have of bothering you.” In 1655, she noted how free she felt to express her thoughts, this time in much different terms: “I most humbly ask pardon of your charity for the liberty I have taken of speaking to you so freely. I noticed this as I reread my letter.”

This freedom of expression manifested itself every day in the way in which they discussed the life of the Daughters of Charity. They made mutual decisions in light of the gospel and by their shared reflection on events: “We must decide what will be done with Marie Denyse.” Louise proposed changes that seemed expedient to make at the town of Chars where the Jansenist pastor was somewhat uncompromising: “So as not to offend the Pastor of Chars too much, I have been thinking since yesterday about suggesting to your charity, if you think fit, to send Sister Jeanne-Christine in place of Sister Turgis and to keep Sister Jacquette for Chantilly.”

Vincent would do nothing without first consulting Louise. He submitted to her the draft letter he had just written to the Abbé de Vaux: “I wrote to Abbé de Vaux telling him that you have given your word to supply Sisters for eight places before you can give him any. See, Mademoiselle, whether that is not contrary to what you have told him.”

In 1650, the Marquise de Maignelay had just asked for two sisters to be sent to the parish of Saint-Roch. The appeal was urgent, and the Marquise wanted the sisters to arrive the following day. Louise was reluctant to agree, and she gave her reasons to Vincent, who did not want to say no to the sister of Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi, the former general of the galleys:

The above-mentioned lady is asking for two Sisters for tomorrow. This poses two difficulties: first, we have to propose to you the ones we are to send and let you get to know them, and they have to make a retreat beforehand. The other difficulty is that girl, who remained and is now married, [a girl who had left the community] is living in the house where our Sisters are supposed to stay, and such proximity is dangerous for us. I most humbly entreat you to take the trouble to let me know what I should do in these circumstances so as not to displease the Marquise or do any wrong to ourselves.

Freedom emerges through an awareness of one’s own reactions, tendencies, and motivations. To judge oneself fairly is always difficult. Through
the comparison of ideas and points of view, the friendship that never seeks to dominate or conquer permits each person to come to a deeper knowledge of oneself. Louise desired a relationship that allowed for differences and helped her to grow:

I beg you most humbly, Monsieur, not to let the weaknesses of my spirit, which I have manifested to you, exact of your charity the condescension that might cause you to think I want you to defer to my way of thinking. This is completely foreign to my desire, and I have no greater pleasure than when I am reasonably thwarted, since God almost always gives me the grace to acknowledge and value the advice of others, particularly when this is a charity. I am certain of seeing this truth clearly, even in matters that may be obscure to me for a time.493

Louise and Vincent had no desire to influence one another, to force their own opinions on each other, or put themselves in the limelight. They wanted their relationship to make them more effective in their mission to proclaim Jesus Christ to the poor. This very unselfish characteristic of their friendship allowed them to honestly express their opinions to each other.

During his long sojourn in the west of France in 1649, Vincent visited the various houses of the Daughters of Charity. Before his arrival in Nantes, Louise spoke to him of Marie Thilouze, a sister who had always been problematic: “If you charity thinks Sister Marie from Tours needs to be changed, at least have her sent to Tours rather than back here to Paris. We have tried her in several places and, when I sent her to Nantes, I told her this was our last attempt. Do with her whatever your charity sees fit, as Our Lord inspires you.”494 Vincent, who was always so patient, did not want to send her home immediately but rather suggested that she be sent to Richelieu for one last try: “Marie must be sent to Richelieu; once she gets there, we will figure out a way to send her home.”495

A sister from Saint-Germain who was having difficulty regaining her strength after an illness asked to be sent to a faraway place to rest. Louise recognized the need for a change of air for this sister but was opposed to her making a long journey. She expressed her point of view to Vincent, whom the sister was going to meet:
I think a change of air will do her a great deal of good and that the air here [in Paris] would be better for her than elsewhere. Permit me to tell you, Most Honored Father ... I foresee many problems if your charity permits this journey because others have been refused the same thing for several reasons.496

With their mutual confidence and freedom, Louise and Vincent were also able to exchange their points of view on the future of Michel.497

**A Shared Friendship**

The more they encountered one another, the more Louise and Vincent discovered their complementarity. They not only shared common points of view concerning events, but more importantly, they shared their gifts, their talents, and their love for Jesus Christ. The mutual enrichment that resulted presupposed a long process of germination.

Gradually, Vincent communicated to Louise the optimism of his outlook in all things and his abiding peacefulness. He often witnessed Louise’s quick and lively temperament and her somewhat severe judgments. Slowly and patiently, he encouraged Louise to live more calmly, to change her outlook, and to conform herself to the model of Jesus who was meek and humble of heart.

The departure of young women who abandoned their vocation greatly pained the superioress of the Company. She judged them severely and felt guilty for having failed to help them. Vincent reassured her: “You are a little too sensitive about the departure of your Sisters. In the name of God, Mademoiselle, work at acquiring the grace of acceptance in such situations. Purging the Company in this way is an act of mercy Our Lord is granting it and will be one of the first things Our Lord will let you see in heaven.”498

Some of the young women had difficulty in acquiring the skills necessary to nurse or to teach catechism. Others did not want to make the necessary efforts for the formation, which they found difficult and tedious. Louise asked herself whether these sisters should be allowed to remain in the Company. Vincent appealed to her to discern more patiently:

With regard to your desire to unburden yourself of useless Sisters, I do not quite understand the uselessness of which you are complaining. If you mean that of our Sisters who are not productive or who do not know what to do after being tried
for a time and who, in fact, have no character traits that might give hope for improvement, you would do well to dismiss them. If, however, you mean those who are not yet sufficiently well trained for the duties of the Charity and therefore cannot attend to them, or who are prevented from doing so by some handicap of which they can be cured, I think, Mademoiselle, we must be as patient as possible with them.499

Gradually, Louise became aware of her impatience, anxiety, and tendency to dramatize. She thanked Vincent for coming to her aid: “I most humbly thank your charity for doing me so much good. It seems to me that when I allow myself to get carried away like that by the fears that put me in the same state as genuine afflictions, I need to be guided a little severely.”500 Vincent encouraged her to search for peace: “Be at peace; you are doing what has to be done before God.”501

The benevolence, indulgence, and forbearance that characterized Vincent’s approach gradually transformed Louise’s personality. In 1655, she wrote about a difficulty taking place at Saint-Denis Hospital: “Will your charity please let me know if there is anything I should do in this matter other than to admire the workings of Providence, to try to make known its goodness and consequences, and to believe that it is a good thing to suffer and to await patiently the hour of God in the most difficult circumstances? All this is so contrary to my very impulsive nature.”502

In 1658, Louise invited the impetuous Anne Hardemont to find peace in the midst of the difficulties she was experiencing at Ussel: “Do not be upset if things are not as you would want them to be for a long time to come. Do the little you can very peacefully and calmly so as to allow room for the guidance of God in your lives. Do not worry about the rest.”503

At the same time, Louise shared with Vincent her organizational talents and her opinions on the future of the Company. She realized that in the midst of his many responsibilities, Vincent could easily forget the meetings he had scheduled with the Daughters of Charity. She aided his memory by sending him reminders before a planned conference: “I most humbly entreat your charity to remember that ... we must have the conference you have so kindly promised us, tomorrow, Thursday. I most humbly entreat you to take the trouble to send us the subject so we can notify all our Sisters.”504 “I most humbly entreat your charity to remember that you promised us a conference for a week from today.”505
Louise appreciated the richness of Vincent’s insights and she wanted to take notes from his conferences to reflect on them afterward, to send them to sisters who were far away, and to preserve them for future sisters. What Vincent refused to allow the Priests of the Mission to do, he allowed the sisters to do at the gentle insistence of Louise. In January 1643, he had no sooner finished speaking when she asked him for his notes: “I hope our Sisters will make good use of the instruction your charity gave us today. Their hearts are all filled with desire to do this and they would really like to remember it forever. This causes me to entreat you most humbly to send us the little memorandum of the points you had in it. It seems to me that this would help me recall a large part of what our good God said to us through your mouth.”

It was in this way that the text of the magnificent conference on the virtues of country girls has come down to us. On 19 August 1646, Vincent spoke in the absence of Louise, who was accompanying the sisters going to Nantes. The notes were written by Élisabeth Hellot, who submitted them to Vincent. Very moved, he sent them on to Louise: “Enclosed is a summary of the conference of our dear Sisters, written out by dear Sister Hellot. I have just read part of it and must confess that I shed a few tears in two or three places. If you are not coming soon, send it back to us after you have read it.”

Louise possessed a conviction that she very much wanted Vincent to share. As a woman of great insight and intuition, she knew the Company of the Daughters of Charity could never be solidly established if in each diocese it was dependent on the local bishop. She believed that only the absolute dependence on the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission could assure the community’s long term fidelity to its charism. The service of the poor was the end of the Company, and to maintain this service in accordance with God’s plan, the Daughters had to remain humble servants. The Priests of the Mission, formed in the same spirit by the same founder, could assist them in keeping this identity. To maintain this authentic service, the Daughters of Charity had to continue to serve poor persons in their homes, as God had wished them to do since the time of their foundation. The Company’s dependence on the superior of the Congregation would prevent a bishop from one day trying to transform the Company into a cloistered order of nuns. With all the delicacy she could muster, Louise sought to convince Vincent: “The way Divine Providence has led me to speak to you on all occasions causes me on this one, where there is a question of carrying out the Holy Will of God, to speak to you in all simplicity.”

Many years would pass before Vincent would be convinced of this necessity and agree to have the act of the approbation of the Company changed,
recognizing him and his successors as superiors (see chapter 14). When this finally took place, Louise expressed her gratitude that now the Daughters of Charity could continue the work exactly in the way that was God’s will: “May Our Lord in His goodness continue to realize His plans for the Company under your holy guidance for many years to come.”

Vincent and Louise’s friendship had truly become a communion in which each one gave and received, in which each one placed at the service of the other all that he or she had and was. Their genuine friendship, based on their firm belief in a shared mission, led them to a profound acceptance of their differences and obtained for them an immense mutual enrichment.

A Strong Friendship

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac knew that they could count on each other in any circumstance. In 1657, Louise expressed this clearly: “The needs of the Company really make it somewhat urgent for us to meet and for me to speak to you. I think my mind is so weak that it is totally confused. Its only strength and peace, after God, is to be, by His love, Most Honored Father, your most humble and very obedient servant.”

The friendship between Louise and Vincent was strong because it was not self-seeking, but rather was based on a shared desire to conform themselves to Jesus Christ. Over and over they reinterpreted daily events in the light of the gospel. The pastor of the parish of Saint-Roch dismissed two sisters. Vincent meditated on this dismissal as he wrote to Louise: “If this is a reason...
for honoring the sorrow Our Lord experienced on seeing Himself driven out of places where He was—and His Apostles as well—oh! how good it is to have similar opportunities of uniting ourselves to the good pleasure of God!"​

The deaths of their companions were moments when their friendship fully expressed all its tenderness and when fidelity became the means for overcoming the pain of these deaths. In 1653, Vincent was overcome at the death of Monsieur Lambert in Poland. Louise wrote to him to express all her feelings and affection:

Am I not truly bold, Most Honored Father, to dare to mingle my tears with your usual submission to the ways of Divine Providence, and my weakness with the strength God has given you to bear the generous portion of Our Lord’s suffering, which He gives you so often?...

I could not conceal from you, Most Honored Father, the extent of my sorrow, but your charity has taught me to love the Will of God, who is so just and merciful ....

In 1658, it was Vincent’s turn to give his affectionate support to Louise at the death of her dear Sister Barbe Angiboust: “Meanwhile, let us honor the Blessed Virgin’s acquiescence in God’s good pleasure regarding the death of her Son.”

To honor the life of Jesus Christ on earth and to conform one’s life to his was advice that Vincent and Louise very often gave to the Daughters of Charity. It was the basis for their own lives and represented the true strength of their friendship.

Louise found in Vincent the steadfast support she needed when she was tormented by the behavior of her son, Michel. In these most painful moments, Louise did not hesitate to address herself to Vincent: “It is impossible for me to seek help elsewhere.... My sorrow is so great!” Vincent endeavored to bring peace to this mother who was in such anguish: “In the name of God, Mademoiselle, do not worry about the bailiff [Michel]. Do you not see the extraordinary care Our Lord is taking of Him, almost without you? Let His Divine Majesty act; He is quite capable of showing the mother, who takes care of so many children, His satisfaction in this, by the care He will take of her child, and that she could never anticipate or surpass Him in goodness.”

Age and infirmity began to affect the health of Louise and Vincent more and more. The kindness of their friendship is revealed by the concern they
showed one another. Louise once wrote, “I most humbly entreat Your Charity to allow me to ask you for news of the true state of your health. For the love of God, do not be in a hurry to go!” Vincent replied, “I thank Mademoiselle Le Gras most humbly for her concern about my health and I ask Our Lord to restore hers.” Louise extolled the medicinal benefits of tea. She closely followed the development of the ulcers on Vincent’s legs; his suffering had become her own. In all truth, she may have even been able to feel the pain in his legs. Louise suggested some dressing techniques and various medicines: “If you find it does you some good, continuing it once or twice a week will bring some relief to those poor legs of yours.” Fatigued and ill, Vincent good-naturedly accepted the prescribed treatments and wrote back to his nurse: “Her charity will judge from that what she thinks advisable for me to take tomorrow, and at what time. I will do so, God willing. I was feverish last night and this morning. I have just taken the tea.”

How beautiful it is to read the thank-yous they wrote to each other at the end of their lives. In March 1659, at the age of seventy-nine, Vincent wrote, “Never has her kindness seemed so worthy of esteem and so amiable. God be praised for manifesting Himself so well through the kindness of Mademoiselle, whom I thank once again with all the gratitude of my heart!” In January 1660, two months before her death, Louise in her turn thanked Vincent for the firmness with which he had supported God’s work against all opposition.

With this same simplicity, Louise and Vincent would help each other to prepare to leave this world and be born again in a new world. The prayers they offered for each other at the end of the year 1659 are the reflection of their mutual gratitude and their profound desire to remain faithful to God. Louise wrote to Vincent, “I am still hoping to see you when this can be done without endangering the precarious state of health God is giving you. I implore you to preserve it until the complete fulfillment of His plans for your soul, for His glory and the welfare of many others.” Vincent, for his part, dictated a short note for Louise to his secretary, Brother Ducourneau: “I wish Mademoiselle Le Gras as her New Year’s gift the fullness of the Spirit and, for her Company, that of the preservation of such a good mother, that she might give them an ever greater share of the gifts of this Spirit.”

In this search to draw closer and closer to God, they gradually accepted the fact that they would never see each other again in this life. In October 1658, Louise wrote, “I am somewhat distressed at having been so long deprived of speaking with you. God wills it, since he permits it to be so.” One year later, on 24 December 1659, she very calmly wrote, “My powerlessness to accomplish any good prevents me from having anything acceptable to offer to...
Our Lord … except the deprivation of the only consolation that His goodness has given me for thirty-five years.\textsuperscript{528} I accept this for love of Him and in the way that His Providence ordains…”\textsuperscript{529}

Louise and Vincent’s friendship was now beyond the need for any meetings. It had become so simple and transparent that it had no more need of human gestures. To the dying Louise, Vincent sent this short message: “You are the first to set out; if God forgives me my sins, I hope soon to rejoin you in heaven.”\textsuperscript{530}

Vincent and Louise’s friendship united them, beyond their differences, in the certainty that they were together fulfilling God’s will. Their relationship found its source and model in Jesus Christ who revealed the love of God for humanity through his Incarnation. This friendship was based on authenticity, that is, the profound acceptance of the other’s unique identity and the recognition and respect of their complementarity. It became the image of the Trinity, that great mystery of God in which the mutual gift is experienced simultaneously in unity and diversity.

Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul enriched the Church by their foundations for the service and evangelization of the poor, but above all, they illumined the world by their witness of a life that was simple, humble, and full of love.

THE END
LOUISE, VINCENT, AND DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY WITH CHILDREN.
OIL ON CANVAS BY M. GÓMEZ-MORENO, 1907.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
PORTRAIT OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC. PAINTING BY BRO. FRANÇOIS CARBONNIER, DATED 1865. ORIGINAL IN THE MOTHERHOUSE OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION, PARIS.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/


Ibid.

Ibid.


Cf. L.360B, “(To Sister Cécile Angiboust at Angers),” 8 February 1653, SW, 412. Louise exhorts the sisters to spiritual care of souls so that they will “make the acts of faith, hope and charity necessary for salvation … hate sin and love virtue … resolve to live well, if they recover, or to prepare well for death…. Lead them to desire to make a good confession in order to appease God’s anger with them because of their sins.”

Gobillon, Life, 4.

Document A.5, “(Retreat),” (c. 1632), SW, 717.


Document A.50, “(Visits to the Confraternities of Asnières and Saint-Cloud),” February 1630, *SW*, 705.


L.1, “To Monsieur Vincent,” 5 June 1627, SW, 5.


Letter 29, “To Saint Louise,” [between 1626 and May 1629], ibid., 1:54.


L.1, “To Monsieur Vincent,” 5 June 1627, SW, 6.


L.1, “To Monsieur Vincent,” 5 June 1627, SW, 6.


Letter 38, “To Saint Louise,” [April or May 1629], ibid., 1:63–64.

Ibid., 1:64.


Ibid., 1:65.

For details about places in France visited by Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul see: John E. Rybolt, C.M., In the Footsteps of Vincent de Paul: A Guide to Vincentian France (Chicago: DePaul University Vincentian Studies Institute, 2007).


Ibid., 706.

Ibid.

Letter 55, “To Saint Louise,” [September 1630], CCD, 1:86.


Letter 64, “To Saint Louise, in Montreuil,” [April 1631], *ibid.*, 1:102.
Letter 42, “To Saint Louise,” [1630], *ibid.*, 1:70.
Letter 46, “To Saint Louise, in Villepreux,” [April 1630], *ibid.*, 1:75.
Letter 84, “To Saint Louise,” [22 or 23 September 1631], *ibid.*, 1:126.


Mt. 26:41.

Document A.5, “(Retreat),” (c. 1632), *SW*, 717.


Letter 147, “To Saint Louise,” [around 2 September 1633], *ibid.*, 1:211.


Letter 50, “To Saint Louise,” [around 1630], *ibid.*, 1:82.

Letter 71, “To Saint Louise,” [before 1632], *ibid.*, 1:111.


Letter 147, “To Saint Louise,” [around 2 September 1633], *ibid.*, 1:211.


Letter 151, “To Saint Louise,” [August or September, around 1633], *ibid.*, 1:216.

Letter 152, “To Saint Louise,” [September or October 1633], *ibid.*, 1:217.

Gobillon, *Life*, 18. Reverend Nicolas Gobillon was pastor of St. Laurent Parish, in which Saint Louise lived with the early Daughters of Charity at the time of her death.


Letter 167, “To Saint Louise,” [around 1634], *ibid.*, 1:239.

Letter 210, “To Saint Louise,” [between 1634 and 1636], *ibid.*, 1:305.


Letter 207a, “To Saint Louise,” [October 1635], *ibid.*, 1:300.
Letter 379, “To Saint Louise, in La Chapelle,” [between 1635 and 1639], *ibid.*, 1:548.


L.8B, “To Monsieur Vincent,” [c. 1638], *SW*, 17.


Letter 228, “To Saint Louise,” [1636], *ibid.*, 1:327.


Letter 156a, “To Saint Louise,” [January 1634], *ibid.*, 1:223.


Letter 163, “To Saint Louise,” [March or April 1634], *ibid.*, 1:235.


Letter 175, “To Saint Louise,” [between 1632 and 1636, probably 22 July], *ibid.*, 1:240–41.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Mt. 18:20.


Ibid.


Ibid.

L.89, “To Monsieur Vincent,” [c. 1638], SW, 16.


Document A.80, “Rule For the Sisters Who Care For Children,” (c. 1640), SW, 736.


Bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704) often preached about the
eminent dignity of poor persons.


L.48, “To Monsieur Vincent,” (October 1641), SW, 63.
Letter 503, “To Saint Louise,” [1640 or 1641], CCD, 2:166.
Letter 529, “To Saint Louise,” [April or May 1641], ibid., 2:198.
Conference 6, “Explanation of the Regulations,” 16 August 1641, ibid., 9:34.
Conference 9, “Care of the Sick,” 9 March [1642], ibid., 9:49.
Document A.75 “(On the Conduct of Divine Providence),” SW, 768.
Ibid., 9:72.
Ibid.
L.110, “To Monsieur Vincent,” (c. October 1644), SW, 120.
L.111, “(Account of the Pilgrimage to Chartres),” 1644, ibid., 122.
186 Louise de Marillac: Come Winds or High Waters


211 §23. Saint John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* (“The Mother of the Redeemer”), 25 March 1987. “Jesus highlights a new relationship between Mother and Son, the whole truth and reality of which he solemnly confirms. One can say that if Mary’s motherhood of the human race had already been outlined, now it is clearly stated and established. It emerges from the definitive accomplishment of the Redeemer’s Paschal Mystery. The Mother of Christ, who stands at the very center of this mystery—a mystery which embraces each individual and all humanity—is given as mother to every single individual and all mankind.” See: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html)

212 Document A.10, “Resolutions for the Period from Ascension to Pentecost,” (c. 1630), *SW*, 704.


216 College may be compared with a boarding school for secondary education or high school.


218 Letter 221, “To Saint Louise,” [1636], *ibid.*, 1:314.


L.274, “To the Count de Maure,” (December 1649), *SW*, 308.


Lk. 14:26–27.


Letter of Monsieur Portail to Louise de Marillac, 18 March 1646, Archives of the Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, 140 rue du Bac, Paris. (Hereafter cited as ADCP.)


Letter of Monsieur Ratier to the Abbé de Vaux, n.d., ADCP.

Document A.44, “(Remarks on Three Deceased Sisters),” (c.1646), *SW*, 767.

Letter of Monsieur Ratier to Louise de Marillac, n.d., ADCP.


Ibid., 174.

Ibid.

L.151, “To Monsieur Vincent,” 21 August (1646), ibid., 167.


L.164, “To Monsieur L’Abbé de Vaux,” 27 November (1646), ibid., 186.


L.166, “To My Very Dear Sister Turgis,” (c. April 1647), SW, 196.


L.174, “(To Our Dear Sisters the Daughters of Charity),” 8 May (1647), SW, 196.


Ibid., 9:282.

Ibid., 9:283.


Ibid., 2:601.
Ibid., 2:602.

Ibid., 13b:126.

Letter 772, “Saint Louise to Saint Vincent,” [August or September 1645], ibid., 2:598.
Ibid., 2:599.
Ibid., 2:598–99.


Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.


Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid., 9:257.
Ibid., 9:258.


Document 147, “Petition of the Queen, Anne of Austria, to the Pope,” (1647), ibid., 13b:142.


Conference 40, “Love of Our Vocation,” 25 December 1648, ibid.,

L.324, “To My Very Dear Sister Julienne Loret,” 1 September (1651), SW, 369.
L.556, “(To the Sister Servant of Saint-Denis),” *ibid.*, 682.


L.97, “To Our Very Dear Sick Sister,” (March 1644), *ibid.*, 108.
L.230, “To My Very Dear Sisters Marie and Brigide,” (October 1648), *ibid.*, 265.


L.458, “(To Sister Madeleine Mongert),” (c. May 1646), *ibid.*, 146.


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For example, see A.100, “(Problems for the Company),” (1660), *ibid.*, 832-33.


Document A.8, “Retreat” (c. 1633), *ibid.*, 718.

Document A.10, “Resolutions for the Period from Ascension to Pentecost,” (c. 1630), *ibid.*, 704.

Mt. 25:40.


L.424, “(To Sister Barbe Angiboust at Bernay),” [c. May 1655], *ibid.*, 468.


L.125B, “To the Sisters,” 9 September 1644, *ibid.*, 118.


Monsieur Holden was a friend of the Marillac family.

L.221, “To My Very Dear Sister Hellot,” (28 August 1648), *SW*, 258.


*L.244,* “To Sister Jeanne Lepintre,” 6 April (1649), *ibid.*, 280.

L.259, “(To Sister Julienne Loret),” (April 1649), *ibid.*, 284.


See L.212, “To His Lordship, Chancellor Séguier,” (c.1649), *SW*, 306.


L.400, “(To Sister Anne Hardemont),” (c.1653), *ibid.*, 432.


Conference 3, “The Vocation of the Daughter of Charity,” 19 July 1640,
ibid., 9:18.

Ibid., 9:19.


Letter 1405, “To Saint Louise,” [September 1651], ibid., 4:257.


Ibid., 10:85.


L.360B, “(To Sister Cécile Angiboust),” 8 February 1653, SW, 412.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Document A.45, “(Advice requested from Monsieur Vincent),” 30 December 1656, SW, 814.

Ibid., 815.

Ibid.

L.174, “(To Our Dear Sisters, the Daughters of Charity),” 8 May (1647), *ibid.*, 197.


Document A.8, “Retreat,” (c. 1633), *ibid.*, 718.


L.395, “(To a Sister Servant),” *ibid.*, 682.

Document A.7, “(Retreat Meditations),” (c. 1628), *ibid.*, 698–702.


Document A.7, “(Retreat Meditations),” (c. 1628), *SW*, 701.


See Meditation M.40B, “(Abandonment to Divine Providence),” *ibid.*, 784.
Document A.45, “(Advice requested from Monsieur Vincent),” 30 December 1656, *ibid.*, 815.


Document A.62, “(Motives Which the Daughters of Charity have for Giving Themselves to God to Obtain the Preservation of the Company),” (25 May 1654), *SW*, 796.

Document A.61, “(On the Care that the Daughters of Charity Must Take to Preserve their Company),” n.d., *ibid.*, 824.


L.169, “(To Sister Turgis),” 31 January (1648), *SW*, 239.

Document A.62, “(Motives which the Daughters of Charity Have for Giving Themselves to God to Obtain the Preservation of the Company),” (25 May 1654), *ibid.*, 796.


L.481, “To Monsieur L’Abbé de Vaux,” 29 June (1649), *SW*, 293.


Gobillon, *Life*, 64.

This number includes 400 letters of Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 75 percent of which were written before 1642, the date of the installation of the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity in the faubourg Saint-Denis. The remaining 200 letters are from Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul, 80 percent of which were written after 1645, the date of the appointment of Brother Ducourneau as secretary to Monsieur Vincent.

Letter 38, “To Saint Louise,” [April or May 1629], ibid., 1:64.

Letter 136, “To Saint Louise,” [April 1633], CCD, 1:197. There could be the danger of contagion due to an epidemic of the plague.


See Constitutions, C. 32.a, 81.
Letter 2283, “Saint Louise to Saint Vincent,” [12 or 13 June 1657], CCD, 6:342.
Louise de Marillac:


Louise and Vincent had been friends for thirty-five years.
