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.219

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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Louise and the Virgin Mary. The text reads: “My dear sisters, I beg you to take the Holy Virgin as your only mother.”

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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/
Mes chères sœurs, je vous prie de prendre la Sainte-Vierge pour votre unique Mère.
(Dernières paroles de notre vénérable Mère.)

LOUISE AND THE VIRGIN MARY. THE TEXT READS:
"MY DEAR SISTERS, I BEG YOU TO TAKE THE HOLY VIRGIN AS YOUR ONLY MOTHER."

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