10 The Stormy Years: Crisis in the Company

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 Gesseaume, 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’Anhemont. 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.266 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.”267

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.’”268

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.
THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, SERVANTS OF THE SICK.

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