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, and 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.²⁹⁷ 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
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.317

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.”318

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.”319

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.”320

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.”323

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.”324 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.325

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.”326 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.”327

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.”328

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

113 Louise de Marillac: Come Winds or High Waters
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.

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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.

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THE ATTIRE AND HEADDRESS OF A DAUGHTER OF CHARITY.

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