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 confreres 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.  

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.”  

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.”\textsuperscript{381} 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.”\textsuperscript{382}

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.\textsuperscript{383} 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.”\textsuperscript{384}

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.\textsuperscript{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.  

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.” The order in which the names

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

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