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.403

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.404
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.”405 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.”406 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?”407

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.”408 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.”409

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.”410

Louise would struggle her entire life against this tendency to vivaciousness that often provoked such passionate reactions, this hasty 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. But
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.

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LOUISE’S NEW TOMB, IN THE CHAPEL OF OUR LADY OF THE MIRACULOUS MEDAL, DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY MOTHERHOUSE, PARIS.

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