The final hours of New Year’s Eve are a natural time to reflect on the year that is coming to an end. This exercise can anticipate that time when, approaching the end of life, people naturally reflect on the accounts of their lives that they must render to God.

On 31 December 1658, Louise sent her New Year’s greetings to Vincent and told him, “The last hours of the year are upon us. I throw myself at your feet to entreat Your Charity to obtain mercy for me, since I await only the one when God will call me to render an account to Him.”

Louise reflected for a long time on the Company. She wondered if she had done all she could to help the Daughters of Charity remain faithful to God’s plan for them. She would have liked to have had the opportunity to speak at length with Vincent about the difficulties she was experiencing. However, since she did not know when she would meet with him, she wrote out the different points that still needed to be decided with respect to the Company’s approval.

She noted, “I think something still remains to be done for the spiritual strengthening of the Company. If Your Charity would allow me to send you a report on this, I would do so even if I should have to blush for shame because of it.” The next morning, she continued, “My ailment prevented me from finishing this letter yesterday, and I am beginning the year with great weakness and suffering of mind and body.”

Louise spent several months composing her memorandum. In October 1659, she finally sent it to Vincent: “I am sending you, Most Honored Father, the document I mentioned to Your Charity concerning the spiritual means for consolidating the establishment of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Please do not show it to anyone else for fear lest they ridicule it. This memorandum has not been preserved, but several other texts written in the last years of her life permit us to form an understanding of her worries with regard to the future of the Company.

For some time, conflicts had emerged within the Company. Some sisters opposed certain of its structures and directions, and wanted them to be changed. To Louise, such a course of action appeared dangerous: “Another thing which would contribute to the ruin of the Company would be, first of all, a desire to alter its customs, because this would, in a way, be to prefer one’s own judgment to the guidance of God who knows well enough its future needs.” Three
points which touched on the very foundations of the Company were being called into question: poverty, humble employments, and secularity.

For several years, Louise had noticed changes in the behavior of some of the sisters. The first Daughters of Charity, for the most part, came from humble backgrounds. Through their contact with the Ladies of Charity in the Confraternities, they were introduced to the lifestyle of the nobility. In addition, the sisters received from the Ladies sums of money with which they purchased medicines and food for the poor. For these country girls, who were not used to handling money, there was great temptation:

Since the majority of those who enter the Company are not in the habit of conversing with persons of rank, nor are they used to handling money or to possessing little things which are now freely obtainable, there is another danger which is greatly to be feared, namely, that as they become accustomed to working with the rich and the influential they may take advantage of the situation .... Moreover, the management of money gives them the opportunity to appropriate some of it for themselves or to use it as their impulses dictate by purchasing useless objects because they have seen others with them.\(^{445}\)

The availability of funds led some of the sisters to live in relative comfort, no longer having to worry about working to earn their living.\(^{446}\) The founders put a great deal of emphasis on the necessity of manual labor to remind the sisters of their identity as servants rather than as Ladies of Charity living securely off their income. In 1649, during a conference on work, Vincent explained, “When our Sisters are comfortably established and don’t have enough to do, they’ll neglect the work they do have and won’t bother going to visit the poor. Then we’ll have to say good-bye to the Charity; it’s no longer the Charity; it’s buried; then we’ll have the funeral of the Charity.”\(^{447}\)

Vincent was saying that a life that was too easy and comfortable would prevent the sisters from being attentive to those who were suffering and from being creative in searching out new forms of poverty. In 1648, Louise had reminded Élisabeth Turgis of the importance of manual labor:

Remember well this practice of ours of earning our living through work.

Lately we have sisters around Melun. Oh, how they spare
nothing of themselves! God did not relieve us of the need to earn our bread simply to give us a life of ease. He did so in order that we might work even harder in imitation of His Son. 

This reminder was continued in the following letter with an invitation for the sisters to open their eyes: “My God, how I fear places where we are more comfortable than our condition indicates!... Are there no sick in any of the small neighboring villages?”

The manual labor the sisters performed to earn their living was the work typically done by most peasant women in the country or the city: sewing, spinning, washing clothes, raising livestock, making preserves, and so on. This work always needed to be done in addition to serving the poor. Louise was firm in her belief that if the sisters lost the habit of working for their living and if they imitated the lifestyle of upper class women, they would no longer be able to persevere in their vocation as servants of poor persons: “Another thing which could cause the complete destruction of the Company would be for the sisters to forget what they are, and on account of their long collaboration with the Ladies, which gives them the opportunity to handle the money donated for the poor and to live comfortably without worrying about earning their livelihood, to become complacent. This could lead to vain satisfaction and the desire to accumulate
goods. Forgetting the obligations of their vocation ....”

In Louise’s view, a Daughter of Charity could not call the poor her “lords and masters” unless she chose to live simply “for the love of the Poorest of the poor, Jesus Christ Our Lord.” She could not be content with beautiful resolutions and mere words, but she must choose to live in poverty: “I beg her to continue to love holy poverty, not only abstractly and in her words, but by practicing its many aspects.”

Louise also noticed that some sisters tried to draw attention to their abilities and to be personally recognized for the way that they taught catechism, taught the little girls, or prepared medicines in the pharmacies. She was concerned because these sisters always wanted additional education and were not interested in performing the more humble tasks required by the service of the sick poor. She noted:

Now since this method of instruction [used at La Fère] is brilliant and sophisticated, if those sisters who have great capabilities were permitted to undertake it but were not dispensed from more lowly tasks, they might, after having been well trained for it, seek dispensations from several exercises and expect better treatment than that given to those in more humble duties. If contradicted in this matter, they would soon leave the Company.

Other sisters would turn to avid reading. In the desire to appear capable, they would devote their attention to learning without taking into consideration other necessary work.

These sisters, who liked being placed on a pedestal, looked down on sisters who were less gifted or capable. Their conceit led them to form a clique in the midst of the Company. For Louise, these developments would inevitably lead to the total destruction of the Company:

However, to turn this into an essential function in the Company of the Daughters of Charity would be to enter on the pathway to its destruction. At the very least, it would divide it into two bodies. Those who would judge themselves capable of this employment would be the dominant group and, in their illusions of grandeur, they would fulfill the functions of Saint Mary Magdalen [the sister of Martha and
of Lazarus]. They would compromise and they would lord it over those employed in visiting the sick. Little by little, poor girls would be prevented from entering the Company and the others would soon become ladies. This is already the pretense of several sisters.\textsuperscript{454}

Louise foresaw that these sisters who considered themselves like “new Ladies” would experience the same difficulties as the Ladies of Charity, even though they thought they were full of ardor for serving the poor. Vincent observed that the Ladies “were often inconvenienced by carrying this soup pot, [and] became disheartened.”\textsuperscript{455}

Louise asked, Who, then, would be left to undertake the difficult services to the sick and the poor that were so essential to their vocation? Who would be willing to perform the many needed small, humble services that were not spectacular and which were so often scorned in the eyes of the world?

On 10 January 1660, she wrote to Marguerite Chétif, whom she had chosen, at the request of Vincent, to assume leadership of the Company after her death. She explained again the choice made to serve the poor by simple means and humble tasks. This choice required the foundation of a solid and deep Christian life:

So you have not found any girls who want to give themselves to the service of Our Lord in the poor as members of the Company?... This requires strong characters who desire to reach the holiness of true Christians and who want to die to themselves by mortification and a veritable act of renunciation, which they already made at the time of their holy Baptism, so that the Spirit of Jesus Christ may abide in them and grant them the strength to persevere in this way of life which is totally spiritual, although they will be employed in exterior works which appear lowly and despicable in the eyes of the world but which are glorious in the sight of God and His angels.\textsuperscript{456}

The sisters who questioned the Company’s direction also questioned a point that, to Louise, seemed essential to maintaining the service of poor persons. In January 1659, she informed Vincent of a discussion she had had with some of these sisters: “Some sensitive persons in the Company have a
repugnance for the term Confraternity and want only Society or Community. I took the liberty of saying that word [Confraternity] was essential for us and could be very helpful in remaining firm against innovation. I also said that it signified secularity for us.”

These sisters would have liked the Company of the Daughters of Charity to have the public status and renown of one of the great religious orders or monastic communities. They found living in a simple confraternity deprived them of the status and attention given to nuns. For them, the dress of a simple country girl did not have the glamor of a religious habit, and the head covering they wore seemed to attract scorn. They thought that the contemplative life, lived in a cloister, was superior to a life of service in the streets.

These sisters would have supported having the Company of the Daughters of Charity become a religious order of elite cloistered nuns (who would be addressed with the title of “Mother,” as was the custom at that time). The service of the poor would be delegated to a group of sisters outside of the cloister, or extern sisters. Louise explained all this to Vincent in January 1660: “My fear is that, if they were to settle into a lifestyle which required greater expenses and had customs tending toward ostentation and partial enclosure this would oblige them to seek means of maintaining it. It would also cause them to turn in on themselves, become inactive, and live separated from those who go out and are poorly clothed because certain Sisters say to one another that ‘this person who wears a poor headdress, this Sister in name only, is not respected but causes people to despise us.”

It must be remembered that at the time the secular character of the Company was revolutionary, and it surprised and astonished those who encountered the Daughters of Charity serving in the streets. Throughout their lives, Vincent and Louise continued to explain and justify it. In 1649, Louise wrote to the Abbé de Vaux, “I met with the Vicar General two or three times to explain to him that we were just a secular family.” One year later, while telling Vincent about the visit she had just made to the procurator general, she described what she had explained: “He asked me if we claimed to be regular or secular. I explained to him that we claim to be only the latter. He told me that this was unprecedented.”

For Louise de Marillac, as for Vincent de Paul, the secular character of the Company was indispensable for the maintenance of effective service of the poor, and for the mobility necessary to be able to serve the most abandoned wherever they were to be found: in the city, in the country, in hospitals or prisons, on the battlefields, or in regions devastated by war. This vocation
required each sister to have a profound personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a great esteem for the Rules of the Company, and a constant desire to live according to a spirit of humility, simplicity, and charity. Louise commented, “Gentleness, cordiality and forbearance must be the practices of the Daughters of Charity just as humility, simplicity and the love of the holy humanity of Jesus Christ, who is perfect charity, is their spirit. That, my dear Sisters, is a summary of what I think I should tell you about our Rules until such time as Divine Providence permits you to have the entire text.”

For Louise, living a life that was “poor, simple, [and] humble” was fundamental for the Company of the Daughters of Charity. It was only in this way that the sisters would be able to serve the most abandoned and “those who are destitute in all things,” and through their service, receive an opportunity to lead a more fully human life.

At all times and in all places, the Daughters of Charity have tried to be faithful to the inspiration of Louise de Marillac, so that they may respond with ever-renewed fidelity and availability to the contemporary needs of the poor.

A few hours before her death, Louise addressed some final words to the sisters gathered around her bed. She spoke of the uniqueness of the Company:

My dear Sisters, I continue to ask God for His blessings for you and pray that He will grant you the grace to persevere in your vocation in order to serve Him in the manner He asks of you.

Take good care of the service of the poor. Above all, live together in great union and cordiality, loving one another in imitation of the union and life of Our Lord.

Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only Mother.

On Monday of Passion Week, between eleven o’clock and noon, Louise de Marillac, aged sixty-eight, passed to her eternal rest and returned her soul to the Lord. It was 15 March 1660.
ENGRAVED PORTRAIT OF LOUISE TITLES HER AS THE MOTHER OF THE POOR.

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