For thirty-five years, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac worked together in the mission God had confided to them. A reading of the numerous letters that have come down to us (more than 600) helps us discover the astonishing and marvelous record of their friendship.467

Sanctity was not innate in either Vincent or Louise. It rested on their humanity. Their relationships with God and the poor and their friendship with each other would gradually transform, enhance, and perfect their entire personalities. The friendship that would unite this seventeenth-century man and woman emerged from a series of encounters in which each became aware of their own identities, discovered their mutual complementarity, and helped each other to grow in humanity and holiness.

The first meeting between Louise and Vincent was a difficult one. Reticence, hesitation, and incertitude on both their parts marked the beginning of their relationship. Louise noted how she had found accepting her new spiritual director “repugnant.”468 This word “repugnant” is a strong one, but it accurately indicates Louise’s initial feelings of distaste for her director. For his part, Vincent hesitated a great deal in taking on the responsibility for the spiritual direction of this widow, who was the niece of the former keeper of the seals and a tormented woman.

Vincent and Louise were also different from each other in every way: their social origins, their educations, their life experiences, and their temperaments. Nevertheless, through obedience to her “Light,” Louise opened her soul and her conscience to this forty-four-year-old priest. Vincent, for his part, responded to the needs of his thirty-four-year-old directee and helped her to free herself from her anguish and to calmly redirect her attention toward God and the poor.

For the first two years (1625–1627), the tone of their letters was very polite and formal. The letters also reveal how different each of their expectations were. Louise wanted to see her director frequently and worried when he was absent. Vincent did not want his regular activities to be impacted by the excessive demands of his directee. He said: “Our Lord ... Himself will act as your director. Yes, He will surely do so, and in such a way that He will lead you to see that it is He Himself.”469

Progressively, the tone of their letters changed, and by the beginning of 1628 their relationship was on an even keel. Vincent expressed this in several
If it were not so late as it is, I would come and see you to find out from you the details of the matter you wrote to me about. However, that will be for tomorrow with God’s help.”

“If I come early this evening, I shall have the happiness of a word with you.”

A more frequent correspondence was now gratefully received. Vincent expressed this very simply: “Mon Dieu, my dear daughter, how your letter and the thoughts [you] sent to me console me!”

More frequent meetings permitted Vincent and Louise to discover the richness of each other’s personality. In Vincent, Louise discovered a priest of sure judgment who was dedicated to leading souls to God and preoccupied with the poor. In Louise, Vincent recognized a woman of great sensitivity who was sometimes overzealous in her desire to do God’s will. If Vincent slowly and methodically walked like a peasant guiding his plow through the field to be planted, Louise, who was hasty, already looked forward to reaping the harvest. In this period of mutual discovery, Vincent played the dominant role. It was he who directed Louise to restore her confidence. Humbly, she allowed herself to be guided.

By 1629, Vincent decided the moment had come to invite Louise to be a part of his charitable activities. When he sent her on a mission to Montmirail on 6 May 1629, they had reached a genuine turning point in their relationship.

They then established an intense and effective collaboration working together on behalf of the same mission, which continued to grow through their efforts. The scale of their activities was enormous. Both of them were in the prime of life.

They studied the problems they encountered, either when they met or through letters. They shared their opinions with each other and took responsibility for resolving these issues. Their complementarity is obvious. Vincent considered Louise to be his collaborator, and in his letters, he no longer addressed her as “my dear daughter.” This term more appropriately described the relationship of a director with a directee. By now using the term “Mademoiselle,” Vincent recognized Louise’s full participation in shaping their common mission.

In Louise, Vincent encountered a woman who was intuitive and always ready to forge ahead; a woman with a great sense of organization and a concern for precision; a noblewoman who was at ease among the Ladies of Charity. In Vincent, Louise found a priest dedicated to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, a person full of common sense, a wise adviser, and a peasant who understood the need for growth.

Louise and Vincent were often called from Paris by the needs of the missions in the countryside and the Confraternities of Charity. During these
times their correspondence intensified, and regular letters (sometimes one per week) kept each other up-to-date on the joys and difficulties of the mission, the problems they encountered, and proposed solutions. These letters served a purpose for their missionary work, and the two correspondents also took the opportunity to inform each other about little news items from their daily lives, as in these examples from Vincent: “The horse’s falling on top of and under me was quite dangerous and the protection of Our Lord most extraordinary.... The fall left me with a slightly sprained ankle which, at present, gives me little pain.”474 “We have no water at all. I am sending to Monsieur Deure for some.”

They very comfortably shared their reflections on different events. Louise expressed the difficulty she felt when she encountered situations that were unclear and imprecise. Vincent shared the same point of view: “I am like you, Mademoiselle; there is nothing that bothers me more than uncertainty. But I do indeed greatly desire that God may be pleased to grant me the grace of making everything indifferent to me, and to you as well. Come now, we shall make every effort, please God, to acquire this holy virtue.”476 Their apostolic collaboration brought to light similar spiritual needs; in these instances, Vincent would use the word “we.” In another circumstance he wrote to Louise, “Remember our spiritual needs.”

In his letters, Vincent did not hesitate to share his own reflection on his actions: “It will be well for you to contact Madame Goussault and Mademoiselle Poulaillon to ask their opinion about Germaine. Just two days ago I became aware of that way of acting, which seems cordial and deferential to me. I may perhaps have offended them by having you make the final decision about your work without telling them.”478

The friendship that was forming between Louise and Vincent caused them to worry about the other’s state of health, especially during the plague epidemics that ravaged Paris from 1631 to 1633. Vincent told Louise, “Please take care of your health. It is no longer yours since you destine it for God.”479 For her part, Louise prepared medicines for Vincent, which he gratefully accepted.

The collaboration and friendship did not erase the differences that existed between Louise and Vincent, and it should not be surprising that a few misunderstandings arose. After the failed coup d’état against Cardinal Richelieu, Louise’s uncles, Michel de Marillac, the keeper of the seals, and Louis, the field marshal, were arrested and imprisoned. Louise suffered over the family tragedy. Vincent, doubtlessly trying to distract her from her grief, proposed that she go
to visit the Confraternities of Charity in the region of Montmirail. Louise’s reaction was unexpected. She thought Vincent was sending her away because he no longer wanted to see her. Astonished by this reaction, Vincent wrote of his pain: “Banish from your mind the reason you advanced to me for taking this trip. You could not imagine how that has saddened my heart. Oh no! I am not made that way, thank God; but God knows what he has communicated to me with regard to you, and you will understand in heaven.”

For a long time, Louise and Vincent had very different opinions on the future of the young country women serving the Confraternities. Louise had the intuition that it was with these women that she would somehow fulfill the “Light” she had received on the feast of Pentecost 1623: “A time would come when I would be in a position to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and that I would be in a small community where others would do the same. I then understood that I would be in a place where I could help my neighbor but I did not understand how this would be possible since there was to be much coming and going.”

But at first, Vincent did not see the need to organize them into a group distinct from the Confraternities of Charity. Although they still worked together to discern and judge the vocations of new sisters, Vincent left most of the responsibility for their formation to Louise: “Allow me to tell you that you should not send your young women to the place you mention without finding out from the doctor if there is any danger.”

However, as we have seen, Vincent gradually allowed himself to be convinced by Louise’s insistence. After all, what if God was speaking to him through her? After having prayed and reflected for a long while during his retreat, Vincent invited Louise to see him so they could study more closely the advisability of bringing the girls together in a small Community. On 29 November 1633, Louise welcomed the first young women from the Confraternities into her home to live in community and better serve God and poor persons.

The rapid increase in the number of young women who joined the community and their dispersal to many places led Vincent and Louise to determine the distinctive spirit that should animate the members of this new confraternity. Louise drafted the daily schedule and the rules. Vincent edited them and explained them in conferences given to the young women. On a daily basis, Louise helped the sisters form their prayer life, learn how to live together in charity, and learn how to love and respect the poor whom they served.
Louise and Vincent helped each other face challenges as they arose: the many requests of the Ladies of Charity for sisters to serve in their parishes or villages, the sickness and death of some sisters who were victims of their devotion, and the problems created by the behavior of some of the immature sisters. Louise, who was somewhat wounded by the attitude of one girl, received these words of encouragement from Vincent: “Do not be astonished at seeing the rebellion of that poor creature. We shall see many more like her, if we live on; and should we not suffer as much from our own as Our Lord did from His? Let us be truly submissive to His good pleasure in the situation of the moment.”

Vincent’s enthusiasm often helped Louise to recover her serenity in the midst of her concern with so many daily problems. He often commented on the beauty and the grandeur of the vocation of a Daughter of Charity. Upon the death of one of the sisters, he wrote, “I trust, Mademoiselle, that she is very happy, seeing that she died in the practice of a virtue with which she could not be lost; for she died in the exercise of divine love since she died in that of charity.”

The deaths of sisters upset Louise a great deal. She wondered why God was taking his workers. Vincent intervened once more:

You seem depressed. You are afraid that God is angry and wants none of the service you are rendering Him, because He is taking your Daughters away from you. Far from it, Mademoiselle, His acting that way is a sign that He cherishes it, for He is treating you as His dear spouse, the Church. At its beginning, He not only had the majority die by natural deaths, but also from torture and torments. Who would not have said on seeing that, that He was angry with those holy young plants? Therefore, do not believe that any longer, but rather the contrary.”

This attentiveness to the other person in a relationship brings with it personal support when it is needed. However, there are also times in such close relationships when tensions and conflicts naturally arise. This is what happened during a difficult time in Vincent and Louise’s relationship between 1640 and 1642. During this time, the differences in their personalities caused a distance to grow between them, and even their complementary aspects provoked different reactions in them. The relationship between this very committed man and woman became reserved and cool.
A shared mission first brought Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac together. The first years of getting to know one another were followed by a time of mutual discovery and then by a period of intense collaboration. This was followed by a period that was rather more difficult, but from which they emerged with a better knowledge and esteem of each other as they moved forward. The magnificent friendship they would share for eighteen additional years would radiate both humanity and sanctity.

The spontaneity and authenticity of their sharing reveals the absolute freedom which existed between them. Faced with the many problems that needed to be resolved and decisions that needed to be made, their friendship moved beyond mutual assistance and arrived at a profound sharing. The strength that flowed from their friendship was even more unshakable because it was rooted in their faith in God and in Jesus Christ who died and rose again for the salvation of humanity.

A Friendship of Freedom

The basis of the relationship between Louise and Vincent was freedom from timidity, fear, or prejudice. It allowed them to share their thoughts and opinions in all simplicity and truth, certain of the other’s openness. This freedom emerged
from the recognition of their responsibilities and mutual trust.

Louise, who was often afraid of bothering Vincent, wrote to him in 1644: “The confidence our good God has given my heart towards your charity overcomes the fear I should justly have of bothering you.” In 1655, she noted how free she felt to express her thoughts, this time in much different terms: “I most humbly ask pardon of your charity for the liberty I have taken of speaking to you so freely. I noticed this as I reread my letter.”

This freedom of expression manifested itself every day in the way in which they discussed the life of the Daughters of Charity. They made mutual decisions in light of the gospel and by their shared reflection on events: “We must decide what will be done with Marie Denyse.” Louise proposed changes that seemed expedient to make at the town of Chars where the Jansenist pastor was somewhat uncompromising: “So as not to offend the Pastor of Chars too much, I have been thinking since yesterday about suggesting to your charity, if you think fit, to send Sister Jeanne-Christine in place of Sister Turgis and to keep Sister Jacquette for Chantilly.”

Vincent would do nothing without first consulting Louise. He submitted to her the draft letter he had just written to the Abbé de Vaux: “I wrote to Abbé de Vaux telling him that you have given your word to supply Sisters for eight places before you can give him any. See, Mademoiselle, whether that is not contrary to what you have told him.”

In 1650, the Marquise de Maignelay had just asked for two sisters to be sent to the parish of Saint-Roch. The appeal was urgent, and the Marquise wanted the sisters to arrive the following day. Louise was reluctant to agree, and she gave her reasons to Vincent, who did not want to say no to the sister of Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi, the former general of the galleys:

The above-mentioned lady is asking for two Sisters for tomorrow. This poses two difficulties: first, we have to propose to you the ones we are to send and let you get to know them, and they have to make a retreat beforehand. The other difficulty is that girl, who remained and is now married, [a girl who had left the community] is living in the house where our Sisters are supposed to stay, and such proximity is dangerous for us. I most humbly entreat you to take the trouble to let me know what I should do in these circumstances so as not to displease the Marquise or do any wrong to ourselves.

Freedom emerges through an awareness of one’s own reactions, tendencies, and motivations. To judge oneself fairly is always difficult. Through
the comparison of ideas and points of view, the friendship that never seeks to
dominate or conquer permits each person to come to a deeper knowledge of
oneself. Louise desired a relationship that allowed for differences and helped
her to grow:

I beg you most humbly, Monsieur, not to let the weaknesses
of my spirit, which I have manifested to you, exact of your
charity the condescension that might cause you to think I
want you to defer to my way of thinking. This is completely
foreign to my desire, and I have no greater pleasure than when
I am reasonably thwarted, since God almost always gives
me the grace to acknowledge and value the advice of others,
particularly when this is a charity. I am certain of seeing this
truth clearly, even in matters that may be obscure to me for a
time.\textsuperscript{493}

Louise and Vincent had no desire to influence one another, to force their
own opinions on each other, or put themselves in the limelight. They wanted
their relationship to make them more effective in their mission to proclaim
Jesus Christ to the poor. This very unselfish characteristic of their friendship
allowed them to honestly express their opinions to each other.

During his long sojourn in the west of France in 1649, Vincent visited the
various houses of the Daughters of Charity. Before his arrival in Nantes, Louise
spoke to him of Marie Thilouze, a sister who had always been problematic: “If
you charity thinks Sister Marie from Tours needs to be changed, at least have
her sent to Tours rather than back here to Paris. We have tried her in several
places and, when I sent her to Nantes, I told her this was our last attempt. Do
with her whatever your charity sees fit, as Our Lord inspires you.”\textsuperscript{494} Vincent,
who was always so patient, did not want to send her home immediately but
rather suggested that she be sent to Richelieu for one last try: “Marie must
be sent to Richelieu; once she gets there, we will figure out a way to send her
home.”\textsuperscript{495}

A sister from Saint-Germain who was having difficulty regaining her
strength after an illness asked to be sent to a faraway place to rest. Louise
recognized the need for a change of air for this sister but was opposed to her
making a long journey. She expressed her point of view to Vincent, whom the
sister was going to meet:
I think a change of air will do her a great deal of good and that the air here [in Paris] would be better for her than elsewhere.

Permit me to tell you, Most Honored Father ... I foresee many problems if your charity permits this journey because others have been refused the same thing for several reasons. 496

With their mutual confidence and freedom, Louise and Vincent were also able to exchange their points of view on the future of Michel. 497

A Shared Friendship

The more they encountered one another, the more Louise and Vincent discovered their complementarity. They not only shared common points of view concerning events, but more importantly, they shared their gifts, their talents, and their love for Jesus Christ. The mutual enrichment that resulted presupposed a long process of germination.

Gradually, Vincent communicated to Louise the optimism of his outlook in all things and his abiding peacefulness. He often witnessed Louise's quick and lively temperament and her somewhat severe judgments. Slowly and patiently, he encouraged Louise to live more calmly, to change her outlook, and to conform herself to the model of Jesus who was meek and humble of heart.

The departure of young women who abandoned their vocation greatly pained the superioress of the Company. She judged them severely and felt guilty for having failed to help them. Vincent reassured her: "You are a little too sensitive about the departure of your Sisters. In the name of God, Mademoiselle, work at acquiring the grace of acceptance in such situations. Purging the Company in this way is an act of mercy Our Lord is granting it and will be one of the first things Our Lord will let you see in heaven." 498

Some of the young women had difficulty in acquiring the skills necessary to nurse or to teach catechism. Others did not want to make the necessary efforts for the formation, which they found difficult and tedious. Louise asked herself whether these sisters should be allowed to remain in the Company. Vincent appealed to her to discern more patiently:

With regard to your desire to unburden yourself of useless Sisters, I do not quite understand the uselessness of which you are complaining. If you mean that of our Sisters who are not productive or who do not know what to do after being tried
for a time and who, in fact, have no character traits that might give hope for improvement, you would do well to dismiss them. If, however, you mean those who are not yet sufficiently well trained for the duties of the Charity and therefore cannot attend to them, or who are prevented from doing so by some handicap of which they can be cured, I think, Mademoiselle, we must be as patient as possible with them. They have no character traits that might give hope for improvement. If, however, you mean those who are not yet sufficiently well trained for the duties of the Charity and therefore cannot attend to them, or who are prevented from doing so by some handicap of which they can be cured, I think, Mademoiselle, we must be as patient as possible with them.499

Gradually, Louise became aware of her impatience, anxiety, and tendency to dramatize. She thanked Vincent for coming to her aid: “I most humbly thank your charity for doing me so much good. It seems to me that when I allow myself to get carried away like that by the fears that put me in the same state as genuine afflictions, I need to be guided a little severely.”500 Vincent encouraged her to search for peace: “Be at peace; you are doing what has to be done before God.”501

The benevolence, indulgence, and forbearance that characterized Vincent’s approach gradually transformed Louise’s personality. In 1655, she wrote about a difficulty taking place at Saint-Denis Hospital: “Will your charity please let me know if there is anything I should do in this matter other than to admire the workings of Providence, to try to make known its goodness and consequences, and to believe that it is a good thing to suffer and to await patiently the hour of God in the most difficult circumstances? All this is so contrary to my very impulsive nature.”502

In 1658, Louise invited the impetuous Anne Hardemont to find peace in the midst of the difficulties she was experiencing at Ussel: “Do not be upset if things are not as you would want them to be for a long time to come. Do the little you can very peacefully and calmly so as to allow room for the guidance of God in your lives. Do not worry about the rest.”503

At the same time, Louise shared with Vincent her organizational talents and her opinions on the future of the Company. She realized that in the midst of his many responsibilities, Vincent could easily forget the meetings he had scheduled with the Daughters of Charity. She aided his memory by sending him reminders before a planned conference: “I most humbly entreat your charity to remember that ... we must have the conference you have so kindly promised us, tomorrow, Thursday. I most humbly entreat you to take the trouble to send us the subject so we can notify all our Sisters.”504 “I most humbly entreat your charity to remember that you promised us a conference for a week from today.”505
Louise appreciated the richness of Vincent’s insights and she wanted to take notes from his conferences to reflect on them afterward, to send them to sisters who were far away, and to preserve them for future sisters. What Vincent refused to allow the Priests of the Mission to do, he allowed the sisters to do at the gentle insistence of Louise. In January 1643, he had no sooner finished speaking when she asked him for his notes: “I hope our Sisters will make good use of the instruction your charity gave us today. Their hearts are all filled with desire to do this and they would really like to remember it forever. This causes me to entreat you most humbly to send us the little memorandum of the points you had in it. It seems to me that this would help me recall a large part of what our good God said to us through your mouth.”

It was in this way that the text of the magnificent conference on the virtues of country girls has come down to us. On 19 August 1646, Vincent spoke in the absence of Louise, who was accompanying the sisters going to Nantes. The notes were written by Élisabeth Hellot, who submitted them to Vincent. Very moved, he sent them on to Louise: “Enclosed is a summary of the conference of our dear Sisters, written out by dear Sister Hellot. I have just read part of it and must confess that I shed a few tears in two or three places. If you are not coming soon, send it back to us after you have read it.”

Louise possessed a conviction that she very much wanted Vincent to share. As a woman of great insight and intuition, she knew the Company of the Daughters of Charity could never be solidly established if in each diocese it was dependent on the local bishop. She believed that only the absolute dependence on the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission could assure the community’s long term fidelity to its charism. The service of the poor was the end of the Company, and to maintain this service in accordance with God’s plan, the Daughters had to remain humble servants. The Priests of the Mission, formed in the same spirit by the same founder, could assist them in keeping this identity. To maintain this authentic service, the Daughters of Charity had to continue to serve poor persons in their homes, as God had wished them to do since the time of their foundation. The Company’s dependence on the superior of the Congregation would prevent a bishop from one day trying to transform the Company into a cloistered order of nuns. With all the delicacy she could muster, Louise sought to convince Vincent: “The way Divine Providence has led me to speak to you on all occasions causes me on this one, where there is a question of carrying out the Holy Will of God, to speak to you in all simplicity.”

Many years would pass before Vincent would be convinced of this necessity and agree to have the act of the approbation of the Company changed,
recognizing him and his successors as superiors (see chapter 14). When this finally took place, Louise expressed her gratitude that now the Daughters of Charity could continue the work exactly in the way that was God’s will: “May Our Lord in His goodness continue to realize His plans for the Company under your holy guidance for many years to come.”

Vincent and Louise’s friendship had truly become a communion in which each one gave and received, in which each one placed at the service of the other all that he or she had and was. Their genuine friendship, based on their firm belief in a shared mission, led them to a profound acceptance of their differences and obtained for them an immense mutual enrichment.

A Strong Friendship

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac knew that they could count on each other in any circumstance. In 1657, Louise expressed this clearly: “The needs of the Company really make it somewhat urgent for us to meet and for me to speak to you. I think my mind is so weak that it is totally confused. Its only strength and peace, after God, is to be, by His love, Most Honored Father, your most humble and very obedient servant.”

The friendship between Louise and Vincent was strong because it was not self-seeking, but rather was based on a shared desire to conform themselves to Jesus Christ. Over and over they reinterpreted daily events in the light of the gospel. The pastor of the parish of Saint-Roch dismissed two sisters. Vincent meditated on this dismissal as he wrote to Louise: “If this is a reason
for honoring the sorrow Our Lord experienced on seeing Himself driven out of places where He was—and His Apostles as well—oh! how good it is to have similar opportunities of uniting ourselves to the good pleasure of God!”

The deaths of their companions were moments when their friendship fully expressed all its tenderness and when fidelity became the means for overcoming the pain of these deaths. In 1653, Vincent was overcome at the death of Monsieur Lambert in Poland. Louise wrote to him to express all her feelings and affection:

Am I not truly bold, Most Honored Father, to dare to mingle my tears with your usual submission to the ways of Divine Providence, and my weakness with the strength God has given you to bear the generous portion of Our Lord’s suffering, which He gives you so often?...

I could not conceal from you, Most Honored Father, the extent of my sorrow, but your charity has taught me to love the Will of God, who is so just and merciful ...

In 1658, it was Vincent’s turn to give his affectionate support to Louise at the death of her dear Sister Barbe Angiboust: “Meanwhile, let us honor the Blessed Virgin’s acquiescence in God’s good pleasure regarding the death of her Son.”

To honor the life of Jesus Christ on earth and to conform one’s life to his was advice that Vincent and Louise very often gave to the Daughters of Charity. It was the basis for their own lives and represented the true strength of their friendship.

Louise found in Vincent the steadfast support she needed when she was tormented by the behavior of her son, Michel. In these most painful moments, Louise did not hesitate to address herself to Vincent: “It is impossible for me to seek help elsewhere.... My sorrow is so great!” Vincent endeavored to bring peace to this mother who was in such anguish: “In the name of God, Mademoiselle, do not worry about the bailiff [Michel]. Do you not see the extraordinary care Our Lord is taking of Him, almost without you? Let His Divine Majesty act; He is quite capable of showing the mother, who takes care of so many children, His satisfaction in this, by the care He will take of her child, and that she could never anticipate or surpass Him in goodness.”

Age and infirmity began to affect the health of Louise and Vincent more and more. The kindness of their friendship is revealed by the concern they
showed one another. Louise once wrote, “I most humbly entreat Your Charity to allow me to ask you for news of the true state of your health. For the love of God, do not be in a hurry to go out!” Vincent replied, “I thank Mademoiselle Le Gras most humbly for her concern about my health and I ask Our Lord to restore hers.” Louise extolled the medicinal benefits of tea. She closely followed the development of the ulcers on Vincent’s legs; his suffering had become her own. In all truth, she may have even been able to feel the pain in his legs. Louise suggested some dressing techniques and various medicines: “If you find it does you some good, continuing it once or twice a week will bring some relief to those poor legs of yours.” Fatigued and ill, Vincent good-naturedly accepted the prescribed treatments and wrote back to his nurse: “Her charity will judge from that what she thinks advisable for me to take tomorrow, and at what time. I will do so, God willing. I was feverish last night and this morning. I have just taken the tea.”

How beautiful it is to read the thank-yous they wrote to each other at the end of their lives. In March 1659, at the age of seventy-nine, Vincent wrote, “Never has her kindness seemed so worthy of esteem and so amiable. God be praised for manifesting Himself so well through the kindness of Mademoiselle, whom I thank once again with all the gratitude of my heart!” In January 1660, two months before her death, Louise in her turn thanked Vincent for the firmness with which he had supported God’s work against all opposition.

With this same simplicity, Louise and Vincent would help each other to prepare to leave this world and be born again in a new world. The prayers they offered for each other at the end of the year 1659 are the reflection of their mutual gratitude and their profound desire to remain faithful to God. Louise wrote to Vincent, “I am still hoping to see you when this can be done without endangering the precarious state of health God is giving you. I implore you to preserve it until the complete fulfillment of His plans for your soul, for His glory and the welfare of many others.” Vincent, for his part, dictated a short note for Louise to his secretary, Brother Ducourneau: “I wish Mademoiselle Le Gras as her New Year’s gift the fullness of the Spirit and, for her Company, that of the preservation of such a good mother, that she might give them an ever greater share of the gifts of this Spirit.”

In this search to draw closer and closer to God, they gradually accepted the fact that they would never see each other again in this life. In October 1658, Louise wrote, “I am somewhat distressed at having been so long deprived of speaking with you. God wills it, since he permits it to be so.” One year later, on 24 December 1659, she very calmly wrote, “My powerlessness to accomplish any good prevents me from having anything acceptable to offer to
Our Lord … except the deprivation of the only consolation that His goodness has given me for thirty-five years.⁵²⁸ I accept this for love of Him and in the way that His Providence ordains…”⁵²⁹

Louise and Vincent’s friendship was now beyond the need for any meetings. It had become so simple and transparent that it had no more need of human gestures. To the dying Louise, Vincent sent this short message: “You are the first to set out; if God forgives me my sins, I hope soon to rejoin you in heaven.”⁵³⁰

Vincent and Louise’s friendship united them, beyond their differences, in the certainty that they were together fulfilling God’s will. Their relationship found its source and model in Jesus Christ who revealed the love of God for humanity through his Incarnation. This friendship was based on authenticity, that is, the profound acceptance of the other’s unique identity and the recognition and respect of their complementarity. It became the image of the Trinity, that great mystery of God in which the mutual gift is experienced simultaneously in unity and diversity.

Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul enriched the Church by their foundations for the service and evangelization of the poor, but above all, they illumined the world by their witness of a life that was simple, humble, and full of love.

THE END
LOUISE, VINCENT, AND DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY WITH CHILDREN.
OIL ON CANVAS BY M. GÓMEZ-MORENO, 1907.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
PORTRAIT OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC. PAINTING BY BRO. FRANÇOIS CARBONNIER, DATED 1865. ORIGINAL IN THE MOTHERHOUSE OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION, PARIS.

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