The childhood and adolescence of Louise de Marillac were marked by suffering that affected her deeply. Louise never knew the gentleness of a mother. Neither did she experience the warmth of growing up in a family home. Her father, Louis de Marillac, born in 1556, was a widower at the time his daughter was born. Who was her mother? No one knows, and no one will ever know. Louise’s baptismal records have never been found, as many seventeenth-century records have disappeared. Louise’s father remarried on 15 January 1595. His new wife was Antoinette Le Camus, a widowed mother with three children. At that time, no doubt foreseeing future difficulties, Louis de Marillac signed a legal document providing an income for his daughter. Louise was placed in the convent of Poissy; she would never return to live with her stepmother. In her writings, Louise spoke of her Marillac and Attichy cousins, but never referred to her half-sister Innocente, who was born in 1601.

Louise de Marillac was born on 12 August 1591. Her place of birth is not known, but it is most likely her mother lived in Paris and that during her pregnancy she suffered the privations caused by the long siege of the city. In 1590, Paris had been besieged by Henry IV’s troops. Henry had succeeded to the French throne after the assassination of Henry III. As a Huguenot, the new king was not acceptable to many of his Catholic subjects, and he had to capture Paris by force. The siege resulted in a great famine in the city. All this might help to explain Louise’s fragile health and frequent migraines.

At the age of thirteen, Louise felt the sorrow of her father’s death on 25 July 1604. Louis de Marillac loved his daughter, even if his affection could not be expressed fully because of the circumstances of her birth and his remarriage. He wrote in his will “that she had been his greatest consolation in the world and that he thought she had been given him by God for his peace of mind in the afflictions of life.” At her father’s death, Louise again felt a great loneliness and sense of abandonment. Her uncle Michel became her guardian, but he remained a rather distant and aloof figure.
In spite of the sufferings that left their mark on her youthful personality, Louise would attain sanctity. Isn’t this a lesson God is giving to us, demonstrating how even a child so wounded by life can blossom, do good, and arrive at true sanctity?

The education Louise received, while bringing her much joy and enrichment, was also a source of additional suffering. While still very young, she was entrusted to the Dominican nuns of the royal convent of Poissy. Founded by Saint Louis IX, this convent took in young noble girls as boarders to provide them with an education corresponding to their rank in society.

Louise de Marillac belonged to one of the great French families who occupied important posts in the army and royal administration during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Her uncle and guardian, Michel de Marillac, became keeper of the seals, the most important position in the kingdom after the monarch. Her uncle Louis was a marshal of France, holding the highest rank in the army. Her aunt Valence’s husband would become the minister of finance. From her father’s family, which had its origins in Auvergne, Louise received the heritage of a keen sense of honor, a love of work, a certain impetuosity, and the soul of a mystic. It was also said that the Marillacs were a handsome and proud people.

At Poissy, Louise received an excellent education and a thorough religious formation. She learned to know Jesus Christ, to love him, to pray to him, and to serve him by serving the poor. Her daily life in the convent was punctuated by prayer and participation in the sacramental life of the Church. The Dominican nuns gave their students a solid humanistic education. Louise learned to read and write, and studied Latin and perhaps Greek. She also learned painting and music. At Poissy, she experienced the deep affection of one of her aunts, a learned nun named Mother Louise de Marillac.

Suddenly, Louise had to leave this convent she loved. Was it her father who, unable to pay her expenses at Poissy, withdrew her? In 1602, Louis de Marillac sued his wife, charging her with squandering his money. Louise was then placed in a boarding house similar to a finishing school. According to her biographer Nicolas Gobillon, “[Her father] placed her in Paris, in the hands of a capable and virtuous woman, who would give her suitable training in household skills.”

At this juncture, Louise had her first experience of real poverty. In this boarding house, daily life was very different from that at Poissy. Louise received a practical education here, learning cooking, housekeeping, and sewing, all the skills thought necessary for a woman to possess.
Through these varied educational experiences, God prepared Louise for her future role as educator of the sisters and foundress of the Company. Isn't this an example of how God invites us to discover the evidence of his love in each event of our lives?

In 1606, a religious ceremony took place in Paris that awakened (or reawakened) in the fifteen-year-old Louise a desire to consecrate herself to God. A community of Capuchin nuns was solemnly installed in a new convent on Rue Saint-Honoré: “The nuns entered Paris in procession, barefooted, the archbishop of Paris in person at their head. The nuns set a striking example of the strictest asceticism and radiated the light of Franciscan devotion.”

The young Louise felt a strong attraction to the nuns’ life of prayer, manual labor, and great poverty. She often went to pray in their chapel. It was at this time that she vowed to give herself to God by joining this rigorous cloistered convent. Given the attitudes of the time, one might wonder whether Louise saw this vocation as a way for her to “appease God’s justice” and atone for her father’s sin that had led to her birth.

Some years later, Louise told her guardian of her desire and asked for his permission to enter the Capuchin order. He advised her to meet with the provincial of the Capuchins, Honoré de Champigny. The provincial’s response was firm and clear: Louise, whose health was precarious, would not be able
to endure the austerities of the Rule. She was therefore not suitable for entry into Capuchin life. Finally, whether to console the young woman or whether inspired by God, the priest “declared to her that he thought God had some other design on her.”

For Louise, this rejection was yet another profound disappointment. She now felt she had failed to keep her promise to God. Was this refusal also perhaps linked to her inability to bring a sufficient dowry to enter the cloister? She again felt the sting of her poverty and loneliness. The words of Father de Champigny, “God has other designs on you,” were engraved on Louise’s heart. But what did God want of her? She returned to this question often in her prayers.

During her retreat in 1632, Louise was still asking this question. She wrote: “I must perseveringly await the coming of the Holy Spirit although I do not know when that will be. I must accept this uncertainty as well as my inability clearly to perceive at this time the path which God wishes me to follow in His service. I must abandon myself entirely to His Providence so as to be completely His. In order to prepare my soul for this, I must willingly renounce all things to follow Him.”

To distract Louise, her uncle Michel sent her to live with her aunt Valence, where she was kept busy helping with her seven cousins. The Marillac family would now try to find a husband for this woman, soon to be twenty-two years old.
PLAN OF THE CITY OF PARIS CIRCA 1615.
ENGRAVING BY MATTHÄUS MERIAN.

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