The First Expansion of the Company (1636–1642)

The number of Daughters who committed themselves to the service of the sick poor in the parishes of Paris continued to grow. From five or six sisters in 1633, they grew to twelve by July 1634 and around twenty at the beginning of 1636. Louise’s house was becoming too small for them. It was time to think of moving. But where would they find a large house? How would they cover the cost of rental or purchase?

Since they had to move anyway, Louise wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to move closer to Vincent. Since 1632, the Congregation of the Mission had been headquartered at the Priory of Saint-Lazare, just north of Paris on the rue Saint-Denis. Louise wanted to find a house nearby to make it easier to consult with Vincent and more quickly resolve the many problems related to the Daughters’ community life and service in the parishes.

Vincent did not think it was appropriate for the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity to be located near Saint-Lazare. Although such a move would have been more convenient, he was concerned about what people would say seeing the frequent contacts between the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity:

You may perhaps think that I have some reason which involves you on account of which I think it unwise for you to live in this neighborhood. Oh! no, that is not the case at all I assure you. The reason, rather, is this: we are among people who watch everything and pass judgment on everything.

They would not see us go into your house three times without finding the opportunity to talk, to draw conclusions, which they ought not to draw, and to repeat them wherever they go. It is not that we have been watching them, but only the one who has the power to do so.138

Fearing that he might have saddened Louise by his refusal, Vincent added, “When I have the happiness of seeing you, I will speak to you about the matter in greater detail.”139

Louise accepted Vincent’s decision since she considered him to be the superior of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, and she looked for another location for the new house. Madame Goussault, the president of the
Ladies of Charity at the Hôtel-Dieu, assisted in the search. Two rental properties were examined: “The house to which Madame Goussault was referring is not the one I mentioned to you. The first is more beautiful and is priced at forty or fifty thousand livres; the second costs about seven or eight. The first one would be scandalous for poor girls and the second is too far from the Church [sic]. You will see.”¹⁴⁰

Vincent had confidence in Louise’s prudence and simplicity. In the end, neither of the two houses was chosen and the search continued. A vacant house was located at La Chapelle, a little village situated between Saint-Lazare and Saint-Denis. Madame Goussault spoke to Vincent about the property, and he invited Louise to go see it: “I wrote Madame Goussault, the President’s wife, that I think you would be wise to go and see the house in La Chapelle and find out how much rent they want for it. That will give you a diversion as well. She feels, as I do, that the country air is good for you. Meanwhile, remain cheerful and take care of your health.”¹⁴¹

The house proved to be suitable and was rented. However, Louise could not sign the contract since the Company of the Daughters of Charity did not yet have legal recognition. Madame Goussault could sign since the Confraternities of Charity had legal standing, and it was thus she who would take care of these legal requirements. “Madame Goussault told me that she signed the contract for the house,” wrote Vincent.¹⁴² It is probable that the Ladies of Charity also provided the funds for the rental since the Daughters of Charity had hardly any resources of their own in the first years after their foundation.
The move took place in May 1636. Some Daughters remained in the house in the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet to continue their service of the sick there. The choice of which sisters would move to La Chapelle and which would stay in the first house was a mutual decision between the two founders: “You will have to see us in order to decide whom you will take there.”

In the midst of all of the challenges experienced in the move, it is probable that Louise proposed to the sisters that they use this opportunity to reflect on the occasion when “Jesus and the Blessed Virgin … moved from Bethlehem to Egypt and then to other places.” She had made this meditation at the time of one of her own moves around 1632. She now shared it with the sisters:

To go to my new home with the motive of honoring Divine Providence which is leading me there. To place myself in the disposition to do all that this same Providence will permit to be accomplished there.

By this change of residence, to honor the changes made by Jesus and the Blessed Virgin when they moved from Bethlehem to Egypt and then to other places, not wanting, any more than they, to have a permanent dwelling here on earth.

Louise always remained confident in the guidance of Divine Providence. Within a few years, God would broaden the field of action of the Daughters of Charity. The sisters did not stop with their work to relieve the misery of the sick poor in their homes, but would also extend their care to little children, galley convicts, and the sick poor in hospitals. The charitable efforts of the sisters would no longer be limited to Paris, but would reach the nearby suburb of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, as well as cities much farther away: Richelieu, Angers, and Sedan.

Louise carefully chose the sisters who would be sent to these new ministries and foundations, and would adapt the Rule to guide them in their new work. She mentored the sisters with her advice, letters, and personal visits.

The Foundlings

The work of the foundlings was the result of collaboration among Vincent, Louise, the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, and the Priests of the Mission. This collaboration proved to be demanding for all concerned. Working
with others requires patience and humility; it requires knowing one’s own limitations and failures and the acceptance of others’ weaknesses. Collaboration of itself is an act of charity that reveals the presence of the Lord: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

In seventeenth-century Paris, 300 to 400 infants were abandoned each year in the streets of the city or on the porches of churches. Each district had a superintendent who took charge of the infants and brought them to a house called La Couche to be cared for. As Vincent noted, “Those poor little creatures were receiving very little assistance,” and he added, “In fifty years, not one of them has lived.”

There were not enough wet nurses: only one for each four or five infants. To keep them from crying at night, they were given laudanum pills. Some of these babies were sold for eight sols to beggars who broke their arms and legs to attract the pity of passers-by. Others were given to women who wanted to be recognized as mothers. All this trafficking in infants supplemented the meager resources of La Couche.

The chapter of Notre Dame Cathedral was responsible for this house. Was it they who asked Vincent to come to the aid

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**STAINED GLASS WINDOW, ST. JOSEPH SEMINARY, PRINCETON. NOTABLE FOR ITS DEPICTION OF VINCENT AND LOUISE WITH THE FOUNDLINGS (AT LEFT), AND LOUISE OFFERING AID TO THE GALLEY CONVICTS (AT RIGHT).**

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/
of these little children, or was it Vincent who, overwhelmed by the children’s suffering, proposed that something be done? The Ladies of Charity spent a long time considering their possible response to this situation. Vincent summed this reflection up in the course of a conference: “Our Lord has called you to be their mothers; and here is the sequence followed for that: [1] For two or three years He had the priests at Notre-Dame seek you out; [2] you held various meetings for this purpose; [3] you prayed fervently to God concerning it; [4] you sought the advice of wise persons; [5] you gave it a try; [6] And, in the end, you made the decision to accept it.”¹⁴⁷

On 1 January 1638, Vincent informed Louise of the Ladies of Charity’s decision: “At the last meeting, it was the general opinion that you be asked to experiment with the foundlings to see if there is a way of feeding them with cow’s milk, and to get two or three of them for that purpose. I am consoled that Providence is turning to you for this work.”¹⁴⁸

The Ladies could not take on the service of the foundlings by themselves. Louise was moved by the suffering of these innocent little children. Her heart lovingly embraced them all. Three of them were received into the house at La Chapelle. At the end of January, the first efforts seemed to be going very well, and the Ladies expanded their scope. Vincent wrote, “Let us talk…. About the little foundlings…. Would there be any objection to your buying a goat and continuing your experiment further?”¹⁴⁹

There were differences of opinion among the Ladies of Charity about what should be done next. Some thought they should proceed very carefully and not accept more infants than they had resources to support. Others wanted to proceed quickly and boldly and take over entire responsibility for La Couche. Vincent asked Louise’s advice:

Mademoiselle Hardy is still urging me to call a meeting of the Ladies who promised her they would contribute. If I do not do it, I shall hurt her feelings; if I do it, it will be against my better judgment. I doubt that it will succeed the way things are. She expects those Ladies to go the foundling home and would have everything done right there according to the order prescribed. I think it would be better to give up the capital of the established house rather than be subject to rendering so many accounts and overcoming so many difficulties, and to set up a new institution, leaving the former as it is, at least for some time. What do you think?¹⁵⁰
Louise approved of Vincent’s thoughts. When the Ladies met, Mademoiselle Hardy’s proposal was rejected. They agreed to rent a house for twelve infants on the rue des Boulangiers, outside Saint Victor’s gate. Vincent wrote to Louise, “The entire company considers it essential for that house to depend on the superioress of the Daughters of Charity, as I wrote you, and for you to go and spend a week or so there, if your health permits.”

The direction of the house was confided to a Daughter of Charity, Madame Pelletier. Louise prepared a rule of life for the house, and it was reviewed by Vincent and the officers of the Ladies at two meetings. It specified the role of Madame Pelletier, her obedience to the Ladies “for purely temporal matters” and to Louise for “the direction of the sisters, the wet nurses and the little runaway children.” But shortly after she arrived at the institution, Madame Pelletier schemed with ecclesiastical authorities and lawyers to dismiss Vincent and the Ladies of Charity from the work of the foundlings and to take it over herself. For several months Louise endured the activities of Madame Pelletier, who finally left the Company of the Daughters of Charity. The house of the foundlings was entrusted to another sister, Élisabeth Turgis, whom Vincent always called Madame Turgis.

Soon difficulties of another kind arose. Louise informed Vincent of what had happened: “Sister Turgis is greatly upset because the Sergeant of the Company of Monsieur de Castillon came to tell her that he would be sending soldiers to be billeted in the quarters at the front and in the ones where the children are housed.”

Louise was very worried about this situation. She suggested that Vincent appeal to the Duchess of Aiguillon, Cardinal Richelieu’s niece, or Madame Seguier, the chancellor’s wife. “Nothing is certain concerning things that depend upon the great,” admitted Vincent.

Two years after the beginning of the work of the foundlings, the Ladies of Charity thought that the time had come to undertake responsibility for all the abandoned infants. They made this decision at their meeting on 12 January 1640. As the house on rue des Boulanger was not large enough, a number of children were sent to the motherhouse at La Chapelle. Upon their arrival on 30 March, Louise sent the healthiest infants to be cared for by wet nurses. She drew up a precise list of these arrangements: “A girl named Simonée was placed with a wet nurse in Villars called Saint-Sépulcre, to one Marie Parsin, the wife of Jacques Prévault. The same day, a girl named Madeleine Lebon was given to be wet nursed to Thomasse Patrice, wife of Denis, a butcher, residing in Drinville near Montfort-L’Amaury.... The second day of April, Charles
whom people say is a gentleman and little Catherine were both given to a wet nurse of the house of faubourg Saint-Victor.”

In three weeks, twenty infants were entrusted to wet nurses who were carefully chosen by Louise and the Ladies of Charity. Some sisters visited the children to check on the quality of their care. In 1649, because of the civil war of the Fronde and the subsequent dangers on the roads, a brother of the Congregation was sent.

Always concerned about the children, Louise helped the sisters to overcome the contemporary prejudice that considered the foundlings to be “children of sin.” In the course of the conference of 7 December 1643, one sister summed up this negative outlook: “Father, these children, who in all probability are doubly conceived in sin, represent to us a very thorny plant that God is unwilling to throw into the fire, but from which He wants to gather roses; and these roses are their rational souls, which He has created and redeemed by the blood and death of His Son. This thought has given me a great desire to serve them.”

The founders would always emphasize the dignity of these children. Louise wrote in the Rule for the sisters serving the foundlings: “They shall … offer to God all the services that they are going to render to the childhood of Our Lord in the person of His children.”

Vincent concluded the December 1643 conference in this way: “When you serve these little children, when you nurse the sick poor, when you seek them out, you render to God the greatest service that can be given Him; you do your utmost so that the death of the Son of God might not be in vain for them; you honor the life of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who often did the same things as you do.”

This service demonstrated the “eminent dignity of the poor,” (according to an expression of Bishop Bossuet), illustrating again how the Church has been attentive to the lowly and the abandoned throughout history, and that it has concern for all people.
Richelieu

Cardinal Richelieu had built a town on his lands that bore his name. Many Protestants lived in this region, and the Cardinal asked Vincent de Paul to establish a house of the Priests of the Mission in his city. The contract was signed on 4 January 1638, and ten priests were sent to Richelieu. Upon arriving, Monsieur Lambert, the superior, wanted a Confraternity of Charity to be established in the city and asked for the Daughters of Charity. The Duchess of Aiguillon, Richelieu’s niece, supported the request, and on 20 February, Vincent decided to send Barbe Angiboust. He wrote to Monsieur Lambert, “I hope to send you an excellent Daughter of Charity for that purpose. She does bloodletting, administers medicines, and gives enemas. She is the one who preferred the service of the poor to that of the great lady whom I mentioned to you.”

Was it Louise who put off the departure, hesitant to send sisters so far from Paris (Richelieu is 320 kilometers away, a journey of several days)? Who would follow them and support them when they encountered difficulties?

For several months, Vincent repeated his promise to Monsieur Lambert. In September 1636, he wrote to Louise inquiring about the delay: “The Charity in Richelieu really needs Sister Barbe now because of the great number of sick people. What do you think, Mademoiselle, of sending her to help those good people in this necessity? Their illnesses are not contagious.”

Vincent tried to convince Louise by stressing the needs of the poor, but at the same time he tried to reassure her that there was no danger whatsoever for the sisters. Louise finally agreed to Vincent’s plans for this departure. Barbe was accompanied by Louise Ganset. On 1 October, Vincent wrote of his joy to Monsieur Lambert: “Here are two Daughters of Charity coming to see you about relieving the Ladies of the Charity and assisting the sick poor. Both of them know how to teach little girls.”

Louise gave advice to the two sisters as they prepared for their departure. She asked Vincent to bless the two travelers. In his response (perhaps to calm Louise who was still worried about sending sisters so far from Paris), Vincent praised the vocation of the Daughters of Charity: “Bon Dieu, Mademoiselle, what happiness for those good Sisters to be about to continue the charity Our Lord exercised on earth in the place where they are going! And who would think, seeing them together, those two headpieces, in the coach, that they are departing for a work so admirable in the eyes of God and the angels that the God-Man found it worthy of Himself and of His holy Mother?”
In December, Vincent paid a visit to the house at Richelieu and saw the good work that the sisters were accomplishing: “The Charity is doing very well. It has treated sixty sick people since Easter without any of them dying except one young woman; before, there was no escaping it. The two sister servants of the poor whom we sent from here are working wonders there, one with the sick and the other teaching the girls.”

But in October 1639, Louise learned of some difficulties between the two sisters. In a somewhat severe tone, she asked them to examine their souls. She wrote, “I have learned what I have always greatly feared. Your work, which has been succeeding so well for the relief of the sick and the instruction of girls, has done nothing for your advancement in perfection. On the contrary, it seems to have hindered it.”

Louise invited each sister to examine her behavior with regard to her companion; Barbe, for her lack of support and cordiality, and Louise, for her lack of acceptance of her sister servant and her attachment to money. She entreated the two sisters to turn their eyes toward Christ, “to act with great gentleness and charity as the Son of God recommended when He was on earth” and instructed them to “cultivate a love for poverty in imitation of the Son of God. By so doing, you will obtain the graces necessary to be a true Daughter of Charity.” She concluded, “True humility will regulate everything.”

When he passed through Richelieu at the end of November, Vincent saw the beneficial effect of the letter. He calmed Louise by sharing what he had seen: “Your letter worked wonders for your Daughters; they are happy at present and content, provided they see you.”

**Angers**

Madame Goussault had repeatedly asked Vincent to send some Daughters of Charity to the hospital at Angers, which was in a state of chaos. On 20 September 1639, she died without seeing her request fulfilled. The aldermen of the city of Angers delegated the Abbé de Vaux to negotiate for the sisters’ services, thus bringing about the fulfillment of Madame Goussault’s dream.

At the end of November 1639, Louise left Paris with three sisters and arrived in Angers on 5 December, the eve of the feast of Saint Nicholas. During the journey, bad weather aggravated Louise’s bronchitis from which she had been suffering before her departure. She fell ill and had to be nursed herself. The Abbé de Vaux generously welcomed her into his home, beginning a long friendship between them. The Abbé de Vaux would prove to be a vigilant director and counselor for the sisters.
The plague was raging in the hospital when the sisters arrived there. Fearlessly, they set to work. Louise realized the immense task that was facing the sisters and asked Vincent for more assistance. He sent three other sisters “the day before Christmas Eve on the Orléans coach.”

The arrival of the Daughters of Charity would mean an end to the chaos that characterized the hospital of Saint-Jean. The hospital administrators asked that a written contract be drawn up. Louise relayed the request to Vincent, who had not foreseen this and had thought a verbal agreement would be sufficient. Louise received a response dated 11 January 1640: “Seeing that those Gentlemen want to communicate in writing, do this, in nomine Domini, and have it drawn up in your name as Directress of the Daughters of Charity, servants of the sick poor of the hospitals and parishes, under the authority of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission, Director of the aforesaid Daughters of Charity.”

Vincent knew that the Company of the Daughters of Charity still had not received legal recognition, and he added, “If they ask you for the letters of establishment of this body, you will say that they have no other than the power that has been given to the said Superior, Director of the Charity, as is done everywhere, especially in that diocese, in Bourgneuf, on Madame Goussault’s estates, I believe, although I am not very sure about it, [and] in Richelieu, in the diocese of Poitiers.”

This somewhat vague response did not satisfy Louise, who liked clarity and precision. With his usual careful approach to all things, Vincent had long hesitated to seek recognition for the little Company. His delay was explained by his fear that such recognition might lead to the sisters being transformed into a religious order. Perhaps because of Louise’s reaction to this letter, Vincent reconsidered the issue in two other letters dated 17 and 22 January. On 28 January he said again, “I told you my opinion concerning the stipulations and the status you should assume in them.”

In her humility, Louise did as Vincent requested and signed the contract between the hospital administrators and the Daughters of Charity on 1 February. Louise returned to Paris in March and threw herself into her usual work: the formation of the sisters, receiving new recruits, distributing assignments, and receiving the foundlings at the motherhouse (the Ladies had just decided to remove all of the children from La Couche). Moreover, Vincent was waiting to discern with her on what assistance might be given to the galley convicts.
Convicts sentenced to service of the king’s galleys were imprisoned in the Saint Bernard Tower, near the church of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, while awaiting their departure for Marseille. Their living conditions there were inhumane. In 1630, the Company of the Blessed Sacrament had paid for four additional guards so that the prisoners could at least take a walk in the courtyard each day. In 1639, Monsieur Corneul bequeathed an annuity of 6,000 livres to improve their conditions.

Some considered it the height of folly to even consider sending the Daughters of Charity to minister to the galley convicts. Vincent, who had visited the prison, had great compassion for the prisoners: “I’ve seen those poor men treated like animals.”

Because she lived nearby in the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, Louise had also seen the unfortunate prisoners. The Ladies of Charity of this parish had tried to help. For both Vincent and Louise, serving the galley convicts was an opportunity to honor Jesus Christ himself. Vincent often told the sisters, “How true, Sisters! You are serving Jesus Christ in the person of the
Louise de Marillac: Come Winds or High Waters

The sisters needed prudence, simplicity, and patience. Barbe Angiboust experienced this once while serving a meal. Convicts overturned her soup pot, and the broth and meat spilled on the ground. She cleaned it all up “without saying a word ... looking just as pleasant as if they hadn’t said or done anything to her,” one of her companions said. To try to avoid scenes such as these, Louise asked the Ladies of Charity to visit the galley convicts at meal times. She always demonstrated great concern for the sisters’ safety.

Sedan

The foundation at Sedan, requested by the Duchess of Bouillon, raised some problems. “It is a newly Christianized area,” wrote Vincent, “The Duc and the Duchesse have been Catholics for just a little while. Heresy established its throne in that principality ninety years ago.”

Under the circumstances, it would be necessary to send a Daughter who was mature and solid in her vocation. Vincent’s choice fell on Marie Joly, who had served poor persons in the parishes of Paris since 1632. But withdrawing her from her work in the parish of Saint-Germain was a delicate matter for she had to be replaced by a sister who was just as competent. These negotiations proved difficult. Wishing to hasten the sister’s departure for Sedan, Vincent intervened with Louise: “I think, Mademoiselle, that I did not make myself well understood concerning the Sister we must send to Saint-Germain. I wrote you that these Ladies are requesting the one you took from there and placed at Saint Etienne. It is up to you to see if you can give them that one or some other who comes near her in experience.”

This letter touched a nerve in the always sensitive Louise. Two days later, on 9 February, she wrote, “The resolution that I thought you had taken never to send a sister out alone is so deeply rooted in my mind that I find it necessary to send someone with her [Marie].” Louise proposed sending the sister Claire who knew how to read and would be able to teach school to poor little
As can be seen, the tone of the letters between Vincent and Louise changed as time went on. Their collaboration had highlighted the differences in their personalities. The differences had proved to be complementary: Vincent’s slow discernment had been compensated for by Louise’s vivacity, and her severity had been lightened by his great kindness. But, slowly, their differences were becoming more difficult to reconcile. Their sanctity was rooted in their humanity. Between 1640 and 1642 their relationship, which was subject to the same interpersonal dynamics of every collaboration and friendship, experienced a crisis that would become a source of growth for them and others.

Louise, whose mind was very logical and organized, wanted the Company of the Daughters of Charity to be recognized by the civil and religious authorities. We have seen her misgivings at the time of signing the contract for the hospital at Angers, and this problem arose again at the end of 1641 when a new motherhouse was purchased. The Congregation of the Mission had to sign the bill of sale.

The choice of location for this new motherhouse was also a source of tension between Vincent and Louise. The house in La Chapelle had become too small, and Louise had always wanted to be closer to Saint-Lazare. Vincent did not agree. A house was available in La Villette, a little village halfway between Saint-Lazare and La Chapelle. Vincent proposed it to Louise, who turned it down. They looked elsewhere, but finding a large enough house was not a simple task. After some months, Vincent finally gave in to Louise and looked for a house in the faubourg Saint-Denis, in the parish of Saint-Laurent, near Saint-Lazare. Louise was impatient and thought matters were not proceeding quickly enough.

In February 1641, Vincent was ill, and Louise expressed her worry at the fact that a house still had not been found. Vincent wrote her a letter that was quite severe: “I still see a little of the human in your feelings as soon as you see me ill. You think all is lost for want of a house. O woman of little faith and acceptance of the guidance and example of Jesus Christ!... For a handful of girls that His Providence has manifestly raised up and brought together, you think He will fail us!”

In September 1641, two houses adjoining one another and situated across...
Louise de Marillac: Come Winds or High Waters

the street from Saint-Lazare were rented and then purchased. The Ladies of Charity helped with the expenses by establishing an annuity on a capital of 45,000 livres. Some repairs were needed, but on 29 May 1642, the sisters occupied their new motherhouse. 186

Louise expected the young women in formation to make rapid progress and became impatient with Vincentte Auchy, a young woman from Richelieu whom Vincent knew well. He was astonished at her severity: “She is a very fine young woman, with a good reputation in her own region and has perseveringly served her mistress for seven or eight years. That poor woman is inexpressibly pained by her absence. There are some persons that do not adjust at first to every little rule. Time takes care of everything. I experience that situation every day among ourselves.” 187

Vincent made the same appeal for patience with Jeanne Lepintre, who wanted to wear a coiffe different from the other sisters: “I told Jeanne not to think of that kerchief for the coiffe when going to church. I think we will have to bear with her in this attachment. She will be able to get over it in time.” 188

There was another source of tension between the two founders. Vincent, who was overwhelmed with work, always promised to visit but never did. Twenty-eight letters from March 1640 to June 1642, about one per month, expressed either a promise to come, or an excuse for not having been able to come, or for having completely forgotten the meeting. Several times it was necessary to tell the sisters than a planned conference would have to be canceled. 189 Louise was not happy about this situation. Sisters traveled from all of Paris only to learn that the conference was canceled. Wasn’t this taking time away from the service of the poor?

In her transcriptions, Louise made note of Vincent’s excuses at the beginning of his conferences (which he occasionally gave during that period). On 16 August 1640, Vincent was very much in a hurry: “I was nearly unable to come at all today because I had to go far into the city; therefore, I won’t have much time to talk to you.” 190 On 16 August 1641, one year later (and there had not been a conference between those two dates), Louise noted Vincent’s excuses: “I should have brought you together long ago but was prevented mainly by my own wretchedness and my business affairs. Well, Sisters, I hope that God’s goodness itself has made up for what I should have done for you.” 191

At the beginning of the conference of 9 March 1642, she even wrote, “Because of urgent business, M. Vincent was unable to be present at the beginning of the conference…. M. Portail began [it].” 192 When Vincent finally arrived, she noted the hour, five o’clock, and the conference had begun at two o’clock. The
following 16 March, Louise noted with a touch of sarcasm: “M. Vincent did us the honor of being present from the beginning.” Only the conferences given between March 1640 and March 1642 bear such annotations.

Vincent’s letters in which he provides excuses for his absences show that he gave priority to the Ladies of Charity, the archbishop of Paris, and the queen. The Daughters of Charity always came second. Louise accepted this situation with difficulty, and this was reflected in her communications with Vincent:

… I very humbly supplicate you to do us the charity which your goodness leads us to expect and which we greatly need [a conference had been planned]. The occasions which have prevented you from doing so will continue to arise as always unless you do us the honor of postponing them. Pardon me for taking this liberty.

For Louise, the Daughters deserved to be treated with as much honor as the Ladies or the queen.

During these years from 1640 to 1642, in spite of these relational difficulties, the life of the little Company went on: sisters were sent to Fontenay-aux-Roses and Nanteuil, and above all, the members of the Company prepared to take vows for the first time. On 25 March 1642, Louise de Marillac, Barbe Angiboust, Élisabeth Turgis and two other sisters, whose names are unknown, gave themselves completely to God through the four vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and service of the poor. This was a profound joy for Louise.

Suddenly, on the eve of Pentecost 1642, an event occurred that upset both Vincent and Louise. On this Saturday afternoon, the floor of one of the rooms in the motherhouse collapsed. There were no fatalities. However, Louise had only left the room a few minutes before the accident, when a sister had warned her that a beam had just cracked. If Vincent’s conference that day had not been delayed, he would have been in the room with all the Daughters.

Vincent, who was always most attentive to events, was deeply struck by this providential occurrence. Reflecting on what had happened from the perspective of faith brought him to a new resolution. On Pentecost morning, he wrote to Louise:

You have in this encounter a new reason for loving God more than ever. He has preserved you as the apple of His eye in
an accident in which you ought to have been crushed under
the ruins, had not God averted the blow by His gracious
Providence. We have given thanks to God for doing so, and
this afternoon, God willing, I hope to have the happiness of
seeing you here in this house, if you come to Vespers, or at
your house. I am sending you these lines, meanwhile, to greet
you and wish you a good day in advance.195

These lines from Vincent are filled with kindness. What a difference in
tone from the preceding letters! Louise was also transformed by this event.
Some years later, she wrote in her meditations: “The day and the season when
God permitted us to recognize His Divine Providence by the remarkable
events surrounding the fall of our ceiling reminded me once again of my
profound interior conversion at that time when His goodness gave me light
and understanding concerning the great anxieties and difficulties which I was
then experiencing.”196

Vincent and Louise were aware that Providence was challenging them to
surmount the relational crisis they had just gone through. In giving them this
new insight, God again revealed how he was the founder of the Company, over
which he would always show a particular care. What God asked was that they
continue their work together for the good of poor persons and for his glory.
Vincent and Louise would several times recall the event of the falling ceiling
as a tangible sign of the love of God for the Company.

The next month, as if to rediscover the dynamism of the “breath of
the origins,” Vincent gave a conference to the Daughters on the virtues of
Marguerite Naseau, the “first Sister who had the happiness of showing others
the way.”197
SAINT-DENIS-DE-LA-CHAPELLE;
LOUISE DE MARILLAC’S PARISH DURING HER TIME IN LA CHAPELLE.

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STAINED GLASS WINDOW, ST. JOSEPH SEMINARY, PRINCETON.
NOTABLE FOR ITS DEPICTION OF VINCENT AND LOUISE WITH THE FOUNDLINGS (AT LEFT), AND LOUISE
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THE CHURCH OF SAINT-NICOLAS-DU-CHARDONNET.
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