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Life of Louise de Marillac - Mademoiselle Le Gras

Nicolas Gobillon

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Life of Louise de Marillac
Mademoiselle Le Gras

Handwritten Translation from French

by

Elizabeth Bayley Seton

Emmitsburg, Maryland

1818

Life of Louise de Marillac
Mademoiselle Le Gras

Introduction

Sulpician émigré priests from France presented Elizabeth Bayley Seton—Mother Seton—with a biography of Louise de Marillac and thus introduced her to a kindred soul. Elizabeth befriended Louise as a companion on her journey of faith in the Company of Charity.

Elizabeth rendered the first English translation of the biography by Nicolas Gobillon, *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras* (Paris, 1676). Readers gain insight into the mind and heart of Elizabeth from her selective translation dated 17 September 1818.

Elizabeth used the *Life of Louise de Marillac* to instruct her Sisters of Charity about the life and spirituality of Saint Louise and her vision for an apostolic society of women dedicated to serving Jesus Christ in their neighbors in need. Elizabeth not only adopted the charism of charity inspired by Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul, but was the first to inculturate the Vincentian mission in North America. Elizabeth's translation reveals her priorities for consecrated life, mission, and ministry.

The selections Elizabeth chose to translate reflect similar experiences of the two women. Each had a troubled childhood characterized by parental loss and steppingstones to sanctity as wives, mothers, and widows. Initially, both were involved in lay ministry within their parishes and served persons struggling, due to disease and poverty, at the margins of society. Both were imbued with the Vincentian spirit of apostolic service among poor persons. Both bequeathed the charism of charity as a legacy for their spiritual offspring. Gobillon's portrayal of the life of Louise also describes Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton:

[Charity] is traced through the whole course of her life...this virtue regulated and animated her whole conduct...to find out the wants of the poor, to procure them relief, employment, and instruction seemed the sole [aim of her] ambition or pleasure.¹

Betty Ann McNeil, D.C.
Emmitsburg, Maryland

¹ Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise, St. Louis, MO. The Archives of this province preserves the original Seton manuscript and is in Emmitsburg, Maryland, USA. The English text appears in 13.3 and 13.4, "Life of Louise de Marillac," Regina Bechtle, S.C., and Judith Metz, S.C., eds., Ellin M. Kelly, mss. ed., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings*, 3 vols. (New City Press: New York, 2006), 3b: 355-396. Nicolas Gobillon, *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, trans. from the 1676 edition, (London: Sisters of Charity, 1984).

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Introduction

Sulpician refugee priests from France presented Elizabeth Bayley Seton with a biography of Louise de Marillac and thus introduced her to a kindred soul. Elizabeth befriended Louise as a companion on her journey of faith in the Company of Charity.

Elizabeth rendered the first English translation of the text by Nicolas Gobillon, *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras* (Paris, 1676). This manuscript, dated 17 September 1818, is a selective translation. Readers gain insight into the mind and heart of Elizabeth by reflecting on the selections of Louise's life and spirituality which Elizabeth Seton chose to instruct her Sisters of Charity. These selections also held special meaning for Elizabeth's own life, mission, and ministry.

Elizabeth's choices reflect similarities between the two women. Each had a troubled childhood characterized by parental loss and steppingstones to sanctity as wives, mothers, and widows. They both not only engaged in lay ministry within their parishes but also committed themselves to service of the sick and poor. They both embraced the spirit of Vincent de Paul and left the charism of charity as a legacy for their spiritual daughters in the Vincentian and Setonian tradition. The author's description of the life of Louise also describes Elizabeth Seton:

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Betty Ann McNeil, D.C.
4 January 2000

¹ Mother Elizabeth Seton, trans., *Life of Madam [sic] Le Gras* (1818), 13. ASJPH, 1-3-3-24A. The full English text may be found in Nicolas Gobillon, *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, trans. from the 1676 edition, (London: Sisters of Charity, 1984):

Suffer with Him in continual union with his
thorns, nails, and spear, Listen to every
word he says till Consummatum est . . .

Duties of minutes

- Eternities of rewards

Be most peaceable and humble in
acknowledging your misery,

- it brings us so much nearer to him

- our misery deplored draws down
his ever ready mercy -

St. Joseph's House

Suffer with Him in continued union with his thorns,
nails, and spear; listen to every word he says till con-
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Duties of minutes.

Eternities of rewards.

Be most peaceable and humble in acknowledging your
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→ Madam Le Gras →

Was born at Paris 12th Augt 1591 -
her Mother died when she was an Infant
her Father gave every possible attention to
her education, , to her personal and
mental accomplishments, and his care
was so well rewarded that he testified it
in his last will, in which he says that
"She had been his greatest Consolation on Earth
and he believed that she had been
given to him by God to be his comfort
and his Peace through every affliction
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(The Capucins) because of the extreme weakness of her constitution, and while she was thus forced to deliberate on her Vocation, she was overruled by persuasion and necessity to unite herself with Anthony Le Gras, Secretary to the Queen of Medicis, whose family was singularly devoted to the poor; who after her marriage became generally as it were the children of her adoption. Wherever she found them and her love for them became so strengthened by her fervent and continual practice of charity, that it may truly be said to have been without limits, for she not only visited the sick and indigent in their poor & wretched dwellings but extended her care to the public hospitals.

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where she rendered them with her own hands the lowest and most painful services, and not content with her own personal charities, she engaged a number of ladies to assist in them, & by her counsel and example laid already the foundation of the institutions of charity which were to become so fruitful in her future years.

.. scarcely could a soul be found more detached from the world, and the things of this life; she was never so happy as when she could escape all commerce with society and enjoy herself with God in prayer and meditation. Her Director the Bishop of Belley after teaching her the exercises of a spiritual life, was obliged to restrain her fervour, and wrote her "You must use your exercises of retreat and recollection as you would eat honey, that is rarely and moderately, for your spiritual avidity must be restrained."
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of constitutional infirmities, and most painful employments of charity she used hair cloth fasting, and watching as in the ordinary duties of life; and the enemy of souls seeing he could not ensnare her by her passions or the love of pleasure, took a more certain method of tormenting her, and tempted her by her own virtue, and she began to turn her very purity and tenderness of conscience against herself and conceived so great a fear of sin that she was in a continual examine of her faults, and even of the weaknesses which may escape the most innocent. Her Director (the Bishop Belley) wrote her . . . "these are clouds my daughter which come between you and the eternal Serenity to prevent you from seeing its pure light and the joy of the services of God . . . do not be so difficult about indifferent things, turn your eyes from yourself, & fasten them on ^{the} JESUS CHRIST, this in my opinion

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will be your true perfection" . . . still she was troubled for many years with these temptations from fear of sin, and at intervals with others still more dangerous, the enemy driving her from one extreme to the other through trouble of mind, at last attacked her Faith on the very existence of God & immortality of the Soul . . . this temptation once lasted her from the Ascension to Pentecost, but she was relieved from her torment during the Mass of the Holy Ghost at which she was assisting at St. Nicholas, and filled with his consolations and strength. —

It was the Providence of God for this precious soul to sanctify it through many trials . . . Monsieur Le Gras for some years before his death suffered several violent maladies, which rendered him extremely fretful and difficult . . . this was the moment of exertion for the most tender & faithful charity of Madame, whose cares and solitudes for him were so unwearied that

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that she made her service to him an apprenticeship, or study of charity, and the arts of consoling and relieving the sick, so that the lessons & instructions she gave her own community some years afterwards were in consequence of the experience she gained at that time, and her generous conduct gave her such influence on the mind of Monsieur Le Gras, that she had the consolation to inspire him with every disposition for a good death.

She wrote in these terms after his death to his cousin German, Rev. Father Hilarion

"I could never give you an idea of the abundant graces Mr. Le Gras rec^d in his last sickness, he scarcely slept at all yet was so patient that he never disturbed the rest of any one. . . it seemed as if our Saviour would give him a participation of his own sufferings in death so general and extensive were the pains he endured

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his mind seemed always filled with thoughts of the passion . . . the blood poured from his mouth seven different times, the seventh put an immediate end to his life ; , I was alone with him in the awful moment . . . to his last sigh he expressed in every possible manner that his mind was fastened on God, uttering no words but pray for me, pray for me, in the most moving manner . . . Do remember him my Rev. Father, especially at complin for which he had so particular a devotion that he very seldom missed saying them every evening " a few hours after this earthly tie was broken Made la gras hastened to her confessor, and in Communion made a renewed ardent consecration of herself to God - every year on St. Monica's Day 4th May she renewed her Vow of widowhood to God, and the offering of her person, life, and service to him in any way he would be pleased to use them . . . at this time her Director the Bishop of Belléy being too distant from her to give her the

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continual advice she was in need of, recommended her soul and conduct to the care of Vincent de Paul eminent for his sanctity, and foundation of Charity. he could not refuse the charge of this soul from the hands of this Prelate, although at that time he would have particularly avoided a case of that nature -- But the moment was come when God would clearly manifest his ~~designs~~^{will} to Made. Le Gras who was so struck with the designs of M. Vincent's charity that she was determined to assist them to the utmost of her power, and offered even then, to vow herself to the service of the poor if M. Vincent had permitted it. . . he chose rather to try her for some years, but the delay became but a kind of Novitiate to increase her zeal and strengthen her Resolutions in which she persevered so humbly & piously that M. Vincent was as it were forced to permit her the exercise

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The faithful & zealous Mad. Le Gras received the orders of M. Vincent with the utmost submission and fulfilled them with the most exact obedience he gave her written instructions on the management she was to observe on her journeys & in the fulfilment of their object and she received Communion the day she set out, as a pledge of divine protection. The first journey she made was to Montmiral and M. Vincent wrote her . . . Go madame, go in the name of our Lord, I beg his divine goodness to accompany you, to be your consolation on your way, your strength in your labours, and to bring you back in health loaded with good works . . . Go to communion the day you set out in honour of the Charity of our Lord, his travels, labours pains and contradictions

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and to beg him that you may act by his Spirit, and bear your pains and sufferings as he did his" — She was accompanied in these journeys by pious women. They endured many hardships on their way, taking part with the misery of the poor wherever they went — they took quantities of linens, drugs & provisions for the sick, and when they would come to a village, they would assemble the charitable women who composed the confraternity of the place, give them every necessary instruction and encouragement, animate their zeal, & do every thing in their power to promote their good works, visiting the sick, administering to their wants with their own hands, and consoling them in every possible manner. . . they would then assemble the young girls of the village at particular houses, and teach them the articles of Faith, duties of a Christian life, and if there was a school mistress in the place

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they would instruct her in her duty, and if there was none, they would try to procure one.

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She was like a moving star shedding her light & influence in every direction, ... Visiting a place called Villepreux, where M. Vincent had long since established a Confraternity of Charity, Mademoiselle found that the curate of the place was not very well disposed towards her on which she wrote M. Vincent for his directions, Who wrote her 'by no means to stay in a parish where she was not welcome, that our Lord would draw more glory from her submission than from all the good she could do, that one act of resignation and humility was worth more than many other

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other good works" but after she explained to the curate her intentions he joyfully received the charity she had desired to exercise to his flock, in which she did all manner of good till she fell sick with exertion and fatigue. . . . M. Vincent wrote to congratulate her that she had been found worthy to suffer something for God, and to remind her to make a good use of such an occasion of merit. . . . having learned the honour which had been shown to Mademoiselle the following winter in the town of Beauvais he wrote her also on the use she ought to make of it. "that she must unite closely in spirit with the contempt and ill usage which the Son of God endured while she saw herself esteemed and honoured, that a mind truly humble would humble itself more when it was honoured than when it was despised, and like the honey bee would draw its

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Thoughts of Mad. le Gras, On Vocation
of Sisters of Charity

One of the principal graces God has given you my sisters is your call to this company and Vocation of Charity, therefore I will tell ^{you} what your thoughts should be of it. - - they may be both very high and very low and still without contradiction. . . they may be very low my sisters, for can there be any thing lower in the eyes of the world than our condition? . . country women, assembled to serve the poor, to carry them food & remedies! . . without any change in their simple dress and way of living, . . so simple indeed that in the beginning you know we scarcely dared show ourselves in the street - - what could be more humble than our beginnings - - and with regard to yourselves what labour & fatigue in serving children, poor paupers, and even galley slaves . . how hard to be poorly fed, and always pushing on in your painful employments! . . Surely all this

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 your company as far as human respect
 goes, . . . , considers it indeed my daughters
 as the last & least in the church of God,
 and by taking a custom of thinking of it in
 this manner you will never be surprised
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 what consolation to see the goodness of God,
 who has chosen this manner of life for you
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is enough to give you a low opinion of your company as far as human respect goes. . . consider it indeed my daughters as the last and least in the Church of God, and by taking a custom of thinking of it in this manner you will never be surprised when contempt or injustice may be offered to you. Yet on the other hand, what consolation to see the goodness of God, Who has chosen this manner of life for you to honour by it the life of his Son on earth. What can be more exalted than a Vocation which engages us to the invitation of so great an example. Which one among you could have hoped had it not been for this establishment to have had the privilege of comforting the poor, giving them food and remedies, entering their houses to instruct and reform them. I owe to you, my Sisters, how much I wished this, but who could have dared to hope it. Yet you see you do it every day. How grateful then should you be for being called to so sacred an employment.

All Christians it is true are under the obligation of serving God in their neighbour—but see how their different employments distract them, while such is the goodness of God to you, that this blessed work is your very profession, and you have nothing else to do, so that without any means whatever of your own to do good you do, and can do incomparably more than the richest people in the world, since it is a small matter to give away your property in comparison with giving your very self, and employing every moment of life, & exposing yourself to all kinds of danger for the love of God in serving the poor. . . .

Whenever I think of the manner your company was formed, and of the singular providence, which has supported it I owe to you, my daughters I cannot express my astonishment, . . . to God alone it belongs to do great things by means so small, and even with nothing

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Divine Saviour our Master and model
Jesus crucified! you alone can do these
'wonders of mercy', and give to the
hearts of your servants, not a consuming
fire, but the ardent burning zeal of
your love

2d

How grateful then should we be for
our Vocation which is in itself a practice
of the two principal Commandments --
obliging us to give every moment of
life to Charity, serving her exteriorly
in our care of the Body, but principally
in our care of souls, speaking to them
of God, and helping them to know, and
love him eternally -
Besides how grateful we should be to God
for choosing ^{us} for this manner of life
so secure and profitable for salvation
since in it we may easily practice even
the Evangelical counsels in perfection
if we only are faithful to God -
- our best proof of our love of our Vocation
is our faithful practice of our rule

Divine Saviour our Master and model Jesus Crucified." You alone can do these
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for choosing us for this manner of life so secure and profitable for salvation
since in it we may easily practice even the Evangelical counsels in per-
fection if we only are faithful to God. Our best proof of our love of our
Vocation is our faithful practice of our rule

HER DEATH . . . She then repeated her blessing to her community kneeling round her, received the Apostolic Benediction granted by Pope Innocent 10.th for her and her Daughters at the article of Death, and her curtains closed & in a few minutes slept in Our Lord - giving up her soul to him - Monday in Passion week, 15th March, aged 68.

The Curate of S.^t Lawrence who was there and had an intimate knowledge of her Virtues, (besides having received her General Confession), cried out "O the beautiful soul which carries away with it its Baptismal Innocence" -

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She was interred in the church of St. Lawrence in the chapel of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin, where many of her Daughters had been buried. The manner of her burial being the same as theirs by her earnest request, which she made as a true Daughter of charity & servant of the poor, nothing she declared being more glorious to her than this title. . . . she begged to have a cross near her grave and the motto *Spes Unica* on it. . . . and so it was done, and one also was put on the wall of the Church directly opposite her & her Daughters graves as the common device of all. M. Vincent had a public solemn service performed for her at St. Lazare not only as a testimony of Gratitude for her services to the poor, but also of her Zeal for the clergy, having been accustomed

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her whole life to offer Communion and prayers, (especially in the times of ordination) to beg of God to send faithful labourers in his church and she had this so at heart, that she made it a part of her will that this practice should be continued in her community.

There could be no mark more certain of the sanctity of Made la Gras, and her happiness after Death, than the practice of Charity she had observed throughout her life, persevering in it to the last . . . a more excellent gift says the Apostle than the gift of Miracles, for Charity is the Virtue which makes saints, innumerable persons testify (and I have myself many times experienced it) that there arose from the tomb of this servant of God a sweet vapour like the odour of the Iris & Violet, which perfumed the clothes of those who visited it, so that sisters who went there, would carry it with them to the Infirmary of the Sick Sisters in the Houses . . . I could never discover by the most careful examination

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17th September 1818