

Spring 1990

The Relationship of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise from His Perspective: A Personal and Theological Inquiry

Hugh O'Donnell C.M.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj>

Recommended Citation

O'Donnell, Hugh C.M. (1990) "The Relationship of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise from His Perspective: A Personal and Theological Inquiry," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol11/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact wsulliv6@depaul.edu, c.mcclure@depaul.edu.



Reverend Hugh O'Donnell, C.M.

**The Relationship of Saint Vincent and Saint
Louise
from His Perspective:
A Personal and Theological Inquiry**

BY HUGH O'DONNELL, C.M.

We have come together in a spirit of inquiry to know our roots in the Golden Age of our founders and foundresses in hope that their lives and relationships will light our path now and into the next century. We sense that the collaborative friendships of Francis de Sales and Jane Frances de Chantal, of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, while

revealing the face of God in their lives, will help us perceive his grace in our own.

The lifework of the Jesuit thinker, Bernard Lonergan, was to articulate a method for theology. He was stirred by the dream of accomplishing by method--based on attention to the authentic operations of each human person--what Thomas Aquinas did by genius. There is in the same way a genius in the relationships of Jane and Francis, of Louise and Vincent, which is unique and proper to them. We thank and glorify God for the revelation of his love in and through them. Grateful for the gift of God in their lives, we, following Lonergan's lead, sense the possibilities in our own. Such relationships in and for the Kingdom are unmerited, unexpected, a gift of God, a pure grace leading to an abiding spirit of thanksgiving, freedom, respect, love, and mutuality.

The present symposium begins a new phase of interest in the life and spirit of Vincent and Louise. I thank the Vincentian Studies Institute for its hard work, initiative, and vision. I am personally glad for the renewed and growing interest in Vincent and Louise in the American Vincentian family and for the opportunity to be touched by their love of God and his poor. I find--I know many of you do--an unnamed hunger among people today for what Vincent and Louise have to offer and an enthusiastic joy in the hearts of whoever gets to know our founders. This symposium will give us new energy and vision for incarnating their charism in the final decade of this century and into the twenty-first. Because it marks the beginning of a fresh understanding, this is not so much a time for complete answers as a time for questions and inquiry.

As a theologian rather than an historian, I intend to pursue Vincent's relationship with Louise in a spirit of inquiry. There are three reasons for this approach: first, because questions rather than answers lie at the heart of both theological method and approach to the mystery of God (as well as to the incarnate mystery of the human person); second, because it will be some years, I believe, before we have a comprehensive view of the relationship between Vincent and Louise; and third, because you, the participants in this workshop, have the spirit of both saints and, in keeping with the tradition of repetition of prayer, have most to say in response to the questions raised by inquiry.

I mentioned Lonergan in passing. His work has taught me much about asking the right questions. He was interested in the questions which rise spontaneously from who we are as beings with an unre-

stricted desire to know and an unlimited desire to love (when possible, unconditionally). Human persons are oriented to the ineffable and gracious mystery of God who, as Saint John says, is love. This orientation which comes from the depths of our hearts finds its way to the surface of our lives in the experiences of desire, longing, and questioning.

Lonergan desired to create a framework for dialogue among scientists, specialists, and ordinary people. I have a similar motive for introducing his contribution to theology. I believe that the interest in Vincent and Louise taking hold among us will benefit a great deal from dialogue, a dialogue which involves historians, theologians, sociologists, the poor, and all who are drawn to Vincent and Louise.

Lonergan taught me I must ask a question of myself: who am I as I come to this inquiry? This is crucial because authentic subjectivity is the road to affirming what is real and true. I need to pay attention to where I am coming from so I can pay attention to Vincent and Louise.

Who am I as I come to this particular question of Vincent's relationship to Louise? I am someone who has believed for a long time that the mystical and celibate relationship we are considering is a central realization of the Kingdom of God, that in the past such relationships have been occasional and exceptional but in the future will become commonplace, that celibacy is a gift for all because it represents the gift of being sisters and brothers to one another, that these relationships are grounded in an unconditional and personal relationship to Jesus, that this implies the mystical journey at least implicitly, and finally, that these relationships are not ideals but facts, and as such are governed by the grace of God and the reality of each person's life. I also believe that in the future the biblical paradigm of brothers and sisters will become, in fact is becoming, a paradigm of adult relationships in the world. So, there is substantial significance and encouragement for the future in the present inquiry.

Finally, let me suggest a way of listening to this presentation. You know that when Louise was dying, she sent word asking Vincent to visit her. He did not come. He himself was very sick and his legs would not carry him. Then she asked him for at least a note, a few words of consolation. He did not reply. This is puzzling. Whatever the explanation, let us set that aside for the moment. I invite you to imagine that in fact Vincent did write or dictate a note, maybe even a whole letter, to Louise in those closing days of her life. What do you imagine the contents and tone of that letter to have been?

I. What Do We Know of Vincent's Relationship with Louise?

Initially, Vincent related to Louise as spiritual director, then a few years later as collaborator and coworker, and throughout most of the relationship as a dear friend. There seem also to have been a couple of years of distance, perhaps estrangement, which, when healed and overcome, intensified and confirmed the two in their collaboration and friendship.

A. *Spiritual Director.*

On the feast of Pentecost 1623, Louise received an illumination which set her mind at peace regarding questions disturbing her at the time. Part of what she understood that day had reference to Vincent as her future spiritual director. She wrote: "I also understood that I was to be in peace as to my director, and God would give me one, whom he caused me then to see, as I supposed, for I felt a repugnance about accepting him, but all the same I consented, and it seemed to me that I was not to make this change just yet."¹ Whatever her repugnance, there was certainly a class distinction. Louise came from a noble and influential family, and Vincent was a peasant. For his part, Vincent had reached definitive clarity about the direction his life, namely, the Confraternities of Charity and the mission to poor country people, and was reluctant to tie himself down to an individual penitent and directee. These differences seem to have disappeared early in the relationship.

Vincent acted as her spiritual father, addressing her in the beginning as his daughter. "The tone and style of the first letters are very reverent and somewhat complicated," notes Sister Élisabeth Charpy, D.C. "The expressions that would seem to us to be those of friendship are actually a reflection of the language of daily life in the XVIIth century."² As they got to know each other through conversation and more frequent letters, Vincent came to understand her pain and the quality of her spirit. "He listened to her suffering and patiently helped her to accept it."³

Louise was ultra-sensitive, given to worry, anxious about her son Michel, and in a hurry to know the Lord's future plans for her. While compassionate and understanding, Vincent had come to the

¹Saint Louise de Marillac, *Écrits Spirituels* (Tours, 1983), 3.

²Élisabeth Charpy, D.C., "Come Wind or High Water: Louise de Marillac," *Echoes of the Company* (1987), 113. Charpy's life of Louise was published serially from January 1987 through November 1988. Because *Echoes* has no volume numbers, the articles will be cited by year and page.

³*Ibid.*, 114.

deepest conviction that Providence was in charge and that his role was to help her enter completely into a attitude of trust. "Be quite cheerful in the disposition of willing everything that God wills," he told her in 1628.⁴ In his mind, the Lord himself was her director, and Louise had only to surrender to his guidance and to his sense of timing. God's fatherly Providence was the touchstone of Vincent's own fatherly guidance of Louise.

One of the significant differences between the two was that Louise was in a hurry; Vincent was not. Her lively and energetic temperament inclined her to act quickly. Vincent often told her to wait for Providence, not to tread upon its heels. "*Mon Dieu*, my daughter what great hidden treasures there are in holy Providence and how marvelously Our Lord is honored by those who follow it and do not try to get ahead of it!"⁵

Vincent counseled her to be at peace with what is, to recognize God's presence in the midst of suffering, pain, and distress. There was, what we might call, a Zen-like sense of detachment and presence when Vincent wrote to her around 1629: "[D]o not think all is lost because of the little rebellions you experience interiorly. It has just rained very hard and it is thundering dreadfully. Is the weather less beautiful for that? Let the tears of sadness drown your heart and let the demons thunder and growl as much as they please. Be assured, my dear daughter, that you are no less dear to Our Lord for all that. Therefore, live contentedly in His love. . . ."⁶ In the same vein he wrote: "Try to live content among your reasons for discontent and always honor the activity and unknown condition of the Son of God."⁷

In faith, Vincent viewed Louise's sufferings as associated with those of Mary and Jesus. "Honor the Blessed Virgin's sorrow when she saw her Son suffering," he told her. "Honor as well the eternal Father's acceptance at the sight of His only Son's sufferings. I hope that He will make you see and understand how much you are obligated to His Divine Majesty for His having honored you by associating your sufferings with His. . . ."⁸

⁴Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, trans. Helen Marie Law, D.C., et al. (Brooklyn, 1985), 1:36. Hereinafter cited as *CED*. This is the first in a projected series of fourteen volumes.

⁵*Ibid.*, 59.

⁶*Ibid.*, 62.

⁷*Ibid.*, 54.

⁸*Ibid.*, 63.

So, the first few years were a time of allaying Louise's anxieties through trust in God's Providence. "Little by little, Louise regained confidence in herself, helped by Vincent who sustained and advised her," observes Charpy. It was also a time for recognizing Louise's gifts and love for the poor. "Vincent relied on her more and more and would make her his collaborator for all the activities of the Confraternities of Charity."⁹

B. Collaborators.

A new phase in their relationship opened in the spring of 1629 when Vincent, responding to an invitation from Father Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi to come to Montmirail, asked Louise to consider visiting the Charity there. She accepted and thus began "a great work for the Confraternities."¹⁰

Vincent sensed, indeed seemed to know, something significant was beginning. It was not just a task; it was the initiation of her mission. This seems clear by the way he sent her forth. "Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord," he wrote from Montmirail. "I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works."¹¹ Her trip to Montmirail was the first of many visits to the confraternities established around Paris and farther afield. It was quite unusual for a woman of her rank to travel by coach and horseback, frequently alone, and on business. And she continued these rounds for several years. I believe it was this aspect of Louise's life that first helped deepen my sense and understanding of this extraordinary person.

After each visit she wrote a detailed account of what she found and how she responded. Vincent appreciated the reports and answered by affirming her work, giving his own point of view, and expressing full confidence that she would know best how to respond to the situation either through her own good sense or through divine inspiration. "Do what Our Lord inspires you to do."¹²

"The missionary *savoir faire* of Louise de Marillac was known to all. Her cordial attitude, her manner of speaking, of encouraging, gave

⁹Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water" (1987), 116

¹⁰Ibid., 144.

¹¹Kilar, *CED*, 1:64-65.

¹²Ibid., 89.

people back their confidence and aroused enthusiasm."¹³ It is striking to me that the gift she gave the people was exactly the same as the one she received through Vincent, a sense of genuine confidence in oneself. As Jesus said, "What you have received freely, freely give" (Matthew 10:8).

"During these years 1629-1633, a true teamwork was established between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. . . . Both of them discovered their complementarity. In Louise, Vincent found a woman who was intuitive, quick, lively, and always ready to go to the fore. Often, he will be obliged to moderate her passion and to remind her that missionary work was neither overwhelming activism nor excessive zeal."¹⁴ There was a beautiful freedom between them born of respect and trust. And in this there was a sense of equality, manifest in the openness of their letters as they kept each other informed about what was going on. Louise's reliance on Vincent from the beginning is clear, but by the early 1630s he came to rely on her--on her love of the poor, on her practical common sense, on her organizational abilities, on her judgment. "Give me a word of advice," he would ask in 1638.¹⁵

The spiritual-direction aspect of the relationship during the first four or five years focused on complete trust in Divine Providence, God's absolute goodness, and joyful waiting. In the 1630s the other pole appeared: their mutual love of and service to the poor through the Charities. Vincent and Louise were united not only by their love of God but also by a common work or rather a common mission--their shared love of the poor.

Their collaboration came to fruition in the founding of the Daughters of Charity. That story is too well known and in a way too complex to tell here. There are, however, a few points worth mentioning for what they add to the picture of collaboration between Vincent and Louise.

The hand of Providence was present from the beginning, apparent as Marguerite Naseau volunteered to assist the Ladies of Charity. Vincent was full of joy and admiration. God was watching over the Charities. So too was Louise. Vincent gave advice and counsel but left all the initiative to her. As a number of young women came to help, girls Vincent sometimes referred to as "your Sisters," Louise saw the need

¹³Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water" (1987), 146.

¹⁴Ibid., 147.

¹⁵Kilar, *CED*, 1:423.

and possibility of bringing them together in community. He was slow to agree. "Louise allowed it to mature in her heart and begged God to enlighten Vincent."¹⁶

In May 1633 Vincent became open to the project, but still unsure if Providence wanted it, he recommended further prayer and cheerfulness. He made it a special matter for his annual retreat in August of that year. Then, convinced it was the Lord's will, he and she reached a decision in early fall: "Louise de Marillac would propose to the young women the experience of this 'adventure' of a consecrated life in the midst of the world." In November she welcomed into her home "five or six young women, that they might live in community and serve the Poor."¹⁷ It is hard to grasp the full revolutionary character of this initiative, but as we do, we get some sense of how Vincent listened to Louise, the depth of his trust in her, and his faith in the way she was attuned to the Holy Spirit.

In the development of this original initiative many questions arose that needed to be discussed. The correspondence between Vincent and Louise shows great freedom and honesty "with each giving an opinion to the other without fear. Their differing views on matters did nothing to weaken their collaboration."¹⁸ Vincent in his prudent slowness and Louise in her vivacity and ardor complemented one another; they accepted one another in these differences.

The psychologist Eric Erickson has highlighted the important role of generativity in human life. Work carries this meaning in a central way. The bond between Vincent and Louise, focused as it was on the love and service of the poor, was a profound collaboration in generativity. This comprised the second aspect of their relationship. Now let us turn to their friendship.

C. *Friendship.*

In his biography of Louise, Jean Calvet sums up the relationship in its early phase in these words: "On both sides and in both hearts there was a clear-sighted affection, naive in its intensity, the very ideal of that pure friendship between two beings with whom God always makes a third."¹⁹ This sentiment was clearly expressed by Vincent about the time of the founding of the Daughters of Charity. "Courage!"

¹⁶Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water" (1987), 196.

¹⁷Ibid., 198.

¹⁸Ibid., 257.

¹⁹Jean Calvet, *Louise de Marillac: A Portrait* (New York, 1959), 47.

he wrote to Louise. "May Our Lord be in our hearts and our hearts in His, so that they may be three in one and one in three and that we may wish only what He wills."²⁰ That was the same image he had of Jane de Chantal and Francis de Sales's being united in God, which he saw in a vision at the moment of Jane's death. Basically, these are summary statements of fact and desire.

The letters between Vincent and Louise are not easy for contemporary Americans to interpret because it is difficult to know how much their language needs to be discounted as seventeenth-century French style. Still, there is an evident, spontaneous affection and care between them. Their letters almost always end with a reference to the love of the Lord, often in such a way that the writer's own love is included in the Lord's.

In addition to these habitual references, there are several texts in which Vincent directly expressed his feelings of care and love for Louise. Those presented here are far from a complete reading of the letters with this question in mind. An interesting feature of them is that, with the exception of the first, Vincent explicitly addressed her as "my dear daughter." I offer the following excerpts for the reader's reflection.

I could not tell you how ardently my heart desires to see yours to know how this has come about in it [Abelly says the reference is to a decision to give her life to the poor], but I am quite willing to mortify myself for the love of God, in which love alone I desire yours to be immersed.²¹

What shall I tell you about the one whom your heart loves so dearly in Our Lord?²²

Mon Dieu, my dear daughter, how your letter and the thoughts [you] sent me console me! Indeed, I must confess to you that the feeling has spread through every part of my soul, and with all the more pleasure, since they let me see you are in the state God wants of you.²³

Meanwhile, tell us, please, what is on your mind? Mine has been very much occupied this morning with you and with the thoughts Our Lord is giving you.²⁴

I was promising myself the consolation of coming to see you, but I had to leave unexpectedly for the Bois de Vincennes. Your dear heart will

²⁰Kilar, *CED*, 1:212-13.

²¹*Ibid.*, 46.

²²*Ibid.*, 54.

²³*Ibid.*, 61.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 87.

forgive me and on my return, with the help of God, we shall talk about everything. . . .

Adieu, my dear daughter, stay quite cheerful. . . . Do not let your heart grumble against mine for leaving without speaking to you, because I did not know anything about it this morning. I hope to see you again in eight to ten days.²⁵

I recommend myself to your prayers and wish you a good evening with as much tenderness of my heart as I am, in the love of Our Lord, your servant.²⁶

Finally, the often quoted saying, “*Que j’ai peine de votre peine* [How I feel the pain of your pain],” were words addressed to Louise when she was suffering from a false allegation that she had promised to marry a certain man.²⁷ They expressed the “suffering with” of compassion born of love.

Another way to approach the question of Vincent’s friendship for Louise is to consider the beneficent aspect of love, which is to desire and will the good of another. What did Vincent desire and will for Louise? There are a number of passages which make it clear that he rejoiced most in her conformity to the divine will, in her abiding in God’s love, in her patient, peaceful, and joyful honoring of Divine Providence, and in her love for the poor. The following is from a letter which gives a sense of what Vincent wanted for Louise.

As for the rest, I beg you, once and for all, not to give it a thought until Our Lord makes it evident that He wishes it, and at present He is giving indications to the contrary. We want a number of good things with a desire that seems to be of God, and yet it is not always from Him. God permits it that way to prepare the soul to be what we desire. Saul was looking for a she-ass and found a kingdom; Saint Louis, for the conquest of the Holy Land, and he found the conquest of himself and a heavenly crown. You are trying to become the servant of those poor young women, and God wants you to be his own, and perhaps of more people than you would be in that way. And even if you were only His, is it not enough for God that your heart is honoring the tranquillity of Our Lord’s? Then it will be fit and ready to serve Him. The Kingdom of God is peace in the Holy Spirit; He will reign in you if your heart is at peace. So, be at peace, Mademoiselle, and you will honor in a sovereign way the God of peace and love.²⁸

The occasion of this letter was Louise’s wish to gather the young

²⁵Ibid., 106-07.

²⁶Ibid., 111.

²⁷Pierre Coste, C.M., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris, 1920-25), 1:142. Hereinafter cited also as *CED*. For an English version of the letter, see Kilar, *CED*, 1:138.

²⁸Kilar, *CED*, 1:111.

women into community. In that context, I believe it speaks powerfully of what Vincent desired for her: that she be the servant of God in peace.

Finally, there is an interesting passage, which shows that Vincent wanted for Louise what he wanted for himself: the great gift of holy indifference understood in relationship to Divine Providence. It is especially revealing because he lapsed into the first person plural. "I am like you, Mademoiselle: there is nothing that bothers me more than uncertainty," he wrote. "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."²⁹

To move from beneficent love to friendship, we might ask one final question: what was the good, what were the goods, that they shared? In other words, what was the common ground of the relationship? It seems to me that each independently, and then both together, had in common the love of God and the love of the poor. They found God in their own hearts, in one another's heart, and in the hearts of the poor. My image is of Vincent and Louise standing side by side, rather than face to face. Their love and communion were fired by two realities: the goodness of God and the mystery of the poor. They had a shared experience of God's providential goodness welling up in their hearts and were of one heart in responding to the mystery of the poor.

D. A Time of Distance and Strain in the Relationship.

In addition to the facets of spiritual direction, collaboration, and friendship, there came a significant period of distance and strain in the relationship. Sister Charpy points out that the years 1640-1642 were a time of what might be called a crisis in the relationship.³⁰

Until then, differences were just differences. At that point they became issues of separation and distance. Four matters divided them. First, Louise wanted the legal establishment of the new community, but Vincent was unready to do it. This left the growing community dependent on the Congregation of the Mission or other parties for legal transactions, like buying houses. Second, she wanted to establish the Daughters' motherhouse near Saint-Lazare, but he resisted this move for fear of scandal. Third, they differed on how to respond to some of the young women joining her. Vincent considered Louise impatient in

²⁹Ibid., 240-41.

³⁰Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water" (1987), 347ff.

some cases and thus perhaps too severe and insufficiently understanding of the young women's backgrounds and needs. Fourth, he often promised to come to visit the sisters and give conferences and just as often sent word of his inability to do so. The sisters, for example, went without a conference between 16 August 1640 and the same date the next year. When Vincent did come, he sometimes arrived late. Louise wrote one day: "Monsieur Vincent paid us the honor of being present from the beginning."³¹ He was extremely busy in this period. His letters show he gave priority to the Ladies of Charity, the archbishop of Paris, and the queen. "The Daughters always came second," concludes Charpy.³² These were the tensions, and they were quite severe.

The resolution of their estrangement came through an unexpected event that could have been fatal for both. Vincent was expected at the Daughters' house on the eve of Pentecost 1642 for a meeting with Louise and some Ladies of Charity. He was prevented from coming. Meanwhile, Louise was in the room where the meeting was to take place. One of the sisters heard timbers cracking and urged her to leave. Louise had hardly stepped out when the floor collapsed. Anyone in the room would probably have been killed. It was a sobering event for both Vincent and Louise and each referred to it several times in the years that followed as "a tangible sign of the love of God for the Company."³³ The following month Vincent gave a conference on the virtues of Marguerite Naseau, "the first Sister who had the happiness of pointing out the road to the other Sisters."³⁴ It seems that this conference was a healing event, touching as it did on the origin of the Daughters and restoring collaboration for the future. Charpy suggests that the mending of the rift reunited Vincent and Louise as coworkers at a new and deeper level. Summarizing their friendship, she concludes, "Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac 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."³⁵

³¹Coste, *CED*, 9:61.

³²Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water" (1987), 350.

³³*Ibid.*, 351.

³⁴Coste, *CED*, 9:77.

³⁵Charpy, "Come Wind or High Water" (1988), 418-19.

II. The Person and Freedom of Vincent: Who Was Vincent in 1625?

The first part of this paper has explored the information available on Vincent and Louise, the insights of biographers, and the best assessments of historians to discover what can be affirmed as real and true in all the research. Lonergan would tell us that these fundamental and necessary operations are the work of textual critics, exegetes, interpreters, and historians in response to three fundamental imperatives in our human consciousness: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable.

For a few moments, I would like to turn to the final two imperatives of human inquiry--be responsible, be in love with God --and focus them on Vincent when, at age forty-four, he first met Louise. These imperatives draw our attention to two aspects which are the heart and soul of his life, namely, the absolutely free gift of God's love and the free choices and decisions he made to become the person he was in 1625.

It has been my sense for the past couple of years that at the time of the founding of the Congregation of the Mission and becoming the director of Louise de Marillac, Vincent was a completely free man, fully given over to the will of God. It was as if the long journey of conversion to service of the poor (which might be called Vincent I) was finished, and the public life of the Father of the Poor and the Father of France (Vincent II) was about to begin. This was the moment at which Louise came into his life.

Although the story of Vincent's conversion to the poor is well known, let me highlight four events which, I believe, made him the person he was in 1625. The first was a decision to devote his life to the poor, a resolution taken toward the end of his long trial of doubting the faith. At some point I began asking myself who was the poorest person Vincent ever met. The answer? Himself, during his incapacitating trial of faith. He came to know himself as the poor man. I have a sense that this gave Vincent a sovereign freedom because he would never meet anyone more in need of God's goodness and mercy than himself.

The other three events are grouped in the two years before he founded the Congregation of the Mission. In 1623 a mission to the galley slaves in Toulouse brought him near his family home, which he had not visited since 1600. Vincent spent ten happy days there visiting relatives and friends. On the last day he said mass with all of them and in the homily he took leave for good. Weeping over this for the next few months, he discovered how deeply attached he was to his family during

the previous years. In these months, he gave them their freedom and took his own.

The third event occurred in 1624. He made a retreat to ask the Lord to deliver him from his moody and sour ways. The Lord answered. The influence of Francis de Sales in this matter, of course, was also considerable and lifelong.

Finally, toward the end of that year, Vincent consulted a professor at the Sorbonne, André Duval who became his advisor, about the work of the mission. For the past seven or eight years, explained Vincent, he had tried to find a community to undertake the work of the missions, but no one would accept it. Madame de Gondi, who had set aside 45,000 *livres* as a foundation for the work, was becoming anxious to have the project secured before her death. Vincent also shared with Duval that he and some other priests were carrying on the missions, while waiting for a community to say yes, and, in fact, their work had been blessed by God. Hearing a clear indication of God's will in Vincent's struggle, Duval told him that according to the Scriptures we are required to do the will of God when we recognize it. With that, Vincent made up his mind to accept the Gondi burse and found the Congregation of the Mission. His lifework of the missions and Confraternities of Charity was now in place. His freedom was profoundly shaped by Providence and to be further shaped by the work he had received.

The root of that freedom was his fidelity to the final imperative: be in love with God. The journey to freedom was long, perhaps originating in his acquaintance with Benedict of Canfield's *Rule of Perfection* which promoted following the will of God as the simplest and most direct way to holiness. It was from him that Vincent learned not to tread on the heels of Providence (*ne pas "enjamber sur la Providence!"*).³⁶ Knowing Vincent and reading Canfield convinced me of the mystical character of Vincent's love of God. Undeniably, Francis de Sales also had an immense influence on him in this regard. That Vincent was in love with God is evident and needs only to be called to mind here.

³⁶Benoit de Canfield, *La Règle de Perfection: The Rule of Perfection*, ed. and an. Jean Orcibal (Paris, 1982), 24-25, n. 48, 385; André Dodin, *L'esprit vincentien: Le secret de saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris, 1981), 108, n. 65. The phrase as quoted above appears only in the 1609 edition preserved in the library at Troyes. This was the version available to Vincent. "Mon Dieu, ma fille," Vincent wrote to Louise in 1629, "qu'il y a de grands trésors cachés dans la sainte Providence et que ceux-là honorent souverainement Notre-Seigneur qui la suivent et qui n'enjambent pas sur elle! [My God, my daughter, what hidden treasures there are in holy Providence and how sovereignly those honor Our Lord who follow it and do not tread upon its heels!]" (Coste, *CED*, 1:68).

The dimensions and meaning of being in love are beautifully set forth by Lonergan:

That capacity [for self-transcendence] becomes an actuality when one falls in love. Then one's being becomes being-in-love. Such being-in-love has its antecedents, its causes, its conditions, its occasions. But once it has blossomed forth and as long as it lasts, it takes over. It is the first principle. From it flow one's desires and fears, one's joys and sorrows, one's discernment of values, one's decisions and deeds.³⁷

There is no doubt that in 1625 Vincent's life flowed from his love of God and the freedom it brought. We can affirm that he was well along the mystical journey when he began to direct Louise who, it turned out, was on the same path in search of her lifework.

Love and freedom prompt another question: what understanding or vision of life and the world did they give Vincent? To stimulate reflection, let me suggest five statements expressive of Vincent's worldview: (1) God is love; (2) God is here—in events, in the poor, in everyone; (3) time is on God's side, and so on ours (Providence); (4) Jesus, the Savior, is present in our masters, the poor; (5) let us love God with the sweat of our brows and the strength of our arms.

III. What Is the Meaning of the Relationship of Vincent and Louise for People Today?

We have been considering the central role of being-in-love with God and human freedom. These factors are the keys to the mystical journey, true friendship, and a new relationship to the world. One of Lonergan's principal contributions has been to suggest that religious and moral conversions lead to a new way of understanding our world and relating to it. I would like to raise a question, not to answer it, but to show its place and relevance. How can we bring the gift of Vincent and Louise into dialogue with our contemporary church and world? This really involves two questions: what themes arise from our reflection on the spiritual, apostolic, and personal friendship of Vincent and Louise? and what themes express our insight into spiritual friendship and reveal its meaning in a coherent way? Let me suggest the following for critical examination.

³⁷Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J., *Method in Theology* (New York, 1972), 105.

(1) Gift and thanksgiving. Vincent and Louise knew their relationship was a pure gift and consequently lived in an abiding spirit of thanksgiving.

(2) Freedom and authenticity. From the start, their relationship was marked by a sense of freedom manifest in openness, sharing, love, respect for differences, and non-possessiveness. Each honored the authenticity of the other's journey.

(3) "Your humble servant." Used frequently to close letters between Vincent or Louise, this phrase was stylistic and pro forma. Nevertheless, the words might be taken to represent the fact that Vincent and Louise meant to be and really were servants to one another, responsive to whatever the other asked or needed.

(4) Mystical. The goodness and love of God was the source of their love of the poor and one another. It was the experience of God's unconditional love that was the heart of everything for them. This is particularly clear in the way the Spirit was experienced and spoken of by each, perhaps in a special way by Louise.

(5) The Poor. Their shared love of the poor was a source of immense devotion, energy, and meaning in their lives. What is particularly interesting in this context was the way in which the poor mediated reality to Vincent and Louise. They were eminently in touch with and responsive to the history of their times through the poor. Louise gave this as a reason for living a poor, simple, and humble life. The sisters needed to be in contact with the poor, otherwise they would "become a withdrawn and inactive group, living apart from transient and poorly clothed people."³⁸

(6) Father-daughter. For all the equality and mutuality between Vincent and Louise, the image of father-daughter continued to the end. To be sure, their relationship was also Monsieur-Mademoiselle, reflecting parity and adulthood. The interconnection between these two modes requires more reflection. At present, however, I am inclined to the opinion that the father-daughter image mediated, rather than hindered, a deepening sense of mutuality and friendship. Our contemporary experience of parents and their adult children coming to an experience of adult mutuality may offer a helpful parallel.

A final question involves communication with the Church and world. How can we dialogue with our contemporaries and share our

³⁸Louise de Marillac, *Letters of St. Louise de Marillac*, trans. Sister Helen Marie Law, D.C. (Emmitsburg, Maryland, 1972), 624.

gift? What light does present-day experience shed on the meaning of Vincent and Louise for us? Let me offer a direction rather than an answer. At the opening mass of the Second Vatican Council on 11 October 1962, Pope John XXIII said, "Providence is leading us to a new order of human relationships. . . ."39 It is in this new order of human relationships, of sisters and brothers, that we are invited to offer the gift of Vincent and Louise.

Conclusion

The friendship between Vincent and Louise, rooted in the love of God and the poor, was characterized by open communication and wholehearted collaboration. On the three-hundredth anniversary of their deaths, John XXIII proclaimed that their mode of presence to us is still collaborative through the communion of saints. The theology of Bernard Lonergan aimed at providing a method for collaboration and dialogue with our complex times. Because this is needed in responding to contemporary challenges and opportunities, I have offered the questions which, according to him, arise spontaneously when we pay attention to how we operate.

I did not expect the themes of dialogue and collaboration to arise so compellingly from this study. But they have, so I offer them to you. The relationship of Vincent and Louise through thirty-five years, their contact with and attentiveness to the people and events of their time, and their love of God and one another urge us to love God and each other, to work together, and to find Providence in the events of our time.

I look forward to the collaboration and dialogue this symposium anticipates among scholars and all interested in Vincent and Louise. I look forward also to the growing collaboration between women and men, the high-born and the lowly, rich and poor, believers and all of good will. Finally, I look forward to the contribution we can make through sharing the gift of Vincent and Louise with contemporary men, women, and children.

In light of this presentation, I raise again the question I suggested at the beginning: what might Vincent have written to Louise

³⁹Quoted in Giancarlo Zizola, *The Utopia of Pope John XXIII*, trans. Helen Barolini (New York, 1978), 258.

during her final illness? In my view he probably would have echoed a sentiment he shared with her thirty years before: "God is love and wants us to go to Him through love."⁴⁰

⁴⁰Kilar, *CED*, 1:81.