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A New Approach:  
The Filles Séculières  
(1630-1660)*

By  
Elizabeth Rapley

Modern historians of the Counter-Reformation in France agree to divide that event into two phases: the Counter-Reformation properly speaking, strongly influenced by the Mediterranean Catholicism that triumphed at Trent,¹ characterized by a highly adversarial approach to the questions that had been thrown up by Protestantism; and what is known as the Catholic Reformation, a period of genuine religious regeneration, during which the Church recognized, and moved to redress, the immense problems within itself.² The turning point between these two phases is generally placed around the beginning of the seventeenth century.³

But this “turning point,” like most others, requires qualification. The atmosphere of violence and anxiety which fostered the Counter-Reformation spirit did not die with the conversion of Henri IV and the Edict of Nantes. The Protestant presence continued to cause severe, and often brutal, reaction. Even when non-violent, the defense of the faith was conducted largely through campaigns of apologetics, mounted by the great preaching congregations. On the other hand, the “Catholic Reformation,” in the sense in which that term is usually employed, was not fully realized until later in the seventeenth century. The central drive of the Catholic Reformation was for the reform of the clergy, on which was predicated the christianization of the laity.⁴ This strategy was designed by the Council of Trent, but it was

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not implemented in France until a full century later. The French Church's program of structural reform had to wait for its financial recovery from the losses of the Reformation years. Only in the 1670s, with the setting-up of seminaries throughout the country, did clerical reform begin in earnest. In the meantime, much of France remained poorly served by its clergy. The grand siècle, writes one Church historian, was not the magnificent "moment" that has sometimes been depicted, but a period of severe and continuing crisis.

Thus the first decades of the seventeenth century were a period during which the country's religious reformers gathered their forces and laid their foundations. This period had its own particular characteristics. It was the time of the "mystical invasion"—a sudden flowering of religious sentiment within French Catholic society. It was also the time of an extraordinarily high level of lay participation in religious affairs. An important part of the Church's work passed into the hands of the laity, at a time when there was a shortage of qualified priests. "Most priests stand aside with their arms crossed; God has had to raise up laymen—cutlers and mercers—to do the work of these idle priests." So wrote a great clerical reformer, Adrien Bourdoise. The laymen of whom he spoke were less likely to be cutlers and mercers than men of substance; but the point of his argument was correct. What is remarkable is that there existed a body of people capable of taking up this work. These were the dévots.

The dévots defined themselves, and were defined, in several ways. In its most general sense, the term simply described pious laymen, or, in the feminine gender, laywomen. But at the turn of the seventeenth century the dévots were also a religious party with a strong political purpose, under the leadership of Pierre (later Cardinal) Bérulle and Michel de Marillac, keeper of the seals to the crown. Spiritual descendants of the Holy League (indeed, many of them had been Leaguers), they represented the pure "Catholic" interest, and were therefore frequently at odds with the more pragmatic policies, first of Henri IV,
then of Cardinal Richelieu. In particular they favored alliances with Catholic powers—Spain and Austria—and were appalled at the government’s *rapprochement* with Protestant princes. Their political influence came to an end with the Day of Dupes, in 1630, when Richelieu finally drove his enemies from power. Thereafter, as state policy became ever more independent of religious considerations, they separated themselves from the “world,” which they now saw as intrinsically evil. *Dévots* took on the role of critics of society and guardians of its morality. Hence their battle against Protestants, libertines, atheists, actors, and every other type of deviant. Hence their conspicuously sober clothes, their theatrical services of reparation during carnival and other seasons of excess, and their unremitting battle against dueling, dancing, gaming, and the theater. For all their status and influence, they were only a small segment of French society, and they were cordially disliked by many for what was seen as their excessive, and foreign, religiosity.

Unfortunately for the *dévots*, their memory is enshrined for us in the brilliant satire created by one of their enemies. The Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, the most powerful and political of all *dévot* organizations, pursued the playwright Molière as a threat to public morality. His reprisal was *Tartuffe*. For three centuries audiences have been regaled with Tartuffe’s hypocrisy and prurience, and also with his hunger for power. But there was more to the *dévots* than Tartuffe. Their influence on their times was powerful and, in many ways, beneficial.

First and foremost, *dévots* were characterized by their interior religious fervor. “No Christian epoch,” writes one historian, “has been more penetrated by the supernatural than the beginning of the seventeenth century. . . . Never did Christian souls ponder more anxiously the ways of divine grace.” They practiced spiritual discipline at a

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*The Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, founded by the duc de Ventadour in 1630, was a secret association of laymen and priests whose purpose was “to embrace with zeal every kind of good purpose, and to procure the glory of God by every kind of means.” Its records show gypsy women locked away, a deist put into jail, a hermaphrodite banished from Paris, prostitutes prosecuted, butchers jailed for selling meat on Fridays—as well as continuing action against Protestants. On the other hand, it was active in a wide range of good works, including assistance to war-torn rural areas. See Comte René de Voyer d’Argenson, *Annales de la Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement*, publiées et annotées par le R. P. Dom H. Beauchet-Fillieau (Marseilles, 1900), throughout.*


level hitherto unknown in laymen. They confessed frequently (a practice which had begun only with Trent), mortified their bodies, and read and meditated upon the many religious works that were now coming into print. Above all, following the advice of François de Sales given in the *Introduction à la vie dévote*, they found themselves spiritual directors, and developed the practice of methodical prayer. "This practice," writes Lucien Febvre, "which during the Middle Ages belonged to the convents ... passed into the 'world.'" He argues that to it, more than anything else, can be attributed the intense religious fervor of the time.\footnote{L. Febvre, "Aspects maçonnés d'un renouveau religieux en France entre 1590 et 1620," AESC 13 (October-December 1958):641. See also Charles B. du Chesnay, "La spiritualité des laïcs," *XVIIe Siècle* 62-63 (1964):39.}

Dévots aspired to an other-worldly life within the world. "Those who are simply good men trudge along God’s road," wrote François de Sales, "but the devout run, and when they are truly devout, they fly."\footnote{François de Sales to Mme. Présidente Brulart, 13 October 1604, in François de Sales, *Oeuvres complètes*, 25 vols. (Annecy: 1892-1908), 12: 347.}

Part of the activity proper to the dévot was good works. Indeed, it was this vocation that distinguished him from the other orders in society. In the seventeenth-century mind, charitable works were not the responsibility of the priest, still less of the religious. They fell to the layman and laywoman as their apportioned lot, the means of their salvation. "If you love the poor," wrote François de Sales to his *Philothée*, "spend time among them; take pleasure in having them at your home, and in visiting them at their home. ... Make yourself their servant, go to serve them in their beds when they are sick, and do it with your own hands; be their cook at your own expense; be their sewing maid and their washerwoman."\footnote{François de Sales, *Introduction à la vie dévote* (Paris: Nelson, 1947), part 3, chapter 15. This was clearly a counsel of perfection, seldom followed literally; but among those who did follow it were the first sisters of the Visitation, in the period before they were cloistered.}

Many dévots undertook good works as part of their spiritual exercises.\footnote{Du Chesnay, "La spiritualité des laïcs," 36-8; 43-5.} For those who found personal contact with the poor distasteful, there was alternative social action: organization, animation, fund-raising. It was in these fields that the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement and its branches in the provinces were most effective.

From the 1630s on, dévot spirituality was, so to speak, bonded to good works. For the next thirty or forty years, the care of the poor, in all its diverse forms, bore the stamp of a particular mind-set that was
other-worldly and yet highly practical. This mind-set, which saw poverty as an evil and the poor as social problems, was a far cry from the cheerful and undiscriminating charitable outlook of the Middle Ages. The social relationships of the seventeenth century were tinged with a highly pessimistic theology. "For the disciples of Bérulle," writes one historian, "nature, soiled by original sin, was fundamentally evil." The poor required assistance, training, and—above all—salvation. Their future was not in this world, but the next; true charity consisted not in pampering their bodies, but in salvaging their souls.

The new attitudes towards the poor did not spring from theology alone. It has been pointed out that the same general policies were developed in Protestant societies working from a different theological base. In its war on mendicancy, France was much closer in spirit to Protestant England than to Catholic Spain, where all efforts to enclose and correct beggars were resisted, well into the eighteenth century. The harsher social approach came to prevail where it had the conjoncture on its side. Economic and social conditions, the triumph of mercantilism and the passion for order in all things combined to change the attitude of the respectable classes towards their weaker brethren.

However, a powerful and influential section of the dévot movement continued to draw, at least partly, on the traditional idea of the poor as alter Christus—the other Christ. At the risk of overgeneralizing, it may be argued that this section represented the feminine point of view, while the other represented the masculine.

In French Catholic tradition, the exercise of charity towards the poor had always been a feminine prerogative. "In these parts this ministry is usually practiced by women," wrote François de Sales. Wives were entitled by law and custom to give alms on behalf of their husbands. They monopolized the field; indeed, it was the only field outside the home that they were allowed to monopolize. However,
in the environment of the Catholic Reformation charity took on a higher profile, and pious laymen resolved to take their share. Consequently, the work was divided into two categories: the business of social control, in the sense of the supervision and training of the able-bodied poor, and charity pure and simple, such as the care of the sick and the obviously helpless. The former became the preserve of men, the latter of women. Throughout the century, each sex continued to dominate its own segment of charitable works.

It was under the auspices of the dévotes that the first charitable company of women—the Filles de la Charité—was born. These were, essentially, unmarried women or widows who wished to live together under one roof and dedicate themselves to good works. Their original purpose was to assist lay action, and they usually worked closely with other pious, but less committed, laywomen. The evolution and the expansion of the business of charity, however, laid a demand on them far beyond expectations. To meet this demand, they underwent organization and training, and became an officially recognized company.

Changing perceptions of poverty came first, from changes in poverty itself. The seventeenth century was indeed a “tragic century.” At the end of the religious wars there was a short breathing space; then came what has been called a “climax of misery”: bad harvests in 1629 and 1630, followed by bubonic plague; war in Lorraine, then in Picardie and Champagne. The years 1647-1648 and 1651-1652, also bad harvest years, were aggravated by the upheavals of the Fronde. These blows fell heavily upon the rural poor. Unable to survive the disorganization of their habitat, great numbers of people simply took to the road, migrating to cities that had no real means of absorbing them.

Poverty became highly visible. “One saw wandering troops of vagrants, without religion and without discipline, begging with more obstinacy than humility, often stealing what they could not otherwise get, gaining the public’s attention by pretended infirmities, coming even to the foot of the altars to disturb the devotions of the faithful.” These vagabond poor were despised by respectable people. They were “the sweepings of cities, the plague of Republics, gallows meat, from which come thieves, murderers, and all sorts of other good-for-nothing rascals.” They were feared, probably with cause, as

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23 Henri Jadart, Memoires de Jean Maillefer continués par son fils jusqu’en 1716 (Paris-Reims, 1890), 120.
being ripe for trouble. In 1649 the bourgeois of Paris complained officially: "The poor within our city walls are constantly planning frightful sedition, and the despair which is beginning to fill their hearts convinces them that there is no other remedy for their ills." 24

Behind these problem poor, whose wandering ways were equated in the seventeenth century with heresy, disease, and vice, 25 stood another class of poor who, though less visible, caused equal concern. These were the respectable poor. By contemporary definition, a man was respectably poor "who lives as a Christian, who cannot earn his livelihood and who blushes for shame when he is forced to beg." 26 For the majority of the poor who remained integrated into their towns and villages the danger of destitution was only too real. "Most of them have not enough to survive two days of sickness without assistance from the Hôtel-Dieu," wrote one civic official of the poor in his city. 27 The saturation of the labor market by incomers and the rising price of grain kept their numbers high. In 1651, at the peak of the troubles of the Fronde, one Parisian parish alone, Saint-Sulpice, identified 856 families, for a total of 2496 mouths, as, respectable poor. 28

A number of institutions already existed to handle the poor, but they were inadequate for present needs. The small country hospitals were mostly abandoned by the seventeenth century. The municipal hôtels-dieu, or hospitals, were run down and poorly maintained. Bureaux des pauvres had been established during the previous century in many cities, but they usually existed in name only, without funds or buildings. Operations that continued to function did so only in a desultory way. The Couche of Paris, for instance, the institution for abandoned children, was maintained by a tax on the high justices of the city under the aegis of the chapter of Notre-Dame; but the children were neglected and abused nonetheless. "They were sold at eight sols apiece to beggars, who broke their arms and legs so that people would be induced to give them alms, and then let them die of hunger." 29

26 "Ordre à tenir pour la visite des pauvres honteux, following the Reglements de la Charité de Saint-Germain de l'Auxerrois, quoted in Allier, La "Cabale des dévois." 95.
Everywhere, at the end of the troubles of the sixteenth century, facilities had broken down, and the will to rebuild them was lacking.30

The credit for changing this situation lies largely with one man. In typical seventeenth-century fashion, his own revelation of the misery of the poor came first on the spiritual, rather than the material, level. In 1616 Vincent de Paul,31 then almoner to the Gondi family, was traveling with Madame de Gondi on her domain when he was asked to hear the confession of a sick peasant. A few days later the peasant declared to Madame de Gondi that this confession had saved his soul, that without it he would most certainly have been damned. Madame de Gondi turned in horror to her almoner: “Ah! Monsieur, what is this? . . . It is doubtless the same for most of these poor people . . . . Ah, Monsieur Vincent, how many souls are being lost! What remedy is there for this?”32

At his patron’s urging, Monsieur Vincent organized a mission in the local parish of Folleville, to exhort the inhabitants to make a general confession. The response was so overwhelming that he could not handle the confessions alone and had to call upon the Jesuits of Amiens for assistance. This was the first of his missions. In 1625, armed with a legacy of sixteen thousand livres from Madame de Gondi, he founded a congregation of priests whose sole purpose was to convert the countryside. The method that they continued to use was the mission: an organized descent by a group of preachers upon a community, a period of intensive exhortation and instruction which ended only when everybody had received the sacrament of penance.

This method, “corresponding to the needs of the country people,” as Monsieur Vincent put it, bore great fruit. But its unforeseen product was the effect it had upon the missioners themselves. “I did not learn about the state of these poor people from someone else,” wrote one priest, an Oratorian who had assisted at a mission, “I discovered it for myself. . . . The other confessors and I found aged people, sixty years old and more, who told us freely that they had never confessed; and

31 Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), born of peasant parents in a small village close to Dax, in Landes. Once a swineherd, he lived to become one of the most influential ecclesiastics of his time, when he was appointed to the king’s conseil de conscience. He was the founder of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Filles de la Charité, as well as the lay confraternities known as the parish charités.
when we spoke to them about God, and the most holy Trinity, and the Nativity, Passion and Death of Jesus Christ, and other mysteries, it was a language which they did not understand at all.”

On discovering this alien world so close to its own doorstep, Catholic society experienced a profound sense of shock. Monsieur Vincent and his Mission priests consciously induced and exploited this uncomfortable awareness. Information from the countryside was relayed to the city, and disseminated by word of mouth and by pamphlet. This information, acting on the tender dévot conscience, produced powerful results.

In the minds of seventeenth-century theologians, ignorance of the faith meant damnation. “Without a clear faith in the fundamental truths of our holy Church, it is impossible to please God and be saved, no matter what outward ceremonies one observes.” These neglected people, then, were in danger both of material destitution and spiritual death. And the danger extended back onto those who were guilty of the neglect. “Si non pavisti, occidisti”—if you have not fed them, you have killed them—this hard doctrine was repeated frequently by Vincent de Paul. “How shall we answer to God if through our negligence one of these poor souls comes to die and is lost? . . . Ought we not to be afraid that He will call us to account for this at the hour of our death?” It was a disturbing thought, but a powerful one. Beneath the good works of the seventeenth century lay, not a comfortable philanthropy, but a deep sense of anxiety and guilt.

However, this pious laity looked forward also to the temporal reordering of society, and therefore found good works attractive for highly practical reasons. Even Monsieur Vincent was ready to include the socialization of the poor among the blessings of charity: “The rich acquire a million blessings in this world and eternal life in the other . . . the poor are instructed in the fear of God, taught to earn their living, and assisted in their needs, and . . . finally, cities are delivered from throngs of ne'er-do-wells and troublemakers, and improved by the trade created by the industry of the poor.”

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33Ibid., 55.
36Abelly, Vie de S. Vincent de Paul, 1: 237.
The two motivations—the spiritual and the practical—existed side by side, so closely entwined that nobody, then or now, could distinguish one from the other. Under their impulse a great variety of institutions and projects were launched: orphanages, hospitals, refuges, workshops, asylums, prison-visiting programs, legal aid for galley convicts, training schools for servants, seminaries for teachers, furniture depots for the destitute, seed-grain for the peasants—all maintained by voluntary effort until, with the establishment of the hôpitaux-généraux (workhouses) at mid-century, the direction began to pass to the government, and the spirit changed.

In short, the manpower behind the good works of the period 1620-1650 was primarily secular, voluntary, deeply religious in conviction, but also dedicated to the concept of an orderly and productive society. It had one further characteristic: it was largely feminine. Of the different organizations developed to assist the poor, the majority were female. Since the work was all voluntary, this was something over which nobody had any control. Some found the fact worrying, others found it providential.

The beginnings, and growth, of the greatest female charitable organization of the times certainly did have a fortuitous character. In 1617 Vincent de Paul, having escaped temporarily from Madame de Gondi’s devoted grasp, was working as a curé in Châtillon-les-Dombes, in the archdiocese of Lyon. One Sunday, just before mass, he learned of a family that was sick, some distance from the village. He announced the news from the pulpit, then, after mass, prepared to go out to visit the family, taking with him “a worthy man, a bourgeois of the town.” “On the road we found women going out ahead of us, and, a little further on, others who were coming back. And as it was summer and very hot, these good women were sitting along the side of the roads to rest and get cool. There were so many of them that you could have called them a procession.”

The difficulty was that they had overwhelmed the sick family with their generosity. Monsieur Vincent realized that much of the food they had brought would spoil, and then the family would be in need once more. He decided to coordinate the women’s good will: “God gave me this thought: ‘could these good women not be brought together and persuaded to offer themselves to God to serve the sick

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38Ibid., 14: 125.
poor?' Afterwards, I showed them the way to handle these great necessities with great ease. At once they resolved to do it."  

This was the first parish Charité. It was so successful that Vincent de Paul undertook to establish a similar organization wherever he preached a mission, and later instructed his Mission priests to do the same. Charités were legally erected as confraternities, with a superior and a treasurer elected by the members. Their funds were raised by donations, by organized begging by the members, and also from any properties that the confraternity might acquire. Many of the village Charités owned sheep and cattle.

The most successful Charités were those in which women of different social levels were included, because in this case the wealthier women tended to provide the money while the women of modest means did the work. But the several rules which have survived show that, initially, all members were expected to take their turn preparing the food and visiting the sick. The diet was to include meat, eggs or fish twice a day, as well as wine and bread and—for the very sick—broth and more eggs. The sick poor were expected to confess and communicate, and to accept the spiritual exhortations of their benefactors. Those who died while under the care of the charité were to be buried, if necessary, at the charité's expense, and the members were to try to attend their funeral, "thus taking the place of mothers who accompany their children to the tomb."

As bigger towns became involved, the organization became more elaborate. In Mâcon in 1621, a formal meeting was held at the city hall, attended by municipal and royal officials. The confraternity, once established, was given the responsibility of enumerating the poor and of suggesting how to raise the money to assist them. The city fathers' skepticism dissolved into delight as the project began to take effect. "One no longer found oneself besieged, in church and in the streets, by these sturdy beggars who spend the whole day looking for their living, without respect for the churches, or regard for their betters, or courtesy for those who refuse to give in to their importunities." The Mâcon operation achieved impressive proportions. Fourteen years

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39Ibid., 9: 209.
42Père Desmoulins, Oratorian, quoted in ibid., 495.
later, the Charité was still distributing twelve hundred pounds of bread and thirty to thirty-five francs per week, as well as paying for medicines, a doctor, and two nurses to watch over the sick.\footnote{Ibid., 496.}

Vincent de Paul did not conceive of this work as exclusively feminine. As early as 1620 he set up a male Charité; in 1621, he attempted to make men and women work together. While the women were to continue their work with the sick, the men were to oversee those who were healthy but unable to take care of themselves.\footnote{Règlement de la charité mixte de Joigny, in ibid., 447.} The women’s work was more in the charitable tradition, while the men’s work contained a corrective element. Monsieur Vincent warned the men to respect the women’s work: “Our Lord is as much glorified in the ministry of women as in that of men.”\footnote{Ibid., 455.} However, the men’s Charités did not thrive and the mixed Charités did not work. He later wrote: “Men and women do not get along together at all in matters of administration; the former want to take it over entirely and the latter will not allow it. . . . We charged the men with the care of the healthy poor and the women with the sick; but because there was a shared purse, we had to get rid of the men. And I can bear this witness in favor of the women, that there is no fault to find in their administration, so careful and accurate are they.”\footnote{Vincent de Paul to Étienne Blatiron, 2 September 1650, CED, 4: 71.}

Male membership gradually dwindled and finally collapsed, while female membership continued to grow. The enthusiasm of women for the new confraternities brought them out in numbers that were sometimes alarming. From Beauvais, the royal lieutenant wrote that “about a fortnight ago, a priest named Vincent arrived in this town, and . . . called together a great crowd of women, and persuaded them to set up a branch of the confraternity which he has called a ‘Charity.’ . . . Since then it has all been arranged by the aforesaid Vincent: this confraternity has been erected and about three hundred women admitted, who meet together frequently to perform their religious exercises and other duties; which ought not to be tolerated.”\footnote{Coste, Le grand saint, 1: 248.} But official sensibilities aside, the success of the Charités was guaranteed, because the need they served was so pressing.

The first confraternity in the archdiocese of Paris was erected in 1629. Vincent de Paul was initially unenthusiastic about the city Charités.
The institution had been designed specifically for country conditions, for a certain integration of society in which members from different walks of life would still be able to work together at what were, after all, menial tasks. How could the upper-class women of Paris be expected to do the same? His fears proved justified: the high-born ladies were unable to perform the "lowly and demeaning services" that the rule required. While they were ready to provide and prepare the food, they preferred to send their servants to carry it to the sick. In some cases these servants abused or neglected their charges. The sick poor were "badly served," remarked Monsieur Vincent.

The solution was suggested, not by Monsieur Vincent, but by someone else. At about this time (1629), while on mission, he met a young servant woman, Marguerite Naseau. She had heard of the *charités* in Paris, and offered herself as a servant to do the work that the ladies could not stomach. He invited her to come, which she did, to serve with great fidelity until her death of the plague in 1633. To Marguerite—the "poor uneducated cowherd" of Villepreux—Vincent would later attribute the creation of the Company of the Filles de la Charité.

Marguerite brought in several other young women, who were given a two-day retreat and then placed in the parish *Charités*. This caused difficulties, however: village girls, no matter how well-intentioned, were poorly prepared for city life. It was decided that they should undergo a period of training in the house of one of the *dames de la Charité*, Mademoiselle Le Gras. Thus the first members and the foundress appeared in reverse order, and thus began the unplanned evolution of the Company of the Filles de la Charité. Even their title was an accident. Originally christened the "*servantes des pauvres malades*," or servants of the sick poor, in keeping with their function, they became known to the public as the "*filles de la Charité*"—the women who worked for the *Charité*.

Vincent de Paul later gave the commonplace name its transcendent meaning.

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49 Ibid., 244.
50 Conference of December 1648, ibid., 445-56.
51 Louise de Marillac (1591-1660), niece of the chancellor and leader of the *dévot* party Michel de Marillac; married in 1613 to Antoine Le Gras, *sécritaire des commandements* to Queen Marie de Medicis. While her husband was occupied at court she adopted the lifestyle of a *dévote*, and in particular dedicated herself to visiting the sick. Her husband's death in 1625 left her free to pursue the life she had long desired.
From 1633, when the first few young women entered Mademoiselle Le Gras's house, until 1658, when the company, now numbering eight hundred, received its letters of registration from parlement, the picture is the same: the founders were always led ahead by events, struggling to control and solidify their immensely successful institute. In this long-drawn-out process of foundation, it was Mademoiselle Le Gras who perceived the problems, envisaged the solutions, and begged for decisions. Monsieur Vincent, preoccupied with his other concerns, and also instinctively slow to move, preferred to wait to be sure "that the good God wishes it."52

Another force played a part in the creation of the company: its rich and powerful benefactors. One of Vincent de Paul's greatest successes was the establishment of the Company of Dames de la Charité in Paris in 1634. This organization very soon numbered between two and three hundred members, including some of the grandes dames of Parisian society.53 As will be seen, it was always in response to the wishes of important persons such as these that Vincent sent his daughters into a new situation.54 The dévotes of the upper classes, in other words, pressed the sisters into their own preferred projects, and thus deeply modified the nature of their work.

Initially the community was completely secular in character. The women wore the gray dress and white toquois, or turban, that was standard among peasant women of the Paris basin. They rose at a comfortable hour for working women—5:30—and observed no rule of silence. They were allowed to go home on family visits. They took no vows and observed no exceptional religious practices. They were, in Monsieur Vincent's words, "members of parishes, subject to the curés wherever they are established."55

Soon, however, the characteristics of a religious community began to appear. In 1634 the women (now twelve in number) received their first "petit règlement."56 Their rising time was pushed forward to 4 o'clock. Their daily devotions were defined, the great silence (from evening prayers until morning prayers) was imposed. The obligation of obedience became absolute. In the mother house, Mademoiselle Le

52Abelly, Vie de S. Vincent de Paul, 2: 27.
54Coste, Le grand saint, 1: 443.
55Abelly, Vie de S Vincent de Paul, 2: 38.
Gras was to be superior. In other communities, even those of only two sisters, a superior was to be appointed. "It is necessary," they were told, "that among you there should always be one in the position of superior." Each sister was to attend a retreat annually. In time, further conventual customs were added. Weekly conferences were to be given, either by Monsieur Vincent or by one of his priests. The rule was to be learned and relearned during the period of "testing"; thereafter it was to be read aloud weekly in community, a regular practice in convents. "Let them resolve to observe with exactitude all the rules, particularly the rule of unquestioning obedience," wrote Mademoiselle Le Gras. From both her writings and Vincent's, it is plain that the founders privately considered the life of the sisters to be a religious life, as perfect as any found in a monastery. "Your vocation," Monsieur Vincent told them in 1643, "is one of the greatest that I know of in the Church." This conviction was repeated, with increasing emphasis, throughout the rest of his life. In 1659 he was prepared to say: "You are not religious in name, but you must be religious in fact, and you are more obliged than they to work towards your perfection."

From 1640 onwards, the Filles de la Charité took vows. On the subject of these vows Vincent de Paul was highly circumspect, for fear of altering the legal status of the sisters. Living in community was one thing; living in community with vows was another: it suggested religious life, and religious life, where women were concerned, meant clausura. "To say 'religious' is to say 'cloistered,' and the Filles de la Charité must be free to go everywhere." His solution was to make the vows private, without witnesses. "They are no different from the vows that devout people make in the world," wrote Mademoiselle Le Gras, "indeed they are not like these, since usually people in the world make them in the hearing of their confessor." By avoiding the slightest semblance of public vows, Vincent de Paul, an expert canonist himself, turned the difficulty of canon law and put his daughters beyond the reach of the cloisterers.

The company still lacked formal status. Mademoiselle Le Gras, who was more concerned with organizational problems than was her

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57Ibid., 221.
58Mademoiselle Le Gras, Lettres, 899.
59Conference of 7 December 1643, CED, 9: 141.
60Ibid., 9: 658.
61Ibid., 9: 143.
director, kept pressing him on this issue; he kept delaying "until he
could see more clearly." In 1645, he found the formula he wanted: the
company could be erected as a simple confraternity, like the other
charités which the sisters had been recruited to serve. This would put
its secular character beyond question. To the sisters, who wanted a
more exalted title, he later explained: "We have judged it appropriate
to leave you with the name of society or confraternity . . . for fear that
if the title of congregation was given to you, people would some day
start wanting to turn the house into a cloister and themselves into
religious, as the Filles de Sainte-Marie have done."

This was the heart of the problem. Vincent de Paul, who had been
a friend of François de Sales and Mère de Chantal, and who had been
canonical superior of the Visitation on the rue Saint-Antoine since
1622, understood well the trap in which that congregation had been
catched. Once his own daughters began leaving Paris for other dio-
ceses they, too, could find themselves exchanging their life of service
for confinement in a cloister.

He gave them instructions on how to speak to a strange bishop: "If
he asks you who you are, and if you are religious, tell him no, by the
grace of God; that it is not that you do not have high esteem for
religious, but that if you were like them you would have to be en-
closed, and that as a result you would have to say good-bye to the
service of the poor. Tell him that you are poor Daughters of Charity,
and that you are given to God for the service of the poor, and that you
are free to retire or to be sent away."

In this last sentence lay the bargaining strength of the company.
From early days the sisters had proved their usefulness. The letters of
Mademoiselle Le Gras show that the demand for their services far
exceeded the supply of sisters. "You are only there on loan," she
reminded them. By retaining their freedom to leave a situation that
had become unsuitable, they were able to avoid interference in their
way of life. The final difficulty for the company was the matter of
jurisdiction. Since the time of Borromeo, all new female communities
had been subject to the bishop in whose diocese they were established.

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64 Robert Lemoine, *Le monde des religieux: l'époque moderne 1563-1789*, vol. 15 (part 2) of *Histoire
du Droit et des Institutions de l'Église en Occident*, ed. Gabriel Le Bras and Jean Gaudemet (Paris:
Editions Cujas, 1976), 309.
66 For a discussion of the case of the Visitation, see chapter 2.
67 Advice to the sisters leaving for Nantes, conference of 22 October 1650, *CED*, 9: 533-34.
As the previous chapter has shown, this rule was a deterrent to any project of a central direction, or of unity between houses. "The more houses we have," Fourier had written, "and the more dioceses they are in, the more difficulty we shall have in establishing an assured government and a perfect union of all houses." His solution had been to appoint a visitor to oversee observance of the rule throughout the congregation, while still deferring to the local bishops' authority. His plan had had only small success; the majority of houses of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame had passed into the jurisdiction of the ordinaries. The other new active congregations had remained altogether under diocesan control, and the result, once the first generation of nuns disappeared, had been fragmentation.

At the time of its erection as a confraternity in 1645, the new company of servantes des pauvres malades had been placed by the archbishop under the customary obedience: "the confraternity is and will remain forever under the authority and dependence of Monseigneur the archbishop and of his successors." It followed from this that, if the company moved into other dioceses, the communities involved would be subject to other ordinaries. Furthermore, its close ties with the Congregation of the Mission were to last only for Monsieur Vincent's lifetime. It appears that the founder himself was ready to accept this arrangement; but Mademoiselle Le Gras was made of sterner stuff. At her request the queen mother petitioned the pope, asking that the confraternity be placed under the perpetual direction of the superior general of the Mission. When Rome granted her wish in 1655, this simple confraternity obtained what no feminine religious congregation had hitherto achieved in France: unity of direction and a partial exemption from local episcopal control.

The path that the Filles de la Charité took was difficult. Interiorly, their lives resembled those of religious in all but the strictly monastic aspects of clausura and Divine Office. Vincent de Paul, called upon to explain how they differed from religious, could only say that "most religious are directed only towards their own perfection, whereas

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70Ibid., 13: 567.
71After Mademoiselle Le Gras's death, and just before his own, Monsieur Vincent was forced to make one final organizational decision. He chose for her replacement, not one of the Dames de la Charité, but a sister from inside the confraternity. For a canonist's perspective on the institution of this company, see Lemoine, Le monde des religieux, 309-13
these women are devoted ... to the care of their neighbor. Exteriory, however, they were simply “women who come and go like seculars.” All external signs that might identify them as religious were carefully avoided. Thus they were forbidden to wear veils, or to ring bells in their houses, or erect grilles in their parlors. “It is to be feared ... especially if there is a grille, that in due course it will turn into a religious order,” Monsieur Vincent explained. Their language was revealing in its saintly deviousness. While privately they used the vocabulary of religious (the conferences used words like “company,” “rule,” and “habit”), outwardly they spoke as seculars, and the words invariably used were “confraternity,” “règlement,” and “dress.” Like François de Sales before him, but for different reasons, Monsieur Vincent impressed upon his daughters the principle of interiority. “Your monastery,” he told them, in what may well be called the founding charter of the filles Séculières, “is the house of the sick ... your cell is your rented room ... For cloister, the city streets, where you must go in the service of your patients. For clausura, obedience, because obedience must be your enclosure, never exceeding what is set down for you, holding you enclosed within its bounds. For your grille, the fear of God. For your veil, holy modesty.”

Whereas the founder of the Visitation had desired to use the exercise of charity to perfect the inner life, Vincent de Paul gave priority to the life of service. His daughters were “to leave God for the sake of God.” In divesting them of all the external appearances of religious life, he was simply practicing a defensive strategy. In the minds of their contemporaries, the slightest suggestion that religious women were free to roam the streets was the subject of scandal. Hence the care to maintain a secular appearance; hence the repeated admonitions to go out only when permitted and to behave modestly while outdoors. In spite of all this, scandals did occur, and the sisters were sometimes harassed in the streets; but in general, they were well received by the public.

Just as the company’s community life evolved, so did its work. Originally, the women were exactly what their title suggested, “servantes des pauvres malades.” They made two rounds each day

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74 Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 24 August 1659, ibid., 10: 662.
75 Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 17 November 1658, ibid., 10: 595.
with the medicines prescribed by the doctors, and a third round—at noon—with the pot of food, or marmite, that had been prepared by the ladies of the local charité. Soon their duties were extended to include bandaging, bleeding, and the making of medicines. Along with this physical care, they were to give simple spiritual counseling: an exhortation to receive the sacraments and to accept the malady in a spirit of faith.

Another specialization appeared: teaching. Although their principal duty was to visit the sick poor, the sisters, from earliest times, also taught catechism to little girls. There were two reasons for this. The parish charités had always concerned themselves with catechizing, and, by extension, with school classes. In the words of one historian, “they put schooling in the same category as soup for the sick, or clothes for babies, or hospital visiting.” The sisters inherited this work, along with the other undertakings of the charités. The ultimate purpose in this, as in every other good work, was salvific. “Take pleasure,” Mademoiselle Le Gras wrote, “in instructing, to the best of your ability, these little creatures who have been bought with the blood of the Son of God, so that they may praise Him and glorify Him eternally.”

There was a second, more practical, reason for teaching school. The intended milieu for the sisters was the small town or village, where a charité of approximately twenty women supervised the care of the sick poor. For an operation of this size, a single servant was adequate. But the lifestyle of the sisters depended on a community of at least two. Therefore the second sister needed another occupation, and the instruction of children provided it. In her spare time she could assist in visiting the sick, or do handwork (usually spinning) to help support the house. The Fille de la Charité, like other poor women, seldom sat without a distaff in her hand.

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77 Mademoiselle Le Gras, Lettres, 589.
78 Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 16 March 1642, CED, 9: 60-66.
79 Coste, Le grand saint, 1: 464.
80 See, for instance, the règlement for the charité of Folleville, 1620, CED, 13: 484.
81 Marcel Fosseyoux, Les écoles de charité à Paris sous l’ancien régime et dans la première partie du XIXe siècle (Paris: 1912), 27.
82 Ibid., 853.
83 Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 14 October 1641, CED, 9: 51. Any surplus cash was sent home to the mother house at the end of the year.
Out of this division of labor a tendency towards further specialization developed. Those women who could read and write became schoolmistresses, while others, whose work was in nursing or visiting, remained illiterate. In time, the work of the schools absorbed more of the sisters. However, although they occasionally sought advice on teaching methods from teaching professionals such as the Ursulines or the Filles de la Croix, they did not at this time become specialists in teaching. Mademoiselle Le Gras retained her reserve in the question of the schooling of poor children. "The fear and love of God": these were the subjects to be taught, not the facility "to talk a lot about it."85

Another more fundamental development began, which the founders had not foreseen and did not entirely welcome. This was the diversion of the sisters into institutions. The hospital at Angers was the first: badly administered and inadequately staffed, it requested Filles de la Charité to take over the nursing. Monsieur Vincent's friend Madame Goussault pleaded with him from her deathbed to grant the request. He acquiesced reluctantly, and in 1640 nine sisters were officially installed as hospital nurses.86 From this time on, more and more of the company's personnel were placed in the service of institutions. In Paris, by 1660, the year of both founders' deaths, the sisters were in charge of three major institutions (the Enfants Trouvés, the Nom-de-Jésus, a workhouse for the aged poor, and the Petites Maisons, an insane asylum), and heavily involved in two more, the Hôtel-Dieu and the prison for galley-convicts.87 As well, they had been committed to more than a score of institutions in the provinces—hospitals both civil and military, orphanages, and asylums.

Their success in these institutions was an irresistible argument for continuing the work. "You would not believe how greatly God blesses these good women everywhere, and in how many places they are wanted," Monsieur Vincent told his priests. "One bishop wants for them for three hospitals, another for two; a third wants them as well; he talked to me about it only three days ago, and pressed me to send them to him."88

85Mademoiselle Le Gras, Lettres, 854.
86Coste, Le grand saint, 1: 465-71.
87It was still the practice to sentence criminals to forced service as oarsmen on the state's galleys. Before being shipped out to serve their sentence they might spend some time in prison. Vincent de Paul had always felt a personal concern for these galley-convicts, since he himself in his youth had been a slave of the Turks.
88Abelly, Vie de S. Vincent de Paul, 2: 36.
Nevertheless, the work of the hospitals was a deviation from the company’s original purpose. “Well, there you are doing the work of real hospital nurses,” wrote Mademoiselle Le Gras to some of the sisters, “just so long as that does not interrupt the work of the Company of Charity.” As she and Vincent de Paul saw it, home care had been developed expressly to save poor families from the pain and separation caused by hospitalization, “if in a poor family someone fell sick [and] it was necessary to separate husband from wife, mother from children, father from family.” The growing movement to build and expand hospitals contradicted the work of the parish charités, and in so far as it drew from the same pockets it threatened to weaken them. “What will become of the work of the Dames de la Charité,” wrote Mademoiselle Le Gras, “if their patients are forced to go to the hospital? You will see: the worthy poor will be deprived of the help that they receive from prepared food and remedies, and the little bit of money that they get now will no longer be available for their needs.”

However, the company could do little to resist the new trend. The servantes des pauvres malades were, from their inception, bound to the dames de la charité and to the social levels from which the ladies came. Vincent de Paul reminded them continually of their dependence on these ladies: “It is they who give you the means to serve God and the poor. What would you do without them, my daughters?” This close association with the ladies, and especially with the most aristocratic confraternity of all, the Dames de la Charité of the Hôtel Dieu of Paris, was the source of the company’s strength, of its ability to expand almost without regard to expense. But it also meant that the paths along which the company was to move were largely chosen by the ladies, often with regard to their own territorial concerns.

Thus the move to Angers was inspired by Madame Goussault, that to Richelieu by the duchesse d’Aiguillon, that to Vaux by Madame Fouquet, and so on. The patronage of two queens, Marie-Louise Gonzague and Anne of Austria, took the sisters to Poland and to a string of military hospitals along the frontiers of France. The ladies had power to dictate not only the sisters’ location, but the nature of

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88Mademoiselle Le Gras, Lettres, 808.
89Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 13 February 1646, CED, 9: 246.
90Mademoiselle Le Gras, Lettres, 805.
91Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 14 June 1643, CED, 9: 118.
92Coste, Le grand saint, 1: chapter 19, 461-528 throughout.
their work. “They are like the head of a body, and you are only the feet,” Monsieur Vincent told the sisters. “You must treat the ladies this way; otherwise, they will get tired of you.”

Thus the free-moving and flexible parish charitès were largely overtaken by the prevailing trend towards institutionalization. In one outstanding case, however, Vincent de Paul refused to give way. This was in the matter of the Hôpital-Général of Paris, the great social experiment of the 1650s.

Renfermement, “the involuntary incarceration of groups considered marginal or potentially dangerous,” had been in the public mind for some time. A move in 1611 to lock up the beggars of Paris had had the effect of clearing the streets, as those beggars mostly preferred to leave town. As the official effort flagged, however, they came flooding back in. A permanent solution would require a more coordinated effort, like that which established the Hôpital-Général in Lyon in 1622.

The principal promoter of the project of a Hôpital-Général for Paris was the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement. As early as 1631 the subject was under discussion at its meetings. But it was the years after the Fronde—“the high point of popular suffering”—which saw forty thousand beggars in the streets of Paris, that brought the matter to a head. In 1656 mendicity was banned by royal edict. Out-of-town beggars were expelled. The beggars of Paris were ordered enclosed in one or other of a group of institutions. In 1657 the round-up began, assisted by bodies of enforcers especially enlisted for the purpose, and by a decree from the parlement forbidding the private distribution of alms. In the first year alone six thousand poor were incarcerated.

Renfermement had its apologists. It saved the poor from idleness, considered in the seventeenth century to be the mother of all vices, and it taught them a trade. As the Jansenist Arnauld explained, it had a pedagogical value. “The greatest benefit of incarcerating the poor is the good education of the children. This is best achieved by watching over them ceaselessly, and, by this continual surveillance “cutting

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94Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 2 February [1647], CED, 9: 306-07.
96Allier, La “Cabale des dévots,” 63.
97Chill, “Religion and Mendicity,” 413
98Ibid., 415.
Above all, it fitted in with the mercantilist spirit which now, at mid-century, was coming into its own. One of the greatest champions of the workhouses was Minister Colbert, for reasons different from those of Arnauld, as his instructions to the municipality of Auxerre show. “Inasmuch as abundance always comes from hard work, and misery from idleness, your first effort must be to find the means of enclosing the poor and of giving them an occupation to earn their living. On this matter you are to make good resolutions as soon as possible.”

It did not, however, impress Vincent de Paul. He was a member of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement. Like other men of his time, as the règlements of the charités show, he saw no harm in mixing assistance with discipline. He himself had established a workhouse—the Nom-de-Jésus—which combined a hard working day with lengthy religious devotions. However, he objected in principle to coercion Nom-de Jésus had only voluntary inmates, and its success was attested to by the fact that it had a waiting list. Why not start the Hôpital-Général, also, on a voluntary basis? His plan was later described by his first biographer: “According to his thinking all that was needed at first was a trial: a hundred or two hundred poor should be taken in—and again, only those who would come of their free will, without any constraint. If these were well treated and happy, they would attract others, and thus the number would grow as Providence sent the funds... and that on the contrary, the haste and fear that was being used might well be an impediment to God’s design.

When his point of view did not prevail, and the Hôpital-Général became an institution of confinement, he distanced himself from the project. On learning that the government had assigned the spiritual direction of the institution to his Mission priests, he declined the offer, “not being sure enough that God wills it.” Asked to send sisters to the women’s institution at the Salpêtrière, he sent two, but only for a short time.

It has been argued here that two approaches to the question of public assistance existed side by side in seventeenth-century France.

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99 A. Arnauld to P. de Cort, 6 April 1657, quoted in Taveneaux, Le catholicisme dans la France classique, 1: 220.
100 Quoted in Gutton, La société et les pauvres, 134.
101 Coste, Le grand saint, 2: 495.
102 Abelly, Vie de S. Vincent de Paul, 1: 194.
103 Quoted in ibid., 144.
104 Coste, Le grand saint, 2: 506.
The one, which found its most unequivocal implementation in the policies of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement and in the building of the hôpitaux-généraux, treated poverty as a punishment and a danger "Social disorder was man's concupiscence writ large."\textsuperscript{105} The other, represented by Vincent de Paul and the parish charités, was more compassionate. "The poor are our masters," Monsieur Vincent told his daughters. "They are our kings, and they must be obeyed. It is not an exaggeration to speak of them like this, since Our Lord is in the poor."\textsuperscript{106}

It is not too simplistic to say that the first, and more modern, approach pertained to men, and the second, more traditionalist, approach, to women. "If the work to be done is considered political," wrote Mademoiselle Le Gras, "it seems that men must undertake it; if it is considered a work of charity, then women may undertake it."\textsuperscript{107} The exercise of charity sprang naturally from women's position in the family and in society.\textsuperscript{108} The nature of the work of the Dames de la Charité and, by extension, of the Filles de la Charité, was traditional. After all, it was the women of Châtillon-les-Dombes, not the men, whom Vincent de Paul had met on the road after he had made his appeal for help. This kind of action was perfectly familiar and unthreatening to the seventeenth-century world.

But the scale of the effort changed, and with it, the effect that the women had on their social environment. By 1660 charity was becoming an important part of the Church's business. In subsequent years, as Louis XIV's reign progressed and the secular powers became more concerned with the management of society, this highly practical aspect of the Church's work fell more and more under government control. In so far as women made themselves indispensable to this work, they established a new role for themselves, not only in the Church, but in lay society.\textsuperscript{109} However, the intervention of the government in the management of the poor paralleled, if it did not actually contribute to, the exhaustion of the spiritual movement that had given birth to the charités.\textsuperscript{110} At the moment that society acquired an appetite

\textsuperscript{105}Chill, "Religion and Mendicity," 424.
\textsuperscript{106}Vincent de Paul, Correspondance, 13: 430. [This appears to be an erroneous citation for the Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 25 November 1658, CED, 13: 610].
\textsuperscript{107}Pensées de Louise de Marillac, quoted in Coste, Le grand saint, 2: 497.
\textsuperscript{108}Gustave Fagniez, La femme et la société française dans la première moitié du XVII\textsuperscript{e} siècle (Paris: J. Gambler, 1929), 362.
\textsuperscript{109}Gutton, La société et les pauvres, 149.
\textsuperscript{110}Deyon, "À propos du paupérisme," 152.
for schools, hospitals, and orphanages, the voluntary support systems established by the laity began to fall away. The filles séculières found themselves alone in the field, stripped of the cover that the dévot environment had once provided them, much closer now to a professional lifestyle than they had been at the beginning.

In 1633, a handful of village girls, armed only with their own good intentions, had worked under the direction of parish charités at tasks too menial for their patrons to perform. In 1660 an officially recognized company of some eight hundred women, with strong central direction and an equally strong esprit de corps, was spread out across the country. The women obeyed a rule, took simple vows, and wore a distinctive dress, yet remained secular. However, they were indeed religious, as their founder told them, in all but name. This was a revolution, though a hidden one. The Council of Trent had forbidden religious women to mix with the world. The first Frenchwomen who had attempted to lead a life combining religion with service to society—the Ursulines, the Visitandines, and the Congrégation de Notre-Dame—had been firmly put back into the cloister. Yet here were other women, only a few years later, and less than a half-century after the legislation of Trent had been accepted by the French Church, doing exactly what the council had forbidden. The principal reason for their success was one of approach. The congrégées of the Counter-Reformation had attempted a modification of the religious life, and this was seen as threatening, both by the reforming hierarchy and by Catholic society at large. The filles Séculières approached their goal from a different direction. They denied all connection with the religious life. They practiced a modification of the secular life, adapting it to be more devout, more ordered. There was nothing unusual in this. As a respected Parisian ecclesiastic observed, "It seems that this generation wishes to live by a Rule, and that by following the example [of religious], people of the world propose to live as though they have fled the world, though this flight is only one of the spirit." From the private dévot life to community life was a small step, and for single women an eminently sensible one. If purists stirred nervously, the rest of the world refused to be alarmed. Who could find fault, as long as they remained secular? No one was unduly concerned, any longer,
with the wider canonical implications. Finally, when the new communities sent their members out to serve the poor, society remained equable. After all, the women were performing a useful service at moderate cost, and this was a conclusive argument in their favor. Then, within a very few years more, the *filles Séculières* were part of the structure of public assistance, and from that time on their position was secure.

People as a rule are glad to talk to a king; those who think it hard to talk to God for half an hour have no judgment.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity, 4 June 1643)*

It is essential to continue well, because to begin is nothing.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity, 16 August 1640)*