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Understanding Hearts—Elizabeth Seton and Louise de Marillac

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A wellspring of wisdom generates the pulse of charity, which arises from "the heart of one who has understanding." Louise de Marillac (1591-1660), and Elizabeth Seton (1774-1821), are two women who, although separated by time, are united in ways of charity and wisdom. These foundresses model a way of wisdom for contemporary women in ministry. Their lives can be instructive for persons driven by gospel values—to be flames of love for others. This article will compare and contrast their common life themes and highlight areas of striking similarity, especially the development of their mission and its relevance today.

In God’s Hand

God molded Louise and Elizabeth in labyrinthine ways of wisdom and gave them a mission which endures. Formators of the charism of charity for apostolic women, these two foundresses searched for and found God as lay women. They were wives, mothers, and widows before they founded communities and vowed themselves to the evangelical counsels. Although removed by almost two centuries, there are striking similarities in their lives, their philosophy and spirituality. Both women had similar experiences that led them into a process of personal conversion. Both experienced early maternal loss, had half-siblings, knew rejection by stepmothers, relied on a favorite uncle as a paternal figure, nursed terminally ill husbands, coped with parenting alone as widows, cared for children of relatives, sought strength from God’s Word and sacrament, and had formative, spiritual experiences. Even physically, both were only 4'11" tall and quite petite. They remembered significant events in the same months--both were born in August and widowed in December.

1 Proverbs 15:23.
These women had understanding hearts that span the gap of time between them and us. The impulsive and high-strung Louise worried when she felt insecure, while the high spirited and impetuous Elizabeth dreamed about ideals. Late in life Elizabeth reflected on her romanticism by writing, “all life is but a wish.” Louise’s sense of organization caused her to attend to everyday details with precision, while Elizabeth’s orderliness inclined her to be more concerned about future possibilities. Both enjoyed the arts: Louise painted and was well-read, while Elizabeth played the piano and wrote poetry. Both women were well schooled in diplomacy. Louise, ever cordial but persuasive, could communicate her convictions decisively and persistently. Elizabeth, always gracious and compassionate, could also manifest a feisty determination and issue spicy remonstrances when justice or charity warranted firmness.

Louise de Marillac

Born in the environs of seventeenth-century Paris, Louise never knew the comforting security of a mother’s love because of her out-of-wedlock birth. She was placed at an early age, perhaps as a preschooler, in a convent where a paternal aunt lived. There she received the foundation of a classical education until her father transferred her to a boarding home for a more practical training in domestic arts. Active in politics and government because of the influential Marillac family, Louis de Marillac remarried but his new wife did not accept his four-year-old daughter into their home. At age twenty-two, Louise entered an arranged marriage with Antoine Le Gras. Their only son Michel-Antoine Le Gras (1613-1696), was always a source of concern for his mother. After only nine years of marriage, Louise’s husband became terminally ill approximately three years before his death in 1625. A religious woman, though anxious and scrupulous, Louise met Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), and involved herself with the works of charity which he was beginning in the nearby parishes of Paris.

Vincent saw her potential and soon assigned supervisory responsibilities to Louise. Following her keen feminine intuition, Louise recommended that the village girls coming to volunteer in the confraternities of charity be trained. Her goal was for them to provide quality service to persons who were sick and poor. This insight led Louise and

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3 Elizabeth Seton to Juliana Scott, June 1817, Joseph B. Code, Letters of Mother Seton to Mrs. Julianna Scott [New York: Father Salvator M. Burgio Memorial Foundation, 1960], 261. “But to dream life away looking at the clouds, careless even where tomorrow’s bread is to come from, is all I can obtain from my best resolutions.” (See 11 August 1813, Elizabeth Seton to Juliana Scott, ibid., 229.)
Vincent to co-found the Company of the Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor, in 1633. That initiative became the prototype for communities of apostolic women not bound to the cloister. Louise was actively involved in developing and drafting the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity*, especially the “Particular Rules for the Sisters of the Parishes” in which the often quoted poetic text first appeared: ‘having only for a convent the houses of the sick . . . for a cell a hired room, for a chapel their parish church, for cloister the streets of the city.’ For twenty-seven years, Louise formed the early sisters, supervised and expanded their ministries from home nursing to care of abandoned babies, education of girls, battlefield nursing, hospital management, care of refugees, prisoners, persons who were elderly or mentally ill, and addressing other forms of poverty throughout France and beyond its borders into Poland in 1652.

**Elizabeth Ann Seton**

Born an Episcopalian in New York, Elizabeth knew the searing pain of loss at the tender age of three. Her mother had died and she already had been rejected by her step-mother by the age of four. However, her father saw that she was educated in French, music, literature and the arts according to the standards of the day. Before turning twenty, Elizabeth Bayley Seton, married William Magee Seton (1768-1803), in 1794. Blessed with three daughters (Anna Maria, Rebecca, and Catherine Charlton), and two sons (William and Richard), the couple was healthy and happy. They enjoyed the comforts of social status and prosperity but soon encountered bankruptcy and illness. When tuberculosis threatened her husband, Elizabeth and their eldest daughter, Anna Maria, desperately embarked on a sea voyage for his health. At Leghorn, authorities feared his disease and quarantined the family for a month. During that period William’s fragile health rapidly declined under such harsh conditions, and his death thrust Elizabeth into circumstances that changed her life and history.

The Filicchi family, William Magee’s business associates, befriended Elizabeth and extended gracious hospitality to the Setons in Italy. The Setons learned about Roman Catholicism from them. After returning to the United States, Elizabeth converted to Catholicism (1805), struggled unsuccessfully to support her family in New York, and came to Mary-

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land (1808), to begin a school for girls in Baltimore. The following year she established the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's (1809), and founded Saint Joseph's Academy Free School (1810), in Emmitsburg.

**All Good Things Came to Be**

The charism of charity first blossomed in Louise de Marillac, along with her own inner healing and personal growth, as her insecurity lessened and self-reliance increased. Her attention to detail, gentle persuasion, and understanding heart helped form the communal and service dimensions of the Daughters of Charity. Louise de Marillac died in Paris at age 68 and was canonized in 1934. Pope John XXIII declared her patron of Christian Social Workers in 1960.

Elizabeth Seton's steadfast hopefulness on her own journey planted the charism of charity in the United States. Her courageous determination, openness to new possibilities, dynamic vivacity, and understanding heart shaped the Company of Charity in a new culture. The communities of her spiritual daughters trace their roots to the foundation Elizabeth made in Emmitsburg, and are now united in the Sisters of Charity Federation. Elizabeth died in the midst of her little community at age forty-six, and was canonized in 1975. She is the first citizen born in the United States to be declared a saint, and is considered a pioneer Catholic educator and patron of American Catholic schools.

**Wisdom -- Spirit and Friend**

Elizabeth and Louise are women who knew the hurt of childhood rejection and adolescent conflicts, the happiness and struggles of marriage, the joys and concerns of motherhood, the challenges of parenting alone, the anxiety of spiritual conflict, and the love of a generous God in whose Providence they put all their trust. God spoke to Elizabeth and

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5 The Federation, first organized in 1947, was formerly known as the Conference of Mother Seton's Daughters, then as the Elizabeth Seton Federation before adopting the present name in 1996. These communities trace their roots to Mother Seton's 1809 foundation in Emmitsburg: the Daughters of Charity provinces in the United States; Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul of New York; Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati; Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception of Saint John, New Brunswick; Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul of Halifax; Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, Convent Station; Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul of Greensburg; and Les Religieuse de Notre Dame du Sacré Cœur. Other communities belonging to the Sisters of Charity Federation share roots in the rule of Louise and Vincent: the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth; Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy, Charleston; Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth; Vincentian Sisters of Charity of Pittsburgh; and Vincentian Sisters of Charity of Bedford.
Louise through events, circumstances and companions on their journey.

Providential circumstances intertwined in convoluted ways for both women, enabling them to birth the charism of charity according to God’s mysterious design. For example, the friendship that existed in seventeenth-century France between Vincent de Paul and Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657), founder of the Sulpicians, realized new expressions in a later century on a different continent. The French Revolution had caused many religious, including the Sulpicians, to immigrate to America. While visiting New York, Reverend Louis William V. Dubourg, S.S. (1766-1833), president of Saint Mary’s College in Baltimore, had a chance meeting with Mrs. Elizabeth Seton. Dubourg invited her, a struggling widow and recent convert, to relocate her family in Baltimore where he would support her in beginning a school for girls in 1808. During the school’s first year at Paca Street, the Sulpicians, who had known or collaborated with the Daughters of Charity in France, recorded in the minutes for their assembly of March 14, 1809: “It is a matter of buying a plantation near Emmitsburg to found there a community of daughters, à peu près sur le même plan que les filles de la Charité, de Saint Vincent de Paul [sic] [like that of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul]; who join to the care of the sick, the instruction of young girls in all branches of Christian education.” Their intuition became the seed of the Vincentian charism in the United States, which first flourished under Sulpician direction, especially during the years when Reverend John Dubois, S.S. (1764-1842), was superior general of the Sisters of Charity and Reverend Simon Bruté, S.S. (1789-1829), Elizabeth’s spiritual director.

Reverend John Baptist David, S.S. (1761-1841), second superior general of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph’s, requested Reverend Joseph Benedict Flaget, S.S. (1763-1851), bishop-elect of Bardstown, Kentucky, who visited Paris in 1810 to return with a copy of the rule Louise and Vincent had written for their Daughters of Charity. Flaget was able to comply and brought a copy of the Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity, and arranged for the arrival of some Daughters of Charity from Paris, to make a foundation and to form the Emmitsburg sisters as members of the French community in America. It seems that David hoped to unite the Emmitsburg community with the French Daughters of Charity. Elizabeth wrote Bishop Carroll in 1811 and expressed some concerns about her role in the community if foreign sisters were to arrive. They never

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7 Kelly and Melville, Elizabeth Seton Selected Writings, 172, n.12.
reached the United States because of the intervention of Napoleon which prevented their departure.

How could you have expected my Rev. Father that the regulations of the house would have been concluded before the departure of Rev. Mr. David, since his calculations are turned on the arrival of the French sisters. What authority would the Mother they bring have over our Sisters (while I am present) but the very rule she is to give them—and how could it be known that they would consent to the different modifications of their rule which are indispensable if adopted by us. What support can we procure to this house but from our Boarders, and how can the reception of Boarders sufficient to maintain it accord with their statutes. How can they allow me the uncontrolled privileges of a Mother to my five darlings?—or how can I in conscience or in accordance with your Paternal heart give up so sacred a right.8

Dubois translated the French text. In consultation with Bishop Carroll, Dubois and the Sulpicians wrote in modifications to address circumstances within the American church, which Elizabeth accepted. This modified version, based on the Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity issued in 1672, embodied the teachings of Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul. Elizabeth Seton agreed to its changes and Dubois submitted the revised rule to Bishop John Carroll (1735-1825), of Baltimore, "The rules proposed are nearly such as we had in the original manuscript of the sisters in France. I never had a thought discordant with them as far as my poor power may go in fulfilling them."9 After Carroll's approval in 1812, Dubourg, as the superior at Saint Mary's Seminary, became the canonical Protector of the Constitutions of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's at Emmitsburg. In addition to honoring

8 Elizabeth Seton to John Carroll, 13 May 1811, ibid., 270-73. There is no written record of Elizabeth Seton's thinking on the issue of whether her community should unite with the French Daughters of Charity. Early references to consultations by the council of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's with France about practices of the French community date to 1814. [Archives Saint Joseph's Provincial House, Daughters of Charity (ASJPH), First Council Book, 4.] See also [John Mary Crumlish, D.C.,] The Union of the American Sisters of Charity with the Daughters of Charity, Paris, 1850 (Emmitsburg, Maryland: Saint Joseph's Central House, 1950), 22-23.

9 Elizabeth Seton to John Carroll, 5 September 1811, Kelly and Melville, Elizabeth Seton Selected Writings, 273-74.
Jesus Christ as the source and model of all charity by corporal and spiritual service to persons suffering from sickness and poverty, the Seton rule recommended that the sisters “honor the Sacred Infancy of Jesus in the young persons of their sex whose heart they are called upon to form to the love of God, the practice of every virtue, and the knowledge of religion, whilst they sow in their midst the seeds of useful knowledge.” During her lifetime Elizabeth, like Louise, also championed the cause of education, justice, and charity wherever the Sisters of Charity ministered. The earliest text of the rule of Louise and Vincent for their Daughters of Charity recommended in 1640 that the sisters “serve the sick poor corporally, by supplying them with all they need, and spiritually, by taking care that they live and die holily.”

The Sulpicians, particularly Bruté, helped Elizabeth to discover Louise by delving into her writings and those of the Vincentian tradition. Elizabeth loved to read spiritual works and translate them into English. Her prolific translations included the writings of Louise and Vincent, their biographies, and community publications of the period. These provided Elizabeth with an overview of the seventeenth-century teachings of those who had given birth to the Vincentian mission and its ministries. With this awareness, and her ongoing dialogue with the Sulpician priests, especially Dubois and Bruté, Elizabeth deepened her

10 The version of the rule of Louise and Vincent, that Bishop-elect Flaget had brought to Mother Seton from France, was promulgated in 1672 by Reverend Rene Almeras, C.M. (1613-1672, superior general 1661-1672) who succeeded Vincent de Paul. Almeras organized the forty-three articles compiled by Louise and Vincent, added some of the founders' teachings that had not been included, and re-arranged the articles in nine chapters. This version, commonly known as the rule of Vincent, and approved by Clement IX in 1668, has been adopted and adapted by many communities throughout the world. The text of Almeras governed the Daughters of Charity (with some modifications in 1954, in response to the 1917 changes in the Code of Canon Law) until 1983, when the Holy See approved the updated Constitutions and Statutes of the Company of the Daughters of Charity in response to Vatican II. “The Rule of 1812. Regulations for the Society of Sisters of Charity in the United States of America” quoted in Ellin M. Kelly, Numerous Choirs. A Chronicle of Elizabeth Bayley Seton and Her Spiritual Daughters, Volume I. The Seton Years. 1774-1821, 2 vols. (Evansville, Indiana: Mater Die Provincialate, 1981), 243. ASJPH 3-1-1. See also Kelly, Numerous Choirs. Volume II. Expansion, Division and War. 1821-1865 (Saint Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press, 1996), 139; 149.


13 As a result of the French Revolution the Company of the Daughters of Charity (like all other religious communities) was suppressed (1792-1800). After being reestablished by the government, a difficult period followed which involved a schism within the Company in which Pope Pius VII intervened. At the insistence of Louise de Marillac, the superior general of the Congregation is also the superior general of the Company of the Daughters of Charity whose routine administration is the responsibility of a superioress general. The Congregation of the Mission underwent a longer period of destabilization (1792-1804 and 1809-1815) and slowly gained equilibrium until the election in 1843 of Reverend Jean-Baptiste Etienne, C.M. (1801-1874), as superior general (1843-1874).
knowledge about the French community, its history and tradition. This understanding enabled her to inculcate the Vincentian mission in America while shaping it with dimensions unique to her own charism.

Elizabeth read the first biography of Louise de Marillac, Mademoiselle Le Gras, written by Reverend Nicolas Gobillon, Louise’s pastor, in 1696. After translating it into English, Elizabeth used it along with Louis Abelly’s biography of St. Vincent, and some of the Conferences of Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity, as primary sources for formation of the American Sisters of Charity.  

“How grateful then should we be for our vocation which is in itself [Elizabeth’s emphasis] a practice of the two principal commandments -- obliging us to give every moment of life to charity, serving her exteriorly in our care of the body, but principally in our care of souls, speaking to them of God, and helping them to know, and love him Eternally. Besides how grateful we should be to God for choosing us for this manner of life.”

Elizabeth imbibed the spirit of Vincent and Louise and took pains to instill their wisdom in her sisters. At the conclusion of their first annual retreat of 1813, made under their newly approved rule, the American Sisters of Charity made their vows for the first time on the feast of Vincent de Paul.  

There is, however, no written record from Elizabeth’s pen of her position regarding a possible union between her American community and the French Daughters of Charity in Paris.

There was, however, periodic correspondence between the two communities during Elizabeth’s lifetime. The Emmitsburg council sought advice from the general council in Paris about particular practices of the French community. Elizabeth Seton, and her council at Saint Joseph’s, first consulted the Daughters of Charity in Paris in 1814 to resolve the question: “Can a Novitiate be extended to 5 years as it was by the Rule of Saint Vincent for our European Sisters?” There is also correspondence between Dubois and Carroll concerning the spirit of the rule of Louise and Vincent, much of which resulted from David’s persistent requests.

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14 Simon Bruté indicates that Elizabeth also translated the following works which deal with the Vincentian mission: the Life of Saint Vincent de Paul (Abelly); Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras (Gobillon); selected Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity; and The Life of Sister Françoise Bony, an eighteenth-century Daughter of Charity. She also had borrowed the Catéchisme des Filles de la Charité et Maximes de Saint Vincent. See Reverend Simon G. Bruté, bishop of Vincennes, Mother Seton (Emmitsburg, Maryland, 1884), 129.


16 The Church celebrated the feast of Saint Vincent de Paul on 19 July in 1813.

17 [Crumlish], The Union of the American Sisters, 22-23.
Sister Servant, a term employed by Louise and Vincent to connote authority as service. The contemporary concept of servant leadership reflects this dimension of the Vincentian spirit.

The Charity tradition has always stretched itself to address unmet needs. Elizabeth followed her maternal instincts, and the path so carefully created by Louise de Marillac, in her care of the foundlings. Louise instilled in the first Daughters of Charity a love of orphans, which Vincent de Paul considered to be a privileged ministry for the sisters who "hold the place of mother for them [the orphans]." In response to their concern for the vulnerability of poor children in such a situation, the American community opened its first mission beyond Emmitsburg in Philadelphia, where Elizabeth sent her sisters in 1814 to care for needy orphans. Later sisters were missioned to New York in 1817 to begin a desperately needed orphanage in Elizabeth's native city.

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Desire for Wisdom

Although some aspects in the journeys of both Louise and Elizabeth do contrast, many similar patterns emerge throughout their lives. The foundresses responded to human events, familial roles, life transitions, and a range of emotions that make them real models for today. Their experience can and does speak to persons who share their desire for wisdom. Louise and Elizabeth are models for women of all ages and seasons of life.

Youth

Themes of loss, maternal deprivation, isolation and rejection by a step-mother are prominent motifs that appear during the early years of both Louise and Elizabeth. The unknown identity of Louise's natural mother remains shrouded in the anonymity of the circumstances of her birth out of wedlock. Catherine Charlton Bayley died when her daughter, Elizabeth, was only three years old in 1777. The next year Elizabeth also lost her younger sister, Kitty, to death. Both Louise and Elizabeth were four years old when their fathers remarried; both had stepmothers who rejected them resulting in both being sent away while still very young children. Louise was first raised in the Dominican convent at Poissy, then in a boarding home. Elizabeth and her sister, Mary, spent much of their childhood in the home of a paternal uncle, William LeConte Bayley of New Rochelle, New York.

Marriage and Motherhood

Circumscribed by social convention, at twenty-two years of age Louise entered an arranged marriage to Antoine Le Gras (d. 1625), ten years her senior, who was a secretary in the court of Queen Marie de Medicis. Their marriage contract of 5 February 1613 reveals the social distance invoked by the circumstances of Louise's birth. It states that Louise is the natural daughter of her father, and on it her aunts and uncles who attended the wedding in the church of Saint-Gervais were listed as "friends of the bride," not relatives. Louise carried the title Ma-demoiselle, rather than Madame, reserved for the nobility, because her husband was a simple squire belonging to the bourgeoisie. Although Louise and Antoine had not selected one another through courtship, they grew to love each other deeply. William Magee Seton, aged twenty-six, an import-export merchant of New York, courted and married for
love the vivacious nineteen year-old Elizabeth Bayley on 25 January 1794. The wedding took place in her sister's home in New York City (lower Manhattan) on a Sunday evening. Her journal of Dear Remembrances exudes her happiness, "My own home at twenty. -- The world and heaven too, quite impossible!"19

Both Louise and Elizabeth became pregnant within the first year of marriage. At age twenty-two Louise gave birth prematurely on 18 October to her only child, Michel-Antoine. He developed slowly and also suffered from deafness. Michel, whom Louise described as lazy, was a constant source of worry for his mother, especially during his adolescence when conflicts seemed to punctuate their already tense relationship. Louise wanted him to be a priest but that was not his call. He once disappeared, to the exasperation of his frantic mother, who vented her pain and anger to Vincent de Paul before they found Michel with a girlfriend (whom Louise did not hold in high regard).20 At that time Michel was an adult of 31.

Anna Maria Seton (1795-1812), the first of Elizabeth's five children, was born on 3 May when Elizabeth was twenty-one. After returning from Italy, Anna Maria was called Annina ("little Ann"). She was to provide great support for Elizabeth during future crises. Annina was a kindred spirit to her mother, who became quite perturbed over this daughter's adolescent romance with Charles du Pavillon, a student at Saint Mary's, Baltimore. Soon overcome by tuberculosis, on her deathbed Annina became the first American Sister of Charity to pronounce her vows, "I do believe there can be no better way in this world to serve God than as a Sister of Charity. This has long been my thought."21 Annina's premature death precipitated a period of desolation and depression for her grief stricken mother who keenly felt the loss of her first born -- one of her most faithful friends.22

Parental Joys and Concerns

Louise and Elizabeth entered marriage with dreams and hopes which were shattered after only eight to nine years of happiness by family reversals, illnesses, and worries about their children.

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19 Quoted in Kelly, Numerous Choirs, 1:40.
21 Quoted in Kelly, Numerous Choirs, 1:159.
22 Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, 20 September 1809, in Code, Letters of Mother Seton, 189.
When only twenty-six, and enjoying the delights of motherhood during her son's preschool years, Louise's widowed cousin (who was also Michel's god-mother), died, relegating the responsibility for seven young children to Louise and her husband. This change strained their financial resources and complicated their lives because of the children's demanding attitudes. The d'Attichy children, naturally distraught because of the loss of their parents, were less than gracious toward the Marillac's for all their efforts in providing for them.

Antoine Le Gras developed a terminal condition when Louise was only thirty-one. During his years of illness (possibly from tuberculosis), Louise found herself having to contend with dramatic personality changes in her husband as he had become very vexing and disagreeable. This was a very dark and painful period for Louise and Michel. Her son was living in the shadows of his father's illness, his mother's unhappiness, and the family's threat of bankruptcy. During this period Francis de Sales visited Louise in her home. Soon she also met Vincent de Paul, but initially felt some repugnance toward him. Later Vincent became her most trusted confidante.

At age twenty-three and far advanced in pregnancy, Elizabeth welcomed into her home the seven minor children of her recently deceased father-in-law. Into this packed household, she brought her newborn Richard. His life was saved at birth by his grandfather, Doctor Richard Bayley, who had breathed life into his lungs at a moment of crisis during childbirth. Elizabeth's labor and delivery had been so taxing that she temporarily lost her eyesight. Before long little Richard became desperately ill. Often a weary Elizabeth wrote her dear friend Julia Scott about her "darlings," and their bouts with childhood illness, "My two boys were taken sick this morning with symptoms of the measles which are very prevalent in our city." 23

For several years Elizabeth was quite afraid of any health dangers to her husband, especially during the sieges of yellow fever in New York. His lovely wife was only twenty-seven when William began showing signs of tuberculosis. Simultaneously, piracy at sea and politics conspired to precipitate serious financial problems for his business, the Seton-Maitland firm, which eventually declared bankruptcy. During these anxious months, Elizabeth economized in every way possible, and worked late into the night doing bookkeeping for her husband until

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23 Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, 24 May 1798, ibid., 24; Seton to Scott, 20 August 1798, ibid., 29; Seton to Scott, 1 February 1802, ibid., 100.
the only recourse was to attempt a voyage to Italy. They were driven by the desperate hope that his health would improve in the warmer climate of the Italian Riviera at Leghorn.

As mothers, both Louise and Elizabeth knew the emotional exhaustion of heartaches. Louise's insecurity made her anxious and overprotective of Michel, who found his studies difficult, lacked clarity about his life's vocation, and at times was restless and irresponsible. While planning their trip to Italy, the saucy temperament of Anna Maria gave Elizabeth so much cause for concern that she was not sure of the advisability of leaving this daughter, along with her other children, in the care of relatives. The Setons providentially decided to keep this child under their parental eyes. Later Elizabeth mused, "Never can a child know what a mother suffers . . . Our God alone knows a mother's heart and He will pity us."24

24 Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, 14 March 1814, ibid., 234; Seton to Scott, 1 December 1814, ibid., 240.
Widow

Widowed at age thirty-four and with a pre-adolescent son, another factor adding to Louise’s concerns was the demand of new financial constraints as the sole parent. Louise continued to worry about her thirteen year old son’s education, health, and well being. Louise struggled with a multitude of emotions surrounding her own grief, even though it would have been natural to feel relieved because Antoine was no longer suffering. Vincent de Paul became a father figure to Michel, whom Louise wanted to be a priest. An exasperated Vincent once wrote Louise, the sole parent of a troubled teenager:

Our Lord most certainly did well not to choose you for His Mother, since you do not think you can discern the Will of God in the maternal care He demands of you for your son. Or perhaps you feel that will prevent you from doing the Will of God in other matters. Certainly not, because the Will of God is not opposed to the Will of God. Honor, therefore, the tranquility of the Blessed Virgin in such a case.25

Some years later (when Michel was well into adulthood but still unsettled), a frustrated Louise wrote Vincent, “I am truly angry that my son did not accept the honor you extended to him in admitting him to your residence. My God! I do not think I will be granted my request for his total conversion . . . I truly fear he is turning a deaf ear.”26

Louise dealt with her initial grief by offering her services as a volunteer in the Confraternities of Charity. During this period, Louise also overcame her reluctance and negative feelings about accepting Vincent de Paul as her new spiritual director. In 1629 Vincent sent Louise on her first missionary journey to visit the charity at Montmirail. Her report and observations were so insightful that Vincent involved her in more of his charitable projects. Eventually they collaborated as peers.

Widowed at age twenty-nine in a foreign land, Elizabeth struggled with her own grief and emotional numbness after her husband’s death. Her daughter’s illness delayed their departure for the United States. She had been reduced to dependency on others for a livelihood. The Filicchi family, friends, and business associates of the Setons, became a vital sup-

26 L. 151, Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul, 21 August 1646, Sullivan, Spiritual Writings, 167.
port system for Elizabeth. They provided comfort and hospitality to her in Leghorn, where she was introduced to the Roman Catholic faith. Upon her return to the United States, Elizabeth grappled with the conflict in her heart about the true religion, and whether she should leave the Episcopal Church of her youth for Roman Catholicism. As an Episcopalian, Elizabeth had revered the reception of Holy Communion. After much soul searching, and in the face of strong family opposition, at age thirty, Elizabeth’s deep faith convictions led her to embrace the Catholic faith.

This decision had far reaching consequences. After her conversion former friends undermined Elizabeth’s efforts to earn enough income to support her family. Several of her projects failed because of anti-Catholic bigotry. Fortunately, there were a few Catholic families in New York whose kindness included the Setons among their circle of friendship, and who introduced Elizabeth to visiting clergy. It was just such an occasion that allowed Elizabeth to become acquainted with Dubourg, who became the catalyst for her future mission. After arriving in Baltimore, Elizabeth made the acquaintance of Samuel Sutherland Cooper, (1769-1843), a wealthy seminarian, whose “views ... have always been to afford instruction and consolation to the poor in every way.”27 Cooper purchased an old farm near Emmitsburg where Elizabeth’s nascent community would open a school for poor children and provide other services.

The young widow’s lack of financial support in New York after her conversion caused Elizabeth to worry about feeding and clothing her five growing children (ages three to ten), their education, especially for the boys, and the recuperation of son William who developed a life threatening illness but survived. As their mother embarked on a new lifestyle in Emmitsburg, the Seton children, especially William and Richard (now ages thirteen and eleven), looked to two priests at Mount Saint Mary’s as their father figures, Dubois and Bruté, just as Michel LeGras had looked to Vincent de Paul. As the years progressed, Elizabeth became most concerned with helping Catherine (Josephine), her only surviving daughter, to succeed as a young woman in the world.

Grandmother

Louise and Elizabeth were enamored with a gracious and loving God whom they worshiped, to whom they prayed, and with whom they communed intimately. This relationship with the Divine sustained them.

27 Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, 23 March 1809, ibid., 182.
and enabled them to pour their love on their families and communities. Their maternal hearts, seasoned and nurtured by God’s love, had an abundance of generativity that was poised to embrace new life. “Had it pleased God I could have been a grandmother I would have been more tied to this life by a second generation than a first,” Elizabeth wrote to a friend.

Louise became a grandmother at age forty. Louise Renée Le Gras, her only grandchild, often came to visit the community and was affectionately called from infancy by the pet name, “the little sister.” “The Little Sister’ does not yet have enough teeth to eat [cake].” Although Elizabeth died before her son William married and had children, she mused about grandchildren to her life-long friend Julia Scott, who was a grandmother already. “How delightful is this order of nature which reserves all our warmest and most endearing solicitudes and affections. The thought of seeing one of William’s or Richard’s before me starts a tear of sweetest pleasures in a moment.”

Ways of Charity

Woman of Charity

Louise and Elizabeth were active women involved in the church and in charitable and social activities. Both were deeply spiritual and had an appreciation for the Word of God. Their knowledge of the Bible led them to translate their affective love of God into effective love of neighbor as lay ministers in works of charity.

Devotion to the Word of God became the basis for Louise’s later emphasis with the early Daughters of Charity. She encouraged her sisters to imitate the public life of Our Lord and to meditate often on sacred scripture. Louise and her husband regularly read the Bible in the vernacular, an unusual practice for that time which required a special permission. They also recited Compline together. As a married woman Louise lived the gospel by imitating Jesus in his social mission, and through concern for persons who were poor, according to her first biographer.

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28 5 October 1817, Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, ibid., 265.
29 Louise Renée Le Gras, born in 1651, became, by marriage Mademoiselle d’Ormilly. She died childless. L. 339, Louise de Marillac to Sister Julienne Loret, 7 January 1652, Sullivan, Spiritual Writings, 388.
She applied herself from the first years to visiting the poor sick of the parish where she lived. She herself gave them broths and remedies, made their beds, instructed them and consoled them by her exhortations, disposed them to receive the sacraments and buried them after their death.33

Prior to 1633 (when the Daughters of Charity began), Louise had written a "Rule of Life in the World" for herself. It blended neighborly service with discipleship.

May the desire for holy poverty always live in my heart in such a manner that . . . I may follow Jesus Christ and serve my neighbor with great humility and gentleness, living under obedience and in chastity all my life and honoring the poverty that Jesus Christ practiced so perfectly.34

Elizabeth and other devout ladies, many of whom were parishioners of Trinity Episcopal Church in New York, united to assist needy families in crisis. They established the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children in 1797. The group became the first charitable organization managed by women in the United States.35 Elizabeth served as its treasurer. She was an energetic member until she became a widow and in need herself.

Strengthened by prayer, Elizabeth also drew consolation from the sentiments of Psalm 23, her favorite psalm, "though I walk in the midst of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."36 Immediately after their arrival in Italy, Elizabeth spent some of the darkest hours of her life quarantined along with her dying husband, whom she tried to comfort with familiar scripture passages. In her journal she recorded:

If we did not now know [sic] and love God--If we did not feel the consolations, and embrace the cheering Hope

he has set before us, and find our delight in the study of his blessed word and Truth, what would become of us?37

As women of charity, Louise and Elizabeth's communion with their God generated life-giving attitudes for mission. Their personal perspectives became formative for community members. These values were built on love, fed by laughter, strengthened by a willingness to cooperate, tempered by forgiveness, purified by renunciation, enriched by appreciation, and sustained by their own deep faith and vibrant hope in Divine Providence.38

**Hidden Things of God**

Louise and Elizabeth responded to many paschal points along their journeys of faith. Through their faith-filled responses, many of these moments became epiphany experiences. Their fiat led to the birthing of new life in and for the Church -- apostolic women committed to living out their mission in community. Rooted in their consecration by Baptism, this way provided a new form for women called to live the evangelical counsels and serve their neighbor. Idealizing a unity of life, Elizabeth reflected that, "the nearer a soul is truly united to God, the more its sensibilities are increased to every being of His Creation; much more to those whom it is bound to love by the tenderest and most endearing ties."39

**Epiphany Moments**

Like Mary of Nazareth, Louise and Elizabeth shared intimate moments with a God of surprises. Pondering this potential in their hearts, they reverenced the richness of these experiences, and pondered all things in their hearts. Louise's memoirs of her Pentecost enlightenment, and Elizabeth's "Dear Remembrances," are among their great gifts to us. Both women experienced intense religious events amidst the emotional upheaval of heartache over their ailing husbands. At these times God became especially present to themselves, and led them into a spiral of personal conversion -- choice by choice.

Louise tells us that at age thirty-two she had been in a state of in-

37 Ibid., 46.
39 Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, 20 September 1809, in Code, Letters of Mother Seton, 188.
Mrs. William Magee Seton. Elizabeth, in her youth, as she appeared at the time of her marriage to William. Married at the age of nineteen in 1794, Elizabeth found herself widowed by the age of twenty-nine after William succumbed to tuberculosis in 1803.

Painting by the Rev. Salvator Burgio, C.M.

*Courtesy, Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, MD*

credible anguish for ten days, from Ascension to Pentecost, during her husband’s illness in 1623. Louise developed an inner conflict about whether she should leave him and became emotionally distraught. In a turmoil of indecision at that time, Louise wrote, “while I was praying in the church . . . my mind was instantly freed of all doubt.”

Ultimately Louise came to embrace the God of both light and darkness, and proclaimed, “God is my God.”

For Elizabeth, at age twenty-nine, the crucible of confinement in the lazaretto became another layer of self-emptying. This stripping led to her embracing the cross more fully in its varied forms of poverty, illness, and injustice. These became her steppingstones to eternity. During this time of agony she wrote that, “God is with us—and if sufferings abound in us, his Consolations also greatly abound, and far exceed all utterance . . . [I was] not only willing to take my cross but kissed it too.”

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41 L. 369, Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul, 24 August before 1650, in Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 341. Toward the end of her life Elizabeth Seton uttered a similar thought, “But our God is God, and I know all will turn out well at last.” (Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, 24 July 1817, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 262.)

Pregnancy, child bearing, and parenting prepared Louise and Elizabeth for birthing new forms of life-giving ecclesial roles for women to live out their baptismal consecration. Each foundress encountered unmet needs. They led others on mission by Spirit driven initiatives. In this way, Louise and Elizabeth created new ecclesial institutes. Their unique mission and way of being in ministry for apostolic women of the Church in seventeenth-century France, and in the nineteenth-century United States, paved the way for others as a prototype.

When Louise was thirty-eight and her son seventeen (and away at school), Louise had time to become more involved with the charitable projects of her new spiritual director, Vincent de Paul. After visiting some of the Confraternities of Charity at his request, she made recommendations to him. Louise’s observations focused on the training needs of the volunteers (mostly illiterate young women of the villages). Gradually she persisted in recommending to Saint Vincent that the young women be brought together and formed in community for the mission -- service of sick and poor persons in their home. Louise assumed responsibility for training these volunteers who became the first Daughters of Charity. On 29 November 1633 Louise’s intuition led to the establishment of the first successful community of apostolic women in France. Today the Church recognizes the Company of the Daughters of Charity as a society of apostolic life.

When the thirty-two year old Elizabeth met Dubourg in New York, little did she realize that telling him the story of her difficulties would evoke an invitation to teach in Maryland. Much less did she dream it would lead her to establish the first new community for apostolic women in the United States. The Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph’s mission focused on serving sick and poor persons and educating young girls. Indeed, Elizabeth writes, “Providence has disposed for me a plan after my own heart.”

Call to Mission

Societal needs and personal circumstances enabled Louise and Elizabeth to be attentive to the Spirit’s call to mission for the corporal and spiritual service to persons oppressed by poverty. Their ministries involved visiting sick and poor persons in their homes, educating little...
girls, caring for orphans, and collaborating with the wealthy and influential laity to sustain their charitable ministries. Persons oppressed by poverty taught both Louise and Elizabeth about their unmet needs and helped them to realize the importance of adequate formation for the sisters in ministry. Led to God through emerging social needs, Louise and Elizabeth listened to their collaborators and discovered unforeseen ministries. Through them, Louise and Elizabeth recognized and tapped a reservoir of their own untapped gifts which the Spirit unleashed for the good of the Church.

Both women were concerned about the principles and core values which would drive their mission. Respect for the individual, characterized by flexibility and mobility, was the foundation of quality service. Louise and Elizabeth formed their daughters in the fundamental disposition of being available to be sent on mission. Willing to take necessary risks, both foundresses sought effective ways to extend their communities' services to others when new needs emerged. Louise's twenty-seven years in community leadership allowed for engagement in a breadth of diverse ministries, whereas Elizabeth had only twelve years to launch her mission which emphasized education as a primary ministry to families in poverty. The first major initiative each undertook for their communities was the care of abandoned infants and orphans. This is not surprising when one recalls that both of these foundresses had experienced maternal deprivation themselves at an early age.

In the journal entry about her Pentecost experience, Louise recorded her understanding that she would be involved in social ministry, along with others, although it was unclear how this would happen. It was characteristic of her trust in Divine Providence to maintain a stance of unrestricted readiness or availability. Her Company of Charity could then be mobile and flexible in responding to new and changing needs. Louise encouraged her sisters to maintain this fundamental posture for mission with an attitude of "cordiality and gentleness" with all whom they would encounter.

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45 The first health care ministry of the Sisters of Charity, an institution in Baltimore, eventually became the University of Maryland Hospital. This mission was under consideration during the last months of 1820 but was not accepted by Elizabeth Seton's successor, Mother Rose White, and the council, until 1823, after Elizabeth's death in 1821. ASJPH 11-2-20.
46 The Daughters of Charity began caring for the foundlings in 1638. The Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's opened their first mission beyond the valley in 1814 at Saint Joseph's Orphan Asylum, Philadelphia.
48 L. 43, Louise de Marillac to Sister Barbe Angiboust, c. 1636, ibid., 12. This is the earliest extant letter written by Louise to a Daughter of Charity.
Soon after arriving in Baltimore, while at prayer one day, Elizabeth experienced a strong desire to dedicate herself to the instruction of poor children. As her mission evolved, despite many challenges, a hopeful Elizabeth wrote of her belief that “All is in his hands,” because of her deep trust in Divine Providence. At Emmitsburg, Elizabeth and her sisters encountered much which demanded flexibility and creative adaptation. In that spirit, Elizabeth raised fundamental questions about mission during her instructions. “Do we serve God in Hope, looking to his promises, confiding in his love, seeking his Kingdom, and leaving the rest to Him?”

Consecrated Life

Both Louise and Elizabeth chose March 25, feast of the Annunciation, as the date for pronouncing their four annual vows which allowed them to be available for ministry among poor persons. The decision to co-found the Daughters of Charity with Vincent de Paul led Louise to realize the details of her pivotal Pentecost enlightenment, “that a time would come when I would be in a position to make vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and that I would be in a small community where others would do the same. I then understood that I would be in a place where I could help my neighbor . . . [although] there would be much coming and going.”

The vow formula used by Elizabeth is almost identical to one found in Louise’s own handwriting. Louise, aged fifty-one years, along with four other sisters, pronounced vows for the first time in 1642. In both formulas, the sisters renew their Baptismal promises, commit themselves to the evangelical counsels as well as the corporal and spiritual service of persons who are poor, and entreat the intercession of Jesus crucified and the Mother of God.

49 Charles I. White, Life of Mrs. Eliza Seton (New York: Edward Dunigan & Brothers, 1853), 244.
50 Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 8 February 1809, in Kelly and Melville, Elizabeth Seton Selected Writings, 246.
51 In order to support themselves financially, the sisters had to attract boarding students from wealthy families who could afford to pay tuition. This income enabled the sisters to care for orphans and to serve sick and poor persons of the area, including widows with young children.
52 Kelly and Melville, “Instructions -- The Sisters of Charity Meditate on the Service of God,” Elizabeth Seton Selected Writings, 326. ASJPH 1-3-3-20-E, 37.
54 See Appendix. Also see A44.B “Formula of the Vows,” Sullivan, Spiritual Writings, 782; and Appendix C, “First Vow Formula.” Kelly, Numerous Choirs, 1:280.
First Vow Formula of the
Daughters of Charity

I, the undersigned, in the presence of God, renew the promises of my baptism, and I vow poverty, chastity and obedience to the Venerable Superior General of the Priests of the Mission in the Company of the Daughters of Charity in order to give myself, for the whole of this year, to the corporal and spiritual service of the sick poor, our true Masters. I shall do this with the help of God which I ask of Him through His Son Jesus Crucified and the prayers of the other Holy Virgin.

First Vow Formula of the
Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's

I, the undersigned, in the presence of God and the company of Heaven, renew the promises of my Baptism and make my Vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience to God and our Reverend Superior General until the 25th of March next, and engage myself to the corporal and spiritual service of the poor sick, our true Masters, the instruction of those committed to our charge, and to all the duties pointed out by our Rule in the Society of the Sisters of Charity in the United States of America, which I beg to fulfill through the merits of our crucified Savior and the intercession of the Blessed Virgin. Amen.

Elizabeth, aged thirty-five years, prior to making her vows privately in 1809 before Archbishop Carroll in Baltimore, previously had written a friend, "I have long since made the Vows which as a religious I could only renew." Later, after completing the first novitiate in 1813 under the newly approved rule (patterned on that which Louise and Vincent had given to their Company of Charity), Elizabeth and seventeen other sisters pronounced their vows for the first time as Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's. They said their vows aloud in St. Joseph's House (the White House) between the two elevations of the consecration at the Eucharistic liturgy, on 19 July, feast of Saint Vincent de Paul, whom the new community honored as chief patron and founder. It was probably on this occasion that Elizabeth recorded a meditation entitled Saint Vincent's

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55 A44.B "Formula of the Vows," Sullivan, Spiritual Writings, 782.
56 Kelly, Numerous Choirs, 1:280.
57 Elizabeth Seton to Philip Filicchi, 21 January 1809, Kelly and Melville, Elizabeth Seton Selected Writings, 244.
Day, in which she reflected that, "Our hearts [are full] with boundless desires to share in their happiness before thee, to share in the demand [of] love and praise through our perseverance and unwearied fidelity in thy blessed service." 59

Living the Way

The circumstances of Louise and Elizabeth's lives had influenced the formation of their personal values. These became the basis for convictions and choices about their call to mission. For example, the foundresses readily acknowledged individual differences among their earliest companions in community. This prompted Elizabeth to write realistically to a friend that one can't "talk of making nuns like making bread." 60 Louise and Elizabeth responded wisely and patiently to events as they happened, and used their own lived experience to guide how the community would respond. Each foundress communicated well with both companions and lay collaborators. They were present to community members in life-giving ways. Bonds of mutual and lasting friendships formed within and beyond the community. Their trust, care, and concern for others gave them the requisite courage to dare to accomplish their mission. 61

Soon after the first twelve Servants of the Sick Poor (whom the people of Paris called "daughters of charity") began living a community life, Louise arranged for Vincent to give them regular conferences in order to instruct them well. Her goal was for them to understand the fundamentals of the way of life they had chosen, and motivate them to fidelity to its spirit. Their rule was continuously modified during twenty-two years of lived experience. It was not committed to writing until 1645, and not presented to the sisters for their ratification until 8 August 1655 at the Act of Establishment of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. 62

Similarly, beginning 31 July 1809, Elizabeth and the first Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's adopted provisional regulations which out-

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59 Elizabeth Seton, "Saint Vincent's Day," Retreat Meditations of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. ASJPH, 1-3-3-20E.
lined their order of the day. This structure helped them define roles and organize responsibilities over time. “We begin to get accustomed ... and we also have the consolation of observing in some degree the system which is hereafter to govern us,” wrote Elizabeth. Later, after the rule of Vincent and Louise was modified, it was presented to the assembled community for acceptance by the sisters.

Approaching Eternity

Louise and Elizabeth both had their own spiritual directors, gave spiritual direction to the laity, shared intimate friendships of a spiritual nature with soul friends, and were the midwives at their husbands’ birth into eternal life. Both nourished their lives of ministry in community with a vibrant prayer life. As voluminous correspondents, journalists, and creators, Louise and Elizabeth eloquently expressed their spiritual selves through prose, poetry, painting, or playing music. They cared for and accompanied others on the last stages of their journey to eternity before finally closing their own eyes. Louise viewed death as a gateway while Elizabeth longed to be beyond the gate. They are models who left a rich legacy of spirituality in both words and symbols.

When speaking to the early Daughters of Charity after his colleague’s death, the elderly Vincent de Paul, then almost an octogenarian, openly expressed his keen admiration for his dear friend Louise. “What a picture does God place before your eyes [in the life of Louise de Marillac] which we should regard as a prototype ... Which you should gaze on, a picture of humility, charity, meekness, patience in infirmities. Behold what a picture! And how are you to make use of it, my dear Sisters? By striving to form your life on hers.”

Bruté, Elizabeth’s confessor and soul friend, had almost daily contact with the American foundress for the better part of her last ten years. After her death, he recorded his impressions. “I truly believe her to have

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63 Elizabeth Seton and four companions (Cecilia, Harriet, Annina Seton and Anna Maria Murphy Burke) had left Baltimore on 21 June, but upon their arrival in Emmitsburg repairs were incomplete on the old Fleming farm house (the Stone House). Father John Dubois, S.S., gave them hospitality in a cabin at the mountain until 29 July, when they returned to Saint Joseph’s Valley to greet the second group arriving from Baltimore. On Monday, 31 July 1809, Mother Seton and her companions began a regular way of life in the Stone House following an order of the day. That date, the feast of St. Ignatius of Loyola, patron of the Maryland missions, also marks the birth of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph’s in the United States. (See Kelly, Numerous Choirs, 1:127; and ASJPH 11-0.)

64 Elizabeth Seton to John Carroll, 6 August 1809, in Kelly, Numerous Choirs, 1:131.

65 “We were all at liberty to adopt these rules or not, free to retire, if we wished to from the Community. All were invited to stay notwithstanding bad health and other infirmities. Each was invited to raise her hand, if she were willing to adopt the rules.” “Journal of Mother Rose White,” Vincentian Heritage 18:1 (1997): 48.

been one of those truly chosen souls (âmes d’élite), who, if placed in circumstances similar to those of Saint Theresa [of Avila], or Saint [Jane] Frances de Chantal, would be equally remarkable in the scale of sanctity. For it seems to me impossible, that there could be a greater elevation, purity and love of God, of heaven and for supernatural and eternal things, than were to be found in [Elizabeth Seton]. . . . O how deeply impressed was she with the greatness of God!”

Spiritual Testament

On their deathbeds, both Louise and Elizabeth were thoughtful of the assembled community and sensitive to their feelings. They prayed for blessings on those dear to them, and expressed gratitude to all present. They voiced their hopes for the community and its spirit, describing how they wished their companions and followers to continue the mission they had begun. The collective example of their lives, and the wisdom of their writings, incarnates the charism of charity -- their spiritual legacy for the Church.

Louise bequeathed a spiritual testament to her daughters from her deathbed. “I continue to ask God for His blessings for you and pray that He will grant you the grace to persevere in your vocation in order to serve Him in the manner He asks of you. Take good care of the service of the poor. Above all, live together in great union and cordiality, loving one another in imitation of the union and life of Our Lord.”

In her last hours Elizabeth said, “I am thankful, sisters, for your kindness to be present at this trial. Be children of the Church; be children of the Church. [After a pause:] May the most just, the most high, and the most amiable will of God be accomplished forever!”

Last Will and Testament

Louise and Elizabeth were loving women foremost, whose vocation as wives and mothers readied them for their call to mission as foundresses of communities. Yet, in the face of eternity, maternal solicitude and parental responsibility for their children remained primary. Each appointed one of their offspring as executor of her last will and testament. Elizabeth appointed Catherine (Josephine) and Louise designated Michel, along with Vincent de Paul.

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67 Annals 1816-1821, ASJPH, 7-8:1:207-08.
69 White, Life of Mrs. Eliza Seton, 425.
William Magee Seton (1768-1803), a businessman from one of the most prominent families in New York, was a loving husband to Elizabeth. His declining health was a constant source of worry, eventually leading him to retreat to Italy with his young wife in hopes of recovering, where he died and Elizabeth was introduced to Catholicism.

Painting by the Rev. Salvator Burgio, C.M.

*Courtesy, Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, MD*

Initially written fifteen years before her death, Louise’s lengthy will of approximately seven pages has two codicils. These were added after her son married (1650), and after the formal Act of Establishment of the Daughters of Charity (1655). As a leitmotif in her will, Louise focuses on her son. She also frequently mentions: God, her late husband Antoine, the Marillacs, Vincent de Paul, the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and individuals in poverty whom they serve. Revealing her maternal anxieties, Louise directly implores her son to measure up to his Marillac and Le Gras heritage, gives directions about her burial, and specifies at least eight legacies. She also directs Michel to discreetly recover an outstanding debt related to her own dowry. These two long codicils modify Louise’s benefits for her son’s family, and single out her only grandchild, five year old Louise Renée, that she might in-

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vite persons who are poor in her parish to an annual dinner and serve them as guests.\footnote{See Sullivan, "Genealogy of the de Marillac Family," \textit{Spiritual Writings}, 858.}

Written 14 November 1820, less than two months before her death, Elizabeth's concise one page last will and testament (without any codicils) gave primary consideration to her only surviving daughter, age twenty and unmarried, over her sons (ages twenty-two and twenty-four): "I consider it my duty to provide as far as is in my power for my beloved daughter Catherine Josephine Seton, whose situation claims all my attention--accordingly granting by beloved boys William and Richard all the blessings which a most affectionate Mother can bestow and knowing that their brotherly hearts will perfectly coincide with me in the distinction I make."\footnote{See "Last Will & Testament of Elizabeth Seton," probated 18 June 1821, Frederick County Will Records, Frederick County Court House, Frederick, Maryland, HS-2:475.} Elizabeth makes no reference to burial arrangements.

At Louise's original burial site, in a side chapel of the Church of Saint Laurent, the pastor recorded that: "From time to time a kind of soft haze emanates from it, spreading fragrance like that of violets and irises."\footnote{Gobillon, \textit{Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras}, 65. See also Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., "Spes Unica -- Path to Glory: The Canonization of Louise de Marillac," \textit{Vincentian Heritage} 13:2 (1992): 113-26. The relics of Saint Louise de Marillac are enshrined in the chapel of the mother house of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul at 140 rue du Bac in Paris, France.} After Elizabeth's burial in the wooded, community cemetery in Saint Joseph's Valley, her companions and loved ones, planted a rose bush, the symbol of her immortal crown.\footnote{White, \textit{Life of Mrs. Eliza Seton}, 426. See also "Blessed Mother Seton's Remains Translated to new Emmitsburg Site," \textit{Mother Seton Guild Bulletin}, no. 103 (April 1968): 1; Sylvester Taggart, C.M., "Canonization," no. 129 (December 1974), \textit{The Seton Causeway}, 1. The relics of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton are enshrined in the Basilica of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton at Saint Joseph's Provincial House in Emmitsburg, Maryland.} The life, legacy, and lessons of these two women of wisdom continue to influence their spiritual daughters in whom the charity charism still blossoms.

Louise and Elizabeth responded to mission from a Christo-centric perspective. "Faith lifts the staggering soul upon one side, Hope supports it on the other. Experience says it must be, and Love says--let it be."\footnote{Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, 26 March 1810, Code, ed., \textit{Letters of Mother Seton}, 197.} Such wisdom "rests in the heart of one who has understanding" - like Louise and Elizabeth, whose lives became a legacy of charity inspiring their daughters to become "flames of love" for others according to the Spirit.\footnote{Proverbs 15:23. Elizabeth Seton to Reverend Pierre Babade, S.S., n.d., Kelly and Melville, \textit{Elizabeth Seton Selected Writings}, 274.}

Their legacy invites us to minister with the vitality of their under-
standing hearts, and to inculturate their spirit and mission in and for the Church of today -- imitating their passion, creativity, and innovation. The charism of charity, lived and taught by Louise and Elizabeth, was rooted in the mission of Vincent de Paul who summarized its spirit to his seventeenth-century collaborators in ministry:

Your Confraternity is a work of God ... who, by divine grace, has called and united you together ... [and] wants you to listen to the voice of the Almighty so that you may go with joy and tenderness wherever God calls you .... Loving the poor means to love in the best way.77

If charity were a tree, cordiality would be its leaves and fruit; if it were a fire, cordiality would be the flame.

(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity, 2 June 1658)