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Specific Contribution of St. Vincent and St. Louise To the Identity and Spirituality of the Daughters of Charity

by Benito Martínez, C.M.
Province of Zaragoza
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These last few years, there has been little importance given to the fact that the Daughters of Charity are secular and not religious. Even so, this reality is as important now, if not more so than it was at the origin of the foundation, because the Daughters of Charity were brought into existence to work for the good of the poor. Since the modern-day world has nationalized education, health care and social services, it seems that society no longer needs the sisters' work. By abusing its power, the State considers that it alone has the right to provide for the necessities and well being of its citizens. It seems that currently, *religious* have no other choice but to return to the sources: *to be the sign of the Kingdom of God on earth!* Nevertheless, this is not the case of the Daughters of Charity who came into being not only to bring the *witness* of the evangelical values through their lives, but to *serve the poor*. Without them, there would be no Daughters of Charity. That is why, in studying the foundation and formation of the Company, it is necessary to take the poor into consideration, or better yet, the natural development of service over the course of the centuries.

1. The Company of the Daughters of Charity

It is said that the Daughters of Charity are what St. Vincent wanted them to be and what St. Louise made of them. I am totally in agreement with this saying. The natural evolution of social and religious events was of great importance. Circumstances presented different manners of finding a remedy for the needs of the poor to the two saints, and both of them had sufficient insight to make use of them. Their realistic understanding was the impetus to establish the Charities.¹ Everything sprung forth from the Charities. The Daughters of Charity were the practical evolution from it, adapted to diverse situations. In reading the first documents of the life of St. Vincent, it seems that the time line stops after the foundation of the Association of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission. It was conversations with St. Louise over the years and her initiatives that impelled our founder to introduce the Daughters of Charity into the Charities and to form this special association that was to become the Company. It was events that they presented themselves and that they knew how to take advantage of, or that which they considered invaluable in other institutions for their purposes, which gifted the new Company with a Council, a Director, canonical and regular visitations, etc.

¹ Martínez, Benito, C.M., *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres* (CEME: Salamanca, 1995) 81-85.

It is evident and without discussion: the Confraternities of Charity are the exclusive work of St. Vincent de Paul; however, the foundation of the Daughters of Charity belongs equally to both saints. I dare to assert, by using a little science fiction, that if one of the two had been missing, the Company of the Daughters of Charity would never have existed. Even though it was Marguerite Naseau² who first had the idea of integrating into the Charities young girls desiring to give themselves to God for the free service of the poor, Mademoiselle Le Gras played an indispensable role: offering a place of welcome, of encounter, of reference, and above all, that of being formator of the young girls. Vincent expressed this innumerable times. In 1630, he wrote to Louise: *“Let me also know whether that good young woman from Suresnes, who visited you before and who spends her time teaching girls, has come to see you as she promised me last Sunday when she was here”* (Coste, Correspondence, I, 68). Vincent said that Marguerite, before dedicating herself to the care of the sick poor, visited Louise several times and kept in touch with her. The insistence of Vincent, on this occasion, that Marguerite visit Mademoiselle, supposes that he considered Louise’s influence on Marguerite to be decisive, or he judged her advice to be a determining factor in this extremely important event. As a follow-up, he continued to proceed in the same way with regard to the other girls. Marguerite was the reference point or model. Vincent welcomed them into the Charities and Louise received and formed them. The influence of Louise was even greater in the definitive formation of the Company. Although many historians attribute this to Vincent de Paul, and very few to Louise de Marillac, I believe that it is necessary to attribute as much to St. Vincent as to St. Louise, each one having a particular role to play in view of the divine charism.

An ecclesial institution is formed when there is a convergence of irreplaceable divine mediations and a series of diverse natural circumstances. If we examine the latter, we find that one day, St. Vincent de Paul wrote to Mademoiselle Le Gras: *“I am delighted with the employment of those good young women and I commend your desire to give them a painting, but not your giving way to concern about the matter. You belong to Our Lord and his holy Mother. Cling to them and to the state in which they have placed you until they make it clear that they wish something else of you”*³ Without changing the context of the letter, but on the contrary, in accord with the thinking of Vincent de Paul, I am led to believe that this refers her to a change in civil state, in this specific case, to become religious. I deduce this because Louise was thinking of this state in order to appease God for the vow made during her youth which she was unable to keep. St. Vincent was opposed to this. Sometime afterwards,

² St. Vincent recounts these events 5 times. Four of the times, he attributes the initiative to Marguerite and only in one of the accounts does he attribute the first decision to himself. Coste, Conferences to DCs, 71, 184, 217, 406, 535.

³ Coste, Correspondence, I, 70-71. In the seventeenth century, the word “state” signified social class (for example, the third estate), the milieu in which a person lives his civil situation: celibate, widow or religious.

Vincent de Paul would again firmly oppose the intentions of his directee: *“As for the rest, I beg you, once and for all, not to give it a thought until Our Lord makes it evident that he wishes it, and at present he is giving indications to the contrary ... You are trying to become the servant of those poor young women, and God wants you to be his own, and perhaps of more people than you would be in that way. And even if you were only his, is it not enough for God that your heart is honoring the tranquility of Our Lord’s?”* (Coste, Correspondence, I, 111).

This letter enlightens us much. Vincent was opposed to Louise’s changing her state and becoming a religious. The letter however also says that Louise wants to change states together with the young women and that in this new situation they would not be serving the neighbor. We can deduce from this that Louise was seeking to create a new religious foundation. This does not surprise us today, but Vincent de Paul told her that God had another design on her: to consecrate her to the service of many people, without defining where she would serve them, if in the future Company, in the Charities, or going to visit them. What is meant by the sentence, *“And even if you were only his?”* Does that mean to enter a convent by herself or remain as she is?

This attitude of Louise gave rise to frequent conversations between the two saints on this same subject. Vincent developed a supernatural conviction that would be for him the key element in the future: Louise had a mission to accomplish but united to the young women and for the poor. One has the impression that the two saints spoke about assembling the young women in a Charity only for them. Louise, undoubtedly, had to undertake this. She nervously pushed herself to bring this about quickly, and obstinate that she was, she never ceased to renew this effort. In May 1633, Vincent tried to stop her because he was not sure if this was the will of God. In September, Vincent was convinced that God wanted something exceptional from Louise; concretely, he wanted to bring the young girls together in a Charity for them alone. One month later, Louise, with the direction of Vincent, began this experiment during weekends. Finally on 29 November 1633, they both decided to more formally begin this new Charity with Marie Joly and two or three other companions. Nine months before, Marguerite Naseau had died.⁴

I think that it is the human unfolding of various circumstances that leads us to the conclusion that St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac are both the founders of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. We can arrive at this same conclusion if we examine the events in a supernatural way: the Vincentian charism is also a Louisian charism.

There is no doubt, that in order to found the Company of the Daughters of Charity, both Vincent and Louise received the divine charism as founder: an

⁴ Coste, Correspondence, I, 174, 175, 200, 211, 216, 218.

experience of God that led them to become aware of their life. For Vincent de Paul, this experience came about in 1609 when, being accused of stealing, he met Bérulle who introduced him to prayer. For Louise de Marillac, it began in 1607 when, in the boarding school, having suffered abandonment, she had recourse to the Capuchins who taught her to pray. The experience of God brought about a change of life, a conversion; and the divine experience and conversion led to a revelation that gave them a mission: to devote themselves to the poor. With St. Vincent, it came from material egoism, with St. Louise, spiritual egoism and for both of them, a Dark Night experience in 1617 and 1623 respectively. Materialization of the mission came from a dark night experience. To escape from it, Vincent offered himself to the poor and as for Louise, it was God who drew her out of it in order to offer her to the poor. St. Vincent began the project at Folleville and Châtillon; St. Louise made the discovery thanks to St. Vincent in 1629. It was one same charism in two people, which means it can be said that both saints received the same charism.

Study on the development of the Company leads us to the same end. The two founders influenced essential aspects of the nature of the Company, even though from different positions. Vincent de Paul, founder of the Confraternities of Charity, is the Director and Superior of the nascent Charity. He gave it spirituality, theological foundation and he set up its juridical structures. At that time, it was out of the question that a woman could be director of a confraternity.⁵ But, Vincent de Paul ordered nothing contrary to the opinion of his collaborator, not at least without her knowledge. For her part, Louise was very attached to the person of her director; she was the best and most faithful disciple. She accepted his teachings as the most appropriate for her daughters. Vincent had great and particular esteem for his directee, and justifiably so, since he put all confidence in her.

2. Circumstances, St. Vincent and St. Louise

It seems that St. Vincent had been president of numerous commissions of directors for “projects” dedicated to the poor. With regard to the Daughters of Charity, however, he adapted into rule the ideas and initiatives of the Directress because she, more than he, was in contact with the realities of the workings of the Company. It is enough to read some responses of St. Vincent to Louise’s letters to be convinced of this. *“I approve of what you wrote me; therefore, kindly do it as soon as possible, Mademoiselle. Excuse me if I do not come to see you today; I am anxious to get to the city.” “I just read the order of the day that you sent me and think it is fine.”* Or the terse responses he gives to her questions: *“I think*

⁵ Do not forget the difficulties encountered by Mlle. Le Gras in not being able to sign the contract for the hospital in Angers as *Directress* but *“Directress under the authority of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission”* (Coste, Correspondence, II, 2, 8).

so, ... you will see, ... you are doing well, ... please try that, ... when you think it is time, ... speak with the Duchess...."⁶

The Charity of the daughters was a Charity dependant on Monsieur Vincent, who himself was named director – not the pastor. He settled the daughters in Louise's house – not in the parish – and he named her Superioress.⁷ The governance and the immediate direction of the Charity were the responsibility of the Superioress, as in the other Charities. Vincent was very busy with ecclesiastical and civil affairs. He knew the qualities and values of Louise de Marillac very well and he more or less entrusted the Company into her hands, considering that the sisters were more her responsibility than his. Usually he spoke of "*her girls*." At the time of the first *council* of the Company, the Superior said: "*After that, the sister servant [St. Louise] who will have collected the votes, will follow that which she found to be the most appropriate. And if she does not wish to follow neither one nor the other, that is up to her to say. We will not finish this point today; we will need to think about this before God. Or else, if she wants to take advice, she might say: I will discuss this with Monsieur Vincent; we will see what will be the best.*"⁸ Louise drew up the first rule and employment of time, adapting the general rule of the Charities to her daughters. Vincent made very few changes in it after taking several months in reading it. He suggested that Louise explain it to the sisters and only in view of the admiration Louise had for the Director, did he himself explain it during the month of July 1634. Since it was in its embryonic stage, the rules drawn up by St. Vincent in 1645, 1646, and 1655 take into consideration both the rule of the Charities as well as the one drawn up by Louise with the observations that she stressed to him.⁹ Furthermore, without knowing why – as the hypothesis goes, because the fear of being considered as religious – St. Vincent did not want to publish the Rules of the Daughters of Charity and it even seemed he was afraid to compile them. Nevertheless, in 1651, St. Louise stressed again the necessity of writing rules so that the sisters would be able to read them once a month and that the Company would be strengthened (L. 315). In 1655, after the approval of the

⁶ Coste, Correspondence, II, 77, 131, 290-293.

⁷ At the beginning of the Company, the Superioress and the two officers were widows or single women from other Charities. The first were Louise de Marillac from the Charity of St. Nicolas-du-Chardonnet and Mesdames Goussault and Pollalion from the Charity of Hôtel-Dieu. Who had the idea of electing her from among the Daughters of Charity? On the one hand, St. Vincent wrote to Fr. Ozenne: "It has been a while since I thought about this subject and I often asked myself what would be the best way to direct them, to choose someone from the same Company, or from the Company of the Ladies of Charity, or someone else from among the Ladies? But each solution presents difficulties... That is why, after having well thought out and considered everything, we felt it was best to start with a blank slate and to elect, by a majority of votes, someone the company judges to be the most capable among them to accomplish this mission." But we also know that St. Louise wanted the same thing. Mathurine Guérin wrote after the death of St. Louise: "One day a sister told her that she would not like a Superioress who was not a member of the community (Company)... And, as the sister did not know if it was a good disposition or not, the same Superioress (Louise) said to her that one must praise God for having given her the idea."

⁸ Coste, XIII, 592 (French Edition). Cf. also, Coste, Conferences to DCs, 732-733 and what is said in the Council of 8 September 1655 (XIII, 693, French edition).

⁹ Spiritual Writings, A.54, 55; Coste, XIII, 125, 145, 146 (French Edition).

Rules of the Company, Louise continued to take initiatives to the Superior “for the strengthening of the Company” (L. 605, 629).

3. The Daughters of Charity and the Priests of the Mission

The initiatives of St. Louise have had a great influence on the *evolution* of the Company. Louise knew that her daughters, like most women of the 17th century, were second-class citizens both in society as well as in the Church. They were subordinate to men, having no juridical rights, so that the Charities had to admit a man as a prosecutor “to act in justice proceedings.”¹⁰ She also knew that they had no other culture than that which life had taught them and that popular religion was full of superstitions, but that they were young women consecrated to God, living the evangelical counsels, to whom the responsibility of directing numerous civil and ecclesial works had been confided. It is very curious that for the first time in history these girls were obliged to mix with the crowds on the street. It was necessary, therefore, that these young women have a simple plan of formation so that there would be harmony between consecrated life and service. That is to say that they be Daughters of Charity and Louise was charged with this under the direction of Vincent. The Company could not copy other institutions because at that time it was the only one of its kind. That is the reason it was supported by the Congregation of the Mission, which was part of its organizational structure.

Without taking into account the reluctant attitude of St. Vincent¹¹ who tried to avoid distracting the priests from their missions, Louise planned courtesy and business meetings with them to exchange news about the works or persons in the two Companies.¹² It is probable that today we see only simple social relationships which was the style of the time. We sense, however, that in the spirit of Louise all of this was part of a vast plan that she did not hide and that she strove to bring to fruition,¹³ with tenacity to the point of saying to the Daughters of Charity, that the superior of a community of missionaries is also the superior of the sisters in that place. This is not a symbolic superior as this phrase could suggest to us: “*Please convey my very humble and respectful greetings to your reverend superior*”[that of the missionaries], but having authority over the Daughters of Charity as she wrote in a Rule: “*The sisters shall have great respect for the administrators and obedience to the superior of the Mission.*”¹⁴ In this way, by encouraging the sisters to have confidence in the missionaries we can say that it was Louise who promoted the foundation of the union between the two institutions and between their members, a union which is still in place today.

¹⁰ St. Louise, Documents, 624; Coste, XIII, 420 (French edition).

¹¹ It was the missionaries more than St. Vincent who opposed directing the Daughters of Charity, as we will see further along.

¹² Spiritual Writings, L.10, 179, 182, 202, 214b, 261....

¹³ Ibid., L.88, 445, 607, 629....

¹⁴ Ibid. L.646, 135.

Certainly St. Vincent, in his heart of hearts, was surely in agreement with this idea, because, at the end of his life, he openly defended this idea even against the opinion of his missionaries. He wrote to Fr. Dehorgny as follows: *“I think that, as Superior of the Missionaries, he [Fr. Cuissot] should still regard those sisters in the same way as he does the seminarians and that those who hear their confessions, instruct, and direct them should do as he recommends and independently of him”* (Coste, Correspondence, VIII, 270-271). Ten days before his death, the saint gave an *obedience* to the sisters sent to Poland in which he told them: you will keep *“the manner of life that you have been accustomed to in France, under the direction of Monsieur Desdames or another who would be Superior of the Priests of our said Congregation who are now in Poland”* (Coste, XIII, 589, French Edition).

Psychology provided Louise de Marillac with a sense of security and support that she received from the fact of being united to a prestigious congregation of men, as was the case of the Congregation of the Mission at the time of St. Vincent. Louise felt at peace and somewhat lost interest in the communities near a house of missionaries or of those in which a priest of the Congregation of the Mission was visiting. During a council meeting, a question arose of opening an internal seminary in the south of France, and a type of provincial house for the south. Louise clearly said: *“I think this would be quite useful seeing that it was in a place where there were Priests of the Mission”* (Coste, XIII, 713, French Edition). Convinced of this idea and against the advice of Vincent de Paul who wanted to distance the Central House of the Daughters of Charity from St. Lazare, Louise, tenaciously put it in the forefront¹⁵. When there were no Priests of the Mission close to the houses of the sisters she insisted that Vincent de Paul send a missionary *to visit the houses, review their life and encourage them, up to the point of permitting them to make vows, to place or name an interim Sister Servant.*¹⁶

4. Canonical Visitations, Provincial Directors, Confessors and Spiritual Direction

From here it was only one step to undertaking canonical visitations by the missionaries officially appointed by Monsieur Vincent. We need to assert that the initiative comes from Louise. And the fact is confirmed by the dialogue that took place between the two founders. We cannot forget that the first time, as far as we know, that Fr. Lambert made the visitation to the community at Angers, St. Vincent wrote to him: *“Mademoiselle Le Gras would like you to go to Angers to see the Daughters under the form of a visitation [Canonical],”* and we are surprised that four years later Fr. Lambert writes to Louise in these words:

¹⁵ Spiritual Writings, L 131, 134, 182, 204, 300, 310, 416, 646; Coste, Correspondence, I, 308; II, 150, 175.

¹⁶ Among other letters, see: Coste, *ibid.*, II, 80-81; III, 216-218; Spiritual Writings, L. 185, 186, 312, 554.

“eight days ago, I received one of your letters, but not the one where you sent me to Angers and you indicated something in particular for when I would be there.” It is necessary to also remember that each missionary, after having made the visitation, sent a report to Louise concerning the points that she herself had indicated to him¹⁷.

It is in similar historical and social circumstances, and taking into account the distances between the houses, that we must look for the origin of the present Provincial Directors. Without a doubt, the Director General finds his origin as a result of the overload of work of Vincent de Paul. With the impossibility of directing the Daughters of Charity as he should, Vincent delegated certain works concerning the sisters to another missionary. This irrefutable fact was facilitated by Louise de Marillac in recommending to the Superior (Vincent) that another missionary attend the conferences with him (L. 124). This missionary also participated in the Councils of the Company. It was almost always Frs. Portail and Alméras. The role of the Provincial Director, however, flowed from the distance of some communities, especially those in Poland. It was necessary to accord to the superior of the missionaries sufficient authority to direct the sisters and even to discharge them from the Company (Coste, Correspondence, VII, 416).

By accepting the rigid and archaic doctrine of the 17th century on confessional jurisdiction,¹⁸ Louise knew that the Superior of the Congregation was also Superior of the Daughters of Charity. Vincent de Paul, who told them that they *“were Daughters of the parish under the direction of the parish priest,”* forbade them to go to confession without his permission to priests that he had not named.¹⁹ St. Vincent’s position in what concerns confessions of the Daughters

¹⁷ Coste, Correspondence, II, 80-81; Spiritual Writing, L. 47, 103.

¹⁸ Cf. Venceslaus Czaplá, C.M., *De iurisdictione ad excioidendas confessiones Puellarum Charitatis Sancti Vincentii a Paulo. Dissertatio ad Lauream*, (Pro manuscripto) Romae, 1957.

¹⁹ Coste, Correspondence, VIII, 276-279; Conferences of 9 June 1658, 16 March 1659, 11 August 1659. It is convenient to recall, for all that follows, some dates and aspects of the Company during the time of the Founders. Up until 1636 the Founders did not have a clear vision of what would become of this Confraternity of young women and widows. They only knew that it was a “Charity” within the “association” of Charities, like the Charity of Hôtel-Dieu became a few months later. From 1636, and more exactly from 1639, at the time of the foundation at Angers, they were convinced to have founded a new institute that today we call Consecrated Life, composed of the laity. In all of the Charities of women, the Director was the pastor of the parish, except for two: the one located at the home of St. Louise and that of Hôtel-Dieu. As they were not located within any parish, Vincent named himself director of the two, and in the Charity of *young women and widows*, he also named a *delegate to replace him during his absences*. But it was the *Superioress and the two officers* that directed and governed the Charity of women. During the first years of the Charity of young women and widows, St. Vincent named the *widows of the Charity of Hôtel-Dieu* as being responsible for them. The Priests of the Mission had been authorized to establish Confraternities of Charity, by the Archbishop of Paris as well as by the Pope (Coste, XIII, No. 66, 72, 79, 81 French Edition), up until the time they were confirmed in the Rules (I, 2). *Establish but not direct*. Once a Charity was established, it remained under the spiritual direction of the parish priest, although Vincent de Paul – because he was the founder – was used to asking a visitor or visitatrice to review and animate the Charities in the Provinces, as was the case with Louise de Marillac (Spiritual Writing, A.51, 53). However, very soon, it appeared to others that the Confraternity of the

of Charity is not clear. There was a constant struggle within himself. Whenever appropriate, the missionaries would be the confessors, given the particular nature of the missionaries and their identical charism. This however, clashed with Canon Law and in addition many missionaries felt a repugnance for this ministry.²⁰ Louise had clear ideas surrounding the question: the missionaries must be part of the direction and take care of confession of the Daughters of Charity according to a plan she had established in her mind down to the smallest detail. If they are not authorized to be their usual confessors, she would see to it that they could be so in extraordinary cases, such as when a sister had a problem, when the community was new, or when there was a delicate situation, or when there was a specific social environment like during the time of the Fronde. When a community of missionaries was in proximity to Daughters of Charity Louise would ask them to be their ordinary confessor.²¹

Although Vincent de Paul did not like to set aside missionaries as confessors for the Daughters of Charity – he vehemently refused that they be confessors for religious – he assumed, against the advice of a number of his confreres, that the spiritual direction of the Company be a work confided to the Congregation of the Mission. This does not mean that all missionaries, just because they are missionaries, be spiritual directors of Daughters of Charity.²² This can be seen in the Assembly of 1651. Despite the compliments given to the works of the sisters, Vincent decides that the missionaries will direct them only in some extraordinary cases. During the last years of his life, however, St. Vincent accepted the idea of St. Louise, and he defended the following against the objections of the missionaries: spiritual direction of the Daughters of Charity was a work confided by God to the Congregation of the Mission. He went as far as to insert this in the Rules of the Congregation²³.

I dare to give this conclusion: Louise persisted and in a certain way succeeded that this aspect of the activity of missionaries be part of the

Daughters of Charity – and not that of the Hôtel-Dieu – was placed under the direction of the Congregation of the Mission. It was thus that the Queen Louise Marie of Poland wrote to St. Vincent: “Although always ... under the direction of the Congregation of the Mission” (Coste, Correspondence, V, 165). It is good to recall that during the 17th century, the parish confessors were the parish priests and those who had their own jurisdiction, vicarial, or by delegation. This also applied to the members of the Charities, even if they were Daughters of Charity.

²⁰ Not counting the places where the missionaries were parish priests, like at Richelieu, we find that the missionaries and St. Vincent himself were the confessors for the Daughters of Charity at Valpuseaux, but did not allow the sisters at Châlons and Sainte-Menehould to “have as confessors” the “Gentlemen of the Mission.” They were not the confessors for the sisters because they did not have permission (Coste, Correspondence, III, 395-397; Spiritual Writings, L. 375, 385).

²¹ Ibid., L.10, 67, 133, 277b, 261, 375, 385, 585; Coste, Correspondence, II, 23, 181, 205; Coste, Conferences to DCs, 46. Although this is not very clear, it seems that the confessors of the Central House were also priests of St.-Laurent. St. Louise wrote to St. Vincent: “Several of our sisters would very much like to make their confession today, and I fear a priest from St.-Laurent will not be available to us.... I beg you to do us the charity of sending us one” (Spiritual Writings, L. 348).

²² Coste, Correspondence, VIII, 263; Coste, Conferences to CMs, 605.

²³ Common Rules, XI, 11; Coste, Correspondence, VIII, 270-271, 276-279.

organization of the Company. Vincent de Paul allowed himself to be convinced of the appropriateness of this at the end of his life (Coste, Conferences to CMs, 607-608).

5. Two branches of one same Company

One of the contributions of Louise de Marillac to the Company was succeeding in having the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission as Superior General of the Daughters of Charity. This is well known. No one is ignorant of the fact that, thanks to Louise's tenacity, the Daughters of Charity have the Superior General that they had wanted despite the original opinion of St. Vincent. Much has been written about this subject and I am not going to stop to discuss it.²⁴

The vision and desire that Louise had about the structure of the Company is not well known. Whereas St. Vincent, a law graduate, appealed to the Council of Trent and to the Constitution *Quaecumque* of Clement VIII (7 December 1604) to establish the juridical nature of the Daughters of Charity, Louise dreamt of a single institution composed of two bodies, that of missionaries and that of servants. This had been a dream, but success did not accompany it neither during her life nor after her death. It seems that no one accepted her wishes because they were so audacious or perhaps prematurely prophetic. Her vision was to become historic, but at the time, it was already magnificent to have been able to impose her opinion on the topic of the Superior General. Three times, at least, she wrote to Vincent about the natural union between the Company and the Congregation of the Mission, and on these three occasions one has the impression that she wanted a particular union, a union that would have perhaps changed our history.

The eve of Pentecost 1642, when Louise was to have worked in a room where the ladies of the aristocracy were to have met, the ceiling collapsed. St. Vincent tells us that it is by the grace of God that the meeting had been cancelled and that Louise had gone out a few minutes before and had been saved. Surprised, Louise wrote to her Director, "*we should see it as a warning to his Charity to establish a close union between the way of life that God wanted this community to practice and that of his institute, since there are common interests to be found in this place of God*" (Spiritual Writings, A. 75). Louise surely wrote this around 1645.

The strong canonical and civil establishment of the Company was a great concern for Louise at this time. She saw in this graced accident the manifestation

²⁴ See the reasons for the two positions in Benito Martínez, C.M. *op. cit.*, 180; also, R. Meyer – L. Huerga, *Una institución singular: El Superior General de la Congregación de la Misión y de las Hijas de la Caridad* (Ceme: Salamanca, 1974).

of the Divine Will of which the desire was to unite the two institutions into one, because she understood that their interests were shared. To firmly establish the Company was of as much interest to the Daughters of Charity as to the missionaries.

In 1651, St. Louise strengthened in her mind the conviction that the Superior General of the Priests of the Mission should also be that of the Daughters of Charity, and she adds an explanatory condition that many biographers have silently overlooked: “... *with the consent of their Company, so that, in association with them, it might share in the good they accomplish so that the Divine Goodness ... might grant our Company the grace to live in the same spirit with which his goodness animates their honorable Company*” (Spiritual Writings, L. 315).

In the 17th century the word “association” had the meaning of uniting in one body in a physical or moral way in order to form one unity in the same manner that a faculty and a professor are associated to a university or a third order to its foundation. We can affirm this if we read a meditation from 1646. Remembering some past events, Louise writes as if this is something normal: “*On the octave of the Feast of Corpus Christi, I adored the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel of our venerable fathers. I begged our Lord, by the loving union of the Word with man, that both Communities might be eternally united to him; that we might remain forever united to the Roman Apostolic Hierarchy by means of the close union of each member of our Communities with the poor, in conformity to the Will of God*” (Spiritual Writing, A. 21B). These two bodies cannot be other than the two institutes that St. Louise imperatively demanded form but one community or Congregation. And if we have doubts and think she is referring to local communities she dispels our uncertainty when she asks the Immaculate Conception to “preserve the purity in both Companies.”

Each text, studied in particular, obliges us to reflect on this doubt, but on the whole, I am inclined to admit as judicious, the affirmation that I just presented. St. Vincent did not have to doubt, even if in the beginning he seemed reticent, about the relationship between the missionaries and the Daughters of Charity. At the end of his life, however, one has the impression that he assumes the position of Louise. We are well acquainted with the arguments that he presents to his confreres to convince them of the relationship existing between the spiritual aid to the Daughters of Charity and the nature and end of the Congregation of the Mission (6 December 1658). Despite everything, it seems that he did not dare present, before all the missionaries, an argument that was suspicious for them but that he did not hesitate to write to Fr. de la Fosse in February 1660: “*The Daughters of Charity have become, in the order of Providence, a means God has given us to do by their hands what we cannot do by our own in the corporal assistance of the sick poor, and to say by their lips a*

few words of instruction and encouragement for their salvation ... these sisters are devoted, like us, to the salvation and comfort of their neighbor. If I say with us, I will be saying nothing contrary to the gospel....” (Coste, Correspondence, VIII, 239).

6. Formation of the Daughters of Charity

Formation of the first sisters was entirely Louise’s responsibility. In the beginning this formation was short – one to three months – focusing almost exclusively on mastery of the passions, detachment through mortification and on technical and human preparation for service. Soon, however, Louise organizes a simple formation plan for ordinary women. She arranged times and practices in reading, sewing and techniques for service. She sought help from other people without putting aside the pedagogical knowledge she received from the Ursulines, something which did not please St. Vincent. She arranged spiritual and religious formation using a catechism, by exchanges, and conferences that she herself gave each week.²⁵ It is Mlle. Le Gras who brought a sense of organization and St. Vincent supervised. We are a little surprised at the aplomb and the autonomy, one could almost say independence, with which Louise gave advice and norms to the sisters sent to distant or difficult places: Le Mans, Montreuil, Arras.²⁶ Louise had conceived a plan and she had participated in the development of the conferences that the superior gave. The superior suggested having a conference monthly or every two weeks, however, Louise wanted them weekly and she even gave the topics. In general, these dealt with, as far as possible, practical subjects, the Rules, or lifestyle. Louise recommended to Vincent to choose the theme in advance in order to prepare it, suggesting some point for meditation and a reflection for putting it into practice.²⁷ Very delicately with her feminine ways, she would ask him for another missionary to come to the conferences.

Certain experts are not in agreement with some of my ideas. They attribute to St. Vincent many of the achievements that are rightly Louise’s. If this was not totally the case she at least participated in accomplishing them with our founder. I am going to repeat here, what I have already written elsewhere: *“Vincent de Paul has been the source of teachings given to the Daughters of Charity but Louise was the root through which the teachings flowed and the fountain to which the sisters came to draw water. Everyone knows well that water takes its flavor from the lands through which it flows.”*

²⁵ Abelly, Book I, Chap. XXIV, p. 114-115 (French Edition); Coste, Correspondence I, 290; Gobillon, Book IV, Chap. I, p. 137 (French Edition).

²⁶ Spiritual Writings, L. 134, A. 85.

²⁷ *Ibid.* L.124, 128, 86, 173; A.55; Coste, Correspondence, I, 263, 334-335, 438-439; Coste, Conferences to DCs 13, 614-615; Gobillon, Book IV, Chap. I, p. 137 (French Edition).

Vincent de Paul, rather, contributed to the formation of the sisters in previous centuries as well as this epoch. He influenced them more after his death than during his life. Over the course of his life, but above all after his death, the Priests of the Congregation of the Mission felt obliged to help the Daughters of Charity fulfill one wish of their founder. But the missionaries are at present, as they were previously, penetrated with St. Vincent and very little of St. Louise. They have within their reach the conferences of the Founder. In the beginning these were written copies and later they were printed. Even later, the letters between the two saints and the letters of St. Vincent to certain sisters were printed. It took, however, 226 years to publish, in an incomplete way and in French only, the letters and writings of Louise de Marillac. To have her complete works, it was necessary to wait 250 years and it existed then exclusively in lithograph for libraries.²⁸ Vincent de Paul, with human politeness and saintly prudence, had refused to communicate with the sisters, except some in confession, in direction or by letters. He had had some particular exchanges with some sisters and communities through Louise de Marillac. Because of his exhausting work, he could not take charge of the Company. It is Louise who is then recognized as body and soul for this work. Vincent knew this, he approved it, and he was reassured with it.

In reading the Conferences to the Daughters of Charity, we can falsely conclude that her influence was not only enormous but decisive. Let us analyze it in all facets. With the number of conferences that we have, it does not seem that we have lost too much given, on the one hand, the great esteem that Louise had for them, the enthusiasm with which she compiled them or had them compiled, and on the other hand her fidelity to preserve them corresponds to an average of one every four months. At several retreats, St. Louise delicately complains about the long time between two conferences.²⁹ It must be added that only the sisters of the house were able to attend, and one from each parish in Paris, so that “the poor would not be inconvenienced” (Spiritual Writings, L. 124). The sisters sent to the provinces did not have the possibility of attending the conferences. One must remember that since 1647, there were as many sisters in the provinces as there were in Paris. One must also remember that Louise never permitted the conferences of the superior to leave the house so that they would not be lost or be copied “for fear that the meaning of our Most Honored Father would be changed” (Spiritual Writings, D. 954).

It is Louise who modeled the spirituality and life of the Daughters of Charity. It is necessary to remember several behaviors of Louise and the sisters: for many years, Louise had been the formator for those who came to the Company and of the Seminary sisters. She was also the Directress of the house.

²⁸ The Spanish-speaking sisters were not able to read the letters of St. Louise until 1945, and her writings, almost in totality, until 1985 (CEME Edition, translation of the French of Sr. Charpy).

²⁹ Spiritual Writings, L. 75, 110, 124, 386, 650.

All the sisters lived with her day after day, at least for some months. Some sisters sent outside of Paris wrote to her that they missed the teaching they learned from her. When they left for other communities, she continued to direct them through her letters which constituted, for most Daughters of Charity, the indispensable nourishment to be, to live and to serve. Louise de Marillac knew the importance of her letters. She wanted, at times being too optimistic, to maintain a correspondence with the Daughters every week or at least every two weeks. The year of her death, in January, she writes to Mathurine Guérin, her former secretary: “*My dear Sister, take care to read our dear letters in order to receive in this way the spirit of Jesus Christ, without which all our words and actions would be but clanging cymbals*” (Spiritual Writings, L. 650). In summary, Louise endowed the identity of the Daughter of Charity with characteristics which, despite influences from readings and former Directors, have been transmitted until this day and have been preserved as a Louisian deposit that one is unable or does not want to uproot.

7. Spirituality

Nevertheless, one must assert that Louise was not the only superior giving final decisions, neither was she the one to project the ideology that gave form to the Company. She reserved this role to Vincent de Paul. She tried to see that the Daughters of Charity were living the spirituality that the superior, Vincent, had shown them and with which she identified herself year after year. Louise took on the function of showing the practical pathway to be able to live out the Vincentian teachings. Louise who had lived out a Rhine-Flemish spirituality during her youth, later had assimilated Vincentian spirituality. During the last years of her life, however, she combined these two tendencies in such a way that she lived her spirituality, Louisian spirituality. She directed the sisters as Vincent de Paul wanted rather than how she thought, more along the lines of Francis de Sales than of Bérulle. From St. Francis she preferred for her Daughters, the *Introduction to the Devout Life* to his *Treatise on the Love of God*, even though she was never able to ignore the Nordic spirituality of St. Francis that she sometimes inculcated in some of her Daughters whom she considered to be more spiritually profound.³⁰ She spoke to others about intimate union with God, about abandonment, total detachment and annihilation. She invited them to seek *pure love*. One cannot forget that she dedicated to all the Daughters of Charity the few pages of the writing *Practice of Pure Love* (Spiritual Writings, A. 27).

8. The Spirit of the Company

Without a doubt, the vows constitute an identifying mark of the Daughters of Charity. According to what we read at the end of the conference of 19 July 1640, St. Vincent prepared them with St. Louise, a work of the two of them, which was

³⁰ Spiritual Writings, L. 377, 405, 426, 448, 519, 531b, 546, 642.

linked to the religious conditions of the times. This was the most characteristic trait of the charism of the Company and is the spirit behind the purpose: *totally given to God to serve the poor corporally and spiritually*. Good service requires appropriate virtues and above all, a life of union and community. If the work team is not cohesive, it is not effective. It follows that St. Vincent, and in a special way, St. Louise, enumerate the qualities and necessary virtues for the sisters in order to live in unity and serve the poor with dignity. Little by little Vincent and Louise arrive at the conviction that these virtues must not be numerous so that they will be able to be easily assimilated by the poor country girls. They were struck by these three virtues: humility, simplicity and charity. In 1617, St. Vincent was already speaking about the necessity of the Ladies of Charity in Châtillon possessing these virtues of humility, simplicity and charity (Coste XIII, p. 435, French Edition). At the time of proposing the characteristics of the Daughter of Charity, however, Vincent hesitates between several of them until the month of February 1653 when he explains the spirit of the Company in three famous conferences. Louise de Marillac arrives at the same result. To which one of them do we owe this spirit? To both of them? To the spiritual atmosphere of Paris at the time? The three virtues went perfectly with the doctrine of Bérulle on the Incarnation of which St. Vincent could never completely separate himself; *“Jesus Christ in His Incarnation is the Adorer of the Father and Servant of His Loving Plan.”*³¹ In this way he arrives at the theological explanation drawn from the Incarnation of the Word. As for Louise de Marillac, she is fully “Bérullian,” delighted, she accepts them, but she explains them in a more practical and precise manner. *“Gentleness, cordiality and forbearance must be the practices of the Daughters of Charity, just as humility, simplicity and love of the holy humanity of Jesus Christ, who is perfect charity, is their spirit”* (Spiritual Writings, L. 377).

(Translation: Translation Center – Daughters of Charity, Paris)

³¹ C. 1.5. Idea taken from St. Vincent, Coste, Conferences to CMs 111-113.