

11 The Stormy Years (continued)

The Approbation of the Company in 1646

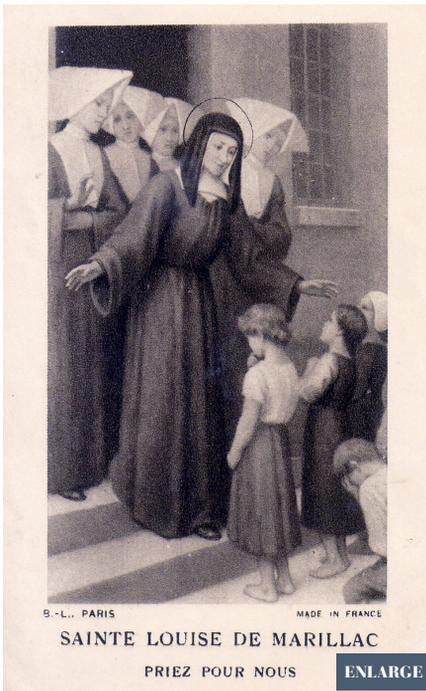
For some time, Louise had recognized the necessity of having the little Company legally recognized by the civil and religious authorities. At Angers in 1640, she had experienced some difficulties signing the contract with the hospital in the name of the Company since it did not yet have legal existence. In 1641, the Congregation of the Mission had to undertake the purchase of the new motherhouse.

Vincent did not seem to be in any hurry to obtain this official recognition. Perhaps he may have feared that this confraternity of young women, coming and going in public on the streets, might come to be considered a religious order through this process and that the obligation of the cloister would then be imposed on it. This is what had happened to the Visitandines of Bishop Francis de Sales.

In 1645, the time seemed to have come to take the necessary steps to receive this approbation. Vincent prepared the first document. After describing the establishment of the Confraternities of Charity in various parishes of Paris and many villages of the archdiocese by the Priests of the Mission, the text recounts how the Company of the Daughters of Charity had come into existence:

But because the ladies who make up the Confraternity belong, for the most part, to a social class that does not allow them to perform the most menial and abject services proper to the work of this Confraternity, such as carrying the soup pot through the city, doing the bleedings, preparing and giving enemas, dressing wounds, making beds and watching at night over the sick who are alone and near death, they have taken some good country girls to whom God had given the desire to assist the sick poor, who attend to all these little services, after having been trained for this purpose by a virtuous widow named Mademoiselle Le Gras.²⁶⁹

The various types of poor persons whom the Daughters of Charity



HOLY CARD OF LOUISE AND THE DAUGHTERS
COMING TO THE AID OF SUFFERING CHILDREN.

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served in Paris are named: the sick of the parishes and of the Hôtel-Dieu, the foundlings, and the convicts. Next, the cities in which they were found in France were named: Angers, Richelieu, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Sedan, and Saint-Denis. As it was not possible to name all the villages in which the Daughters of Charity had been established, the text simply said “and other places in the country.”²⁷⁰

The text explains that through her service, the Daughter of Charity devotes herself completely to suffering humanity: “And what is still more noteworthy in the work of these poor girls is that, besides the corporal services they render to the sick poor, they try to contribute to their spiritual welfare, as best they can, particularly by saying some good word to them from time to time and giving them little reminders about their salvation, both to those who are going to die, that they might leave this world in a good state; and to those who will recover, in order to help them to lead a good life.”²⁷¹

The text ends with the Rule of the Daughters of Charity, the very first draft of their future Constitutions. The beginning of this Rule concerns the government of the Company: “The Confraternity will be composed of widows and unmarried women. Every three years they will elect four of their number, by a plurality of votes, to be their officers, of which the first will be the Superioress or Directress; and they may have another term of office.”²⁷²

After laying out the sisters’ daily schedule, the final section of the text

explains the spirit with which the Daughters of Charity conduct themselves in their service:

And to give greater honor to Our Lord their patron, they will have a straightforward intention to please Him in all their actions and will strive to conform their lives to His, especially in His poverty, humility, gentleness, simplicity, and moderation....

They will be mindful that they are called Daughters of Charity; that is, Sisters who make profession of loving God and the neighbor; consequently, besides the sovereign love they should have for God, they should excel in love of the neighbor, especially of their companions.²⁷³

Louise reviewed this long draft document, and the following notes show how much she prized precise wording and how important it was for her that the Community live in humility. She observed, "The number of Sisters employed in the service of the foundlings is greater and should increase around All Saints' Day when a number of children will be brought in."²⁷⁴ Regarding the daily schedule, Louise wrote, "The two o'clock reading and silence are not specified, nor at the other time either; perhaps this is not necessary."²⁷⁵

It seemed to her that the text also praised the Daughters of Charity too highly. She asked: "Is it necessary to be so lengthy in the praises of the above-mentioned Sisters which begin with the words: 'And what is more worthy of consideration'? Would it not suffice to say that, 'in addition to the corporal service they render to the above-mentioned sick poor, God is blessing the little reminders they give them for their salvation, both to those who are going to die and to those who are going to recover, in order to help them to live well, which is producing very good results."²⁷⁶ The draft was rewritten as Louise suggested. The petition, signed by Vincent, and the copy of the Rule were sent to Jean-François de Gondi, the archbishop of Paris, around September 1646.²⁷⁷ Louise may not have seen the final draft since she was absent from Paris from 26 July to the end of September. She had gone to Nantes to accompany the first Daughters of Charity who were going to staff the hospital there.

On 20 November of that same year, the coadjutor of Paris, Jean-François Paul de Gondi, the nephew of the archbishop, signed the act of approbation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity:

By authority of the Archbishop, we have erected and do erect by these present letters the conference of the unmarried women and widows in this diocese in the form of a separate Confraternity under the title of Servants of the Poor of the Charity. We will and ordain that those already admitted to it and those who will henceforth be received into it may freely do whatever can relieve and console the sick poor, on condition that the Confraternity will be, and will remain in perpetuity, under the authority of and dependent on the Archbishop and his successors and in the exact observance of the attached Statutes, which we have approved and do approve by these present letters.²⁷⁸

When Louise read the official text, she expressed her disapproval to Vincent: "I did not think to ask you if I should share this with our Sisters, and I have not done it."²⁷⁹ She did not like the name that the archbishop gave them, Servants of the Poor of the Charity. She wanted to keep the name of Daughters of Charity, which had been used in the Rule. She continued, "Allow me to tell your charity that the explanation given in our Rule of Daughters of Charity causes me to want to retain this title, which has been left out, inadvertently perhaps, in the text of the terms of the Establishment."²⁸⁰

Louise's most important objection was that the document placed the Company under the authority of the archbishop of Paris and his successors. She queried, "Could not this uncompromising wording 'dependence on the Archbishop' be harmful to us in future, by the liberty it gives to draw us away from the direction of the Superior General of the Mission? Is it not necessary, Monsieur, that by this Act of Establishment your charity be given to us as perpetual Director?"²⁸¹

She was well aware that the archbishop of Lyon had imposed the cloister on the Visitandines when they established themselves in his diocese. She feared that the community would face this risk if they were placed under the authority of the bishops. The end of the letter has a tone that is both solemn and pleading: "In the name of God, Monsieur, do not let anything happen that would, even in the slightest, draw the Company away from that direction God has given it, because you can be sure that immediately it would no longer be what it is, and the sick poor would no longer be assisted, And thus, I believe that God's Will would no longer be done among us."²⁸²

Louise continually used these two arguments, the service of the poor and the will of God, to convince Vincent to seek a revision of Company's act of

establishment. She knew how attentive he was to the will of God and how concerned he was for the service of poor persons, but she would have to wait nine years before obtaining the desired modifications.

Even though Louise did not wish to tell the sisters about the approbation of the Company, Vincent did. He waited for a favorable moment and did so in the course of the conference he gave on 30 May 1647 (six months after the approval of the text). The subject of his talk was the importance of the exact observance of the Rules. He took out a copy of the Rules and said, "This is the petition presented to [the archbishop]; here are the Rules, then here's the approval. I'll read them for you one after the other."²⁸³

In the report she wrote on this conference, Élisabeth Hellot noted that Vincent read the entire text "even though there was a lot of writing in them."²⁸⁴ When Louise heard the passage about the election of the community's officers, she went on her knees and begged the sisters to immediately adopt the provision that the superioress general be elected for a term of three years. Vincent replied with much kindness: "Your Sisters and I, Mademoiselle, have to ask God to give you many more years of life.... It's God's usual method of acting to preserve by extraordinary means those who are necessary for the accomplishment of His works; and if you think about it, Mademoiselle, you really haven't been alive for more than ten years now—at least in the ordinary way."²⁸⁵ Louise would continue as superior of the Daughters of Charity for another thirteen years.

After Louise had arisen, Vincent continued to read the text accompanied by his commentary. Louise expressed her regret that the name Daughters of Charity had not been retained. Vincent paused when he read the article that said "it will be a Confraternity and will bear the name of '*Confraternity of Sisters of the Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor*.'"²⁸⁶ Élisabeth Hellot noted: "Having said this, he exclaimed softly, 'What a lovely title, Sisters! *Mon Dieu!* What a lovely title and what a beautiful designation! What have you done for God to deserve it? *Servants of the Poor* is the same as saying *Servants of Jesus Christ*, since He regards what is done to them as done to himself, for they are His members."²⁸⁷ As he continued his reading, Vincent remembered that Louise had asked that the rule on silence be noted in the Rule, so he paused and said, "I urge you to observe this, Sisters. Honor at that time the hidden life of the Son of God."²⁸⁸ At the end of the reading, Vincent emphasized to the sisters the importance of an exact observance of the rules, and quickly noted that the Rule made the Company dependent on the archbishop of Paris. He said, "You should consider these Rules as coming to you from the hand of God himself, since they're given by order of the Archbishop, on whom you depend."²⁸⁹

The account of the conference does not mention Louise's reaction to this announcement. She prayed and reflected, and when she felt at peace, she wrote to Vincent in November 1647. Six months had passed since his conference. Louise said: "It seemed to me that God gave my soul great peace and simplicity at prayer, which I made very imperfectly on the necessity for the Company of Daughters of Charity always to be uninterruptedly under the guidance which Divine Providence has given them, both for spiritual and temporal matters. I think I have understood that it would be more favorable for His glory, if the Company were to fail completely than to be under any other guidance, since that would seem contrary to God's will."²⁹⁰

It seems that Vincent did not answer. There is no extant letter in reply and Louise certainly would not have failed to carefully preserve such a response.

Louise knew that an episcopal approbation would normally have needed to have been confirmed by royal approbation. The royal approval, called Letters Patent, would take effect after being registered by the Parlement of Paris. The Letters Patent for the Company were drafted and sent to the procurator general, Monsieur Méliand. And what happened next? The letters were somehow lost. It is impossible to know how this happened.

Moreover, Anne of Austria, at the suggestion of an unknown person, drew up a petition to the pope to have the Company of the Daughters of Charity depend in perpetuity on the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission. The queen's request read: "The Queen entreats His Holiness to name as perpetual Directors of the Confraternity or Society of Servants of the Poor of the Charity the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and his successors in the same office. In so doing, there is reason to hope that this good work will continue to flourish, the Church will be edified by it, and those who are poor better relieved."²⁹¹

Papal approval of this request would forever prevent any difficulties with bishops. Louise, who certainly must have known about this petition, never brought the topic up again while awaiting a response from the Holy See. It was not until April 1650 that, having received no response from Rome, she began to act.

During this period, there were many other concerns that occupied her time and attention: her son, Michel, the violent crisis that was shaking the Company, and the extreme difficulties being encountered with the work of the foundlings.



B.-L., PARIS

MADE IN FRANCE

SAINTE LOUISE DE MARILLAC

PRIEZ POUR NOUS

HOLY CARD OF LOUISE AND THE DAUGHTERS COMING TO THE AID OF SUFFERING CHILDREN.

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