

2 Her Years of Marriage

Following the custom of the time, Michel de Marillac looked for a husband for his niece. Marriage for love did not exist in the seventeenth century; parents arranged and negotiated their children's unions.

The Marillac family chose the thirty-two-year-old Monsieur Antoine Le Gras, one of the secretaries of the Queen Mother, Marie de Medici. It was while serving in this position that he became known to the queen's intendant of finances, Octavien d'Attichy, the husband of Louise's aunt, Valence de Marillac. Antoine Le Gras was a simple squire, not a nobleman. He thus belonged to the bourgeoisie rather than to the aristocracy. Louise would not have the title of Madame, which was reserved for women of the nobility. Rather, she would be called Mademoiselle.

On 4 February 1613, a marriage contract was drawn up before a notary in the home of the Attichy family.¹² Louise had been living there for some time helping to take care of her cousins. The marriage contract recorded that she was the "natural daughter" of her father. Her aunts and uncles who were present as witnesses signed as "friends" of the future bride. Once again, she felt the suffering and loneliness of her youth. The next day, the marriage was celebrated in the church of Saint Gervais in Paris. Louise de Marillac now became Mademoiselle Le Gras. The Marillac family thus had provided for the future of the illegitimate daughter of one of their own.

Although Antoine and Louise did not choose one another, a true love would develop between them. With her husband, Louise finally found the joy and warmth of a family home. The newlyweds settled on rue Courteau-Villain. They began work on remodeling the house and even had a little turret added. Because she was a member of Parisian society, Louise's circle of friends included other young wives whose husbands worked at court: Mademoiselle



ANTOINE LE GRAS, WEARING THE STAR OF THE ORDER OF SAINT MICHAEL. THE ONLY KNOWN PORTRAIT; ORIGINAL AT THE VINCENTIAN MOTHERHOUSE, PARIS.

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Rousselet, Mademoiselle Foras, Madame Ménard, Madame de Villesbin, and others.

Louise also participated fully in the spiritual and cultural life of her age. She read the works of the bishop of Geneva, Francis de Sales, including the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, (published in 1609), and the *Treatise on the Love of God* (published in 1616). She welcomed the holy bishop of Geneva into her own home in 1618. She was also familiar with the spirituality of Pierre de Bérulle, who had just founded the Oratory of Jesus (1611). In her yearning to draw closer to God, she asked for permission to read the Bible in French. Bishop Jean-Pierre de Camus, her spiritual director, granted it to her and her husband. Every evening Antoine and Louise prayed and meditated on the Word of God, and prayed Compline together.

In her free time, she visited and served the poor. A woman of the court who visited the Le Gras home gave this testimony: “She had a great piety and devotion for serving persons living in poverty. She brought them sweets and preserves, biscuits, and other delicacies. She brushed their hair, washed away their scabies and vermin, and prepared them for burial. Often at table she would seem to be eating, but she was not.”¹³ Louise’s visitor continued, “She got up at night to place the food in her closet (and for prayer) as soon as Monsieur was asleep. She had hair shirts and disciplines.”¹⁴

This happy period in Louise’s life included the birth of her son, Michel, on 18 October 1613. But the parents’ joy soon faded. The child had developmental challenges and learned slowly.

Antoine and Louise were also affected by the deaths of her uncle and aunt. Octavien d’Attichy died in 1614, and his wife, Valence, in 1617. They left seven orphaned children who were still very young. Michel de Marillac was named their guardian, but he confided the management of their estate to Antoine Le Gras, who gratefully accepted since the Attichys had been in favor of his marriage to Louise.

Managing the orphans’ inheritance proved difficult and time consuming. Antoine Le Gras even used a part of his own resources to avoid bankruptcy for the estate. The oldest of the Attichy children blamed Antoine and Louise for this situation and wrote them hurtful letters. Louise told her uncle Michel about it, and he simply encouraged her to have patience. She thus had firsthand experience of ingratitude. Serving others can be a source of joy, but it also makes our souls vulnerable.

New trials now befell Louise. Around 1621–1622, Antoine became ill. His long and painful illness affected his behavior. He became increasingly angry and despondent.¹⁵ Louise lovingly cared for her husband, but his mood



LOUISE DE MARILLAC'S PARISH CHURCH, SAINT-NICOLAS-DES-CHAMPS,
RUE SAINT-MARTIN. EUGÈNE ATGET, CIRCA 1898. GEORGE EASTMAN HOUSE COLLECTION.

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swings and frequent bouts of impatience became more and more disquieting for her. The warmth of her family life was disappearing. She panicked. Wasn't this all her fault? Hadn't she promised God to become a Capuchin? Wasn't all this a punishment from God for her broken promise?

Despite receiving letters of spiritual encouragement from her uncle Michel and her director Bishop Camus, Louise was consumed by her feelings of dejection and misery. At the time she wrote: "On the Feast of Saint Thomas, I fell into a state of depression which lasted all day. The sight of my own abjection led me to consider myself as a mass of pride and self-love. I experienced discouragement, annihilation of myself and desertion by God which I had merited because of my infidelities. My heart was so depressed that the force of my emotions sometimes resulted in physical pain."¹⁶

"To make God's justice triumph" (using her own expression), Louise tried to appease God by multiplying her pious prayers and spiritual exercises.¹⁷ But her anguish only increased. On the feast of Saint Monica, 4 May 1623, she made a vow of widowhood. She thought this promise would bring her peace, but it did not. She felt as though her life were falling apart.

Louise later wrote:

On the following Feast of the Ascension, I was very disturbed because of the doubt I had as to whether I should leave my husband, as I greatly wanted to do, in order to make good

my first vow and to have greater liberty to serve God and my neighbor.

I also doubted my capacity to break the attachment I had for my director which might prevent me from accepting another, during his long absence, as I feared I might be obliged to do.

I also suffered greatly because of the doubt I experienced concerning the immortality of the soul. All these things caused me incredible anguish which lasted from Ascension until Pentecost.¹⁸

It was then that the great “Light of Pentecost” shone upon her. On Sunday, 4 June 1623, Louise went to pray in her parish church, Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs. She later recalled, “On the Feast of Pentecost, during holy Mass or while I was praying in the church, my mind was instantly freed of all doubt.”¹⁹

God also gave her a glimpse of what he expected of her. And, although obscure, God revealed to her his future plan for the Company of the Daughters of Charity:

I was advised that I should remain with my husband and 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 but I did not understand how this would be possible since there was to be much coming and going.

I was also assured that I should remain at peace concerning my director; that God would give me one whom He seemed to show me. It was repugnant to me to accept him; nevertheless, I acquiesced. It seemed to me that I did not yet have to make this change.

My third doubt was removed by the inner assurance I felt that it was God who was teaching me these things and that, believing there is a God, I should not doubt the rest.²⁰

Louise recorded all the details of this “Light” on a piece of paper that she then folded carefully and always kept on her person, either in her pocket or in a little bag. In difficult moments, when she would wonder what it was God

wanted of her, she would reread the text.

An examination of this extant manuscript, a yellowed paper covered front and back with rapid handwriting, shows it has become quite fragile through frequent unfolding and refolding. On the back, on what served as a cover for the little booklet, we can read the single word “Lumière”—“Light.”

If this “Light of Pentecost” brought profound peace to Louise, it did not resolve all her difficulties. Antoine’s illness continued to grow worse: insomnia kept him awake most of the night and frequent hemorrhages weakened him. Louise’s care of her husband was constant and loving. On 21 December 1625, she was alone with him when he suffered a violent fatal hemorrhage in the middle of the night. In a letter to her cousin, Father Hilarion Rebours, she recounted her husband’s last moments: “I was alone with him to help him, at this important transition, and he gave proof of so much devotion that it was evident till his last sigh that his spirit was attached to God.”²¹

For the rest of her life, Louise remembered her husband with great fondness. She always marked their wedding anniversary, and in 1630, in the journal of her visit to the confraternities of Asnières and Saint-Cloud, she wrote: “God permitting, I wanted to have a Mass celebrated on that day because it was the anniversary of my marriage. I abstained, however, wishing to perform an act of poverty and to depend solely upon God in the action I was about to undertake. I had not expressed my wish to my confessor who celebrated the Mass at which I received Holy Communion. However, as he came out on the altar, the thought came to him to celebrate it for me as an alms and to say the nuptial Mass.”²²

In her last will and testament written in 1645, Louise recalled her husband’s virtues, exhorting her son to remember “how [Antoine] greatly feared God and was scrupulous in keeping himself irreproachable, especially recalling his patience in the great sufferings which were sent to him in his last years, and in which he practiced very great virtue.”²³

Thus at the end of 1625, Louise found herself alone with her twelve-year-old son. Seeing Michel deprived of his father’s affection, Louise recalled her own suffering at the death of her father; she had been the same age. As a mother, she was filled with anxiety about her son’s future. She surrounded Michel with smothering affection instead of responding to his need for understanding and direction. Michel was a difficult child; for three years he had lived with a sick father and a depressed mother. He was also an unstable youth, lacking energy and a work ethic. His mother wanted him to become a priest, but he did not know what he wanted to do. Over the years, many

conflicts would take place between mother and son.²⁴

Louise freely admitted her failures as a mother, but despite these difficulties, she made peace with herself. This is a profound lesson for us: sanctity is not connected with human success. Failure can help us to understand and appreciate the apparent failure of Christ on the cross. Failure thus can be a source of renewal and of redemption.



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