

3 Her Years of Widowhood

Now that she was widowed, Louise was increasingly distraught. She wondered what would become of her and her son now that they were alone. She also wondered who would help guide her soul in the midst of the storm she felt was rising again. How could she come to know God's will in her life?

In the depths of her heart, Louise still felt an intense desire to give herself completely to God. To try to discern God's will, she intensified her prayer and devotional exercises. She recited the rosary and the little office of the Blessed Virgin every day. As often as possible, she meditated on the presence of God, and in addition she tried to meditate thirty-three times daily in honor of the thirty-three years Jesus Christ spent on earth.²⁵ She attended daily mass and read the gospel and the life of the saint of the day.²⁶ Louise also tried to fulfill all the devotions required by the numerous religious confraternities to which she belonged: the Confraternities of the Five Wounds of Our Lord, of the Blessed Sacrament, of the Rosary, of Saint Monica, and of Saint Francis.²⁷

Together with these spiritual exercises she fasted on Fridays, on the eves of feasts of Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin, and during Advent and Lent. She also used the discipline regularly. This demanding life of prayer became another source of stress for her; it was sometimes very difficult to be faithful to the demands of all these practices. Each failing, however involuntary, reinforced her anguish.

Vincent de Paul, who had by then become her spiritual director, helped her to seek God in a more relaxed and realistic manner. At one point, he advised: "As for all those thirty-three acts to the holy humanity and the others, do not be distressed when you fail to do them. God is love and wants us to go to Him through love. Therefore, do not hold yourself bound to all those good resolutions."²⁸

Still feeling tormented, Louise tried to find comfort and support among her friends and relatives. For example, she shared her search for God and the obstacles she encountered with her cousin, Father Hilarion Rebour: "Is it not reasonable that I should be all for God, after having been for so long for the world? I tell you then, my dear cousin, that I want this with all my heart, and in the way it pleases Him. But I have much reason to doubt my ability to persevere in this holy desire, because of the continual obstacles which oppose the designs God has on me. So then, my dear Father, help my poor soul, and by your prayers break those bonds which attach me so strongly to all that is not God."²⁹

Louise also wrote to Bishop Jean-Pierre Camus, her former spiritual director. She shared with him her spiritual darkness and the state of her troubled soul. He responded:

Mademoiselle, my dear Sister,
What I heard about you through Monsieur Chappe indicated that you wrote two letters, of which I have received only one, that you said you wrote since the affliction of your widowhood. Now, my dear sister, I do not know why your spirit is troubled and thinks itself to be in darkness and abandoned. For what reason? You are no longer divided. Now you belong wholly to the heavenly Spouse having nothing more to do with earthly things. For a long time now you have desired only him, and now that he has broken your bonds and that you must offer a sacrifice of praise in the Host, you are astonished? Daughter of so little faith, why do you doubt? You must say what Our Lord said to Mary at the resurrection of Lazarus: If you have more confidence, you will see the glory of God coming upon you. But what is it? It is what I do not see clearly, but what I believe most assuredly.

Belley, 26 March 1626.³⁰

Bishop Camus did not understand this tormented and anxious young widow well. During her husband's illness she had made a vow of widowhood, and now that she was a widow, she still had not found the peace she was seeking. What exactly was she seeking? Overcoming her depression, the pain of losing her husband, and her anxiety about the future were not things that could be easily or quickly done, even with all the good will in the world. What she needed was time.

Bishop Camus, whose diocese was far from Paris, appointed a new spiritual director for her. Louise was hesitant and at first felt little attraction for Vincent de Paul. The rustic simplicity of this priest was far different from the aristocratic refinement of Bishop Camus or Bishop Francis de Sales. But Louise remembered her "Light of Pentecost" in which God had revealed she would receive a new spiritual director, and, despite her "repugnance," she went to speak with Vincent. She desired to know and follow God's will, and to follow this "Light of Pentecost" that had come to illuminate the darkness in which she found herself.

In her “Light of Pentecost,” she wrote, “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.”³¹

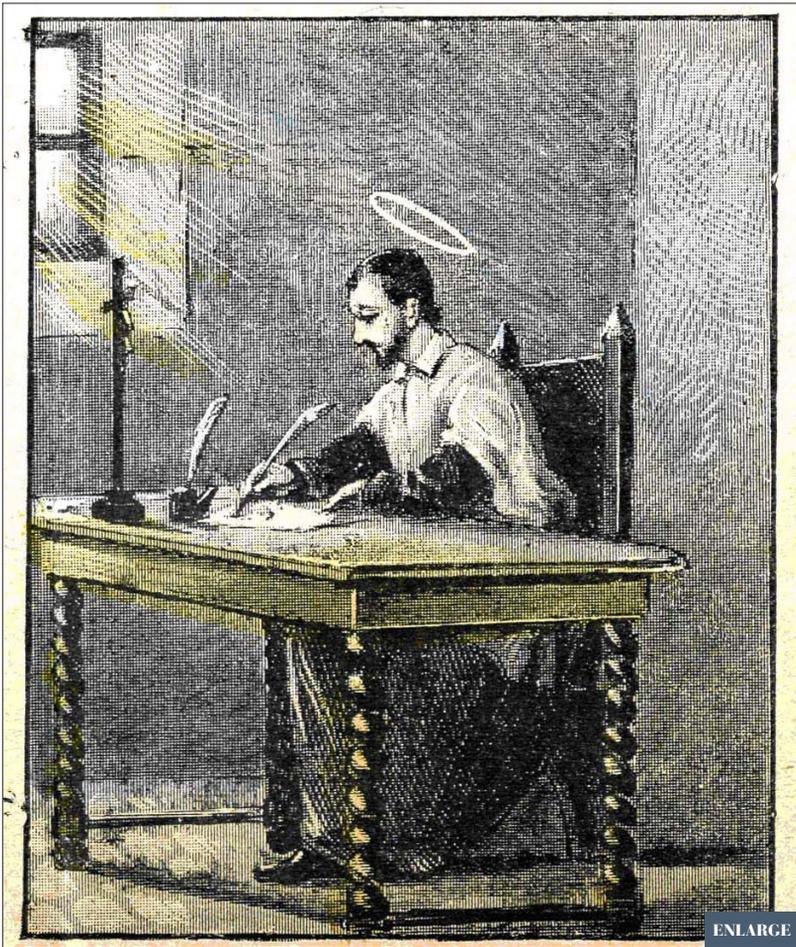
Vincent, for his part, was reluctant at first to accept the spiritual direction of this young widow. He had provided spiritual direction for Madame de Gondi. He knew the demanding nature of women of the nobility and was very hesitant to undertake this responsibility again. At this same time, the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission to evangelize poor persons and to give missions to the countryside was making great demands on his time.

Who finally convinced Vincent to accept the role of spiritual director for Louise? Was it Monsieur de Bérulle? Was it perhaps their common friendship with Bishop Francis de Sales, who had died in December 1622? Perhaps it was simply an inspiration from God. Several years later, Vincent wrote to Louise, who was constantly sharing her problems with him: “Understand once and for all, Mademoiselle, that a person whom God in His plan has destined to assist someone else is no more overburdened by the advice that the other requests than a father is by his own child.”³²

In obedience to God’s will, Louise accepted Vincent as her spiritual director and found him to be a priest filled with good sense who was close to God and to the poor. Vincent accepted this anxious woman and helped her free herself from her anguish and find God’s peace in her life.

Louise was now living close to Vincent’s residence at the Collège-des-Bons-Enfants in Paris. At the beginning of 1626, she moved from her house on rue Courteau-Villain to a new residence on the rue Saint-Victor in the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. Her decision to move was doubtlessly related to the lessening of her resources following her husband’s death. She seemed to have moved frequently. In her correspondence, we see that she lived in the house of a Monsieur Tiron, then that of a Monsieur Guerin, and next that of a Monsieur Veron.

Vincent’s first encounters with Louise seemed to confirm the reasons for his hesitancy to undertake this relationship. Beginning with her first extant letter to him in 1626, we see how exacting she could be of her director. She wrote often, and Vincent could not respond to all her letters. She worried whenever he left Paris to give a mission in the countryside. What would become of her during his absence? Vincent tried to reassure her: “Our Lord ... Himself will act as your director. Yes, He will surely do so, and in such a way that He will lead you to see that it is He Himself.”³³



ENLARGE

ETCHING OF VINCENT DE PAUL WRITING LETTERS AT HIS DESK.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

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These first letters between directee and director are reverential in tone, and marked by a tenderness of expression that reflects the language of a spiritual friendship in the seventeenth century. Louise writes to Vincent, “I hope that you will excuse the liberty I am taking in telling you how impatient I have become because of your long absence, troubled as I am about the future and by not knowing where you are or where you are going.”³⁴ Vincent responds in the same manner: “Forgive my heart if it is not a little more expansive in this letter.”³⁵ Later he writes, “Kindly assure your own heart that, provided it honors the holy tranquility of that of Our Lord in His love, it will be pleasing to Him.”³⁶

Through their meetings, and letters that became more and more frequent, Vincent and Louise grew to know each other, discovering both their similarities and their differences. Vincent discovered Louise to be an ultrasensitive woman who had been marked by the harshness of life. He listened to her suffering and patiently helped her to accept it. On a day of a violent storm in Paris, he wrote to her: "Do not think that all is lost because of the little rebellions you experience interiorly. It has just rained very hard and it is thundering dreadfully. Is the weather less beautiful for that? Let the tears of sadness drown your heart and let the demons thunder and growl as much as they please. Be assured, my dear daughter, that you are no less dear to Our Lord for all that. Therefore, live contentedly in His love."³⁷

In his many letters, Vincent encouraged Louise to turn her attention toward the Son of God: "Try to live content among your reasons for discontent and always honor the activity and unknown condition of the Son of God."³⁸ He told her: "Honor ... the Blessed Virgin's sorrow when she saw her Son suffering. Honor as well the eternal Father's acceptance at the sight of His only Son's sufferings. I hope that He will make you see and understand how much you are obligated to His Divine Majesty for His having honored you by associating your sufferings with His."³⁹

Much of Louise's anxiety was caused by her worry over her son's future. Every other letter she wrote (up until the foundation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity) spoke of Michel. From the beginning, Vincent seemed to understand this young man. Was he perhaps moved to pity for this mischievous orphan, alone in the world except for his anxious mother? While Louise's letters refer to Michel as "Monsieur, my son," Vincent often would use a more affectionate term. For him, Michel was "the little one."

Louise frequently asked Vincent for advice concerning her son: "About three weeks ago, while I was at Mademoiselle du Fay's, I had an opportunity to write to you. I am afraid that my letters have been lost. They dealt principally with the advice which I was asking of you concerning my son."⁴⁰ Vincent reassured her, moderating the excessive worry of a mother's heart. In 1628, he wrote, "I praise God because [your heart] has freed itself from the excessive attachment it had to the little one and because you have made it correspond to reason."⁴¹

At that time, the "little one" was now fifteen years old and living as a boarder at the seminary of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet directed by Monsieur Adrien Bourdoise. The adolescent's schoolwork was very inconsistent, and he had great difficulty with the studies that were supposed to lead him to the priesthood. Would he ever succeed if he did not work, his mother kept asking him.

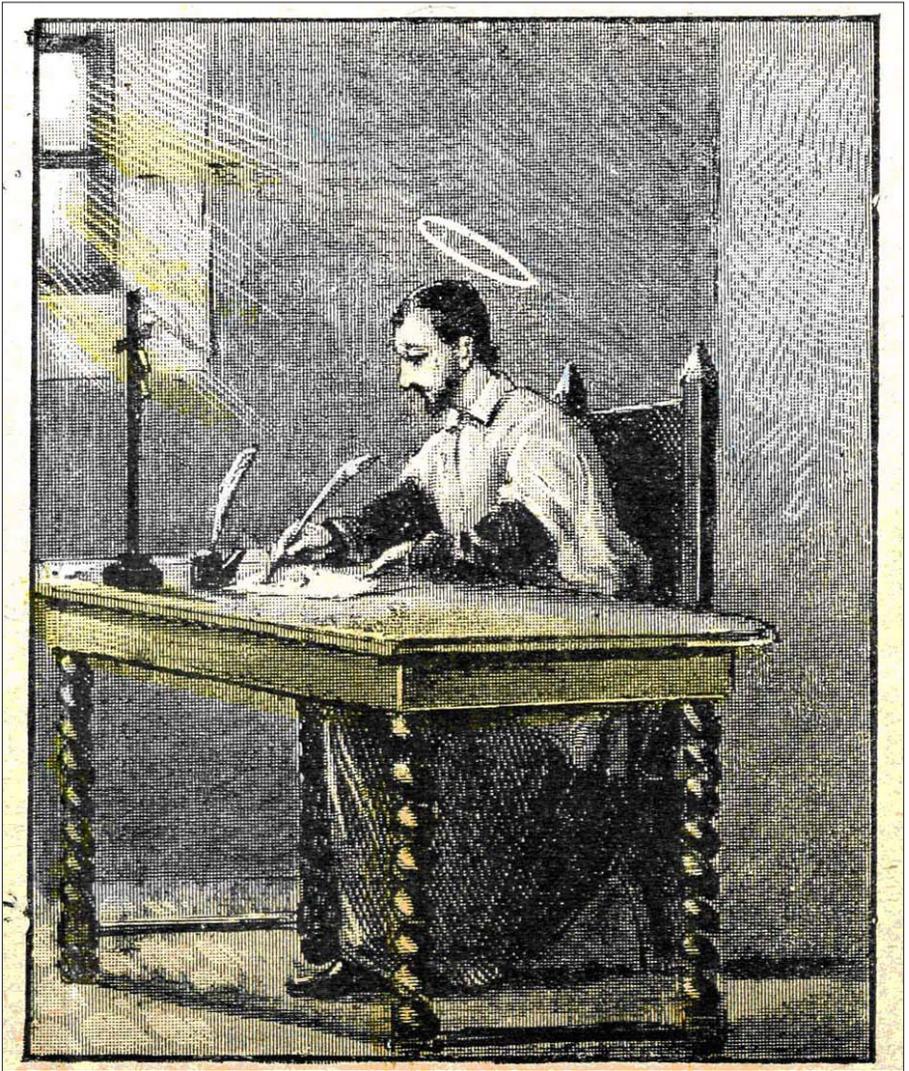
Vincent early on discovered in Louise a great yearning to know and accomplish God's will. He supported her in these efforts, but whereas Louise was hurried, lively, and prone to act quickly, Vincent was slow and methodical. He believed that one should never anticipate Providence. Vincent patiently waited for events to reveal God's will. Louise expressed her concerns: "These past days I have greatly desired you to remember to offer me to God and to ask of Him the grace of accomplishing His holy will in me despite the opposition of my misery."⁴²

Vincent knew how rich Louise's spiritual life was, and how firmly she desired to be united with God. He simply invited her to seek God's will with confidence and joy: "Be quite cheerful in the disposition of willing everything that God wills."⁴³ He said, "Oh! what great hidden treasures there are in holy Providence and how marvelously Our Lord is honored by those who follow it and do not try to get ahead of it."⁴⁴

Louise, for her part, soon learned of Vincent's many activities in service to poor persons, especially through the work of the Confraternities of Charity. It was natural for her to begin to participate in this work together with her cousin Mademoiselle du Fay. On 5 June 1627, she wrote to Vincent: "The work which your Charity gave me is finished. If the members of Jesus need it and you want me to send it to you, Father, I shall not fail to do so. I did not want to do this without your authorization."⁴⁵

Vincent called upon Louise to collect clothing for the poor and to send it to the different Confraternities. But very soon, he also asked her to visit poor persons in their homes and to care for girls in distress by finding them safe places to live. Vincent appreciated Louise's availability as well as her sure judgment and talent for organization, writing, "These few lines will be to thank you for having taken that good young woman into your home, for the twelve shirts that you sent me."⁴⁶

Gradually, helped by Vincent's support and advice, Louise regained confidence in herself. Vincent relied on Louise more and more, and eventually she would become involved as his collaborator in all the activities of the Confraternities of Charity.



ETCHING OF VINCENT DE PAUL WRITING LETTERS AT HIS DESK.

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