

# 4 The Service of the Confraternities of Charity

Both Vincent and Louise were very attentive to the unfolding of events in their lives, believing that God used these to reveal his will. When they received a request for assistance from Father Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi, they believed it God's will that they respond. This became the starting point of an intense collaboration between these two missionaries of charity.

Father de Gondi, former general of the galleys of France, had become an Oratorian priest in 1627 after the death of his wife. In April 1629, he asked Vincent to meet him at the town of Montmirail. This little town in the Brie region was situated on the property of the Gondi family. Vincent had visited it several times previously and in 1621 had established a Confraternity of Charity there. Before his departure, he informed Louise, "Father de Gondi sent me word to come by coach to see him in Montmirail. That will perhaps prevent me from having the honor of seeing you, because I am leaving tomorrow morning."<sup>47</sup> As the letter continued, he invited her to travel to Montmirail to visit the various Confraternities of Charity in the region: "Do you feel like coming, Mademoiselle? If so, you would have to leave next Wednesday on the coach to Châlons, in Champagne.... And we shall have the happiness of seeing you in Montmirail."<sup>48</sup>

Louise's response was quick. She had a fervent desire to serve the poor. Vincent knew this journey would be an important one for her. He sent her off with a solemn blessing. The text was inspired by the traditional travel blessing for clerics: "Go therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that His Divine goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil, and finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and full of good works."<sup>49</sup>

Vincent thought a stay of one or two days with each confraternity would suffice. But he left Louise free to use her own judgment: "Although I say two days, take more, if need be, and do us the kindness of writing to us."<sup>50</sup>

This journey to Montmirail was the beginning of a great ministry assisting the Confraternities. Louise was in the prime of her life. She was soon to turn thirty-eight years old. The depression that had overcome her following her husband's death had now dissipated. Her seventeen-year-old son Michel was a boarder at the seminary at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. Louise's time was now her own.

She would travel constantly without sparing herself, riding many miles on horseback, in a coach, or even going on foot if necessary. In February 1630, she visited the Confraternities at Asnières and Saint-Cloud, northwest of Paris. In May, she was at Villepreux in the west. October found her at Montmirail east of Paris, and December, at Beauvais in the north.<sup>51</sup> In subsequent years, her visitations were frequent.

On each visit, Louise would meet with the local Ladies of Charity. She would review the functioning of the confraternity, its finances, and the role of each of its members. She would also ask about the members' spiritual life. If there was a need, she would make changes to their rules. Moreover, she would visit the local poor, take an interest in the little girls, and try to find them a schoolmistress.

After each visit, she would write Vincent a detailed report as below:

For the past year there has been no Procurator for the Confraternity of Sannois. Nevertheless, a good man has continued to keep a written record of revenues and expenditures and he is now willing to accept this position, if elected to it. The Ladies of the Charity have let their zeal cool a bit. Often they do not visit the sick on the days for which they are responsible because the Treasurer is so good-hearted that she cooks the food for those who should be doing it that day. Also, she and the Superioress are sometimes satisfied with giving money to the sick....

These Ladies, or at least the majority of them, go months without receiving Holy Communion. They need to have their zeal rekindled by a sermon.<sup>52</sup>

At Franconville, for example, Louise noted the difficulties that existed in the relationship between the Ladies of Charity and the local treasurer who was "very autocratic."<sup>53</sup> At Herblay, the confraternity still enjoyed its usual fervor. However, in Conflans, "no Procurator was ever elected for the Charity. Because of illness, the service of the sick stopped a long time ago."<sup>54</sup> Seeing the effectiveness of her visits, Vincent wanted Louise to go everywhere. While she was staying with her niece in Attichy, he wrote, "You must not go so near the Charities of the Beauvais diocese without paying them a visit at your convenience."<sup>55</sup>

During a visit to Villepreux, Louise received this message: "Please find

out how the Charity in Crosnes is doing.... If you had a horse to go there, you would not lose any time.”<sup>56</sup> Wherever confraternities were ineffective or experiencing conflicts, Vincent relied on Louise to know how to bring them back to life. He wrote, “They really need you here at the Charity of Saint-Sulpice. They have made some beginning but, according to what I have been told, things are going so badly that it is a real pity. Perhaps God is reserving for you the opportunity to work there.”<sup>57</sup>

A short time later, as noted by Vincent, it was Mademoiselle Tranchot, the president of the Charity of Villeneuve-Saint-Georges who asked for Louise: “Mademoiselle Tranchot really wants you in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges where the Charity is going badly. I think Our Lord is reserving the success of that good work for you.”<sup>58</sup> The organizational *savoir faire* of Louise de Marillac was obvious to all. Her cordiality and her manner of speaking and encouraging restored members’ confidence and their zeal. Even local men came in secret to listen to her.

Louise shared her reflections and questions with Vincent, who was in admiration of this woman’s sure judgment. He said, “Would to God that good Madame de la Croix could follow your advice! It would be worth as much to her as a good religious order would be. As for the drugs, you have done well to deliver them.”<sup>59</sup> Later he wrote, “I am satisfied with everything you told me about the Charity [in Montreuil]. Please propose to the sisters whatever you find appropriate in that regard, and draw it up, as much according to what you have written me as to what you will consider best.”<sup>60</sup>

Whenever he thought it necessary, Vincent did not hesitate to offer his opinions, but he gave his collaborator full freedom to act according to her own judgment: “You want to know whether you are to speak to the assembled members of the Charity. I would indeed like that very much, they would profit from it, but I do not know whether it is opportune or advisable. Speak to Mademoiselle Champlin about it and do what Our Lord inspires you to do.”<sup>61</sup>

Around 1632, moved by the misery of the convicts incarcerated in the Saint-Bernard Tower close to her house in Paris, Louise explained her desire to do something to relieve their suffering. Vincent responded, “Charity towards those poor convicts is of incomparable merit before God. You have done well to assist them and will do well to continue in any way you can.”<sup>62</sup>

But Vincent knew that the actions of an individual would have limited impact. He asked Louise if it would not be better to undertake a collective action, such as having the Confraternity of Charity of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, of which she was president, assume responsibility for the convicts: “Give a little

thought to whether your Charity at Saint-Nicolas would be willing to take on the responsibility for them, at least for a time. You could help them with the money you have left. Indeed, it is difficult, and that is what makes me suggest the idea casually.”<sup>63</sup>

Between 1629 and 1633, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac developed a close working relationship. Vincent no longer used the term “my dear daughter” in his letters to Louise, suggesting a director-directee relationship, but instead he now used that of “Mademoiselle,” recognizing Louise’s leadership in this common mission. Both of them discovered a complementarity to their personalities. In Louise, Vincent found a woman who was intuitive, quick-witted, lively, and always ready to jump into action. Often, he was obliged to remind her to moderate her excessive zeal and limitless activism: “I am really afraid that you are doing too much . . . Our Lord wants us to serve Him with common sense, and the opposite is called indiscreet zeal.”<sup>64</sup> Again he cautioned, “Be careful not to do too much. It is a ruse of the devil, by which he deceives good people, to induce them to do more than they are able, so that they end up not being able to do anything. The spirit of God urges one gently to do the good that can be done reasonably, so that it may be done perseveringly and for a long time. Act, therefore, in this way, Mademoiselle, and you will be acting according to the spirit of God.”<sup>65</sup>

Vincent often relied on Louise’s keen and organized mind, and her concern for precision, especially in writing the regulations for the Confraternities: “I shall send you . . . the rules for the Charity which I have adapted to the needs of Montreuil. Look them over and, if anything should be deleted or added, please let me know.”<sup>66</sup> He wrote, “You are a skillful woman to have adapted the [general] rule of the Charity [for Saint-Nicolas] in this way; I think it is fine.”<sup>67</sup>

Louise knew she could rely on Vincent as well. In him she found a sure and prudent adviser, a solid support, and an attentive spiritual director. In her letters to Vincent, she spoke of the satisfaction she enjoyed in her missionary work, and with a certain humor, he responded, “After that, will you say that you are of no use to the world?”<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, Louise was concerned about the effect of the many compliments she received everywhere she went. Was she not in danger of succumbing to this flattery? Her spiritual director reassured her: “Be at peace. When you are honored and esteemed, unite your spirit to the mockeries, contempt, and ill treatment that the Son of God suffered. Surely, Mademoiselle, a truly humble spirit humbles itself as much amid honors as amid insults, acting like the honeybee which makes its honey equally well from the dew that falls

on the wormwood as from that which falls on the rose.”<sup>69</sup>

Louise also shared with Vincent any difficulties she encountered in her work. At Villepreux and Mesnil, the pastors refused to give “that missionary woman” permission to speak in their parishes. Prudently, Vincent advised her to withdraw, saying, “It is very difficult, Mademoiselle, to do any good without conflict. And because we must relieve other people’s distress as far as it is in our power, I think that you would be performing an action agreeable to God by visiting the Pastor and apologizing for having spoken without his knowledge to the sisters of the Charity and the girls. Tell him that you thought you could act in Villepreux just as you did in Saint-Cloud and elsewhere.... Our Lord will perhaps draw more glory from your submission than from all the good you

could do.”<sup>70</sup> Vincent later wrote, “Honor in this way of acting the humility of the Son of God in his.”<sup>71</sup> This act of submission on Louise’s part won the complete trust of the pastor of Villepreux.

Louise set to work with such ardor that she often became ill. Her health would often serve as a check to her enthusiasm. Frequent migraines would oblige her to stop, and the many conferences she gave caused her to lose her voice. Vincent said, “It seems to me that you are killing yourself from the little care you take of yourself,”<sup>72</sup> and further implored, “Please take care of your health. It is no longer yours since you destine it for God.”<sup>73</sup>

In 1630, political events in France would have a profound effect on Louise. On 10 November, a coup d’état tried to overthrow Cardinal Richelieu, the first minister under Louis XIII. This day, later called the Day of the Dupes, was a failure.



PORTRAIT OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC'S UNCLE,  
MICHEL DE MARILLAC.

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The leaders of the attempted coup were imprisoned, one of whom was Michel de Marillac, the keeper of the seals and Louise's uncle. Some months later, Louise's other uncle, Marshal Louis de Marillac, was arrested as well. The whole family was distraught. Madame Marshal de Marillac died of grief on 15 September 1631. The Marshal was executed on 8 May 1632 in the square in front of the city hall of Paris, before a frenzied crowd. At the end of the same year, Michel died in prison at Châteaudun. Louise shuddered at each new sorrow. Vincent tried to comfort her after Madame Marshal de Marillac's death, writing, "Although the interior is upset, it will soon be quieted. The Son of God wept over Lazarus; why should you not weep for that good lady? There is no harm in it so long as, like the Son of God, you conform yourself in this matter to His Father's Will."<sup>74</sup>

Around 1631, another event would distress Louise. Someone spread the rumor that she had promised to marry. Louise, completely bewildered, confided her feelings to her spiritual director. Only his response has been preserved: "How sorry I am about your suffering! But, such being the order of Providence, what can you do? And truly, what real harm do you have to fear from this? So, there is a man who says you promised to marry him, and it is not true. You are being falsely accused. You are suffering interiorly, unjustly, and without cause."<sup>75</sup>

Vincent's response showed how much Louise was troubled by this gossip. At forty, Louise knew that she was still attractive to men. Was this all that was bothering her, or could it have been that there may have been a temptation deep in her heart that threatened her vow of widowhood? The end of Vincent's letter allows us to wonder about this: "Rest assured that [unjust suffering] is one of the greatest means of conformity with the Son of God that you could have on earth. You will thereby acquire victories over yourself that you could never have had. Oh! how much vain complacency is being destroyed in this way and how many acts of humility are being brought forth by this means!... So, strengthen yourself within against the feelings of nature, and the day will come when you will bless the hour in which Our Lord tried you in this manner."<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps Louise had the experience that a vow of chastity needed to be reinforced daily by vigilance and prudence. Experiencing a temptation should not be surprising. Christ warned his disciples, "Be on guard, and pray that you may not undergo the test."<sup>77</sup>

And so, come winds or high waters, Louise de Marillac continued her journey. The "Light of Pentecost" had given her the spiritual understanding that she would one day be part of a little community that would serve the poor.

She thought about this insight often in her spiritual meditations and retreats. In one of these meditations she wrote, “I must accept this uncertainty as well as my inability clearly to perceive at this time the path which God wishes me to follow in His service. I must abandon myself entirely to His Providence so as to be completely His. In order to prepare my soul for this, I must willingly renounce all things to follow Him.”<sup>78</sup>

Louise sensed that God would be asking something more of her, a more complete commitment. She waited in peace for God to manifest his plans more clearly.



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