

5 Her Great Intuition

Even while Louise was immersed in her work with the Confraternities of Charity, she continued to reflect on the illumination she had received at Pentecost in 1623. One day she would live in community and make vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. While she had no idea of how or when this all would come about, she made the effort, following Vincent's advice, to live in peace and joy and to remain open to God.

For his part, Vincent continued his missionary activity in the countryside. In 1630, in the course of a parish mission, he saw a peasant girl approaching him. He was immediately struck by her appearance; she was full of life and seemed radiant with a joy that reflected the love of God that filled her.

Marguerite Naseau briefly told Vincent her story. He later often repeated it in his conferences to the Daughters of Charity:

She was just a poor, uneducated cowherd. Moved by a powerful inspiration from heaven, the idea came to her to teach young people so she bought a primer and, since she was unable to go to school for instruction, went and asked the Pastor or the Assistant to tell her the first four letters of the alphabet.

On another occasion, she asked about the next four, and so on for the rest. Afterward, while minding the cows, she would study her lesson. If she saw a passerby who looked like he knew how to read, she would ask: "Monsieur, how is this word pronounced?" In this way, she gradually learned to read, then taught other girls in her village. Next she decided to go from village to village to teach the young people, accompanied by two or three other young women she had instructed.⁷⁹

Marguerite had just heard Vincent describing the work of the Confraternities of Charity and the many sick persons who were being helped by them. She wondered whether she was being called to dedicate herself to this new service. It struck her that the girls she had been teaching could now teach other girls.

Vincent was full of admiration for this young woman. Providence had been guiding the development of the Confraternities for some time, but he had been worried. The women who were members of the Confraternities of

the parishes in Paris were all ladies of “condition” (that is, belonging to the aristocracy or upper bourgeoisie). While they had a great desire to assist poor persons, problems had arisen, as Vincent later described: “When it came to carrying out the project, they were greatly hindered in rendering [the poor] the lowly, difficult services.”⁸⁰ He added, “They were often inconvenienced by carrying this soup pot, became disheartened, and talked of finding some servants who would do it for them.”⁸¹ The Ladies gave all of these unpleasant tasks to their servants.

Vincent asked himself, was this charity? These servants obeyed their mistresses and did the work, but they did not serve the sick poor with the affection and tenderness they needed. Would this not turn charity into cold and impersonal work? Filled with emotion, Vincent accepted Marguerite’s offer to serve. He observed, “Because the Ladies of the Charity of Saint-Sauveur were women of quality, they were looking for a young woman who would be willing to carry the soup pot to the sick.”⁸² Marguerite began her service in the parish of Saint-Sauveur in Paris. Louise and Marguerite would meet each other several times. Vincent told Louise, “Let me know also 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.”⁸³

Louise taught Marguerite about caring for the sick. Marguerite, for her part, shared her years of experience teaching little girls with Louise. Both marveled at how Providence had guided them, and both came to a heightened consciousness of the needs of the most abandoned: the sick poor who had no one to help them and the poor little girls whom no school would accept. Louise observed Marguerite’s profound faith, a faith marked by a docility to the Holy Spirit, a genuine humility, and a sense of joyfulness. She admired Marguerite’s kindness toward all the poor, even those who were, by human standards, the most repugnant.

One evening, Marguerite welcomed a poor sick woman and offered her own bed for the night. Some days later, Marguerite fell ill. Her symptoms pointed to the plague, an illness which often led to a rapid death in the age of epidemics. Vincent asked Louise to try everything possible to save the life of this servant of the poor: “As for Marguerite, it would be well to have the surgeon from the Santé [Saint-Anne Hospital] visit her.... I think it would be wise to have that done as soon as possible.”⁸⁴



BELGIAN HOLY CARD PICTURING MARGUERITE NASEAU, IN AN EARLY HABIT OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, CARRYING A SOUP POT AND LADLE.

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In spite of the care she received, Marguerite's condition worsened, and she was taken to the Saint Louis hospital, which was reserved for plague victims. As Vincent recounted, "She said good-bye to the Sister who was with her, as if she had foreseen that she was going to die, and went off to the Saint Louis [Hospital], her heart filled with joy and conformity to God's Will."⁸⁵ Marguerite died toward the end of February 1633; she was thirty-nine years of age. The memory of Marguerite Naseau remained important to Vincent and Louise. After all she "was the first Sister who had the happiness of showing others the way, both to teach young girls and to nurse the sick poor."⁸⁶

Marguerite's example was contagious. Very quickly, other peasant girls came to help in the Confraternities: Germaine, Jeanne, Jacqueline, Michèle, Marie. Normally Vincent welcomed them, and then sent them to Louise. He wrote, "Marie has replied to me quite earnestly, lovingly, and humbly that she is ready to do what you wish and in the way you wish. She is only sorry that she does not have enough common sense, strength, or humility to be of use for it; but, if you tell her what she has to do, she will follow your instructions completely."⁸⁷

Louise instructed these young women, teaching them the basics of care and explaining how a confraternity of charity was supposed to function. In addition, she had them make a short retreat and pay close attention to their spiritual growth.⁸⁸ As their numbers grew, Louise divided up the work and chose the parishes where it was most needed. Vincent provided advice, but left all of the leadership decisions to his collaborator.

During the visit to the Confraternity of Mesnil, Louise informed Vincent that she had found a schoolmistress, but that she was still quite young. He answered, “If that good eighteen-year-old girl has common sense and an intelligent mind, do not scruple about letting her take care of the girls. A good mind is better at that age than a poor one at the age of fifty.”⁸⁹

During a new outbreak of the plague, Vincent wanted Louise to be prudent. He could not help but think of the sudden death of Marguerite. He wrote, “Allow me to tell you that you should not send your young women to the place you mention without finding out from the doctor if there is any danger.”⁹⁰

Louise now had daily contact with these peasant girls. She appreciated their desire to serve poor persons and to live their lives as Christians to the fullest. This all suggested the possibilities of something more to Louise. Hadn’t her “Light of Pentecost” revealed to her a future non-cloistered community “in which there would be coming and going”?⁹¹

It seems that around 1630, Louise began to speak with Vincent about this intuition of hers. His response was very restrained: “I am delighted with the employment of those good young women [in one of the Confraternities in Paris] ... but not your giving way to concern over 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.”⁹²

When Louise asked again, Vincent responded by asking her to adopt an indifference that honored the hidden life of our Lord: “Cling to it, Mademoiselle, and courageously resist any feeling you get that is contrary to it. Rest assured that by this means you will be in the state God requires of you in order to have you advance to another for His greater glory, if He so sees fit.”⁹³

As the months passed, it seemed this idea was becoming clearer and clearer in Louise’s mind. Perhaps she shared her inspiration with Marguerite Naseau. Around 1631–1632 Louise again humbly submitted her idea to Vincent, but he remained firm, saying, “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.”⁹⁴

In Vincent’s view, Louise’s request to become the servant of these daughters of the Charities and form a new community seemed opposed to the designs of God. Hadn’t the Visitandines of Bishop Francis de Sales been obliged after all to adopt the cloister? It seemed impossible to form a community that would still be free to visit the poor in their homes. In addition, these young women whom Louise desired to unite into a community were only simple country girls, without dowries and without personal refinement. How could it be possible to found a community at a time when religious life seemed to be reserved for daughters from “good families”? It seemed there were obstacles at every turn to Louise’s vision. Vincent invited her to remain at peace: “The kingdom of God is peace in the Holy Spirit; He will reign in you if your heart is at peace. So, be at peace, Mademoiselle, and you will honor in a sovereign way the God of peace and love.”⁹⁵

What should she do when an inspiration that seemed without doubt to come from God was met with nothing but opposition? Vincent’s advice was that Louise should patiently wait, pray, and ask for clearer signs to be made apparent to those who would have to make decisions about such a proposal. This exactly what Louise did. She did not abandon her project, or rather, what she believed to be God’s project. She allowed her plan to slowly mature in her heart and begged God to enlighten Vincent.

Around May 1633, it seems that Vincent first began to seriously reflect on the merits of Louise’s proposal. He wrote, “With regard to your employment, my mind is not yet enlightened enough before God concerning a difficulty which prevents me from seeing whether it is the Will of His Divine Majesty. I beg you, Mademoiselle, to recommend this matter to Him during these days in which He communicates more abundantly the blessings of the Holy Spirit, rather, the Holy Spirit himself. Let us persist, therefore, in our prayers, and may you remain quite cheerful.”⁹⁶

Slowly and prudently, Vincent tried to discern the signs that would reveal God’s will about this proposal to him. Louise would have liked a more rapid decision and manifested some impatience. Vincent responded, “What shall I say to you except that ... what I think He is asking of you is that you honor His holy Providence in your conduct by not hurrying or bustling about?”⁹⁷ In another letter, he added, “Permit me to add to this the recommendation of holy indifference, although nature grumbles against it. I tell you that everything is to be feared until we succeed in this, since our inclinations are so wicked that they

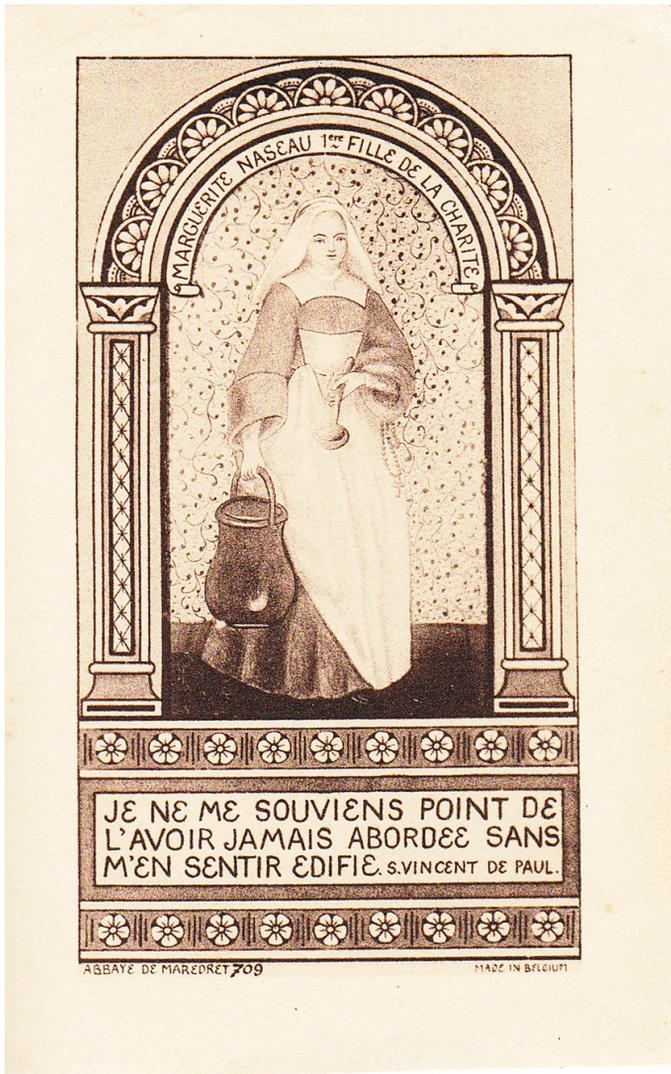
seek themselves in all things.”⁹⁸ The conclusion of this letter shows to what extent Vincent had come to make the project presented by his collaborator his own, and how much he desired that it would also be revealed to be in accordance with God’s plan. He wrote, “Courage! May Our Lord be in our hearts, and our hearts in His, so that they may be three in one and one in three and that we may wish only what He wills.”⁹⁹

In August 1633, Vincent took full advantage of his annual retreat to ask for enlightenment from God about the timeliness of bringing these young women together. He knew these women were as capable of exercising the highest Christian virtues as were cloistered nuns. Marguerite Naseau had been an example of this. He had seen all these young women animated by a profound love of God serving the Charities without pretense, unafraid to suffer with the sick. If they were to be united in a little confraternity, wouldn’t this be a means of aiding and supporting them, and of “perfecting” their service in the Confraternities?

At the end of his retreat, Vincent with great simplicity shared the results of his prayerful discernment with Louise: “Four or five days ago, [your good angel] communicated with mine concerning the Charity of your young women. It is true; he prompted me to recall it often and I gave that good work serious thought. We shall talk about it, God willing, on Friday or Saturday, if you do not write to me sooner.”¹⁰⁰

Some weeks later, the decision was made. Louise would speak to the young women and propose this new experiment of living a consecrated life in the midst of the world. Not all of them were interested. For example, Germaine, the schoolmistress of Villepreux, never came to join the group. At the end of October, Vincent, ever prudent and careful, wrote to Louise, “We must surely meet before making a firm decision about the girls, and it can only be toward the end of the week. In the meantime, please send them away for the next twelve to fifteen days, at which time you can notify them.”¹⁰¹

Finally certain of the will of God, on 29 November 1633, Louise de Marillac welcomed five or six young women into her home near the church of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, so that they might live in community and serve the poor. Thus the Company of the Daughters of Charity was born.



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