

## 6 The Beginning of the Little Company (1633–1636)

On 29 November 1633, Louise received “a few girls into her house to live a community life” according to Gobillon, her first biographer.<sup>102</sup> This date marked the beginning of a new phase in the life of Louise de Marillac. From then on, she would no longer have servants. Rather, she would share her own home, her life, and her daily work with these few peasant girls who had the same desire she had: to consecrate their lives to God and to serve him in the poor. Louise became the superior of this little group, or “confraternity,” as it gradually emerged.

Marie Joly, Jeanne, Marguerite, Nicole, and Michèle were soon joined by others. Arriving from the areas around Paris, they came on their own or were sent by the Ladies of Charity. Some had heard about this little group of “servants of the sick poor” through Vincent’s priests in the course of missions in their villages. By 31 July 1634, there were twelve of them at a conference given by Vincent. Barbe Angiboust, from Serville near Chartres, had just arrived. Louise quickly took note of her strong and rich personality.

Élisabeth Martin of Argenteuil, Henriette Gesseume of Villers-sous-Leu, Madeleine Mongert of Sucy-en-Brie, little Barbe Toussaint of Suresnes, Cécile, Barbe Angiboust’s sister, Geneviève Poisson, Marie-Denyse, and many others came to offer themselves to the ministry of charity. Vincent and Louise naturally examined their motivations for coming to Paris and the authenticity of their vocations. The letters they exchanged reveal their concerns.

Louise had just met with three women from Colombes. Pleased with the results of the interview, she gave an account of it to Vincent: “Good Sister Jeanne from the parish of Saint-Benoit has just brought me three girls from Colombe [*sic*] who seem very promising and who desire to serve the poor anywhere that they are sent.”<sup>103</sup> Often these young women who desired to serve in the Confraternities of Charity would address Vincent directly. He wrote, “Yesterday three fine girls from Argenteuil came to offer their services for the Charity at the suggestion of the priest to whom I had someone mention it. He is supposed to come and see me tomorrow concerning the matter. I did not send them to you because it was too late when they arrived but, according to what they told me, they will come to see you on Friday.”<sup>104</sup>

Vincent and Louise wrote to each other frequently to share their impressions about the girls and reflect on the decisions to be made. For example, Vincent wrote:

I have seen that good young woman, Madeleine. I think you will have to work with her a little as her passions are rather strong. So what! When these young women have the strength to overcome themselves, they work wonders afterwards. Accept her, therefore, please ....

As for that good young woman from Argenteuil who is melancholy [*sic*, melancholic], I think you are right in raising objections to taking her, for it is a strange disposition, that of melancholy.<sup>105</sup>

One young woman who had lived for a time in a monastery and had left it presented herself to Louise. What should she do? Vincent was reluctant to admit her: "That entering and leaving religious life indicates some instability; you will have to be careful about that."<sup>106</sup> Louise, who had seen and talked with the young woman, asked Vincent to meet with her. After the interview, he wrote, "That good young woman seems to have a fair amount of common sense and good will. The only problem is that she has been in a religious community. However, she told me that, although she was persuaded to enter that community, her heart was with the Charity. Therefore, I do not think there is any harm in letting her try."<sup>107</sup>

Some widows also asked to be admitted. It seems that Louise had a little more difficulty in rejecting them. It seems that in these cases, it was Vincent who made the decision: "I really wish that widow from Colombes could read; please have her see us. Well! I just noticed, on rereading your letter, that she has two children; if that is so, how could we admit her?"<sup>108</sup> A short time later, Vincent advised sending away a widow he thought unsuitable to serve poor persons. "As for the good widow ... she strikes me as uncouth, very gloomy, and vulgar. I think we shall have to send her away very gently and tell her that we shall have to think it over for a long time."<sup>109</sup>

When circumstances did not allow for this type of pre-screening with a "postulant" who presented herself for admittance, she was observed for a trial period instead. Vincent wrote, "But what shall I tell you about Mademoiselle Laurent? She appears to have good judgment but her age worries me. Nevertheless, if you think it advisable to have her come to the Hôtel-Dieu, spending two or three days with her, and after that to have her come and go from one house to the other ... then do so. She can observe and you can observe her. But make it quite clear to her that this is just an experiment."<sup>110</sup>

On another occasion, Vincent wrote, “I saw that young woman and do not know what to tell you, except that I think your plan to see her three or four days before she enters is a good one. With that in view, I gave her half an écu to live on.”<sup>111</sup> The reason for this prudence is self-explanatory. Some of the young women seemed more interested in coming to Paris and discovering its pleasures rather than serving the poor.

One girl from Normandy caused a scandal at the Hôtel-Dieu. Vincent informed Louise, who was visiting the Confraternity of Charity at Gournay, that “Mademoiselle Viole’s girl ... is scandalizing [the other sisters] because of the way she behaves with some young men who come to see her.... I sent for her yesterday to tell her not to bring young men into the house, but she did not take it well and told me she would rather leave. We must remain at peace after we have done all we can in such cases.”<sup>112</sup> Some months later, it was Louise who described to Vincent the behavior of another girl with some young men: “She has been seeking advice for a long time from everyone, especially a bachelor club known as the Gentlemen of the Corner from whom she receives delicacies, bottles of wine and pâtés.”<sup>113</sup>

These examples were exceptions to the rule. Most often, Vincent was impressed by the generosity and fervor of these first Daughters of Charity. He shared his feelings of admiration with Louise, who too often concentrated on what was going wrong and blamed herself. He wrote, “I thank our Lord ... for the blessing He is granting your Sisters of being so good and generous.”<sup>114</sup>

In May 1636, the Duchess of Aiguillon asked Vincent for one of these young women to live with her and help with her good works of charity. Vincent dared not refuse this generous benefactress; Marie-Denyse, the young woman who was asked to undertake this service, did. As Vincent reported, “She had left her father and mother to give herself to the service of the poor for the love of God, and she begged me to excuse her if she could not change her intention in order to go and serve that great lady.”<sup>115</sup> Barbe Angiboust accepted at first, but, as Vincent said, “she was startled to see such a grand court...she could not live there, and begged me to take her away. She said that Our Lord had given her to the poor and she entreated me to send her back to them.”<sup>116</sup>

Vincent was moved by the reactions of these two young women. He told Louise, “Are you not delighted to see the strength of the spirit of God in those two poor young women and the contempt that He has given them for the world and its greatness? You could not believe the ardor that this has given me for the Charity.”<sup>117</sup>

Louise also needed courage, patience, and *savoir faire* to be effective in teaching these peasant women how to care for the sick, to support the sisters in their spiritual formation, and to help them learn how to live together in community. There were, after all, great differences in class, culture, and education between Louise and these first Daughters of Charity!

The majority of these young women coming from the country were illiterate, as were most women of the seventeenth century. They had to learn to read and write, so they could teach the little girls in the parishes and villages. In her free time, Louise patiently taught them the letters of the alphabet. She also composed a little catechism with simple questions and answers to facilitate their catechetical efforts. Vincent encouraged this: “*Mon Dieu!* How I wish your Sisters would make an effort to learn to read and that they might really know the catechism you are teaching!”<sup>118</sup>

Knowing how to read is one thing; teaching others to read is very different. Vincent and Louise researched the best teaching methods together. Vincent wrote, “We must reflect a little on some way of preparing the Sisters to teach school.”<sup>119</sup> Louise prepared a plan and submitted it to Vincent for his consideration. Some Daughters of Charity could be sent to learn how to teach from the Ursulines who educated the children of the wealthy classes. Vincent said, “I do not expect much from the Ursulines’ way of communicating with your Sisters. Please send them there, nevertheless.”<sup>120</sup>

There was honesty between Vincent and Louise, with each freely giving their opinions to the other without any fear. Their differing views on matters did nothing to weaken their collaboration. Louise prepared a rule of life and submitted it to Vincent. The attention of the sisters was to be continually oriented toward Jesus Christ, the Son of God, living in their midst. It was in contemplating Jesus and healing the sick, the blind, and the lame that the sisters would learn to serve poor persons with meekness, respect, cordiality, and compassion. It was in meditating on the hidden life of the Son of God at Nazareth and in his public ministry that the sisters would discover the beauty of humility, the importance of personal asceticism, and the importance of obedience. According to the first Rule, “When they have all returned to the house ... they shall read a passage of the Holy Gospel so as to stimulate themselves to the practice of virtue and the service of their neighbor in imitation of the Son of God.”<sup>121</sup>

Louise asked Vincent to come and speak to the sisters. In 1634, he gave three conferences dedicated to the explanation of the Rule (only the third has been preserved). Vincent taught them that the service of the poor was a continuation of their prayer. It was an act of love toward God and toward their



VINCENT DE PAUL, LOUISE DE MARILLAC, AND THE LADIES OF CHARITY.  
PAINTING BY JEAN ANDRÉ, O.P. MUSEUM OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE, PARIS.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online  
<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/>

neighbors: “To serve those who are poor is to go to God, and you should see God in them.”<sup>122</sup>

Community life was not easy. Louise witnessed the difficulties the sisters experienced in living together and in accepting and supporting one another. There were instances when these tensions led some sisters to strike their companions. Louise was concerned about preserving charity in community life. She asked to meet with Vincent to discuss the means that could be taken “to perfect” community life. He replied, “I find quite appropriate ... discussing with you at length some means of establishing perfect charity among your Sisters.”<sup>123</sup> Louise insisted on cordiality, mutual support, and sincere affection among the sisters. The Rule of Angers, drawn up in 1640, invites the sisters to form strong friendships: “They shall cherish one another as sisters whom He has bound together by the bond of His love.”<sup>124</sup>

Louise often asked Vincent to provide formation for the sisters, but he was seldom available: “I am involved up to my ears with a large number of retreatants, an appointed bishop, a First President, two doctors, a professor

in theology, and M. Pavillon, in addition to our exercises. All that, I must say, prevents me from coming to see you.”<sup>125</sup>

Through their letters from this period, we see that, little-by-little, Vincent urged Louise to assume full direction of the Daughters of Charity: “Exercise your authority,” he said several times.<sup>126</sup> Vincent made it clear to the Ladies of Charity that Louise was the superioress of the Daughters: “The entire company [of the Ladies of Charity] considers it essential for that house [for the foundlings] to depend on the superioress of the Daughters of Charity.”<sup>127</sup> And, each time Vincent wrote to Louise, he used the phrase “your Sisters” (or “your Daughters”) when speaking of the Daughters of Charity. For example, he wrote, “I received your letter yesterday and your outline of the rules for your Daughters,”<sup>128</sup> or “I shall see your Daughters individually and then all together,”<sup>129</sup> or “Your Sisters at the Hôtel-Dieu are doing fine.”<sup>130</sup>

Louise did not want to have the sole responsibility for the little Company. With her usual delicacy, she would sometimes write Vincent in turn concerning “your Daughters.” On one occasion, she wrote, “Monsieur, all your daughters take the liberty of recommending themselves to your charity.”<sup>131</sup> Through these exchanges, perhaps one can see the reflection of Vincent’s initial resistance to the idea that he and his successors should serve as superior of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, and Louise’s determination that this would come to pass.

From the start, the Ladies of Charity valued the work of these first servants of the poor. They all wanted to have Daughters like Marguerite Naseau serving the Confraternities of their parishes. When a sister did not give satisfaction, these Ladies often requested that she be changed. They usually addressed these requests to Vincent, since he was the person in charge of the Confraternities. He would then tell Louise and ask her to intervene: “Mademoiselle de la Bistrade and Madame Forest are supposed to come and ask you to relieve them of Nicole because of her many health problems and because Marie, who is bearing the whole burden, cannot go on unless you send them someone to replace Nicole.”<sup>132</sup> When Louise was preparing to replace Nicole, the Ladies changed their minds; they wanted to keep Nicole after all: “Madame Forest came here to thank us for the good stout young woman you wanted to send them, because their Nicole is better.”<sup>133</sup>

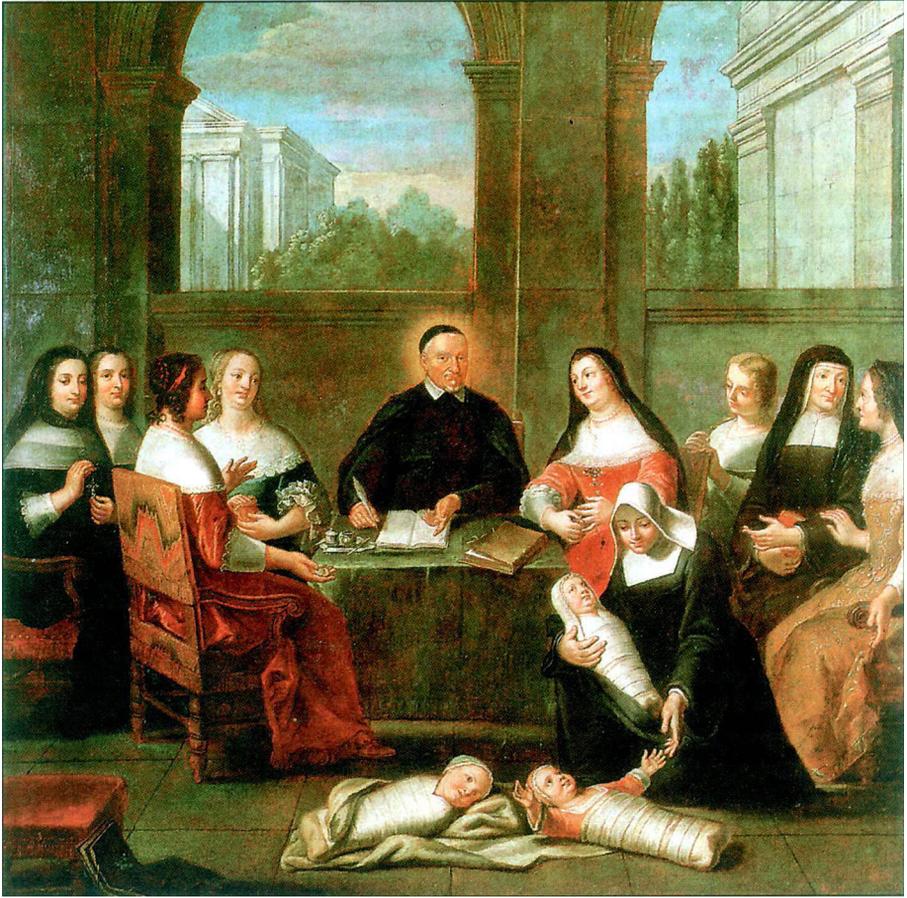
Even though collaboration is indispensable, it is not always easy. This is why Vincent recommended a spirit of indifference to Louise: “It’s a virtue.... to accept whatever God may send us.”<sup>134</sup> He later wrote, “I am like you, Mademoiselle; there is nothing that bothers me more than uncertainty. But I do indeed greatly desire that God may be pleased to grant me the grace

of making everything indifferent to me, and to you as well. Come now, we shall make every effort, please God, to acquire this holy virtue.”<sup>135</sup>

Together, Vincent and Louise took responsibility for the Daughters of Charity; together they reflected on all the requests and difficulties that presented themselves. But they also shared a common desire to belong totally to Jesus Christ. Louise asked Vincent not to hesitate in warning her of her faults. He wrote to her quite simply, “Above all, try not to rush around, but do everything gently as you can imagine the good Bishop of Geneva did.”<sup>136</sup>

In her letters (which have not been preserved), Louise must have told Vincent he was a little slow in making his decisions. His response shows how much he appreciated how their personalities complemented each other: “This slight indisposition will give me the means to reflect a little more on our concerns about the Charity. Afterwards, if Our Lord grants me life, we shall work at it in good earnest. Your letter the day before yesterday let me see some slight reluctance in your mind about it. *Mon Dieu!* Mademoiselle, how fortunate you are to possess the antidote for eagerness.”<sup>137</sup>

The prudent slowness of Vincent de Paul was complemented by the ardent vivacity of Louise de Marillac. The acceptance of their differences and complementarity assured that the work of God they accomplished would be balanced and harmonious.



VINCENT DE PAUL, LOUISE DE MARILLAC, AND THE LADIES OF CHARITY.  
PAINTING BY JEAN ANDRÉ, O.P. MUSEUM OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE, PARIS.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online  
<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu:8181/>