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Saint Vincent and Saint Louise In Relation to the French School of Spirituality

BY RAYMOND DEVILLE, S.S.

The place of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in the French school of spirituality has received little study. Historians who address it disagree. With respect to Vincent, there are basically three opinions. (1) Henri Brémond and Pierre Pourrat hold that Saint Vincent was totally Berullian and that his sense of mission came from his contemplation of the Incarnate Word. (2) Luigi Mezzadri, C.M., denies any strong connection between Pierre de Bérulle and Saint Vincent. (3) Louis Cognet, in his latest work, affirms that Vincent belonged to the French school in the broad sense of the term but thinks that he was not totally Berullian. Having read many of Saint Vincent's writings, especially the conferences to the missionaries and to the Daughters of Charity and also the Common Rules, I agree with the third position. As for Saint Louise, who unfortunately is less well known, I think she too is a witness of the French school, but with personal nuances. I prefer to speak of her apart from Saint Vincent, for she deserves special attention as Father Benito Martínez, C.M., and Sister Élisabeth Charpy, D.C., have shown.¹

Before entering into details, I must emphasize again the strong influence of Francis de Sales—and indirectly of Jane Frances de Chantal—on Vincent and Louise. Both knew Francis very well. They met often. Saint Louise had received him in her house before founding the Daughters of Charity. Both Vincent and Louise read, reread, and made their disciples read the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and the *Treatise on the Love of God*. The emphasis Vincent and Louise placed on doing God's will probably came in equal measure from Francis's writings and from Benedict of Canfield's *Règle de Perfection contenant un abrégé de toute la vie*

¹See Benito Martínez, C.M., "Santa Luisa de Marillac: primera etapa de su vida (12-8-1591/29-11-1633)," *Vincentiana* 4-6 (1984):487-514; Martínez, "San Vicente y la oracion de Santa Luisa," in *Vicente de Paul, la inspiracion permanente* (Salamanca, 1982); Elisabeth Charpy, D.C., "Come Wind or High Water: Louise de Marillac," *Echoes of the Company* pts. 1-15 (January 1987 to November 1988).

spirituelle réduite à ce seul point de la volonté de Dieu (*Rule of Perfection Containing a Summary of the Entire Spiritual Life Reduced to This Sole Point of the Will of God*, 1593). For a study of that question, see Father André Dodin's excellent book *François de Sales, Vincent de Paul: les deux amis* (*Francis de Sales and Vincent de Paul: The Two Friends*) or read again the works of Saint Francis de Sales.

According to Henri Daniel-Rops, Vincent is to be situated at the center of the entire movement of reorientation and renewal of the church during his time: missions, charity, spirituality, concern for the priesthood and priestly formation, etc. I shall emphasize four areas. (1) Vincent participated in a vast movement of spiritual and missionary renewal which characterized the church of seventeenth-century France, and he knew almost all the spiritual and pastoral leaders of the period. (2) His concern for the mission both inside and outside of France harmonized with a broad apostolic movement of the church at that time. (3) His solicitude for priests in particular was shared by contemporaries like Pierre de Bérulle, Charles de Condren, Adrien Bourdoise, Jean-Jacques Olier, John Eudes, and many others. (4) Vincent's spirituality was very Christocentric, more explicitly so than that of Francis de Sales and approaching the mystical Christocentrism of the Berullians. Vincent, however, cannot simply be identified as a Berullian. If we can speak of the double family of Vincentians and Daughters of Charity as brothers and sisters, then it is better to say that Bérulle, Olier, Eudes, and Vincent de Paul were cousins rather than brothers. In each of these four areas, I shall point out one or two details and quote a few texts of Saint Vincent.

Saint Vincent and the French Church in the Seventeenth Century

As Father Dodin points out, the span of Vincent's life coincided with the great period in the history of the French Church. He was involved in almost every significant event of the time, political as well as religious. He knew or met most of the spiritual and apostolic leaders of seventeenth-century France. It is amazing to see the number of people listed in the index of Pierre Coste's *Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*—forty pages consisting mainly of references to Vincent's acquaintances. He was no stranger to the people who gathered with Madame Acarie even if he did not frequent her circle. Those included, to name but a few, André Duval, a professor at the Sorbonne, who became Vincent's confessor and a confessor to the Daughters of Charity (at Saint Lazare, Vincent commissioned two paintings, one of Saint

Francis de Sales, the other of André Duval);² Michel de Marillac, uncle of Louise, whom Bérulle often helped; and perhaps Benedict of Canfield whose *Rule of Perfection* Vincent read assiduously. Vincent was probably a member of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament, which, though very controversial, played a prominent role in France during that period.³ Other significant relationships included those with Bérulle and the first Oratorians, like Condren and François Bourgoing. Vincent lived awhile in their community without, however, joining the Oratory. As mentioned in the previous presentation, Bérulle played a determinative role in the saint's life. Although he later objected to the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, his influence on Vincent cannot be denied: concern for the renewal of the Church, especially through missions, the formation of the clergy, and a Christocentric teaching. Like Bérulle, Vincent was a close friend of Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, abbé de Saint-Cyran. After 1642, however, their relationship cooled because of the Jansenism of Saint-Cyran's group. Olier and the irascible Bourdoise were also intimates of Vincent.

His relationships extended too to the politically influential. Vincent was well acquainted with Cardinal Richelieu, Cardinal Mazarin, Queen Anne of Austria, and Pierre Séguier, chancellor of the realm. Through the Gondi family, which gave Paris three successive bishops, he met a host of important people in high society and the Church. During the ten years following the death of Louis XIII in 1643, Vincent served on the Council of Conscience, which was a kind of national ministry for religious and social affairs. Membership on the council brought him in touch with significant persons and involved him in important issues of the day, especially the appointment of bishops.⁴

Many others could be named. A picture of a meeting of the Tuesday Conference will illustrate the point (see page 32). Although painted after Vincent's beatification, it is nonetheless very interesting. In the center is Saint Vincent pointing to "Charity." To his right are several bishops, some of whom have been identified.⁵ Looking outward on the lower level is Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704).⁶ Seated on the same

²Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris, 1920-1925), 1:116, n.1. Hereinafter cited as *CED*.

³Coste, *CED*, 3:271-85.

⁴With regard to the Council, see Coste, *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, 3 vols., trans. Joseph Leonard (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1987), 3:86-112. [See also, Pierre Blet, S.J., "Saint Vincent and the Episcopate of France," trans. Frances Proffit, D.C., *Vincentian Heritage* 10 (1989):102-35. Ed.]

⁵In the original painting the bishops are on the right and the priests on the left. In the engraving, which is here reproduced, the situation is reversed.

⁶Ordained a priest in 1652, Bossuet became grand archdeacon of Metz. Eighteen years later he was elevated to the episcopate as bishop of Condom. Ed.



*B Vincentius Sacerdotes plurimos ad habendas inter se de
Divinis Collationes singulis hebdomadis colligit.*

level at the far right and also looking outward is Alain de Solminihac (1593-1659), bishop of Cahors, an excellent prelate and a friend of both Saint Vincent and Father Olier.⁷ He was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1980. Above Solminihac at the far right is Henri de Maupas du Tour (1606-1680), who was a good friend of Saint Vincent. He was bishop of Le Puy, then of Évreux. He wrote a life of Jane Frances de Chantal in 1653 and another of Francis de Sales four years later. To his left is probably Antoine Godeau (1605-1672), bishop of Grasse and later of Vence, who was at court for a time and became—afterwards—a holy man. The bishop between him and Vincent is unknown. The men on the left side of the picture are priests. To the immediate left of Saint Vincent is Father Olier. Next to him is Louis de Chandénier (?-1660), abbé of Tournus, who lived at Saint-Lazare from 1653 until his death when he was admitted to the Congregation.⁸ Saint Vincent held him in great esteem. The man to Chandénier's lower-left is probably Father Bourdoise, who was bold and zealous, and below him is perhaps Saint John Eudes. Such a picture illustrates Daniel-Rops's view that Saint Vincent was at the center of Church renewal.

The French School, Vincent, and the Mission

The mission is usually identified with Saint Vincent de Paul. That is accurate, of course. However, it is necessary to know that the seventeenth century in France was not only “the great century of souls,” *le grand siècle des âmes*, it was also the great century of missions. Fifty years ago a very interesting dissertation by G. de Vaumas explored this topic: *L'éveil missionnaire de la France, d'Henri IV à la fondation du Séminaire des Missions étrangères 1663* (*The Missionary Awakening of France, from Henry IV to the Foundation of the Foreign Missions Seminary, 1663*).⁹ Our founders—and their friends—were at the same time spiritual masters and missionaries. Here again I will make several points.

(1) Controversy with Protestants was a prominent feature of the age. Francis de Sales worked hard in his diocese (Geneva) for the return

⁷On Solminihac's relation to Vincent and the Double Family, see Miguel Pérez Flores, C.M., “Old Saint and New Beatus: Saint Vincent de Paul and Blessed Alain de Sominihac,” trans. Stafford Poole, C.M., *Vincentian Heritage* 6 (1985):5-33. For a translation of the correspondence between Solminihac and Vincent, see John Carven, C.M., “Solminihac,” *ibid.* 1 (1980):31-66. Ed.

⁸Louis de Chandénier was a nephew of Cardinal de la Rochefoucauld. After moving into Saint-Lazare, he repeatedly asked for membership in the congregation, but Vincent refused him because the community was unworthy of a priest of such noble rank. He was finally granted membership at his death. Ed.

⁹G. de Vaumas, *L'éveil missionnaire de la France, d'Henri IV à la fondation du Séminaire des Missions étrangères 1663* (Lyon, 1942).

of Calvinists to the church. Bérulle converted quite a few important persons. Many letters of Saint Vincent also allude to this issue.

(2) The preaching of missions in countryside and city, even at court, was one of the most important activities of the Oratorians, Jesuits, Capuchins, Eudists, and, of course, Saint Vincent de Paul and his disciples. It is noteworthy that among the missionaries who worked under Saint Vincent was Father Olier.

(3) The renewal of parish life was a great concern for many churchmen. The efforts of Bourdoise at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet and Olier at Saint-Sulpice serve as good examples of parish renewal, which included fine liturgies, catechetical instruction, care of the sick and the poor, etc.

(4) Service to the poor and orphans was not a specialty reserved to Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. John Eudes founded the order of Our Lady of Charity for prostitutes. The term "house of charity," or simply "charity," was at that time a very common designation for centers of welcome for the poor.

(5) While the Jesuits and Oratorians conducted colleges for rich and middle class youth, those of the lower class were not neglected. Blessed Alix le Clerc (1576-1622) and Saint Peter Fourier (1565-1640) cofounded the *Soeurs de Notre-Dame de Lorraine* (Congregation of Notre Dame) to establish and run free schools for poor girls, and John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719) later founded the Brothers of the Christian Schools to do the same for boys. Many others, too, contributed to the education of the poor.

(6) The formation of good priests was regarded a condition for the success of the mission. Vincent often noted this, as did Father Olier. For example, the latter wrote: "In the last few years we have gathered together several subjects, who, after having worked with people in the missions, have realized that it was useless to work among those people without having first purified the source of their sanctification, the priests themselves. Consequently, they have set themselves apart to cultivate the new seedlings which have been entrusted to their keeping, those who appear to be called to the clergy."¹⁰

(7) Many religious communities were actively engaged in foreign mission work: the Jesuits, Ursulines, Augustinian Sisters, and Sulpicians in Canada; the Vincentians in Madagascar; the Jesuits in Indo-

¹⁰Jean-Jacques Olier, *Divers écrits*, 1:71, Mss. 14, Archives of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. Hereinafter cited as ASSP.

china; the Capuchins in the Near East. The Seminary for Foreign Missions was established in 1663 as a result of this activity, thus representing the fruit of missionary renewal while marking the beginning of a deepened commitment.

There is a very interesting phenomenon of vocabulary. Saint Vincent always spoke of “mission” and “missionary”—Jesus, the first missionary of his father. Although he sometimes used the term “apostle” or “apostolic,” he preferred the vocabulary of mission. His contemporaries, however, opted for the vocabulary of apostle. Of course, the two were interchangeable. It is important to note that both were used frequently during this period. At a later date, Saint John Baptist de La Salle in his wonderful *Méditations pour le temps de la retraite* (*Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, 1729) told his brothers that they succeeded to the apostles in their task of teaching the gospel to the poor. “God gave you the grace of participating in the ministry of the Apostles.” That is very strong. It is also very interesting because the brothers were lay people not priests, but they participated in the ministry of the Apostles. Some years earlier, both Francis de Sales and Alix le Clerc spoke of women as *apôtresses* (women-apostles).

Several texts will illustrate the use of this vocabulary. Writing to Olier about a certain missionary, Charles de Condren stated, “I recognize in him, it seems to me, and honor in him something of the apostolic grace of which I beg Our Lord to give me some share.” Olier, on departing for a mission in Montdidier, wrote to a Benedictine nun under his direction: “I entreat you to ask for me, strongly and often, the apostolic spirit. . . . What good would we not be capable of doing with that spirit? . . . It is necessary to use all our powers to obtain that gift.”¹² Another letter, written the same day to a Visitandine nun, spoke of “that adorable spirit of Jesus, the apostolic spirit which he poured forth on the apostles going out to sanctify the world.”¹³ Elsewhere Olier wrote “of invoking every day the apostolic spirit on self and on the whole Church.”¹⁴ The final text comes from Marie de l’Incarnation (Marie Guyard of Tours, 1599-1672), an Ursuline who led the first group of women religious to Quebec in 1639. She enjoyed an extraordinary gift

¹¹Paul Auvray et André Jouffrey, eds., *Lettres du Père de Condren* (Paris, 1943), 200-01.

¹²Eugène Levesque, ed., *Lettres de M. Olier, curé de la paroisse et fondateur du Séminaire de Saint-Sulpice* (Paris, 1935), lettre 52.

¹³Ibid., lettre 51.

¹⁴Olier, *Divers écrits*, 1:67, Mss. 14, ASSP.

of contemplation and, several years after entering the convent, received in a dream the first hint of her missionary future. The following is an extract from her autobiography.

When I was about thirty-four or thirty-five years old, I entered the state which has been pointed out to me and which I was, in a sense, awaiting. It was an emanation of the apostolic spirit which was none other than the Spirit of Jesus Christ which seized my spirit so that my spirit no longer had life other than in his and by his; all was surrendered to the interests of that divine and adorable Master and to zeal for his glory so that he might be known, loved, and adored by all the nations he has ransomed by his precious blood. My body was in my convent; but my spirit, which was bound to the Spirit of Jesus, could not be [so] contained. That Spirit carried me in spirit to the Indies, to Japan, to America, to the Far East, to the West, to parts of Canada, to the Hurons, and to all the inhabited earth where there were human beings whom I saw as all belonging to Jesus Christ.¹⁵

The French School and Service to Priests and Priestly Formation

Saint Vincent had a deep concern for priestly ministry and spiritual life. He organized the retreats for ordinands (1628), the Tuesday Conferences (1633), and finally founded a seminary in the Collège des Bons-Enfants (1642). His concern and endeavors were part of a large movement rooted in the experience of the church and aimed at implementing the decrees of the Council of Trent. Most spiritual and pastoral leaders of the time agreed that all evil in the church came from priests. In order to restore priestly life and dignity, Bérulle organized the Oratory (1611). The same desire prompted Adrien Bourdoise, a famous Parisian pastor known for both his zeal and bad temper, to establish a seminary at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet (1631).¹⁶ Likewise, Father Olier founded the seminary of Saint-Sulpice (1641). In 1643 John Eudes left the Oratory because Condren's successor as superior general, Father François Bourgoing (1585-1662), refused to allow him to open a seminary. The following year Eudes established both the Congregation of Jesus and Mary (Eudists) and the seminary at Caen in Normandy.

The history of these various foundations is very interesting but cannot be recounted here in detail. Still, I will emphasize three things. (1) The Tridentine conception of a seminary was a complete formation program gathering under one roof adolescents of eleven, twelve, and thirteen years of age with adult seminarians. In present-day terms, it

¹⁵*La relation autobiographique de 1654* (Solesmes, 1976), 90.

¹⁶Verbal approval of the seminary was granted in the above year. Written approval was given by the king in 1643 and by the archbishop of Paris the following year. Ed.

was both a minor and major seminary. This was the model implemented in Italy and Spain. The system followed by Eudes and Olier, however, admitted only clerics—major seminarians. Initially, Vincent and Bourdoise accepted adolescents into their institutions, but both soon abandoned the practice in favor of the one developed by Eudes and Olier. As Vincent expressed it:

The ordinance of the Council of Trent is to be respected as coming from the Holy Spirit. Experience, nevertheless, compels us to see that it has not been successful either in Italy or France in the manner in which it is carried out, as far as the age of seminarians is concerned; some leave before the time, others have no inclination for the ecclesiastical state; some again retire to religious communities, while others . . . prefer to seek their fortunes elsewhere. . . . It is quite another thing to take men from twenty to twenty-five or thirty years of age. We have twenty-two scholars in our seminary of the Bons-Enfants, and of that number we can only see three or four who are passable, and who give hopes that they will persevere, no matter what care may be taken; and hence I infer there is reason to fear . . . that this arrangement as it has been proposed will not succeed.¹⁷

(2) Like Olier, Saint Vincent insisted that seminarians have a *vocation* to the priesthood and that they take the steps necessary to discern God's call. Although this seems self-evident today, it was not so then. At that time, there were many priests—too many—in the cities. Some historians speak of 50,000 priests in Paris! For 500,000 inhabitants. Most of them had no vocation. They had been ordained for financial interests or other reasons totally alien to spiritual or pastoral outlooks. We have the draft of a conference given by Saint Vincent on that topic: "It is necessary to recognize whether someone really has a vocation . . . by praying and consulting the confessor. . . ." ¹⁸ In the same vein, Olier wrote: "One must enter [the priesthood] by the gateway of a vocation. The Shepherd must call you and name you because he knows all his sheep and calls them by their name."¹⁹

(3) The teaching on priesthood was slightly different according to each of our masters: it was more explicitly theological for Bérulle and Olier, more practical for Saint Vincent and Bourdoise. All of them, however, followed the doctrine of the Council of Trent insisting that the ordination was a participation in the priesthood and mission of Jesus. Priests not only had to imitate the behavior of Jesus, they had to

¹⁷Coste, *CED*, 2:459.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 13:141-42.

¹⁹Olier, *Mémoires*, 3:324.

continue his mission, to share in his feelings, intentions, and compassionate love for the people.

While it is interesting to compare the points of view of our founders—our fathers or uncles—on priestly formation, the same spirit guided each of them in spite of slight differences.²⁰ The differences, however, were apparent even at that time. For instance, at the end of his life in 1660, Vincent spoke of the four major seminaries which were then in Paris.

There are in Paris four houses which do the same thing: the Oratory, Saint-Sulpice, Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, and our poor house Les Bons-Enfants. Those [the priests] of Saint-Sulpice tend toward purifying the minds; they aim at uplifting the spirit, detaching it from earthly affection, and directing it toward great illumination and high feeling. We see that all those who have passed through there keep very much to that, some more and some less. I do not know if they teach speculative theology.

Those at Saint-Nicolas do not uplift so high but tend toward labor in the vineyard, to train men devoted to hard work in ecclesiastical functions. To that end, they keep: (1) always to the practical; (2) always low—sweeping, dishwashing, scouring, etc.—low. . . .

The Oratory. Let us leave it there and say nothing about it. [There were problems between the Oratory and the Vincentians at that time].

Of these four houses, the one which unquestionably succeeds the best is Saint-Nicolas where they are like so many little suns everywhere. Never have I heard complaint about them, but everywhere edification.

It is, therefore, the most useful, and we must strive and at very least try to imitate them. You know they never teach speculative theology but only moral theology, and they give practical lectures. Thus I am inclined very much that it please God to give us the grace to follow them.²¹

Vincent said nothing about the Eudists because they had no seminary in Paris, only in Normandy. Yet I do not think that the five founders, including Bourdoise at Saint-Nicolas, had the same concern, the same teaching, the same spirit, even if they sometimes followed the same method. They were not brothers but cousins.

The Place of Jesus in the French School and Vincent's Teaching

My first presentation attempted a description of the main themes of the Berullian school. It might appear that the Christology of Saint Vincent was less profound, even less theological, than that of Saint John Eudes, for example. Of course, we cannot compare what Bérulle wrote

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²⁰See Christian Sens, C.M., "La Formation du Clergé," *Vincentiana* 4-6 (1987):745-62.

²¹Coste, *CED*, 13:185-86.

on the “states and mysteries” of Jesus with the simpler sentences of Saint Vincent. I do think, however, that Vincent was very near to Bérulle, perhaps nearer to Bérulle, Olier, and Eudes than to Saint Francis de Sales. Not just because Saint Vincent was less optimistic than Francis de Sales—Vincent was more Augustinian and realistic—but above all because, unlike Francis, he always spoke of Jesus: “Therefore, Messieurs, you must empty yourselves in order to clothe yourselves with Jesus Christ.”²² Recall, too, his famous letter to Antoine Portail:

Remember, Monsieur, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ. Now, once these foundations have been laid, let us give ourselves up to contempt, to shame, to ignominy, and let us disclaim the honors people pay us, the good reputation and the applause they give us, and let us do nothing which has not that end in view.²³

You would think that you were reading Saint Paul or John Eudes. When Vincent spoke of Jesus, however, he differed from other members of the French school in three respects: (1) he was much simpler, nearer to the synoptic gospels than to Saint John; (2) he insisted over and over again on the mission of Jesus which his disciples must carry on; (3) he strongly emphasized that the poor were the members of Jesus and that in serving them we serve him.

Now, I will pose the question: who was Jesus for Saint Vincent? This is a fundamental question. Father Jean-Pierre Renouard, C.M., wrote a very good article on this subject.²⁴ Of course, Christianity is the religion of Jesus Christ, and each baptized person is brought face to face with Jesus. Such a relationship may be colored, however, in diverse ways: there is the Jesus of Matthew, the Jesus of Mark, of Luke, of John, of Paul, of Ignatius, of Teresa, etc. Bérulle adored the Incarnate Word. Nourished by Saint Paul and Saint John, he contemplated the humility, the *anéantissement* (annihilation), of Jesus in his incarnation: Jesus emptied himself in his infancy. Bérulle regarded Christian life as an adherence to the states and mysteries of Jesus, which, though past in history, were still alive and active in Jesus and in his disciples. This corresponds to Abbot Columba Marmion’s “Christ in His mysteries.” Eudes consid-

²²Coste, *CED*, 9:343.

²³Coste, *CED*, 1:295.

²⁴See Jean-Pierre Renouard, C.M., “Le Christ de Monsieur Vincent,” *Vincetiana* 4-6 (1984):565-577.

ered Christian life as a continuation and accomplishment of Jesus' life. For Father Olier, the key verse of the New Testament was Galatians 2:20: "The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me."

Saint Vincent, too, quoted this verse in his conferences, but his presentation of the relationship to Jesus was simpler and more practical but always very deep. He insisted on the necessity of imitating Jesus who was the model of all the virtues. The Common Rules, for example, are replete with this theme: Vincentians must clothe themselves with the spirit of Jesus, essentially a spirit of charity, compassion, and tenderness; they must conform their actions and intentions to his, especially his commitment to the poor. In a special way—and I think that this was Vincent's charism—he insisted on carrying out Jesus' mission.²⁵ For Vincent, Jesus must imprint us with his mark and character. This is the fruit of the Spirit of God, of the Spirit of Jesus.

Here Vincent agreed with Olier and Bérulle. Olier wrote that the true Christian was one who possessed the spirit of Jesus so that he lived according to Jesus' will, feelings, and inclinations. Bérulle, as wrote Bourgoing, thought that Jesus looked in three directions: "One towards his Father to honor and adore him, one towards men and women to love and save them, and one towards himself to sacrifice himself." Saint Vincent resonated with this presentation but insisted on the *mission* of Jesus and the imitation of Jesus' virtues and attitudes. "Jesus is the only rule of the Mission."²⁶

How Did Louise de Marillac Belong to the French School?

Louise is better known now than she was twenty years ago, thanks to the publication of her letters and spiritual writings. Thanks also to books like her biography by Father Joseph Dirvin, C.M. Scholars, however, must probe more deeply into her spiritual journey to elucidate its meaning for today. I have no pretensions about presenting new insights in these few pages. Rather, I shall offer four brief observations and propose some of the main spiritual themes which guided her. A study of Louise's writings and several conversations with Sister Élisabeth Charpy, D.C., at the Mother House in Paris convince me that Louise de Marillac is both an heiress of the French school and an excellent witness to the main lines of seventeenth-century French spirituality. Before proposing the principal themes of her spirituality, I

²⁵See Common Rules throughout.

²⁶See the index of the Common Rules under "Jesus Christ."

want to make four observations.

1) Louise belonged to a typically aristocratic family of seventeenth-century France. Although the illegitimate daughter of Louis de Marillac, lord of Ferrieres and Farainvilliers, she was recognized by her father. He provided her with a good education and she read widely. Because of her marriage to the non-aristocratic Antoine Le Gras, she was addressed as Mademoiselle rather than Madame. Still, Louise was quite at ease in high society, more so than Vincent. She knew or met many important people of the period in Paris.

(2) Louise was abreast of the social and political situations of the day. Two of her uncles, Michel and Jean-Louis de Marillac, held important posts, the former was keeper of the seals and the latter a *maréchal* of France. Unfortunately, both were imprisoned after the Day of Dupes, 10 November 1630, when failed an ill-starred plot hatched by the queen mother, Marie de Medici, to have Michel topple Cardinal Richelieu and usurp his place. In May 1632 Jean-Louis was executed and his brother died in prison later that year. While current in political affairs, Louise also was aware of the desperate plight of the rural and urban poor. As Henri-Dominique Lacordaire once said: "Great-hearted persons have the grace of being aware of the difficulties and pains of their contemporaries, and they receive the mission of doing much for them." So it was that Louise de Marillac was immersed in the society of her time. She was immersed in the great movement of the French Church, and she had open eyes and an open heart to share in the sufferings of the poor for Jesus' sake.

(3) She was a familiar of Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, and many Visitandines. She read Francis's books repeatedly.

(4) Her spiritual life progressed from the abstract school, with its strong sense of God's grandeur and justice, to the *devotio moderna* and a sense of the holy humanity of Jesus—a little like Bérulle. Vincent exerted a determinative influence over both her spirituality and charitable commitment to the poor.²⁷

There are six significant themes common to the spirituality of Louise and the French school.

(1) Her correspondence and writings bespeak a deep concern for God's will. She was preoccupied with knowing God's design for her.

²⁷See Martínez, "Santa Luisa de Marillac" and "Vicente y la oración de Luisa."

This was not just a theme but a concern rooted in the gospel: “Thy will be done”; “My food is to fulfill my Father’s will.” In this respect, Louise was clearly an exponent of seventeenth-century French spirituality which placed heavy emphasis on this point. The *Rule of Perfection*, written by the English Capuchin Benedict of Canfield, insisted on the fulfillment of God’s will. Popular in pious circles, the book was read and reread by both Louise and Vincent. As mentioned in the previous presentation, however, both saints learned the same lesson from the works of Francis de Sales whose *Introduction to Devout Life* and *Treatise on the Love of God* also stressed abandonment to Divine Providence and fulfillment of God’s will. Compare the teaching about this in Louise’s *Spiritual Writings* with Book 9, chapter 9, of Francis’s *Treatise*, a chapter often quoted by Vincent.²⁸

(2) Louise had a deep respect for God, a characteristic of the theocentrism of the French school. “We must look to God first and not to ourselves.” It is said that Bérulle restored the spirit of religion—a kind of respectful and loving awe towards God. According to Denis Amelote (1606-1679), an Oratorian, Bérulle lamented, “Nowadays many people love God but very few respect Him.” Saint Louise often spoke of honoring God or Jesus. The word “*honor*er” (to honor) is full of meaning. She encouraged the Daughters of Charity to offer themselves to God for the service of the poor, thus reflecting the wonderful definition of apostolic ministry Paul gave in 2 Corinthians 4:5: “We [the apostles] are your slaves for the sake of Jesus.” The poor were the masters of the Daughters, but always for the sake of Jesus.

(3) The imitation of Jesus through a personal relationship with him was a driving force in Louise’s life. It became more pronounced under Saint Vincent’s spiritual direction. This element came directly or indirectly from the Berullian spirituality. Louise repeatedly spoke of the holy humanity of Jesus, a typically Berullian phrase. Exactly like Bérulle and less like Vincent, she held that the feast of the Annunciation—the Incarnation—was *the* great feast. Her devotion to the eucharist and to the infancy of Jesus as well as her emphasis on the grace of baptism identify her as a member of the French school. In my view, the following expression seems proper to Saint Louise: to have the image of Jesus Christ imprinted on my soul.²⁹

²⁸See Louise de Marillac, *Écrits Spirituels* (Tours, 1983).

²⁹“The only way for me to find mercy at the hour of death,” wrote Louise, “is that at that moment the imprint of Jesus Christ may be found on my soul” (*Écrits Spirituels*, 713).

(4) Mary's place in Louise's life and teaching was very important. She spoke of Mary more than did Vincent. Psychological reasons may have accounted for this: she never knew her own mother and was herself a mother who suffered over her son Michel. No matter the reason, her devotion to Mary was very theological, rooted in her faith, in the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption. Part of Louise's spiritual testament to the Daughters of Charity was, "Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin that she may be your only Mother."³⁰

(5) Louise had great devotion to the Holy Spirit. Like many contemporaries, she made a retreat between the feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost. The latter was especially dear to her not just because of its historic significance in her life (the "great light" and the falling of the ceiling)³¹ but because she believed that like the apostles all Christians were under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This was a common theme of Francis de Sales who spoke often of the Spirit's inspiration. Father Condren used to say that Pentecost was the first feast of the church. When Olier built his seminary, he commissioned the painting of an immense picture of Pentecost which was hung over the main altar so that students could see it readily when awaking during meditation or mass!

(6) Finally, Louise's emphasis on the virtues of humility, simplicity, and especially charity was always connected with a call to imitate Jesus in his mysteries. Her actions, her attitudes, and her teaching always depended on her contemplation of Jesus. The humility of Jesus summoned her to be humble. His charity toward the poor called her to love them. At the same time, her charity for them flowed from her faith in Jesus present in them.

In conclusion, let me present an exceptional text from Louise. It is about holy communion and was written in 1660, the year of her death.

³⁰Marillac, *Écrits Spirituels*, 823.

³¹On Pentecost in 1623 Louise received an internal illumination setting her soul at rest. For ten days she had agonized over three questions: whether to leave her sick husband to vow herself to Jesus in poverty, chastity, and obedience; whether to change spiritual directors, for she felt too attached to her present one; whether the soul was immortal. The interior light she received set her heart at rest over each of these issues: she was to remain with her husband and a time would come for her to take the desired vows; she was to be at peace about her director, for God would provide her with another whom she saw in a vision (Vincent, for whom she felt repugnance); she lost all doubt about the immortality of the soul because of the illumination God had given her about the first two questions.

On the vigil of Pentecost 1642 Louise was spared when the floor of a room gave way. Only moments before, she had been standing over the weakened spot. At first ignoring the warning of a sister who heard a beam crack, Louise finally stepped out the door just as the floor collapsed. Both she and Vincent viewed the event as providential: neither she nor anyone below had been harmed; moreover, the room was to have been the site of a meeting that afternoon. Ed.

On the feast of Sainte Geneviève [3 January] 1660, as I was receiving holy communion, I felt, upon seeing the sacred host, an extraordinary thirst which had its origin in the belief that Jesus wanted to give himself to me in the simplicity of his divine infancy. While receiving him and for a long time afterward, my mind was filled by an interior communication which led me to understand that Jesus was bringing not only himself to me but also all the merits of his mysteries. This communication lasted all day. It was not the force of interior preoccupation. It was rather the presence of a recurrent recollection as sometimes happens when something is troubling me.

I felt that I was being warned that since Jesus had given himself entirely to me, laden with the merits of all these mysteries, I must make use of this occasion to participate in his submission to humiliations.

One means to attain this end is to be found in the fact that, without any cause in me, I appear to others as having received some grace from God. This both humbles and encourages me.

Without desire or resolution, the grace of God will accomplish in me whatever he wills.³²

This absolutely extraordinary text is almost identical to one of the last writings of Saint Teresa of Avila. The year before her death in 1581, she wrote her last spiritual relation, which also spoke of no desires, no resolutions. Louise's words, like those of Teresa, were truly mystical.

It is essential to continue well, because to begin is nothing."

*Saint Vincent de Paul, Conference to the Daughters of Charity,
16 August 1640.*

³²Marillac, *Écrits Spirituels*, 821-22.