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The Spirituality of Louise de Marillac: Moved by the Spirit to Charity

BY

LOUISE SULLIVAN, D.C.

United in heart, in the heart of Jesus Christ, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac sought to discover what God willed for them as the year 1633 was drawing to a close. Freed at last from the fetters of the past, Louise was living in the present, her eyes fixed on Jesus Christ suffering in the poor. Her zeal had given her renewed physical and spiritual strength as she devoted her energies to the work of the Confraternities of Charity. She was active, busy, and happy, but somehow convinced that God was asking yet more of her — a more total commitment to Jesus Christ in the poor. The “light” of Pentecost 1623 had brought her the insight that one day Father de Champigny’s prophetic words that “God had other designs” on her would be fulfilled. She tells us, “I was advised ... that a time would come when I would be in a position to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and that I would be in a small community where others would do the same. I then understood that I would be in a place where I could help my neighbor but I did not understand how this would be possible since there was to be much coming and going.”¹

Louise often thought of this during her meditations and retreats. In her retreat notes, probably in 1632, she wrote:

I must perseveringly await the coming of the Holy Spirit although I do not know when that will be. 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.²

¹“Light,” A.2., in *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac: Correspondence — Thoughts*, trans. and ed. Louise Sullivan, D.C. (Brooklyn: 1991), (hereinafter cited as SWLM), 1.

²Retreat, (c. 1633),” A.8, *ibid.*, 717.

Although she had progressed a long way on the path of abandonment to the will of God, nevertheless waiting was not something that Louise did naturally or readily. At the age of forty-one, she was a woman in a hurry. It is not our purpose here to try to determine whether it was Louise or Vincent who first conceived the idea of a community which would one day become the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Vincent acknowledges that he "did indeed think of Confraternities of Charity in parishes."³ On several occasions, however, he denies categorically that the idea of founding the Daughters of Charity had ever occurred to him.⁴ Indeed, at the time, such a thing, as he put it, "would not have seemed possible."⁵ In a conference of 22 January 1645, after reassuring the sisters that it was God himself who had established their Company, he added, "I was thinking about it again the other day and I said to myself, 'Did you ever dream of founding a Company of Sisters? Oh! no, no, no.'"⁶ For our purposes here, Vincent's next remark is revealing. He continued, "Did Mademoiselle Le Gras? Just a little."⁷ It is this "just a little" that we find reflected in several letters of Vincent to Louise from 1630 to 1633. An examination of them provides an instructive illustration of a discernment process in which two people were honestly and prayerfully striving to discover the will of God for them. We know, from a letter dated 19 February 1630, that Vincent had begun sending girls to Louise to be trained to work under the direction of the Ladies of the Confraternities of Charity of Paris. The girl of whom he is speaking here is Marguerite Naseau whose inspiring story Vincent loved to repeat since he considered her, although she died in February 1633, as the first Daughter of Charity, the one "who had the happiness of pointing out the road to [the] other sisters."⁸ That something has transpired is indicated in a letter of October of the same year in which Vincent speaks of Germaine, a young woman whom Louise has trained as a schoolmistress. He concludes, "Tell us, please what is on your

³Conference of 22 January 1645, *The Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M., (London: 1979), 184.

⁴*Ibid.*, 535, 606-07, 741.

⁵*Ibid.*, 184.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*, 71.

mind? Mine has been very much occupied this morning with you and with the thoughts Our Lord is giving you.”⁹

By the spring of 1631, Louise, with her usual impetuosity, wanted to devote all her time and energy to forming these young women. Vincent, however, has as yet had no clear indication that such was the will of God. Thus, once again, he urged her peacefully to await a sign from God which he was convinced would come in God’s good time.

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. We want a number of good things with a desire that seems to be of God, and yet it is not always from Him ... You are trying to become the servant of these poor women, and God wants you to be His own, and perhaps of more people than you would be in that way. And even if you were only His, is it not enough ... that your heart is honoring the tranquility of Our Lord’s? Then it will be fit and ready to serve Him.¹⁰

We must ask ourselves what Vincent meant by “contrary” indications. He was probably reluctant to see her take valuable time from her visits to the Confraternities of Charity. The poor served by them were perhaps the “more people” to whom he was referring. However, there appears to be something else. Vincent spoke to her of honoring the tranquility of the heart of Christ. Only, it would seem, when she had done that would her heart be “fit and ready to serve Him.”

Guided by a saint, Louise had gradually discovered the paternal love of God for her. Peace and confidence had quieted her agitated soul. She had come to realize, as she spent her energies in serving the poor, that despite her weaknesses and complexes, she was called to bring this love of the Father to others. Nevertheless, a point remained which prevented any long term calm and which threatened to delay or even to block her ascent to the level of spirituality to which she was drawn. This was her love for her son. Concern for him, which circumstances often justified, would plague her all her life. Moreover, Louise de Marillac was a worrier. She does not so much cease to worry with the passage of time as to change the focus of her anxiety away from herself

⁹*Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents. I. Correspondence (1607-1639)*, ed. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., trans. Helen Marie Law, D.C., John Marie Poole, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik, C.M., ann. John Carven, C.M. (Brooklyn: 1985); II. *Correspondence (January 1640-July 1646)*, ed. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., and Marie Poole, D.C., trans. Marie Poole, D.C., Esther Cavanaugh, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik C.M. (Brooklyn: 1989), (hereinafter cited as SVP), 1:87.

¹⁰Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, before 1632, letter 71, SVP, 1:111.

and, most importantly, to control it so that it was no longer debilitating. During the period prior to the founding of the Daughters of Charity, at least with regard to Michel, such is not the case.

There are twenty-six letters from Vincent to Louise during this period which deal with Michel Le Gras. From them we learn that Vincent was supportive and helpful. When she was away visiting the Confraternities, he would often write to assure her. On one occasion he wrote, "As for your son, be at peace. When you come back, we shall talk about him, and I shall do what is necessary."¹¹

Vincent also befriended the boy, welcomed him at Saint-Lazare,¹² prevented him from being overly bled and purged,¹³ and, most importantly, saved him from studies for the priesthood, for which he had no calling.¹⁴ At the same time he calmed Louise's anxieties concerning Michel's well-being. Nonetheless, he chided her for her inability to keep matters in perspective. Sometimes he did so humorously, as when he wrote, "Oh! Our Lord most certainly did well not to choose you for His mother."¹⁵ At other times, he was more serious. In 1630 he asked her, "But what shall we say about this excess affection? I certainly think ... that you have to try before God to rid yourself of it."¹⁶ Vincent was convinced that until she could "be concerned only in a ... tranquil way,"¹⁷ she could not undertake the task to which she believed God was calling her. And so he asked her to wait until God revealed clearly his will in the matter.

In the meantime Vincent continued to encourage her. There is a joy and a tenderness in his words as she progressed. On one occasion he wrote, "Please take care of your health. It is no longer yours since you destine it for God. And my heart is no longer my heart but yours, in that of Our Lord, Whom I desire to be the object of our one love."¹⁸

¹¹Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 2 April 1631, letter 63, SVP, 1:101; see also letters of 2 September 1631, letter 75, 1:116; 13 September 1631, letter 81, 1:121; 15 September 1631, letter 83, 1:125; 17 October 1631, letter 86, 1:129.

¹²Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 2 September 1631, letter 75, *ibid.*, 1:116; see also letters of 13 September 1631, letter 81, 1:121; 15 September 1631, letter 83, 1:125; 1 November 1631, letter 88, 1:132.

¹³Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 17 October 1631, letter 86, *ibid.*, 1:129. See also letters of 13 September 1631, letter 81, 1:121; 12 October 1631, letter 85, 1:127-28.

¹⁴Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 1631, letter 91, 1:138.

¹⁵Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, May 1631, letter 69, 1:109.

¹⁶Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 19 February 1630, letter 40, *ibid.*, 1:67.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, before 1634, letter 119, *ibid.*, 1:172.

Although Vincent did not yield to her desire to dedicate herself to the formation of the young servants of the poor, it becomes increasingly evident, from his letters to Louise, that he is aware that God is asking more of her than she is currently doing. He wrote concerning her exposure to the plague, "Have no fear, Our Lord wishes to make use of you for something that concerns His glory and I think He will preserve you for that purpose."¹⁹

At Pentecost 1633 the discernment process seems to be drawing to an end, although the eternally patient Vincent still hesitated. He wrote to Louise to tell her that a period of intense prayer is called for. "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 ... 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."²⁰

When he sent a young woman named Marie to Louise for training during the summer of 1633, Vincent appeared just about certain of the will of God. He told Louise, "I certainly think that Our Lord has given her to you Himself so that He might make use of her through you."²¹

In August Vincent made his annual retreat. During it he sought light from God concerning his holy will. After the retreat Vincent shared his thoughts quite simply 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."²²

Vincent was at last confident that God was making it evident that he did indeed want Louise to undertake the formation of the girls. The potentially paralyzing effects of her "excessive affection" for her son, which had, as Vincent thought, prevented her "from doing the will of God in other matters,"²³ had been brought within the bounds of reason. At the end of the week, as promised, Vincent and Louise would meet to make "a firm decision about the girls."²⁴ Our Lord had spoken to their

¹⁹Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, January 1632/February 1633, letter 131, *ibid.*, 1:186.

²⁰Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, May 1633, letter 138, *ibid.*, 1:200.

²¹Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, c. 2 September 1633, letter 147, *ibid.*, 1:211.

²²Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, August/September c. 1633, letter 151, *ibid.*, 1:216.

²³Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 19 February 1630, letter 40, *ibid.*, 1:67.

²⁴Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, September/October 1633, letter 152., *ibid.*, 1:217.

listening hearts. On 29 November 1633, the first Daughters of Charity gathered together in Louise de Marillac's home. A new company in the Church had been born.

Events now moved swiftly and four months later, on 25 March 1634, with Vincent de Paul's full approval, Louise de Marillac was at last free to consecrate herself and all her energies by vow to the new undertaking. Gobillon, her first biographer, described her consecration. "Having taken on the responsibility for this newborn company, she loved this vocation so much that she wanted to dedicate herself entirely to it, and the following year, on the feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, she committed herself to it by an irrevocable vow, at the same time renewing her vow of widowhood."²⁵

The founding of the Company and Louise's subsequent vow to dedicate herself entirely to its development and works mark another turning point in her spiritual journey.

In 1645, when Vincent de Paul petitioned the archbishop of Paris, Jean-François de Gondi, for approval of the young community, he wrote, "Works pertaining to the service of God come to an end ordinarily with those who begin them, if there is no spiritual bond among the persons involved in them."²⁶ With the guidance and support of Vincent, it had devolved on Louise de Marillac to create and sustain this "spiritual bond" among the village girls. The conferences of Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity were a rich source of spiritual formation for the infant community, but it must be remarked that there were but 120 of them, covering a period of twenty-six years. Moreover, fifty-five of them are from the last five years of Vincent's life, 1655-1660. The spiritual formation of the sisters was, therefore, largely the task of Louise de Marillac. Other responsibilities certainly prevented Vincent from more direct involvement with what must surely have been his most consoling undertaking, but he perhaps also felt that the time had come for Louise to plumb the depths of her own spiritual resources and to employ them for the formation of others.

It is easy when reflecting on the extraordinary accomplishments of Vincent, Louise, and their Daughters, to be dazzled by the extent to which they discovered and alleviated the miseries of the poor and,

²⁵Nicholas Gobillon, *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras* (London: 1984), 19.

²⁶Vincent de Paul to Jean-François de Gondi, archbishop of Paris, August/September 1645, letter 773, SVP, 1:602.

consequently, to lose sight of the unifying force behind it all: the vision of Jesus Christ suffering in the poor whom they served.

In a work called *Caring: A Biblical Theology or Community*, Thomas Dubay says that community “is not built” but rather it “happens” as the result of two factors: a “common vision” and the “burning pursuit” of that vision.²⁷ It was the vision of Christ in the poor that had brought Vincent and Louise to work together in the Confraternities of Charity and later with the Daughters of Charity. Let us now examine that vision as Louise de Marillac lived it and transmitted it to her spiritual daughters.

The centrality of Jesus crucified in Louise’s spiritual evolution is evident from her earliest writings. Life had taught her that her vocation was to unite herself to Jesus on the cross. A text in her *Spiritual Writings*, dating from the period prior to 1633, is revealing in this regard. “God, who has granted me so many graces, led me to understand that it was His holy will that I go to Him by way of the Cross. His goodness chose to mark me with it from my birth and He has hardly ever left me, at any age, without some occasion for suffering.”²⁸

Elsewhere, at this same period, moved by the words of Jesus on the cross, “I thirst,” she exclaimed, “Listen to him, O my soul, as if He were speaking to you alone, ‘I thirst for your faithful love.’”²⁹

In 1643, when Louise began using the seal which would become the seal of the Company, it bore the image of Jesus crucified surrounded by the words of Saint Paul as she had modified them, “The Charity of Jesus crucified urges us.” Late in her life, in a conference to the sisters entitled “On the Pure Love We Have Vowed to God,” she urged her Daughters to respond unreservedly to the call of Christ on the cross.

Let us take the first step in following Him, which is to exclaim, “I desire it thus, my dear Spouse, I desire it thus. As proof thereof, I am going to follow you to the foot of Your Cross which I choose as my cloister. There, I shall leave behind all earthly affections because Your voice has called me and urged my heart to forget my people and my father’s house so as to be open to Your great love. Therefore, at the foot of this holy, sacred and adored Cross, I sacrifice everything that might prevent me from loving, with all the purity that you expect of me, without ever aspiring to any joy other than submission to Your good pleasure and to the laws of Your pure love.”³⁰

²⁷Thomas Dubay, *Caring: A Biblical Theology of Community* (Denville: 1973), 7, 22.

²⁸“On charity,” A.29, SWLM, 711.

²⁹“Thoughts on the Passion of Our Lord,” A.21, SWLM, 702.

³⁰“On the Pure Love We Have Vowed to God,” A.27, *ibid.*, 828.

Later on, in the same conference, Louise prayed, "My Lord, I received a kind of new light concerning the uncommon love that You wish to receive from those You choose to exercise the purity of Your love on earth. Look upon this little flock of Yours and see if we dare to hope for such a thing."³¹

At this juncture, Louise de Marillac was "daring" to call the "good village girls" of the Company to the life of contemplation which had previously been reserved to wealthy, educated religious. Indeed, for Louise, it was the contemplation of Christ which was to lead to service. It was Christ himself who was to be their rule, their model, and the only object of their love. She told the sisters "not to be fearful ... even if, in using the word all [she was] making no exceptions."³² As she had tried to do, they too would find comfort and strength at the foot of the cross. At the time of the misfortunes that were besetting the Marillac family Vincent had written to Louise, "Our Lord will see to the matter, especially if you are happy at the foot of the Cross where you are at present and which is the best place in the world you could be. So be happy there ... and fear nothing."³³

In 1657 Louise would write along similar lines to Marguerite Chétif.

I trust, my dear Sister, that Our Lord has let you taste the sweetness reserved for souls filled with His love amidst the sufferings and anguish of this life. If such is not the case and you are still standing on Calvary, rest assured that Jesus Crucified is pleased to see you retire there and to know that you have enough courage to want to remain there as He did for love of you. You may be certain that you will emerge from there gloriously.³⁴

If Louise de Marillac sought to keep the eyes of her Daughters on the suffering Christ as the one whom they served in the poor, she also presented to them the entire life of Christ, "the Source and Model of all Charity,"³⁵ as the exemplar for the true servant of the poor.

Louise's prayers and meditations followed the rhythm of the liturgical year. At each season she entered into what André Dodin called "this mysterious adventure of the Incarnate Word."³⁶ During her advent retreats she reflected on the birth of Christ and the lessons of the crib. On one such occasion she wrote, "Our Lord, born in poverty and

³¹Ibid., 829.

³²Ibid., 828.

³³Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, undated, letter 103, SVP, 1:155.

³⁴Louise de Marillac to Marguerite Chétif, 22 September 1657, L. 545B, SWLM, 570.

³⁵*Rules of the Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor*, (Emmitsburg, Maryland: 1976), 1.

³⁶André Dodin, C.M., *Saint Vincent de Paul et la Charité* (Paris: 1960), 69.

obscurity, teaches me the purity of His love which He does not manifest to His creatures. He is satisfied simply to do whatever is necessary for them. Thus, I must learn to remain hidden in God, desiring to serve Him without seeking recognition from others ... content that He sees what I am striving to become."³⁷

Love, simplicity, humility — virtues which would later be presented as the fundamental virtues of the Daughters of Charity. The Christmas before her death, she would once again remind the sisters of the wisdom contained in this mystery. She told them, "You will learn from Jesus, my dear Sisters, to practice solid virtue, as He did in His holy humanity, as soon as He came down upon earth. It is from the example of Jesus in His infancy that you will obtain all that you need to become true Christians and perfect Daughters of Charity."³⁸

Meditation on the Incarnate Word led Louise de Marillac quite naturally to Mary, his mother, to whom she would consecrate the "Little Company,"³⁹ and whom she would designate in her "Spiritual Testament" as its "only Mother."⁴⁰

The contemplation of the intimate union of Mary with her son moved Louise to desire to attain profound union with her God. On Christmas day, while praying before the crib, her heart overflowed with joy and she exclaimed, "Most Holy Virgin, you know the emotions of my heart today at the thought of your Divine Son in the Crib and how great this mystery seemed to me ... O holy time of grace! Why are our souls not in a continuous state of joy and happiness? Why does this time not suffice to fill our lives with love for so good a God?"⁴¹

We find Mary here as we will always find her in Louise de Marillac's writings, as the Mother of God, intimately united to her son in the accomplishment of the divine plan.⁴² Louise's reflections on the role of Mary in the redemption caused her to see, well before any definition of the dogma, the importance of the Immaculate Conception. She wrote, "Most Holy Virgin [I wish] to glorify God for the choice He made of you to be the Mother of His Son. Because of this divine action,

³⁷"Retreat," A.8, SWLM, 718.

³⁸Louise de Marillac to Geneviève Doinel and Marie-Marthe, 28 December 1659, L. 647, SWLM, 666.

³⁹"Account of the pilgrimage to Chartres," 1644, L.111, SWLM, 121-22.

⁴⁰"Spiritual Testament," undated, SWLM, 835.

⁴¹"To the Virgin Mary," A.14B, SWLM, 774.

⁴²See Éliizabeth Charpy, D.C., *Un chemin de sainteté: Louise de Marillac*, (Paris: 1989), 201-19.

your conception was immaculate since the Father applied to you the anticipated merits of the death of Jesus Christ."⁴³

Every aspect of Mary's life became a subject of prayer for Louise. She wished her spiritual daughters to turn daily to the Blessed Virgin. She asked them to recite the rosary while meditating on a single mystery and hailing Mary as "Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son and Spouse of the Holy Spirit."⁴⁴

Let us return now to Louise de Marillac's reflections on the life of Christ as the model of the life of a Daughter of Charity. From this perspective, the hidden life in Nazareth held special importance for her. In 1659 Louise wrote to Anne Hardemont at Ussel. Anne was lonely and frustrated because she had little to do. Louise advised her:

I share in the pain you are experiencing because you feel that you are doing nothing. Be thoroughly consoled, my dear Sister, by the thought that you are imitating the state in which the Son of God found Himself when, after leaving the temple where He had been working for the glory of God, He went with the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph to obey them. He thereby accomplished the will of God by toiling for many years at the humble tasks of a carpenter's shop. Yet He had come upon earth to labor for the salvation of the entire human race.⁴⁵

Louise concluded another letter to Anne on the same subject by reminding her that contemplation of the life of Christ must lead to imitation. She told her, "You perhaps admired this before [God] placed you in a situation where you are called upon to imitate it."⁴⁶

As lent began, Louise de Marillac's prayer centered on the mystery of the Redemption. It was this aspect of the life of Christ, the suffering servant, which for her was the essence of the vocation of the Daughter of Charity. In a letter to Antoine Portail, asking him to obtain an apostolic blessing for herself and for her companions, she wrote, "I wish ... to ask you ... to obtain this ... for all those to whom God will give the grace to die in the Company of the Daughters of Charity, since it seems that it is the spirit of Jesus Christ that inspired those whom He chose to honor His human life on earth to desire this manner of life."⁴⁷

In Louise de Marillac's "Correspondence and Thoughts," we find the blueprint she offered her sisters who were striving to learn from the

⁴³"Oblation to the Blessed Virgin, (c. 1626)" A.4, SWLM, 695.

⁴⁴Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul, March 1646, L.303B, *ibid.*, 140.

⁴⁵Louise de Marillac to Anne Hardemont, 20 December 1659, L.642, *ibid.*, 660.

⁴⁶Louise de Marillac to Anne Hardemont, c. 1659, L.575, *ibid.*, 659.

⁴⁷Louise de Marillac to Antoine Portail, 21 June 1647, L.179, *ibid.*, 202-03.

example of Christ to be servants of their "lords and masters," the poor.⁴⁸ As Father Richard McCullen, C.M., put it in the preface to the 1991 edition of the *Spiritual Writings*, it is often in her letters that we find "the deepest insight into the workings of [her] mind and heart" as well as a revelation of "the nobility of her soul."⁴⁹ The 377 letters we have to the first sisters show a transformation in Louise's spirituality. The spirituality of the "I," of a God-and-I relationship, albeit one which reached out to the poor, has been replaced by a spirituality of the "we." Calvet will speak of a "Mysticism of the group."⁵⁰ It would be together that the aristocratic Louise and "the good village girls" would move toward union with God.

Few things show better than Louise de Marillac's letters the blending of the divine and the human, the supernatural and the practical, the contemplative and the active which was to characterize this new form of consecrated life. The mails were slow and unreliable, so Louise profited from the opportunity to write to the sisters to include remarks and reflections on all aspects of their lives. The vocation of the Daughter of Charity, her consecration by vow, her service of the poor, her life in community, the virtues of her state are intertwined with news of family, recipes for remedies, and advice on how to pack pears. Louise de Marillac was a mystic with her feet solidly planted on the ground, and she called her spiritual daughters to a similar mysticism.

What are the aspects of the life and person of Christ of which Louise most often spoke? First, the will of God. Just as Jesus had come to accomplish the will of the Father, so the Daughter of Charity must strive throughout her life to know and to carry out God's will for her. The remarkable letter that Louise wrote to Jeanne Dalmagne, who was dying, reechoes this preoccupation which appears some eighty-two times in her letters. Moreover, she asks Jeanne to intercede for the Company in this regard. "Remember, then, my very dear Sister, the needs of the poor Company to which God has called you. Become an advocate for it before the Divine Goodness so He may accomplish His plans for it."⁵¹

Louise turned to Jesus also to provide the exemplar for the fundamental virtues of the Daughter of Charity: humility, simplicity, and

⁴⁸Louise de Marillac to Barbe Angiboust, 11 June 1652, L.353, *ibid.*, 396.

⁴⁹Preface to the English Language Edition, *ibid.*, xxix.

⁵⁰Jean Calvet, *Louise de Marillac: A Portrait*, (New York: 1959), 194-95.

⁵¹Louise de Marillac to Jeanne Dalmagne, March 1644, L.97, SWLM, 108.

charity.

In Louise de Marillac's meditations her reflections on humility, on her own nothingness, and on her weaknesses and sins can be disconcerting, especially to the contemporary reader. Nevertheless, we must recognize that Louise compared herself to no one but God and, therefore, her conclusions are logical. Her letters, however, present a gentler, more balanced concept of humility which recognizes it as a gift of God. She speaks of such humility to the Abbé de Vaux. "Because you desire it, I will tell you quite simply that we must wait peacefully for grace to produce true humility in us by revealing our powerlessness to us. We are thereby led to recognize it and to accept willingly to endure what you call our little infirmities, pride and sensitivity, without any hope that they will be destroyed in us because we are and will be tossed about by such disturbances throughout our lives."⁵²

It was supernatural humility leading to gentleness, respect, condescension, and forbearance that Louise proposed to the sisters, and she warned them of the consequences of a lack of such virtue. In 1645 she wrote, "What is necessary is to have the true and solid virtues which you know are essential in order to carry out well the work in which you are so happy to be employed. Without that, my Sisters, your work will be almost useless to you."⁵³

Among these true and solid virtues, simplicity was an essential. Frequently mentioned by Louise in conjunction with humility, it was to be a hallmark of the Daughter of Charity, touching every aspect of her life: her relationship with God, with the superiors, with her companions, with the rich and with the poor. It was the means to preserve the primitive spirit of the Company. A text, catalogued as #100 and written by Louise de Marillac only weeks before her death in 1660, shows how strongly she felt about this. It is, unfortunately, too long to quote in its entirety but the conclusion gives an idea of the vehemence behind it. The dying foundress stated, "this Company must never depart from nor change its poor manner of life. Thus, should Divine Providence provide them with more than is necessary, let them go to serve the corporally and spiritually poor at their own expense. If this passes unnoticed, what does it matter, so long as our souls honor eternally the Redemption of our Lord?"⁵⁴

⁵²Louise de Marillac to the Abbé de Vaux, 10 March 1643, L.80, *ibid.*, 90.

⁵³Louise de Marillac to Sister Madeleine, 27 June 1645, L.121, *ibid.*, 129-30.

The fire in the words of this dying woman reveals an aspect of Louise de Marillac's character with which she had to struggle all her life. If she spoke so often of gentleness and required "gentle persuasion"⁵⁵ as an essential attribute of a superior it was because she was only too well aware that she had a sharp tongue. Her retreat resolution of 1628 reveals this awareness. She resolved, "I must practice interior ... and exterior ... humility ... in order to honor the true and real humility of God Himself in whom I shall find the strength ... to combat my frequent outbursts of impatience and to acquire Charity and gentleness toward my neighbor."⁵⁶

Louise humbly admitted this failing to her sisters and asked for their prayers. In 1645 she wrote, "My dear Sisters, you know that because of my age I have some deeply rooted habits, and that is why I truly need the help of your prayers."⁵⁷ The sisters did, indeed, know of her outbursts. The 1983 edition of her correspondence, which restored the original seventeenth century French, shows flashes of it. To Barbe and Louise, "Your work, which has been succeeding so well ... has done nothing for your advancement in perfection."⁵⁸ To Sister Andrée, "For the love of God, learn to spell so that I can read your letters easily."⁵⁹ To the sister servant of Saint-Denis, "My God, Sister, how amiable the truth is! I have told you over and over to get rid of these animals and you pay no attention to me and then you complain that a sister does not obey you."⁶⁰ And to Vincent, "You would recover more quickly from that cold if you went to bed earlier."⁶¹

However, if Louise could be sharp, she deeply loved each sister and this the sisters also knew. As a child Louise de Marillac was, as modern parlance would put it, "disconnected." Her relationship with Vincent and with the first sisters as well as with some of the Ladies of Charity provided her with the "connectedness" she needed. The security coming from this and from her ever-deepening relationship with God enabled her to deal with her own frailty. This in turn gave her the freedom to use her past experiences to assist others. There can be no doubt that in the advice Louise gives her sisters in her letters she is

⁵⁴Louise de Marillac, "Problems for the Company (1660)," L.100, *ibid.*, 833.

⁵⁵Louise de Marillac, "Rule for the Motherhouse," A.91b, *ibid.*, 754.

⁵⁶Louise de Marillac, "Thoughts on the Passion of Our Lord," A.21, *ibid.*, 701.

⁵⁷Louise de Marillac to Sister Madeleine, 27 June 1645, L.121, *ibid.*, 130.

⁵⁸Louise de Marillac to Barbe Angiboust and Louise Ganset, 26 October 1639, L.11, *ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁹Louise de Marillac to Daughters of Charity at Nantes, 16 February 1658, L.566, *ibid.*, 588.

⁶⁰Louise de Marillac to the Sister Servant at Saint-Denis, undated, L.556, *ibid.*, 682.

⁶¹Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul, 1644, L.32, *ibid.*, 104.

drawing from her own sufferings and struggles. A letter to Françoise Carcireux in which she is “repeating ... what [she] was told long ago,”⁶² is a clear illustration of this. The letter could well be one from Vincent to Louise years earlier. Louise tells Françoise:

Allow me, my very dear Sister, to say that I praised God many times for the grace He has granted you. I begged Him to help you to forget yourself and to mortify your desire for self-satisfaction which, in you, hides under the beautiful appearance of striving for great perfection. We are greatly deceiving ourselves if we think that we are capable of it, and even more so if we believe that we can attain this perfection by our own efforts and by constantly and closely watching over all the movements and dispositions of our souls.⁶³

Louise is certainly not advising indifference and she goes on to explain, “It is a good thing, once a year, to apply ourselves seriously to this kind of examination while being duly distrustful of ourselves and recognizing our weaknesses.”⁶⁴ Then comes the *caveat*, the lesson that Louise had learned only after long years of anxiety. She continues “repeating” Vincent’s advice of the past.

But to put ourselves through a continual purgatory to analyze our souls and to give an account of all our thoughts is useless, even dangerous ... Believe your Reverend Director, although you speak with him only once a month, and very briefly then. Rest assured that this is sufficient for you. Succinct confessions are always the best. What are we looking for in this sacrament? Grace alone, and we can be certain that the divine goodness will not withhold it from us if we approach the sacrament with the necessary dispositions of simplicity, heartfelt sorrow and submission. I beg Our Lord to grant us these dispositions.⁶⁵

Vincent de Paul’s wise, patient, loving spiritual accompaniment has borne fruit. Louise de Marillac is now able to accompany others in the same way along the journey toward union with God. The “mysticism of the group” of which Calvet speaks⁶⁶ is becoming a reality. Louise describes it to Françoise; “I beg you, my dear Sister, to help me by your prayers, as I will help you by mine, so that we may obtain from God the grace to walk simply and confidently along the path of His holy love.”⁶⁷

⁶²Louise de Marillac to Sister Carcireux, c. 1656, L.557b, *ibid.*, 521.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 520.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 520-21.

⁶⁶Calvet, *Louise de Marillac*, 194-95.

⁶⁷Louise de Marillac to Sister Carcireux, c. 1656, L.557B, SWLM, 521.

With simplicity and confidence, Louise de Marillac is ready to enter the last phase of her spiritual journey, the stage given over completely to the third and most important virtue for the Daughter of Charity: love. The love of Jesus Christ crucified is urging her on toward the love of total abandonment which is union with God.

As love was the driving force of Louise de Marillac's life, so she wanted it to be for all her Daughters. In speaking of the sisters of Angers, she wrote, "I desire all of them to be filled with a great love which will immerse them so sweetly in God and so charitably in the service of the poor that they will no longer have place for so many thoughts which endanger their perseverance."⁶⁸ Indeed, love alone was capable of sustaining them on the difficult path they had chosen to follow. To the sisters of Serqueux she gave the following exhortation: "Be of good heart! Work well toward your perfection in the numerous occasions you have to suffer and to practice gentleness and patience. Rise above rejection and any contradiction you may encounter. Be so stout-hearted that you find nothing difficult for the most holy love of God and of His Crucified Son."⁶⁹

The love to which the Daughters of Charity and their foundress were called was to be nourished by the qualities described by Saint Paul in chapter 13 of his first letter to the Corinthians. Love was to be "patient and kind." "So be patient, my dear Sister, ... with everyone. ... Practice great gentleness, condescension and discretion."⁷⁰ Love was "never boastful or conceited." "Let us willingly give ourselves to God to accept all the humiliations our pride must endure."⁷¹ Love "does not take offense, and is not resentful." "We must not be so sensitive that we are hurt if someone does not speak to us or does not smile at us. We should rather try to win their hearts by support and cordiality."⁷² Love "delights in the truth." "You must realize that authority is not to be wielded absolutely but charitably ... We must console our dear sisters who will always have sufficient difficulty in putting up with us."⁷³ Love "is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure." "Renew your confidence in God and abandon yourself to His guidance. If you

⁶⁸Louise de Marillac to Madeleine Mongert, June 1642, L.441, *ibid.*, 75.

⁶⁹Louise de Marillac to the Sister sent to Serqueux, October/November 1645, L.344, *ibid.*, 139.

⁷⁰Louise de Marillac to Cécile Angiboust, 20 September 1650, L.290B, *ibid.*, 330.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 386.

⁷²Louise de Marillac to Sister Turgis, 24 August 1644, L.105, *ibid.*, 115.

⁷³Louise de Marillac to Cécile Angiboust, 20 September 1650, L.290B, *ibid.*, 330.

continue ... to observe your Rules, you may be certain that He will assist you in all your needs."⁷⁴

One of the essential aspects of love, in the thought of Louise de Marillac, was the love the sisters were to have for one another. She spoke to them of it, in season and out of season. While she recognized that it could at times be difficult, that it must always respect the individual, and that it often called for great virtue, she never tired of reminding them that it was to this love that they were called and that without it the Company could not endure. To explain this ideal of love to her Daughters, Louise chose on numerous occasions one of the principal themes of her personal prayer life: the image of the Blessed Trinity. But, as was her way, she led the sisters to concrete ways in which they could strive to image among themselves the unity of the Triune God. In May 1651, she wrote:

In the name of God, I beg you ... to reflect on the fact that there are three of you together and that you must honor the Blessed Trinity by this number. But how exactly? It is by the union that must exist among you, by deferring to one another, so as to avoid contention and by acquiescing, as far as possible, to one another's opinions. If occasionally they differ, remember, my dear Sisters, that Our Lord always deferred to the will of His Father. In that way, you will, as it were, honor this deference.⁷⁵

Pentecost was approaching and Louise concluded the above letter thus: "I beg the goodness of Our Lord to dispose our souls for the reception of the Holy Spirit so that, burning with the fire of His holy love, you may be consumed in the perfection of this love which will enable you to love the holy will of God."⁷⁶ The feast of Pentecost, celebrating the coming of the spirit of love into the Church and the world, held special meaning for Louise de Marillac. She wrote to the sisters at Nantes, "Pray for us, my dear Sisters, that Our Lord Jesus Christ may bestow His Spirit upon us ... so that we may be so filled with His Spirit that we may do nothing or say nothing except for His glory and His love."⁷⁷

To prepare herself for the coming of the Holy Spirit, Louise made a retreat each year between Ascension and Pentecost. The feast was also a reminder for her of the special graces she had received from God at the

⁷⁴Louise de Marillac to Laurence Dubois, 7 August 1657, L.536, 562.

⁷⁵Louise de Marillac to Anne Hardemont, May 1651, L.429, *ibid.*, 353.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷Louise de Marillac to Jeanne Lepintre, 19 May 1651, L.345, *ibid.*, 351.

time of Pentecost. It had been on Pentecost Sunday, 4 June 1623, that she had received the light which revealed her vocation to her.⁷⁸ On the eve of Pentecost 1642, a ceiling in the motherhouse suddenly collapsed. There were no casualties. As in 1623 this feast of Pentecost marked a turning point in Louise de Marillac's spiritual journey toward union with God. She saw in the accident a sign of the special protection of God for the Company,⁷⁹ but she also saw in it a call to her to sacrifice everything, to abandon everything and everyone to him. In one of her meditations she wrote, "The soul that truly loves God must seek nothing more. The greatest happiness it can experience is to cooperate in rendering glory to Him ... the unique object of all our affections."⁸⁰ Louise concluded this meditation thus. "Blessed are they who employ the full power of their love so as to make the love of their Master the soul proprietor of their hearts ... Blessed, therefore, are they who help others to fulfill their obligations to Him."⁸¹

Louise is surely thinking here of her companions on her spiritual journey who had helped her to fulfill her obligations to God. Her correspondence reveals that, in her later years, her friendship with the sisters and with some of the Ladies of Charity had meant more and more to her. Yet it was at the same time a period during which she was little by little detaching herself from everything that was not God himself.

However, it is unquestionable that she is referring, in the above text, to Vincent, the one in whom she had found strength and support for thirty-six years. She had come to realize, albeit painfully, what Vincent referred to in his 1660 letter to Mathurine Guérin as "the great secret of the spiritual life."⁸² Through his freeing friendship she had at last been able to "abandon to [God] all that [she loved] by abandoning [herself] to all that He [willed]."⁸³ In the end she could be fully united with her beloved, exclaiming with the psalmist, "The Lord has been my strength; He has led me into freedom. He saved me because he loves me."⁸⁴

⁷⁸"Light," A.2., *ibid.*, 1-2.

⁷⁹"On the Conduct of Divine Providence," A.75, *ibid.*, 768.

⁸⁰"The Purity of Love Necessary to Receive the Holy Spirit," A.25, *ibid.*, 802.

⁸¹*Ibid.*

⁸²Vincent de Paul to Mathurine Guérin, 3 March 1660, in *Saint Vincent de Paul: Conférences, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 8:255.

⁸³*Ibid.*

⁸⁴Psalm 18:19-20.



Standing, left to right: Sister Louise Sullivan, D.C., Sister Donna Franklin, D.C., Ms. Vie Thorgren, Sister Kieran Kneaves, D.C., Reverend John Rybolt, C.M. Sitting, left to right: Reverend Edward Udovic, C.M., Very Reverend Richard McCullen, C.M., Sister Mary Rose McPhee, D.C., Reverend Hugh O'Donnell, C.M.