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Louise Sullivan D.C.

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The Hands of Providence: Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, and Feminine Charitable Activity in France, 1617-1660

BY

LOUISE SULLIVAN, D.C.



*Sister
Louise Sullivan, D.C.*

In the Museum of Public Assistance in Paris, there is a painting, attributed to the eighteenth-century French School, depicting Vincent de Paul surrounded by obviously wealthy women of the nobility and bourgeoisie. Among them is a young widow recognizable by her solemn black attire as Louise de Marillac. In the foreground is a Daughter of Charity with three foundlings wrapped in swaddling bands. No effort is made here to discuss the intrinsic artistic value of the work. It is significant for our purposes because it is a visual representation of what is, perhaps, Vincent de Paul's most singular accomplishment, namely the

mission of charity which he confided to the laity and particularly to women. Indeed, it is incontestable that there were many women in Vincent de Paul's life, including some of the most influential figures of the time, Madame de Gondi, Madame Goussault, Jane Frances de Chantal, the Duchess d'Aiguillon to name but a few. As early as his arrival in Paris in 1608, Vincent had begun to frequent their society. He would later number them among his closest friends and collaborators upon whom he could count in his charitable endeavors and even in his work for the reform of the clergy. During an era when, for many, the desired feminine virtues were "naiveté, childishness and servitude,"¹ Vincent de Paul saw in women a wellspring of untapped potential. He

¹Jean-François Six and Helmut Nils Loose, *Saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris: 1980), 40.

had witnessed this in the women who had been part of Madame Acarie's circle. In them he perceived not only generosity in the service of the poor but also a thirst for the spiritual and the capacity to enter, on an equal footing with men, into the way of mystical union with God. Vincent de Paul's work, however, was not simply a large-scale evolution of Madame Acarie's circle. It would lead not to the Carmel of France but to the Ladies of Charity and the Daughters of Charity who seek to combine contemplation and action and in so doing continue Vincent de Paul's work to our own day. Let us now examine more closely this collaboration between Vincent de Paul and women in the service of the poor.

It is generally accepted among Vincentian scholars that the year 1617 marks the turning point in Vincent de Paul's existence. We learn from Vincent himself that twice between January and late August of that year God intervened directly and perceptibly in his life. On both occasions, an event caused him to stop, to reflect before God, and to undertake a course of action which would alter his future. Women would play a significant role in the outcome of each.

To understand these events and their far-reaching effects it is essential to recall the context in which they occurred. At the time of the episode at Gannes-Folleville in January 1617, Vincent was thirty-six years old. Since 1613 he had been in the household of Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, General of the Gallies of the king, as tutor for the children and as spiritual director for Madame de Gondi. It was an enviable position for an ambitious man, one in which he found the security and the "honorable retirement,"² he had longed for since his youth. But having attained it, he was dissatisfied. The soil of his soul was ready for conversion in the truest sense of the word.

The incident that took place when Vincent accompanied the Gondi family to their estates at Folleville is, at first glance, quite ordinary, even banal, in the life of a parish priest: he was called to the bedside of a dying man to hear his confession.³ Moreover, Vincent had little experience as a parish priest—sixteen months in sixteen years—so it is quite possible,

²Vincent de Paul to his mother, 17 February 1610, in *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents 1, 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), (hereinafter cited as *SVP*), 1:17.

³Extract of a conference to the Priests of the Mission, undated, in *Saint Vincent de Paul: Conferences, entretiens, documents*, Pierre Coste, C.M., ed. 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), (hereinafter cited as *CED*), 11: 4.

according to the Vincentian scholar, Jean Morin, C.M., that it would never have led to the first “sermon of the Mission”⁴ had it not been for the intervention of Madame de Gondi.⁵ It was she who first reacted after the old man’s confession, she who pushed Vincent to preach the following day; she who chose the subject of the sermon, and she who asked Vincent to continue the work begun at Gannes in the other villages on her lands. Vincent himself tells of the providential role she played. Scrupulous by nature, with a tendency to dramatize, Madame de Gondi drew a generalization from the old man’s revelation and feared that the peasants on her estates were in danger of damnation. Thus she challenged her spiritual director saying, “Ah, Sir, what is he saying? What is it that we have just heard? The same no doubt holds true of those poor people. Ah, if this man who was looked upon as a good man was in a state of damnation, what is the state of others who live badly? Ah, Monsieur Vincent, how many souls are perishing! What is the remedy for that?”⁶

Thanks to Madame de Gondi, Vincent responded to the challenge and preached at Folleville, and according to his own testimony, “God had such a regard for the confidence and good faith of this lady . . . that He blessed my discourse and all those good people were so touched by God that all came to make a General Confession. . . . We then went to the other villages belonging to Madame . . . and God bestowed His blessing everywhere.”⁷

It is certain that, after the experience of Folleville, Vincent de Paul was a changed man. Exactly how changed we do not know. What we do know is that suddenly, in July 1617, he abandoned the easy life of the chateau to become the parish priest in a little town in southeastern France, near Lyons, which, according to one historian, “was losing its soul.”⁸ There, on 21 August, the second transforming event of 1617 took place. The story is well known. Vincent himself recounts it. There was a family in the parish in great misery because they were all poor and sick and had no one to care for them.⁹ This time, however, Madame de Gondi was not there to challenge Vincent. This time he had to act on his

⁴Ibid., 5.

⁵Jean Morin, C.M., *Carnets Vincentiens*, I (Toulouse: 1990), 26.

⁶*CED*, 11: 4.

⁷Ibid.

⁸André Dodin, C.M., *Saint Vincent de Paul et la Charité* (Paris: 1960), 23.

⁹Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 22 January 1645, *CED*, 9: 209.

own. He had, however, matured and grown spiritually since Folleville. He was capable of acting independently and quickly. Three days later, 24 August, the first Confraternity of Charity, composed entirely of women, was established in Châtillon.

Like Folleville, Châtillon was a sign of the direct intervention of God in Vincent's life. Just as he will always refer to Folleville and Madame de Gondi when speaking of the founding of the Congregation of the Mission, so he will refer to Châtillon when recalling the origin of the Confraternities of Charity and of the Daughters of Charity.

For the first time, at Châtillon, Vincent was faced by a social problem – material poverty. At Folleville, he had become aware of the full extent of the spiritual abandonment of the poor who were forsaken by the Church and especially by the clergy. At Châtillon, he is confronted by society's abandonment of the poor. His immediate response is to preach and he obtains the desired result. The women of the parish rush to the aid of the family. He tells us, "I spoke . . . so strongly that all the ladies were greatly moved. More than fifty of them went from the city and I acted like all the rest."¹⁰ Abelly, the first biographer of Vincent, tells us of Vincent's reflections that evening on the experience. He says, "Here is an example of great charity but it is not well organized. The sick poor will have too many provisions all at once, some of which will spoil and be lost and then, afterwards, they will fall back again into their original misery."¹¹ That very evening, the notoriously slow acting Vincent had laid the foundation for the confraternity. He says, "I proposed to all those good ladies, who had been animated by charity to visit these people, to group together to make soup, each on her own day, and not only for them but for all those who might come afterwards."¹²

Châtillon is the second panel in the diptych of Vincentian charity. Henceforth, Vincent will unite the double experience of 1617. The adverbs "corporally and spiritually,"¹³ found first in the rule of Confraternity of Charity of Châtillon, will appear like a leitmotif in his correspondence and conferences. While this is a change of focus for a parish priest, it is a revolutionary concept for the lay women of the Confraternities of Charity and later for the Daughters of Charity, and Vincent is fully conscious of this. Lay and religious women had cer-

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Louis Abelly, *La vie du venerable serviteur de Dieu, Vincent de Paul*, (Paris: 1891), book 1, chapter 11, p. 46.

¹²CED, 9: 209.

¹³Charité de femmes de Châtillon-les-Dombes, November-December 1617, *ibid.*, 13: 423.

tainly taken care of the bodily needs of the poor prior to 1617 but, for them, evangelization and spiritual ministry were the prerogative of the clergy. In 1617 Vincent points this out to the Ladies of Charity of Paris, the group which evolved from the first confraternity. He states:

It has been 800 years or so since women have had public roles in the Church. Previously, there had been some, called Deaconesses, who were charged with grouping women together in the churches and instructing them on the ceremonies which were then in use. However, about the time of Charlemagne, by the secret plan of Divine Providence, this practice ceased and your sex was deprived of any role and has had none since. Now this same Providence has called upon some of you, in our day, to supply for the needs of the sick poor of the Hôtel-Dieu. They responded to this design and shortly afterwards God asked others who had joined their number to be mothers of abandoned children, directresses of the Foundling Hospital and dispensers of alms collected in Paris for the provinces, particularly the most devastated ones.¹⁴

Elsewhere he said to the Ladies Charity of the Hôtel-Dieu, "You are undertaking the work of the widows of the early Church, which is to take care of the corporal needs of the poor and also of [their] spiritual needs. In this way you are lifting the prohibition imposed upon you by Saint Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 14: 'Let women keep silence in the churches. They are not allowed to speak there.'"¹⁵

Subsequent to the events at Châtillon, Vincent de Paul could have remained a country priest, combining in his life and parish, evangelization and service of the poor. Two hundred years later Jean-Marie Vianney would do exactly that in the tiny village of Ars just a few miles from there. Strangely enough, or better yet, providentially, it was a woman, once again Madame de Gondi, who would draw him away from Châtillon and assist him on the next step of his journey toward the total gift of himself to God for the service of the poor. To convince him to return to Paris and to her household she would speak not of security and position but of "the six or eight thousand souls that were living on her lands."¹⁶

Vincent does return and this time he has a clearly defined goal. He will preach missions as he had at Folleville and he will establish, in each place, a Confraternity of Charity modeled on that of Châtillon.

¹⁴Conference to the Ladies of Charity, 11 July 1657, *ibid.*, 809-10.

¹⁵Outline of conference to Ladies of Charity, 1636, *ibid.*, 764.

¹⁶Abelly, *Vie*, book 1, chapter 11, p. 40.

Extensive as were the Gondi lands – they covered several dioceses – they were not the vast terrain on which the future Apostle of Charity would labor. That work would be called forth by two women whom, in 1617, he had yet to meet. The first was a young mother, the wife of Antoine Le Gras, secretary to the queen, better known to historians by her maiden name, Louise de Marillac. The other was a shepherdess from the village of Suresnes who, in 1617, was just setting about learning the alphabet, Marguerite Naseau. Together with them and the women surrounding them, Vincent would transform the social order of the France of his day and bring the healing hands of Providence to all categories of poor.

Let us turn now to the first of these two women, the one who would become Vincent's friend and collaborator of thirty-six years, Louise de Marillac.

Although the exact date of their first meeting is unknown (probably some time between the latter part of 1624 and the early part of 1625), it is certain that there was reluctance on both sides. Ironically, Madame de Gondi, who had played such an important role in bringing Vincent to the realization of his vocation, may well have been the cause of his hesitation. Between 1618 and 1625, she was practically omnipresent. If we examine the rules of the Confraternities of Charity, we find her signature on five, as well as on several other documents dealing with their establishment.¹⁷ It was Madame de Gondi who, from 1618 to 1625, opened doors, along with her purse, to Vincent for his work with these confraternities. Moreover, it was she who, by her financial support, would help to found the Congregation of the Mission, 17 April 1625. The Act of Establishment bears her signature as well as that of her husband. Let us be clear on this point. Madame de Gondi was a woman of great generosity and faith. Vincentian works owe her a debt of gratitude of which Vincent was fully aware. However, she also placed great demands on him as her spiritual director and dealing with her scruples took the time and energy he now wanted to devote to evangelization and to the service of the poor. One can legitimately suppose, therefore, that he did not welcome the prospect of the responsibility for the spiritual direction of another woman of similar character.

Indeed, what do we know of Mademoiselle Le Gras in 1625? At the age of thirty-four, she has been profoundly marked by the dramatic, often traumatic, events of her life. The "natural" daughter of Louis de

¹⁷CED, 13: 444, 457, 466, 482, 519.

Marillac, she would never know, despite her father's affection for her, the love and security of family life. She never knew her mother, whose name, to this day, is unknown. Her health would always be delicate due, no doubt, to the conditions in war torn France when she was born in 1591. As a member of an illustrious family, although she always felt herself an outsider, she was educated at the Royal Monastery of Poissy where her aunt, another Louise de Marillac, was a Dominican nun. There, she was introduced to the arts and the humanities as well as to liturgical prayer, spiritual reading, and the responsibility of the rich to the poor. Poissy also gave rise in her to the desire to enter the cloister. The refusal of the Capuchin superior to allow her to do so was surely providential, but this is in hindsight. For Louise it was devastating. Marriage was her only option. Arranged by the Marillacs for their interests rather than hers, it nonetheless seems to have been a happy one especially after the birth of their son. This happiness would prove short-lived. The prolonged illness of her husband, leading to his death in December 1625, and the limitations of her child would plunge her into the "dark night" of the soul. Relief would come only on Pentecost Sunday 1623 when her doubts would dissipate and she felt assured that one day she would be able to give herself to God as she had desired.¹⁸ When she met Vincent in 1624-1625, most of the storm had passed, but Louise was still a frail, scrupulous woman needing considerable support in her spiritual life. It would appear that, at first, she did not believe that Vincent de Paul was the one to provide it. When speaking of her Pentecost experience, Louise herself tells us of her repugnance to accept any change in director. She writes, "I was assured that I should remain at peace concerning my director, that God would give me one whom He seemed to show me. It was repugnant to me to accept him, nevertheless, I acquiesced."¹⁹

But the day would come when, moved by the Holy Spirit, they would both set aside their desires and hesitations to enter into the divine plan. The friendship and collaboration that would develop over a period of thirty-six years between these two widely differing personalities would prove to be of incalculable significance for the Church, for the poor, and for their own personal growth in holiness. Many difficulties would have to be overcome but both Vincent and Louise

¹⁸See *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac: Correspondence-Thoughts*, trans. and ed. Louise Sullivan, D.C. (Brooklyn: 1991) (hereinafter cited as SWLM), "Light", A2.1.

¹⁹Ibid.

would very soon become conscious of the need each had for the other as they combined their gifts of nature and grace for a work as yet undefined except in the mind of God who knew that Vincentian works would, as Louise's biographer Jean Calvet put it, "become what they were because Louise de Marillac put her hand to them."²⁰

As one reflects on the portrait of the young Louise de Marillac sketched above, one is hard pressed to understand how Calvet could make such a claim. Indeed, many, when studying Louise, have stopped with this image believing that Vincent was somehow a master puppeteer guiding her every move with extraordinary results. For example, it was only during a retreat he was preaching in 1980 to the Daughters of Charity that Jean Morin, C.M., an outstanding Vincentian scholar, would admit that he had long held such a limited view. He said:

I must admit that Louise de Marillac appears more and more to me as an impressive, even captivating person. For twenty years, until this year, Saint Vincent has occupied my readings and research, and I remain convinced that he played a major role in the foundation of your company as in numerous other initiatives for the service and evangelization of the poor of his time. I also found evidence of the extreme importance . . . of Marguerite Naseau and her companions. Finally, in an effort to follow the spiritual journey of Louise de Marillac, I saw that she had acquired experiences which would prove to be . . . indispensable for your vocation and for your foundation. Conscious of that, I better understand that Louise was the ideal collaborator of Saint Vincent in most of his undertakings for the benefit of the outcasts of society.²¹

Father Morin then concluded his remarks thus, "Certainly, much more than Saint Louise, Saint Vincent experienced, for fourteen years, the hardships and injustices of the life of the poor but, much more than Saint Vincent, Saint Louise knew certain sufferings and injustices of life: birth abandonment, illness, death. . . . Now I understand better all that Saint Louise brought Saint Vincent to help him to organize a more effective service of the poor."²²

Louise de Marillac is at last emerging from the shadows where she had remained hidden for over three centuries. The image of her now forming is one of a woman who transformed adversity into positive energy for the service of the poor and used her deep, personal spirituality to grow in union with God and to form the first Daughters of Charity

²⁰Jean Calvet, *Louise de Marillac: A Portrait* (New York: 1959), 46.

²¹Jean Morin, C.M. *Carnets Vincentiens*, II (Toulouse: 1991), 15.

²²*Ibid.*

as Servants of the Poor. She also developed, with the support of Vincent's freeing friendship, her considerable personal talents. Shy and introspective by nature, she was also a highly intelligent, decisive woman, an intellectual with a practical sense and remarkable organizational ability, capable of conceiving and actualizing vast enterprises in their most minute detail. Together with the Ladies of Charity in the provinces and in Paris, many of whom were her personal friends, she and her Daughters of Charity became the hands of Providence for the poor in their homes, in hospitals, schools, orphanages, institutions for the elderly and for the mentally ill, in prisons and on the battlefield. It would be difficult to find a group in need excluded from the charitable endeavors of Vincent, Louise, and the women with whom they shared their vision of the service of Christ in the poor.

There are, however, two distinct periods in the service of the poor as envisioned by Vincent de Paul. The first coming before, the second after his encounter with Marguerite Naseau. An examination of the rules of the various Confraternities of Charity reveal that Vincent's original goal was to lead wealthy women to assist and to serve the less fortunate.²³ This will remain a constant throughout his life and will always be indispensable. Moreover, it is not surprising, given his experience with Madame de Gondi and with his parishioners at Châtillon, that such should be the case. It is certainly a perspective that Louise de Marillac, raised among the wealthy boarders at Poissy, could share. Indeed, she was remarkably successful in calling forth and rekindling the generosity of wealthy women on her visits to the confraternities and as a Lady of Charity herself. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac's personal experience of the world of the rich enabled them to discover and to recognize its value and potential. Because of their ability to mobilize these women, the rich themselves benefited spiritually and humanly, and the poor were better served. It is also worthy of note that the rules of the Confraternities of Charity called upon the members to be true "servants of the poor" and to bring to their service the virtues which Vincent and Louise would later present as the fundamental virtues of the Daughters of Charity: humility, simplicity, and charity.²⁴ The history of the confraternities reveals the great debt owed to them but it also allows us to appreciate the full import of the

²³See *CED*, 13: 444, 457, 466, 482, 519.

²⁴*Ibid.*

encounter with Marguerite Naseau which ushered in the second period in the Vincentian vision of service of the poor.

Who, then, was Marguerite Naseau? Unfortunately we have few facts on her life and personality. There are but ten references to her in the thirteen volumes of Coste.²⁵ Scant though they may be, they do enable us to form an idea of her remarkable character and of the affection and admiration that Vincent had for her. Whenever he speaks of the young cowherd from Suresnes, whom he considered “the first sister who had the happiness of showing others the way,”²⁶ one can easily detect those qualities he most admired in her: her creativity in teaching herself to read; her vocation to teach others; her courageous, even daring initiatives; her tenacity in face of adversity; and finally her heroic death.

The reaction of Pierre Fresnay, who portrays Vincent in the Jean Anouilh film, *Monsieur Vincent*, is probably an accurate expression of Vincent’s joy when, leaving a particularly frustrating meeting of the Ladies of Charity on that Sunday in February 1630, he meets the peasant girl come to offer her services to the confraternities. For the first time, he sees the potential for charity in this “good village girl” and others like her. A peasant himself, Vincent could but hear in Marguerite’s story echoes of his own. A letter to Louise dated 19 February, 1630 reveals that he sent Marguerite to her immediately to be trained and formed for the service of the poor in the Confraternity of Charity in the parish of Saint-Sauveur.²⁷ So pleased are the Ladies, that other Parisian confraternities ask for the assistance of village girls like Marguerite. Just as she had attracted other girls from the villages around Suresnes to assist in teaching others to read, so Marguerite brought other peasant girls to the work of the confraternities.

Thus, three widely differing spiritual and personal journeys converged – those of Vincent, Louise, and Marguerite. The service of the poor is about to be transformed but, as yet, these three major players in the foundation of the Daughters of Charity do not realize it. Vincent is concerned about the missions, Louise about the confraternities. No one is thinking about founding a company of widows and girls for the service of the poor. Even Marguerite, whom Vincent calls the “first”

²⁵See *CED*, 1: 76, 131, 185, 187; 9: 77, 209, 244, 455, 602; 10: 101.

²⁶Conference to the Daughters of Charity, July 1642, *ibid*, 9: 77.

²⁷Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 19 February 1630, *SVP*, 1: 67.

Daughter of Charity, does not know it.²⁸ She never will. She died of plague in February 1633, eight months prior to the founding of the Daughters of Charity.

The death of the prototype could well have proven ruinous for the entire project. It seems, on the contrary, to have accelerated the process. Early on, Louise had begun to bring the girls together for their formation, and she speaks to Vincent on several occasions about uniting them in community. We can follow this in the correspondence of Vincent de Paul and see the long, difficult discernment process that led to the next step in the service of the poor.²⁹ Just as Madame de Gondi had pressured Vincent in 1617, so Louise de Marillac and the example of Marguerite Naseau would lead him to his most daring endeavor: the foundation of the Daughters of Charity. These young women, formed by Vincent and Louise, would transcend the strict class barriers of the day to work in collaboration with the Ladies of Charity in the service of the poor. Moreover, these mostly peasant women, excluded by lack of wealth and education from religious orders, would enter into a new form of consecrated life calling them to unite contemplation and action.

The role of forming these girls would devolve on Louise de Marillac. Vincent would certainly be there to support and guide her, but the task was essentially hers and she was equal to it. The personal mysticism of the "I" of Louise's younger years would give way to the mysticism of the "we" or of the "group" as Calvet puts it.³⁰ Louise's writings and correspondence reveal her journey toward the total gift of herself to God and to others. She who was initially so dependent on Vincent is now capable of transmitting to the first Daughters of Charity the source and motivation of her own spiritual growth and of discerning with them and with Vincent the spirit that will animate future servants of the poor. Luigi Mezzardi was certainly correct when he said, "In the history of the consecrated life, the courageous initiative of the foundation of the Daughters of Charity permitted the irruption of women into the direct apostolate and its rule constitutes a turning point in the evolution of religious life."³¹

It must be noted, however, that the founding of the Daughters of Charity was the outcome of the close collaboration between Vincent de

²⁸Conference to the Daughters of Charity, July 1642, *CED* 9: 177.

²⁹*SVP*, 1:116-85.

³⁰Calvet, *Louise de Marillac*, 194-95.

³¹Quoted in Six and Loose, *Vincent de Paul*, 40.

Paul and women which began at Folleville. If it is true, as Calvet claims, that Vincentian works became what they were because Louise de Marillac (and we might add, Madame de Gondi, the Ladies of Charity of France, Marguerite Naseau, and the first Daughters of Charity) put their "hand to them,"³² it must also be recognized that Vincent de Paul's unique ability to call forth the full human and spiritual potential of the women with whom he collaborated changed forever their place in the Church. There were indeed many women in Vincent de Paul's life and, as a result, the Church, the poor, and society in general are the beneficiaries.

³²Calvet, *Louise de Marillac*, 46.