

Saint Louise de Marillac and Charity

Introduction

The four hundredth anniversary of the origin of the Vincentian charism, which we have the joy of celebrating, should lead us to a deeper understanding of Louise de Maillac and her effective and successful collaboration with the Confraternities of Charity.

In light of the fact that Louise was never recognized or accepted by her mother, we are invited to take notice of “the plan of God” which is always present among those who suffer. Louise, because of her illegitimate birth, experienced rejection and marginalization by the Marillac family. At a very early age she was sent to a boarding school where she developed her intellectual skills. She expressed a desire to enter a religious congregation but her family decided that she should marry.

God’s providence led her to an encounter with Vincent de Paul who became her spiritual director. He perceived Louise to be restless and very concerned about her son. At the same time, however, Vincent valued Louise’s deep spirituality and after the death of her husband, Vincent involved her in ministry with the Confraternities of Charity. For thirty-five years Vincent and Louise worked together in the mission that God had entrusted to them. Slowly Louise became more confident in herself and visited many of the Confraternities (a mission that Vincent had entrusted to her). Later she, together with Vincent, would establish the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

1. The personality of Louise de Marillac

Through her letters, we come to see that Louise was very affective and emotional. Vincent often counseled her to moderate her tenderness and her exaggerated manifestations of love toward her son, Michel.

Because of her affectivity, she was perceived by people as a welcoming, sociable, delicate and sacrificing woman. In other words, a charming woman whose tenderness enabled people to open their hearts to her and thus, enter into a relationship of friendship... a woman whose presence filled the air with joy.

Louise was anxious about the future, about that which was unknown and at one time, that anxiety characterized her life. She came to know the “ups” and “downs”, the successes and failures and the promises and disappointments of life.

It seems that Louise suffered from a guilt complex (1623), that is, she felt her husband’s illness was a punishment because she had not fulfilled her vow. She felt she was being punished because of the failures of her son... until the time of her death she felt responsible for the sins of the Daughters, for the fact that some of the Daughters abandoned their vocation, and for whatever went wrong with the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Louise had an analytical mind that allowed her to examine and reflect upon her life. She was obsessed with examining her interior life. She felt she deserved hell and that led to profound expressions of humility.

Vincent de Paul, who understood the psychology of women, helped Louise to move beyond those limitations and presented her to the poor and encouraged her to find happiness in her life. Vincent needed several years in order to discover the true personality of Louise de Marillac.

Louise was a very accepting woman and her goodness and ease in understanding situations enabled her to establish good relationships with people, enabled her to draw close to people... like Vincent, she was a good organizer.

The friendship between Vincent and Louise enabled them to move beyond their difference. The source and the model of their relationship was grounded on Jesus Christ, who in the Incarnation revealed God's love for humanity. Their friendship was rooted in authenticity, in the acceptance of the other and in a respect and recognition of their complementarity.

2. Louise de Marillac: animator of the Confraternities of Charity

Vincent had established the Confraternities of Charity to care for the sick and to instruct the ignorant. Thus at the very beginning the Confraternities were the first fruit of the Vincentian charism. Wherever Vincent preached a popular mission, he established a Confraternity and in some of those group the enthusiasm and the fervor of the women declined with the passing of time. He needed someone to coordinate, to encourage and to guide the members of those groups.

In 1629, Vincent felt that Louise de Marillac was the right person to help him organize the Confraternities of Charity. He had come to know the depth of her spirituality, her human qualities and her ability with regard to organizing. He extended to her the invitation to work on behalf of the poor: *[Would you be willing to travel to Montmirail in order to visit the Confraternities that have been established in that city and in the neighboring villages]. Father de Gondi sent me word to come by coach to see him in Montmirail. Do you feel like coming, Mademoiselle? If so, you would have to leave next Wednesday on the coach to Châlons, in Champagne... And we shall have the happiness of seeing you in Montmirail.*¹

Louise after reflecting briefly on that matter, responded positively to the invitation of her spiritual director... a response that would lead her to unimagined places. Vincent sent her on her mission with the following words: *Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that his divine goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your*

¹ CCD:I:63-64; CCD refers to the English translation of Vincent de Paul, *Correspondence, Conference, Documents*, translators: Helen Marie Law, DC (Vol. 1), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 1-13b), James King, CM (Vol. 1-2), Francis Germovnik, CM (Vol. 1-8, 13a-13b [Latin]), Esther Cavanagh, DC (Vol. 2), Ann Mary Dougherty, DC (Vol. 12); Evelyne Franc, DC (Vol. 13a-13b), Thomas Davitt, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Glennon E. Figge, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), John G. Nugent, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Andrew Spellman, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]); edited: Jacqueline Kilar, DC (Vol. 1-2), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 2-13b), Julia Denton, DC [editor-in-chief] (Vol. 3-10, 13a-13b), Paule Freeburg, DC (Vol. 3), Mirian Hamway, DC (Vol. 3), Elinor Hartman, DC (Vol. 4-10, 13a-13b), Ellen Van Zandt, DC (Vol. 9-13b), Ann Mary Dougherty (Vol. 11-12); annotated: John W. Carven, CM (Vol. 1-13b); New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2009. Future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, followed by the page number, for example, CCD:I:63-64.

shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally, that he may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works (CCD:I:64-65)

From that time forward we notice a change in their language when writing to one another. Vincent no longer used the phrase *my daughter (ma fille)*, but rather *mademoiselle*. Vincent is no longer addressing an individual whom he is directing but is speaking to his collaborator. Louise became the Visitor of the Confraternities of Charity. Letters were exchanged on a weekly basis: they informed one another about their daily life, about the joys and the difficulties that they encountered in their mission, about possible solutions for those problems. There was a certain naturalness in the exchange of correspondence.

3. Working with the members of the Confraternities

Louise visited those places where the Confraternity of Charity had been established. Her purpose was to guarantee quality service in ministry. During those visits she reviewed their financial records, wrote reports and encouraged the women to see Christ in the poor whom they served.

In the various towns and villages that Louise visited she became aware of the ignorance of the people and felt called to establish the little-schools. In the Rule for the Confraternities she wrote: *the above mentioned widows ... shall contribute to the support of this good work... they shall teach the little girls of the villages while they are there. They shall strive to train local girls to replace them at this task during their absence. They shall do all of this for the love of God and without any remuneration*². It was in this way that the “little-school” came into existence.

In 1630, the Confraternity was established in the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet and Louise was requested to serve as President of that group --- this occurred thirteen years after the establishment of the first Confraternity of Charity.

Despite their differences, Vincent and Louise have provided us with a wonderful example of what two people can do together when they are motivated by a deep love for God and for the neighbor.

3.1. Preparing for the visit

Any visit requires preparation, material as well as spiritual preparation. The mission that had been entrusted to Louise was lived as an act of faith. She was aware of being sent forth in order to accomplish something good and worthwhile. On February 5th, 1630, during the celebration of the Eucharist, Louise experienced a profound desire to give greater meaning to her mission: *at the moment of Holy Communion, it seemed to me that Our Lord inspired me to receive him as the Spouse of my soul* (SWLM:705 [A.50]).

In 1636 Louise entered into dialogue with Madame Beaufort about the establishment of a Confraternity of Charity in the parish of Saint-Étienne. The women there very highly motivated and Louise counseled them to talk with the pastor: *In order to begin well and to persevere, they need to gather together a large number of persons, both from the nobility and from the lower class, so that some of them will contribute*

² SWLM:729 [A.47]; SWLM refers to the English translation of LOUISE DE MARILLAC, *Spiritual Writing of Louise de Marillac*, Edited and Translated from the French by Sister Louise Sullivan, DC, New City Press, Brooklyn, New York, 1991. Future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [SWLM] followed by the page number, followed by number of the letter or the number of the writing and or manuscript, for example, SWLM:729 [A.47].

most of the funds while the others will give themselves more willingly to visit the sick poor on their appointed days (SWLM:13 [L.6]).

Louise knew how to encourage the women and did not want their enthusiasm to wane. She had very clear ideas about the organization of the Confraternities and was attentive to the smallest of details. On September 4, 1634 Louise wrote to Vincent and stated: *I am returning the Rule of Saint-Sauveur to you. I had not seen it. It appears that the first part makes the Confraternity completely dependent upon the pastor. I do not know if this is wise. It is certainly true the pastors in Beauvais would be delighted to have it that way. However, this would immediately lead them to want no one else to know what was happening with each Confraternity* (SWLM:9 [L.4]).

3.2. Louise's travels

Louise utilized the ordinary means of transportation for her travels. Short distances (10 to 15 kilometers) she walked or traveled by horse. For longer distances she traveled by coach which were by and large quite uncomfortable. In the places where she stopped to rest or to eat, she discovered promiscuity and outrageous food prices. Her experience would enable her to give good advice to the Daughters when they would travel together: *When you arrive, you shall ask the innkeeper's wife to provide you with a small room so that you can sleep separately from the others ... since bread is usually more expensive at an inn, you would be well advised to buy a good quantity from a baker so as to meet your needs* (SWLM:731 [A.77]).

During her travel, when she saw the steeple of a church, she was accustomed to ask her guardian angel to greet her Master in the tabernacle: *Oh my dear angel, look at this place in which Jesus dwells. Tell the Divine Savior that I adore him and that I love him with all my heart. Ask this wonderful prisoner of love to enter into my heart. This heart is too small for such a great King but through love and faith I want to enlarge my heart.*³

3.3. Louise visits the Confraternities

When Louise arrived at her destiny, she sought lodging in Neuville or in Pont-Saint-Maxence. She wanted to guard her freedom and so looked for lodging at some hostel or private house.

Her visits involved: being informed about the life and the establishment of the Confraternity in a particular place, examining the quality of service that the women provided, and viewing the manner in which the members interacted among themselves. Louise's competency in many different areas of life, as well as her keen sense of observation, allowed her to offer concrete solutions to specific problems.

As Louise ministered with the members of the Confraternities, she provided a motherly, feminine touch... indeed, Louise was whole-hearted in that ministry. She traveled from village to village and encouraged the members in their service; she herself visited the sick poor and wanted the members to provide the infirm with the best care possible. That desire was expressed in a letter that Louise wrote to Vincent de Paul (June 5, 1627): *I have been aware that Mademoiselle du Fay has been more anxious than usual. We spent the feast of Pentecost together. After services, she would have liked to confide in me but we remained open to and desirous of accomplishing the will of God* (SWLM:6 [L.1]).

³ Translator's Note: no reference is give for this quotation and I was unable to find it among Louise's writings.

In Pont-Saint-Maxence, Louise was overjoyed with the service that the women provided, not only to the sick poor, but all the people of that area: *they show great cordiality to one another and are devoted to works of charity. Even their husbands encourage them in their endeavors. The people have noticed them, and since the establishment of the Charity, the local inhabitants are better* (SWLM:723 [A.52])

Louise valued the experience of the women and trusted them: *as for keeping the accounts, I think that the women can take care of this themselves* (SWLM:9 [L.4]). Louise was very attentive when listening to the members and wrote very detailed reports to Vincent about her visits.

3.4. Some difficulties among the members of the Confraternities

The members of the Confraternity were enthusiastic and people of good-will, but very quickly difficulties arose, especially with regard to different ways of serving the poor. At the same time there was often a question with regard to who should receive preferential treatment and who should be served.

Such difficulties were not uncommon and had to be confronted by those persons who had positions of leadership in the different Confraternities: *There seems to be cordiality among the Ladies, although some of them sometimes criticize the behavior of the Officers* (SWLM:721 [A.53]). When Louise arrived at Neuville-le-Roy she found *much dissension among the Ladies over the reception of the sick and the purchase of meat. Each one wants to bring the meat from home according to her whim, if she does not receive the customary amount* (SWLM:722 [A.53]).

In Sannois, the treasurer (a well-intentioned woman) wanted to do everything herself and as a result the other members of the Confraternity lost interest: *The Ladies of Charity have let their zeal cool a bit. Often, they do not visit the sick on the days for which they are responsible because the Treasurer is so good-hearted that she cooks the food for those who should be doing it that day* (SWLM:705 [A.51]).

Louise de Marillac encouraged those women to work together. She instructed them and read to them a draft of the proposed Rule ... a passage that dealt with the relationships among the members: *said widows shall contribute to the support of this good work, in keeping with their means and their devotion. They shall cherish one another as sisters whom Our Lord has united by the bond of his love* (SWLM:728 [A.54]).

Louise understood that the mission among the suffering members of Christ was not a personal matter but rather that mission had to be embraced by all who claimed to be members of the Church. Since no one individual “owned” the mission, Louise felt that it was necessary to seek advice in order to verify what was being said and done.

3.5. Service on behalf of the poor

Louise was very attentive to the manner in which the women engaged in their service on behalf of the sick poor. In her reports, she was very attentive to details:

- In Bulles she observed that the sick were visited three times a day. The women bring to the sick cooked portions of meat but not in equal amounts because each Lady wants to take from her home what she judges right so as to please the sick.
- In Verneuil it seemed that the sick were visited at a very late stage in their illness.
- At another place, the Ladies visit the sick when they are no longer contagious; they did not bring them food until noontime and then, very little.

Louise noticed all these details because in her zeal she was convinced that in serving the poor, the women were serving Christ. She avoided making judgments about those practices that she felt did not contribute to the well-being of the sick, but rather invited the members to reread their Rule and to live in accord with the directives outlined in said Rule.

Frequently the members asked Louise: *Whom should we care for? What persons are truly poor? What are we to do when we are asked to care for sick persons who possess material goods?* Louise was very attentive to such concerns and to the many other concerns of the members of the Confraternities.

Louise was also attentive to the concerns of the inhabitants of the villages where the women performed their service on behalf of the sick poor. In Neuville, the people murmured about the delay in caring for the sick and in Gournay, the people supervised the use of alms ... *the local inhabitants complain that charitable donations are used to have Masses said* (SWLM:723 [A.52]).

When such concerns were brought to Louise's attention, she invited the Ladies to come together and to reflect on those matters. Louise demonstrated that she was very competent in legal and financial matters, and was very precise in her use of words.

3.6. The spiritual life of the group

Louise did not conclude her visit with the members of the Confraternity until she had examined the spiritual life of the group. When visiting the group in Herblay she saw that the members were still in their "first fervor", while the members of the group in Sannois, *or at least the majority of them, go months without receiving Holy Communion. They need to have their zeal rekindled by a sermon* (SWLM:705 [A.51]). In all her visits Louise was greatly satisfied to note the concern of the Ladies to accompany the sick poor at the time of their death (and where possible, they sought the presence of a priest).

Louise made note of the enthusiasm that her visits created among the members of the Confraternities. Later, when speaking to the Daughters she stated: *Once I visited a village where all the women were greatly consoled at my presence. They spoke to their husbands about this and these men wanted to come to listen to me. They were told that men were not part of the group, but nevertheless their husbands hid themselves in various places around the meeting place. After, they asked if I would hear their confession⁴.*

Many of the Confraternities wanted to be visited by Louise. In most cases, Vincent communicated those calls from the members of the Confraternities: *Mademoiselle Tranchot really wants you in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges where the Charity is going badly. I think Our Lord is reserving the success of that good work for you* (CCD:l:128).

4. Qualities of Louise de Marillac as the animator of the Confraternities of Charity

The members of the Confraternities of Charity discovered in Louise de Marillac certain qualities that helped them to understand the importance of their own vocation:

- Louise listened attentively to the members which allowed them to express their difficulties and their doubts. Such listening meant that Louise was able to put aside her own concerns and

⁴ Translator's Note: No reference was given to this quote and I was unable to find the reference even though I am familiar with the quote.

difficulties (she understood that she had to put aside her concerns with regard to her son in order to be totally present to the Ladies of the Confraternity).

- In every matter, the members of the Confraternities experienced themselves as being accepted and understood by Louise. This meant that the women were able to acquire a greater degree of confidence in themselves since they felt that someone understood what they were doing.
- Louise received the members with such simplicity that the women felt consoled and above all were in turn assisted in finding solutions to their problems and/or difficulties.
- The women valued the respect that was shown to them. Louise never judged in a harsh manner their attitudes or their behavior. Louise knew how to observe those matters that were not being done properly and because she was able to do this in such a delicate manner her words were well-received by the members of the Confraternity.
- Louise was able to discover and value the potential of every member of the Confraternity that she visited.

Throughout the years, Louise's competency was honed by listening to legal and financial experts. She observed the manner in which doctors acted. Above all else, Louise was an avid reader. All of this influenced her decisions and her counsel. She was convinced about the importance of knowledge and about the need to be up-to-date if one was to instruct others.

In his biography, Jean Calvet states: *Louise de Marillac had a gift for imparting instruction, a passionate love of teaching, for she valued knowledge and prized wisdom for which men and women were made.*⁵

The Confraternities alleviated hunger and the "little schools" provided the poor with knowledge and spiritual formation: *To enable these real men and women to escape from extreme poverty, we must allow them to be dignified agents of their own destiny ... This presupposes and requires the right to education -- - also for girls (excluded in certain places) --- which is ensured first and foremost by respecting and reinforcing the primary right of the family to educate its children, as well as the right of churches and social groups to support and assist families in the education of their children* (Pope Francis, Address at the United Nations, September 25, 2015).

5. Establishment of the Daughters of Charity

Through her ministry with the Confraternities of Charity, Louise acquired a profound understanding about the needs of the poor. At the same time she developed here innate leadership qualities and sought the most effective structures for serving others. Thus, on November 29th, 1633, Louise began to prepare some young girls in her own house ... young women who would tend to the needs of the poor and through their community life would support one another in their service. From those humble origins arose the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Louise provided leadership and direction to the development of services that she and Vincent initiated.

6. Conclusion

For thirty-five years Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac labored together in the mission that God had entrusted to them. Louise, a woman with a profound spirituality, made Jesus present in her midst and

⁵ Jean Calvet, *Louise de Marillac: A Portrait*, translated by G. F. Pullen, P.J. Kennedy and Sons, New York, 19590, p. 118.

did that through her life, her service and her teachings. Indeed, Louise discovered Jesus, contemplated him, proclaimed him and served him in the person of those men and women who were poor. A provident God had destined her from all eternity to engage in a charitable mission which she would accomplish in the company of Vincent de Paul.

Vincent de Paul accompanied Louise and directed her spiritual development. He came to value Louise as an intuitive woman, concerned about details, gifted with the qualities of a leader... a woman whom he was looking for as his collaborator.

On one occasion, Louise stated that to follow Christ, to serve him in his suffering members is to love with a *very rare form of love*⁶, that is, with a strong, firm love that is not intimidated by any difficulty that might arise. Louise's strength was the Mother of God: *all authentic Christians ought to have a great love for the Blessed Mother*⁷.

Louise de Marillac, the animator of the Confraternities, was able to assist the women involved in this charitable ministry come to an understanding of their vocation in the church and in the world... and also helped those women fulfill their mission. Together they lived the adventure of a committed faith in service on behalf of the poor. Rooted in the word of God, Louise found the strength that allowed her to commit herself to the work of animating the Confraternities. Therefore, that love for every member of the AIC allowed the poor (those persons who were despised and humiliated) to be renewed, to rise up and become new men and women, freed from every form of evil and sin, freed and restored to dignity.

Let us listen to the words that Pope John Paul II wrote in 1988, words that from the depths of my heart I want to share with you: *we are called to become the living sign of Jesus Christ and his Church in showing love towards the sick and the suffering (Christifideles Laici, #53) ... in this way we give witness to the gospel of life.*

I conclude with the following words of Pope Francis: *The task which the Lord gives us, on the contrary, is the vocation to charity in which each of Christ's disciples puts his or her entire life at his service, so to grow each day in love... You are that crowd who follows the Master and who makes visible his concrete love for each person* (Pope Francis, Homily on the occasion of the Canonization of Mother Teresa, September 4, 2016)

By: Sister Pilar Luisa Caycho Vela, D.C. [Peru]

⁶ Translator's Note: The reference to p. 817 in the Spanish edition of Louise's writings is incorrect and I could not find the right reference

⁷ Castañares, (no book is referenced), volume ii, p. 286.