

Louise and Formation

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Hello. My name is Fr. Joe Agostino of the Congregation of the Mission. I serve as the International Coordinator of the Vincentian Family Office working with the 160 branches that form our Vincentian Family movement.

Long before modern learning praxes were formulated, St. Louise de Marillac exemplified true formation.

She never utilized an abstract learning plan. Rather, she began with daily life experiences. She personalized what she taught, infusing her teachings with her own dynamism that enhanced its value.

Louise was attentive to the spiritual growth of her audience, be they the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, or those living in poverty.

The Ladies and Daughters needed to be educated and formed so that their zeal could be maintained.

Those in need were taught so that they could break the chains of poverty, and for that reason Louise founded her “Little Schools”.

And so that this work would not depend solely upon herself, Louise formed teachers and catechists who were concerned both with their pupils’ need to learn to read and write and their desire to grow in faith.

Louise understood that formation was not an optional exercise. It lies at the heart of our Mission.

Louise believed that God’s love for humanity, as actualized in the Incarnation of Jesus, was to be transmitted so that the hearer’s faith would be energized.

Her formation was characterized by three fundamental principles:

1. Maintaining a mutual respect for all – promoting their freedom and dignity;
2. Remaining open to the ideas of others; and
3. Knowing how to properly express one’s own thoughts. As Louise said: “Present your reasons humbly, forcefully, gently, and briefly”.

I would like to offer two thoughts for your reflection on Louise as Formator.

1. The importance of teaching from one's lived experience

I fear that all too often, we approach formation as we do any other subject for learning. We focus on the abstract truths and facts of our faith and fail to connect these to everyday life.

Jesus taught by parables. Louise began with what happened in life, drawing from this what the Holy Spirit wished her hearers to learn.

In all honesty, Louise's methodology is difficult, because it demands that the formator be open to and aware of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in her own life. Without such personal awareness, one cannot teach from experience.

2. The importance of forming formators

The Ladies of Charity, as well as all the branches of the Vincentian Family, have expressed an urgent need for the ongoing formation of their members, especially in Vincentian spirituality.

Such a need is not going to be met unless we set aside the resources necessary to form our members. And those resources entail both personnel and funding.

This formation needs to consider the way people learn today and the essential role that technology plays in this process.

Formation is of crucial importance if we wish to see our Charism continue to grow into future generations.

We need to burn with zeal so that we can effectively serve and form those God has given to us as our Lords and Masters.

As we again celebrate the Feast of St. Louise de Marillac, let us pray that we learn from her the importance of formation for ourselves and for all whom we serve.