

St Louise and St Vincent

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As is usual each year, the feast of St Vincent de Paul is celebrated over three consecutive days at the Berceau. The Eucharist was celebrated this year by Mgr Sarrabère, with Fr Christian Laboure as Master of Ceremonies. A large number of friends, amongst whom was a delegation of young people from the College and BEP (who came of their own free will!) gathered around the 'residents'.

It fell to Fr Jean-Pierre Renouard to give a chat, the following day, on the links between St Louise de Marillac and St Vincent de Paul; a way of celebrating, one last time, the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of St Louise.

For a week, St Louise was in agony. She had entered it imperceptibly, at the end of many years when she was not too aware of it. But suddenly, on the morning of that Ascension Day, 25 May 1623, everything collapsed; she was assailed by a thousand questions which tortured her and kept her trapped in a serious crisis of conscience.

She wanted to flee, to leave her sick husband and her slow-learning child, she began to doubt everything; the immortality of the soul and even the existence of God. Thinking she would find peace there, she multiplied fasts, vigils and prayers (*Petite Vie*, p.12). Fr Gonthier, a diligent reader of St Louise for many years, has clearly grasped the agony in which she lived; "*Her interior night reached its darkest on the feast of the Ascension...her scrupulous temperament and her tendency to neurasthenia became allies in the temptations which shook her faith in eternal life and even in the existence of God. By these means, the Lord tested his servant who sought to love him with a purer love*". (*Messages et Messagers*, 202, p.V)

This was the woman then who took a serious decision: if her husband should die, she would accept no other attentions and would not enter a second marriage, even if this should be flattering and lead her to rise to greater social heights. She made a vow to remain a widow. For her, service of God must come first. But the means of doing so eluded her...she did not know 'how that would come about'...she could not find peace at all.

It was during this difficult and trying time that she went into the church of St Nicholas des Champs on the morning of Pentecost. Suffering, but not despairing, she prayed to God to give her peace...as she was preparing for the Eucharist in prayer, or perhaps as she was reciting the 'Veni Sancte Spiritus', she was suddenly overcome by an extraordinary mystical grace. We call it her 'Light of Pentecost'. This grace, both personal and intimate, has been passed on to us by means of a manuscript 28cm by 9cm, made fragile as a result of being much folded and carried about, in a pocket or a

bag. Lest we doubt it, here is the major event which changed the life of St Louise and which was the very origin of your Company;

On the day of Pentecost, during the Holy Mass or praying, in the Church, suddenly, in an instant, my spirit was enlightened of its doubts. And I was made to understand that I must remain with my husband, and that a time would come when I would be in a condition to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and that I would be in a small community with others doing likewise. I understood also that it would be in a place where we might serve the neighbour; but I could not understand how this might happen since it would mean going and coming.

I was then assured that I must remain at peace about my Director and that God would give me one who would help me see, and while I seemed to feel a repugnance about accepting this nevertheless I acquiesced and it seemed to me that this was with the purpose of not having to make this change again.

My third sorrow was lifted from me by that the assurance that I felt in my spirit that it was God who was teaching me all of this and that, having such a God, I need not doubt what followed.

This ‘Light of Pentecost’ really is the major event in her life, the one which transformed her and set her again at peace and in union with God, which gave birth to her ardent and fruitful charity, despite all her suffering and her human limitations. All her doubts collapsed, she knew that she must lead her husband to the final harbour, and that she could then undertake to live a consecrated life if she did not see fully all the newness of the future community life of the Daughters of Charity. Time did its work and, imperceptibly, as M Vincent said, she would see fulfilled to the letter all that she had perceived first on that Pentecost morning. Manifestly the Holy Spirit, this great interior Master prepared her for great things by giving her, at the same moment, the grace of serenity.

This prophesy was also to put into her life someone she would first feel ‘repugnance about accepting’, by which I mean, of course, M Vincent. It is this companionship that we must discover now. What I suggest is that we examine certain facts before explaining the quality and nature of their collaboration.

The facts; discovery and collaboration

The ‘light of Pentecost’ brought St Louise a peace about her Director of Conscience. If this prophetic vision took place in 1623, it was not to be fulfilled until 1626. Antoine Le Gras died on 21 December 1625. Louise says; “I was alone with

him to help him...he could never say more to me than “Pray God for me, I can pray no more”; words which are forever engraved on my heart” (*Writings*, 986-987, Law p.7¹)

The first letter of St Vincent to St Louise is from 30 October 1626 and the first from Louise to Vincent is from 5 June 1627. We must be missing the intervening messages. As Fr Jean Morin observes, at the beginning the relationship seems to have been difficult. It doesn't seem that the difficulties come from incompatibility so much as from the fact that the spiritual director was involved in a thousand other responsibilities and activities, while Louise de Marillac was somewhat in the situation in which Madame de Gondi had been before her, wanting to have a personal chaplain, always there and always accessible.

The two letters below, on this subject, are very significant.

St Vincent (I, 12) is some 28 leagues from Paris (112km), in Loisy-en-Brie, where he is preaching a mission. This entails an absence of some 15 to 20 days. But he has gone without telling her! “*I was reluctant to upset you by letting you know about it!*” (or “I suffered at causing you suffering”) He leaves Louise, while he is away, under the direction of Our Lord, and excuses himself on account of his occupations. To tell the truth, we understand the thinly-veiled reticence on the part of Vincent who had just founded the Congregation of the Mission, was Chaplain-General of the Galleys, Superior of the community of the Visitation and director of a large number of Conferences of Charity...still finding time, however, to preach mission after mission.

The first letter of Louise de Marillac is also very revealing (Law, 1), especially the first lines; “*I trust that you will forgive the freedom with which I reveal to you the impatience of my soul, since you have been away so long and your destination is so uncertain*”. It is clear that Louise finds her Director a little too ‘distant’. Moreover, she complains about him to her cousin the Bishop of Belley, while he responds to her; “*Excuse me, my very dear Sister, if I say that you become a little too attached to those who guide you and lean too heavily on them; here is M Vincent away for a while and Mlle Le Gras is out of sorts and awry*”. Mgr Le Camus, however, promises to meet with M Vincent.

Little by little the correspondence become more regular and, especially, warmer, even though St Vincent was still to be always overworked; “*I write to you towards midnight, and am a little tired. Forgive my heart if it is not a little more expansive in this letter*” (I,15): and, for the first time, to our knowledge, St Vincent asks Louise de Marillac to do him a favour, a little favour for the conference at Gentilly. It was about sending on two or three shirts...it led to a remarkable evolution, doubtless desired by the excellent “director/ animator” that Vincent was. He knew that, in opening herself to others – especially to the poor – and in engaging herself with them face to face, that herein lay the best chances of forgetting her personal worries and her scruples, and of finding again her personal equilibrium and individual

¹ The reference is to the English translation edited by Sr. Helen Marie Law DC, published in 1972.

blossoming... Vincent himself had indeed experienced this between 1616 and 1618². In the period from 1626-1629, we have 18 letters from St Vincent to St Louise and one from her. He always seems busy but always faithful to helping Mademoiselle to advance on the way of perfection: curing her of an excessive disquiet about her son, orienting her towards the needy, forming her in joy, obliging her to take part in verbal dialogue (in order, no doubt, to help him to clarify his meanings), getting her used to separation and to taking charge herself, inviting her to read the Gospel and to meditate on it, making her seek out and welcome the will of God, teaching her to abandon herself to Holy Providence, he teaches her to see “signs of God” in every event. All of this spirituality was formative for she who would become, one day, herself a formator in charity.

What strikes me most in this outline is, on the one hand, St Vincent extreme attention to the formation of a soul and, on the other, St Louise’s great docility and openness which continued to await both spirit help and tasks from him. Little by little, as Sr Elizabeth Charpy has indicated, the “state of depression which crippled St Louise.

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With regard to Mlle Guérin’s Charity, please get the name of her parish, and, if we go to Chartres, we will try to go to help her with the Charity, since we do not know anyone in that area who is accustomed to this work.

² Jean Morin in ‘Carnets Vincentiens’, 2, pp. 32-33.

Farewell, Mademoiselle, remember us in your prayers and, above all, take care of your health, which I beseech God to preserve for you, being, in his love... ” (I,39)

I have quoted this letter extensively because it isn't usually done and, even more, because it is so revelatory of the way in which St Vincent and St Louise came to work together. Following these lines, we move from the spiritual to the material. The two saints came to work together and write to each other in these ways. From Visitatrix of the Charities, St Louise would become Founder and then Superior General of the Daughters of Charity (from 1633 to 1660). Their common concerns would always place them at these two levels; the spiritual and the temporal and these 'two orders' would come to mingle in their correspondence as if they were inseparable. It is, moreover, a vincentian constant acknowledged by M Vincent to Antoine Durand, the young superior nominated for the seminary at Agde, causing Vincent to comment strongly on that subject "*that one cannot simply be concerned with what is revealed, those functions concerning spiritual things*" but that one must also '*take care of even the least of temporal things*'. (XI, 351).

What is sure is that their collaboration would become very effective; they were to live out a complementarity in and for the service of the Poor, whether it be within the Charities or within the Company of the Daughters of Charity. We could not think of making an inventory of the work here...let us simply seek to discern the nature and quality of their work together.

The nature of their collaboration; a relationship of communion

Recent studies have shown clearly what they were for each other and because of the other. I quote number 52 of the 'Fiches Vincentiennes'³; M Vincent found in Louise de Marillac;

- An intuitive, quick, lively woman always ready to go to the fore without being held back by her health; a missionary
- A woman with a sense of organisation in the service of the Lords and Masters, the Poor
- A lady at ease among the Ladies of Charity, since she was, after all, a 'de Marillac'.

Louise found in Vincent;

- A priest, a sure counsellor, for whom she had now no repugnance
- A man, that is to say, a solid support, which she had found neither in her father nor her mother
- A countryman, a peasant, who knew the necessity of long fruitions, who followed Providence without ever hindering it.

³ No. 52; Louise de Marillac; 'A friendship which succeeded'.

They completed one another, as we might say today. But, even aside from the natural gifts or an affinity which they finally found, they lived for a common purpose, for an objective chosen and desired together, because it was, at root, evangelical; the liberation of the poor, as much at the human as at the spiritual level. They were committed to this task by conviction and by choice. They both lived out a real inner purification, they both underwent the same Paschal Mystery. They discovered, in their deepest selves, and in their reciprocal experience, the urgency and imperative of freeing those whom hunger or 'bad-faith' held captive in extreme distress. Their bond was not self-interest, or seeking advancement or promotion but simply the cause of God which is indissoluble from the cause of the poor. This then was their reason for communing and resonating together, day by day. They were bound by the same vocation and the same goal.

They espoused the cause of the poor through fidelity to their God. And they lived out a real friendship; no sentimentality, not even a quasi-mystical union, even one above all human ambiguity. But, has been said so well 'a unity in diversity', *a bond for what was essential*.

It is important to state how free they were with regard to one another. If they collaborated closely, they never felt obliged to agree with one another or to silence their difference of evaluation or judgement. This is clear in the minutes of the Councils of the Company which have been preserved for us. We can cite the following; 'With regard to accepting young boys into the rural schools run by the Sisters, St Louise was in favour of it and saw many advantages in it. But the refusal of St Vincent was absolute "we must obey the orders of the King and of the Bishops". In the same way, with regard to accepting people to stay in the smaller houses in the country; St Louise was in favour of it, but St Vincent saw many disadvantages. The advice of St Vincent prevailed and St Louise communicated it clearly to the Sisters" (Documents 493 or XIII, 646 and Writings, 455 and 466).

Jacqueline "is an unquiet spirit, who causes many little upsets, as a result of which it would be much better if she were no longer in the Company". The sisters present were asked to give their opinion. "Mlle Le Gras said that it was very necessary to send her away since to keep her there as a volunteer would give bad example to the others". St Vincent nuances the advice by giving it in a strong Gascon way; "If, she can bring herself to go and live somewhere and live quietly...I think it would be better"...(XIII, 593-596).

We could give other examples. Yes, St Louise and St Vincent were free, confident and simple; they made their point without aggression or the desire to carry it. They feared neither confrontation nor opposition but kept each other to the final decision.

The other characteristic of their friendship is the sharing. They told each other everything that was useful and necessary for the direction of their foundation.

Sr Charpy has noted this double exchange; “Vincent shared with Louise his positive view on everything and his profound peace. Louise shared with Vincent her sense of organisation and her profound sense of intuition about the Company”. (Cahiers Vincentiens 52, p.5)

Most striking and amusing, however, is their mutual solicitude for each other’s health. Thus, most precise recommendations are sent to Louise by Vincent himself, for example; “Spare nothing in order to eat properly during your hard work, I still think that you do not eat enough” (I, 198d) or “you would give me great consolation if you would consent to rest yourself in bed these two days”. (I, 230)

We also read in another letter; “I think you would get rid of your cold sooner if you went to bed a little earlier in the evening because hard work and so much standing heat up the blood”. (II, 696)

And they speak about purges, blood-lettings, broths, convalescence, rest, doctors etc...

In fact, Mademoiselle does the same for St Vincent. She asks him constantly for news of himself, indicates the latest remedies then in use and he, wickedly, lets her do it; “Your medicine, Mademoiselle, worked its effect on me nine times...my little fever is, as you say, double tertian; but you know that, at this season, I usually have it double-quartian and have already had it that way this fall”. (I, 394)

I can’t resist the pleasure of St Vincent on his ‘health-chart’; “My little cold is better, thank God, and I am taking good care of myself...I do not leave my room; I take extra rest every morning, I eat whatever is given me and every night I have taken a kind of julep⁴ which Br Alexandre gives me. As for my cold, it is only half as bad as what I was suffering and is gradually disappearing, so there is no need to think about the tea.

This sharing extended to all the topics which filled their lives; community problems with the sisters, relationships with parish priests or administrators, and little Michel, the worrying son of St Louise.

There we have the third element of their solid friendship; strength.

They knew that they could rely on one another, particularly in moments of difficulty. The most revealing illustration of this is the moment where the new-born community of the Daughters of Charity was undergoing a real crisis of belief, “a crisis of development, purification, of faith in the originality of this community and its needs” (Petite Vie, 71). Already, towards the end of 1645, there were signs of this ‘malaise’; people refusing to change parish, disputes about Sister Servants, murmuring, criticisms. St Louise asked M Vincent to intervene and so he did on 13 February 1646. He insisted on poverty and on allowing God to act. The Company is

⁴ A potion made up of a thick or narcotic juiced in a water-based form, a tea made of soaked plants or a syrup.

really the work of God. They must attack the evil at its root; break attachments to this lady or that, banish criticism, stop the murmuring, avoid dislikes, speak with friendliness and gentleness, live intensely one's love for Jesus and the Poor person, which combine in one and the same love; "You serve Jesus Christ in the person of the Poor. That is as sure as we are here. A sister will go ten times a day to visit the sick and, ten times a day, she will find God there". (IX, 252)

Apart from all that, the big question was that sisters were rethinking and leaving the Company. Mathurine Guerin, who was the secretary, noted in 1661; "So great a number of sisters left that it seemed that God wanted to empty the house". (Documents, 949)

Then there was the business at Le Mans! It was, from the beginning, a false start; four sisters set out on 4 May 1646 and who could not gain acceptance from the people they had come to replace. Louise blamed herself; "This is, for us, a great confusion as we think that it is only because of our foolishness and bad dispositions which have caused so much trouble with regard to our work here" (Writings 148, to M Portail). They had to set out again three weeks later. Check mate!

All this while, an unexpected death happened at Angers and the departure of Catherine Huitmill upset the community...the house in Paris was subject to Jacqueline lively criticisms. They had foreseen it; a Counsel debated her case and thought of sending her away again (28 June 1646 – Document 397 or Coste XIII 589). And it was during this same council that the community at Nantes was set up; six sisters were chosen, amongst whom was Elizabeth Martin, the Sister Servant.

Louise was going to set up this new foundation in place, in two months! The journey of the sisters was a real marathon. On their arrival, they were welcomed with open arms; the beginnings were promising. Louise was full of joy about this foundation but, in March 1647, and after a winter which had brought a full crop of deaths among the sisters; calamity! The first Nantish difficulties arose. Serious community conflicts became apparent. People spoke of 'a huge disarray'. Jeanne Lepintre was sent out quickly and began what amounted to a full scale canonical visit. On 22 September 1647, at Mam'selle's request, M Vincent once again intervened, in the form of a new conference on temptation and perseverance in vocation (IX, 350 etc.).

Little by little the intensity of the crisis lessened. I like the commentary written by the author of 'against winds and tempests'; in the course of these long months Louise de Marillac allowed herself to be marked by the grace of God. Initially convinced of her heavy responsibility for the crisis which the community was undergoing, she discovered, little by little, the Saviour's work of purification, the gradual removal of all attachments. The 'survival' of the Company, after all these ups and downs, "is proof that God watches over it" (p.87) Did she not write at that time; "God is my God" (Writings, 340). It is clear in any case that St Vincent had helped her greatly to overcome this difficult peak and that they had both sought to seek out

and discern, in the midst of these conflicts, the will of God. And we can be sure that they did, since their work continues still!

This is where we speak of authentic friendship. It is agreement about the essentials. It shows, moreover, that their ‘spiritualities’ were intrinsically linked; it would be so easy to show the points of convergence. It is enough for us today to list the essential points of agreement before we finish; the person of Christ, their sole aspiration; the imitation of his way of acting; daily reference to prayer; the constant searching for the will of God; a charity which was, at the same time, affective and effective; a constant effort to live humbly; a total gift of their being in the service and evangelisation of the Poor; a desire to live out community life; in short, all the values which their disciples still seek to live out with one another and which have lasted through the centuries.

To finish, allow me to borrow Sr Charpy’s own conclusion in her work, *A Short Life of Louise de Marillac (Petite Vie)*, because she has said the last word on what we may consider about the friendship of St Vincent and St Louise; “The friendship which Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac lived out was founded on authenticity, that is to say on the profound acceptance of the identity of the other, the recognition and respect for their diversity. Starting from obedience in the freely chosen relationship of spiritual direction, it moved through learning from the other in a complementary relationship of collaboration, and, reaching the serenity of old age in a ‘relationship of communion’, this friendship is an astonishing journey of sanctity, filled with humanity”. (p.114)

Translator’s note; where possible, references to the letters of the saints are the letter numeration in the English texts; references to Volume IX and above (the French texts) are page references.

(EUGEN CURRAN, C.M., translator)