

Margu rite de Silly, the Wife of Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi

The first woman who could not do without Vincent de Paul

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Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi and Margu rite de Silly

Silly-Gondi

Margu rite de Silly and Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi were married in the year 1600, the same year that Vincent was ordained a priest. They were approximately the same age. They did not know one another and there were no similarities between them. But the paths of life and the hand of God drew them together into a relationship of understanding and collaboration.

Nothing is said in the books of the life of Margu rite de Silly about her life before her marriage in 1600. She was the eldest daughter of Antoine de Silly (Count of Rochepot, Squire of Commercy, Sovereign Lord of Euville) and Mary de Lannoy, Lady of the Manor of Folleville. The titles of nobility were so much used and exhibited during that era that it is best not to mention these as we move forward. The list of titles of the de Gondi family would fill several pages.

We do not know any details regarding the encounter of Philippe and Margu rite. However it was, they met and married and truly loved one another. They lived in Paris, first at Rue de Petits Champs and later at Rue de Pav e. But they spent prolonged periods of time (at least when the military campaigns of Philippe Emmanuel as General of the Galleys permitted it) in their country residence which included extensive land holdings.

The first de Gondi who arrived in France came from Florence to Lyon and was named Anthony de Gondi. He was a banker and his interests were financial. In Lyon he married a woman named Mary Catherine de Pierre Vive. During a trip of Queen Catherine de M dicis to Lyon, the queen took a liking to them and as a result Anthony changed his profession from banker to politician. Thus began the French saga of the de Gondi's.

Anthony and Mary had two children, the first generation: Albert, who dedicated himself to the military and Peter, who dedicated himself to the Church.

Albert and Catherine de Clermont had four sons and several daughters, the second generation: Charles and Philippe Emmanuel were dedicated to the military and Henri (the first cardinal of Retz) and Jean Fran ois (the first archbishop of Paris) dedicated themselves to the Church. Two of their daughters became religious at the Abbey of Poisy but the most renowned, Claude-Margu rite, the Marchioness of Maignalais, who as a widow for twenty years, consecrated her life and her inheritance to religion and charity.

There was a third generation, the children of Margu rite and Philippe Emmanuel: three sons, Pierre (dedicated to the military), Henri (dedicated to the Church and died prematurely), and Jean Fran ois Paul (who succeeded his brother and became known in history as the cardinal of Retz).

First Interlude – Clichy

As nobles during that era, they lacked for nothing. The more pious nobles had chaplains in their residences who provided for the religious care of their family and servants. The de Gondi's asked Pierre de B rulle, a famous and influential priest and their friend, to recommend someone as their chaplain. B rulle chose Vincent de Paul, neither famous nor influential, but one who had begun to reflect on his life and under the direction of B rulle had embraced a process of healing and interior conversion. In 1612, Vincent was pastor at Clichy and felt completely happy. He was at this parish because B rulle had asked him to go there and now B rulle asked him to go to the house of de Gondi-Silly as chaplain.

It could be supposed that he did not go willingly. He lived in this house during two different periods: 1613-1617 and 1618-1625 (interrupted by his famous escape to Ch tillon-les-Dombes). His stay in this house would be more important for his future life than he could have imagined.

First stay with the de Gondi's – The missions (1613-1617)

During this first period he fulfilled his duties as chaplain and tutor. He was the tutor of two children because the third, a new born, was not placed under his care. The two oldest, Pierre and Henri, were instructed in Latin and basic Christian knowledge. He also provided for the religious needs of the servants of the house. Since he had to accompany the family on their journeys to the villages on their lands, he took advantage of this opportunity to catechize, preach and hear the confessions of the villagers. He also was able to influence the family, for example, he convinced Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi to withdraw from a duel and he began to form Madame de Gondi's conscience so that instead of depending on him she began to focus on the poor and works of charity.

An event occurred, however, that would prove to be decisive for Vincent's life as well as the life of Madame de Gondi. This event took place in January, 1617 in Folleville. It was the confession of a poor peasant in Gannes, a nearby village. After his confession this man made public to his neighbors, to Madame de Gondi and to Vincent that his previous confessions had been sacrilegious because he did not have the courage to confess all his sins. Madame de Gondi was horrified and could not imagine such a situation. She asked her chaplain: *What is the remedy for such a state of affairs?* So they established a plan. Vincent would later say: *this lady asked me to preach a sermon in the church of Folleville to urge people to make a general confession, which I did, pointing out to them its importance and usefulness. Then I taught them how to make it properly.* The result was miraculous. So many people came forward to confess their sins that *Madame sent someone to ask the Jesuits of Amiens to come to assist us.* The Rector himself came and later Father Fourch . *Next we went to the other villages belonging to Madame in that area, and did the same as in the first one. There was a huge crowd, and God gave His blessing everywhere. That was the first sermon of the Mission. From the success God gave it on the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, he certainly had a plan in mind on that day.*¹

¹ CCD, XI: 3-4.

Around the same time a similar event occurred. *The late wife of the General of the Galleys went to make her confession to her Pastor and she noted that he did not give her absolution; he mumbled something between his teeth. So one day she asked a monk who came to see her to give her the formula of absolution in writing, which he did. And when the good Lady went back to confession, she asked the Pastor to say over her the words of absolution written on the paper [...] When she told me this, Saint Vincent was recalling this moment, I was on the alert and paid special attention to the priests to whom I made my confession. I found that this was indeed true and that some of them did not know the words of absolution.*²

We know that Vincent was not satisfied during his first stay on the de Gondi estate. It could be that he longed for the happy days in Clichy. It could be that he was not having much success as a tutor of the de Gondi children. It could be that on the estate he could not evade the worldly noise and the movement of persons of intrigue and politics. It could be that something inside told him that his path had to lead to Gannes or Folleville. Whatever the case, we are told that when he was on the estate of the de Gondi's he was a recluse, like a Carthusian and did not appear to be happy, a prisoner of a somber and melancholy temperament. On more than one occasion Madame de Gondi had to admonish him. This brought about a change in Vincent's life but he was helped by Francis de Sales, a person who would soon enter his life.

Even though Vincent had to leave the de Gondi estate, he would speak well about the years 1613-1617, a time in which he was able to focus on the path that God had revealed to him. He experienced the misery of the poor peasants and the incredible ignorance of the majority of the French clergy. He shared these two experiences with Madame de Gondi, apparently fragile but very strong at the moment of truth. The best biography of Vincent de Paul writes: *without knowing it Marguérite de Silly was the first of several women who had a powerful influence in Vincent's life. She was God's instrument who revealed to Vincent the true path for his priestly life. In this regard it could be said that she had a decisive influence on his life.*

Second Interlude

Among the first letters of Saint Vincent's correspondence that are preserved, five are related to Maguérite de Silly. The first is from Vincent and he communicates to Madame de Gondi that he had been

² CCD, XI: 162-163.

absent from her household because he decided to exercise parish ministry in some other place. The second is from Madame de Gondi to Vincent written after she was informed by her husband that he had received a letter from Vincent. The third is from Vincent to Madame de Gondi encouraging her to submit to the will of God. The fourth letter is from Madame de Gondi to Vincent expressing the hope that Vincent's journey to Paris will bring him back to their house. The fifth letter is from Vincent to Charles du Fresne, secretary of de Gondi; Vincent told him that he was travelling to Paris and that according to the enlightenment that God gives him, he will make a final decision concerning his return to Ch tillom-les-Dombes or the De Gondi family.³

All of these letters were written during the brief period of three months during the year 1617. Obviously the most interesting letter is the second one, the letter of Madame de Gondi to Vincent, which is the only one that we have in its entirety (the others are summaries). Therefore we cite here that letter:

September 1617

Monsieur,

I was not mistaken when I feared losing your assistance, as I mentioned to you so many times, since I have indeed lost it. My anguish over this would be unbearable without a very special grace from God which I do not deserve. If it were only for a time, I would not be so upset; but when I think of all the occasions on which I shall need to be assisted by direction and counsel, either in death or in life, my grief begins anew. Consider then whether my mind and body can bear the grief for long. I am not able to seek nor receive assistance elsewhere, because you are well aware that I am not free to reveal the needs of my soul to many people. Monsieur de B rulle promised me that he would write to you, and I am calling upon God and the Holy Virgin to give you back to our home for the salvation of our whole family and of many others toward whom you will be able to exercise your charity. I entreat you once again to practice it towards us for the love you bear Our Lord, to Whose goodness I entrust myself on this occasion, although with a great fear of not being able to persevere. If you refuse me after that I shall hold you responsible before God for whatever happens to me, and for all the good that I shall fail to do for want of being helped. You are putting me in danger of being very frequently deprived of the sacraments in various places because of the great difficulties which may befall me there and the few people who are capable of assisting me. You know very well that the General has

³ CCD, I: 21.

*the same desire as I, which God alone is giving him by His mercy. Do not resist the good that you can do by assisting in his salvation, since he is destined one day to assist in that of many others. I know that, since my life serves only to offend God, it is not dangerous to place it in peril, but my soul should be assisted at death. Remember the apprehension in which you saw me during my last illness in a village; I risk falling into a worse state. The mere fear of that would do me so much harm that, were it not for my former excellent health, I think it might possibly cause my death.*⁴

This letter, both marvelous and also filled with apprehension, reveals the soul of Madame de Gondi, delicate and scrupulous, exaggerated in speaking about her weaknesses, clear and yet at the same time obdurate in using every argument to convince Vincent to return to her house. It also reveals the deepening of a spirituality that Vincent had inspired in the family. It is easy to find a response to her behavior since Vincent himself spoke about this matter later when he was addressing the Daughters of Charity: *When it pleased God to call me to the home of the wife of the General of the Galleys, I looked on the General as God and on his wife as the Blessed Virgin. If they ordered me to do something, I obeyed them as if I were obeying God and the Blessed Virgin. I do not remember ever having received their orders except as coming from God, when it was the General of the Galleys who was giving me the command, or from the Blessed Virgin, when it was his wife; and I do not think I ever did anything contrary to that, by the grace of God. I also venture to say that, if God had been pleased to give some blessing to the Company of the Mission, I dare say that it has been in virtue of my obedience to the General and his wife and of the spirit of submission with which I entered their household. "Be His the glory and be mine the shame!"*⁵

In order to know more about Marguétite de Silly, Madame de Gondi, let us look at the testimony of various biographers of Vincent de Paul.

ABELLY: *This virtuous lady deeply loved promoting the welfare of her family and her subjects, and was moved by the grace of God who had given her a priest who was all she could hope for as a spiritual guide. Beside the other sterling qualities she recognized in him, his wisdom and charity were so evident that she could in all confidence place herself under his direction.*⁶

⁴ CCD, I: 19-20.

⁵ CCD, X: 311; cf. also CCD, IX: 7.

⁶ LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, translated by William Quinn, F.S.C., New City Press, New York 1993, Vol. I, p. 56.

COSTE: *It would have been hard to find a more virtuous woman. Her naturally quick temper inclined her to acts of impatience which she immediately regretted. Whenever she forgot herself, she went down on her knees, even before her domestic servants, and begged pardon. Her chief fault was a tendency to scrupulosity and this weakness entailed even more suffering on her confessor than on herself.*⁷

*If the confessor was deeply edified by the delicacy of conscience of this chosen soul (for she abhorred even the shadow of sin), he had, on the other hand, much to endure for her tendency to scrupulosity. She wished to have him beside her both in the house and on her travels. When he was absent, she feared lest an accident or an illness had deprived her of him, and kept urging him to return. To combat this excessive attachment, Vincent de Paul introduced her to an excellent spiritual guide, a priest of the Order of Recollects, whom she consulted when her usual confessor was not at hand.*⁸

CALVET: *Madame de Gondi was as lively but more restless than her husband. Her untiring imagination continually represented to her both past and future so that she tortured herself with scruples about the one and fears for the other. She was very devout and felt compelled to carry out the promptings of her heart, and thought herself damned when she failed to do so. She was destined to become as great a torment to her directors as she was to herself. At the outset she took special notice of her son's new tutor. When she saw in him a man of God she put herself in his hands and gave him the keeping of her conscience. This was no sinecure. She would wear him out with difficulties that had been solved several times. She desired to have him constantly at her side to have recourse at once to his ministry if some scruple troubled her. Vincent took his first steps as a spiritual director with no common case. He held Madame de Gondi and the exceptional graces bestowed on her by God in reverence. It seems that his patience was so greatly taxed by her and by the great pomp surrounding here that in 1616 he decided to make his escape.*⁹

HERRERA: *Margu rite de Silly – angelic piety and a heart of gold – who at times forgot meekness, but when she became aware of this fault she knelt down before her servants and asked for their forgiveness.*

⁷ PIERRE COSTE, *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, translated by Joseph Leonard, C.M., The Newman Press, Westminster (Maryland) 1952, Vol. I, pp. 61-62.

⁸ PIERRE COSTE, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 65.

⁹ JEAN CALVET, *Saint Vincent de Paul and His World*, revised by Msgr. Wm. J. Doheny, C.S.C. (no publisher or date of publication is noted in the book), pp. 75-76.

Her primary defect was scrupulosity which tormented her and also her confessor [...] In the house of de Gondi Vincent did not receive special attention or honors. Madame de Gondi was indecisive in her decisions and even worse was too attached to Vincent's direction. When he was absent, uneasiness and anxiety tormented her. When she left the house he had to accompany her [...] thus Vincent planned his departure from the de Gondi household.

ROMAN: *M. and Mme. De Gondi began to look on their chaplain as a man sent by Providence, someone truly sent by God for the salvation of their family. It was the wife who first realized this. Margu rite de Silly was a troubled, complex soul. She was beautiful and she was delicate. Her fragile beauty was like that of the lady of Ghirlandaio and she was so pious that she told Father de B rulle she would rather her sons be saints in heaven than great lords on earth. God, to her, was more of a judge than a father. She tormented herself, and her confessors too, with her unfounded scruples.*¹⁰

CORREA: *A beautiful, sensitive woman with a delicate conscience that bordered on scrupulosity, deeply religious, a faithful wife and very Christian mother who was not, however, very successful in the education of her children. She suffered from a permanent temptation of insecurity. Feminine to the point of exaggeration, she felt incapable of living an independent spiritual life without the obsessive support of a spiritual director.*

MEZZADRI: *If during the time of Ch tillon Madame de Gondi had feared losing him, now the situation had changed. She understood that she was not able to mortify the generosity of the man of God. If she had been able to keep Vincent beside her, he would have been there as a hostage. So that she would not lose him completely, she decided to support his aspirations, approving the work of the missions. These missions would be given on the lands of the de Gondi estate. In this way she guaranteed the work of her esteemed chaplain.*

Second stay with the de Gondi's – The Confraternities and Missions (1618-1625)

A woman like Margu rite de Silly was not one to simply remain with her arms folded. Pierre Coste, the illustrious biographer of Saint Vincent states: *Madame de Gondi asked for the prayers of the principal*

¹⁰ JOS  MAR A ROM N, *Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, translated by Sr. Joyce Howard, DC, Melisende, London 1999, p. 112.

religious communities in Paris for her intention and, early in October, dispatched a messenger to Ch tillon. This was an old friend of the Saint's, Charles du Fresne, formerly secretary to Queen Margu rite of Valois and now secretary to Philip de Gondi. He set out provided with a bundle of letters, from Cardinal de Retz the Bishop of Paris, from M. de B rulle, from Madame de Gondi, her children, her nearest relations, from the chief officers of her household, from doctors of divinity, members of religious communities and from many persons of rank and piety.¹¹ She was impossible to resist. Vincent left broken and resolved to seek guidance from Father Bence, superior of the Oratorians in Lyon. From Lyon he left for Paris but not before saying farewell to the parish of Ch tillon, doing so in the midst of the tears and grief of the parishioners.

On December 24, 1618 Vincent entered for a second time the house of the de Gondi's. Abelly, according to his style, says that Madame de Gondi received him *like an angel from heaven*. Even though we do not know the exact words that Vincent directed to her, it seems that he made it clear that this second stay on the estate would be different. He did not come as tutor (one of his followers, a seminarian named Antoine Portail who Vincent came to know in Clichy, would take on that role). Vincent would be their chaplain. He placed conditions on his role and Madame de Gondi made concessions. What was most important for her was that she had her director and chaplain close at hand. Besides this she was willing to accompany Vincent in the works that he proposed.

Vincent proposed two works: the missions which he had initiated with her in 1617 in Folleville-Gannes and the Confraternities which were constitutive elements of his ministry from his time at Ch tillon. That event is well known. Vincent was about to celebrate Sunday Mass when he was told that a family who lived outside the village was in extreme need. Everyone in the family was sick and there was no one to help them. He explained this situation in his homily and his listeners heeded his word. As Vincent was walking to visit the family he met parishioners coming and going to help the family. When he arrived at the house he saw the amount of material assistance that had been gathered and he discovered that the Christian community was very generous, but their generosity lacked organization. As a result of this he established the first group of the Ladies of Charity who, in their own way, went forth to confront the different situations of poverty. Naturally this work had to continue in Ch tillon and Vincent's primary collaborator was Madame de Gondi. Between the two of them they established the Confraternities in Villepreux, Joigny, Montmirail and

¹¹ PIERRE COSTE, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 91.

in almost all the villages on the de Gondi estate. Each Conference had its rule, a rule redacted by Vincent that was detailed, meticulous and orderly with regard to the spiritual as well as the community life of the women... many details with regard to serving the poor and the ill, the distribution of alms, food, medicine, etc. Madame de Gondi was very generous in providing for the Confraternities in which she intervened. In Volume X of the *Obras Completas de Vicente de Paul* (Volume XIIIa and XIIIb in the English edition) we see Madame de Gondi as the founder and a member of the Confraternities at Joigny, Montmirail, Folleville, Courboin. She is the most renowned of the Ladies of Charity.

Together with the Confraternities was the work of the missions. In reality all the missions concluded with the establishment of the Confraternity of Charity. One of the conditions that Vincent placed upon his return to the de Gondi house was the freedom to dedicate himself to the missions among the peasants who lived on the lands of the de Gondi's and to establish in these villages the Confraternities as he had done in Châtillon. He was able to do this with the blessing of Madame de Gondi until the time of her death in 1625.

This blessing reached the point that Madame de Gondi decided to guarantee the work of the missions and the Confraternities. We know that the first sermon of the mission was preached in Folleville on January 25, 1617. We know about the missions that Vincent personally conducted during his stay at the de Gondi house. But this was not enough for Madame de Gondi. She wanted to guarantee the continuation of these works. Coste states: *Madame de Gondi conceived a project of putting aside 16,000 livres for a community that would undertake to give missions on all her estates every five years.* Vincent spoke about this matter with Father Charlet, the Jesuit provincial and to Bourdoise and de Bérulle and since no community could be found that would accept this offer *Madame de Gondi made a clause in her will by which she left the sum assigned for the foundation to Vincent himself, leaving him the choice of where the missions should be given and the means whereby they could be preached.*¹²

Now the time had come to culminate this work. Once again the benefactor was Madame de Gondi. Vincent attributed to her not only the financial support that she provided but also the inspiration that gave rise to these works. On April 17, 1625, five people gathered together in the de Gondi house on Rue de Pevée: two notaries from Chatelet, the de Gondi's (Philippe and Marguérite) and Vincent de Paul. Here the contract was read and signed. As a result of this contract

¹² PIERRE COSTE, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 70.

the Congregation of the Mission of Saint Vincent de Paul was born. Of Saint Vincent de Paul? Yes, from the outset. But Madame de Gondi was also part of this Congregation and when Vincent spoke to his missionaries about this event he called her *our first founder*. This was not some affectionate concession that Vincent made to pay homage to this woman; he was speaking the truth. Without her the Congregation would have risen up in the Church because as Saint Vincent said the only founder is God. But in fact, the first founder was Margu rite de Silly, Madame de Gondi. The de Gondi's gifted this new institute with financial support: 45,000 livres. One year before this, through the mediation of the de Gondi's, her brother, the archbishop of Paris, gave Vincent the property and buildings of the College des Bons-Enfants. In Vincent's name, Antoine Portail, took possession of this property on May 6, 1624. This would be the first house of the future Congregation of the Mission.

She was able to die

Once her work was accomplished, Madame de Gondi could die. She had been a good disciple of her director and gave the impression that she had become freer and was able to give herself to the poor in accord with the spirit of Saint Vincent. We can also see in Vincent a rapid progress in holiness and human maturity from 1617-1625 and Madame de Gondi played a role in this. She died on June 23, 1625, just two months after she had signed the foundational contract. At the time of her death, as she had always desired, she was assisted by Monsieur Vincent. She was forty-two years old. She wanted Vincent to remain at the house and attend her husband and her children. But Vincent, forty-four or forty-five, was being called by the voice of his newly established Congregation. He had to give the General (who was in Marseilles with the galleys) the news of his wife's death. The General also embarked on a new path and entered the Oratorio of B rulle, where he was ordained a priest. The friendship and mutual assistance between Vincent and the de Gondi family was always preserved. Vincent de Paul was indebted to Madame de Gondi for having shown him the true path for his life.