

# Louise de Marillac and the Spirituality of the Daughters of Charity

## Meeting of Provincial Directors

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### Introduction

Louise de Marillac is an extraordinary woman and a great mystic, and to speak of her and her spirituality is, in a certain sense, to marvel anew at God's loving plan for humanity, for the Church, for persons living in poverty, and for God's preference for the lowly and humble of heart. Yes, God always surprises us, and in taking a new look at the life of Louise de Marillac, and dwelling on the spirituality shared with the first Sisters, we see how God constantly borrows from our ways to reveal His love.

I'm going to begin by letting St. Vincent speak. On July 24, 1660, two months before his death, he exhorted the first Sisters as follows: "*Sisters, after the example of your good mother, take the resolution to work at becoming holy and to detach yourselves from what displeases God in you*"<sup>1</sup>. "After the example of your good Mother". I think that looking at Louise to learn from her how to work at making ourselves holy according to God's plan for us, and to detach ourselves from what displeases God, is characteristic of a spirituality: proposing a special path of holiness, a particular way of following Christ.

The 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the deaths of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac was certainly a special opportunity to discover Louise or to get to know her better. So I am not going to speak about her spiritual journey, even though it is important to keep it in mind, for it was in her own special context that her personality was shaped, as well as her spirituality, which was the source and driving force of her service of persons living in poverty.

This will be a three-part presentation based on the spiritual writings of Saint Louise. It will highlight some very classic points, which, however, are the foundation and basis of the spiritual life of Saint

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<sup>1</sup> Conference of St. Vincent "Virtues of Louise de Marillac" (X, p. 587).

Louise and of what she shared with the Sisters. They are to be understood in our present context, where many currents – philosophical, spiritual, and others – of unequal merit, cross one another, making the interior construction of the person difficult. Hence, the need and the urgency of fostering the growth of an authentic spirituality for a holistic development.

So the three parts will treat:

1. The strong points of the spirituality of Saint Louise de Marillac
2. Sharing her spirituality with the first Sisters
3. The coat of arms of the Company, icon of the spirituality of the Daughters of Charity

## I. THE STRONG POINTS OF THE SPIRITUALITY OF SAINT LOUISE DE MARILLAC

We read in *Vita Consecrata*, no. 93<sup>2</sup>,

*“...the spiritual life, understood as life in Christ or life according to the Spirit, presents itself as a path of increasing faithfulness, on which the consecrated person is guided by the Spirit and configured by him to Christ, in full communion of love and service in the Church. All these elements, which take shape in the different forms of the consecrated life, give rise to a specific spirituality, that is, a concrete program of relations with God and one’s surroundings, marked by specific spiritual emphases and choices of apostolate, which accentuate and re-present one or another aspect of the one mystery of Christ”.*

In the spirit of *Vita Consecrata*, we can say that Louise’s meditations are indicative of her concept of God and of the way she received the Gospel and made it her own. There are not many of these meditations, but they are intense enough to let us see her spiritual experience. They reveal the extent of her theological knowledge, the depth of her thinking, and her personal prayer.

Fr. Benito Martinez makes this observation in his book *Mademoiselle Legras and Saint Louise de Marillac*: “Her spirituality of following Christ and her Marian devotion was born in the eternal plan of God. It is on this plan that Louise built her theology and Christology”<sup>3</sup>.

This first part will take us to the heart of this close relationship Louise had with her God, with the Trinity, with Jesus, and with Mary.

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<sup>2</sup>*Vita Consecrata*, no. 93.

<sup>3</sup>*Mlle Legras and St. Louise de Marillac*, 1992, p. 126.

I have noted five strong points that mark and characterize her spiritual journey:

1. Seeking the will of God;
2. contemplation of the Trinity and of the Incarnate Word;
3. Another strong point that nourishes her contemplation is the Mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation.
4. The Virgin Mary, masterpiece of God;
5. the Eucharist summarizes everything.

### 1. Seeking the will of God

The primary aim that orients the entire life of Louise is the accomplishment of the will of God. As the years go by, she is more and more convinced that compliance with the good pleasure of God is the only way of pure love of God. Her meditations show that she has only one desire in the depths of her heart: to know God's will in order to conform herself to it! *"O my God... to live for as long as it pleases You, but with Your life which is one of total love. May I flow into the ocean of Your Divine Being!... loving and willing Your good pleasure"*<sup>4</sup>.

Wanting to express her deep attachment to God and to do God's will, she wrote her act of protestation, inspired by the one suggested in the *Introduction to the Devout Life* of Francis de Sales, in it she commits herself to live the grace of her Baptism, which made her a child of God, and to give herself entirely to God to love and serve God with greater fidelity. *"On the day of my sacred Baptism, I was consecrated... to my God to be his daughter... Trusting in the infinite mercy of my God... I now renew... the profession made to my God on my behalf... and resolve irrevocably to serve and love God with greater fidelity, giving myself totally to him... abandoning myself entirely to the plan of his holy Providence for the accomplishment of his will in me"*<sup>5</sup>.

Along this path of doing God's will, she ardently desires to let the grace of the Holy Spirit act, noting *"Eternal Light, take away my blindness, simplify my spirit... may the power of love you have placed in my soul dwell no longer on the disordered state of my self-sufficiency which is... only a hindrance to the pure love I should have by the infusion of the Holy Spirit"*<sup>6</sup>.

Progressively, as events unfolded, Louise feels called to follow the obedient Christ, in an "evangelical plan" of the Spirit: the *Light of*

<sup>4</sup>*Spiritual Writings*, A. 26, p. 817, henceforth cited as SW.

<sup>5</sup>SW, A. 3, p. 693.

<sup>6</sup>SW, A. 26, p. 817.

*Pentecost* will become for her a real journey of seeking God and holiness. She will have the courage to inspire others with her ideas, convictions, and positions but also the ability to be open to new perspectives and to change her own point of view. Assiduous seeking of God's will is her only desire, for she grasps fully that God wants nothing but the happiness of his children, and to share his infinite, gratuitous love with each and every person without exception. "*On the Feast of Saint Sebastian, the martyr*", she writes, "*I felt a strong desire to give myself to God to fulfill His holy will for the remainder of my life. I offered Him the inspiration He had given me to seal this desire by vow once I had obtained permission... The following Saturday, I begged God earnestly to make known what His goodness desired of me...*"<sup>7</sup>.

## 2. Contemplation of the Trinity and of the Incarnate Word

The mystery of the Trinity enlightens the entire existence of Louise. Because she knows who God is, Louise knows what she ought to be. Her contemplation of the Trinity produces in her an intense desire to adapt her life to it, to exist ever more only for God. "*The Triune God, in the unity of His essence*" she writes, "*has created me for Himself alone. He has loved me from all eternity. Seeing that I could neither come into being nor subsist without Him, since He is my first and only origin, He wants also to be my end*"<sup>8</sup>.

Louise constantly marvels at the beauty and grandeur of divine love at the heart of the Blessed Trinity. "*I adore you, Most Holy Trinity... one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*"<sup>9</sup>.

She loves to contemplate the Trinity holding council, seeking to recreate humanity, telling us all its love, deciding together the Incarnation of the Word. We read in her retreat notes: "*As soon as human nature had sinned, the Creator who wanted to repair this fault... ordered in the council of his Divinity, that one of the three Persons should become man*"<sup>10</sup>.

Strongly nourished by theology, Louise made her own the thinking of Berulle, an apostle of the Incarnate Word. Louise's spirituality is configured around the Mystery of God made man, center and source of all Christian life. "*The invention of His Divine Love teaches me... to attach myself to the most holy humanity of His Son... which shall be the only example for my life*".

<sup>7</sup>SW, A. 15b, p. 692.

<sup>8</sup>SW, A. 19, pp. 709-710.

<sup>9</sup>SW, A. 49b, p. 770.

<sup>10</sup>SW, A. 7, p. 799.

### 3. Another strong point that nourishes her contemplation is the mystery of the redemptive incarnation

In reading her writings, we are struck by noting to what point Louise contemplated this Mystery of the Incarnation, combined with the Mystery of the Cross. Louise contemplated at length the Son of God made man, a man fully human, except for sin. It is precisely because he is not a sinner that Christ is fully human. In contemplating Christ, Louise discovers who God is, and who the human person is.

Each meditation is, for her, a meeting with Jesus: *"You truly love us, since you are only one with the Father, who willed to show us his love by giving you, his Son, to us"*<sup>11</sup>.

She contemplates the intensity of the Mystery of the Incarnation and discovers the incredible love of God for humanity: *"The love of God for mankind willed that the Son should take human flesh because His delight is to be among His creatures. By becoming like them, He could bear witness to the fact that God has loved them from all eternity. This He did throughout His human life upon earth"*<sup>12</sup>. God, who by nature, is *"inaccessible to all being"*, found only one way to reach the human person, *"his Incarnation... which makes God man and man God"*<sup>13</sup>.

She meditates on this mission of the Incarnate Word, who comes to propose to humanity reconciliation and the renewal of the Covenant, and when she dwells on the Passion of Jesus, Louise recognizes the incredible love of God for humanity: Jesus, who gives himself totally on the Cross, and, at the same time, leaves the human person entirely free to respond to Him. She writes this admirable reflection: *"I thirst! This word is addressed to us so that we might understand that His death is not sufficient to save us if we do not accept it... let us listen to Him saying, 'I thirst for your faithful love'"*<sup>14</sup>. For her entire life, Louise will keep her eyes fixed on "Jesus Crucified".

Jesus is not only the Son of God made man, He is also the Redeemer. *"The Incarnation of the Son of God is, according to His plan from all eternity, for the Redemption of the human race"*<sup>15</sup>.

Along these same lines, Louise admires the humility of Jesus and the reasons for this humility. *"The Son of God... willed to come into this world in a manner not at all consistent with His grandeur. He came as*

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<sup>11</sup>SW, A, 27, p. 829.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>SW, A. 13b, p. 800.

<sup>14</sup>SW, A. 21, p. 702.

<sup>15</sup>SW, A. 31b, p. 830.

*humbly as can be imagined... This humble act shows us how great this virtue is in God*<sup>16</sup>. And elsewhere, *"I must learn to remain hidden in God, content that He sees what I am striving to become"*<sup>17</sup>.

The conclusion of her meditation on Baptism shows us in summary the depth and intensity of her Christocentric contemplation: *"Let us live, therefore, as if we were dead in Jesus Christ. Henceforth, let there be no further resistance to Jesus, no action except for Jesus, no thoughts but in Jesus! May my life be solely for Jesus and my neighbor so that... I may love all that Jesus loves"*<sup>18</sup>.

Louise recognizes in Jesus the most human among human beings: totally for others, He is the fullness of all that is human. *"In his meeting with the Samaritan woman, the place and the words express only love"*<sup>19</sup>.

#### **4. The Virgin Mary, masterpiece of God**

For Louise, God's eternal plan is the principle of her Marian doctrine. She situates Mary at the very heart of God's loving plan for humanity: *"I gaze upon you today, most pure Virgin Mother of Grace, since it is you who not only provided the matter for the formation of the sacred body of your Son... By bringing him into the world, you have become both Mother of God and Mother of a man"*<sup>20</sup>.

Louise contemplates the intimate relationship of the Virgin Mary with the Blessed Trinity, desiring that everyone should give the Blessed Virgin the glory she merits: the *"beloved daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son, and Spouse of the Holy Spirit"*<sup>21</sup>.

She marvels at the Trinity, which does not hesitate to associate a woman in a very special way to its divinity. *"Throughout my life... I desire to love and to honor the Blessed Virgin... by my gratitude to the Blessed Trinity for the choice made of the Holy Virgin to be so closely united to the Divinity"*<sup>22</sup>.

She also contemplates the splendor of Mary as the woman who brought forth in her humanity the Son of God: *"O my God... You have shown me the great dignity of the Blessed Virgin... the Mother of your*

<sup>16</sup>SW, A. 7, p. 700.

<sup>17</sup>SW, A. 8, *Retreat*, p. 718.

<sup>18</sup>SW, A. 23, p. 786.

<sup>19</sup>SW, A. 7, p. 700.

<sup>20</sup>SW, A. 14b, p. 775.

<sup>21</sup>SW, A. 4, p. 696.

<sup>22</sup>SW, A. 31b, p. 831.

*Son!... With good reason the Church addresses her as the Mother of Mercy because she is also the Mother of all Grace*<sup>23</sup>.

She likewise admires the way Mary responded to God's plan: *"May this beautiful soul, chosen from thousands of millions for her adherence to God's plan, be eternally glorious"*<sup>24</sup>.

We also know of Louise's very special devotion to the Mystery of the Immaculate Conception. Mary is full of grace, since she gave birth to Grace itself. Indeed, to bring about His redemptive incarnation, Mary was showered with grace and preserved from all sin. *"Reflecting on this Holy Conception, I saw... the application of God's plan in the Incarnation of His Son... The most pure body of the Blessed Virgin is a worthy dwelling place for the soul God created for her... her most pure Conception comes from the merits of the death of her Son"*<sup>25</sup>. Louise associates Mary with all the mysteries of her Son.

She also considers Mary's deep humility and often asks her to put in her the sentiments she always had. *"She is the only pure creature who has always found favor in the eyes of God. This makes her the astonishment of the Heavenly Court and the admiration of all humanity"*<sup>26</sup>.

## **5. The Eucharist summarizes everything**

For Louise de Marillac, the mystery of the Eucharist is the recapitulation of everything: it is the Sacrament of Christ who gives himself as food to human beings to transform them into himself. So, she writes, *"The Son of God was not satisfied with taking a human body and living in the midst of us. But, wishing an inseparable union of the divine nature with human nature, He accomplished this by the admirable institution of the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar"*<sup>27</sup>.

Christ is the perfect man, the pure reference to God and to others. The Eucharist makes us more human because it is more divine. *"He seems to give himself to us in the holy host for our sanctification"* she will note, *"...wanting us to be like Him by His love"*<sup>28</sup>.

For Louise, It is clear that the basic plan of God is to unite all men and women in love and to have them share His own life. God created humanity to espouse it, and He espouses it by becoming man. To espouse, in the fullest sense of the word, is to become only one flesh

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<sup>23</sup> SW, A. 14b, p. 775.

<sup>24</sup> SW, A. 4, p. 696.

<sup>25</sup> SW, A. 31b, p. 830.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> SW, A. 14, p. 784.

<sup>28</sup> SW, A. 71. p. 779.

with humanity. Christ became food in order to become flesh of the flesh of humanity. “*At Holy Communion*”, she also wrote, “*it seemed to me that Our Lord was inspiring me to receive Him as the spouse of my soul...*”<sup>29</sup>.

Whether receiving Holy Communion or in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, Louise constantly contemplates God’s desire of “*the loving union of His Word with humanity*”, and she ardently desires to respond to this call<sup>30</sup>.

Having grasped interiorly this immense desire of God to join humanity even in its poverty, Louise de Marillac consecrated herself to Christ to serve Him in the person of the poor, whoever they might be. One retreat day she wrote, “*I felt in my prayer... a great attraction for the holy humanity of Our Lord, and I desired to honor it insofar as I was able in the person of the poor and of all my neighbors*”<sup>31</sup>.

The corporal and spiritual service of persons living in poverty is like a continuation of the Incarnation and Redemption, allowing those who are humiliated, sick, crushed, or rejected to rediscover their full quality of human being and child of God.

And I will end this first section by once again allowing Saint Louise to speak; she manifests to us her interior determination and dynamic missionary force, which shows that her actions were nothing other than the work of God (as they were for Saint Vincent. Isn’t that why the Vincentian Family is still very much alive today?) “*I want to imitate... Our Lord when He came to earth to do the most Holy Will of God His Father, and to help my neighbor as far as I can both spiritually and corporally...*”<sup>32</sup>.

## II.

### SHARING HER SPIRITUALITY WITH THE FIRST SISTERS

We might say that Louise de Marillac transmitted to the Daughters of Charity a spiritual tradition.

In this second part, I will present briefly six basic elements – what we might call the pillars that constitute in, a certain sense, the spirituality of Daughter of Charity, and which Louise particularly stressed when she was responsible for the formation of the first Sisters – elements that she herself lived, as we have just seen in the preceding section.

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<sup>29</sup>SW, A. 50, p. 705.

<sup>30</sup>SW, A. 21b, p. 732.

<sup>31</sup>SW, A. 26, p. 820.

<sup>32</sup>SW, A. 40b, p. 784.

We will find these elements in her letters to the first Sisters:

1. A constant seeking of the will of God;
2. a deep life of union with God and her radicality in living humility and charity;
3. living well together;
4. a passion for persons who are poor;
5. reviewing one's life in the light of the Gospel;
6. love of the Blessed Virgin.

**1. By her constant seeking of God's will, Louise leads the sisters to give themselves totally to God to do his will (*Louise seeks only the will of God*)**

She is attentive to a true education in holiness. Louise expects a great deal of the Sisters and wants to help them lead a holy life by seeking only the will of God. To Sister Anne Hardemont she writes, *"I beg you, my dear Sister, to send us frequently news of yourself and of our dear Sisters. I hope they are filled with holiness so that they may work usefully at God's work... We must have continually before our eyes our model, the exemplary life of Jesus Christ, which we are called to imitate not only as Christians, but as persons chosen by God to serve Him in the person of His poor"*<sup>33</sup>.

Louise leads the Sisters to get rid of their routine, in order to give themselves to God in the person of the poor, to strive to be converted to Christ, and to find His constant presence in everyday activities. She exhorts and encourages them to even greater sacrifices. We heard this already, *"Let us live, therefore, as if we were dead in Jesus Christ. Henceforth, let there be no further resistance to Jesus, no action except for Jesus, no thoughts but in Jesus! May my life be solely for Jesus and my neighbor so that... I may love all that Jesus loves"*<sup>34</sup>.

Louise knows that it takes an entire lifetime to become a saint; she realizes this for herself and for others. She is attentive to helping the Sisters move forward and proposes a certain radicality to them. She encourages them to enter more deeply into the Gospel spirit of the gift of self. She urges them to persevere in their resolutions, for she is well aware that we are always being put to the test by the temptation to return to freedom, individualism, free will, and to doing our own will. She invites the Sisters to follow God's plans with all their heart.

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<sup>33</sup>SW, L. 217, pp. 260-261.

<sup>34</sup>SW, A. 23, p. 786.

To Sister Madeleine Mongert, she writes, “*We have to belong to God, who wills that we want nothing other than what He wills*”<sup>35</sup>. To the Sisters in Nantes, she says, “*We must belong to God, and all to God, and to do this well, we have to detach ourselves from ourselves*”<sup>36</sup>. And the same insistence with Sister Barbe Angiboust, “*We must willingly submit to the good pleasure of God in what has happened to our good Sister. I would regret her loss if I dared, but instead, I pray that the holy will of our great Master may always be done by all of us and in all of us*”<sup>37</sup>.

Seek and do the will of God in all things!

## **2. By her deep faith, Louise helps the sisters to construct their spiritual life**

*(Louise has great love for the Blessed Trinity and the Incarnate Word)*  
She helps the Sisters to construct their life of faith.

### ***Imitating Christ the Servant***

Louise’s fervor encourages the Sisters to move toward the same spiritual heights. She invites them to walk in the footsteps of Christ. She assists them in fixing their attention on the imitation of Christ in the service of persons living in poverty. This means contemplation of “the holy humanity of Our Lord” in order to imitate Him, and to adopt His ways of thinking and acting: His gentleness, His humility, His spirit of service, and His obedience to His Father.

To the Sisters in Angers, she writes: “*We cannot go on except by following Jesus, who was always working and suffering*”<sup>38</sup>. Louise helps them to draw upon a strong, solid spiritual life, and to develop a sense of interiority. Christ’s attitude during His public life must become their point of reference. Daily meditation on the Gospel will give the Sisters renewed strength, a new power of love. Prayer and meditation on the Word of God are means for self-forgetfulness, which are necessary for growth. God alone brings about conversion of heart.

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<sup>35</sup> ...

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<sup>37</sup> *SW*, L. 127, p. 82.

<sup>38</sup> ...

### ***Trust in Providence***

As she herself draws her courage from God, Louise never ceases to encourage the Sisters to have great trust in the guidance of Divine Providence, especially when they have to face the difficulties of each day, accepting whatever comes and abandoning themselves to the love of God in contemplating the Cross of Christ.

To the Sisters in Ussel, she writes, *“Don’t worry if, for a very long time, you do not see things reach the point you may desire; do the best you can in great peace and tranquility to give place to God’s guidance of you, and don’t be concerned about anything else”*<sup>39</sup>. To Sister Madeleine Mongert: *“Be thankful for the care Divine Providence takes of you by providing you with all that is necessary”*<sup>40</sup>.

### ***The spirit of humility, simplicity, and charity***

Louise advises the Sisters to contemplate the Son of God who came into our world, and to ask Him to give them His spirit of humility, simplicity, and charity. To Sister Genevieve Doinel: *“You will learn from Jesus in the crib to practice solid virtue, as He did in His holy humanity, as soon as He came down to earth. It is from His infancy that you will obtain all that you need to become perfect Daughters of Charity. You will do so by entreating Him to grant you His Spirit”*<sup>41</sup>.

To the Sisters in Richelieu: *“Gentleness, cordiality, and forbearance must be the practices of the Daughters of Charity, just as humility, simplicity, and love of the holy humanity of Jesus Christ, who is perfect charity, is their spirit”*<sup>42</sup>. Louise galvanizes the Sisters, communicates her dynamic force to them, and encourages them to walk in the same direction in communion with one another. To the Sisters in Angers: *“Begin by a true desire to please God, recalling that His Providence has brought you to the place where you are established and has united you so that you can help one another to grow in perfection”*<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup>SW, L. 519, p. 614.

<sup>40</sup>SW, L. 441, p. 75.

<sup>41</sup>SW, L. 647, p. 666.

<sup>42</sup>SW, L. 377, p. 406.

<sup>43</sup>SW, L. 104b, p. 113.

### **3. By her witness of community living, Louise leads the sisters to live quality relationships among themselves, with poor persons, and with their collaborators (*Louise's Sisterly love*)**

Louise teaches the Sister to live well together and with persons who are poor.

#### ***Living well together***

Contemplating the Blessed Trinity, Louise encourages the Sisters to live together in the image of the Trinity, in close communion, where each one commits herself with all her faith and love. To the Sisters in Montreuil: *"We must have but one heart, and act with one mind as do the three divine Persons"*<sup>44</sup>.

Louise constantly exhorts the Sisters to live closely united and to be cordial with one another. Cordiality is the kindness that allows one to discover what is good and beautiful in others: *"If we acquire the practice of esteeming our Sisters and of speaking well of them, a spirit of union, gentleness, and true charity will grow in the Company, in keeping with the plan of God when He formed it"*<sup>45</sup>.

Louise encourages them to support one another mutually, with patience, kindness, and indulgence. To the Sisters in Angers: *"If our Sister is depressed or forlorn, if she is too quick or too slow, what in the world do you expect her to do about it? This is part of her character"*<sup>46</sup>. Louise knows the Sisters well and knows that temperaments differ, that moods change and tensions may arise. During one of her absences, she writes to Jeanne Lepeintre, who is replacing her as Sister Servant at the Motherhouse, pointing out to her the precautions to be taken to maintain good sisterly relations: *"I beg you, Sister, if any Sister seems bitter or agitated, to calm her without seeming to do so, so as to maintain gentleness and cordiality"*<sup>47</sup>.

When Françoise Carcireux encounters difficulties with a young Sister Anne, Louise encourages her to overcome her own feelings and to be very attentive and kind to her younger Sister: *"I ask you, dear Sister to be a great consolation to our dear Sister Anne and to anticipate her needs by your support and cordiality. Sometimes the initiation of marks of respect or deference is very helpful in winning hearts"*<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup>SW, A. 85, p. 771.

<sup>45</sup>SW, A. 74, p. 787.

<sup>46</sup>SW, L. 104b, p. 114.

<sup>47</sup>SW, L. 52, p. 135.

<sup>48</sup>SW, L. 647b, p. 668.

In every situation it is important to learn how to support one another: *"We have to live in great peace and forbearance with the faults of one another"*<sup>49</sup>.

### ***Quality relationships with persons living in poverty***

Louise asks for the same quality relationship with persons who are poor: *"I recommend to you and to all our Sisters that dear cordiality and support that are so necessary for the union of perfect Daughters of Charity, gentleness and holy affection for your poor patients, and modesty and reserve in all your actions..."*<sup>50</sup>.

To Sister Barbe Angiboust: *"We are obliged... to carry out patiently the work of God, doing everything without haste; our vocation of servants of the poor calls us to practice the gentleness, humility, and forbearance that we must have... for the poor because they are the members of Jesus Christ and our masters..."*<sup>51</sup>.

To Sister Anne Hardemont: *"My dear Sisters, practice great gentleness toward the poor... because they are your masters"*<sup>52</sup>.

To Sister Anne: *"Serve your sick poor in a spirit of gentleness and great compassion, in imitation of Our Lord, who acted that way with the most unfortunate"*<sup>53</sup>.

To the Sisters in Angers: *"My dear Sisters, be very gentle and courteous toward your poor. You know that they are our masters and that we must love them tenderly and respect them deeply. It is not enough for these maxims to be in our minds; we must bear witness to them by our gentle and charitable care"*<sup>54</sup>.

### ***Quality relationships with all those with whom the Sisters collaborate***

When the Sisters collaborate with others, Louise strongly advises them to show respect, gentleness, and true humility in all their least actions and gestures:

To the Sisters in Montreuil: *"Our Sisters must have great respect for the women and girls who have run the hospital for a long time, and manifest great love and cordiality toward them"*<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> SW, L. 187, p. 214.

<sup>50</sup> SW, ...

<sup>51</sup> SW, L. 424, p. 468.

<sup>52</sup> SW, L. 200b, p. 209.

<sup>53</sup> SW, L. 383, p. 434.

<sup>54</sup> SW, L. 284b, pp. 320-321.

<sup>55</sup> SW, A. 85, p. 772.

To the Sisters in Angers: *“Remember always to show great respect to the Fathers of the Poor. Continue to welcome warmly the ladies and gentlemen who visit the hospital... We must welcome cordially those who come to visit the poor”*<sup>56</sup>.

#### **4. Through her experience of Ministry to persons living in poverty, she teaches the sisters to give themselves freelt to serve Christ in the poor (*Louise’s passion for persons who were poor*)**

In the first stage, Louise helps the Sisters to make a clear choice.

Why have they come? Louise emphasizes the motives for this ministry. The step taken by the Sisters who are coming to serve poor persons is an act of faith, a response to the Lord’s invitation to give themselves entirely to Him to be entirely given to persons who are poor. For Louise, ministry to persons living in poverty is a special way of committing themselves in depth to evangelical conversion. Louise teaches the Sisters to give their lives for those who are poor, and shows them that service is like an extension of the Redemption, allowing poor persons to take on new life and to become, once again, living human beings.

To Sister Jeanne Lepeintre: *“Isn’t it only reasonable, my dear Sisters, that, since God has honored us by calling us to His service, we should serve Him in the way that pleases Him?”*<sup>57</sup>.

In the second stage, she helps the Sisters to discover poor persons from the inside. Louise knows how to communicate to her Sisters the passion for persons living in poverty. She teaches them to recognize suffering humanity as a continuation of the suffering humanity of Christ. At the school of Louise, the faces of poor persons no longer have the same meaning. The Sisters do not go to them because they feel some attraction but do it to satisfy their suffering hearts, seeing in them the suffering and dying Christ. It is no longer the beauty of the body that calls to them; it is compassion that is unfolding.

To Sister Jeanne-Francoise: *“Please continue serving your masters, His dear members, with devotion, gentleness, and humility, **always seeing God in them**”*<sup>58</sup>. To Sister Claude she writes: *“Please God by serving your masters and His dear members with devotion, gentleness, and humility, and don’t be upset if your senses rebel”*<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup>SW, L. 284b, p. 321.

<sup>57</sup>SW, L. 319, p. 252.

<sup>58</sup>SW, L. 361, p. 421.

<sup>59</sup>SW, L. 547, p. 81.

In the third stage, Louise stresses the demands of service.

When the Sisters leave for different places more or less distant from Paris, living and working conditions are sometimes difficult. Louise is attentive to writing down regulations corresponding to each mission and particular situation in order to give the Sisters clear points of reference and specific goals aimed at providing a structure for the Sisters and developing their sense of belonging to the Company.

Louise assures the formation of the Sisters so that they may be competent and attentive to the needs of poor persons. She repeats to them what is basic for their vocation: **to be servants, following Christ the Servant.** To Barbe Angiboust: *“The Sisters must recall and possess the qualities of **servants of the poor**, in order to remain faithful to their duty”*<sup>60</sup>.

And, in order to be real servants, they must “clothe themselves with the spirit of Christ, gentle and humble of heart”. Louise stresses the virtue of humility, in imitation of Jesus Christ, who abased himself even to the torture of the Cross. This virtue of humility must be reflected in all the behavior of the Sisters.

To Sister Barbe Angiboust, she points out, *“our vocation of servants of the poor reminds us of the gentleness, humility, and support we must have for others; that we must respect and honor everyone; the poor, because they are the members of Jesus Christ and our masters; the rich, so that they may give us the means of doing good for persons living in poverty”*<sup>61</sup>.

She insists on the need for the availability of the servants of the poor and associates it with obedience to God’s will, in imitation of Christ on the Cross. To Sister Turgis, *“Store up a good provision for when Divine Providence calls you elsewhere. Don’t think about when this will happen, but live in detachment”*<sup>62</sup>.

## **5. By her review of life in the light of the word of God, she teaches the sisters to examine their lives in the sight of God**

Louise proposes to the Sisters apostolic and community reviews.

With Louise, the lives of the Sisters are seen in review, not in a methodic and moralistic way, but in the context of events and needs. She asks Vincent if it wouldn’t be a good idea *“to assemble all the Sisters so they can share their thoughts with one another, encourage one*

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<sup>60</sup>SW, L. 419, p. 456.

<sup>61</sup>SW, L. 424, p. 468.

<sup>62</sup>SW, L. 182, p. 206.

*another, and call attention to any faults that might be committed in the service of the poor, in their dealings with the ladies, and in the area of cordiality with one another*"<sup>63</sup>.

For Louise, there is no spiritual progress outside the time frame of the past, reviewed and unified in the light of the Gospel. By her many letters, Louise guides the Sisters to an understanding of God's will for the Company. She takes the time to listen to what the Sisters are living and to clarify situations in the light of the Gospel. She points out difficulties, analyzes problems, puts failures into perspective, and always considers difficulties as stepping stones to better results.

To Sister Jeanne Lepeintre she writes, "*I praise God with all my heart for the guidance of His Divine Providence on the Company. We have such good reason to adore Him that we should be the most ungrateful people in the world if we failed to entrust ourselves to it. It is Providence alone, my dear Sister that should maintain us and provide for all our needs, particularly those which human prudence can neither foresee nor meet. With all my heart, I hope that all our Sisters will enter totally into these sentiments without ever relying on anything else*"<sup>64</sup>.

## **6. By her deep Marian devotion, Louise gives Mary to the company as its only mother**

Louise invites the Sisters to take Mary as its only Mother and as teacher of the spiritual life.

She passes on her love of Mary to the Sisters, constantly encouraging them to place themselves under the direction of Mary and to model themselves on her hidden life, for Jesus cannot be dissociated from Mary. She stresses the example of Mary's life and virtues, particularly her availability as servant. "*In what we do, let us cast our eyes on those of the Blessed Virgin, and think that the greatest honor we could render her is to imitate her virtues, especially... her humility, since, through her, God did such great things*"<sup>65</sup>.

With Mary Immaculate, Louise believed that we, too, receive our life as a gift, and, like Mary, we are invited to trust and gratitude. That is why, in imitation of Jesus, she constantly repeats to her Sisters, "*Behold your Mother... We must carefully consider the advantages that the Blessed Virgin has enjoyed over all other creatures as a consequence of her*

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<sup>63</sup>SW, L. 128, p. 72.

<sup>64</sup>SW, L. 153, p. 164.

<sup>65</sup>SW, M. 33, p. 785.

*Immaculate Conception*"<sup>66</sup>. The Sisters are to imitate the Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, and learn from her how to love Christ in the person of the poor, and to give Him their love with humility.

"*Pray that the Blessed Virgin may be your only Mother*"<sup>67</sup>. We could say that Louise identified the Company with Saint John, who was entrusted to Mary, and who learned through her the practice of virtue. In 1644, during her pilgrimage to Chartres, Louise chose to make of Mary the one and only Mother of the Company, that she might sustain all the Sisters, present and to come, in remaining faithful to their vocation.

In her report of the pilgrimage, she writes, "*Seeing in the Blessed Virgin the fulfillment of the promises of God to humanity, and seeing the fulfillment of the vow of the Blessed Virgin in the accomplishment of the Mystery of the Incarnation, I asked her for the grace of fidelity for the Company*"<sup>68</sup>.

For twenty-seven years, Louise worked at the formation of the Sisters. She summarized the strong points and the difficulties in a letter she wrote to Sister Marguerite Chétif on January 10, 1660:

*"You surely know that some of our Sisters have come from farther away, but this requires strong characters, who desire the holiness of true Christians, and who want to die to themselves by mortification and a real act of renunciation, which they already made at the time of their holy Baptism, so that the Spirit of Jesus Christ may abide in them and grant them the strength to persevere in this way of life, which is totally spiritual, although they will be employed in exterior works, which appear lowly and despicable in the eyes of the world, but which are glorious in the sight of God and His angels"*<sup>69</sup>.

### III.

#### THE COAT OF ARMS OF THE COMPANY, ICON OF THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

Louise was able to communicate to her Daughters her love of poor persons, a love that had its source in the Heart of Christ. She gave them as a motto the expression of Saint Paul, "*Caritas Christi urget nos*"<sup>70</sup>,

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<sup>66</sup>SW, A. 31b, p. 830.

<sup>67</sup>SW, *Spiritual Testament*, p. 835.

<sup>68</sup>SW, L. 111, p. 122.

<sup>69</sup>SW, L. 651, p. 673.

<sup>70</sup>Cf. 2Cor. 5:14.

which she took as example and rule for her whole life and for all the Sisters.

Beginning in 1644, we find on the fragment of sealing wax which she used on her letters, the imprint of the traditional seal of the Company: a heart surrounded by burning flames, on which the Crucified Jesus stands out, with the inscription, "*The Charity of Jesus crucified urges us*". With no hesitation, we can say that this coat of arms is the synthesis of the spiritual journey of Saint Louise: it shows what must remain fundamental for the spiritual life of the Sisters and of the burgeoning Little Company.

Let us consider this coat of arms an icon.

The coat of arms evokes symbols and, in this sense, it encourages openness of heart for a deep interior understanding. It appeals to the understanding of the heart and to the lights of the Holy Spirit, leading us to God's plan for the Company. Let us simply take this symbol of the coat of arms of the Company, with which we are familiar, and look at it with new eyes.

## 1. The heart

In every language in the world the symbol of the heart designates what is the deepest center. When we consider the Heart of Jesus, we understand what Christ holds as most intimate; this center is filled with the Mystery of God. In this heart reigns the infinite love by which God gives himself. "*Learn of me that I am gentle and humble of heart*"<sup>71</sup> also speaks of the gentleness and humility of the Heart of the Father. God truly loves us, and, in the Heart of Jesus, this love has become irrevocable.

All men and women are called to embrace the mystery of God and His love, by letting themselves be transformed by Him: "*You will joyfully draw water from the fountains of salvation*"<sup>72</sup>. In the Heart of Jesus, burning with love for humanity, full of goodness and compassionate mercy, everyone finds shelter, especially the poorest of the poor. "*We have seen the love God has for us and have believed in it*"<sup>73</sup>. Close to the heart of Jesus, the human heart learns to understand the meaning of life, the value of the gift of self, and how to unite filial love for God to love for the neighbor.

<sup>71</sup> Mt. 11:29.

<sup>72</sup> Is. 12:3.

<sup>73</sup> 1 Jn. 1:4,16.

Saint Louise tried to delve into this mystery: *“The infinite goodness and wisdom of God leave the soul free to draw on the infinite sources of His love. He is so good that He communicates His prodigious love to all”*<sup>74</sup>.

### ***The fiery red color***

Of the Heart of Jesus emphasizes the intensity, depth, and ardor of His love, which gives itself constantly: *“I have come to bring fire on earth and how I wish that it were already enkindled”*<sup>75</sup>. Louise knows that what poor persons need, first of all, is love, that only if we love them deeply will we place ourselves totally at their service, and that it is from the Heart of God that we will draw the dynamic love that will call forth and sustain our availability in their regard. To Sister Madeleine Mongert: *“I desire that all the Sisters be filled with a great love, which will immerse them so sweetly in God and so charitably in the service of the poor”*<sup>76</sup>.

In imitation of Saint Louise, the Daughters of Charity strive to deepen their relationship with the Heart of Jesus, so as to revive in themselves faith in the love of God, by welcoming it ever better in their own lives.

## **2. The cross**

### ***The Cross is the most profound expression of the gift Christ made of His life***

Saint Louise invites the Sisters to contemplate Jesus Christ on the Cross, in order to know the limitless love God has for us. The transpierced side of the Redeemer is the source of the love of God. Louise urges the Sisters to draw from this fountain so that they may come to the real knowledge of Jesus Christ, to experience his love more profoundly, and then, to witness it to persons who are poor.

This mystery of infinite love immersed Saint Louise in the most profound adoration: *“The Incarnation of the Son of God is, in accord with His plan from all eternity, for the Redemption of the human race”*<sup>77</sup>. By turning our regard toward the Lord who *“took upon himself our infirmi-*

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<sup>74</sup>SW, A, 7, p. 701.

<sup>75</sup> ...

<sup>76</sup>SW, L, 441, p. 75.

<sup>77</sup> ...

*ties and our burdens*"<sup>78</sup>. We become more attentive to the sufferings and needs of poor persons, and our desire to participate in His work of salvation by becoming servants is strengthened. Louise affirms her determination: "*To choose the life of Jesus crucified as model for our lives*"<sup>79</sup>.

### ***Jesus had a special love for those who were poor and identified with them***

In the Gospel of the Last Judgment<sup>80</sup>, Jesus expresses clearly that the poor person is himself. He gives himself to be known at the heart of His relationship with persons living in poverty. Louise recalls this frequently: "*We serve Our Lord in the person of those who are poor*"<sup>81</sup> (To Sister Claude Brigide).

Louise invites her daughters to have, in a certain sense, the same experience that Thomas had after the Resurrection, that is, to hear the Risen Christ say to them, "*Put forth your finger and see my hands; put forth your hand, and place it in my side; and be not an unbeliever but a believer*"<sup>82</sup>. Like Thomas, we are called to recognize in every suffering person the wounds of the Risen Christ, His pierced hands, and His wounded heart. And as Thomas cried out, "*My Lord and my God*", before the wounds of the Crucified One, we, too, adopt a new way of "seeing" which is a look of faith, "*The poor are our Lords and masters*".

A look of faith is a gift of God to be welcomed, and a task to be fulfilled. In becoming poor among poor persons, we put ourselves in the disposition of welcoming the gift of faith and of seeing Christ in the person of those who suffer. "*Sisters, you see so much misery that you cannot relieve. God also sees it... Share their trials with them; do all you can to provide them with a little assistance and remain at peace... If you had plenty... your hearts would be troubled to use it while seeing our lords and masters suffering so much*"<sup>83</sup>.

### **3. Burning flames**

The ardent love of the Heart of Jesus desires greatly to inflame the earth and transform it into a burning bush. The burning flames, like tongues of fire, are one of the great symbols of the presence and action

<sup>78</sup> Mt. 8:17.

<sup>79</sup> SW, A. 21b, p. 732.

<sup>80</sup> Mt. 25.

<sup>81</sup> SW, L. 276, p. 314.

<sup>82</sup> Jn. 20:27.

<sup>83</sup> SW, L. 353, p. 396.

of God in human history. On the day of Pentecost, “*tongues that were said to be tongues of fire*” descended on each of the Apostles<sup>84</sup>.

If fire symbolizes the Divine Presence, the tongues of fire settled above the heads of the Apostles signify the descent of the Spirit of God on them. They symbolize the gift given to each of them to make them capable of proclaiming, with a tongue of fire, the love of God for all persons: they are what must set charity afire in hearts.

How can we not think of that Pentecost Sunday of 1623, when the Spirit of God came to illuminate the dark night in which Louise had found herself for many long months. “*It was God who was teaching me*”, she wrote<sup>85</sup>. Louise’s commitment of her life for persons living in poverty reveals to us that this teaching was, indeed, “*like a tongue that was said to be a tongue of fire*”.

Louise de Marillac was accustomed to make her spiritual retreat between the Ascension and Pentecost, in order to be in the same “*dispositions as the holy Apostles in preparing to receive the Holy Spirit*”<sup>86</sup>, and to let herself be carried away by the splendor of this gift, the burning fire, and to proclaim the Good News to the poor by her words as well as by her actions. “*I entreat the goodness of Our Lord to dispose our souls for the reception of the Holy Spirit so that, burning with the fire of His holy love, you may be consumed in the perfection of that love...*”<sup>87</sup> (To Sister Anne Hardemont).

For Louise, it is charity that the divine fire enkindles in hearts. Once again, Louise is at the heart of the Gospel revelation: that God is love<sup>88</sup>. He reveals the fullness of His love for humanity in His beloved Son, who gives His life for the salvation of the world and who will make of love – love of God and of the neighbor – the great Commandment entrusted to His disciples. “*It seemed to me that, in order to be faithful to God, we must live in great union with one another. Since the Holy Spirit is the union of the Father and the Son, the life we have freely undertaken must be lived in this great union of hearts... and enable us to bear with one another and to live together with cordiality and gentleness*”<sup>89</sup>.

The Holy Spirit enkindles in us the fire of Divine Love. It is He who transforms our hearts into a furnace of love. “Tongues of fire” burn in the hearts of Daughters of Charity, uniting them in community to serve

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<sup>84</sup> Acts 2:3.

<sup>85</sup> SW, A. 2, *Light*.

<sup>86</sup> SW, A. 10, p. 704.

<sup>87</sup> SW, L. 429, p. 353.

<sup>88</sup> 1 Jn. 4:8.

<sup>89</sup> SW, A. 68, p. 768.

poor persons in a spirit of humility, simplicity, and charity. The fire that burns in the heart of the Company wants to extend to the far corners of the world in order to witness everywhere to the love of Jesus Christ for all those living in poverty.

### *To conclude with these symbols*

The symbols of the Heart of God, the Cross of Jesus, and the tongues of fire present us not only with the essential of the Christian message: the Incarnation, the Passion and Resurrection, and Pentecost, but also the spirituality of the daughters of Charity.

In Saint Louise, reflection on Mary always accompanies her reflection on Christ. In God's loving plan for humanity, she situates Mary fully oriented toward Christ the Redeemer, as His Mother and the Servant of the Lord. She sees Mary in Christ and Christ in Mary. Just as Jesus Crucified gave us Mary as our Mother, Saint Louise gives her Daughters Mary Immaculate as the "Only Mother of the Company"<sup>90</sup>.

In the symbols of the coat of arms of the Company can be seen, as in the background, Mary, the Mother of Christ, Mother of the Church, and Mother of the Company. If the only Rule of the Company is Christ, the only Mother of the Company is Mary.

## 4. The motto

*"The charity of Jesus Christ crucified **urges us**"* is a powerful expression that indicates a dynamic life force.

It is the charity that urged Jesus to leave the bosom of the Father to manifest His love to us and to detach himself from self, to dispossess himself, to forget himself in order to become available to others. The charity of Jesus is a fire that stirs up the heart. Animated by His love, we are urged to reveal Him and to bear witness to Him.

*"The charity of Jesus Christ **crucified** urges us"* is a powerful expression that indicates a dynamic force of service. Jesus Christ crucified urges us to become, like Him, the last of all and the servant of all. We do not have to look for any way of service other than that of Christ the Servant giving His life for His friends. The charity of Jesus Christ crucified urges us to take upon ourselves the suffering of persons who are poor, to make their sufferings our sufferings, and to seek together to how to respond to their needs.

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<sup>90</sup>SW, *Spiritual Testament*, p. 835.

*“The charity of Jesus Christ crucified urges us”* indicates also the community aspect of mission.

Christ has called us and brought us together for the service of persons living in poverty. United in His name, His charity urges us to make of our communities places of sisterly communion for mission. The charity of Jesus Christ crucified urges us, as members of a community, to serve Christ in those who are poor. This means not only respecting them and responding to their needs, but also considering them as “lords and masters”, recognizing in them the seeds of the Word, and letting ourselves be evangelized by them.

#### **BY WAY OF A FINAL CONCLUSION**

I’m going to conclude with a quotation from Sister Evelyne to speak, who today, in the footsteps of Saint Louise, continues to exhort the Daughters of Charity with the same spiritual dynamism.

*“We are truly called to allow ourselves to be transformed by the Spirit in order to put into practice in our Provinces and local communities the aspirations, ‘thirsts’, desires for truth and consistency that emerged so clearly and with such unanimity in the course of our General Assembly. Our world expects this of us, this world which is so complex, diversified, and technological. In his social encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI lists the following as conditions of the integral development of the human person: ‘Attention to the spiritual life, a serious consideration of the experiences of trust in God, spiritual fellowship in Christ, reliance upon God’s providence and mercy, love and forgiveness, self-denial, acceptance of others, justice and peace’ (No. 79)”<sup>91</sup>.*

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<sup>91</sup> Sister Evelyne Franc, *letter of August 15, 2009*.