

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: A Single Passion for the Poor

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Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac worked together for 35 years. Both were driven by two passions: a passion for the Son of God living in the midst of others, and a passion for the poor. But how could this man and woman, with such different family and social backgrounds, and with such different temperaments, work together? What relationship were they able to establish between them? Reading the 600 letters they exchanged shows that their relationship evolved over the course of the years and passed through different stages before becoming a true friendship. Every relationship evolves, building itself up over days and years. Some lack of understanding can coexist with a shared passion for the poor that supports different ways of shaping action.

In Vincent de Paul as in Louise de Marillac, holiness was not innate. It rested on their humanity. Their relationship to God and to the poor, their mutual relationship, transformed who they were little by little, perfecting and embellishing them. The friendship which united them so profoundly was born in a series of encounters in which each one became more and more aware of a personal identity, discovered a reciprocal complementarity, and helped the other to come to terms with the self fully. Their friendship favored the beginning of innovative activities, sweeping along many collaborators in their daring.

A number of stages, with very different aspects, marked the thirty-five years of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac's collaboration.

A Difficult Beginning (1625-1627)

Reticence, hesitation and uncertainty marked the first encounters between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. The differences between them were great enough to explain this.

Relating her Pentecost experience, Louise de Marillac told her director: "*I was assured that I should rely peacefully upon my director*

and that God was giving me the one that he prepared for me, it seemed to me, and feeling repugnant to accept him, nevertheless I acquiesced.” She must have passed Monsieur Vincent often in the street, because the de Gondi mansion where he stayed is close to the house where the Le Gras family lived. She had noticed this young priest who had the characteristics of a peasant: he had neither the elegance nor the distinction of Jean Pierre Camus who, for several years, had guided her on her spiritual path. But when he became Bishop of Belley, he spent less and less time in Paris. So it was with no joyful heart that Louise went to meet her new director. It seems that the friendship she felt for Francis de Sales, who died three years earlier, eased this coming together. As a matter of fact, the Bishop of Geneva had entrusted to Vincent de Paul the direction of the monasteries of the Visitation established in Paris.

On the other side, Vincent de Paul hesitated to direct this sad and depressed young widow whom people thought scrupulous. He remembered the neediness of Madame de Gondi who did not want to be separated from her spiritual counselor, wanting him always close by. Jean Pierre Camus, a great friend of Francis de Sales, had to put heavy pressure on him. One of the letters of Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac shows that he humbly submitted to the will of God: *“Know this, from now on, Mademoiselle, that the person whom God has designated in his wisdom to help another, does not find himself burdened with the explanations she asks for, which would make him a father to a child.”*

From the first months, Vincent de Paul experienced what he feared: Mademoiselle Le Gras was very upset and very anguished during his absences. He received letters without interruption in which Louise expressed her anxiety. *“I hope that you will forgive me for the liberty I take that bears witness to the impatience of my spirit with this long period just passed, and with my apprehension for the future, not knowing the place where you are going after the location where you are now.”* A letter of Bishop Jean Pierre Camus shows how poorly Louise endured the numerous absences of her new director who was preaching the Mission in the villages of the Ile de France. *“Pardon me, my dear sister, if I tell you that you have attached yourself a little too much to those who guide you and you lean too much on them. Here’s Monsieur Vincent in the dark and Mademoiselle Le Gras out of sorts and disoriented.”*

Louise de Marillac’s financial situation became so precarious after the death of her husband that she could no longer stay in her old house in the parish of St. Nicholas in the Fields. Obliged to look for a more simple home, Louise moved to the rue St. Victor, a few steps

from the College des Bons Enfants where Vincent de Paul was Superior. If Louise de Marillac wanted to have her director at her beck and call, he was trying to keep his distance. Vincent de Paul answered a rather demanding request of his directee: "*Our Savior himself took on the office of a director. Most certainly he does it in a way in which he wants you to see him.*" The tone of the letters from 1625 to 1627 is very polite, very respectful in the manner of the 17th Century. In spite of the initial difficulties, Vincent de Paul continued to welcome and counsel Louise de Marillac. He wanted to be faithful to the will of God.

Mutual Discovery (1627-1629)

In the course of their meetings and through their correspondence, Vincent and Louise revealed themselves little by little. Beginning in 1628, they wanted and hoped to meet. Monsieur Vincent expressed it in many letters: "*If it were not too late, I was going to see you this evening to find out just what you wanted of me, but that is for tomorrow.*" This correspondence is received with joy. Monsieur Vincent demonstrates this in all simplicity: "*My God, my dear daughter, your letter and the thoughts you sent me consoled me.*"

Vincent de Paul, attentive to human misery, saw that Louise, a very sensitive woman, had been profoundly scarred by a hard life: he well understood her suffering, her anxiety. He noticed how she strained to know and accomplish the will of God: this tension risked harming both her physical and psychological equilibrium. Vincent did everything to calm her: "*But come, my dear daughter, continue to stay astride and allow God to act.... Take good care of your health for love of him.*" Vincent de Paul also watched Louise de Marillac's great distress about her son, Michael. Quite simply, he made himself the young man's teacher, guiding him in his studies and counseling him when his relationship with his mother became difficult.

On her side, Louise de Marillac discovered in Monsieur Vincent a rich personality: she admired his activities for the country poor. She knew that this priest, who seemed "simple" to her, had an obsession for the poor, and was capable of engaging his energies to go to the aid of those who suffered. She willingly participated in the charitable activities begun in numerous villages in the form of the Confraternities of Charity.

In these times of mutual discovery, Monsieur Vincent took the prominent role. It was he who plotted the course, gave back confidence. Humbly, Louise de Marillac let herself be lead, simply saying what she saw.

An Intense Collaboration (1629-1640)

An intense and effective collaboration built up between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in the midst of boundless activity. Both were at the age of their full maturity: Louise was 40, Vincent 50. Two events, "foundational" in the sense that they gave a solid base to this collaboration, marked this period.

Sending Louise de Marillac on a mission the 6th of May, 1629, was the starting point of this collaboration. Monsieur Vincent had established many Confraternities of Charity on the family lands of the de Gondis. As he went visiting them, he proposed that Louise join him there: *"Father de Gondi wants me to meet him in Montmirail.... Does your heart tell you to come there? If so... we will have the happiness of seeing you in Montmirail."* After a positive response from Louise, Vincent, writing in a most solemn way, made her his "envoy with a mission." *"I am sending you the letters and reports you need for your trip. So go, Mademoiselle, go, in the name of our Lord. I pray that his divine goodness will accompany you, that it will be your consolation on the road, your shade against the heat of the sun, your cover against rain and the cold, your comfortable bed when you rest, your strength when you work, and, finally, that it bring you back in perfect health and full of good works."* Did Vincent really know that this event was important or did he simply let himself be guided by the Spirit?

After her first trip when he saw Louise de Marillac at work, Vincent de Paul leaned more and more on her for everything that pertained to the Confraternities of Charity. Louise responded to the requests of her director and involved herself actively in this work. In the course of the many visits she made, she informed Vincent by her reports more on the plan of the helping organization than on the manner in which aid was distributed. Nor did she forget the spiritual aspect. She submitted the problems she had encountered; Vincent replied by giving her complete freedom of action: *"You want to know if you should speak to a group of the Charity. Certainly, I would like that very much; but I do not know if it is easy and expedient. It would be profitable for them. Speak with Mademoiselle Champlin and do what Our Savior inspires in you."*

Each day Vincent de Paul discovered more of the richness of the personality of his collaborator. He records that she was quite at ease among the Ladies of Charity, that she knew how to speak with them, and that she was not afraid to make whatever comments proved necessary. He did not hesitate to send her to a Charity that was going downhill. He used her abilities to rework the rules. The work was truly shared — one wrote, the other corrected. *"I will send you, by the*

pastor or by someone else, the rule of the Charity, which I have adjusted to be more suited to Montreuil. You will see it; and if there is something to be taken out or added, send it to me, if you please." In 1631, Louise de Marillac started a Confraternity in the parish of St. Nicholas du Chardonnet. She wrote the rule and sent it to Vincent de Paul: "*You are a good woman to have accommodated the rule for the Charity and I like it.*"

A change in the style of their letters indicates that the relationship between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac had really changed. While, in all the first years, Monsieur Vincent wrote to his directee calling her "my daughter," after 1629 he used the expression "Mademoiselle." Both of them left behind the dependent relationship of daughter to father and father to daughter. They recognized one another as mutually responsible for a shared mission.

The many letters from this period (at least one a week!) quite naturally went beyond the work of the Mission. Vincent and Louise shared their little daily news — for example, Vincent's fall from a horse, the lack of water at St. Lazare, Madame Goussault's (a Lady of Charity) trip to Angers, money worries, their reflections on what was going on. Sometimes this sharing went so far as to change their lives. St. Vincent reflected on his selfish manner of acting: "*Remember to pray to God especially for me, who, finding myself between the occasion of fulfilling a promise I had made and an act of charity in regard to a person for whom we could do good or not, I did not do the charity so I could keep my promise, which left that person unhappy; that does not vex me as much as my following my own inclination in doing what I did.*" Louise addressed herself with confidence in her spiritual director: she told him about the joys of her missionary work, her fear of soaking up the compliments. She was reassured by this reflection of Vincent de Paul. "*Relax and join yourself to the mockery, the misunderstanding and the rough treatment that the Son of God suffered, then you will be honored and esteemed. Certainly, Mademoiselle, a truly humble spirit humbles itself as much when honored as when misunderstood and acts like a bee that makes honey as easily from the dew that falls upon wormwood as that which falls upon roses.*" She was not reluctant to speak to him of her continual worries about her son and accepted the wise advice of this educator priest. Vincent's words are often full of humor: "*Oh, yes, our Lord did well not taking you for his mother, because you do not think of finding the Will of God in the maternal care for your son which he requires of you; or maybe you think that it hinders you from doing the Will of God in something else; nothing doing, for the Will of God does not oppose the Will of God. So honor the tranquility of the holy Virgin in a similar situation.*" Louise accepted the remarks of her director.

Louise, an intuitive and quick woman, was not afraid to take the initiative. In 1632, the Tour Saint Bernard, near the rue St. Victor, was converted to take in sick galley slaves. Louise immediately went to visit them. Vincent admired that, but knew that the action of an individual risked no follow-up. So he asked Louise about sharing a possible activity: *"Charity toward these poor galley slaves has an incomparable merit before God. You did well to help them and you will do more good if you continue in whatever way you can. Think a little about whether the Charity of St. Nicholas might want to take charge of it. But whatever, it is difficult, and here I am tossing this idea to your spirit of adventure."* Vincent, knowing the many needs of the poor, wished that the laity be associated in every work of charity which he encountered along the way. *"Mademoiselle, it will be good for you to communicate with Madame Goussault and Mademoiselle Poulailon about Germaine to have their advice. It is only two days since I focused on this way of doing things, which seems to me both cordial and deferential: and maybe I can cause them no pain by having you make the final decision about your work without telling them."*

The second of the foundational events is the start of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. This foundation lets us see, in Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, different appreciations of reality. From 1629-1630, the Confraternities of Charity were established in many parishes in Paris. Numerous noble women wanted to take part. But difficulties appeared quickly. Their husbands did not like their wives going into the slums carrying large pots of soup, cleaning the rooms of the sick. They insisted that they send their servants. Vincent de Paul and Louise questioned one another about the future of the Confraternities in Paris; the service risked becoming a delegated job and not a work of charity.

During a Mission at Suresnes, Vincent de Paul met Marguerite Naseau, a woman with much initiative. Very happy with Marguerite's proposal to come serve the sick poor of the Confraternities, Vincent sent this peasant to Louise de Marillac explaining what he wanted of her. Marguerite's zeal quickly spread. Other young women came forward to serve with the Confraternities. The Charity in Paris was renewed. Louise accepted all these farm girls, spread them out among the different parishes, and resolved the little conflicts that came up between these "servants of the Charities" and the Ladies of Charity. A profound insight arose in her heart: she thought again about the Light of Pentecost, of the little community of servants of the poor that were coming and going. Would not gathering these girls into one community not be efficacious aid? The work was tough, the sick sometimes demanding, and discouragement could arise. Louise spoke to Vincent about her project. He saw no such need and

did all he could to discourage his collaborator. “*You belong to our Lord and to his holy Mother; hold on to them and to the state in which you have been placed, waiting for them to show you if they desire something else from you.*” Louise, who saw the difficulties of peasants working in the Confraternities, followed her thought. She spoke to Marguerite Naseau about it, and thought it possible. Convinced it was God’s will, politely but firmly, she spoke up again. The answer of her director was always the same: he did not see the need for gathering the girls who serve in the Confraternities. “*I ask you again not to think about this, until our Lord makes clear what he wants, who now gives indications contrary to it.... You are looking to become the servant of these poor girls, and God wants you to be only his, and perhaps serve other persons that you cannot arrange in this fashion; and when you arrange only his business, is it not enough for God that your heart honors the tranquility of our Lord’s heart?*”

God spoke through what happened: in February of 1633, Marguerite died of the plague; she was contaminated by a sick woman she had let sleep in her bed. Her rapid death deeply moved Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Charity cannot ignore prudence. Louise’s project was taken up again by Vincent de Paul: “*In regard to the manner of your employment, I no longer have the clarity of heart before God touching the difficulty that prevented me from seeing whether this is the Will of his divine Majesty. I ask you, Mademoiselle, to put this matter before him during these days when God gives the graces of the Holy Spirit generously, yes, even the Holy Spirit himself. Pray fervently and keep yourself happy.*” What was the difficulty that was a problem for Vincent de Paul? The letter does not specify, but it is easy to guess. Would founding a group, a community, of the serving girls of the Charities under the responsibility of Louise de Marillac risk harming the Confraternities of Charity? Was it really necessary to form two distinct groups? Another question must have haunted Monsieur Vincent de Paul. Could you ask peasant girls to live a life totally consecrated to God in community? In the XVIIth Century, religious life was reserved for noble families and the bourgeois, and one needed a dowry. Was it reasonable to envisage a completely new kind of community? It seems that it was Louise de Marillac, a *grande dame* of Paris who was going to influence the Gascon peasant. She knew the girls well, their desire for a life given to God, the seriousness of their spirituality. Drawing them together would assure a deeper formation to know them better before sending them off to where they were asked for. So Louise insisted.

In August of 1633, Vincent de Paul made his annual retreat. Louise took advantage of it and sent him another letter. On the last

day of his retreat, Vincent answered: "*I think that your good angel has done what you told me in what you sent me. It has been four or five days that your angel has communicated with mine about the Charity of your daughters; for it is true that he often suggested that I recall it and I have thought seriously about this good work; we will speak about it, with God's help, Friday or Saturday, unless you send to me sooner.*" This meeting was decisive. Louise was able to propose to her daughters that they try this adventure. Some accepted, some refused. The 29th of November, 1633, Louise welcomed into her house 4 or 5 (we do not know the exact number) "*so they could live in community,*" writes her first biographer.

Both Vincent and Louise, knowing their responsibilities to this new group, assured the formation of the Sisters: Louise, their basic formation, beginner's lessons in reading and the Scriptures, care of the sick, Vincent their spiritual formation. They reflected together on their response to requests that came from different villages and towns, Louise rewrote the rules, Vincent reread and corrected them. Their help to one another is evident. The optimism of Vincent could often calm Louise de Marillac in the wake of the many little daily difficulties. "*Do not be surprised to find rebellion in this poor creature. We will see a lot more, if we live; and we will not suffer more with ours that our Lord did with his. Let us submit ourselves completely to his good pleasure in what comes to us.*" When one of the Sisters died, Vincent, in admiration of the work of all the Daughters of Charity, exalted the beauty and grandeur of their vocation: "*She died in the exercise of divine love, since she died in the work of the Charity.*"

Vincent pushed Louise de Marillac little by little to assume complete charge of the Daughters of Charity. "*Take charge*" he often said to her. Most simply, and very delicately, he helped her to know that sometimes she was a little too serious: "*I ask you to be happier, and you might lessen a little that bit of seriousness that nature gave you and which grace lightens.*" Louise did not hesitate to call to Vincent's attention, monopolized by his many duties, that he had easily forgotten his promises, their get togethers: "*You have forgotten my need that I showed you that I have to talk to you.*" The mutual understanding grew deeper between Vincent and Louise. They saw their qualities better, the richness of the other, but also the little faults, the failings. The experience of their complementarity forced Vincent and Louise to make progress together towards the truth.

This dose of awareness of their complementarity favored the beginning of some original works. The first concerned the foundlings. This work began in 1638, and was complicated by society's rejection of these children. Vincent de Paul encouraged the Ladies of Charity

in their initiatives for these children condemned to certain death. Louise taught the Daughters of Charity to care for and educate these little ones. She also envisaged entrusting some of the children to welcoming families. Vincent confirmed, on the side, the idea of a child going to caring parents. When the work encountered a difficulty, Vincent was there, calling out to the Ladies and reassuring Louise.

In 1638, Monsieur Lambert, shortly after his arrival in Richelieu, wanted some Daughters of Charity sent to this town. Vincent de Paul approved the project, but Louise hesitated to send the Sisters for the first time so far from Paris. Vincent, with much delicacy, tried to conquer Louise's reservations. *"The Charity of Richelieu has a real need right now of our Sister Barbe because of the number of sick there. What would you think of sending help to these good people in their need? They do not have contagious illnesses."* And when two Sisters left Paris for this far-off town, Vincent was there, attentive to the motherly suffering of his collaborator. *"Mon Dieu, Mademoiselle, what happiness for these good daughters to go and continue the charity which our Lord did on earth in the place where they have gone!"*

The terrible misery of the sick at the hospital in Angers, described by Mme. Goussault, also moved Vincent and Louise greatly. Could the Company of the Daughters of Charity, should it take on a new direction, going to care for the sick, no longer at home, but inside a hospital? They reflected on the decision a long time. In December of 1639, Vincent prepared rules for this mission so far from Paris; Louise read them over and added some corrections. This first rule affirmed the ends of the Company: *"The Daughters of Charity of the sick poor are going to Angers to honor our Lord, Father of the poor, and his holy Mother, to help the sick poor in the Hospital of the said town corporally and spiritually."* He summed up the essential part of the life of every Daughter of Charity: *"The first thing our Lord asks of them is that they love him above all and that they do all their activities for love of him; and the second, that they cherish one another like sisters bound together by the ties of love, and the sick poor like their masters, because our Lord is in them, they in our Lord."*

The beginning of the service to the galley slaves by the Daughters of Charity in 1640 came from the same awareness of the extreme misery of these men. Vincent de Paul waited for Louise de Marillac's return from Angers before choosing the Sisters who would have to face this violent situation. *"We are waiting for you with that affection which our Savior knows. You will come at the right time for the galley slaves."*

A Perceptible Tension (1640-1642)

Toward 1640, the relationship between Vincent and Louise underwent a period of change. You could already detect, in the preceding years, some attitudes that revealed a great difference between these two personalities. Every friendship has its crises. That of Vincent and Louise was subject to the same law. Their friendship, which was established in truth, confidence, simplicity, had to face some tensions. The differences, accepted peacefully until then, became a source of impatience. They no longer worked like a complementarity, but rather changed into lack of understanding.

During Louise's stay in Angers, the Administrators asked for a written contract in good and proper form. Monsieur Vincent thought that that could be done by verbal agreement. Louise asked him: "*Who can sign the contract, for the Company of the Daughters of Charity has no legal existence?*" So no statement was then made. It is quite possible that Louise resented "*the harmful effects*" of the slow prudence of Monsieur Vincent. He responded: "*Since these gentlemen want to deal in writing, do so, in nomine Domini, and make the contract in your own name as the head of the Daughters of Charity, servants of the sick poor in hospitals and parishes, at the good pleasure of the Superior General of the congregation of the priests of the Mission, Director of the said Daughters of Charity.*" The letter goes on with some rather complicated explanations. This answer did not satisfy Louise. She must have let him know her surprise, because a fourth letter of Vincent, the 28th of January, 1640, just confirmed everything in the first of the 11th of that same month: "*I have told you my thought about the articles and conditions that you ought to have.*" Louise obeyed, and on the 1st of February, 1640, she signed the contract establishing the Daughters of Charity at the hospital in Angers.

The following year, the choice of a location for a new Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity became a source of several tensions. The house in which the Daughters of Charity set themselves up in 1636 had become too small after an influx of candidates. They had to find something larger. Louise took the opportunity to repeat her desire, already expressed in 1636 and denied by Monsieur Vincent — to live close to St. Lazare. Monsieur Vincent refused again because it was not prudent. When the people of the neighborhood saw a priest of the Mission go into the Daughters' house or a Sister entering St. Lazare, they would gossip and make comments. The Ladies of Charity looked for a house, but Louise refused the different suggestions. In February of 1641, she expressed her impatience. Vincent, who was ill, responded quickly: "*I see always a*

little of human feelings in you thinking that all is lost without a house while you see me sick. Oh woman of little faith or acceptance of the conduct and example of Jesus Christ! The Savior of the world, for the state of the Church, went to his Father for the rules and adjustments; and for a handful of daughters which his Providence has, we know, raised up and gathered, you think he would not supply a house.” A few months later, they bought a house, right in front of St. Lazare. Vincent accepted the sale and the Daughters of Charity moved there in October 1641.

From the beginnings of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, Monsieur Vincent was in the habit of going regularly to speak to the Sisters who very much appreciated these conferences. But for several months, Louise remarked that Vincent always found some excuse for not coming. He was swamped with work, he promised to come and did not, because he put the Ladies, the priests, the Queen, etc. before the Daughters. Louise did not take it well. In the notes of some conferences which Monsieur Vincent did give, she made some comments. On the 16th of August, 1640, she copied the words of Monsieur Vincent: “*I was quite close to not coming today because I had to go far into town; and I will have little time to talk to you.*” On the 16th of August, 1641 — there had not been conferences for a year — she underlines the excuses of Monsieur Vincent: “*It has been a long time since I called you together, but I have been very much hindered by my misery and my business. And so, my daughters, I hope that the goodness of God itself will supply what I owe you.*” More severely, Louise wrote at the beginning of the conference of March 9th, 1642: “*The ninth day of March, Monsieur Vincent was not able, on account of some pressing business, to be present at the beginning of the conference which his charity had resolved to give us.... Monsieur Portail began the conference....*” In the middle of the recounting, she notes: “*Monsieur Vincent arrived at five o'clock, and his charity, after having heard some thoughts of some of our sisters, continued: My sisters, it is getting late...; we will come back to this next Sunday....*” These conferences given between 1640 and 1642 are the only ones that have these notations.

In spite of their slightly strained relationship, their different points of view, the life of the Company went on: accepting numerous postulants, responding to requests, new foundations (Nanteuil, Fontenay aux Roses, Sedan...) as well as the preparation for first vows in the Company, March 25th, 1642.

Suddenly, an outside event, small in appearance, happened to jostle the two Founders. Saturday, the 7th of June, 1642, the eve of Pentecost, in the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, the floor of the room where the Sisters usually gathered for the conferences

collapsed. The gathering expected that day had not taken place because the speaker was called off this time too. Vincent de Paul, always attentive to events, let it speak to him deeply. On the morning of Pentecost, he shared his thoughts with Louise: "*Mon Dieu, Mademoiselle, how shocked I was this morning when Monsieur Portail told me about the accident that happened yesterday, and he said what our Lord said to those who questioned him on the subject of those who had been covered by the ruin of the fall of the tower in Jericho, that it did not happen because of the sins of those persons, nor for those of their fathers and mothers, but to manifest the glory of God. And, certainly, I tell you the same, Mademoiselle.... You have in this happening a new reason for loving God more than ever....*" Louise de Marillac was herself quite transformed by this event. Her only preserved reflection was written some years later, on the anniversary of the accident: "*I had a great interior change when the goodness (of God) gave me light and clarity on some great upsets and difficulties that I had.... It seemed to me that God's goodness was working on a grand scheme for the solid establishment of this little family, interiorly in our Most Honored Father and in the spirits of some of our Sisters....*"

Vincent and Louise welcomed this light from God. They came to a stronger awareness that he was the author of this little Company, that he took particular care of them and that he invited them, together, to persevere in the work begun for his glory and the good of the poor. The Spirit of God, on this Pentecost day, 1642, moved them to surmount the crisis that they were living in and to change themselves. A difficult stage was over. A long period of deep and effective friendship opened before them.

A Productive Friendship (1642-1660)

For 17 years (1642-1660), Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac traveled the same road, learning to know one another, to understand one another more deeply, to esteem and respect one another. Now freedom, that independence of spirit that is not ruled by fear of failure or apprehension, nor by prejudice, was the basis of their relationship. This freedom became a support for the realization of their multiple involvements, revealing their shared passion for the poor.

True collaboration never seeks to dominate or convince; it allows, by facing ideas, different points of view, a deeper knowledge of the self. Louise de Marillac was looking for a relationship that differentiated and made them grow: "*I ask you most humbly, Monsieur, that the weaknesses in my spirit, which I have made known to you, not require of your charity the condescension, which you might have*

been able to have given thought to, that I would like you to undo my thoughts.... God gives me the grace almost always to know and evaluate the advice of other people that is different from my own; and particularly when it is your Charity I am certain to see the truth clearly, whatever it be in areas that are hidden from me for a time." Decisions to be made were clarified by the light of the Gospel and their personal reflection. Louise suggested changes that appeared to be necessary at Chars where the Jansenist pastor showed himself to be quite intransigent: "*The thought came to me yesterday to propose to your charity, if it should find it good, not to offend Monsieur the pastor of Chars so much, to send my Sister Jeanne Christine in place of my Sister Turgis and to keep Sister Jacquette for Chantilly, because I foresee that we will have to take the one who lives there away from Chars.*"

Vincent de Paul showed Louise the letter he had just written to the abbot of Vaux, spiritual counselor to the Sisters of the hospital at Angers: "*I have written to the abbot of Vaux that you have promised to furnish Daughters in eight places before you can send him any. See, Mademoiselle, if that does not contradict what you wrote him.*"

In 1650, the Marquise de Maignelay had asked for two Sisters for the parish of St. Roch. The request was urgent, and the Marquise wanted to have the Daughters on the following day! Louise showed that she was very reluctant and gave her reasons to Monsieur Vincent: "*[a former Daughter of Charity] was alive and was now married, and lived in the house where our Sisters would be living, and it is a dangerous closeness for us. I ask you most humbly to carefully tell me what I should say in the meeting so that I do not offend Madame la Marquise or do us any harm.*" Louise pressed him not even to speak to the woman, because she was the sister of the old General of the Galley, Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi.

Neither Vincent nor Louise wanted to influence the other, nor make their advice prevail, much less exploit the other. They wished that the work they accomplished might be a step up to a more human condition for all those that they served and at the same time announce Jesus Christ. It was this unself-centeredness that let them share their thoughts very freely. Reading the Councils reveal that Vincent and Louise often had opposing opinions. They did not hesitate to express their own reasons, searching together for the will of God and the good of the poor. These Councils were a good place for the participating Sisters to be formed.

The Council of the 30th of October, 1647, studied two problems: accepting little boys in the girls' school, and the possibility of having lodgers in the houses. Vincent, who always presided over the Councils, put the first point: "*Mademoiselle Le Gras proposes that,*

if it is expedient, our sisters in town and in the country who run a school might take in boys as well as girls, and, in a situation where they take in boys, what age limit should they set." Louise presented her reasons. These little boys would receive the basics of piety; this might be their only instruction. In most of the villages there was no school master. Many parents desired that their sons receive at least as much instruction as their daughters. And she recognized that such little children (less than six years) could not be the object of a temptation by the mistress. Vincent unfolded exactly opposite reasons: the mix is forbidden as much by an ordinance of the king as by one of the archbishop. The Sisters should be the first to observe these ordinances, and Vincent gave his word about recalling that school masters who welcomed young girls among the boys were condemned to be burned alive. The deliberation continued by hearing the other participants: one Sister is for it, another Sister against. Monsieur Lambert seemed rather favorable. Louise emphatically said that she had had to do it sometimes, because sometimes a girl could not come to school if she did not bring her brother with her, because the mother was not home to watch him. After having put forth his reasons again, Vincent de Paul concluded: "*It will be good if we do not take any at all. Two or three of us advise this. We should keep it as is.*" So Louise had to review what she had authorized in certain houses.

Then followed the discussion about welcoming lodgers. Here again, there was a big difference in the appreciation of the two founders. Louise saw some advantages there: the education of the girls, financial aid for poor houses. Vincent saw many inconveniences: different food for the girls (the menu of the Sisters seemed to him to be too poor!), a risk that it would seem that there were disagreements among the Sisters in the Community, difficulties in uniting the care of the borders and fidelity to the Rule (prayer). Despite Louise's insistence, Vincent's decision was definite: "*We should keep it as is, and not move one step further.*" Louise de Marillac had to tell different communities of this decision without letting it seem that she opposed it. She knew that a decision made after a shared reflection should not later be contested by one or other member. Total unity was indispensable.

On the 8th of April, 1655, the Council studied the question of the Sisters leaving the hospital in Nantes, because constant conflict demoralized the Sisters and hindered their work. Vincent laid the problem out and developed his reasons for staying and for leaving. All the members present listened and then gave their advice. Three councilors were convinced of the need to leave. Louise's advice was clear — they had to call the Sisters back because they had tried everything. Monsieur Portail suggested waiting and making a change

of Sisters to see what might follow. Monsieur Almérás, who had visited the Community two years earlier, thought that it was wise to “*send for them as soon as they were ready, because it did no good to take more time.*” Louise insisted again, saying “*it was more expedient to end it from this moment, because our Sisters are of one mind in this; this would be good lest we give a cause for scandal to others.*” The conclusion might seem surprising. But it shows that Vincent did not make a decision if he was not sure that it conformed to the Will of God. He ended the Council: “*To omit nothing in such an important affair, I believe it is fitting to commend it to God. And since we do not want to do anything that does not conform to God's holy Will, we have to ask for the light to know what it is.*” It was difficult for Louise to accept the maintenance of the community when the Sisters suffered. On August 28th, she received a letter from Nicole Haran, the Sister Servant who made clear: “*There is a continual war against us... we are almost unable to make the little advance that goes on here.*” At the next Council, Mademoiselle brought the problem up again. She spoke about Nicole’s letter and her worry about the Sisters. Vincent’s response was the same: “*We should commend the matter to God.*” The departure of the Sisters from the hospital at Nantes did not happen until 1664!

When they looked at the life experiences of the Community at Nantes, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac sought to discern the will of God. For Louise de Marillac, the multiple challenges coming from the Administrators and the Bishop were the source of her worry and anxiety for the Sisters and affected her health. The service of the sick felt the effects. It seemed to the Foundress that a service that could not be done the right way should not be continued. Vincent de Paul reconsidered it. Every work done in the name of the Lord has its difficulties, its obstacles. You could not let yourself be discouraged by these difficulties, and as Jesus Christ did on earth, accept facing up to them. Louise welcomed the decision of Vincent de Paul.

Louise de Marillac also shared with Monsieur Vincent her point of view on the future of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. A very intuitive woman, she saw that this community, of a kind completely new in the XVIIth Century, would not survive if it were subject to the Bishops. Her thought was the opposite of the Council of Trent which had reaffirmed the responsibility of the Bishops for the whole of the Christian life of their diocese. But Louise said and said again that the Daughters of Charity were simply baptized women, the daughters of the parishes, and not nuns. Why subject them to the authority of the local Bishop? For Louise, that would end the service of the Poor. She knew that several Bishops were opposed to any consecrated life in the open world: the Visitandines of Francis

de Sales had been cloistered by the Bishop of Lyon; at Bordeaux, the Congregation founded by Jeanne de Lestonnac had to live inside their establishment when the Bishop insisted. If the Daughters of Charity were not able “to come and go” in the streets, in the villages, then say goodbye to the service of the poor in their homes!

Louise tried to convince Vincent de Paul to be the legally responsible ecclesiastical person for the Daughters of Charity. The confrontation would be long. Vincent rejected Louise’s idea. He had submitted himself to the decisions of the Council of Trent, and did not want to touch the authority of the Bishops. Moreover, the Congregation of the Mission had its goals of the Mission in the countryside and the work of seminaries. It did not have the vocation to be busy with women, even if consecrated.

From 1640, Louise de Marillac hoped that Monsieur Vincent would take the necessary steps for the recognition of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Toward 1642-1643, Vincent made or had made several outlines of Petitions. But it was not until August, 1646, that he finally decided to send the request to the Archbishop of Paris. Louise did not read over the last version. She was in Nantes where she had gone to bring six Sisters to the hospital.

Monsieur Vincent was delighted in November, 1646. The Archbishop had signed the approval of the Company. This document was then submitted to the Parliament for official recognition by the Kingdom of France. When Louise de Marillac read the text, she reacted strongly. With some vehemence, she wrote to Monsieur Vincent about her unhappiness. She had the words of the Archbishop before her eyes: *“Monsieur, I do not dare ask you if I should tell this to the Sisters nor have I done so.”* And she explained everything that she objected to: giving the Sisters the title *“Servants of the Poor”*; she held on to the one they were usually given: *“Daughters of Charity.”* But above all she could not accept that the Daughters of Charity were subject to the Archbishop of Paris. She saw that as a serious risk to the service of the poor. She ended the letter with a strong admonition to Monsieur Vincent. The tone looked for no reply: *“In the name of God, Monsieur, do not permit anything to happen that lets any small part of a day go by that draws the Company away from the direction that God gave it because you can be sure that it immediately would not be what it was, and the sick poor would not be cared for, and then I believe that the Will of God would no longer be done by us.”*

Vincent was aware of Louise’s intensity. He thought it wise to say nothing and to wait. Six months went by.... In the middle of a conference on Thursday, May 30th, 1647, he announced to the Sisters: *“Now, my daughters, God wants you to read carefully the approval that he has permitted to be given to our way of life and our rules by the*

most illustrious and Reverend Lord, the Archbishop of Paris. Here is the request which was presented to him, and here the rules, and then the approval. I am going to read them to you one after the other."

Louise, who was present, was very upset. It would take more than six months for her to calm down. Then calmly, she repeated her thought to Vincent de Paul, now with a firm refusal to see the Company of the Daughters of Charity subordinate to the Archbishop of Paris. Her letter was dated November, 1647: "*Monsieur, it seems to me that God has given my soul a deep peace and simplicity in the prayer, quite imperfect from my part, that I have made on the subject of the necessity that the Company of the Daughters of Charity to follow step by step the path that Divine Providence has given it, as much in the spiritual as in the temporal. In this I think I have seen that it would be more advantageous to God's glory that the Company write down all we do, rather than follow this other path, because it seems to be contrary to the Will of God.*" Louise did not receive a reply to this letter, full of simplicity and seeking to calm things down. Vincent also sought the Will of God about the Company of Daughters again. Several times, Louise came back to these two points: the Will of God and the care of the poor. She well knew that Monsieur Vincent was quite reasonable on these issues. She learned patience, and waited long years....

Towards 1652-1653, the elderly Vincent de Paul, seeing on the one hand that the Daughters of Charity had spread into many dioceses and as far as Poland, and on the other hand that Louise's health was more and more precarious, wanted to settle the situation of the Daughters of Charity. A new request was written, and in January of 1655, Cardinal de Retz approved the Company again, placing it, this time, under the authority of Vincent de Paul, Superior General of the Mission, and his successors. Louise was happy, not because of her success, but because the Company could pursue the work begun in the design of God. The Company could be faithful to the charism that God had entrusted to it.

The confrontation was tough, long. No one wanted to or could give up what seemed essential to the mission to the poor. These positions held firmly did not hinder their missionary work or the responses to new requests: for the Daughters of Charity, new placements at Nantes, Montreuil sur Mer, Poland, transferring the foundlings to Bicêtre, etc.; for the priests of the Mission, the mission to Madagascar, relief to Picardie and Champagne, provinces devastated by war, etc.... The Founders were not obsessed by their personal difficulties. They knew how to bypass them to handle an urgent need, and to respond to the many unending needs that surfaced.

Vincent de Paul, who had for so long been hesitant to accept the role of Superior of the Daughters of Charity, had to defend this choice, competing with his responsibilities to the Congregation of the Mission, before his own confreres. In 1660, he explained at length; *"If we have the direction of the house where they [the Daughters of Charity] are formed, it is because this path of God, giving birth to their little company, used our company; and you know that the same things that God uses to create something he also uses to keep it going.... The Daughters of Charity entered into the order of Providence as a way that God gives them to do by their hands what we cannot do with ours, for the bodily help of the sick poor, and to tell the poor personally some words of instruction or encouragement for their salvation. We have some obligation to aid them in their own advancement in virtue to better accomplish their charitable works."* Vincent and Louise had learned to assume fully their decisions taken after shared deliberation, without repeating their opposing reasons that they had already presented.

Giving Thanks

Knowing that death was near, they both felt the need to express their thanks for all that they had received from one another. In March of 1659, Vincent wrote to Louise: *"Never has charity seemed so noble and so amiable as yours. God be praised because it is demonstrated so perfectly by the said Mademoiselle, to whom I give my thanks with all the gratitude of my heart."*

In January of 1660, Louise expressed her gratitude to Vincent for *"the work of God, which, my most honored Father, your charity has supported with such strength in the face of all opposition."* Thus simply did Vincent and Louise help one another prepare themselves to *"leave this world"* to be born in a new creation. The desires that they exchanged at the end of the year 1659 reflected their mutual understanding and the hope of always following the will of God. Louise first: *"I beseech God that he conserve your weak health and that he, for his glory, give you soon the fulfillment of his designs for your soul."* And Vincent sent her a note written by his secretary: *"I wish for Mademoiselle le Gras the fullness of the Spirit as a special gift and that the Company preserve such a good Mother so that she might give them more and more the gifts of this Spirit."*

Gently, always desiring to be united by the will of God, they accepted that they would not see one another again. Their friendship was beyond any meeting; it had become so simple and transparent that it had no need of natural support. On the 14th of March, Vincent sent this short message to the dying Louise: *"You are leaving first,*

and if God forgives me my sins, I hope to come soon and rejoin you in heaven."

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac had learned to get past their differences and work together, to be certain to accomplish the will of God. The immense love of God for humanity that they discovered contemplating the Incarnation of the Son of God had been their strength. Their exchanges were based in authenticity, that is to say, the profound acceptance of the identity of the other, the understanding and respect of their complementarity. Their friendship had become a communion like that of the Trinity, the great mystery of God in which the gift of reciprocity is lived in unity and diversity.

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac have enriched the Church by their institutions that humanized and evangelized the poor. Above all, they illuminated the world by their witness of a simple and humble life full of love.

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