

Passion for Making the Kingdom Present

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: A Relationship that Promoted Bold and Creative Fidelity

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It was an ordinary day; one whose exact date we do not know. Perhaps on the Rue Saint-Denis, in that section very near the walls which widened to form the atrium of the Parish of Saint Sauveur, in Paris. But it also could have occurred in one of the nearby streets. No one knows exactly when, because there are no details of that meeting in any of the documents of human experiences that history has recorded. Perhaps because in that moment, it was not especially meaningful for the two people involved.¹

She lived on Rue Courtau-Vilain.² He on Rue Pavé.³ Both belonged to the same parish of Saint Sauveur.⁴ There she regularly attended the celebration of the Eucharist, Vespers and other devotional activities in which the faithful participated. There she also usually spent her time in private prayer. He would very occasionally attend the parish because he alternated his time in the capital with frequent

¹ We can suppose that this meeting happened before June 4, 1623. By this date, Louise de Marillac knew Vincent de Paul, but she felt a certain displeasure at the idea of relating to him. (See SANTA LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, 1985, p. 11).

² See MARTÍNEZ, BENITO, "Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres," Ed. CEME, Salamanca, 1995, p. 29.

³ See COSTE XIII, 202 / SV 13a, 218. ROMÁN, J.M., "San Vicente de Paul I Biografía," Ed. BAC, 1981, p. 111. CHALUMEAU, R.P., "Guide de Saint Vincent de Paul a travers Paris," Ed. CEFAG, 1977, p. 22.

⁴ Michel de Marillac, who lived on Rue Sainte-Avoye, also belonged to this parish. Louise de Marillac belonged to this parish when she lived on Rue Sainte-Avoye, from 1622 to 1623 and on the corner of Rue du Temple and Rambuteau, from 1623 to 1626. See CHALUMEAU, R.P., "Guide de Saint Vincent de Paul a travers Paris," Ed. CEFAG, 1977, p. 26. And RYBOLT, J.E., "Tras las huellas de Vicente de Paúl. Guía vicenciana de Francia," Ed. CEME, Salamanca, 2004, p. 87.

trips to the de Gondi's lands. This family was of the nobility and they honored Vincent with their friendship and trust. They welcomed him into their luxurious mansion and, from 1617 on, they offered him the pastoral attention of the great number of peasants who lived in the cities, towns, and small villages that were their property.

BY DIFFERENT PATHS

These two persons apparently had little in common. Life had led them by different paths. And, curiously, life also led them to come together in a common project, supporting an evangelical alternative in the midst of an unjust society.

In the development of his personal capacities

He was short of stature but had a large soul. His look was penetrating. He was friendly, full of life, happy, in full development of his personal capacities. His bearing reflected the process of interior growth that he was experiencing. He was a cleric and dressed in a simple but very dignified manner. He was easily identified as one of the clergy who came from the peasantry. He was then about 42 years old.

The days of his serious crisis of life were now past. The meaninglessness of living superficially. The disappointment with a self-centered lifestyle. The security which he thought he would find in an ecclesiastical benefice. In that moment, after the brief experience of possessing abbeys, parishes, canonries and priories, and knowing what that meant for his future, he had not only lost all interest in them; he also had resigned from almost all of them.

His personality was being restructured, bringing to light an enchanting spiritual and human maturity. He was convinced that he had now discovered the purpose of his life. "I am resolved to dedicate my whole life to the service of the poor for the love of Jesus Christ." His heart had declared this with determined serenity some time ago. And now he had no other concerns. Along with his preferred poor, the eyes of the people of Paris and its surroundings were on him. Without knowing very well how, he had felt drawn into the world of the poor; and he witnessed that in his inmost self there emerged a surprising sensibility to perceive their situation, their needs, their sufferings, and to approach their hearts. The de Gondi family was a strategic and a privileged place for him, because the family permitted him to relate with the galley slaves, with the peasants on

their lands, and also with the elite of both the society and the church of Paris.

When he arrived in the city, more than ten years before, he entered into contact with Pierre de Berulle, a priest who represented the most devout and active current in the French Church. Vincent received tremendous support from him in his process of personal transformation. Around then, captivated by finding spiritual meaning for his life, he became friends with André Duval, Adrien Bourdoise and Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, abbot of Saint-Cyran. They envisioned a renewed church, a new situation that would require the commitment of each one. He also wanted to know all that was emerging in the spiritual circles and the reform movements of his time.

Despite his humble simplicity, his personality was beginning to be noticed in Paris. He was of peasant stock, and without intending to, he attracted the attention of the nobility. On first meeting them, he captivated people. He and Francis de Sales met when Francis arrived in Paris at the end of 1618. And they developed a warm friendship. Within a few months they developed a great familiarity, and Francis knew and valued Vincent so much that he wanted to entrust to him in 1622 the direction of the first convent of the Visitation in Paris.

Vincent considered himself a person in process; he struggled interiorly to free in himself "the new man." And hidden behind his dynamic demeanor and his attractive appearance there was life, like a spring that wells up, an experience: the touch of God, the fire that God Himself had placed in his heart and that harmonized all the facets of his personality, and moved him to express the richness of his being, the vitality of his depth, the evangelical creativity of his imagination.

Moved by the natural impulse to taste the joy of living

In her face, in her restraint, and in her character, she also manifested the personal situation she was experiencing. Timid, at times crestfallen, withdrawn, with a rather sorrowful appearance, she could be seen coming and going hurriedly through the streets of the Marais neighborhood. Alone, or accompanied by a friend, she would enter one of the mansions in the neighborhood for a social visit, or she would frequent the Church of Saint Nicholas des Champs or her parish Church of Saint Sauveur. Over time her trips out were almost exclusively to the churches. More and more she would stay at home. She was about 32. She was married to Antoine

Le Gras, at one time the secretary of the Queen Mother, and she had a son.

Her presence at the court was now only a memory. The invitations to parties at the palace, her modest participation in the receptions, lunches and balls, her careful seeking out the proper place for the not so noble couple Le Gras... all this had given her the opportunity to know from the inside the life of the nobility of the kingdom. Her friends called her "Mademoiselle" and because of her dress she appeared to be of the middle class. But there was something in her that made her seem different. Rejecting the frivolity around her, she looked for the proper way to approach life from the perspective of spirituality.

She was a woman with a broad experience of culture. She had received a wonderful education. She was intelligent, sensitive, intuitive, refined and clever. She was cultured in all facets of her personality. She read the classics. She understood Latin well and she knew Greek. She knew how to make lace and do other handicrafts. She painted and she could skillfully manage all the tasks of a household. She knew how to be present and open in her social environment. She often would go to the spiritual circles of Paris. She would devour the modern spiritual publications. She had spiritual companions of great depth and she could relate well to all kinds of people.

Her life up until then had not been easy. She did not know her mother. Her family had rather ambiguous social connections. She was obligated to enter into marriage and now she was caught between the nobility and the middle class, a woman with a sick husband, without sufficient economic resources, and with a son who was maturing very slowly and was somewhat troubled. From deep down she experienced with great force the natural impulse to taste the joy of living.

She was having a difficult time. A profound crisis of identity was eating away at her soul. She felt out of place. Her frustration and sense of dejection were noticeable. More and more her ponderings gave way to negative thoughts. She was filled with sadness, disappointment, and feelings of guilt. The self image which she had created, and in which she felt secure, was inadequate for her now. The lifestyle which she had forged for herself and her family was now like a corset which squeezed the very life out of her. The best of Louise, held captive in her deepest self, had to come to the surface.

There were few decisions which she had been able to make for herself. Almost everything had been planned out and imposed upon her. But there, sinking its roots in a decision which she had made for herself as a resolution when only 15 years old, was prayer. And this

living internalized experience of prayer was leading her, though she did not know it, toward the awakening of the fullness of her being. She was going through a profound “dark night” from which she would soon emerge more mature and calm.

She did not go unnoticed in the society of Paris. She was a Marillac and she had a wide range of relationships. She admired Francis de Sales, whom she received in her home in 1619. And she wanted to be able to speak with him again. She had a strong curiosity which was focused on things spiritual. An insatiable “thirst” maintained her in a constant seeking. She was looking for appropriate spiritual direction, but was not able to find the peace she sought. And so she remained... waiting in the darkness of night for the dawning of her true self.

On June 4, 1623 she intuited that a person whom she did not know well, and only knew superficially, would become her spiritual companion. Both had something in common: the commitment to respond to the call to make of their lives a spiritual experience, and affection, admiration, and a certain spiritual connection with the Bishop of Geneva. She, for the moment, communicated the movements of her soul to a friend of Francis de Sales who did not live in Paris: Jean Pierre Camus.

And so, one day, we do not know when, nor where, nor why, two persons, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, met each other. And so, also in a simple and intimate way, without any particular importance, there began a relationship that, little by little, would have a decisive influence on and meaning for the society of Paris, the poor of France, and for the Church.

A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Some time would pass before the relationship which was intuited, would begin to be cultivated. Both she and he were busy, occupied with their own issues and attentive to the process that was unfolding in their being. Both of them were in a decisive stage of their lives. By the time that they began to communicate regularly, the lifestyles of both had changed notably. On April 17, 1625 a group of priests had been formed around the person of Vincent, with the end of giving missions in the villages. He had now definitively left the de Gondi home, and was living with his companions on the other side of the Seine, in the College of Bons-Enfants,⁵ in front of the Port de

⁵ See COSTE XIII, 197-202 / SV XIIIa, 213-217. After the death of Marguerite de Sully, her husband agreed that Vincent could definitively leave their house. See COSTE XIII, 60-61 / SV XIIIa, 74-75.

Saint-Victor. Early in the morning they would leave Paris, handing over the key of the house to a neighbor, and they would return in the evening, after a day of meetings, preaching the Kingdom, and evangelical joy. When the site of the mission was far from the capital, Vincent would spend days away from home. This style of life attracted the attention of the woman who was observing him. She, a widow since December 21, 1625, had also left the Marais neighborhood, and had moved to a rental house on Rue Saint-Victor, very near Bons-Enfants and the hill of Sainte Genevieve.⁶ There were some small free schools in the area where her son, Michel, could continue his studies.

He, free,⁷ joyful, and decided, lived this stage of his life with determination, trying new paths, new attitudes and new projects. She, unstable and indecisive, was still looking for her place in life. She needed affection, advice, attention. She needed to be listened to. And she turned to Vincent. They developed a rich personal relationship. It began as a helping relationship, spiritual direction or accompaniment. And it evolved through a beautiful friendship, and a wonderful complementarity, into a relationship of rich, evangelical collaboration.

FROM A HELPING RELATIONSHIP

From an early age, Louise felt the need for help. Perhaps it was the sense of abandonment, the lack of affection and family attention in the first moments of her life that caused her basic insecurity. She felt the need to find someone who would pay attention to her. But it was also evident that the dynamic of seeking was very much alive in her. She had sought out religious experience since her adolescence. Her whole self, her soul, remained oriented toward God in the darkness, in the play of shadow and light of daily life. And she was looking for someone to accompany her along the way. She had always turned to qualified persons for counsel: Honoré de Champigny, Michel de Marillac, Francis de Sales, Jean Pierre Camus... and now, Vincent de Paul. He was also having the same

⁶ CALVET, J., "Luisa de Marillac," Ed. CEME, Salamanca, p. 40.

⁷ On June 17, 1626 Vincent renounced the ownership of the College des Bons-Enfants in favor of the Congregation of the Mission. COSTE XIII, 208-213 / SV XIIIa, 230-234. On September 4, 1626, he made a donation of his possessions to his relatives. COSTE XIII, 61-63 / SV XIIIa, 75-77. And that same year he resigned from the parish of Clichy. COSTE XIII, 85-86 / SV XIIIa, 97-98. These decisions, made under the impulse of the Spirit, put him in contact with evangelical freedom.

experience of spiritual accompaniment. First with Pierre de Berulle, later with André Duval. And he also accompanied others: Madame de Gondi, Madame Du Fay, some of the religious of the Visitation, the companions he lived with and others. And so both agreed, despite their initial reticence, to have periodic interviews in which she could express her inner experience.

This relationship, named by both of them as spiritual direction, led them correctly down the path of personal growth and it contributed decisively to the enrichment of all the facets of their personalities. What Louise was looking for was “to live,” to experience the joy of living, and this was also Vincent’s intention, for himself and for those with whom he related. Life is a dynamic force in expansion that springs up from within and holds within itself the demand of liberation from all the ties that strangle and enslave. It always moves toward wholeness. Life carries in its heart the seal of God. Both of them remained attentive to this emerging movement of life in each of them, willing to consent to its momentum toward wholeness.

In tune with the project of God

The priority of this task, and the clarity with which it was perceived by both before the beginning of their relationship, is evident. *“Is it not reasonable that I should belong totally to God...? I desire this with all my heart and in the manner which pleases him,”*⁸ Louise wrote to a cousin of her husband as she informed him of her husband’s death. In the conscience of both, this was the only specific objective of the helping relationship that they had decided to undertake.

This clear orientation, in the direction of finding the meaning of life in the fulfillment of God’s project in each of them, was not merely an idea. It had not come from the reading of manuals of spirituality. It was not part of a dry voluntarism. Both were trying to cultivate a “spiritual sensitivity” to perceive the mysterious presence God in their lives. Vincent, from the time of Folleville and Chatillon, in 1617, when he felt overcome by the certainty: *“It is clear that there God was acting with power.”* Louise, since the day of Pentecost in 1623, when she perceived the “light” about herself and she felt illuminated by the evidence: *“It was God who was showing me all this.”*⁹ And both

⁸ Santa LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, Letter 2.

⁹ COSTE IX, 245 / SV IX, 193, Conferencia 24. Santa LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, E. 3, num. 6.

were also growing in depth in their inmost being. This allowed the natural “thirst for God,” expressed in the particular manner of each, to surface and be recognized. *“I felt moved by the desire to give myself to God, to do His holy will my whole life,”*¹⁰ Louise had written around 1622. And this was the heart of the matter, respecting the flow of God’s life in each one of them, and supporting the way in which this was expressed. In short, to leave the initiative of their lives to God, to allow the image of God, imprinted in the inmost depths of their being, to express itself, by its own dynamism, in their personalities.

Louise felt that she needed help to discover what God had planned for her. She lived with the sensation of interior misalignment, and that the fundamental option of her life was yet to be discovered. She needed to feel supported in her efforts to be attentive to her deepest self. She felt moved to practice “discovering,” and she wanted to share with another person all that was happening in her. The practice of personal prayer had given her the opportunity to deepen her conscience, to know her soul well enough to be able to know *“when she was smothering a good desire, preventing it from being formed,”* and when, conscious of God’s action in her, she gave her consent: *“It seemed to me that our good God asked me for my consent, that I give it fully, so that He could bring about what He wished to see in me.”*¹¹

Luckily, Vincent was living in the same dynamic and he greatly admired this way of life in Francis de Sales. He had observed him well. *“Opening his heart to me he once told me that when he was preaching, he would become aware that **someone** was moving him interiorly”* Vincent recounted. *“I became aware, he told me, that something came out of me, not by my own will, because I had not thought about it before, and I knew nothing of it, but rather I said it by a divine impulse.”*¹² In the experience of others and in his own, he had verified that the decisions motivated by human criteria led one down the wrong paths that could not lead to fullness. These decisions led people down a path so narrow and tortuous that they could not enjoy life.

And they both felt motivated to give their lives to God’s project, to the intensity of feeling themselves inhabited, to the task of discernment. *“As for the rest, I beg you, once and for all, not to give it*

¹⁰ Santa LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, E. 2, num. 2.

¹¹ Santa LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, E. 2, num. 2 and E. 24, num. 84.

¹² COSTE XIII, 69 / SV XIIIa, 82.

a thought until Our Lord makes it evident that He wishes it, and at present He is giving indications to the contrary. We want a number of good things with a desire that seems to be of God, and yet it is not always from Him. God permits it that way to prepare the soul to be what He desires.”¹³ The two began to support each other mutually, establishing a subtle bond of unity between *being* and *doing*. “To be as He desires,” that is, to allow to come to the surface what God has imprinted as His image in the depths of one’s being. And that the “*doing*” flows from “*what one is*” as the most pure expression of one’s being. She manifested that discovering and committing herself to this project of God was “*the only desire of my heart.*”¹⁴ And he, more sure of himself and inwardly peaceful, encouraged her with expressions such as: “*Always wait patiently for the manifestation of His holy and adorable Will.*” “*What is our Lord doing with you?*”¹⁵

To Louise this process of discernment seemed long. She was a passionate person. When she intuited something, she immediately wanted to see it done. Vincent would tell her that this was “*indiscrete zeal.*” She realized that one of the aspects of her personality that needed to be modified was “*haste.*” And he also knew that he was “*too slow in getting things done*” because he had “*a special devotion to follow the footsteps of God’s Providence.*”¹⁶ Louise felt moved to dedicate her life to the formation of the young women who served the poor in the Charities. At last, respecting God’s timing, and discerning the signs that lighted their path, dominating the natural impulse to take their own initiative, and placing the gifts that each one had received from God at His disposition, they believed that the hour had now come. Because “*it is up to His Divine Providence to call us to the works for which He has given us some talent, and it is not our place to aspire to them.*”¹⁷ And toward the end of the summer of 1633, while Vincent was making his annual retreat, there appeared the proof. On November 29, the first community of Daughters of Charity met together in the house of Louise de Marillac, on Versailles Street, in front of a house that had the sign of a royal sword. What had been announced was now being fulfilled, because she was in a place dedicated to the service of the poor, with others who were doing the same thing, coming and going.

¹³ COSTE I, 113 / SV I, 118.

¹⁴ Santa LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, E. 7, num. 18.

¹⁵ COSTE I, 25, 129 / SV I, 23-24, 127.

¹⁶ Santa LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, E. 7, num. 22 and COSTE II, 207 / SV II, 280-282.

¹⁷ COSTE VII, 144 / SV VII, 158-160.

In the exercise of freedom

Although Louise now had experience in helping relationships, her meeting with Vincent de Paul opened a different horizon for her. It situated her in a new perspective in which she discovered an indescribable attraction. Her searching soul was finding a way through the midst of whatever difficulty. And she found in Vincent a person who was clear, sincere, free, who had no reservations about giving his opinion, exactly as it was. She was a woman who was living a personal situation of chronic pessimism and sadness, which he was helping her to overcome. Moved by her anxiety, urged on by her emotional neediness, and settled in her loneliness, she perceived in Vincent's attitude, in his words, and in the testimony of his life, an atmosphere of confidence that allowed her to open up her inmost self. She found in him the horizon that reflected the answer to her life's questioning.

She "hastened" to go to him, forming a dependence that did not let her live in peace. *"Forgive me for telling you, — said Jean Pierre Camus, Bishop of Belley — that you cling to those who guide you and you depend too much on them. Monsieur Vincent de Paul is absent, and here is Mademoiselle Le Gras, beside yourself and disconcerted."*¹⁸ Quite soon the time between their meetings grew shorter, and the letters more frequent. She would ask his forgiveness for being *"so impertinent."* For his part, he would tell her: *"I do not answer all your letters."*¹⁹

Vincent, who was not willing to accept that kind of relationship, spoke frankly to her. He adopted the strategy of acting with freedom, making clear what was the goal of his life, committed totally as he was to the mission of evangelization. And he invited Louise to become aware of this dependence. *"I did not notify you of my departure because it was a little sooner than I had expected and I was reluctant to upset you by letting you know about it. Well now! Our Lord will use this little mortification to advantage if He wishes."*²⁰

Louise maintained the habit of consulting Vincent about everything until the end of her life. Because of her burning desire to reflect in her life God's will for her, she accepted him as a qualified mediation as well as a touchstone. Mathurine Guérin told how *"She resolved almost nothing without first having taken the matter up*

¹⁸ «La Compagnie des Filles de la Charité aux origines,» Document 837, p. 984. La Lettre est du 26 juillet, peut-être 1625, quand Louise, commença probablement ses entrevues avec Vincent.

¹⁹ COSTE I, 25-26, 28-30 / SV I, 23-24, 26-27.

²⁰ COSTE I, 25-26 / SV I, 23-24.

with our most honored Father, at least when she was dealing with something rather extraordinary."²¹ This fact is absolutely certain in their relationship. And it is difficult to ascertain the motives which led her to make a habit of consulting him before making a decision. It could be because of a social dependence, since in their world the woman had to be subordinated to the man in almost everything. Or it could be a functional dependence that led her to make decisions together concerning all that had to do with their collaboration, without disregarding the spiritual aspect mentioned above. Their correspondence reveals how on many occasions Vincent would tell her, "do what you think best," and "what you are saying seems right to me," etc.

Choosing joy

Vincent found himself before a woman who frequently felt herself besieged by the force of her negative thoughts that would lead to feelings of low self worth and guilt. He had now discovered a joyful outlook on life, and after working on himself to overcome what he called his "black moods," he considered himself an optimistic person who was both joyful and happy. In his correspondence and writings there are a great many expressions about happiness, delight, and joy. Louise, however, had not yet accepted herself. She experienced moments of impatience and anxiety, and her inner self was not peaceful. He knew that joy was the most appropriate interior disposition to bring out the best in each person. He had become convinced that God is pleased when we live with joy.²² And at the same time that he maintained his own option for joy, he patiently observed the appearance of this joy in Louise. He invited her to live joyfully. She, for her part, was doing her own inner work. And she began to live more from her options rather than from her reactions. Joy, more than a feeling, is a part of life, and as such it is there, in our inmost depths, sustaining our being and struggling to grow and manifest itself, until it brings fullness to our life. In our inner self we are joy. It is not something that comes from outside a person when things are going well, when life smiles, or when one achieves what is desired. Joy does not vanish with the arrival of problems, difficulties or trials. It springs up and floods our life with happiness when we enter into contact with joy in the depths of our being. It is not

²¹ «La Compagnie des Filles de la Charité aux origines,» *Document* 822, p. 946.

²² COSTE I, 38-39, 85-86 / SV I, 35-36, 80-81.

possible to “achieve joy,” for we possess it in our inner self. It is necessary for us to create a way of being in life that allows us to enter into contact with joy, and to allow it flow.

She had to decide. He was resolute, positive, joyful in his look, his gestures, and in the way he carried himself. She observed him, admired him and paid attention to his joyful manner, opening herself to his influence. He spoke to her in terms like, “*remain joyful,*” “*be joyful,*” “*maintain yourself joyful,*” “*do with joy what you must do,*” “*live resting in joy.*” And she responded by applying herself to the practice of choosing joy, and she committed herself to “*work joyfully,*” and to follow “*the sentiment of joy that I now experience,*” and to “*maintain joy.*”²³

Together they would also discover a special source of joy. That which comes from the beauty that there is in the “things of God,” in the living of the Gospel, in the following of Jesus Christ and in serving Him in the poor: “*I have firmly resolved to follow Him, without any distinction, but rather filled with joy on finding myself so happy to be accepted by Him to live my whole life following Him.*” On August 24, 1650, Louise hurriedly picked up a sheet of paper to write this to Vincent: “*My heart, still full of joy because of the understanding that it seems to me our good God has given it of these words: God is my God! and because of the sentiment that I have experienced of the glory that all the blessed offer Him as a consequence of this truth, I can do no less than communicate this to you this evening to ask you to help me to make (good use) of these excesses of joy.*”²⁴

The interior Master

One of the keys to the success in the relationship of these two people is perhaps the respect that both felt for the autonomy of the dynamism of life in the evolution of their persons. Vincent, ten years older than Louise, was ahead of her in this way of experiencing life. And he brought to the relationship his experience, as Louise brought her confidence and docility. Mathurine Guérin would remember in 1660 that after many years of knowing and helping each other, when Louise spoke freely with her sisters, she would say that:

²³ COSTE I, 39, 77, 85, 109, 145, 147, 188, 200 / SV I, 36, 68-69, 79-80, 106-107, 145, 147, 187-189, 200. And Santa LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, E. 7, num. 20, E. 10, num. 29, E. 22, num. 66.

²⁴ Santa LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, E. 22, num. 67 and Letter 348.

*“To direct souls, there are few people who have the method of our honored Father, who had received a special gift from God to know that way by which He wished to lead souls and to direct them by these ways, in this he was different from other directors who, rather than making an effort to know what God asks of each one, give their own directions and not those of God: their directions, although good, are not always appropriate for all.”*²⁵

With great respect and mutual affection, Vincent placed this “special gift” at Louise’s disposition. By personal experience he “knew” in his depths the Master who had guided him, and enthusiastically he accompanied Louise on the road to this same discovery. He encouraged her to observe, to listen, to recognize the “interior Master,” telling her *“He Himself will act as your director. Yes, He will surely do so, and in such a way that He will lead you to see that it is He Himself.”* And when she would set out on her journeys to visit the Charities, he would convey to her that *“He will tell you Himself what you should do.”*²⁶

He, for his part, was attentive; he waited, observed and respected the rhythm of life in Louise. He rejoiced when the very best of Louise, her true self, began to manifest itself. *“For a month now, our good God has allowed my soul more feeling for Him than usual.”* *“I felt suddenly the desire that Our Lord come to me along with all His virtues to communicate them to me.”*²⁷

Consolidating the experiencing of being a Beloved Daughter

On October 30, 1626, when they had just begun to relate frequently with each other, Vincent gave her this encouraging imperative: *“Be then His dear daughter.”*²⁸ The context in which these words are found draw our attention to the experience that Louise needed to live in her relationship with God. To be, to live, to support each other mutually, to walk together in the direction of experiencing the love of God in the same way that Jesus of Nazareth experienced it, and which the Gospels place on the banks of the Jordan. To hear in the depths of one’s being: *“You are my beloved son/daughter,*

²⁵ «La Compagnie des Filles de la Charité aux origines,» *Document* 822, p. 946.

²⁶ COSTE I, 29, 172-173 / SV I, 23-24, 175.

²⁷ COSTE I, 28-30 / SV I, 26-27. Santa LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, E. 103, num. 272.

²⁸ COSTE I, 25-26 / SV I, 23-24.

with whom I am well pleased."²⁹ The experience of feeling oneself connected with the origin of life, with the source from which existence itself flows. The experience of "being born again." To cultivate this experience, to deepen it, to live from this experience and to radiate it. They felt themselves called to this. They intuited that this was their "*inner strength.*"³⁰ And in this experience to know themselves to be supported by a love which does not pass away, nor diminish. An experience which, grounded in love, is oriented toward a commitment to the Kingdom.

To feel loved. As she asked for Vincent's attention as director, Louise was also expressing her need to feel valued, appreciated, supported and loved. Every human being, in one way or another, must find an answer to this need. And they both also knew this well. To live life with passion, with all its risks and possibilities, without being tossed about by the contrary winds of difficulties or overcome by them, it is necessary to ground the experience of feeling loved on a very firm rock.

It happens frequently that people whom life has treated badly, and who are deeply wounded, find healing in a providential encounter with someone who can help them. Perhaps this is exactly what happened to Louise when she met Vincent. But he, knowing well his own possibilities, invited her to move beyond their encounter, clearing the path by which she would be led to the Source of Love itself. Cultivating this way of living, enjoying the love they receive from God, is to settle down into joy,³¹ and to build a firm foundation for a lasting friendship. "*I desire your heart to be immersed in the love of God alone,*"³² and so to rest in confidence. From the beginning of their relationship Vincent invited Louise to work on this attitude. "*And why would your soul not be full of confidence, since you are, by His mercy, the dear daughter of Our Lord?*" "*Please live peacefully in this assurance.*"³³

Louise was very rich in this experience. "*It seemed to me that my soul was given to understand that its God wanted to come to me, not as though to a place of recreation, nor as though to a rented space, but rather as though to His own property or place that belonged entirely to Him; and because of this I could not deny Him entry, but rather as land which is alive I should receive Him with joy as its sovereign*

²⁹ Mark 1:11.

³⁰ COSTE IX, 703 / SV IX, 552.

³¹ COSTE I, 39 / SV I, 35-36.

³² COSTE I, 51-52 / SV I, 46.

³³ COSTE I, 77, 90 / SV I, 68-69, 84.

owner, by a simple acquiescence and with the desire that my heart be the throne of His majesty.” And this was complemented by another experience which she had in the dead of winter as she was visiting the Charities. *“It seemed to me that Our Lord gave me the thought of receiving Him as the spouse of my soul, and that this was also a kind of marriage, and I felt so strongly united to God in this consideration that for me was extraordinary, and I had the thought of leaving all to follow my Spouse and to consider Him from now on as such, and to support all the difficulties that I would encounter as though receiving them as the sharing of His goods.”* And she was open to receive the most sublime motivation for acting: *“I shall have no desire to serve God other than in the measure in which His holy love draws me.”*³⁴

THE CENTRALITY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

From the beginning Louse de Marillac admired in Vincent de Paul the way he dedicated his best energies in announcing the Kingdom of God. And she was also able to discover as a call the central place the Kingdom should have in her life. Vincent loved to contemplate Jesus Christ calling the attention of his contemporaries to recognize that the Kingdom of God was in their midst. *“Seek before all else the Kingdom of God.... Seek, seek, this means concern, this means action.... Seek God within yourselves, for St. Augustine confesses that while he was looking outside himself, he could not find Him. Seek Him in your soul, as His preferred dwelling place.... Let us grow interiorly, so that Jesus Christ may reign in us....”* *“But it is not enough to labor so that God reigns in us, but rather it is also necessary that we desire and make sure that the Kingdom of God is spread to everywhere, that God reign in all persons, that the world live in a different manner from how it now lives, by the power of the Spirit (the virtue) of God; finally may His justice be sought and imitated by all with a holy life.”*³⁵ *“To seek the Kingdom of God means that we have to work unceasingly for the Kingdom of God without looking for comfort or remaining idle.”*

Louise, in her own time, entered into this current of apostolic life. *“I have to give Jesus voluntarily the possession of my soul, of which He is King by right, and I shall try to conserve the joy that comes to me from seeing the desire and the possibility that each one of us, in particular, may become His beloved.”* And she found the purpose of her life in dedicating herself *“to make God known to the poor,*

³⁴ Santa LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, E. 7, num. 21, E. 13, num. 38, and E. 16, num. 45.

³⁵ COSTE XII, 131 s. / SV XII, –.

to announce Jesus Christ to them, to tell them that the kingdom of heaven is near and that this kingdom is for the poor. What a grand thing this is!"³⁶

IN THE JOY OF FRIENDSHIP

This relationship that began with a certain sense of aversion on the part of Louise, and also perhaps on the part of Vincent, that was conceived as a helping relationship and that was established on the solid foundation of looking together toward the same horizon of allowing God's project to be expressed in their lives, this relationship became a precious friendship and a rich source of joy.

Quite soon Vincent's way of being respectful, simple, direct, and friendly, made it easy for Louise to express herself. She felt captivated by his singular personality. She was fascinated by his style of life, so evangelical, free, committed, joyful and enthusiastic. That way of being in life, that attraction, began to exert an irresistible influence on the spirit of this woman.

They had to overcome the perplexity that could have been present in their first meetings, and overcome the timidity and shyness that inhibit the expression of intimate experiences. There also arose some difficulties because of the natural tendency toward attachments that was part of Louise's affectivity, her predisposition to become depressed when Vincent left her because he had to be away from Paris for some days.

But although their origins were different, they soon became aware of the things that united them. A keen spiritual sensitivity, the great attraction of living the Gospel fully, being in tune with the spirituality of Francis de Sales, the joy that they experienced when each discovered the rich personal depths of the other and the possibility of collaborating on a common project. Coinciding with Louise's decision to visit the Charities in the towns, in May of 1629, their friendship experienced a turning point. Vincent no longer addressed her as "daughter" or "dear daughter" and began to use the term "Mademoiselle" to address her. There was progress in their relationship, an evolution from an uneven relationship toward one of equality. The woman who was before him would become his collaborator. And their sharing broadened and their intimacy was strengthened. Louise was decided and resolute in her action as well as in her telling Vincent what she had done in the villages. He valued

³⁶ Santa LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, E. 22, num. 66. And COSTE XII, 80 / SV XII, -.

her. *"You are a valiant woman."*³⁷ He encouraged her in her difficulties; he assured her that he was very pleased with what she was doing.

The evolution of Louise's inner self, now in its first moments, was attractive to Vincent. Both experienced pleasure in sharing it. *"If it were not so late as it is, I would come and see you to find out from you the details of the matter you wrote to me about."* *"I could not tell you how ardently my heart desires to see yours in order to know how this has come about in it."*³⁸

The affection between them arose spontaneously, for there was a strong connection between them and both had personalities which were rich in sentiments. *"What shall I tell you now about the one whom your heart loves so dearly in Our Lord?"* *"My heart will have a very fond remembrance of hers in that of Our Lord and solely for that of Our Lord."* *"Forgive my heart if it is not a little more expansive in this letter."* *"Please tell me what is going on in your heart. Mine has been focused on you, this morning, and on the thoughts which Our Lord has given it."* *"I wish you a good evening with much tenderness of my heart."*³⁹

Their time of mutual discovery was very rich. Communication awakened interest. For Louise, being able to go to Vincent, to speak with him, was extremely important. He also experienced a positive feeling of wellbeing and joy. He wrote, *"When I have the pleasure of seeing you...."* *"If I return soon this evening, I will have the pleasure of speaking a word with you."*⁴⁰ They experienced joy from their meetings, while the feelings of union became obvious: *"And we shall have the pleasure of seeing each other in Montmirail."* *"I have in His love, I think, one and the same heart with you."* *"And my heart is no longer my heart, but yours, in that of Our Lord, Whom I desire to be the object of our one love."*⁴¹ And also the pleasure. *"Mon Dieu, my dear daughter, how your letter and the thoughts [you] sent to me console me! Indeed, I must confess to you that the feeling has spread through every part of my soul, and with all the more pleasure, since they let me see that you are in the state God wants of you. Well now, continue, my dear daughter."*⁴² Pleasure that surfaced when she made a lovely gesture to him, when he saw in the chapel of Bons-Enfants

³⁷ COSTE I, 71-72, 116-117 / SV I, 63, 115-116.

³⁸ COSTE I, 51-52, 71-72 / SV I, 46, 63.

³⁹ COSTE I, 30, 62-64; XV, 4; I, 113-114 / SV I, 27-28, 54-56, 87, 110-111.

⁴⁰ COSTE I, 37-38, 72-73, 357-358, 515-517, 587-589 / SV I, 34-35, 63-64, 348, 505, 579-581.

⁴¹ COSTE I, 72-73, 86-88, 169-170 / SV I, 63-64, 81-82, 172.

⁴² COSTE I, 69-70 / SV I, 61.

the altar cloth donated by Louise. Vincent could not contain his emotion and he wrote her with enthusiasm: *“That altar cloth you so kindly sent us; it was so beautiful and delightful that it almost stole my heart away with pleasure yesterday seeing your own in it. Even though I did not know it was there, I saw it the moment I entered the chapel. The pleasure lasted all day yesterday and still lingers with an unexplainable tenderness.”*⁴³ It is not a matter of superficial sentiment. Vincent’s sensitivity had evolved and was now oriented toward what was most sublime in life.

The intimacy between them grew, as did their shared experiences. The personal life of each one became transparent and clear to the other. They worried mutually about each other’s health. They carefully communicated the incidents and accidents of daily life. The confidence between them grew very solid and whatever one happened to be going through mattered to the other. *“That family seems to move my heart with tenderness.”*⁴⁴ The relationship of Louise with her family was a recurrent theme in their conversations. Her son, who caused her many headaches, appeared frequently in the considerations of Vincent, who helped him greatly throughout his life. But he was also concerned about the ups and downs of all the members of the Marillac family. Louise, besides sharing her own issues with him, also shared with Vincent all that had to do with the Confraternities, the Ladies and the Daughters of Charity.

A BEAUTIFUL EVANGELICAL COLLABORATION

Their dear friendship was also enriched by a beautiful evangelical collaboration. It all began with a few simple services that Louise and some of her friends such as Madame Du Fay offered to Vincent while he was away from Paris in the small villages. These services consisted in giving Vincent a sum of money for his use, and in sewing clothes for the sick who were assisted by the Charities and in making vestments for the churches. For this he would courteously thank them.⁴⁵ The admiration that they felt for this priest, and the attraction that the apostolic work held for them, awakened the desire to help in these women who wanted to express their femininity beyond the narrow domestic environment in which they lived. And it was a great help to the missionaries who felt overwhelmed by the

⁴³ COSTE I, 152-153 / SV I, 162-163.

⁴⁴ COSTE I, 351-317 / SV I, 505-506.

⁴⁵ COSTE I, 30, 31-32, 38-39, 40 / SV I, 27-28, 28-29, 35-36, 37.

terrible poverty they encountered in the places where they preached the Mission.

Almost at the same time there arose a new need. It had to do with receiving in Paris young women from the same villages in which he announced the Gospel. The poverty in which they lived made it necessary to find a house of the nobility where they could be placed as domestic servants. At other times it was necessary to get them away from a complicated or dangerous situation. Louise and the other women could take them into their homes while they spoke with the ladies of the nobility and worked out a response that would meet the particular needs of the case at hand.⁴⁶

With the passage of time, Vincent discovered the rich personality of Louise and the evolution that she was experiencing. One day Vincent was extremely surprised to read the contents of a letter written in her own hand and exclaimed: *"Oh! what a tree you have appeared to be today in God's sight, since you have borne such a fruit!"*⁴⁷ According to Abelly, it was the common opinion that Louise had felt inspired to make the decision to consecrate herself to God to dedicate herself to the service of the poor. Vincent was moved to his depths by that letter. The image of the tree, although taken from the Gospel of the day, reveals an important aspect of the relationship between Vincent and Louise. She was creative, she felt driven. She was the source of initiatives and options which she perceived in her inmost self. He would observe "what God was doing in her," and he remained attentive so that what was being born would not fade away from lack of interest or nurturing. And he helped Louise so that she would allow it to come forth and grow with force. On May 6, 1629, in Montmirail, he sent her his blessing with great tenderness, so that she would channel the apostolic energy that was moving her: *"Go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works."*⁴⁸

Their collaboration in giving follow-up to the Confraternities of Charity was rich and effective. Both contributed with their characteristic initiatives and the result was a flourishing of groups that would meet together, trying to live the Gospel in a new way,

⁴⁶ COSTE I, 38-39 / SV I, 35-36.

⁴⁷ COSTE I, 51-52 / SV I, 46.

⁴⁸ COSTE I, 73-74 / SV I, 63-64.

and approaching with love those who were suffering. The presence of Louise and Vincent had an influence on the people of those towns and villages that was spectacular. They sensed that something new was being born in the Church of France. As they brought together their qualities and their ways of doing things, it was as if goodness and wellbeing were multiplied among the people of the countryside. Their collaboration, because of its evangelical inspiration and its generosity, audacity, and zeal, was like leaven in the dough of that struggling society. Their way of living, different from traditional models, held an indescribable attraction, not only for the women and the young girls, but also for the men. It made them question themselves and led to the certainty: *"I would like to serve the poor in this way."*⁴⁹

But where their collaboration shown with a brilliance even more charismatic, if possible, was in the foundation, animation, and consolidation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. With Louise there began a new "way of being" and "way of doing" that inspired admiration and would take its place in history. Their collaboration, driven by the Spirit, would lead to a new form of organization, of accompaniment and of governance that would embrace the power of "the Good News" that nourished these young women from the country who were totally given to God to serve Jesus Christ in the poor. A power that they would also transmit to their contemporaries. When the moment arrived for them to collaborate in this project, Vincent and Louise had matured, both at their own pace, in all the dimensions of their personalities. They had deepened their *"being,"* all the gifts they had received from God, in confidence, simplicity, joy, indifference and humility. They drank from the source of God's Love. They knew each other well. They also knew the rich complementarity that they could offer to the world in which they lived. And into this world they would send those young women, of whom the people would say: "You are Daughters of Charity" and also call them, *"Daughters of the love of God, or daughters called and chosen to love God."*⁵⁰ And so began their "doing." It was not any kind of doing. It was meaningful. It was full of the Gospel, of the experience of God, and also full of the "weakness" that could make them strong because in them was the power of love.

⁴⁹ COSTE IX, 601 / SV 9, 473. Conference 52 on February 24, 1653.

⁵⁰ COSTE IX, 474 / SV IX, 370. Conference 41 on September 19, 1649.

THE FAREWELL

Their last winter was going to be very severe. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac had lived to an advanced age. Their contemporaries considered them now to be quite elderly. Both maintained a clear mind, with a detailed memory and a normal level of awareness, sensitivity and good moods. And they accepted with serenity, as they had throughout their lives, the physical aches and pains that accompanied them.

Unusually low temperatures during the month of January increased the risk of illness in the elderly. Louise was preoccupied by the Vincent's health. Believing that he was suffering great pains because of his swollen legs and a fever, on January 4 she sent him for his consolation a holy card with the image of Jesus crowned with thorns and a medal of Our Lady of Llesse. During this time, she felt better, although she was aware that *"even when I have only had to stay in bed a little while, my little aches often make me lethargic and do not allow me to do my duties."*⁵¹ On January 30 Vincent observed that *"my legs have failed me and I can no longer go downstairs nor say Holy Mass."*⁵²

On February 4 Louise became ill with *"a large swelling in her left arm, which required three incisions. The last was made the day before yesterday. As you can imagine, she is suffering a great deal; and, although her fever has disappeared, she is still not out of danger because of her age and her weakness. Everything is being done to preserve her health, but that is the work of God who, having preserved her for twenty years, contrary to all human appearances, will preserve her for as long as it will be expedient for His glory."*⁵³ Vincent remained at peace because *"agitation troubles the soul and is displeasing to God."* He was moved to put all that he loved in God's hands, abandoning himself with perfect confidence to what God would want.⁵⁴

During the following eight days her condition worsened. On the 14th of February Louise de Marillac *"was at her last,"*⁵⁵ *"we dare not hope she will recover,"*⁵⁶ Vincent wrote, confined to his room. That same day Antoine Portail would die. He was Vincent's first

⁵¹ Santa LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, Letter 717.

⁵² COSTE VIII, 231 / SV VIII, 267-269.

⁵³ COSTE VIII, 254-256 / SV VIII, 297-298. And GOBILON, N., "Vida de la Señorita Le Gras," Ed. CEME, Salamanca, p. 175.

⁵⁴ COSTE VIII, 254-256 / SV VIII, 297-298.

⁵⁵ COSTE XV, 140-141 / SV VIII, 294-295.

⁵⁶ COSTE VIII, 240-241 / SV VIII, 279-281.

assistant and the Director of the Daughters of Charity, his companion from the beginning, a beloved brother and a great friend. Both he and Louise received viaticum the same day.

On March 9 the fever returned and gangrene appeared in her arm. Despite all this, Louise continued to be interested in the affairs of the Company. She inquired about the care of the poor of the parish, who were very numerous, and whether food was being distributed to them in their homes. She indicated what needed to be done as though she were in perfect health.⁵⁷ Vincent was concerned about the health of his loyal, intelligent, and faithful collaborator, but his strength grew weaker daily and he could not go out to visit her. When she learned that Vincent was unable to leave the bed, *"she asked him for a few words of consolation written in his own hand."* We would like to have known Vincent's sentiments when he heard the plea of *"his very humble daughter."* And the disposition of his heart when he made the decision not to send her anything written (was he really able to write then?). But the movement of his affectivity and his soul, his emotions, have remained hidden from our curiosity. Any interpretation of this could only be subjective. We can only suppose that a priest or brother of the Congregation of the Mission, went down the stairs quickly, crossed the street, and with prudence, entered the room where Louise was waiting for the end of her life. And he said in a soft voice, perhaps wanting to show her the great affection that accompanied his mission, a few brief words that he had heard from Vincent which ended this way: *"You are going ahead of me; I hope to see you very soon in heaven."*⁵⁸

And so began March 15, the Monday of Holy Week. Her Daughters of Charity surrounded her. The Duchess of Ventadour, a great friend of hers, had been with her through the night. Around 11:30 in the morning she showed signs of entering on her final journey. *"The presence of her spirit was palpable before her final agony."*⁵⁹ A lighted candle, words of blessing, prayers, restrained emotions, sobs. It was the supreme act of *"handing over and abandoning her soul, in the hands of God, her creator and her ultimate end, to freely leave her body to the earth, in hope of the resurrection."*⁶⁰ The pre-

⁵⁷ GOBILON, N., "Vida de la Señorita Le Gras," Ed. CEME, Salamanca, pp. 177-178.

⁵⁸ GOBILON, N., "Vida de la Señorita Le Gras," Ed. CEME, Salamanca, p. 179.

⁵⁹ «La Compagnie des Filles de la Charité aux origines,» Document 803, p. 921.

⁶⁰ Santa LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Correspondencia y escritos*, Ed. CEME, Salamanca, Testament, p. 832.

sence of the mystery overwhelmed them all. And it even reached through the absence of *"the one whom your heart loves so dearly in Our Lord."*⁶¹

Vincent had to make a decision. And the next day he formulated it this way: *"She will be buried tomorrow in Saint-Laurent Church, beside our dear deceased Sisters and with only the same services that were held at the funerals of each of them."*⁶² And this was what was done on the morning of March 17. According to her expressed wish, to mark the place of burial there was placed a wooden cross with a crucifix and a sign at the foot of the cross with the inscription: *"Spes Unica."*

Louise had written in her testament: *"I leave it (the place of my burial) entirely up to the disposition of Divine Providence, by means of the direction of Monsieur Vincent, whom I beg to remember that I have manifested to him the great desire I have to be placed along the wall underneath the Church of Saint-Lazare (in the patio that looks like a small cemetery there have been discovered dead peoples' bones). I continue to desire this to the extent that I am able, and I ask it of his charity for the love of God."*

Vincent, who was progressively losing strength, was finally able to be at the two conferences on the virtues of Louise and at the election of the superiors. *"What have you seen in the thirty eight years that you have known her? What have you seen in her? The least movement of one atom of the flesh was insufferable to her. She was a pure soul in all things, pure in her youth, pure in her marriage, pure in her widowhood."*⁶³ He named Marguerite Chetif as her successor. Meanwhile several Cardinals wrote to him from Rome, inquiring about his health with special affection,⁶⁴ and communicating to him the dispensation from the Divine Office that the Pope had granted him, and asking God to pour out on him His choicest blessings.

On September 27 in the same year, 1660, at 4:45 in the morning, he surrendered his beautiful soul into the hands of his Lord. He died in his chair, completely dressed, near the fire, seated as he was, more majestic, more beautiful and venerable than ever.⁶⁵

Translation: GILBERT R. WALKER, C.M.

⁶¹ COSTE I, 62-64 / SV I, 54-56.

⁶² COSTE VIII, 270-271 / SV VIII, 312-313.

⁶³ COSTE X, 716 / SV X, 575. Conference 118, July 3, 1660.

⁶⁴ COSTE VIII, 427-428 / SV VIII, 515.

⁶⁵ COSTE XIII, 191 / SV XIIIa, 206. Document 96, Diary of the last days of Saint Vincent, p. 232.