

## Reflection 4

### SPIRIT OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC

1660 was a year of great loss for the Vincentian Family. Antoine Portail, Vincent de Paul's first confrere and the first Director of the Daughters of Charity, died in February. His collaborator and friend, Louise de Marillac died in March and Vincent himself died in September. While Vincent's name and countenance have been universally recognized since the XVII<sup>th</sup> century, those of Louise de Marillac faded completely into the background. It would only be in 1983 that she would emerge from Monsieur Vincent's shadow to resume her place on an equal footing with him not only as the Foundress of the Daughters of Charity but as a woman of today who, by her words and actions, is capable of awakening in her fellow men and women the awareness of their proper dignity as children of God and servants of all those who are poor. Thus, in 2010, 350 years after the death of Vincent and Louise, the Vincentian Family from all corners of the world is uniting to celebrate this important anniversary and at the same time discover or rediscover Louise de Marillac.

#### **Who was Louise de Marillac in the XVII<sup>th</sup> century?**

In May 1629, Vincent de Paul sent the young widow he had met a few years earlier to visit the Confraternities of Charity which had begun so well but were, in more recent times, losing their initial zeal. They needed to revive the enthusiasm that had characterized their beginnings. In Vincent's eyes, no one was better suited to undertake this task than Louise de Marillac, known after her marriage to Antoine Le Gras as Mademoiselle Le Gras since her husband was not of the nobility. She succeeded remarkably well and Vincent rejoiced in her success.

When Vincent and Louise met at the end of 1625 or in early 1626, she had just lost her husband after a long, painful illness. She found herself alone with a difficult 12-year-old son and in financial distress. She was a fragile woman seeking her way. Vincent accompanied her. Little by little he discerned, behind the outward appearance of doubt, hesitancy, and anxiety, a strong woman, endowed with exceptional gifts, capable of transforming herself into the Vincentian leader he was looking for to collaborate with him in his charitable endeavors.

The “sending out on Mission” of May 1629 was but the beginning of a friendship and collaboration that would permanently alter feminine consecrated life and the service of those most in need in France and beyond and which continues to this day throughout the world. In the midst of all this radical change stands the figure of Louise de Marillac. She it was who saw early on the necessity of bringing together into a community the “good village girls” she was forming, at Vincent’s request, to assist the Ladies of Charity in serving the sick poor in their homes. At one and the same time, she founded the Daughters of Charity and built a bridge over the chasm separating the rich and powerful from the peasants and the poor as well as men from women. With Vincent de Paul and the first Daughters of Charity, she created a vast network of charity which excluded no one.

Vincent de Paul had a grand vision of responding to the needs of those who were poor. Louise de Marillac had the organizational ability, the attention to detail, the daring, and the creativity to concretize the vision. One needs only to look at her work with the Foundlings, for which she was so impassioned, undoubtedly because of her own birth as a “natural daughter,” that is, born of an unknown mother but recognized by her father, or her establishment of the Hospice of the Holy Name of Jesus for the elderly to recognize the truth of this affirmation.

### **Why did she disappear?**

In light of all that has just been said about the close and fruitful collaboration between Vincent and Louise, the foundation of the Daughters of Charity, and the development of works of charity responding to a whole gamut of needs of those living in poverty, one is rather astonished at the nearly total disappearance of Louise de Marillac. Even after her canonization in 1934 (two centuries after Vincent de Paul’s) and the celebration of the bi-centennial of their deaths in 1960, little mention was made of her.

The response is twofold. Firstly, there was the effort to glorify Vincent and to have him canonized as quickly as possible after his death as the great Apostle of Charity. There was a place in this plan for the Daughters of Charity, but as daughters of Saint Vincent de Paul. There was no place for a collaborator who gave flesh and bones to his ideas. Thus, no one spoke or her much less of her contributions. However, it must be acknowledged that during her lifetime Louise de Marillac never sought to put herself forward. She tells us herself:

*Our Lord, born in poverty and obscurity, teaches me the purity of His love..., thus I must learn to remain hidden in God, desiring to serve Him without seeking recognition from others or satisfaction in communicating with them, content that God sees what I am striving to become. To this end, He wants me to give myself to him so that he can form this disposition in me. I do so with the help of His grace.*

The second reason is more complex. Within the Company of the Daughters of Charity, there was apparently a reticence, albeit a refusal, to advance the cause of canonization of a foundress who was a “natural daughter.” The Company finally took the necessary steps but without much enthusiasm. If it is true that saints have their moment, Louise’s had not yet arrived. For that to happen, one had to wait until the 1980’s.

### **Why did she reappear?**

If Louise de Marillac finally comes out of the shadows in 1983, it is because the soil had been prepared in beginning in 1958 with the publication of her biography by Jean Calvet entitled: *Louise de Marillac: A Portrait* (ET 1959). In this book, the author speaks publically and for the first time of the circumstances of her birth, of the dramatic often traumatic events of her childhood and youth and of her life marked by fleeting happiness and suffering that was never far away. His goal was “truth companion of sanctity.” He recognizes Louise’s tendency to walk in Vincent’s wake as his shadow. Calvet wanted “to discover her originality and to put forward her own greatness as one of the purest glories of French women.”

Two other significant elements are essential if the true Louise de Marillac is to emerge namely: the woman’s movement and the reflection of Vatican Council II on the dignity of the human person (*Constitution Gaudium et Spes*). The propitious moment will occur only in 1983 with the publication of a new edition of the *Ecrits spirituels de Louise de Marillac* (ET *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, 1991). Thanks to a more readable presentation, a new arrangement and chronology, numerous notes, and a detailed index, we discover, especially in Louise’s letters to her sisters, her engaging personality, her human warmth, and her attentiveness to others in all the dimensions of their being.

## What does Louise convey to today's world?

The original French edition revealed the "true" Louise to the French speaking world. The translations that followed in numerous languages spread her reputation around the globe. What portrait of her do they put forth? Exactly what does this strong, liberated woman of her era bring to women and men of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Much has changed since the epoch of Louise de Marillac, but over the centuries, she brings universal and lasting values and the warmth of human relationships to a world dominated by technology. Three hundred and fifty years after her death, some of these values take on particular importance for the Vincentian Family namely:

### Role of women

**Peasant Women:** Well before organized efforts to do so, Louise sought to improve the status of peasant women by: opening the opportunity to them to enter a new form of consecrated life; by human, spiritual, and professional formation; by preparation for responsibility as educators for the Foundlings, school mistresses for poor little girls, and nurses for persons who were sick and abandoned. She told these first sisters:

*...you should be very grateful for the graces God has given you by placing you in a position to render Him such great service.... Do not be fearful....*

**Middle Class and Noble Women:** Louise de Marillac was well placed to be the link between the peasant women who were the first Daughters of Charity and the Ladies of Charity who were from the upper and middle class. As a de Marillac, she had her place in this milieu but she had chosen to live in community with peasant women. While she formed the early Daughters of Charity, often in collaboration with the Ladies of Charity, her role with the Ladies was largely as an animator. By her words and especially by her comportment, she tried to help them: to discover under outward appearances, the dignity of persons who were poor; to respect and to work as equals with the Daughters of Charity. She wrote:

*...the Ladies of Charity recognized the needs of those who were poor and.... God gave them the grace to assist them so charitably and so magnificently.... Were not the means these charitable Ladies used for their distribution plan their holy Assemblies... which provided faithful and charitable subjects to recognize true needs and to provide for them prudently, not only corporally but also spiritually...?*

## Network of Charity

Louise de Marillac never considered the service of those who are poor as reserved to a particular group. For her, the diversity and extent of needs required a vast network of collaboration: men and women, Ladies of Charity, Priests and Brothers of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, and Fathers of the Poor (Municipal Administrators). To insure efficacious service, this collaboration had its requirements.

**First:** A work of Vincentian collaboration asks of everyone involved the will to recognize and accept the personality of the other with its qualities and faults. Louise told her sisters:

*Renew yourselves in the spirit of unity and cordiality... the practice of charity... leads us never to see the faults of another with bitterness but rather always to excuse them while humbling ourselves.*

**Second:** Such collaboration demands of all: mutual respect, openness to the ideas of others while knowing how to express one's own. Louise wrote:

*Present your reasons, humbly, forcefully, gently, and briefly.*

**Third:** Finally, the service of those who are poor is never truly Vincentian unless it is characterized by human warmth, by the feminine qualities Louise spoke of so often modeled her life on: compassion, tenderness, gentleness, in a word **LOVE**.

*Be very gentle and kind with the poor; you know they are our masters and we need to love them tenderly and respect them greatly. It is not enough that we feel this in spirit, it is necessary that we witness to it with our charitable care.*

## Questions for personal and group reflection

1. How does reflection on Louise de Marillac touch me?
2. How can her influence touch my group in the Vincentian Family?

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