

Reflection 12

VINCENT DE PAUL AND LOUISE DE MARILLAC. THE ART OF DECISION MAKING

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac worked together for 35 years to improve the lives of all those who suffered from poverty or rejection by society and to reveal the great love of God for all to them.

Apparent Differences

Vincent de Paul, a Gascon peasant, was raised within a loving family.

Louise de Marillac, a Parisian aristocrat, was rejected by her family because of her illegitimate birth.

Vincent de Paul was an enterprising young man. He threw himself into a variety of undertakings, trying to get ahead and to find a fixed revenue.

Louise de Marillac was raised in a convent and a boarding house and, as a young girl, she sought the hidden life in a Capuchin monastery.

Vincent de Paul was a man with a peasant temperament. He knew how to wait, "Never to go ahead of Divine Providence."

Louise de Marillac was a woman in a hurry to reach her goal and unafraid to challenge society or the Church. She was a Marillac.

How were they able to live and work together while their upbringing and personalities could have kept them apart? How did they manage to communicate?

Around the age of 30, both were confronted by agonizing self-examination on God and on their future. Around 1613, Vincent de Paul was greatly tormented by doubts concerning God. He became conscious of the emptiness, the uselessness of his life as priest. About 1623, Louise de Marillac plunged into "a dark night of the soul," a period of depression. She questioned her life and her future and began to doubt the existence of God. Through these trials, both became aware of the goodness of God to them and desired to dedicate their lives to those who were poor. Their love for God and the poor will unite them.

But that in no way covers over their differences. Numerous examples allow us to discover Monsieur Vincent and Mademoiselle Le Gras' sometimes opposing choices. Listening to them, observing how they live should enable us to understand how they were capable of committing themselves together for a mission of charity and of accomplishing such important actions.

SOME CONCRETE EXAMPLES

Finding a new Mother House

When the Daughters of Charity were founded, Louise de Marillac opened her own home in the parish of St. Nicolas du Chardonnet to the five or six young women who desired to join her. In 1636, as the number of sisters was increasing, the little community moved to La Chapelle north of Paris. Four years later, the house was too small. They, therefore, had to find another residence. Louise has a very definite idea. Since 1632, Saint Lazare, in the Saint Denis District, had been the Mother House of the Priests of the Mission. Louise preferred to have the Daughters of Charity lodged in the same area. Vincent de Paul was very reticent:

You may perhaps think that I have some reason which involves you on account of which I think it is unwise for you to live in this neighborhood. Oh, no, that is not the case, I assure you. The reason, rather, is this: we are among people who watch everything and pass judgment on everything. They would not see us go into your house three times without finding the opportunity to talk, to draw conclusions they ought not to draw, and to repeat them wherever they go (CCD, I, "To St. Louise," c. 1636, pp. 308-309).

In September 1640, Vincent de Paul asks the Ladies of Charity to look around for a suitable house. On 1 November, Vincent is delighted by their proposal. This residence depends on the Priory of Saint Lazare both for local taxes and for judicial matters. Consequently, Monsieur Vincent invites Louise de Marillac to visit the house located in the village of La Villette:

There is a small property in La Villette, just about an acre including the house and garden. It belongs to the parish of La Villette and comes under that house for dues and justice. It is the last house in the village beyond and on the same side as the church from which it is not so far as yours. They mentioned four or five thousand francs. There is a main building or two, with a barn and stable, country style, and it gets air on the side

and in the back. It is the only property for sale in La Villette; see what you think of it (CCD, II, "To St. Louise," 1 November 1640, pp. 150-151).

Louise goes to see it. We do not have her letter commenting on her visit; however, she refused the proposal because she was looking for something else. It appears that this time she wants to overcome Vincent's reticence. The ladies then speak of a house in the Saint Martin District. In February Vincent goes to see it and finds it too small. He shares his views with Louise the morning of 7 February:

Yesterday I saw the house that I had mentioned to you in the faubourg Saint Martin, but there is not enough room. It would be good, as you say, to have one for yourselves as soon as possible, but that is not so easily found. In the meantime, you will have to take the first one that is offered for rent (CCD, II, "To St. Louise," 7 February 1641).

Louise must have reacted immediately. She wants the house purchased not rented. Clearly her letter expressed, without too much tact, her worry and impatience with the slowness of the process. (We do not have this letter). Vincent's response is not long in coming and it too lacks tact:

As for the lodging in that parish, we must rent one at any the price, while waiting for the opportunity to buy one, as the kind we need does not turn up every day.

I still see a little of the human in your feelings as soon as you see me ill. You think all is lost for want of a house. O woman of little faith and acceptance the guidance and example of Jesus Christ! For the state of the whole Church, this Savior of the world refers to His Father with regard to rules and order, and for a handful of young women whom His Providence has so manifestly raised up and brought together, you think that He will fail us. Come, Mademoiselle, humble yourself very much before God in whose love I am your servant, Vincent de Paul (CCD, II, "To St. Louise," 7 February 1641, p. 177).

Tension is high but both are going to reflect, striving to understand the reaction of the other. Vincent, while looking at the essential of the matter, calms the situation:

We must keep on praying for the house; I am not so worried about it as about the way to set you up right now in a rented lodging. O, Jesus, Mademoiselle, your concerns do not depend on a house, but on the continuation of God's blessings on the work (CCD, II, "To St. Louise," February-March 1641, p. 189).

A new proposal is presented: Madame Maretz, who lives on Boulevard Saint Denis directly across the street from Saint Lazare, proposes her small piece of property. An agreement is reached and the sale contract is signed 6 September 1641:

We finally have the contract of purchase for the house and the money has been paid (CCD, II, "To St. Louise," 6 or 7 September 1641, p. 210).

The house was purchased for 12,000 pounds. The Congregation of the Mission assumed the cost because, at the time, The Daughters of Charity did not have the funds. The Company would not repay the Congregation of the Mission until 1653.

The different perspectives on the choice to be made led to frank and uncompromising exchanges. This discussion, without any apparent concession, allowed them to reach a solution that was accepted without afterthought. Respect overcame differences.

Accepting boys in the schools and boarders in the houses

The council meetings of the Daughters of Charity often reveal the very different way Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac viewed the realities of the mission.

The council of 30 October 1647 studies two problems. Monsieur Vincent, who is presiding, presents the first point:

Mademoiselle Le Gras questioned whether it is advisable for our sisters in towns and villages who teach school to take both boys and girls and, in the event they do take boys, to what age they will keep them (CCD, XIIIb, Council of 30 October 1647, p. 285).

First, Mademoiselle's reasons for accepting the boys are put forth: These young boys will receive a foundation in piety; this could well be their only instruction. There is no school master for them. Moreover, the parents want their boys to have at least as much instruction as their girls. Moreover, it is recognized that these very young boys (under six) cannot be a temptation for the school mistress.

Vincent presents totally opposite reasons: Having boys and girls together is forbidden both by a decree of the king and one from the archdiocese. The sisters should be the first to carry out the ordinances. Vincent supports his view by recalling that school masters who accepted little girls among the boys were condemned to be burned alive.

The two sisters present are questioned; one is for, the other is against. Monsieur Lambert, Assistant of the Congregation of the Mission, favors the proposal. Mademoiselle reiterates her opinion, saying that she has sometimes accepted boys because there are occasions when a girl can only come to school if she brings her little brother with her as her mother is not at home to look after him.

After presenting his reasons once again, Vincent de Paul concludes:

For all those reasons, Sisters, it will be well not to admit them at all. Two or three of us feel the same way. It should be left at that (Ibid., p. 288).

Louise thus has to revisit what she has authorized in some houses.

This is followed by consideration of the question of whether or not the sisters could accept boarders in their houses. Here also, there is a great difference of opinion between the two founders. Louise sees advantages in it: education of the girls; financial assistance for poor houses. Vincent sees too many inconveniences: different meals for the boarders (Vincent thought the sisters' menu was too meager!); risk that the sisters would let community differences show; difficulties in maintaining a balance between tending to these boarders and fidelity to the rule (prayer). Despite Louise's insistence, Vincent's decision was categorical:

Leave matters as they are and do not accept them anywhere (Ibid., p. 291).

Louise de Marillac will have to communicate this decision to the different houses while not letting her opposition to it show. Thus, she wrote to Barbe Angiboust in May 1655:

Monsieur Vincent is especially pleased when he hears news of you. He thinks that you should give up your boarders. He says that it is not for Daughters of Charity to keep them. As a matter of fact, it was decided at a Council meeting which was held to discuss several matters that, for good reasons, they should not accept them (Spiritual Writings, "To Sister Barbe Angiboust," c. May 1655, p. 468).

A decision taken after common reflection cannot be contested by any member. Full adherence to a council decision after deliberation is essential.

If the question is to be revisited, it can only be after another common reflection. In 1659, the need to accept boarders is raised by the sisters from La Fère. Louise tells them:

As for the boarders, reflect on the necessity and importance of having them, and then be good enough to inform me of your conclusions. I will then request a decision from our Most Honored Father and communicate his orders to you (Spiritual Writings, "To Sister Mathurine Guérin," 1 November 1659, p. 652).

Louise agrees to revisit a decision made 12 years earlier. But she asks the sisters to reflect together on their motives, to clearly spell out their motivation, and to send this to her. The mission evolves, responses to situations need to adapt. A decision made at one time can be modified if circumstances change. One cannot continuously adhere to what has always been done.

Was there a council meeting and reflection on this subject? Most likely not, as Louise's letter is from the end of November 1659!

The Bellarmine catechism and the Daughters of Charity

The Daughters of Charity taught catechism to little girls in the parishes. For this, they had a little catechism composed of questions and answers drawn up by Louise de Marillac. Some of the sisters wanted to have a deeper understanding of their faith. What option should be presented to them?

Monsieur Lambert, Priest of the Mission, recommended the Bellarmine catechism, which Louise found much too learned. During the council meeting of March 1648, the question is debated. Once again, the great difference in perspective is revealed:

Mademoiselle, there is no better catechism than Bellarmine's. When all our sisters know it and teach it, they will only be teaching what they should because they are there to instruct others and they will know what the pastors must know (CCD, XIIIb, Council of March 1648, p. 664).

And Vincent de Paul goes even further. He urges Louise de Marillac to read and explain the Bellarmine catechism to the sisters:

It would be well to have it read to the sisters and for you, yourself, to explain it to them so that they all may learn it thoroughly so as to be able to teach it; for, if they have to teach it, they also have to know it and there is no better way to learn it more completely than from that book (Ibid.).

To be opposed to a decision and to see it imposed on one for the common good, such was the situation Louise accepted. She will make every effort to understand the benefits.

Real and Effective Work Together

In closing, I would like to show how Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac were able to get beyond their profound differences. Numerous encounters allowed them to become aware of their own identities, to discover how they complemented one another, to aid one another in reaching fulfillment and thus to accomplish real and efficacious work.

Appreciation of the other

To accept the personalities of those with whom we work is often difficult. It requires accepting to see others with their qualities and their defects. This implies, first of all, knowing ourselves with our strengths and weaknesses. Little by little, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac learned to appreciate one another and expressed what they found good or bad in each other.

Vincent de Paul quickly came to admire Louise de Marillac's great competence in her dealings with the Ladies of Charity and he does not hesitate to tell her so:

I am satisfied with everything you told me about the Charity. Please propose to the sisters whatever you find appropriate in that regard, and draw it up, as much according to what you have written to me as to what you will consider best (CCD, I, "To St. Louise," 2 April 1631, p. 101).

He also does not hesitate to point out a fault that could be prejudicial to her action. Louise is leaving with Madame Goussault to visit a Confraternity:

I beg Our Lord to bless your trip.... Please be very cheerful... even though you should have to lessen a bit that somewhat serious disposition which nature has bestowed on you and which grace is tempering... (CCD, I, "To St. Louise," 30 August 1638, pp. 491-492).

Vincent will also tell the Superioress of the Company that she is too demanding of the young sisters in formation. Sister Vincente has arrived in Richelieu and Louise is complaining about her slowness to absorb what she has been told. Vincent recommends patience to her:

She is a very fine young woman, with a good reputation in her own region and has perseveringly served her mistress for 7 or 8 years. This poor woman is inexpressibly pained by her absence. There are some persons that do not adjust at first to every little

rule. Time takes care of everything. I experience that situation everyday among ourselves (CCD, II, "To St. Louise," 1640 or 1641, p. 166).

Louise has a strong personality which reveals itself in her tenacity. When she sees what she believes to be the will of God, she goes forward. She then uses a strong expression: "In the name of God." If Vincent is ill, she vigorously imposes rest:

In the name of God, Monsieur, you know that you must take some time to recover your health and attempt to maintain it for the service of God (Spiritual Writings, "To Monsieur Vincent," 11 August 1646, p. 161).

Faced with the lack of money to pay the board for the foundlings, Louise asserts her suffering and firmly exhorts Vincent de Paul to act. For her, there is only one solution, no longer to accept new children:

In the name of God, my Most Reverend Father, consider whether we should persuade these Ladies not to accept new foundlings... we can no longer stifle the pity aroused in us by these poor people who beg us who beg us for what we justly owe them... they are afraid of dying of hunger and are forced to come from quite a distance, three or four times, without receiving any money.... Please excuse my constant insistence (Spiritual Writings, "To Monsieur Vincent," February 1650, p. 316).

To accept mutuality

To accept mutuality is to acknowledge that the other makes up for what we lack. Louise quickly says what she thinks. She apologizes to Vincent de Paul for this while sending him letters and asking him to respond without delay:

Please excuse me for expressing my thoughts to you so readily (Spiritual Writings, "To Monsieur Vincent," 1651, p. 383).

If Louise recognizes her hastiness, Vincent does not hesitate to acknowledge that, on the other hand, prudence makes him slow. One balances the other.

My God, Mademoiselle, how fortunate you are to possess the antidote for eagerness! The works God Himself is accomplishing are never spoiled by the inactivity of men. Please trust in Him... (CCD, I, "To St. Louise," 13 October 1639, p. 588).

Vincent does not dare send the many people seeking his advice or assistance away. He recognizes this and lets himself be overwhelmed.

Because I am involved up to my ears with a large number of retreatants: an appointed bishop, a First President, two doctors, a professor in theology, and M. Pavillon, in addition to exercises. All that, I must say, prevents me from coming to see you. That is why I am asking you to please send me the reminder you mentioned to me (CCD, I, "To St. Louise," May or June 1632, pp. 159-160).

But, because Louise does not accept Vincent's abandoning the Conferences to the Daughters of Charity, a day or two before the date, she sends a little reminder. "Also remember the need we have for the conference you so kindly promised us for tomorrow, Thursday" (Spiritual Writings, "To Monsieur Vincent," 2 May 1646, p. 145).

The complementary aspect of their relationship continues to grow. Each brings his/her stone to the construction of the work willed by God. This is revealed in the drawing up of the Rules of the Daughters of Charity.

Those are the things I have noticed, my Most Honored Father. However, in the name of God, pay no attention to either my notes or my remarks. Instead, tell us to do what you believe God is asking of us. Please add the maxims and instructions which will encourage us and keep us faithful and exact in the observance of all the points of our Rule... (Spiritual Writings, "To Monsieur Vincent", c. 1651, p. 388).

Sanctity was not innate to either of them. As with all the saints, this journey was supported by their humanity. Little by little, their encounters transformed and perfected their personalities, and made them more attractive. Their differences became a source of enrichment for their common mission. Vincent and Louise will explain to the sisters that they must live in union among themselves while accepting their diversity. To help them, they present the Blessed Trinity as their model:

Remember me to all our sisters and tell them always to remember the advice of Monsieur Vincent especially forbearance and cordiality so as to honor the unity and diversity of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity (Spiritual Writings, "To Sister Jeanne Lepintre," 1 June 1649, p. 289).

Questions for reflection

1. In the face of our differences, how can we foster mutual respect among the members of each group and among the different branches of the Vincenian Family?
2. How can we make the service of the poor the criterion that unites us despite our differences?

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