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## The Spirituality of Louise de Marillac: Formed by the Spirit for Charity

BY

LOUISE SULLIVAN, D.C.

One of the more moving texts of Vincent de Paul is a letter of 3 March 1660 to Mathurine Guérin, superior of the Daughters of Charity at La Fère. His personal sense of loss is evident when he informed her of the recent death of Antoinet Portail, his earliest confrere and the sisters' first spiritual director, as well as of the impending death of Louise de Marillac, his friend and collaborator for thirty-six years. Vincent urges Mathurine to be at peace and to resign herself to the will of God in what is about to happen. He assures her that God will be her strength and consolation and finally the recompense of her love as she and her companions throughout the Company face the loss of their foundress. The letter, however, also contains a poignant note revealing how keenly Vincent felt the coming separation from Louise. He tells Mathurine, "Certainly it is the great secret of the spiritual life to abandon to [God] all that we love by abandoning ourselves to all that he wills. ... Pray for me."<sup>1</sup>

The friendship between these two widely differing personalities, which began so inauspiciously, was to prove to be of incalculable significance for the Church and for the poor. Many difficulties would have to be overcome but both Vincent and Louise would very soon become conscious of the need each had for the other as they combined their gifts of nature and grace for a work as yet undefined except in the mind of God, who knew that Vincentian works would, as Calvet put it, "become what they were because Louise de Marillac put her hand to them."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Saint Vincent de Paul: Conférences, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), (hereinafter cited as Coste, CED), 8:255-56.

<sup>2</sup>Jean Calvet, *Louise de Marillac: A Portrait* (New York: 1959), 46.

It is interesting that in contemporary French parlance the term “spiritual direction” has been replaced by *accompagnement spirituel*, spiritual accompaniment. As such, it is not seen as a one directional process in which one person leads and the other follows, but rather as one in which two equal parties journey together in pursuit of a common vision. Some fifty years ago the French author, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, described such a spiritual friendship, when he said, “to love is not to look at one another but to look together in the same direction.”<sup>3</sup> Vincent would expand Saint-Exupéry’s definition to include the essential third person in such a relationship, Christ. He concludes one of his early letters to Louise thus, “Well, now, I have said enough to my daughter. I must conclude by telling her that my heart will have a very fond remembrance of hers in that of Our Lord and solely for that of Our Lord, in whose love ... I am her most humble servant.”<sup>4</sup>

Subsequent to the charismatic grace bestowed upon her by God on the feast of Pentecost, 4 June 1623, and her later meeting with Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac had set out in earnest on a spiritual journey toward total union with God. Yet despite her efforts and the presence and support of Vincent for thirty-six years, the itinerary would prove to be arduous and painful and would be marked to an extraordinary degree by three elements: her temperament, her personal experience, and the period in which she lived.

It is not our purpose here to recount the life of Louise de Marillac, but an understanding of her spirituality is impossible without some reference to it. Delicate health, due in part, no doubt, to the conditions caused by war and siege in France at the time of her birth in 1591, an anxious spirit constantly troubled by the dramatic, often traumatic, events in her life, a thirst for the absolute which lacked a clear orientation, all these factors contributed to preventing Louise from finding, early in life, the necessary balance between her considerable human talents and her personal mode of sanctification. A highly intelligent, decisive woman, an intellectual with a practical sense and remarkable organizational ability, capable of conceiving and actualizing vast enter-

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<sup>3</sup>Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Oeuvres*, (Paris: 1967), 252.

<sup>4</sup>*Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents. I. Correspondence (1607-1639)*. ed. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., trans. Helen Marie Law, D.C., John Marie Poole, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik, C.M., ann. John Carven, C.M. (Brooklyn: 1985); II. *Correspondence (January 1640-July 1646)*, ed. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., and Marie Poole, D.C., trans Marie Poole, D.C., Esther Cavanaugh, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik C.M. (Brooklyn: 1989), (hereinafter cited as SVP), 1:56.

prises in their most minute detail, Louise nevertheless experienced a need for nearly constant support in her spiritual life. This woman who, despite physical frailty, possessed seemingly limitless energy when confronted with the demands of the works for the poor or the needs of the incipient congregation of which she was the foundress and superioress, nonetheless, was subject to periods of discouragement in her interior life and sought the presence and support of a spiritual guide to supply needed reassurance. One of the more perceptive of her biographers, M.D. Poinset, describes her as "more reasoning than intuitive ... needing to support her deepest, most vital convictions by syllogisms of irrefutable logic ... a 'militant' in the strict sense of the word, whose love required struggle and action in order to prove itself."<sup>5</sup>

A struggle to maintain virtues painfully acquired by rigorous asceticism and numerous devotions will mark the early stage of Louise's spiritual development. There is little spontaneity and, curiously, despite the importance of the Holy Spirit at this time, little quiet openness to infused divine gifts. As a young woman, Louise would strive for sanctity by the sheer force of her will. This is apparent from a letter she received from her uncle, Michel de Marillac, dated 12 September 1619. He tells his niece, "Be patient and humble yourself before God for the faults you may commit against the peaceful submission of your soul to God. Wait for him to grant you the graces you need and do not try to force him to bestow upon you more graces than He wills."<sup>6</sup>

At about the same time her then spiritual director, Jean-Pierre Camus, bishop of Belly, wrote, "I am pleased to know that the exercises of recollection and retreat are so useful and consoling for you. However, you must make use of them like honey, only rarely and in moderation, because you give evidence of a certain spiritual avidity which needs to be controlled."<sup>7</sup>

What is also significant here is the fact that these letters indicate that the recipient has already made considerable progress in the spiritual life. Louise, at the time, is a married woman of about twenty-eight, with a sick husband and a young son who has already become the source of anxiety he would remain for her throughout her life. It is well to examine, to the extent that such an examination is possible given the scarcity of documentation, the characteristics of this initial stage of

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<sup>5</sup>M.D. Poinset in *De l'anxiété à la sainteté: Louise de Marillac* (1958), 159.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted, *ibid.*, 44.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

Louise de Marillac's spiritual itinerary. Reflection on these early years reveals constants in her interior life. It is important to bear this in mind, especially when considering her relationship with Vincent de Paul. Though contemporaries, they nonetheless grew up and spent their youths in a very different milieu. More important still, their temperaments and life experiences varied radically. Louise would always place a high value on Vincent's guidance, but she did not absorb "Vincentian" spirituality to such an extent that her spiritual journey was a carbon copy of his. As Calvet put it, what Vincent de Paul brought her was "not so much a doctrine as a method."<sup>8</sup> This "method," however, would be the means that would free her and enable her to reach her full human and spiritual potential.

What, then, are the elements in Louise de Marillac's spiritual evolution that are discernible from the outset? Before there is any attempt to respond, a *caveat* is called for here. As was mentioned earlier, the documentation is slim. More importantly, however, most of it is not from the pen of Louise de Marillac herself. In the 1991 edition of the *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*,<sup>9</sup> we find for the period prior to 1633 and the foundation of the Daughters of Charity only three letters, all to Vincent, and fifty pages of "thoughts." While these latter texts, some twenty-seven in all, trace the broad themes of Louise's prayer life at the time, the spiritual portrait of the woman is drawn largely from the letters of Vincent de Paul to her. Of the 400 such letters which have been preserved, 75 percent were written before 1642, when the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity was moved to the Saint-Denis district of Paris and was, therefore, in close proximity to Saint-Lazare. Of these, ninety-eight were prior to the foundation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity on 29 November 1633.

Let us now examine the spiritual portrait of Louise that can be deduced from the correspondence of Vincent and the principal themes of her prayer that can be derived from her own writings dating from that time.

### The Spiritual Portrait

Although the exact date of the first meeting between Vincent and Louise is unknown (probably some time between the end of 1624 and the beginning of 1625), it is certain that there was reluctance on both

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<sup>8</sup>Calvet, *Louise de Marillac*, 61.

<sup>9</sup>*Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac: Correspondence — Thoughts*, trans. and ed. Louise Sullivan, D.C. (Brooklyn: 1991), (hereinfter cited as SWLM).

sides. Vincent's can be supposed because of his earlier experience with the spiritual direction of Madame de Gondi and his desire to devote himself to the missions, but Louise's is clear. She herself tells of her repugnance to accept any change in director in her account of her Pentecost experience of 1623. She writes, "I was assured that I should remain at peace concerning my director, that God would give me one whom He seemed to show to me. It was repugnant to me to accept him; nevertheless, I acquiesced. It seemed to me that I did not yet have to make this change."<sup>10</sup>

But the day would come when, moved by the Holy Spirit, they would both set aside their own desires and hesitations to enter fully into the divine plan. The first step in their common journey had been taken. Their initial contacts were cautious. As she opened her heart to him, Vincent responded with quiet wisdom and gentleness. To have acted otherwise, to have demanded from the outset that she forget herself, cast aside her anxiety, and enter joyfully into the service of God and neighbor would have compromised the entire process. Louise de Marillac was an anxious, troubled, scrupulous woman, certainly, but she was also one who had borne more than her share of suffering. The obscurity of her birth, the loneliness of her childhood and youth, the frustration of not being allowed to enter the cloister, the illness of her husband, the limitations of her child, all combined to push her to the very edge of despair. Like Vincent himself, she had experienced the dark night of the soul. The "light of Pentecost" had brought her peace and an indication of her future vocation,<sup>11</sup> but the peace was as yet fragile and the suffering caused by her husband's long agony, leading to his death on 21 December 1625, nearly destroyed it once again. When Louise met Vincent, she already had a regulated prayer life, was versed in sacred scripture, had read a number of important spiritual writers, such as Granada, Gerson, de Sales, and Bérulle, and had received spiritual guidance from Michel de Marillac, Jean-Pierre Camus, and possibly Francis de Sales. In a word, she was not a beginner. Vincent's task, therefore, was to discern what had benefited her and what, though good in itself, had reinforced the weaknesses in her character. When they met, Louise had reached yet another turning point on her spiritual journey. She was again in a hurry. She wanted to know, to understand, to see, to take control of her life of service to God which she had vowed

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<sup>10</sup>"Light," SWLM, A.2, 1.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 1-2.

in her vow of widowhood of 4 May 1625. Vincent knew that God was asking of her unconditional abandonment to his providence. But peaceful abandonment was not in her character. So the challenge was there for both of them: how to prevent her from rushing headlong down the dangerous slope where her self questioning, self analysis, and self contempt were leading her; how to enable her to fulfill in her life the directive she had received years earlier in a letter from the bishop of Belley, "Turn your glance away from yourself ... and fix it on Jesus Christ."<sup>12</sup> Camus, despite his considerable skill as a spiritual guide, was not able to instill in Louise the confidence necessary to enter upon the path of abandonment to the will of God. The wise Monsieur Vincent would do so.

The letters of Vincent to Louise, written between 1626 and the end of November 1633, reveal his gentle, healing touch. Words such as peace, abandonment, and joy recur like a leitmotiv under his pen. At this early stage he perceived that Louise's great gifts of nature and grace were contained in a fragile vessel. She did not need the detached, cold reminders of human frailty she had received from Michel de Marillac<sup>13</sup> or the holy but ineffectual advice of Jean-Pierre Camus.<sup>14</sup> She needed, in her spiritual director, someone who would exercise in her life what she would later call "gentle persuasion."<sup>15</sup> So it is that in the very first letter we have of Vincent to Louise, dated 30 October 1626, we find him gently warding off what he fears is a growing attachment to him and urging her to allow God himself to direct her. He writes:

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, and 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. Be then His dear daughter — quite humble, submissive, and full of confidence — and always wait patiently for the manifestation of His holy and adorable will.<sup>16</sup>

This letter also illustrates one of the most striking differences in the personalities of Vincent and Louise, a difference which would produce

<sup>12</sup>Poinsenet, *De l'anxiété*, 44.

<sup>13</sup>See Poinsenet, *ibid.*, 444-56, and Calvet, *Louise de Marillac*, 35-45.

<sup>14</sup>Poinsenet, *De l'anxiété*, 44-56.

<sup>15</sup>"Obligations of the Superioress, SWLM, A.91B, 75A.

<sup>16</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 30 October 1626, letter 12, SVP, 1:24.

some conflict over the years,<sup>17</sup> but which would also be the base of their complementarity which would bear such abundant fruit for God and the poor. Louise was, as we pointed out earlier, a woman in a hurry, eager to turn ideas into reality. Vincent wanted to “wait patiently,”<sup>18</sup> too patiently perhaps at times, for God to manifest his will. Louise needed restraint, Vincent needed prodding. They would provide that for one another and the poor would benefit.

Let us return, however to the 1626-1633 period. We know from the first letter we have of Louise to Vincent, dated 5 June 1627, that he had begun to involve her in his charitable activities. She speaks about “the 28 year old girl they wish to send from Burgundy and confide to my care,”<sup>19</sup> as well as of a twenty-two year old from Vertus who “might also come here.”<sup>20</sup> The same letter indicates that she had also been doing some needlework for the poor. She tells Vincent, “The work which your Charity gave me is finished. If the members of Jesus need it and you want me to send it to you, Father, I shall not fail to do so.”<sup>21</sup>

It is well to note that Louise has already identified the poor with Christ and is aware that by serving them she is serving him. This focus on Christ was particularly essential for a woman of Louise’s temperament who was so prone to fly to activism, possibly as an escape from loneliness and introspection. She would come to recognize this as a danger for herself and other generous souls. Later, as superioress of the Daughters of Charity, she would warn the sisters, as Vincent had warned her, against “indiscreet zeal.”<sup>22</sup> In the last letter we have from her we find this emphasis on the interior life as the driving force for action in the service of the poor. On 2 February 1660, Louise wrote to Jeanne Delacroix:

I am sure that you are very busy and also that you take great care to help our sisters to strive for holiness ... Above all, let me know if, while they are occupied with exterior service, the sisters’ minds are directed toward vigilance over themselves . . . Without this, external actions, although they are for the service of the poor, cannot be very pleasing to God, nor can they merit a recompense for us because they are not united to those of

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<sup>17</sup>See Élizabeth Charpy, D.C., “Come Wind or High Water: Louise de Marillac,” *Echoes of the Company* (Paris: 1987), 343ff. See also by the same author, *Petite Vie de Louise de Marillac* (Paris: 1991), 104-07. Sister Charpy is certainly correct in stressing the differences in the personalities of Vincent and Louise, but her emphasis on the period 1640-1642 seems to this writer to be exaggerated.

<sup>18</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 30 October 1626, letter 12, SVP, 1:24.

<sup>19</sup>Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul, 5 June 1627, letter 1, SWLM, 6.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, May 1630, letter 48, SVP, 1:79.



Jesus Christ who always worked in the sight of God, His Father. You are well rooted in this practice, my dear Sister, and thus you experience the peace of a soul that is dependent upon her Beloved.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout her life, Louise would strive to keep her gaze fixed on Jesus Christ. As her charitable activities increased and her zeal threatened to undermine her health, Vincent gently but firmly called her to moderation. One of his letters to her, dating from this early period, presents the quintessential antidote for burnout. On 7 December 1630, he wrote to her in Beauvais:

Blessed be God that you have arrived in good health! Oh! take great care to preserve it for the love of God and His poor members and be careful not to do too much. It is a ruse of the devil, by which he deceives good people, to induce them to do more than they are able, so that they end up not being able to do anything. The spirit of God urges one gently to do the good that can be done reasonably, so that it may be done perseveringly and for a long time. Act, therefore, in this way, Mademoiselle, and you will be acting according to the spirit of God.<sup>24</sup>

So, gently, Monsieur Vincent turned Louise's gaze away from herself and toward the Other and others. She was still an anxious, restless young woman, so he urged tranquility and trust. He wrote, "Relieve your mind of all that is troubling you; God will take care of it ... Put your trust in Him ... and your heart's desire will be fulfilled ... Cast aside all those mistrustful thoughts which you sometimes allow to invade your mind. And why would your soul not be full of confidence, since you are, by his mercy, the dear daughter of Our Lord?"<sup>25</sup>

Over and over, Vincent repeats variations of the same theme. "Please live peacefully ... in the joy of a heart that desires to conform itself completely to that of Our Lord,"<sup>26</sup> Anxieties would remain, but Vincent tells her not to be discouraged. "Do not think that all is lost because of the little rebellions you experience interiorly. It has just rained very hard and is thundering dreadfully. Is the weather less beautiful for that? Let the tears of sadness drown your heart and let the demons thunder and growl as much as they please. Be assured ... that you are no less dear to Our Lord for all that. Therefore, live contentedly in His love."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Louise de Marillac to Jeanne Delacroix, 2 February 1660, letter 656, SWLM, 678.

<sup>24</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 7 December 1630, letter 58, SVP, 1:92.

<sup>25</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, c. 1630, letter 53, *ibid.*, 1:84.

<sup>26</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, February 1630, letter 41, *ibid.*, 1:69.

<sup>27</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, c. 1629, letter 36, *ibid.*, 1:62.

Little by little, Louise learned to live as Vincent had taught her, that is, "content among [her] reasons for discontent."<sup>28</sup> As calm was restored, she began to see her vocation as a clear call from God to dedicate herself exclusively to the service of the suffering "members of Jesus."<sup>29</sup> If we are to believe Abelly, some time before 6 May 1629, possibly the seventh Sunday after Pentecost, 30 July 1628, "the faithful servant of Jesus Christ was strongly urged during her prayer to devote herself to the service of the poor. When she asked Saint Vincent's advice, he gave her this response."<sup>30</sup> which Abelly then goes on to reproduce in its entirety.

Well yes, dear Lady, I do consent. Why not, since Our Lord has given you this holy thought? Go to Communion tomorrow, then, and prepare yourself for the salutary review you have in mind; after that, you will begin the retreat you have arranged. I could not tell you how ardently my heart desires to see yours in order to know how this has come about in it, but I am quite willing to mortify myself for the love of God, in which love alone I desire yours to be immersed.

Now then, I imagine that today's Gospel [of the good and the bad tree] touched you deeply; [it is] so impelling to the heart that loves with a perfect love. Oh! what a tree you have appeared to be today in God's sight, since you have borne such a fruit! May you be forever a beautiful tree of life bringing forth fruits of love, and I, in that same love, your servant.<sup>31</sup>

Louise began what we may truly call her new life by a retreat.<sup>32</sup> The graces she received fortified her. She felt confident enough to emerge from her solitude, to engage in personal charitable activity, and to assume greater and greater responsibility. Louise was sure of herself, and Vincent had the sign of the will of God that he had been seeking. The Confraternities of Charity, which had flourished in the beginning, were falling on hard times. The spirit of their foundation was threatened. Someone had to visit them, study their activities, correct abuses, and revive in the members the zeal of their origin. No one, in the eyes of Vincent de Paul, seemed better suited to undertake this task than Louise de Marillac. So it was that on 6 May 1629 he sent her forth to Montmirail, where he was himself at the time. With joy in his heart and an unusual

<sup>28</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, between 1626 and May 1629, letter 29, *ibid.*, 1:54.

<sup>29</sup>Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul, 5 June 1627, letter 1, SWLM, 6.

<sup>30</sup>Louis Abelly, *La vie du venerable serviteur de dieu Vincent de Paul instituteur et premier superieur general de la Congregation de la Mission* (Paris: 1664), vol. 1, chap. 23, 105, quoted in SVP, 1:46, unnumbered footnote.

<sup>31</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 30 July 1826 (?), letter 27, SVP, 1:46.

<sup>32</sup>See "Retreat Meditations," A.7, SWLM, 698-701.

bit of lyricism on his lips, borrowed from the prayer of itinerant monks, the *Orationes Itinerantium*, he wrote, "Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, 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 weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works."<sup>33</sup>

Vincent then went on to give her some advice of his own as well as a warning that commitment to Christ brings suffering as well as joy. He continued, "Go to Communion the day of your departure to honor the charity of Our Lord, the journeys He undertook for this same and by this same charity, and the difficulties, contradictions, weariness, and labors that He endured in them. May He be pleased to bless your journey, giving you His spirit and the grace to act in this same spirit, and to bear your troubles in the way He bore His."<sup>34</sup>

The next four years of intense activity worked a cure in the heart, mind, and even body of Louise de Marillac. She had found a work in which her human and spiritual gifts flourished. Even the tragic events affecting the Marillac family did not distract her from her task. She had, at last, broken the fetters that bound her. She could function as a free woman, confident of God's love for her and desirous of bringing that love to the poor. And she was remarkably successful. In her *Spiritual Writings*, we find the detailed accounts of her visits to the Confraternities.<sup>35</sup> They reveal her keen intelligence, her organizational ability, and her capacity for leadership. She still relied on Vincent, particularly in her spiritual life, but she has become his collaborator, his equal, a woman of decision. The transformation is greater than Vincent could have hoped for and he is overjoyed. His letters from this period express his growing confidence in Louise. Not only does he tell her how pleased he is to hear that God is blessing her work<sup>36</sup> and that the surest methods to be practiced in the Confraternities are the ones that she had in mind,<sup>37</sup> but he acknowledges, for her consolation and encouragement, that particularly difficult situations call for her skills and that, in more than one instance, "God [was] reserving the success of that good work for

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<sup>33</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 6 May 1629, letter 39, SVP, 1:64-65.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:65.

<sup>35</sup>"Visits to the Confraternities of Asnières and Saint-Cloud," A. 50, SWLM, 704; "Notes on the visits to the Confraternities (1633)," A. 53, *ibid.*, 720; "Visits to the Confraternities of Verneuil, Pont-Sainte-Maxence, Gournay, Neufville and Bulles (1633)," A. 52, *ibid.*, 722; "Visit to the confraternity of Gournay (1636)," A. 47, *ibid.*, 729.

<sup>36</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 11 April 1631, letter 65, SVP., 1:104.

[her]."<sup>38</sup> In one letter, after commending her for a task well done, he asks, "Well now, is that not a consolation for you, Mademoiselle? After that, will you say that you are of no use to the world?"<sup>39</sup>

Ironically, Louise is so successful that Vincent becomes the impatient one, asking, "What is preventing you from returning tomorrow? They really need you here at the Charity of Saint-Sulpice. They have made some beginning but, according to what I have been told, things are going so badly that it is a real pity. Perhaps God is reserving for you the opportunity to work there."<sup>40</sup>

But all was not successful. There were trials and failures.<sup>41</sup> Vincent was there to support her. "Our Lord will perhaps draw more glory from your submission than from all the good you could do. One beautiful diamond is worth more than a mountain of stones, and one virtuous act of acquiescence and submission is better than an abundance of good works done for others."<sup>42</sup>

The Louise de Marillac of this period, however, is a changed woman. She now has the inner strength to face difficulties and deal calmly with them. She had foreseen them and found in union with God the courage she needed. Grace had touched her soul. On 5 February 1630, her wedding anniversary, she left to visit the Confraternity of Saint-Cloud. In her *Spiritual Writings* she recounts the spiritual experience of that day.

I left on the Feast of Saint Agatha, February 5, to go to Saint-Cloud. At the moment of Holy Communion, it seemed to me that Our Lord inspired me to receive Him as the Spouse of my soul and that this Communion was a manner of espousal. I felt myself more closely united to Him by this experience which was extraordinary for me. I also felt moved to leave everything to follow my Spouse; to look upon Him as such in the future; and to bear with the difficulties I might encounter as part of the community of His goods.<sup>43</sup>

While visiting the Confraternities of Charity, Louise touched the depth of human misery and discovered the resources of charity capable of alleviating it. With all her energy and talent she sought to take up the burden of others instead of bewailing her own. In so doing, she

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<sup>37</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 1630, letter 42, *ibid.*, 1:128.

<sup>38</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 12 October 1631, letter 85, *ibid.*, 1:128.

<sup>39</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 1630, letter 42, *ibid.*, 1:70.

<sup>40</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, April 1631, letter 66, *ibid.*, 1:105.

<sup>41</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 15 September 1631, letter 83, *ibid.*, 1:124-125.

<sup>42</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, April 1630, letter 46, *ibid.*, 1:75.

<sup>43</sup>"Visits to the Confraternities of Asnières and Saint-Cloud (February 1630)," A.50, SWLM, 705.

broadened her horizons and expanded her heart. She discovered love in its widest dimensions and it set her free. She was no longer alone. Vincent had told her earlier, "God is love and wants us to go to Him through love."<sup>44</sup> With this freeing love in her heart, she laid to rest the ghosts of the past. She took, once again, the name her father had given her, Louise de Marillac, and as a Marillac she had the faith and confidence to believe that she could, with God's sustaining grace, rise above success and failure, joy and sorrow. At the age of forty-two, Louise was in full possession of herself and ready to take, along with Vincent de Paul, the next step on the path along which God was leading them.

Human and spiritual therapy had transformed Louise, but grace could not have taken root in her soul, had she not prepared the soil by a life of prayer. It is that prayer life we shall now examine here in an effort to determine the major elements that characterized it during this early stage of her spiritual journey.

During her childhood and youth, Louise de Marillac had been deprived of the tenderness of a mother's love and the security of family and home. However, God, who frequently writes straight with crooked lines, provided her with an exceptionally rich spiritual environment. Placed as a boarder at a very early age, perhaps even as an infant, at the royal monastery of Saint Louis at Poissy, where her aunt, another Louise de Marillac, was a Dominican nun, Louise passed her first years in a profoundly and authentically supernatural ambience. If her heart remained constricted well into her adult life, Louise's soul blossomed in an environment where God held the first place. Moreover, the atmosphere of Poissy was one where the intellectual life flourished along with the spiritual. The biography of Louise de Marillac by M.D. Poinsenet provides a comprehensive overview of the history of the monastery and of the spiritual and intellectual climate in which Louise spent her earliest years.<sup>45</sup> An abnormal environment for a child, to say the least, but one in which Louise and other little girls of her class learned to know God, to love him, and to discover him hidden under the rages of the poor. At the same time, this little girl, who was mature beyond her years because of the suffering she had endured, developed a love for liturgical prayer, spiritual reading, and contemplation. It is not at all surprising that, as she grew older, she thought of entering a cloister.

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<sup>44</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, c. 1630, letter 49, SVP, 1:81.

<sup>45</sup>See Poinsenet, *De l'anxiété*, 13-33.

The establishment of the Daughters of the Passion in Paris in 1606, with which Michel de Marillac was closely associated, seemed to provide Louise with an ideal setting in which to live the life which she desired and to which she felt called by God. It is not difficult to imagine how shattered she must have been when Father Honoré de Champigny, provincial of the Capuchins, refused her request for admission. His reasons are not clear, but his words proved to be prophetic. He said that God had "other designs" for Louise.

Nowhere do we have recorded Louise's reaction to this unexpected rejection. The crisis of 1623, however, shows the extent to which she was still marked by it. Moreover, her early prayer life shows clearly the influence of Poissy and the desire for a life dedicated to reading and contemplation. Bearing this in mind, let us now turn our attention to Louise's own words.

The earliest document we have, classified by Sister Goeffre for the archive of the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity at the end of the nineteenth century as *Autographe 1*, is Louise de Marillac's "Rule of Life in the World."<sup>46</sup> In this three page text, we find most of the major themes of Louise's spirituality which will be developed and deepened with the passage of time. We also see the form her prayer life takes during the early years of her widowhood.

The first thing that strikes the reader is the rigid structure that Louise imposed upon her life in general and on her prayer in particular. From her first thoughts upon awakening until retiring at night, every minute is accounted for. There is no room for spontaneity. The Dominicans or the Daughters of Passion could hardly have lived a more regulated life. Indeed, it would seem that Louise was trying to turn her little apartment into the cloister into which she had been refused admittance years earlier. Times are set aside for the recitation of the hours of the Office of the Blessed Virgin. The time for assisting at mass and the days for receiving holy communion are fixed. There are specific periods for meditation and spiritual reading. Even the titles are indicated. There is fasting and penance, the hair shirt and the discipline. Finally there are devotions: the rosary, special prayers said at special times, acts multiplied within certain time frames.

Surprisingly, the schedule does recognize household responsibilities and even limited social obligations, such as visits paid and received, and dinner guests. One is hard pressed, however, to see where a

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<sup>46</sup>"Rule of life in the world," A.1, SWLM, 689-91.

thirteen year old boy, her son, Michel, fits into the scheme of things.

Nonetheless, despite the nearly stifling rigidity of this spiritual regimen, the broad lines of Louise de Marillac's spirituality are discernible: Jesus Christ, poor and suffering, honored and served; the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Redemption; the Eucharist; the Holy Spirit; the rhythm of the liturgical year; the Blessed Virgin; the service of the poor; the virtues of poverty, humility, gentleness, cheerfulness, trust, abandonment to the will of God, fidelity, and above all, love.

It is in light of this text that certain letters of Vincent to Louise become clear. He knew that she was a soul called to perfection, and he wanted to help her to reach it. In 1629, he told her, "the desire I have for you to be quite holy is ever increasing."<sup>47</sup> Yet he feared that she was striving to become a saint by the sheer force of her will and the multiplicity of her prayers. Michel de Marillac had warned her in 1619 not to "try to force [God] to bestow upon [her] more graces than He will."<sup>48</sup> It seems that at this time she was still unable to let go enough of her desire to control her spiritual progress to heed his advice. Such a woman, bound to a regular schedule, was certainly not ready to set out to visit the Confraternities of Charity or to dedicate herself to the formation of servants of the poor. Thus it was that Vincent undertook to try to bring balance into her spiritual life. Father de Champigny had been correct. Louise de Marillac's character was not suited to the cloister. It was too prone to close in on itself. She needed to reach out and to find her God in others. And so Vincent would write to her to urge moderation, peace, and calm. Given her scrupulous nature, he feared that she would become anxious if she were unable to maintain the rule she had drawn up. Around 1630 he wrote to her:

Do everything that your fervor suggests, except the discipline, unless it be three times a week. Read the book concerning the love of God [the *Treatise on the Love of God*, by Francis de Sales], in particular the one that deals with God's Will and indifference. As for all those thirty-three acts to the holy humanity [acts in memory of the years Our Lord spent on earth] and the others, do not be distressed when you fail to make them. God is love and wants us to go to Him through love. Therefore, do not hold yourself bound to all those good resolutions.<sup>49</sup>

Over and over he urges her to do what is necessary to preserve her health, including a dispensation from the abstinence of lent. In 1632, he

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<sup>47</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, c. 1629, letter 34, SVP, 1:61.

<sup>48</sup>Cited by Poinsenet in *De l'anxiété*, 44.

<sup>49</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, c. 1630, letter 49, SVP, 1:80-81.

told her, “do not make any objection to eating meat. On the contrary, as far as in me lies, I order you to do so and to put aside the misgivings you are allowing to enter your heart.”<sup>50</sup> He concluded the same letter thus, “I am ordering you, moreover, to procure for yourself the holy joy of your heart by all the relaxation you can possibly take.”<sup>51</sup> When Vincent gave his approval for a practice that Louise wanted to undertake in honor of Mary, he did so with a proviso that applied to all her devotions. He said, “I approve of the practice ... provided you carry it out peacefully.”<sup>52</sup> Vincent furnished Louise with outlines for her retreats, but he urged her, to practice moderation and to go about her exercises “leisurely.”<sup>53</sup>

In her prayer life as in everything else, Louise de Marillac was marked by the era in which she lived. She was a seventeenth-century Frenchwoman. Directly or indirectly, her intellectual processes were influenced by Descartes and the Cartesian method. Be they retreat meditations, acts of consecration, or “thoughts,” they all have one element in common. They are reasoned. Solid, profound, often moving, they are always logical, progressing smoothly from point to point. Vincent would try to help her to become more spontaneous and to be more open to the infused gifts of the Spirit. Louise herself, as she mentions in the notes of one of her early retreats, would “strive to simplify the workings of [her] mind.”<sup>54</sup> It would take a constant letting go before Louise could make a reality in her own life the advice she gave a lady who was seeking spiritual direction from her prior to a retreat.

While reflecting on the divine gentleness during your periods of meditation, speak to Our Lord with great simplicity and innocent familiarity. Do not be concerned whether or not you experience any consolation; God wants only our hearts. He placed within our power only the capacity to make a simple act of the will. He considers this alone and the deeds resulting from it. Make as few reflections as possible and live in holy joy in the service of our Sovereign Lord and Master.<sup>55</sup>

This is the Louise de Marillac who, in a meditation on holy communion toward the end of her life would write, “no desires, no

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<sup>50</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, undated, letter 96, *ibid.*, 1:145.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, c. 1630, letter 49, *ibid.*, 1:81.

<sup>53</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, May 1632, letter 107, *ibid.*, 1:158.

<sup>54</sup>“Retreat (c. 1632),” A.5, SWLM, 714-15.

<sup>55</sup>“To Madame ...,” undated, L.40, *ibid.*, 679.



resolutions. The grace of God will accomplish in me whatever He wills."<sup>56</sup>

Wise man that he was, however, Vincent de Paul would capitalize on Louise's remarkable powers of reasoning to help her to overcome her "indiscreet zeal"<sup>57</sup> and her "useless apprehension."<sup>58</sup> When she tried to do more than her health would allow, he reminded her, "I beg you ... to do all in your power to take care of yourself, no longer as a private individual but as a person upon whose health a number of others are dependent."<sup>59</sup> When an interior trial caused her to abstain from holy communion, he wrote, "You made a rather poor decision ... Do you think that you will become more capable of drawing near to God by withdrawing from Him than you will by approaching Him? Oh! surely that is an illusion."<sup>60</sup> When old anxieties resurfaced, he chided her, "I am sorry that you are allowing your spirit to plunge into certain useless apprehensions ... Leave that fear, which seems to me to be rather servile at times, to those to whom God has not given the understanding of Him that He has given to you."<sup>61</sup>

They had come a long way in nine years. These two widely differing personalities who had entered into their relationship with such reluctance had, over the course of the years, become collaborators and friends ready to undertake the great work to which they were called and for which God in his providence had been preparing them. As Louise de Marillac turned all her gifts toward the service of Christ in the poor, Vincent would be at her side. He told her, "Courage! May Our Lord be in our hearts and our hearts in His so that they may be three in one and one in three and that we may wish only that He wills."<sup>62</sup>

The year 1633 and the great undertaking are approaching. They have but to allow the Spirit to act in and through them as they reached a new point in their spiritual journey.

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<sup>56</sup>"On Holy Communion," 1660, M.8B, *ibid.*, 834.

<sup>57</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, May 1630, letter 48, *ibid.*, 1:79

<sup>58</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, undated, letter 101, *ibid.*, 1:150.

<sup>59</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, August/September 1633, letter 151, *ibid.*, 1:215-16.

<sup>60</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, May 1631, letter 108, *ibid.*, 1:108.

<sup>61</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, undated, *ibid.*, letter 101, 1:150.

<sup>62</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, undated, *ibid.*, letter 148, 1:212-13.