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“Spes Unica”: Louise at the End of Her Life

BY

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The topic I have been given for this talk is Louise at the end of her life. Before discussing the mature Louise I believe it is important to take a brief look at the concept of maturity.

Developmental theories traditionally profile adulthood as the ability to be independent and autonomous. In looking at Louise during her mature years, I suggest an additional measure for maturity. This measure is the ability to live in harmonious relationship with others. The concept is one of interdependence.

It is this definition of maturity as the ability to be self-determined, aware of one’s own identity, strengths, and weaknesses and to place oneself humbly in relationship with others that I will use to discuss the mature Louise.

Traditionally, compassion, gentleness, collaboration, connectedness, and complementarity have been viewed as the weaker or less important aspects of a mature person’s functioning. However, I would ask you to look at Louise in the context of current psychological thinking which has begun to elevate these qualities to a position of significance in the functioning of a mature and healthy adult.

Neurotic, scrupulous, overly sensitive, frantic, dependent — these are terms that have long been associated with Louise de Marillac.

I would ask you to think of Louise as aware of the need for connectedness to others rather than as dependent. Regard Louise’s sensitivity as the foundation for her ability to perceive needs and respond with creative solutions rather than as a neurotic.

I invite you to look at Louise as a woman with the courage and the strength to risk being honest with herself and open with others about her humanness rather than as scrupulous. The way Louise functioned was her way of following Jesus as she understood the gospel message.

When you think about Louise, think of her as a woman of compas-

sion whose life experience led her to be resolute in living out the virtues of gospel adulthood outlined by Saint Paul, "You are God's chosen race, God loves you and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another, forgive each other, over all things put on love to keep them together and make them complete."¹

Louise saw Jesus as a role model. This view of God in human form was the organizing principle of her life. Her religious philosophy was totally infused with the vision of a God who came in the form of a baby to show us the way to salvation. Louise was fascinated with the humility and the caring of a God who would become incarnate so that we might understand how to live in relationship with others.

From Jesus Louise learned the humility of being human. In her retreat notes she shares some thoughts on humility. "Humility is the knowledge of truth."² and "He came as humbly as can be imagined so that we might be more free to approach him."³ Louise's attachment to Jesus Christ and the Good News impelled her to search for ways to make room in her heart and mind for the humility of this baby born in a stable, for the simplicity of this Jesus who lived and worked among the people of Nazareth and for the charity of Jesus crucified.

Let us listen to her words.

I shall honor the serenity of the crib by disposition to replace desire by contentment in the possession of God who never denies Himself to the soul that truly seeks Him. I shall calmly adore the divinity in the Infant Jesus and imitate, to the best of my ability, His holy humanity, especially His simplicity and charity which led Him to come to us as a child so as to be me accessible to His creatures.⁴

Louise continues her thoughts in a meditation on the life of Jesus in Nazareth. "I must spend the rest of my days honoring the hidden life of Jesus on earth. He came among us to accomplish the will of God His Father. He did this during an entire life. Since he saw the common life had the greatest need of examples,

I implore Him, with all my heart, to grant me the grace to imitate Him."⁵

¹Colossians 3:12-15.

²Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*. Translated by Louise Sullivan (Albany: 1984), 20.

³*Ibid.*, 21.

⁴*Ibid.*, 46.

⁵*Ibid.*, 47.

Clearly, the focus of Louise's life and spirituality was the Incarnation. It was from the example of a God who chose to become human that Louise drew the inspiration and direction for her life.

It was from this Jesus who entered into dialogue with the woman at the well, who loved the little children, who ate with sinners and outcasts that Louise learned about morality based on responsibility as well as rights. Jesus's awareness of the dignity of each individual influenced Louise as she learned that the highest stage of moral living is not simply a well developed abstract understanding of human rights.⁶ For Louise, mature moral development meant understanding that people live within a context and that each individual must be viewed and appreciated within that context. Louise appeared to have a talent for emphasizing connection rather than separation.

In Louise's writings in her later years, there is a shift from the intellectual to a more reflective mode. Listen to her words, written three years before her death.

My meditation was more reflective than reasoning. I felt a great attraction for the holy humanity of Our Lord and I desired to honor and imitate it in so far as I was able in the person of the poor and of all my neighbors. I had read somewhere that He had taught us charity to make up for our powerlessness to render any service to His person. This touched my heart very particularly and very intimately.⁷

Louise connected with a God who became human and in her understanding of this God among the people, she found a commonality that connected her with others. Within this context of a God Incarnate, Louise found her self-definition and discovered empathy. From a compassionate and approachable God Louise learned compassion and a way to relate to Vincent, to the Ladies, and the Daughters of Charity and to the poor.

As a person in relationship, Louise grasped the importance of both compassion and respect for individuals. What surfaces in Louise's writings is awareness of each person to whom she writes. Louise's style of communication was narrative and familiar rather than abstract and formal. Let us listen to her words to Sister Carcireux in December, 1659.

⁶Miriam Greensan, *A New Approach to Women and Therapy* (New York: 1983), 337.

⁷*Spiritual Writings*, 199.

I'm not reproaching you for having written to Mother Fouquet, who is a very good and virtuous religious. But because I'm firmly convinced that you love your vocation and are well rooted in it, I don't hesitate to express my thoughts to you as they pass through my mind. That's why I give to you all the advice I feel will be useful to those whom I foresee that God will use to maintain the Company in the spirit of humility and simplicity of Jesus Christ. If I didn't know you thoroughly, and if I weren't certain that you'll accept graciously and with forebearance what I say to you, I'd be careful not to talk to you this way.⁸

The tone of this letter suggests the understanding of another that comes from a caring relationship. Louise expresses compassion and empathy. Her manner of sharing is as affirmative as it is direct. Louise used her sensitivity to understand what the other person needed and she responded accordingly.

By seeing Christ in each person, Louise found a way to understand what binds us together in this human experience. In the context of a common humanity, redeemed by a compassionate God, Louise developed a profound respect for persons.

In the following message, to the Daughters of Charity going to Montreuil, listen to the caring and the respect for the person's understanding of their own needs. In her words, hear the instructions to the Daughters, to inquire, to listen, to give affection. "As for your conduct towards the sick, may you never take the attitude of merely getting the task done. You must show them affection; serving them from the heart; inquiring of them what they might need; speaking to them gently and compassionately."⁹

Miriam Greenspan, a counselor from Boston, Massachusetts, provides us with a modern description of the etiology of compassion. "Compassion grows out of a deep experience of connection to others, an experience of what binds us together as persons in a similar social and human condition. It is an embracing emotion."¹⁰

Doesn't that describe Louise in her words to the Daughters of Charity? A similar tone of compassion and empathy is found in her words to Vincent written a few years before her death.

⁸Louise de Marillac, *Letters*. Translated by Louise Sullivan (Emmitsburg: 1972), 615.

⁹*Spiritual Writings*, 134.

¹⁰Greenspan, *Women and Therapy*, 337.

I still hope to be able to see you when I can without endangering the precarious health God is giving you. I implore Him to preserve you in a state of health until He has completely accomplished His designs on your soul for His glory and the welfare of others, among whom I have the honor of numbering myself.

McNeill, Morrison and Nouwen write in their book on compassion, "God's compassion is a compassion that reveals itself in servanthood,"¹²

How does Louise identify and describe herself in the closing of her letters? Let us listen:

1628 - "Your very humble servant and unworthy daughter."¹³

1646 - "Your very affectionate and humble servant."¹⁴

And in her last recorded letter of 2 February 1660 she ends with:

"Your humble sister and very affectionate servant."¹⁵ When Louise de Marillac names herself, that name is servant.

Compassion appears to be the foundation of Louise's relationships. Her style of expressing this compassion is collaborative. Rather than accepting the description of Louise as dependent on Vincent, I would prefer to understand her as a person aware of the need for complementarity.

Louise never assumed to have the total understanding of how to proceed with this call to meet the needs of the destitute, the abandoned, the truly disenfranchised. Louise writes to Vincent in December, 1659, "I think we should take a stand for the present and the future, if you agree. Could we therefore sit down together tomorrow for a little council at any time you choose to tell us."¹⁶

Louise understood that the work she was about was a shared responsibility. She realized that a variety of virtues and skills were needed for a quality of service of Christ in the poor. Over the years Louise and Vincent supported, cared about, and influenced each other's worldview, philosophy of service, and personal development.

The French aviator and adventurer, Antoine de Saint Exupéry, encapsulated the essence of this relationship between Louise and Vincent when he wrote, "Life has taught us that love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same

¹¹Letters, 610.

¹²McNeill, Morrison, Nouwen. *Compassion* (New York: 1983), 25.

¹³Letters, 9.

¹⁴Ibid., 151.

¹⁵Ibid., 626.

¹⁶Ibid., 611.

direction."¹⁷ Louise's relationship with Vincent and her own commitment to living out the gospel message gave her an appreciation of rationality balanced with compassion, judgment tempered with mercy, theory based on life experience and justice blended with gentleness.

Moving from the vision to the concrete expression of this desire to serve Christ in the person of the poor demanded from Louise the willingness to cooperate with the will of God, collaborate with Vincent de Paul, and share in the life and experiences of the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, and the poor.

Louise was deeply concerned that the Daughters of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Confraternities of Charity collaborate in order to support one another and respond together to the needs of the poor.¹⁸

This same collaborative spirit is later seen in the relationship between Rosalie Rondu and Frederick Ozanam as they worked to establish the Saint Vincent de Paul Society in the nineteenth century.¹⁹

Collaborative living requires a person to develop interactional qualities. Louise outlines some of these qualities for us.

I must practice interior humility. ... I shall do this in order to honor the true and real humanity of God Himself in whom I shall find strength to overcome my pride, to combat my frequent outbursts of impatience and acquire charity and gentleness towards my neighbor. Thus, I shall honor the teaching of Jesus Christ who told us to learn of Him to be gentle and humble of heart.²⁰

At times Louise's collaboration was pragmatic. It focused on task accomplishment. You can hear this task oriented tone in this excerpt from one of her letters to Vincent. She writes, "I'm sending you the paper about which I spoke to you concerning the spiritual means for completing the solid establishment of the Company of Daughters of Charity."²¹ Her words to Sisters Brigitte and Marie at Chantilly express both the practical and the humorous side of Louise as she trained these women to be more specific in the requests they made from the Motherhouse. "Here is part of what you requested. We have no idea

¹⁷Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars* (New York: 1940), 209.

¹⁸*Echoes of the Company* No. 7, (July-August, 1988), 306.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 313.

²⁰*Spiritual Writings*, 22.

²¹*Letters*, 595.

²²*Ibid.*, 243.

whether you want your pot made of cast iron or of copper; neither have we any idea of size. When you send us this information we'll purchase the pot and the ladle to go with it."²²

At other times Louise's collaboration was a beginning point for relationships that developed into friendship. The caring and closeness between Louise and Vincent are evident in many of her letters to him. In March 1659 Louise writes, "I'm grateful that Divine Providence reminded your charity of my wish that you would give me a few minutes afterwards; otherwise I would have been quite upset."²³ In 1660 she writes, "Permit me to inquire about your health, my Most Honored Father. I think it would improve if you'd let yourself be treated as you would command someone else to be treated."²⁴

This comfortable tone and friendship is obvious in letters Louise writes to some of the sisters. In her openness with the sisters, Louise shows her humor, her caring and her ability to understand and tolerate some of Vincent's foibles. Listen to her comments to Mathurine Guérin in December of 1659. "I'm not answering the rest of your letter, leaving it for our Most Honored Father. But you know that he's never in a hurry because he wants to do everything in complete accord with the will of God."²⁵ And in January 1660, Louise again responds to Mathurine:

You were right in surmising that I was waiting for advice from our Most Honored Father before giving a complete answer to your last dear letter. It's still in his room, although I kept a copy of it for fear it might be lost. Having a copy, I can approach him about it again, as there were a few points I didn't want to decide for you because they're important.²⁶

Collaboration was the means Louise used for accomplishing the task of serving Christ in the poor. In the process Louise discovered intimacy and friendship.

Who was the mature Louise? What example does she leave for us?

Was Louise a neurotic woman who allowed her spiritual director to mold her into a competent leader?

Was she a person of such intense holiness, that of course, she would be esteemed and called a saint?

Reflecting on Louise in her later years I see a woman, an ordinary woman. Her words reveal the struggles, the fears, the worries, the

²³Ibid., 583.

²⁴Ibid., 625.

²⁵Ibid., 607.

²⁶Ibid., 617.

concerns, the hopes, the caring and love of a human being.

Listen to some of the phrases she uses in her letters in 1659 and 1660: "I admire ...", "It upset me ...", "I'm somewhat apprehensive ...", "I greatly sympathize...", "I hope...", "I'm doing my best...", "thank you." These are all relationship phrases. These are the words of a human being living each day in a realistic, relational manner.

Louise provides an example of a person who struggled in faith to achieve what is described in the first letter of Peter as, "... that spiritual honesty which will help one to grow up to salvation."²⁷

Louise learned how to acknowledge her incompleteness and need for others. Cognizance of her limitations allowed Louise to welcome into her life collaborators in this mission of charity.

With Vincent de Paul, Louise stood as an equal in strength, in weakness, and in solidarity with the poor. Together they shared a vision, they shared their faith, and they shared in risking all for the sake of serving Christ in the poor.

Dependence on Divine Providence was a strong theme throughout Louise's life. It is this awareness of a compassionate and attentive God that gives her the peace and confidence to write on the feast of Saint Genevieve in 1660. "No desires, no resolutions. The grace of God will accomplish in me whatever He wills."²⁸

Vincent de Paul offers Louise as a role model in his conference to the Daughters of Charity in July, 1660. "What a beautiful picture, O my God, this humility faith, prudence, sound judgment, and constant concern to conform all her actions to those of Our Lord! O Sisters, it is for you to conform your actions to hers and to imitate her in all things."²⁹

As a role model, Louise calls us to celebrate our strengths and gifts, to be honest about our limitations and to put all this together in a shared vision to serve Christ in the poor.

Listening to Louise's words, I do not find her praying for strength, for determination, or for common sense. I believe that she already possessed those qualities. Louise prayed for patience, for compassion, for gentleness. She continually asked Our Lord to teach her the true meaning of the words, "Learn of me for I am gentle and humble of heart."³⁰

²⁷1 Peter 2:2-3.

²⁸*Spiritual Writings*, 219.

²⁹*Ibid.*, VIII.

³⁰Matthew 11:29.

Louise de Marillac was a woman who based her life choices on her goal to "Do as Jesus did." In her struggles, her successes, her risk-taking, and her response to challenges, Louise remained faithful to that goal.

For Louise, Jesus was her role model and her only hope. Let us appreciate her example. Working together as members of the Vincentian family let us support each other with the same caring and affirmation that Louise showed in her relationships. In our service of Christ in the poor let us serve with the same passion and respect that identified Louise's style of service. And in all things, let us take for our goal, Louise's goal to "Do as Jesus did." With Louise as our role model we too can be strong and confident because each day and in all challenges — Jesus Christ will be our only hope.

Let us imitate thrifty housewives and turn everything to profit, remembering that we must not seek satisfaction in creatures or in ourselves, but in God alone.

(Saint Louise de Marillac to the Daughters of Charity at Angers, 18 June 1651, letter 310).

Since you are called Daughters of Charity, you are aware that true charity loves and forbears in all things, even contradictions and repugnance.

(Saint Louise de Marillac to Sister Jeanne Lepintre, 1651, letter 319).

Thank you for the good and beautiful fruit; but, my dear sister, be sure you are not depriving your poor. Always look to their needs and give them the best you have; it belongs to them.

(Saint Louis de Marillac to Sister Julienne Loret, October, 1651, letter 331).

May the desire for holy poverty always live in my heart in such a manner that, freed from all bonds, I may follow Jesus Christ and serve my neighbor with great humility and gentleness, living under obedience and in chastity all my life and honoring the poverty that Jesus Christ practiced so perfectly.

(Spiritual Writings of Saint Louise de Marillac, A.1).