
Fall 1999

Madame de Miramion and the Friends of Vincent de Paul

Mary L. Gude C.S.C.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj>

Recommended Citation

Gude, Mary L. C.S.C. (1999) "Madame de Miramion and the Friends of Vincent de Paul," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol20/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

Madame de Miramion and the Friends of Vincent de Paul

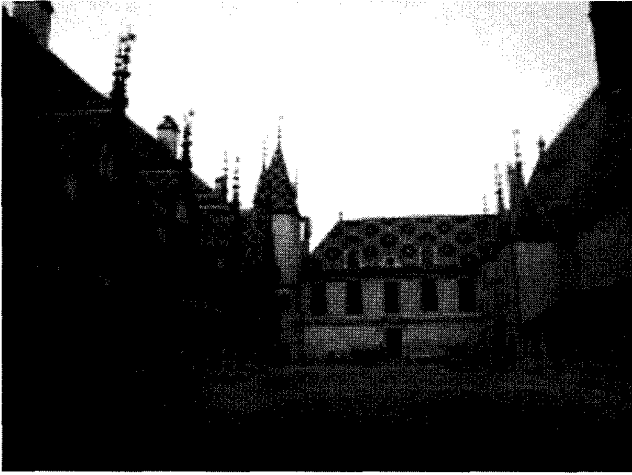
BY

MARY LOUISE GUDE, C.S.C.

The history of the Ladies of Charity of the Hôtel Dieu, wealthy Parisian lay women, is well documented in Vincentian history. However, less well known are the bonds of family and friendship and the generational continuity that linked the Ladies of Charity to each other, to the Daughters of Charity and the Priests of the Mission. Multiple, intertwined networks of personal relationships were a key to Vincent's success and that of the groups he formed. Intersecting family and professional relationships contributed to the extension of Vincent's influence well beyond his death in 1660. The links between the Lamoignons and Marie de Bonneau, Madame de Miramion, related to them through friendship and marriage, illustrate how the networks created by Vincent continued to function after his death in 1660.

The Paris of Vincent's time was a fortified city of 400,000 plus inhabitants whose influential members included the hereditary nobility, ecclesiastics, and the new moneyed elite: financiers and magistrates. For three generations the Lamoignons, a devout and wealthy family in the judiciary, worked to reduce the extreme poverty generated by the cycles of war, famine and homelessness that drove thousands to the streets of Paris. They figure in all eight volumes of Vincent's correspondence. For example, in volume two, one finds the names of three Lamoignon women who were Ladies of Charity, Marie, the mother, and two of her daughters, Madeleine and Anne.¹ Early in the century Marie des Landes, (1576-1651), wife of Chrétien de Lamoignon, *président à mortier*, or presiding judge in the Paris *parlement*, began the tradition. She probably joined the Ladies of Charity after her husband's death in 1636, and headed the group from 1643 until her own death in December 1651. Several of their children, their son Guillaume (1617-1677), chief justice of the *parlement*, daughters Madeleine (1608-1687) and Anne (1605-1663), along with Guillaume's wife, Madeleine Potier de Lamoignon, collaborated with Vincent and continued his work after his death. Born in 1629, and thus younger than any of this second Lamoignon generation, Marie Bonneau, Madame de Miramion became

¹ Pierre Coste, C.M., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, trans. Marie Poole, D.C., 8 vols. (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1989), 2: 535, 568, 641. (Hereinafter CCD.)



The Hôtel Dieu, Beaune, France. The medieval hospice founded in 1443, by Nicholas Rolin, to serve the poor and suffering. Remained open until 1971, when it was finally replaced with a modern facility, and today serves as a museum.
Image public domain

a close friend of both Anne and her sister Madeleine, probably through their contacts as Ladies of Charity. She also worked closely with Guillaume de Lamoignon, whose religious devotion included membership in the secret company of the Blessed Sacrament. After the latter's death in 1677, Guillaume's son, Chrétien-François de Lamoignon (1644-1707), was regularly consulted by Madame de Miramion. He testified as a witness for Vincent's beatification. Shared ministry to the poor led to family bonds when Madame de Miramion's daughter Marguerite married into the extended family.

Madeleine de Lamoignon had insisted on devoting her life to the poor as a layperson and refused to marry, an unheard of choice for a woman of her rank. A determined and forceful person, she was well known both at court and throughout the city for her effort to relieve the city's poverty. Her personality contrasted with that of her sister Anne, wife of François-Théodore de Nesmond (1595-1664), an important magistrate, "Mlle de Lamoignon was quick, energetic and enterprising. Madame de Nesmond was a calm and tranquil spirit, always of the same mind, more inclined to do well what she was doing than to search out something new to do. The former put no limits on a

zeal which extended to all sorts of subjects."² A third daughter Elisabeth, who died in 1658, was a Visitation nun at the Saint-Jacques convent, and Vincent often tried to calm her scruples.³

Vincent's correspondence shows how crucial the Lamoignon women were to his work. For example, they sometimes assigned ministries to the Daughters of Charity, and because of their social prominence could obtain favors from public officials. In February 1643 Louise de Marillac wrote Vincent that Madame de Lamoignon and Anne de Lamoignon (Madame de Nesmond), mother and daughter, had come to see her after visiting a proposed foundation, the hospital of Saint-Denis. They requested that the Daughters staff the hospital, should the nuns in place refuse to accept conditions laid down by the Ladies of Charity.⁴ The Ladies did not hesitate to advise Vincent. In 1650, when the foundlings were housed south of Paris in the huge castle of Bicêtre, Madeleine objected that housing the boys in a separate wing was contrary to Vincent's wishes. Louise de Marillac writes to Vincent: "That good lady, the daughter, told me you had to be firm in seeing that the proposal your charity so strongly supported is put into action. She also said you should make a try of it for this Jubilee year and not put it off until some other time."⁵ Because of their connections with public authorities, Vincent, in a letter to the Ladies of Charity, asked the Lamoignons, in 1649 during the Fronde, to provide protection for wheat convoys destined for Bicêtre, "I asked M. Lambert [a Vincentian priest and Vincent's assistant] to send them a little wheat and I have written to Madame de Lamoignon, the president's wife, to be so kind as to use her influence with the city authorities to provide the wheat escort both inside and outside the city. I don't know either what has been done. If it has not been carried out, I beg both parties to do whatever is necessary for that purpose."⁶ Three years later, as the Fronde recurred at the gates of Paris, Vincent makes the same request to Madeleine, "We hope that Our Lord and his good servants, like the good Monsieur de Lamoignon and you, will protect us in the future as you did three years ago and have done until now, and I assure you Mademoiselle that this

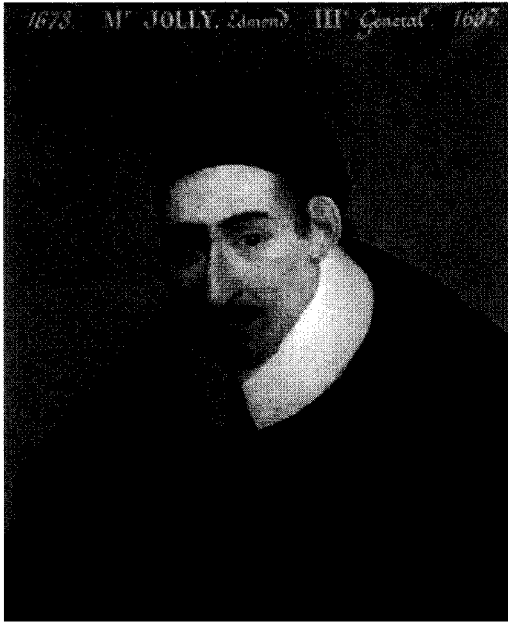
² Le Père d'Orléans, manuscript of *Vie de Mademoiselle de Lamoignon* (Paris: Bibl. Nat), ms.fr.14342, f. 23, 117.

³ Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M., 3 vols. (Brooklyn, New York: New City Press, 1987), 1: 184.

⁴ CCD, 9 February 1643, 2: 641.

⁵ *Ibid.*, April 1650, 4: 1208.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11 February 1649, 3: 1090.



Edmé Jolly, C.M. (1622-1697). The third superior general of the Congregation of the Mission, Jolly served as Madame de Miramion's spiritual advisor from 1677 until her death from pneumonia in March of 1696. Portrait. Image courtesy of the collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute, Chicago, IL

is a soothing consolation for me to think of it." He then goes on to thank her for providing alternate housing for the foundlings, witnesses at their doorstep to the murderous rampages of the Fronde.⁷

In this small, interconnected world of wealthy almsgivers, Vincent and his many ministries stood at the center. Therefore, when the young widow Marie Bonneau de Miramion decided in 1649 to spend her life for the poor, she predictably sought out Vincent and his allies as mentors, among them the Lamoignon family. A full generation younger than Madeleine de Lamoignon, Madame de Miramion is mentioned nowhere in Vincent's correspondence. She was the youngest of the Ladies of Charity who knew him, but wealthy and widowed, she otherwise perfectly fit the group's profile. Born in 1629, Marie Bonneau de Rubelle came from an immensely wealthy family of financiers. She

⁷ Pierre Coste, C.M., *Saint Vincent de Paul et les dames de la charité*, 14 May 1652 (Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1917), no. 46, 244-45.

lost both parents as a child, married in 1645 at fifteen, became pregnant, and lost her husband, Jean-Jacques de Beauharnais de Miramion that same year. He was only twenty-seven. A daughter, Margu rite de Beauharnais de Miramion, was born a few months later, in 1646. Many opportunities for marriage presented themselves to the teen-aged widow—she was even kidnaped by the bad boy of the French court, Count Bussy-Rabutin, who had mistakenly thought he could convince her to marry him—but she refused all comers.⁸ The reluctance of devout, wealthy women like Madame de Miramion to remarry was not unusual because widowhood assured a certain independence and the possibility of single minded service to God and the poor.

On the one hand, like other prayerful Catholics of the period, especially women, Madame de Miramion treasured her inner life and wanted to give herself to it completely. She reported mystical experiences in prayer and, like other women of the period, recorded them at her confessors' requests. Accounts such as hers possessed a kind of extra-official authority that directors could consult without compromising their own. Indeed, the Choisy biography includes many accounts of mystical experiences that Madame de Miramion recorded for her spiritual directors. On the other hand, responsibility for her baby daughter Margu rite made the dream of becoming a cloistered nun impossible. Madame de Miramion found a compromise between her yearnings for the cloister and her personal circumstances in the Vincentian model of service to the poor, as exemplified in the Ladies of Charity. Joining them provided focus for her commitment to serve God and the poor. At the same time her considerable talent could be developed in ways socially acceptable for women.

Today Madame de Miramion is remembered for her extraordinary impact on social service in the second half of the seventeenth century. Her personal fortune underwrote many of her works, but the spiritual and emotional resources for the challenges she faced came from her bonds to the Vincentians and the Lamoignon family. She was involved in every major charitable enterprise in Paris from 1649 until her death in 1696, thereby assuring that direct service to the poor by those who had known Vincent continued to the end of the century.

Her association with Vincent, Louise de Marillac, and the Daughters and Ladies of Charity began when Marie de Miramion was

⁸ Fran ois-Timoleon, l'abb  de Choisy, *La Vie de Madame de Miramion* (Paris: Dezallier, 1707), 13-21; Tallement des Reaux, "Madame de Miramion," in *Historiettes* (Paris: Pl iade, 1961), 2: 749-50.



Period etching of Marie Bonneau de Rubelle (1629-1696), better known as Madame de Miramion. A woman of great wealth and privilege, a Lady of Charity, Madame de Miramion continued, even expanded upon, the social works of Vincent and Louise following their deaths.

Image public domain

nineteen. On 14 January 1649 she started a retreat at the house of the Daughters near Saint Lazare. Four nights later she experienced a mystical call to dedicate herself completely to God and the poor. Vincent himself was consulted about the authenticity of the experience. When the saint stated that it had come from God, on February second her spiritual director, Monsieur Festel, pastor of Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs, allowed her to make a vow of chastity.

Marie de Miramion was then living, as she had since her marriage, with her late husband's parents, at the corner of the rue du Temple and Michel-le-Comte in the western half of the Marais district (traces of its facade can still be discerned today). She became active in her parish, Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs, and treasurer of the parish Charité, one of the confraternities set up by Vincent to serve the poor, and she joined the Ladies of Charity. The young widow took her turn at L'Hôtel-Dieu with the others and set up soup kitchens in her parish. In 1658 she collaborated with Richelieu's niece, perhaps the most famous Lady of Charity, the fabulously wealthy Duchess d'Aiguillon, in order to finance an expedition of missionaries to China. It marked the beginning

of the French Church's commitment to the foreign missions.

In 1653, when her daughter Margu rite de Miramion was seven and a half, her mother sent her, as befitted a child of her rank and wealth, to board at the Visitation convent, *Sainte-Marie*, on the rue St-Antoine. Founded by Francis de Sales, it was often visited by Vincent, the canonical superior; Madame de Miramion made many retreats there and endowed it heavily. In order to be closer to her daughter, she herself soon moved to the rue St-Antoine. The new address also put her at the heart of the Marais and near the Lamoignons, whose city house or *h tel* was just up the street on rue Pav .

The choice of a husband for Margu rite was delicate because Madame de Miramion wanted her daughter married to someone of her own rank and wealth. At the same time Margu rite had to be placed in a family whose good background and domestic tranquility would confirm her in the "right path." Thus, a husband chosen from the hereditary nobility or the military was ruled out. The choice fell, not surprisingly, on a member of the Lamoignon family, Guillaume de Nesmond, son of Anne de Lamoignon, Madame de Nesmond, and Fran ois-Th odore de Nesmond, first magistrate, "Madame the Pr sidente de Nesmond and Mademoiselle de Lamoignon, her sister were her intimate friends; the piety that had united them made the marriage."⁹ When they married in May 1660 Guillaume de Nesmond was thirty-three and Margu rite, fourteen and a half. The new wife moved across the Seine to her new family's home on the left bank, the Quai de la Tournelle. The marriage and the move had profound implications for Madame de Miramion.

Once her daughter was married, Madame de Miramion thought again of the cloister. However, by this time her keen practical intelligence and record of accomplishment were so evident that again she was dissuaded by her director, Monsieur Festel. She compromised by founding her own religious community, thereby linking religious life and active ministry, as had Vincent and many other founders of the century. At the outset there was no thought of creating an officially structured community that would outlast her. Madame de Miramion simply wanted to gather a group of women who would live together and minister to the poor during her lifetime and theirs. Monsieur Festel drew up rules for the new group, and Vincent reviewed and approved them before he died in 1660. They were also approved by Hippolyte

⁹ Choisy, *La Vie*, 44.

Féret, a longtime and well regarded friend of Vincent. He held a doctorate in theology, was grand vicar of Paris, and pastor of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, Marguérite's parish in her new home on the left bank. Early in 1662 the new community named *Sainte Famille* became a reality, and ten women moved into a cul de sac on the rue St-Antoine, where Madame de Miramion had lived for several years.

However, Madame de Miramion's newly married daughter missed her mother, and Anne de Nesmond saw a way to both please her daughter-in-law and have her old friend close by. In a biography purportedly written by Marguérite de Nesmond about her mother, she recounts what happened:

Madame de Nesmond, who dearly loved Madame de Miramion, ardently wished to have her come live nearby. It seemed that God inspired in her this desire because since he was soon to take her from this world, he wanted Madame de Miramion to take her place in order to care for the poor of the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. Madame de Nesmond's intention in all was this: the benefit of the poor, her love for Madame de Nesmond, her daughter-in-law, and her own satisfaction. She herself set out to find a house for her [friend]. When she had one, she put pressure on Madame de Miramion to come live there. The latter did so at the end of Lent 1663. Two days after she had moved in, Madame de Nesmond fell ill and died March 28, of that same year, after an illness of three days.¹⁰

Madame de Miramion was at Anne's bedside at her death and later wrote a short biography of her friend, describing her as someone who lived an ordinary life in an extraordinary way.¹¹ She then assumed all of Anne de Nesmond's charitable responsibilities in the parish. Within its boundaries existed another small religious community on the brink of extinction after thirty years, but one which had been formally incorporated, unlike Madame de Miramion's group; Féret was superior of them both, having assumed responsibility for *Sainte Famille* after the

¹⁰ *Mémoire pour servir à la vie de Mme. de Miramion depuis sa naissance jusqu' à 25 ans*, manuscrit (Paris: Bibl. Mazarine), ms.fr.:2489, 47.

¹¹ Madame de Miramion, *La Vie de feu Madame la Presidente de Nesmond par Madame de Miramion* (Paris: Bibl. Nat.), ms.fr.:14347, 1-2.

death of Monsieur Festel. He proposed that the two become one and take the name of the established group, filles de Sainte-Geneviève. Madame de Miramion finally agreed and in 1670 bought a house for the new community next to her daughter's on the Quai de la Tournelle. Both exist to this day. The former convent of the filles de Ste-Geneviève houses the *Musée de l'assistance publique*, which traces the history of Parisian social service from Vincent's day to the present. Marguérite de Nesmond's house is clearly recognizable by the Nesmond family name over the entry.

The filles de Sainte-Geneviève, or the *Miramionnes*, as they were soon called, taught the rudiments of learning and faith to several hundred poor, young girls in their convent on the Quai de la Tournelle. There they also operated a pharmacy and a dispensary, mixing and distributing their own compounds for the sick poor. The sisters went to rural parishes around Paris and opened schools. Finally, in the mid 1680s, they launched a program of retreats for women, both poor and wealthy.

Besides the works of her own community, Madame de Miramion supported those of the Ladies of Charity. The best known and ultimately most controversial one involved the creation of the General Hospital in 1656, an attempt to rehabilitate the poor by incarcerating them in large numbers. It was a project Vincent did not endorse because of its coercive element, and because he believed that the creation of charitable works should never outstrip the existing capacity to fund them. The Ladies of Charity thought otherwise and prevailed.¹² Although Madame de Miramion did not actively participate in establishing the hospital (she was then in her twenties), she created a home for delinquent girls that eventually was incorporated into it, and she was instrumental in preserving the hospital through a series of financial crises.

Support for the girls' home came from Guillaume de Lamoignon, and funding for it was divided among several Ladies of Charity, among them the Duchess of Aiguillon. Guillaume de Lamoignon, never a director of the Hospital, but committed to its success, also worked with Madame de Miramion to keep the hospital solvent. During the famine of 1661 Guillaume told her that its closing was almost inevitable. She responded by securing 100,000 francs from the Princesse de Conti. At

¹² Orléans, *Vie de Mademoiselle*, 62.

one point when an ill superior was forced to resign, Madame de Miramion moved into the hospital for three months to help orient the new person.

In February 1695, the General Hospital was again on the brink of insolvency because of the 1694 crop failure. The directors proposed to keep only those who were too infirm or too old to find shelter elsewhere. The others were to be summarily discharged in March. Madame de Miramion developed a stop-gap measure for affordably housing 800 young women, while suitable placements for them were found. She then went to the court at Versailles and raised enough money to implement her plan.

Meanwhile the personal links between the Lamoignon family and Madame de Miramion remained strong. She lent them money on several occasions. When Guillaume de Lamoignon's daughter, Madame de Harlay, became ill with small pox in 1671, she remained with her for the short time until her death. Madame de Miramion was Guillaume de Lamoignon's *confidante*; he "knew the extent of her virtue and respected it; he decided nothing without consulting her in matters concerning the poor, presented her with the biggest problems and ordinarily followed her advice."¹³ When he died suddenly in 1677, Madame de Miramion bore the funeral expenses. His daughter, Madeleine de Lamoignon, died ten years later and Madame de Miramion was there. Afterwards, Louis XIV transferred Madeleine's responsibilities of disbursing money to the poor in the king's name to Madame de Miramion. Finally, in 1690, Madame de Miramion was instrumental in persuading her son-in-law Guillaume de Nesmond, since he had no children, to sell his hereditary office of presiding judge to his cousin, Chrétien-François de Lamoignon, Guillaume de Lamoignon's son.

In the period between 1677, when Guillaume de Lamoignon died, and 1696 when Madame de Miramion died, the person who most influenced her was Edmé Jolly (1622-1697), third superior general of the Priests of the Mission (1672-1697). At the death of Hippolyte Féret in 1677, Jolly became her spiritual director and canonical superior of the *filles de Sainte-Geneviève*. Seven years older than Madame de Miramion, he shared with her the privilege of family background and a talent for managing people and institutions. Although their relation-

¹³ Choisy, *La Vie*, 79-80.

ship, documented in numerous letters, always remained within the bounds of the director/directee, and contained admonitions and reflections typical of the period, the letters make clear how much he respected her and the degree to which they collaborated.¹⁴ For her part she urged him repeatedly to be direct with her and not to let her slip on details. He took her at her word.

Upon becoming her director, Jolly asked Madame de Miramion to write a summary of her life, an assignment she found unwelcome, because: it took too much time and she feared getting lost in the details. She spent pages trying to make him relent, but when he refused she acquiesced. Her hesitation could well have been a matter of form, since her previous spiritual directors had demanded and obtained such accounts.

Jolly was as strict with Madame de Miramion as he was with his priests when it came to visiting other houses of the congregation. He criticized her for showing up at Saint Lazare unannounced. She asked to be judged as a Daughter of Charity and Jolly obliged, but he also recognized that the birthright of privilege and access to power had marked her forever. He remarked on her sometimes imperious tone of voice, but approved having her portrait painted, and lent her papers of Louise de Marillac which "make me notice a rather strong resemblance between your grace and hers."

When Madame de Miramion became ill in 1683, he visited her, knelt by her bed, prayed, and then ordered the despairing doctors to give her yet another dose of previously ineffective medicine. She recovered. He asked her to intercede with powerful officials on behalf of his nephew. She responded so well to his admonitions, that he protested in turn he would not have done as well had the situation been reversed, "I see myself so far removed from that disposition that I am ashamed." When more than once she wanted to resign as superior of her community, he refused permission. When in March 1691 he in turn wanted to step down as canonical superior for the sisters, she begged him to remain. He did. The same request, repeated several times over the next five years, always elicited the same negative response from her.

¹⁴ Edmé Jolly, *Letters to Madame de Miramion* (Paris: Bibl. Mazarine), January 1682 to December 1691, 1216; n.d., 1217; 1677-1681, 1218; 1691-1695, 1219.

Madame de Miramion suddenly became ill with pneumonia in early March 1696. Her contemporaries among the Lamoignons had already died, along with her son-in-law Guillaume de Nesmond. Edmé Jolly, Margu rite de Nesmond and her two surviving brothers were among the intimates who surrounded her to the end. Ill himself, Edm  Jolly visited her twice during the last week of her life. Madame de Miramion died 24 March 1696. Jolly followed her one year later, almost to the day, 26 March 1697. The era of those who had personally known Vincent de Paul was drawing to a close.

The life of Madame de Miramion had come full circle. Vincent had said when she was nineteen that her experience of God was genuine and thereby launched her into a life of service. That life put her in contact with others so dedicated, the Lamoignon family, especially Anne and Madeleine, her close friends. In turn that friendship ultimately determined the choice of a husband for her daughter Margu rite, and the permanent site of her religious community. Finally, in middle age, now a well known and revered foundress and advocate for the poor, she was led by, but also counseled one of Vincent's successors, Edm  Jolly. Madame de Miramion's name and work will always be entwined with the mission of Vincent and those who followed him.

Do it yourself! An expression from hell, an expression of disorder and disunion! It is an accursed expression.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul,
conference to the Daughters of Charity, June 1642)*

LAMOIGNON-MIRAMION FAMILY TIES

