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Madame de Gondi: A Contemporary Seventeenth-Century Life

TRANSLATED AND ANNOTATED

BY

JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M.¹

INTRODUCTION

BY

BARBARA B. DIEFENDORF

Little is known with any certainty about the true character of Madame de Gondi, the founding patroness of the Congregation of the Mission. Biographies of Vincent de Paul, drawing inevitably on the same small handful of sources, praise her for her piety and charity and yet at the same time leave a rather unfavorable impression of her as a demanding and insecure woman, whose selfish insistence on keeping Vincent at her side despite his clear calling to a broader mission was enough to try the patience of even a saint. The pressure she applied when Vincent abruptly departed from her household to take up service as a parish priest in Bresse, in particular the letter she wrote detailing her spiritual anguish and charging Vincent with responsibility for the imperiled state of her abandoned soul, is often cited to this end.² Theodore Maynard forcefully characterizes the letter as “a form of spiritual blackmail” and the “revelation of ‘angelic’ egotism and hypochondria.”³ Other biographers are less blunt, but the impression they leave is much the same. Whether Madame de Gondi’s extreme dependency was anything other than the neurotic self-absorption of a spoiled aristocrat is a

¹ The bold footnotes (numbers 58, 61, 64) are those in the original text by Hilarion de Coste; all other footnotes are by the editor and author of the introduction. Material in brackets has been added to clarify the text through the addition of names, etc. Subheads have been added to facilitate reading.

² See Louis Abelly, *La vie du venerable serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul, instituteur et premier superieur general de la Congregation de la Mission*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1664), 1: 41. Madame de Gondi’s letter is also reproduced in *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 1: 21-22 (Hereinafter cited as CED). Coste reproduces it again, along with other correspondence relating to Vincent’s departure, in his *Monsieur Vincent. Le Grand Saint du Grand Siècle*, 2nd. ed. (Paris: 1934), 1: 110-13.

³ Theodore Maynard, *Apostle of charity: The Life of Saint Vincent de Paul* (New York: 1939), 77 and 78.

question that not only goes unanswered but also unasked.⁴

Generations of historians have sifted the archives in search of new information on the establishment of the Congregation of the Mission and its founders; it is unlikely that anything revealing about Madame de Gondi remains to be discovered. Lacking new biographical information, can we perhaps gain fresh insights by reconsidering one of the oldest of biographical texts? I believe that we can, and that the contemporary life presented here, initially published shortly after Madame de Gondi's death (and while Vincent was still alive), has something yet to teach us about her. Despite its great age, this life of Madame de Gondi is also new. It appears not to have been known to Pierre Coste (at least he did not cite it), or even to scholars working specifically on Vincent's relationship with the Gondis.⁵

This biographical sketch of Françoise Marguerite de Silly, Countess of Joigny and Dame of Montmirail, wife of Philip Emmanuel de Gondi, marquis of the Isles d'Or and General of the Gallies of France, comes from a collection of biographies of distinguished women published in 1630 and again in 1647 by Brother Hilarion de Coste (1595-1661), a member of the Order of Minims of Saint Francis of Paola.⁶ A prolific writer, Brother Hilarion was the author of about a dozen books, most of them biographies of important royal and ecclesiastical personages. A collective biography of pious men and women published in 1625 under the title of *Histoire Catholique* apparently sold well enough to convince him that there would be an audience for a book devoted to

⁴ Ironically, the most positive view of Madame de Gondi is given by Vincent de Paul's first biographer, Louis Abelly, whose text, which quotes Madame de Gondi's pleading letter verbatim, has served as the principal basis for all later interpretations of her character. Abelly admits that Madame de Gondi's dependence on Vincent is an "imperfection in this otherwise very virtuous lady" [Abelly, *La vie*, 1: 36] but he treats it as a spiritual failing (not a personality trait) that Vincent thought to remedy by removing himself from the scene. He also sets the departure into a broader context by citing a letter from the General of the Gallies, Monsieur de Gondi, in which he declares his own passionate desire to have Vincent return to his household, for the sake of his own soul and that of his sons, and urges his wife to do everything possible to procure this return. In other words, he treats the issue as a complex problem for Vincent as spiritual director and not just as flight from a trying and willful woman. See Abelly, *La vie*, 1: 35-43. Coste makes no explicit negative judgments about Madame de Gondi's behavior in *Monsieur Vincent*, but he presents her actions in a negative light by introducing Vincent's departure from the Gondi household as a thwarted commencement of his real mission to the poor [91], and then prefacing her letter in the following terms: "The pious lady moved heaven and earth, she used all means, natural and supernatural, to obtain the return of the curé de Châtillon to Paris" [111].

⁵ It is not cited by R. Chantelauze, *Saint Vincent de Paul et les Gondi* (Paris: 1882), or R. Mathieu, *Monsieur Vincent chez les Gondi* (Chalons-sur-Marne: 1966). Nor was it listed among the bibliographical sources mentioned by André Dodin in an interview that he gave in 1985 on the subject of Madame de Gondi. (I owe this information to Reverend John Rybolt's research in the Vincentian archives.)

⁶ *Les Éloges et vies des reynes, princesses, dames et damoiselles illustres en pieté, courage, et doctrine qui ont fleury de nostre temps et du temps de nos pères* (Paris: S. Cramoisy, 1630 and 1647).

women's lives alone.⁷

Brother Hilarion's purpose in writing the two books was clearly didactic. The lives are selected and narrated in such a way as to emphasize traditional Christian virtues. Each begins with a genealogical introduction, setting forth the individual's lineage and praising the virtues of various ancestors, and then moves on to narrate in greater or lesser detail the subject's own accomplishments and qualities. The conventionalized format, with its emphasis on pedigree and heavy-handed attempt at moral edification, should not be allowed to obscure the fact that Brother Hilarion was a patient and careful scholar. He collected information widely from both published and oral sources. In certain cases, he even tells us how he came by a particular bit of information, a citing of sources that was still quite rare among scholars of his era. Concerning Madame de Gondi, for example, he relates one incident that he says he learned from Father Vincent himself.⁸ We can thus be certain that he and Vincent were acquainted, even though no correspondence or other traces of this acquaintance exist. The knowledge that he actually was acquainted with Vincent de Paul and not simply drawing on the testimony of others gives special weight to his comments about the saint, particularly as to Vincent's relationship with Madame de Gondi.

If Brother Hilarion's books thus yield up interesting and documented details on his subjects' lives, they also give useful insights into the values and mores of the time.⁹ The very conventions of the genre -- the "praise of pious ladies" -- can help us to place Madame de Gondi more fully into the context of her times. We can, for example, see another dimension to her extreme dependence on Vincent de Paul when we see this trait, presented not as the character flaw of a neurotic aristocrat but rather as the virtuous reliance of a devout woman on the guidance of a trained spiritual director.

⁷ Hilarion de Coste, *Histoire catholique, où sont descrites les vies, faits et actions heroiques et signalées des hommes & dames illustres, qui par leur piété ou sainteté de vie se sont rendus recommandables dans les XVIe & XVIIe. siècles* (Paris: Pierre Chevalier, 1625).

⁸ See text, page 42.

⁹ The level of specificity in Brother Hilarion's life of Madame de Gondi makes it much more useful than another contemporary narrative source, the 1626 "Lettre de consolation à Madame la marquise de Maignelay sur le décès de feu Madame la générale des galères, sa belle-soeur" by one "A. Dubois," published in the *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* 98 (1933): 65-80. Madame de Gondi's 1619 will, on the other hand, published in the same place, offers a very interesting snapshot of devout piety in the early Catholic Reformation.

In early modern times, it was commonly accepted that women were flawed in their essential nature and capacity for reason. As members of the weaker sex, they were supposed to be dependent creatures, distrusting their own weak will and submitting to the wiser judgments of the men that God had placed over them. Choosing the right spiritual director and learning to rely upon him to interpret all of the movements of one's soul are important themes in Counter-Reformation spirituality -- especially in books aimed particularly at a female audience.¹⁰ It is natural, then, that we should find reference to a laudable dependence on spiritual directors at several points in Brother Hilarion's life of Madame de Gondi.¹¹ The most extensive reference occurs in describing her obedience, a virtue inevitably paired with humility, manifest toward both her husband and her spiritual directors. Most interesting here is that her spiritual advisors not only authorized her submission "to the will of God declared to us through his inspirations," but they were also the medium through which these wishes were made known: "Once she learned through her directors and confessors what God desired of her, she believed that she was then obliged to carry it out."¹²

Madame de Gondi's behavior, as portrayed by Brother Hilarion, is precisely that which Saint Francis de Sales would have his devout Philothée adopt when he instructed her that, having found the proper spiritual director, she must submit to him in perfect obedience and consider him "not as a simple man," but rather as the intermediary through whom God will speak to her. She should listen to him as to "an angel who descends from heaven to lead [her] there."¹³ My point here is not that Brother Hilarion was deliberately modeling Madame de Gondi on Philothée, although he clearly knew and appreciated the *Introduction to the Devout Life*,¹⁴ but rather that this notion that a devout woman should rely absolutely on her spiritual director to authorize -- and even to give voice to -- the movements of her soul was a commonplace of the era. Anxious to preserve the mediating role of the priesthood

¹⁰ See, for example, François de Sales, *Introduction à la vie dévote* (Paris: n.d. [1934]), 22-25.

¹¹ The theme appears first where the author says that "her soul's candor was so great" that she would not even make "some compliment" in her letters without the "advice and counsel of her director," and then again where he tells us that "she spoke regularly with her confessors and directors, never leaving them even when obliged to appear in public." See text, page 35 and 37.

¹² See text, page 38.

¹³ De Sales, *Introduction à la vie dévote*, 24-25.

¹⁴ The *Introduction to the Devout Life* is referred to explicitly in Brother Hilarion's discussion of the practice of weekly communion. See text, page 39.

as interpreters of direct religious experience, the Catholic church was particularly emphatic about the need to guide and channel the mystical élans of advanced spiritual women.¹⁵ Madame de Gondi's plea to Father Vincent to return to the care of her soul may sound unduly emotional and even neurotic to modern ears; we should nevertheless remember how thoroughly she had been schooled to distrust her own instincts and to rely instead on her spiritual director. Is it really any wonder that she became distraught when the man on whom she had depended for four years to authorize every action abandoned her without warning?

While fully internalized in the value system of the early modern period, the idea that women were necessarily weak and imperfect creatures did pose certain difficulties for an author like Brother Hilarion de Coste, who set out to write in praise of members of this sex. The topos of the *femme forte* -- the "strong woman" who rises above the usual limitations of her sex -- was the most common means of circumventing these difficulties. Brother Hilarion employs this topos where he praises Madame de Gondi for her intelligence, a virtue *not* considered traditionally feminine. Lauding "good and generous spirit," and noting that "many great persons often came to consult her, and willingly followed her advice," he goes on to qualify her as "in a word . . . that strong Woman whom Solomon praised so highly."¹⁶ Inviting us to look upon Madame de Gondi as an exceptional woman, Brother Hilarion can praise her virtues without revising his expectations of the female sex in general. At the same time, he reaffirms the traditional gender order by subordinating the virtue of wisdom to that of obedience in describing Madame de Gondi's relationship to her husband. "Although her good sense was particularly apparent in the advice she gave, her respect toward her husband was so great that she always deferred to his judgment. She never sought to speak or contradict his advice although her judgment was usually deemed the more solid and reasonable."¹⁷

For Brother Hilarion, Madame de Gondi's intellectual superiority was all the more cause to admire her humble submission to her husband's will. For modern readers, by contrast, the comparison with her husband's judgment serves rather to reinforce the impression that

¹⁵ An excellent discussion of the relationship between pious women and their spiritual directors in early modern Spain is given in Jodi Bilinkoff, "Confessors, penitents, and the Construction of Identities in Early Modern Avila," in *Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe (1500-1800): Essays in Honor of Natalie Zemon Davis*, eds. Barbara B. Diefendorf and Carla Hesse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 83-200.

¹⁶ See text, page 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Madame de Gondi was in fact clear-thinking and astute. It suggests that her submissiveness was a learned behavior -- a deliberate conformity to an expected social role -- and not an innate character trait.

The description that Brother Hilarion gives of Madame de Gondi's activities on her estates further reinforces an image of competent level-headedness that contrasts markedly with the idea that she was a clinging and demanding woman. The welcome given by her "vassals," who "paraded before her with the cross and banner," suggests the essentially religious understanding that she would have had of her obligations as "mother of her vassals." The account of her removal of a seigneurial judge, against whom many of her subjects had complained, highlights the personal responsibility that she assumed for the administration of her own estates and those belonging to her husband, whose duties as General of the Galleys necessitated long absences from his family and his lands.¹⁸

It is worth noting here that Louis Abelly, also writing in the seventeenth-century, describes Madame de Gondi's activities on her estates in very similar terms. Calling her the protector of widows and orphans, Abelly notes that she had a "particular care to maintain a firm hand over the rendering of fair and prompt justice by her officers."¹⁹ He also emphasizes the visits she made to console sick and unfortunate peasants, and both seventeenth-century histories emphasize the active part she played in the founding of the Congregation of the Mission by setting the story into the context of her concern for the poor village people and anxiety over the salvation of their souls. More recent histories, focusing on the unfolding of Vincent's vocation but also, I believe, unconsciously influenced by an essentially negative view of Madame de Gondi, tend to place her in a more secondary and passive role.²⁰

¹⁸ See text, page 41.

¹⁹ Abelly, *La vie*, 31-32. It is of course possible that Abelly was relying on the same sources available to us here -- the conferences, and even Brother Hilarion's life of Madame de Gondi -- although he would also have had access to other firsthand testimony. My point, however, is that as a (slightly younger) contemporary of Brother Hilarion, imbued with the same seventeenth-century perspective on both the strengths and weaknesses of the female sex, Abelly was inclined to be more generous in his assessment of Madame de Gondi than more recent historians have proved.

²⁰ Coste, for example, makes no mention of Madame de Gondi's administrative and charitable activities on her estates, and frames the story of the historic first Mission sermon at Folleville with Vincent's activities on the Gondi estates. Thus he begins by saying that, "when the Gondis went out to their provincial chateaux, his [Vincent's] great happiness was to regain contact with the villagers and to occupy himself with their souls" (*Monsieur Vincent*, 1: 87). Coste does go on to quote Vincent's description of how Madame de Gondi urged him to preach on general confession at Folleville, and he credits her personally with "conceiving of the project" of leaving money for the missionizing of her lands (*Ibid.*, 89-90). Maynard denies her even this much agency, crediting her only rather vaguely with "the intelligence to see what needed to be done for the spiritually neglected peasantry" and then suggesting that perhaps she was prompted in this by Pierre de Bérulle, whom he describes as a "kind of super director of hers" (Maynard, *Apostle of Charity*, 64-65).



Portrait of Françoise Marguerite de Silly or, as known in marriage, Madame de Gondi.
 Courtesy of the collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute, Chicago, Illinois

There is a certain irony here, in that all of these accounts *except* Brother Hilarion's rely essentially on Vincent's own description of the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission as recounted in his conferences of 25 January 1655 and 17 May 1658, and yet Vincent's story certainly does give Madame de Gondi a central role in the foundation.²¹ Vincent's self-effacement in his narratives was the result of his humility and his understanding of the foundation as the work of God. The effacement of Madame de Gondi's role in more recent accounts has other causes and is due primarily to a misunderstanding of the conventions that shaped the depiction of female virtues in early modern works of piety. Reacting negatively to behaviors that seventeenth-century chroniclers considered virtuous, later biographers have perhaps allowed unconscious antipathy toward Madame de Gondi to obscure the active and collaborative role that she played in encouraging both Vincent's initial attempts to mission on her lands, and the actual foundation of the Congregation of the Mission.

²¹ These conferences have most recently been published in *Vincent de Paul and Louise Marillac. Rules, Conferences, and Writings*, eds. Frances Ryan, D.C., and John E. Rybolt, C.M. (New York, N.Y., and Mahwah, N.J.: 1995), 123-35. It should be remembered that Vincent was talking here about events that had occurred nearly forty years earlier. The passage of time may have colored his reminiscences, which, in any event, were recorded by others and not written out by Vincent himself. Not surprisingly, the two conferences do not agree in all of their details. This adds to the value of Brother Hilarion's history, which was published prior to these conferences and so can be considered an independent but parallel source on the events leading up to the Folleville sermon, or at least on Madame de Gondi's role in them.

**Françoise Marguerite de Silly,
Countess of Joigny, and Dame of Montmirail.²²**

Introduction

This precious Marguerite²³ should be gathered up with respect, inasmuch as her memory is held in benediction. She was the eldest daughter of Antoine de Silly, count of Rochepot, baron of Montmirail, lord of Commercy, knight of the orders of the king, governor of Anjou, and ambassador to Spain. Her mother was Marie de Lannoy, daughter of Louis de Lannoy, lord of Morvilliers. I do not intend to speak here of the nobility and antiquity of the houses of Silly, Rocheguyon, and of Lannoy d'Amerancourt, from which she came, nor of the offices that these houses held at various times. Volumes would be needed for this subject and, since there would be so many, selecting material from them would be harder than just looking for some on my own. Nonetheless, I cannot forbear saying that she could have boasted of being allied with the houses of Évreux and Laval, and thus of being the daughter of many heroes. Also the houses of Silly, Saarbruecken, Lannoy, and Bourbon-Dampierre are the streams which flow from the springs of Coucy and Guînes. Those eager to learn details about them should see what François de l'Alouête wrote in his history and genealogical description of the illustrious ancient house of Coucy. See also the work of André Du Chesne, the premier historian of his age, in his genealogical history of the houses of Guînes, Ardres, Ghent, and Coucy, and those others allied with them.²⁴

The house of Coucy in Picardy is so old that this rhyme was bestowed on it:

Je ne suis roy, ni prince aussi / Je suis le Sire de Coucy.

[I am neither king nor prince; I am (instead) the lord of Coucy.] The ancient house of Montmirail, so fertile in heroes, was allied with the house of Coucy. From this house came Blessed Jean, lord of Montmirail and Oisy, viscount of Meaux, and lord of the manor of Cambrai (several of whose members were constables²⁵ of France). He abandoned his lands, his family and his father's house, with its honors and the favors of our king Philip Augustus, to assume the habit of the holy order of Cîteaux, in the abbey of Our Lady of Longpont, in the

²² Vol. 2, 389-401.

²³ A play on words between Marguerite, a personal name, and *marguerite*, a Latinate name for a pearl, based on the gospel passage of the search for a fine pearl. See Matt 13: 45-46.

²⁴ *Traité des nobles et des vertus dont ils sont formés . . . avec une histoire et description généalogique de la . . . maison de Coucy et de ses alliances. . .* (Paris: 1577).

²⁵ The title given to the commander in chief of the royal armies.

diocese of Soissons. His humility made him an example for all. He so humbled himself that he even went to beg money from the houses of his former vassals, who refused him because they did not recognize him. Through these rejections he learned the virtue of patience, which he attained to the highest degree of perfection. Just as God honored him in life, so after his death on 29 September 1217 or 1218, several miracles took place. This caused the people to venerate him as a saint.²⁶ Several thoughtful authors, both ancient and modern, speak of him as a saint. Among them are the breviary and the menology of Cîteaux,²⁷ Roberto Rusca,²⁸ Barnabas of Montalbe, Angel Manrique,²⁹ and Father Crisostomo Henriquez,³⁰ doctor of theology and historian of the same order in his notes on the martyrology; also André Du Chesne, geographer and historian of the king, in his history of Guînes and Coucy;³¹ Jacques Gutiere, or Éliézer of Calvary,³² a lawyer in the parlement of Paris in his *Abraham*; Aubert Lemire, dean of Antwerp in his *Chronicles of the Order of Cîteaux*;³³ [Nicolas] Hugue Ménard, a religious of the order of Saint Benedict, in his Benedictine martyrology;³⁴ and André du Saussay, protonotary of the Holy See, officialis and vicar general of the archbishop of Paris in his martyrology of France.³⁵ Some years later, the late Father Jean Baptiste de Machaut, S.J., wrote his biography.³⁶

Life of Marguerite de Silly

In 1580, Marguerite de Silly entered the world in the province of Picardy. In her earliest years she and her sister, Magdelaine de Silly, lost their mother in death. Her sister married Charles d'Angennes, lord of Fargis and count of Rochepot; he had been ambassador to Spain.

After the death of his wife, Marie de Lannoy, their father, Antoine de Silly, count of Rochepot, married Jeanne de Cossé. She was the second daughter of Artus de Cossé, count of Secondigny, lord of Gonnor,

²⁶ The preferred year of his death is 1217. Although his cause for canonization was begun, it was never concluded.

²⁷ *Breviarium sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis. Recens a mendis quam plurimis diligentissime repurgatum.* . . (Paris: 1617, 1618).

²⁸ Perhaps: *Breve compendio di alcuni huomini illustri . . . cisterciensi* (Milan: 1598).

²⁹ *Cisterciensium seu verius ecclesiasticorum annalium*, 3 vols. (Lyons: 1649).

³⁰ *Menologium cisterciense*, 2 vols. (Antwerp: 1630).

³¹ *Histoire généalogique des maisons de Guînes, d'Ardres, de Gand et de Courcy* (Paris: 1631).

³² Éliézer of Calvary is the pseudonym of Gutiere.

³³ *Chronicon cisterciensis ordinis* (Cologne: 1614).

³⁴ *Martyrologium sanctorum ordinis divi Benedicti* (Paris: 1629).

³⁵ *Martyrologium Gallicanum* (Paris: 1637). Du Saussay wrote in support of Jean François Paul de Gondî, Cardinal de Retz, and others.

³⁶ *Histoire de B. Jean, seigneur de Montmirel et d'Oysi* (Paris: 1641).

marshal of France. Her mother, his first wife, was Françoise du Bouchet, daughter of the lord of Puy-Greffiers. Jeanne de Cossé had been the widow of Gilbert Gouffier, duke of Rouannois, and marquis of Boisy. This noble lady, with one child from her first marriage, took care of training in virtue and piety the two girls, Françoise Marguerite and Magdelaine de Silly, daughters of her second husband. Because of her goodness and wisdom from her earliest years, the elder gave great happiness and satisfaction to her stepmother, Madame de la Rochepot. Consequently, this lady destined her to become the wife of her only son, Louis Gouffier, duke of Rouannois, count of Maulévrier and lord of Oiron. He, however, married Claude Léonor of Lorraine, eldest daughter of Charles I, duke of Elbeuf, and of Marguerite Chabot. As it happened, Heaven, where marriages are made, was saving this virtuous heroine, Marguerite, for Philip Emmanuel de Gondi, marquis of the Iles d'Or,³⁷ count of Joigny, knight of the orders of the king, and general of the galleys of France. He was the third son of the wise Albert de Gondi, duke of Retz, peer and marshal of France, and governor of Provence. His mother was Claude-Catherine de Clermont de Vivonne. (I wrote about her in my *Lives of the Illustrious Catherines*.)³⁸ Philip Emmanuel married Marguerite in 1606.³⁹ His brothers were Charles, marquis of Belle-Isle;⁴⁰ and Henry, Cardinal de Retz, bishop of Paris, commander of the Order of the Holy Spirit and minister of state.⁴¹ During his ministry, Bearn, Languedoc and Guienne came under obedience [to the king]. Another brother was Jean François, first archbishop of Paris, counselor of the king in his councils, master of the royal chapel, and likewise commander of the orders of his majesty.⁴²

God blessed his marriage with three children. The first was Pierre de Gondy, duke of Retz and count of Joigny.⁴³ By dispensation he married his first cousin Catherine de Gondi, eldest daughter of Henry de Gondi, duke of Retz and of Beaupréau. Her mother was Jeanne de Scépeaux. Henry [de Gondi], duke of Retz, was the son of Charles, marquis of Belle-Isle, himself the eldest son of Albert, duke of Retz.

³⁷ Now called the Iles d'Hyères, located in the Mediterranean off Toulon.

³⁸ This refers to an earlier section in the same book in which the life of Madame de Gondi appeared.

³⁹ An error for 1604, a date known from their marriage contract.

⁴⁰ Charles [III] de Gondi (1569-1596), general of the galleys, succeeding his uncle Charles (1536-1574) in this post.

⁴¹ Henri de Gondi (1572-1622), the first Cardinal de Retz.

⁴² Jean François de Gondi (1584-1654).

⁴³ Pierre [III] de Gondi (1606-1676). Several texts give his birthdate as 1602, but this must be an error.

Jeanne de Scépeaux was the daughter and heir of Guy de Scépeaux, duke of Beaupréau and count of Chemillé. Jeanne's mother was Marie de Rieux.

The second son was the late marquis of the Iles-d'Or, lord of Grande Espérance; he died in childhood.⁴⁴

The third son was Jean François Paul de Gondy, archbishop of Corinth and coadjutor of the archdiocese of Paris.⁴⁵ He is a worthy prelate whose piety and doctrine are well known, not only in Paris and in France, but even in Rome and in Italy. He ascended to this high dignity through all the degrees of honor. He began where others would be happy to finish.

This very devout countess, however, was richly adorned with gifts of nature and grace. Hence, to appear illustrious, she had no reason to rely on any advantage coming from the greatness, nobility, and sanctity of her ancestors. Neither did she rely on the virtues and merits of her husband, her brothers-in-law, or her children. God had endowed her with such an excellent and perceptive mind that she had no difficulty with upright living, whether in administering her household or in public life. She understood public life so perfectly that many great persons often came to consult her and willingly followed her advice.

Although her good sense was particularly apparent in the advice she gave, her respect toward her husband was so great that she always deferred to his judgment. She never sought to speak or contradict his advice although her judgment was usually deemed the more solid and reasonable.

Her soul's candor was so great that whenever she had some compliment to make in her letters, she would never do so without receiving the advice and counsel of her director.⁴⁶

Grace builds on nature, and grace found in her a good and generous spirit. In a word, she was that strong Woman whom Solomon praised so highly.⁴⁷ We should evaluate her many virtues on that basis, since she had been formed in virtue from her young years. Like virginal wax, her spirit was able to receive all the impressions of piety, the first virtue to appear in this very devout lady. For example, she

⁴⁴ Henri de Gondi (1612-1622). He died of a kick from a horse during a hunt.

⁴⁵ Jean François Paul de Gondi (1613-1679), the second Cardinal de Retz. He was titular archbishop of Corinth and coadjutor of Paris (1643), cardinal in 1652, and archbishop from 1654 to 1662.

⁴⁶ Among others, Vincent de Paul.

⁴⁷ Prov 31:10-31.

never let a day go by without hearing mass, and she made her exercises of piety with fervent zeal. From her youngest years she cultivated the virtue of piety, without which all the other virtues are useless. Hence, we may say that it was piety alone which made her so humble, chaste, respectful, and obedient.

During a six-month illness she demonstrated her patience, such a necessary virtue for Christians. That grave illness of hers would have plunged someone else less perfect into despair. Nevertheless her patience gained for her great soul the emblems of victory on a battlefield fertile enough to produce both palms and crowns.⁴⁸ Never was there a soul so pure and chaste as hers. That person is yet to be born who could have seen her taking the least little liberty; and that fact would compel one to believe that nothing pleased her except her husband. She had an extreme aversion to the novels and profane books which usually corrupt our morals as they polish our speech. Not content just with fomenting the wickedness reigning in the world, they also want to make us adopt the anger and rage of others. Though recoiling from romantic books, this chaste heroine inclined toward those which deal with piety. For this reason, several learned and pious men dedicated their works to her. Among them was Jacques Gutiere, Roman patrician and citizen, and lawyer at the parlement of Paris. Under the name of Éliézer de Calvaire he dedicated to her the book entitled: *Abraham ou de la sortie de l'homme hors de sa propre terre, et avec le premier Tabernacle où il se peut reposer pendant sa pérégrination* ["Abraham, or the departure of a man from his own country with the first Tabernacle, where he could rest during his travels"].⁴⁹

Her humility was no less than her modesty and patience. This virtue is also the basis of all the others, and without humility virtues degenerate into vices. Humility made her beloved of God and man, but particularly beloved of her servants and vassals. Those with long-practiced humility in the midst of so many activities never noticed in her the least actions which might offend their eyes or shock their thoughts. She was modest in her glances, restrained in speech, moderate in actions, simple in dress, gracious to her servants and vassals, and friendly to the little and the poor.

Although distancing ourselves from our inclinations is difficult, and the restraint we impose on our nature can keep it in check, human

⁴⁸ That is, the rewards of martyrdom.

⁴⁹ Paris, 1624.

nature still breaks free even though we think it well confined. This is like the case of that astronomer who could not keep his oath of remaining silent about his learning in the presence of the emperor Augustus. Françoise Marguerite de Silly was so inclined to humility that she could not conceal it, and so some examples of it always became known. We see that in his various trials Saint Paul triumphed over the insults he received in preaching Jesus Christ crucified.⁵⁰ Likewise it would have been very difficult to keep the wife of the general of the galleys from her ordinary habit of regarding herself as the least and lowest in the world. She spoke regularly with her confessors and directors, never leaving them even when obliged to appear in public. However, she always observed a great modesty in public and never lessened it. Yet she never set aside either her high station or the rank which her birth and the esteem due her summoned forth from others. It was here that she learned how to manifest that Christian magnanimity with which she was able to regain her station whenever she had performed some humble act. This annoys those who imagine that piety weakens courage and renders the designs of a devout woman lifeless and weak. I am not speaking of that generosity which Aristotle calls an appetite for honor, since I know that the Seraphic Doctor [Saint Bonaventure] himself refutes this, because it involves an appetite for eternal glory. The Angelic Doctor [Thomas Aquinas] has the same opinion. Saint Gregory observed the same in his *Moralia* and said that there is no act so magnanimous as to accept one's lofty place on earth to glorify the things of heaven. Sometimes, too, a person who has done some heroic act still esteems himself very badly. That great pope [Gregory] said that we fulfill our obligation of generosity when we do not let the weaker person fall prey to the stronger, nor the innocent cry out under the weight of an unbearable tyrant, nor, out of respect or restraint, keep from reprimanding a great person for harming a little one. The countess excelled in this virtue, as I will show when I mention her justice.⁵¹

If humility made this pious Marguerite worthy of commendation, her obedience was no less commendable. Since these two virtues are inseparable, it is quite difficult for someone who is not humble to be obedient. She also always showed great respect toward her husband, the general of the galleys, and was obedient to her confessors and directors.

She was so exact in submitting herself to the will of God declared to us through his inspirations, that it appeared that these were like the

⁵⁰ See 1 Cor 1:17-25.

⁵¹ He does so only in connection with her charity.

commandments for her. Once she learned through her directors and confessors what God desired of her, she believed that she was then obliged to carry it out. She received all the inspirations of the Holy Spirit with a respect easier imagined than described, and this was her law in everything. Although she might have sought to undertake some plan or give some advice, she would never do so until she had consulted the author of all good thoughts. Thus, when she was very exact in following those thoughts which came to her, one could say of her what the Prophet King [David] said of the angels: they always are in God's presence to receive his orders and execute them.⁵²

This pious heroine had acquired these virtues by means of piety which, as Saint Bernard said to Pope Eugenius III, consists in consideration of itself alone. This saintly abbot of Clairvaux teaches us that we lose our life if we spend it without exercising piety. It would be a continual death and the entombment of a living person if someone did not exercise this virtue. Piety is what makes us taste (as David has sung⁵³) how sweet and mild God is. Nevertheless, he went on to say in the second book of his *De Consideratione*⁵⁴ that you learn wisdom and good morals if you advance in virtue by this means; you will consider whether you are more or less patient than normal; whether you are more good natured and easygoing, instead of fiery and impetuous, more humble than proud, more grave or affable, more timorous or generous, or more daring and confident than is necessary. It is there that you take your pulse and plunge deep within to consider your nature, who you are deep inside, and what you are in your outward behaviors and actions.

That is what Marguerite de Silly practiced. Her piety was also joined to the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. She had a firm and unshakable faith, and the confidence to ask of God all that was necessary for her salvation. After that, she remained at peace, leaving everything to the loving guidance of divine providence. I write here only what I learned from someone well trained in the spiritual life. He said that, in his broad experience in dealing with consciences, he had never met a higher or more eminent faith than that of the late wife of the general of the galleys.

⁵² Ps 103:20: "Bless the Lord, all you his angels, you mighty in strength, who do his bidding, obeying his spoken word."

⁵³ See Ps 87:5.

⁵⁴ *De consideratione. Libri quinque ad Eugenium III.* "Consideration" refers, at least in part, to mental prayer.

She had a great hope, and placed all her confidence in our Lord. One only had to see her in difficulties, or in the great matters of her life, or in the holy plans that she drew up for the glory of God, to recognize that all her hopes for eternal good were founded on the merits of the savior, on his love for his creatures, and on his ardent desire to preserve the work of his hands and to bestow eternal life on those who cooperate with his grace.

She also had a very great charity. First, as regards her charity toward God, she reflected His presence in her constant practice of virtue, in her weekly communions (which Saint Augustine encouraged the faithful of his time to do, and in our days the late [Francis de Sales] bishop of Geneva of happy memory did, in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*). She did so, as well, through her delicate conscience. She would perceive some problems even in the smallest imperfections where the most perfect person would not find any at all. Yet she always persevered in her spiritual exercises.

Second, she showed her charity toward the neighbor on every occasion, following the example of the suffering servant of God who was a foot to the lame and an eye to the blind.⁵⁵ This particularly shone in her defense of the absent. She never showed more generosity than when there was a question of reputation. She realized that nothing is more delicate than honor, which resembles a mirror on which the least breath leaves some trace. As a result, she either excused an evident fault or, when she could not reasonably excuse it, she dismissed it as coming from weak human nature, from a violent temptation, or from some other cause. She seemed, therefore, like the advocate of the absent, and people called her that in public. In this way she became an example to many women who did not mind tearing down the reputation of their peers.

She was not only the advocate of the absent, but also the mother of the poor. Her charity toward beggars was thoughtful, since she bestowed alms more willingly on those reduced to the greatest need and misery and on her vassals in Folleville in Picardy, in Joigny in Burgundy, in Montmirail in Brie, and in her other lands rather than elsewhere. In so doing she followed the inclination of the Bridegroom *ordinavit in me [charitatem]* ["his charity toward me was well ordered"], etc.⁵⁶

It is good to help the poor, the members of our Savior. But it is even better to show special care for the salvation of one's neighbors and ser-

⁵⁵ Job 29:15.

⁵⁶ A literal reading of the Latin of Cant 2:4.



Philip Emmanuel de Gondi, marquis of the Isles d'Or and General of the Galley of France, married to Marguerite in 1606, a union which produced three sons. Portrait in Arthur Loth's, *St. Vincent de Paul et sa Mission Sociale*, 1880. Courtesy Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois

vants, something this holy woman excelled in. Besides prudently seeing that vice gained no entry to her house, she took very particular care that her children and servants be well instructed in the fear of God. For this purpose she asked insistently that Father [Pierre] de Bérulle, the first superior general of the Congregation of the Oratory (who later became a cardinal) give her a good tutor for her children.⁵⁷ This very pious founder made the choice of Father Vincent de Paul, whose uprightness is famous throughout France, and who is now the superior of the Fathers of the Mission. A great prelate spoke of him in these terms: "This good servant of God, whom heaven seems to have chosen in our days to be one of the most faithful repositories of apostolic zeal and the spirit of the first ministers of Gospel, never finds anything impossible for charity."^{58 59}

⁵⁷ Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629). He became a cardinal one year before his death.

⁵⁸ The bishop of Puy, chapter 25, part 2, of his life of Mother de Chantal.

⁵⁹ Henri de Maupas du Tour, *La vie de la vénérable mère Jeanne Françoise Frémiot* (Paris: 1644). He also delivered the formal funeral oration for Vincent de Paul, at the request of the members of the Tuesday Conferences.

Her piety toward God and all the domestic virtues of her house banished blasphemies from it, and did not admit even one vice, especially drunkenness and impurity, plagues which waste and ruin families. In a word, her house was like that of her sister-in-law, Madame Marguerite Claude de Gondy, marquise of Maignelay: a nursery of devotion, a seedbed of virtue.

Through the good regulations which she enforced by means of her officials, her great charity extended not only to her servants, but also to all those who dwelt on her lands. For this purpose she resolved to visit all her lands in the provinces of Picardy, Brie, Champagne and Burgundy. Her vassals received her there with acclaim and incredible joy. They paraded before her with the cross and banner in the certain hope that she would deal with them calmly and meekly as the mother of her vassals and the support of the oppressed. She would dismiss the judges and other officers who mistreated her people, and rewarded those who had done good. Once, after receiving numerous complaints against one of the judges of her lands, she immediately removed him from office, paying him from her own tithes.

Her entire passion was to procure the advancement of the glory of God and the salvation of souls. For this reason, from time to time, mainly in Advent and Lent, she would send preachers out at her own expense. They would go through her dependencies in the towns and villages of her lands, and even those of her neighbors, to preach there, hear confessions and catechize her vassals. When she saw the happy outcome which it pleased our savior to give to the work of these good priests, in the improvement of morals which she saw in her villagers, and in the instruction of the little children in the Christian faith, she was overcome with happiness and indescribable peace. Yet, she was not content just to help her vassals and to aid in the salvation of souls while she lived. After her death she also cared for the beautiful foundation of the priests of the Mission, begun by Father Vincent de Paul. She magnanimously gave 46,000 *livres*⁶⁰ to establish this useful and necessary Congregation, not only to instruct the poor village people, but also some who dwell in the cities who live without sufficient knowledge of the mysteries of our religion and the sacraments of the Church. The reason why this charitable and pious woman founded the priests of the Mission was the minimal ability of certain priests in the villages.

⁶⁰ 45,000 according to the contract of foundation; Coste, *CED* 13: 198. Both she and her husband signed the contract, and are regarded as the founders of the work.

When still a girl living in a village in Picardy, she realized that her pastor did not pronounce the formula for absolution when she went to confession. She wrote to ask for it from a Minim father⁶¹ of the Amiens convent. He was a person of great merit and morality, and she was going to him for spiritual direction at that time. When she received the formula, she always carried it with her, and gave it to her pastor when she went to him for confession. I learned this detail from Father Vincent de Paul who told it to me and to Father Jean Robineau, a religious of my order.

After such a holy life, she died a holy death in Paris on the [vigil of the] feast of Saint John the Baptist [23 June] in 1625. She received the honor of being buried in the chapel of Saint Joseph in the church of the Mother of God, belonging to the Carmelites on the rue Chapon in Paris. I learned there that an inhabitant of Joigny had come to make a novena there on the advice of his directors and confessors. He was cured from a dangerous illness through the intercession of this woman, whose memory is held in veneration.⁶²

Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi

Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi, count of Joigny and marquis of the Iles d'Or, nephew and brother of great cardinals, and commander of the orders of the king, and general of the galleys of France, thus became the widower of such a meek, upright and holy woman. He was so touched by his loss that he abandoned his marquisates, his counties, his honors and the lofty responsibilities with which kings Henry IV and Louis XIII had honored him. To the great surprise of the entire court, who admired his position and his behavior on various occasions, he entered the congregation of the priests of the Oratory of our Lord Jesus Christ. One of these occasions was at the Carousel, where he was one of the five Faithful Knights, Polidamant.⁶³ This means "Subduer of Many," since, in June 1620, to serve God and the king he subdued the famous corsair Soliman Rais and other corsairs from Algiers and Barbary who had been ravaging the Mediterranean. Also, in 1622 he subdued the religious rebels at Argenton and elsewhere. He was the

⁶¹ **Claude Lait.**

⁶² The chapel was demolished after the revolution. Her body was presumably then removed, with others, to the Paris catacombs.

⁶³ The Carousel was the designation of a formalized tournament celebrating major royal events. During these, selected members of the court dressed in costume and accepted certain identities, such as knights, Turks, and giants. Others rode elaborately decorated horses, in beautiful coaches, and what we would call floats. One such event was held in April 1612 to commemorate the wedding of Louis XIII and Anne of Austria. The modern merry-go-round is the descendant of these carousels.

true heir of the virtues and greatness of his father, the duke and marshal of Retz, whom I honored in the *Praise of Elizabeth of Austria*, queen of France.⁶⁴ He also inherited the virtues and greatness of his paternal uncle, Cardinal Pierre de Gondi, bishop of Paris, count of Joigny and commander of the order of the Holy Spirit. The meekness of this latter gained the hearts of all, and Italy and France esteemed him equally. These two courts never found themselves better in agreement than when they wished to honor him with the [cardinal's] purple. He preserved his fealty in the midst of the rebellion and, during the furies of the wars of the League, he managed the interests of religion and state so well that, while serving the king he also defended the Church and combated heresy. He worked from the first for the conversion of Henry [IV] the Great and with the king's consent he brought about in Italy his reconciliation with Pope Clement VIII in the name of all France. However, his fealty toward our kings Charles IX, Henry III and Henry IV and the trickery of foreign enemies of this crown made him suspect to the common father of the Church. He received permission to enter Rome only on condition that he not speak of this matter. Yet he acquitted himself very well there. Because he had already prepared that incomparable monarch to recognize the successor of the prince of the apostles, he disposed him [the pope] to receive the eldest son of the Church. Thus he began happily a work on which depended the salvation of the king and the peace of this kingdom.

⁶⁴ Volume I, pages 549-50.

Remember that wherever you are God will take care of you.
*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
9 June 1658)*