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"God is My God" The Generative Integrity of Louise de Marillac

BY
VIE THORGFREN

Perspective

Anyone who approaches the life of Louise de Marillac comes to this experience with a particular perspective and a particular set of skills. The vantage point for my reflection emerges from my background in psychology, spirituality, and spiritual direction. Moreover, during the past six years I have had the privilege of being immersed in the Vincentian charism at Saint Thomas Theological Seminary in Denver, Colorado. I have worked collaboratively with the priests of the Congregation of the Mission in the development of a spiritual formation program for lay students and a certificate program in spiritual direction. Both programs are rooted in the spirituality of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. The spiritual direction program has, as its primary focus, ministry to the poor and marginated.

To this particular project, therefore, I bring the lens of psychology, the ears of a spiritual director, and the heart of a Vincentian collaborator. For the past few years I have experienced Louise as one who shares her life and journey with me. As I have walked with her, the questions which naturally emerge from my ministry have provided a focus for my listening.

The counselor in me has listened and longed to know her as a person. What motivated her? What did she value? How did she experience life as a woman? How was her growth and understanding affected by her history? How was she affected by relationships in her life? Where was she wounded? How did she deal with pain?

The spiritual director in me approached the holy ground of her life in reverence and with the "sandals removed from my feet." I listened and watched for the face and the presence of God in the fabric of her life. Who was God for her? How did she experience a relationship with

God? How did she know and respond to the movements of God's Spirit in her life? How did she discern God's will? Who did she come to know herself to be-in-God.

Finally, the Vincentian collaborator in me sought her understanding of the gift of the poor and their primary role in the salvation of the Church. What did the poor teach her? How did they lead her to God and to herself?

In the reflection which follows, the disciplines of psychology and spiritual theology provide a framework for my understanding of the primary wound in Louise's life and its significance in her struggle towards generativity. It is my central thesis that the dynamic of two factors enabled her to transcend her preoccupation with her own brokenness and to give birth to a life-giving ministry that endures today. These two factors are her friendship with Vincent de Paul and her unique relationship with the generative Jesus.

My primary method has been prayer, journaling, and opening myself to receive the Christ gift of Louise. Reading the biographical materials and her personal writings was a meditative journey of entering as fully as possible into her experience in order to encounter Louise and the God she knew. *Lectio Divina* became my primary means of praying with her the details of her life and the reflections and letters she wrote. With this perspective in mind I offer in humility my personal meditation on the generative integrity of Louise de Marillac.

Generativity Means Dying to Oneself

On 24 August 1647, Louise de Marillac addresses a letter to Vincent de Paul her spiritual director, friend and collaborator for more than twenty years. Brimming with joy she longs to share with him what God has done. She writes:

My heart is filled with joy in the understanding God has given me of the words, "God is my God", and the knowledge of all the glory the saints give Him. I can't help communicating with you this evening to ask you to help me to use this excess of joy, and to teach me some practice for tomorrow, the feast of my patron saint. This is the day of the renovation of my vows. I hope, because of this double anniversary, to assist at your holy Mass ...¹

¹*Letters of Saint Louise de Marillac* (trans. by Helen Marie Law, D.C.), 1972 ed., 376.

It is clear from her words that Louise has experienced God's consolation in a profound, personal way. This letter is a pivotal point indicating a significant conversion in her life. It is also a moment of healing, affirmation, and deepened interior freedom.

Louise now rests confidently in the realized integrity of her desire to be in union with God. Her journey of trust now bears fruit in the certitude that God loves her and she belongs to him alone — in the person of the poor. She is set free to pour out the remainder of her life in nurturing “the charity of Christ crucified” in the communities she has birthed.

Why is this letter to Vincent a prism for understanding the generativity of Louise? What is the substance of the joy she experiences as overflowing? The disciplines of psychology and spiritual theology can provide the objective ground for grasping the importance of this event.

According to psychology, generativity involves a movement beyond productivity to creativity. Generativity results when an individual goes beyond the need to prove oneself or even fulfill oneself into the capacity to give freely of oneself. As the capacity for caring matures it gives birth to the ability to make an emotional investment in the life of what one has created, not just as an extension of oneself, but according to its own merits and requirements. Generativity requires the ability to nurture without control or manipulation.

Whether an individual will become generative is not an automatic result of the aging process. A successful movement into generativity necessitates a conscious acceptance of one's own limitations. It involves a coming together of a mature compassion with the virtue of detachment. In the dynamic marriage of these capacities, the self-transcendence of a mature generativity results.

For Christians, the model of generativity is Jesus Christ. In his life and death, he combines a self-involving compassion with detachment, an intense personal concern with a trust in something greater than himself. The result is new life for all humankind.

The tradition of spiritual theology takes the psychological understanding of generativity even deeper. Mature generativity for Christians involves a change of heart concerning one's service to others. No longer is one's heart-attitude that of “working for God.” The response of the individual becomes rather a humble self-effacing desire of “doing God's work.”²

²Thomas Green S.J., *Darkness in the Marketplace*, chapt. 2.

Christian generativity matches the particular gifts of the individual to the needs of the community. By embracing the call to be generative, adult Christians not only live in accord with the faith community's vision, they facilitate the further understanding and development of what it means to live the gospel. While for most persons the individual contribution is imperceptible, certain figures like Francis of Assisi, Ignatius Loyola, and Vincent de Paul quickly emerge in the public consciousness. These individuals are recognizable as carriers of the next leap forward for the community of faith. As we shall see, the life of Louise de Marillac is of equal significance.

The Louise we encounter in 1625 is already in the stage of the spiritual life commonly known as illuminative. This is the movement in prayer-action that gives rise to a mature generativity. In this younger Louise we see all the characteristics of one who is becoming generative in Christ.

She possesses the life of interiority that is marked by affective prayer. Saint Bonaventure describes this as a time when the individual enters an inner temple where the divine icon blazes on the wall of one's own being. Increasingly, Louise's attention is focused on the interior icon of the humanity of Jesus. In 1622 she writes:

I desired to sow, in the heart of Jesus, all the actions of my heart and soul in order that they may grow by sharing in His merits. Henceforth I shall exist only through Him and in Him since He has willed to lower Himself to assume human nature.³

The Eucharist becomes the focus of generative prayer as increasingly Christ is seen everywhere but is welcomed in a particular way in the intimate relationship of Holy Communion. On the Feast of All Saints 1628 Louise describes herself as overwhelmed by the understanding that her God desires to come to her.

He did not wish to come into some temporary dwelling but to a place that was rightly His and belonged to Him . . . As a living soul, I had to welcome Him joyfully as the true possessor of my soul and simply acquiesce to Him, giving Him my heart as the throne of His majesty.⁴

³*Spiritual Writings of Saint Louise de Marillac* (trans. by Louise Sullivan, D.C.), 1948 ed. 10.

⁴*Ibid.*, 17.

The Virgin Mother is no longer a devotional practice or even a primary spiritual symbol. For the generative Christian, she is the essence of womanhood, motherhood, and virginity and is embraced as one's own spiritual mother. In 1626 Louise, now a widow, entrusts herself and her son to the special protection of Mary. "I am entirely yours, Most Holy Virgin, that I may more perfectly belong to God,"⁵ she vows. It is at this time that she crystallizes her understanding of Mary as daughter of the Father, mother of the Son and worthy spouse of the Holy Spirit.

In the midst of this movement into generativity an individual is also blessed with the gracious gift of God through the operation of infused virtue. Primary in this process is the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. It is at this point that contemporary psychology ceases to be helpful because we are no longer dealing with the natural potential of a human being. While there is an attraction to the transcendent in every person and while compassion is a natural human response, the ability to love God purely for himself and one's neighbor with no expectation of return is purely a gift from God.

Charity calls a person to move *through* fear and to establish one's ground in trust of God. It involves the acceptance of loss of control and the establishment of a new foundation in the belief that it is God rather than oneself who will see to the outcome. It requires of the individual the choice of growing in detachment. It is precisely at this point that one may hesitate and turn back. The choice of the Christian literally goes beyond one's own personal strength.

In fact, the maturing generativity of illumination means purgatory. The greatest suffering and the greatest struggle with oneself occurs in this movement. All the demons of one's personality emerge in the battle between fear and trust, shame and humility, my will and God's Will. It is a time of intense turmoil and confusion.

Perhaps this is why Louise at the time she accepts Vincent de Paul as her spiritual director is often misjudged as immature, self-absorbed, dependent, even neurotic. Might another perception be of a woman who is making the choice for generativity? Saint Catherine of Genoa describes the road *through* as the doctrine of Pure Love. In Louise it is enfolded as the perfect charity of Christ crucified.

That Louise lived this choice into the freedom of nurturing it in others is evidenced in 1650-1651 as she writes:

⁵Ibid., 14.

Henceforth let there be no further resistance to Jesus, no action except for Jesus, not through but in Jesus! May my life be solely for Jesus and my neighbor so that by the means of this unifying love, I may love all that Jesus loves and through the power of this love which has as its center the eternal, love of God for His creatures, I may obtain from His goodness, the graces which His mercy wills to bestow upon me.⁶

The integrity of her choice can also be touched in a concrete way in her ability to weather the difficult years of crisis and turmoil during 1645-1649. It is during this time that she suffers greatly the actions of her son, Michel, and the departures, conflicts, and failures of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Despite all, she is coming to know the perfection of charity that realizes that success has never been a sign of God's will. She conveys her conviction to Jeanne Lepintre in 1647, "Let us always adore and love the guidance of divine Providence, the only true assurance of the Daughters of Charity."⁷

Louise de Marillac stands in history and our hearts not merely as a woman who produced a great deal in her lifetime and made a difference in the lives of those she encountered. She bears the full flowering of generative charity. What were the factors which enabled her to pass through the inner turmoil and to transcend her personal strengths? Two consummate gifts shine forth — her friendship with Vincent de Paul and her unique understanding of the generative Jesus.

A Single Soul Dwelling in Two Bodies

As we encounter Louise prior to and following the death of her husband Antoine we recognize a woman hampered in her relationship with God by her own personal history. Her primary wound is an inability to trust God, herself, and others. As a bit more of the covering has been removed from her early childhood we know that she was born outside of wedlock, never knew her mother, and possibly may have been entrusted to the sisters in the monastery prior to her first birthday.

The understandings of developmental psychology shed light on the severity of her struggle with doubt and dependency. According to Erik Erikson and others the early years are foundational for an individual in learning to trust. Children who do not receive the necessary nurturing at this time in their lives become adults who are prone to

⁶Ibid., 152.

⁷*Letters of Saint Louise de Marillac*, p. 215.

mistrust of others and a crippling sense of shame and self-doubt. Persons of this type may be quite religious, but their religious development is idiosyncratic.⁸

Although the cult of the child which exists today is not a cultural reality in the time of Louise, the basic needs of the human person for initial bonding and nurturing are not negated. Louise herself recognizes the importance of this primary mothering in her consistent preference for foster care for the foundlings over group homes.

This is not to say that individuals deprived of this early nurturing cannot grow spiritually. It is simply to say that this primary wound will become a focal point for the spiritual journey and the doorway through which God's providence will be directly experienced.⁹ In fact, many spiritually advanced people have emerged from this group.¹⁰

Key to Louise's ability to transcend the mere fulfillment of unmet childhood needs is her friendship with Vincent de Paul. His initial reluctance to serve as her spiritual director is well-documented. Early in the relationship, however, Vincent realizes the depth of suffering with which her life has been marked and the sincerity of her heart. His choice is open to himself to the intimacy of friendship is not only growthful for Louise but a significant source of sustenance for Vincent in his own journey. In time their friendship joins their lives and ministries to the extent that they can be described as possessing "a single soul dwelling in two bodies."¹¹ This unity of spirit results in their being forever linked in our minds as spiritual parents of the Vincentian charism. For Louise, this relationship is the midwife of her own generativity.

There is a consistency and simplicity that flows through Vincent's letters to Louise which make frequent reference to her anxiety over her

⁸Rosemary Haughton describes Louise's love in early to mid-adulthood as the lack of the strong safe atmosphere of a normally affectionate family." As a result, "her love for God was a tense and unrelaxed affair." Rosemary Haughton, *Six Saints for Parents*, 56.

⁹For Louise's own reflections on suffering, see *Spiritual Writings of Saint Louise de Marillac*, 35, 56, 137.

¹⁰Saint John Neumann struggled with inordinate guilt throughout his life; Simone Weil and Charles de Foucauld displayed an inordinate need to take all the sufferings of the world upon themselves.

¹¹Saint Gregory Nazianzen boasted of his friendship with Saint Basil with the description: "It seemed that in us there was only a single soul dwelling in two bodies." Saint Francis de Sales, a spiritual mentor for both Vincent and Louise, wrote about the precious gift of true friendship in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*. "It will be excellent because it comes from God, excellent because it leads to God, excellent because its bond will endure eternally in God. How good it is to love here on earth as they love in heaven and to learn to cherish one another in this world as we shall do eternally in the next!"

son. His counsel to Louise repeatedly emphasizes care of her physical health, gentleness and compassion for herself, affirmation of the quality of love that has been given and trust in the providence and love of God. He encourages Louise in the movement away from crippling shame and guilt to the true humility of self-acceptance.

On one occasion he emphasizes the importance of taking care of her health when he tenderly writes, "It seems to me that you are killing yourself from the little care you are taking of yourself."¹² On another occasion the firmness of his guidance surfaces. "I am ordering you, moreover, to procure the holy joy of your heart by all the relaxation you can possibly take."¹³

He recognizes in Louise a naturally tender and compassionate heart that goes out to others. He is also aware of her deep desire to live out her promises to God with total integrity. Constantly throughout his letters he affirms the goodness he sees in her and yet recognizes the tendency to be harsh with and unforgiving of herself. The consistent grace in his letters is his recognition that this is a needed area of conversion if she is to achieve the perfection of charity she seeks. Sometime around 1629 he writes to console her about her son and challenges her to compassion with herself when he gently chides her:

what great hidden treasures there are in holy Providence and how marvelously Our Lord is honored by those who follow it and do not try to get ahead of it! ... Yes, you will tell me but it is on account of God that I am worried. — It is no longer because of God that you are worried if you are troubled because of serving Him."¹⁴

Knowing her susceptibility to self-questioning and her fears of having failed in love of Michel, he writes to her in February, 1630 to affirm the quality of her love. At that time he tells her:

Mademoiselle, how good it is to be God's child, since he loves those who have the happiness of possessing this quality in His sight even more tenderly than you love your child — although you have more affection for him than almost any mother I know ... be fully confident that she to whom Our Lord has given so much love for other people's children will merit Our Lord's special affection for her own child. Please live peacefully in

¹²Vincent de Paul, *Correspondence, Conferences and Documents*, Vol. 1. 1985 ed. Letter #95, 145.

¹³*Ibid.*, Letter #96, 145.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, Letter #31, 59.

this assurance, even I say, in the joy of a heart that desires to conform itself completely to that of Our Lord.¹⁵

Vincent clearly recognizes Louise's struggle with trust and seeks to foster in her a confidence in the love of God. Central to this is the development of discernment both in how she pours out her energies and in her self-judgement. Vincent knows that the spirit of God works gently and is not destructive of physical or emotional health. On 7 December 1630 he pleads with her:

Oh! take care to preserve [your health] for the love of Our Lord and his poor members and be careful not to do too much. It is a ruse of the devil, by which he deceives good people, to induce them to do more than they are able, so that they end up not being able to do anything. The spirit of God urges one gently to do the good that can be done reasonably, so that it may be done perseveringly and for a long time. Act, therefore, in this way ... and you will be acting according to the spirit of God.¹⁶

Vincent also understands the difference between suffering that is life-giving and suffering that is self-defeating and authored by someone or something other than God. He knows that the humility of Christ fosters a quiet confidence rather than inner turmoil.

Do not think that all is lost because of the little rebellions you experience interiorly. It has just rained very hard and it is thundering dreadfully. Is the weather less beautiful for that? Let the tears of sadness drown your heart and let the demons thunder and growl as much as they please. Be assured ... that you are no less dear to our Lord for all that. Therefore, live contentedly in His love ...¹⁷

Gently and with fidelity, Vincent companions Louise as she grows in her ability to trust the providence of God. In this process of Louise's bonding with divine charity and coming to recognize herself as "the dear daughter of Our Lord,"¹⁸ Vincent knows the importance of discouraging dependency. Sometimes he encourages her to trust that God will directly show her the way and that she can rely upon her own judgment of God's Will. Other times he may be deliberately unavailable so that Louise can discover her own strengths. Above all, in word and

¹⁵Ibid., Letter #41, 69.

¹⁶Ibid., Letter #58, 92.

¹⁷Ibid., Letter #36, 62.

¹⁸Ibid., Letter #53, 84.

action, Vincent trusts her. Increasingly over time he entrusts to her care more of the responsibility and organization of their shared ventures.

The Pentecost event of 1642 which involves the collapse of the ceiling demonstrates just how far she has come in her ability to discern the hand of providence. Some years later as she reflects on this event she records her awareness that this is a reminder of an earlier Pentecost (1623) when her "mind was instantly freed of all doubt."¹⁹ Clearer now is the realization that "the graces which He had granted to me were ... because I belonged to Him as I was." Still she admits that full comprehension of this goodness eludes her.²⁰

The full ripening of the trust which Vincent has nurtured in Louise is seen in her words to the sisters in 1658. "Draw us, therefore, O my Lord, and we shall run; and the fragrance of your perfumes will hold us so firmly that nothing will be capable of separating us from Your charity."²¹ What had been lacking in the early nurturing of Louise is in some way transcended through the precious gift of her trusted and trusting friend Vincent de Paul. She had chosen to believe what she could not see and now the fruits are her legacy to her Daughters.

The Hidden Life

If Louise's friendship with Vincent is the midwife of her own generativity, her unique understanding of the generative Jesus is the seed. As early as 1622 we witness a gradual but persistent turning in Louise to the humanity of Jesus. It is in the unfolding of her lived Christology that Louise merits recognition as an individual whose life is a visible witness to a deeper generative movement of the Spirit in the community of faith. One of two companion themes in her understanding of the humanity of Jesus is the importance of the hidden years prior to his public ministry. Following shortly after the death of her husband and enduring throughout her life is a consistent meditation on the hidden life of Jesus in the womb of his mother and the hidden years in Nazareth. This is the Jesus she seeks to emulate.

In 1626 during a period of retreat in her life she offers her oblation to the Blessed Virgin. On this occasion she recognizes the "limitless virtues" practiced by Mary during the hidden life of her Son and the

¹⁹*Spiritual Writings of Saint Louise de Marillac*, 3.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 124.

²¹*Ibid.*, 210.

great humility of Mary which created openness “to the action of God ... and to [Mary’s] place in the divine plan.” Louise concludes her reflection by entreating the Blessed Virgin to offer her “pure body which furnished the blood which He shed for our Redemption so that His merits may be applied to the souls of the dying and effect in them complete conversion.”²²

Louise’s meditation on the hidden life of Jesus within the womb is most likely Berullian in origin. What is significant is that it became a daily practice of meditation for her. In 1647, the same year as her profound consolation in understanding “God is my God,” she praises the Virgin Mother for providing “the matter for the formation of the sacred body of your Son.”²³ In this humble action of the Mother of Grace incarnate Louise recognizes the generativity of Mary in the act of redemption.

Louise longs to leave as a legacy to her Daughters the practice of honoring this hidden life. In March 1646 she writes to Vincent:

Three years ago I asked permission for the little rosary I recite privately. I have many of these rosaries in a small box with thoughts written on the subject. I would like to leave them to the sisters after my death, if you have no objections. No one knows anything about this. The idea is the honor the hidden life of Our Lord when He was enclosed in the Blessed Virgin’s womb, and to congratulate her on her happiness during those nine months. The three small beads are used to greet her under the beautiful titles of Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son, and Spouse of the Holy Spirit. This is the essence of this simple devotion. By God’s grace, unworthy as I am, I have never missed saying it since the time I started; and by the same grace of God, I’m ready to discontinue it if you direct me to. In my mind, this simple devotion asks God through the Incarnation of His Son and the prayers of the Blessed Virgin, for the purity so essential to the Company of the Daughters of Charity and the stability of this company in submission to His will.²⁴

Vincent apparently is initially uncomfortable with Louise’s dedication to this practice. Although he refuses her request at this time he later reconsiders because he recognizes how strongly she feels about the gift of this devotion for the Company.

As early as 1632, Louise’s commitment to the hidden years in Nazareth has taken flesh in a joining of her prayer and her actions. At

²²Ibid., 13-15.

²³Ibid., 136.

²⁴Vincent de Paul, *Correspondence, Conferences and Documents*, Vol. 2, 1990 ed., Letter #794, 630; *Letters of Saint Louise de Marillac (Law)* gives a later date of May 1651. See Letter 303b, 308.

this time she is moving to a new home with the intention of honoring Divine Providence. She promises "By this change of residence, to honor the changes made by Jesus and the Blessed Virgin when they moved from Bethlehem to Egypt and then to other places, not wanting, any more than they, to have a permanent dwelling here on earth."²⁵ During a retreat in the same year she "resolved that in everything, particularly in uncertain or questionable circumstances, I would consider what Jesus would have done and honor His submission to His Mother during the years when He was dependent upon her as her Son."²⁶

On retreat a year later, the same year as the birth of the Company, she adopts the hidden years in Nazareth as an icon for her life. Early on Saturday morning she longs to have "the image of Jesus Christ imprinted upon my soul."²⁷ By Monday morning she firmly plants her feet in the ground of Jesus' life from age twelve to age thirty:

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 His entire life. Since he saw that the common life had the greatest need of examples, He devoted more time to it in the continual practice of evangelical perfection. He was rich but He chose holy poverty. He subjected Himself to the Blessed Virgin and to Saint Joseph by His obedience to them. I implore Him, with all my heart, to grant me the grace to imitate Him. Although I am unworthy, I hope that, after having filled me with this desire for so many years, He will in His goodness, effectively bestow it upon me.²⁸

From this day onward, Louise faithfully pursues the will of the Father in the hidden life of the generative Jesus. In the dedication of her life to the simple actions of serving the poor, she desires to "live in such a way that my purity of intention in all my actions will hide me from the eyes of the world so that I may be seen by God alone."²⁹

Louise communicates the significance of the hidden life to the Daughters as a living reality.³⁰ Vincent supports and shares her conviction. In 1660, just prior to her death, Louise reminds the Company once again of this enduring source of strength with the words, "We are told

²⁵*Spiritual Writings of Saint Louise de Marillac*, 39.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 41.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 44.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 47.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 45.

³⁰For some examples see *ibid.*, 75, 218.

to honor His Hidden Life. This is essential for the strength of this Company."³¹

Her conviction of the enduring strength of the hidden years results in Louise's surprising contribution to the evolution of spirituality. The practice of reflection on the humanity of Jesus is a relatively late occurrence in the Christian tradition. Anselm of Canterbury is afforded recognition as perhaps the first individual to encourage such practice. Later, Francis of Assisi and Ignatius Loyola expand and systematize reflection on the events of Jesus's life as important for the wider community. It is, however, Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul who grasp the significance of the hidden years as the source of a true humility which is generative. It is one reality to imitate the humility of Jesus when one focuses on his public ministry. How different the reality when one imagines God incarnate living unknown and unrecognized in the hidden village of no importance!

Louise responds to the scriptural question "can anything good come from Nazareth?" with the substance of her life. The members of the Vincentian family are the beneficiaries of her legacy. This legacy is a new seed planted in the broader consciousness of Christian spirituality. Later, this awareness surfaces in the lives of Therese of Liseaux and Charles de Foucauld. Its further emergence is exemplified by Dorothy Day, Catherine de Heuck Doherty, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Jean Vanier. The fruition of Louise's understanding of what it means to imitate Christ is now becoming visible in the practice of the broader faith community since Vatican II.

Thirst for your Faithful Love

Impregnating the fertility of the hidden years is the generativity of Jesus on the cross who cries out in thirst. Springing up like a fountain through the course of Louise's meditations is this exemplary charity of Jesus who "willed to forego even necessities so as to use every moment of His life to the fullest."³² On the sixth day of her retreat in 1628 she writes, "I accept all the dryness and lack of consolation for which my soul is destined. I offer myself in total abandonment to God."³³ Sometime shortly afterward, during her meditation on the Passion, the following insight emerges:

³¹Ibid., 218.

³²Ibid., 23.

³³Ibid., 21.

When Jesus knew that He had endured all the pain which the scriptures had foretold, He increased His own sufferings saying, "I thirst" ... Jesus thirsted on the cross after He saw that all had been accomplished. His afflicted body, like a deer, sought the relief of water. He suffered a double thirst. "... His third cry expresses His thirst to apply His merits to all souls created for Paradise ... Listen to Him, O my soul, as if He were speaking to you alone, "I thirst for your faithful love." ... Jesus addresses these words to us ... He does not address His Father. He does not ask for something to drink. He simply cries out, "I thirst."³⁴

For Louise, the perfection of charity is uncovered in the thirst of Jesus. After surrendering all and delivering up his body he makes one final act of love. He chooses in this moment an extraordinary sense of separation from the Father in embracing the ultimate human experience. In his total abandonment "Jesus no longer says 'my Father'"³⁵ His cry is rather "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"³⁶ As the Father receives the sacrifice of the Son the human race is reborn.

Coming out of this retreat, Louise is forever "consoled by the thought that God wished, despite my unworthiness, I should help my neighbor to know Him."³⁷ She is committed to the charity of Christ crucified that thirsts "to apply His merits to all souls" and she seeks to bring this charity to those who are most abandoned.

Before tracing the development of this consciousness throughout Louise's life, it may be helpful to explore the primal consciousness of thirst in the human condition. For each of us, the first experience of thirst follows shortly after birth. From its inception the spiritual and the physical reality of thirst is one. The infant who cries out in thirst is gathered in the arms of his mother. Responding solely to the physical cry is not sufficient for life. The child who is not also held may develop a condition called marasmus and fail to thrive.

Additionally, it is important to note the eye contact which is established as the mother nurses the child. Sometime before eight weeks of age the infant recognizes his mother for the first time — and the mother recognizes this "look of recognition." Psychologists believe that this primal experience of bonding with another in the satisfaction of thirst is the blueprint for all subsequent relationships.

³⁴Ibid., 22-23.

³⁵Ibid., 23.

³⁶Mark 15:34.

³⁷*Spiritual Writings of Saint Louise de Marillac*, 27.

The practice in all cultures of celebrating events of individual or communal importance by eating and drinking together is most likely linked to this primal experience. Beyond this, we are reminded of the enduring religious significance of a meal as communion. It may cause us to pause again at the frightening intimacy of a God who wills to satisfy us from his own body. Certainly it is an intimacy that was too much for many of Jesus' own disciples who heard this teaching and "returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him."³⁸

Many of the Resurrection accounts link the recognition of Christ with physical sustenance.³⁹ Others join the recognition with the experience of touch alone.⁴⁰ One of the accounts, however, brings together food, recognition, and generative service. John 21:3-17, recounts the story of a tired Simon Peter and friends after a fruitless night of fishing. Someone calls from the shore, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" Then this person tells them to cast the net over the right side. As this new cast of the net results in a bountiful catch the beloved disciple recognizes Jesus. Peter eagerly jumps into the water in his rush to the shore. Breakfast follows and all present realize this is the Lord. After the meal the famous conversation between Jesus and Simon Peter ensues. "Do you love me ... Feed my lambs."

This bringing together of nourishment, the recognition of Christ and generative service is one of Louise's primary themes with the Charities and with the Daughters. She even uses the primal image of the mother-child bond. In the Rule of Charity she sets forth the responsibility "to fulfill the ardent desire of our Lord that we love one another."⁴¹ She reminds each member that "they should look upon the sick poor as their own children, God having made them their mothers."⁴² Each servant of the poor on her appointed day is to purchase, prepare and serve the meal.⁴³ In her instructions to the Daughters, the same primordial image exists. "As for your conduct toward 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."⁴⁴ The

³⁸John 6:66.

³⁹See Luke 24:30-31; 37-43; Mark 16:14.

⁴⁰See Matt 28:9; John 20:16-17; 27-28.

⁴¹*Spiritual Writings of Saint Louise de Marillac*, 30.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 31.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 134.

charity of the crucified Christ who unites himself with the thirst of his children undergirds her understanding of generative service. Jesus gives "us charity to make up for our powerlessness to render any service to His person."⁴⁵ In her spiritual animation of others she conveys this personal revelation which leads her

to look upon all occasions for doing some good for my neighbor not only in terms of the recompense which Our Lord has promised to me because He considers such acts as done to Himself, but also in light of the fact that the neighbor has been given to me in place of Our Lord, by means of a love which His goodness knows and which He has revealed to my heart.⁴⁶

The one who serves the poor is to unite her service with the thirst of Jesus which is perfect charity. Central to this union is the reception of holy communion. When Louise discovers on her visits to the Charities that many are lax in their reception of communion, she alerts Vincent to the need to address this matter.⁴⁷ The same concern permeates her direction of the Daughters.

It is important to note that where Louise herself is most afflicted by the spirit of fear is in the temptation to forego communion herself. Sometime around 1630 she records her experience:

I felt as if all my sins remained on my soul to such an extent that I was overwhelmed by a sort of physical awareness of having sinned. My love and esteem for the Divine Presence caused me to believe that I should not or could only with great pain permit my Lord to enter a place so unworthy of His grandeur. However, since I had been ordered to do so, I received Holy Communion.⁴⁸

This struggle surfaces in her personal reflections for several years. Interestingly, as Louise's appreciation for the Eucharist deepens, her attention begins to focus on the reception of the Precious Blood.⁴⁹ This is all the more remarkable since she receives communion by the host alone.

In 1647 Louise makes a remarkable entry in her journal, which not only parallels her 1628 meditation on the thirst of Jesus but joins it to the "look of recognition." She writes:

⁴⁵Ibid., 199.

⁴⁶Ibid., 201.

⁴⁷Ibid., 28.

⁴⁸Ibid., 36; for additional examples see 17, 72.

⁴⁹Ibid., See 109, 125, 141, 175, 176, 220.

as God His divine gaze is the continual safeguard for the preservation of our natural and immortal being. This benign gaze protects the grace which subsists in us by His love and goodness alone ... O my God, you desire to teach me the means for obtaining your help in my needs ... I see that I must admit my lowliness and recognize the truth of my nothingness in order to drawn down upon me the greatness of your mercy ... It is by the loving gaze of Jesus upon me that I shall obtain this grace ... By the practice of His Holy Presence, this gentle gaze will inflame me with His holy love.

Then, echoing her 1628 description of the afflicted Jesus thirsting like a deer seeking the relief of water, she concludes:

As the deer seeks water, so my soul seeks God. I shall prepare myself by a great desire to be united to Him so that, as food shares its properties with the human body which consumes it, so the union of my soul with God may render it conformable to Him, and the reception of the Precious Blood of my Savior may lead me to imitate His most holy life.⁵⁰

Here is Louise cradled in the arms of Jesus who seeks to satisfy her need from the substance of his own body. The look of recognition that passes between them is unmistakable. A few weeks later she receives the joyful consolation that "God is my God."

Complete union with the thirst of Christ is evident in a personal reflection just prior to her death. She writes:

On the Feast of Sainte Genevieve, in 1660, as I was receiving Holy Communion, I felt, upon seeing the Sacred Host, an extraordinary thirst which had its origin in the belief that Jesus wanted to give Himself to me in the simplicity of His divine infancy. When I was receiving Him and for a long time afterward, my mind was filled by an interior communication which led me to understand that Jesus was bringing not only Himself to but also the merits of His mysteries. This communication lasted all day. It was not a forced interior preoccupation. It was rather a presence or a recurring recollection.⁵¹

This reflection is a mirror image of her 1628 retreat. Louise now bears the thirst and Jesus comes as an infant. Jesus gives himself entirely to her, laden with all the merits of his mysteries. The generative Jesus and the generative Louise are one.

⁵⁰Ibid., 140-41

⁵¹Ibid., 219.

Conclusion

“God is my God” echoes the generativity of God’s love throughout the history of his people. Long before the birth of Jesus another young widow named Ruth refuses to turn back and surrenders herself to the Providence of God with her famous vow, “Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you! for wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God.”⁵² The refrain is heard again in the words of the Risen Jesus to a woman known as Magdalen. “Stop holding on to me for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them. “I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”⁵³ On 24 August 1647 Louise de Marillac is filled with the joy of the same consolation.

In the life of Louise we are reminded again of the gracious love of God which surpasses our imagination and transcends the brokenness of our personal history. Through her friendship with Vincent we see again the importance of friendship in Christ which leads us to the truth of ourselves. In her embracing of the hidden years of Jesus’s life we discover the fecundity of the everyday moment. From her bonding with the perfect charity of Christ Crucified we recognize her own thirst. With her we are moved to pray, “Draw us, therefore, O my Lord, and we shall run; and the fragrance of your perfumes will hold us so firmly that nothing will be capable of separating us from your charity.”⁵⁴

⁵²Ruth 1:16.

⁵³John 20:17.

⁵⁴*Spiritual Writings of Saint Louise de Marillac*, 210.