The Life of Louise de Marillac

by: Elisabeth Charpy

Translated by Charles T. Plock, CM

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Introduction:

History speaks admirably about the great saint of charity. His prominence and importance has endured to the present century. Do we not say that those who incarnate the virtue of charity in the midst of the forgotten members of society and in the midst of those who die alone … do we not say that those individuals are a modern embodiment of Vincent de Paul.

Why is it that history seems to ignore the humble and discreet collaborator of Saint Vincent de Paul? Is it because this collaborator is a woman? Is it that she was the niece of Michele de Marillac who was the Keeper of the Seals in Richelieu’s cabinet and who attempted to overthrow the established order which resulted in the “Day of the Dupes? Is it that she was an illegitimate child? For a rather extended period of time the Church held such children in contempt, visible signs of their parents’ sin. Louise was not canonized until the twentieth century, almost three hundred years after she had died.

Yet without Louise would the Daughters of Charity (frequently referred to as the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul) have come into existence? Without Louise would the abandoned children have experienced love or received an education? Would the galley slaves and the infirm have experienced the compassionate hands that assisted them during their difficult times? Without Louise would Vincent de Paul have become the popular saint that he is?

Louise de Marillac was born on August 12, 1591. For thirty-five years she would remain at Vincent’s side, sharing the same love for God and for the poor. On March 15, 1660 Louise died, a few months before the death of the humble peasant from Landes.
A Stormy Childhood

In our modern society Louise de Marillac would be one of those countless children classified as “social cases”. Multiple problematic situations marked her personality. She did not know her mother. In 1595 her father, a very unpredictable man, married for a second time. He took as his wife a widow who was a mother of three children. This relationship, however, deteriorated very quickly.

At the age of 12 Louise is an orphan. Louis de Marillac, her father, died on July 25, 1604. Her uncle, Michele, became her guardian but the de Marillac family wanted nothing to do with this child who, as an illegitimate child, had no legal claims on the family. The absence of a mother, lacking a home and brothers and sisters … all of these realities left a profound impression on the sensitivities of this child.

Louise did not live with her father but was placed in the royal convent of Poissy. There she received the affection of her great-aunt, Mother Louise de Marillac, a Dominican Sister and a very human woman. She liked to share with Louise her love of culture and painting. With the other children who were members of prominent families in France Louise enjoyed the religious fervor which was very prominent in the monastery.

At the age of twelve Louise was removed from Poissy and sent to a modest pension (boarding house) that was run by a poor woman. Historians have inquired about the reasons behind this change. Louise did not speak about this event even though at different times she recalled to the Sisters her stay at the modest boarding house. Did the financial situation of her father cause this change? In 1602 Louise’s father was having problems with his wife who had squandered his possessions. Now that her father had died, did her guardian refuse to pay the costs of maintaining her at the convent in Poissy. At the time of his second marriage Louis de Marillac granted his daughter an income for the rest of her life. The eighty-three escudos that had to be paid every four months seemed to be more suited to the life in the modest boarding house. There Louise was initiated in the household chores that a mother normally teaches her daughter.

How did this young woman react to these setbacks? Words that Louise wrote years later lead us to believe that she was perplexed and perhaps even rebellious as a result of so much suffering: God … led me to understand that it was his holy will that I go to him by way of the cross. His goodness chose to mark me with it from my birth and he has hardly every left me, at any age, without some occasion of suffering. Since grace had many times enabled me to esteem and desire this state, I trust that his goodness would, again today, grant me a new grace to carry out his holy will. I begged him, with all my heart, to place me in this state no matter how painful I found it (SWLM:711 [A.29]).

The dawning of the seventeenth century was marked by the renewal that stemmed from the Council of Trent. Religious life flourished in France. The Company of Jesus was restored in 1603. The following year the Capuchins established a house in Saint-Honoré. Louise saw these women walking barefooted in a procession that was led by the Archbishop of Paris through the
streets of Paris. As a young woman Louise felt attracted by their cloistered life of austerity and prayer. At different times Louise visited their monastery: *I was filled with joy at seeing the walls of the monastery* (Translator’s Note: Unable to find the reference that is cited as: Document 923). She was initiated in the practice of prayer and curing certain fasts would eat roots (Translator’s Note: Unable to find the reference that is cited as: Document 947). In a moment of fervor Louise promised God that she would enter the Capuchin Order. At that time, however, it was understood that parents decided the future of their children and a young woman could not decide anything by herself. Therefore with the help of her tutor/guardian she initiated a process to enter the Capuchins. Michel de Marillac, surprised by the request of his niece, sent Louise to see the provincial of the Capuchins, Father Honoré de Champigny. The negative response of the Provincial deeply wounded Louise. Was it really her fragile health that prevented her from becoming a Capuchin? Was she unable to live the rigorous lifestyle of these Sisters? Was this negative response due to the fact that the de Marillac family was unwilling to pay the dowry that was necessary in order to enter this religious order? The provincial, in an attempt to comfort Louise, told her: I believe that God has other plans for you. These words seemed to give some encouragement to Louise and yet for many years Louise was restless and impatient in her search for her vocation.

The de Marillac family was concerned about marrying Louise. One of her uncles, Octavien d’Attichy, superintendent of finances, proposed she marry Antoine La Gras, the secretary to the Queen Mother and Regent. Thus on February 5, 1613 in the church of Saint-Gervais, Antoine La Gras and Louise de Marillac were married. Since Louise married a simple gentlemen (not one who was a noble) she was not called Madame but rather Mademoiselle, like the other women of the bourgeois class. Now the family could rest comfortably since they had arranged the marriage of Louise and thus secured her future.
A fleeting happiness

At her husband’s side Louise experienced moments of true happiness. At the end of the year, their son, Michel, brought great joy to their house. Antoine and Louise set up their home on the rue Courteau-Villain where they met other young couples who were engaged in service to the Queen. Louise and Antoine prayed and read the Bible together.

But soon moments of darkness would upset Louise’s like of calmness and peace. Antoine became ill and his character changed: he became irritable and angry. Louise became concerned. Why? Why this change in her husband? Why did she have to suffer anew? Was she not responsible for all of this? Had she not promised God to enter a religious order? Convinced that she had been unfaithful to her promise Louise was filled with anxiety and feelings of guilt. Gradually everything seemed to be falling apart and she wanted to flee and leave her infirm husband and her son. She began to doubt everything: the immortality of her soul and even the existence of God. Hoping to find peace Louise multiplied her fasts and vigils and prayers.

It was in this context that she had her Pentecost experience, a form of spiritual enlightenment: My mind was instantly freed of all doubt (SWLM:1 [A.2]). This sudden and unexpected light filled Louise’s heart and spirit. Is this not similar to what occurred to Paul on the road to Damascus? Is this not the same phenomena that Claudel experienced on Christmas Eve in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame? He also wrote: In an instant my heart was touched … and I believed. These rays of light that break through the clouds of darkness guide those who have such experiences into the future but they also demand personal understanding and reflection. Claudel noted that it took four years of struggling in order to fully enter into this process of conversion. Saul needed the help of Ananias and spent a lengthy time in the desert before becoming the tireless missionary of the Gentiles.

In order to keep this event before her mind, Louise put into writing her recollections of this moment. The manuscript, a piece of paper that measured 28 by 9 cm was folded numerous times. Folding the paper in this way allowed Louise to keep this document in her pocket, thus able to read it at any time. Looking at the content of this document we see that it is very ordered and surprisingly simple: three doubts, a brief moment, three enlightenments. On that feast of Pentecost, 1623 Louise found the certainty of faith. She remained focused on her mission. There would be a small community consecrated to the service of the poor where there would be the possibility of coming and going. Louise did not understand how all of this would be accomplished since at that time all religious women were cloistered. In order to guide her and sustain her on this unusual journey she was introduced to a new spiritual director, a priest named Vincent de Paul who was forty years old. Previously Louise had entrusted herself to Jean-Pierre Camus who had been appointed the bishop of Belley and therefore seldom traveled to Paris.

What an incredible encounter … Louise de Marillac, an aristocratic Parisian with a lively and sensitive spirit and Vincent de Paul, a peasant from Landes who acted with great prudence! Louise had crossed paths with this priest who was the tutor of the de Gondi children and whose home was near to hers. Speaking about the enlightenment of Pentecost she noted: I was also
assured that I should remain at peace concerning my director; that God would give me one whom he seemed to show me. It was repugnant to me to accept him (SWLM:1 [A.2]). Vincent noted that Louise was sad and turned in on herself. He was very hesitant to take on the role of spiritual director of this woman who was tormented and scrupulous and he was very aware of the demands that Madame de Gondi had made upon him.

There seemed to be many difference between the two of them: their social and cultural origins and background. It appeared on the surface that nothing could possibly bring them together. It was Jean-Pierre Camus, a great friend of Francis de Sales who facilitated and opened the way for this encounter that was based on a common admiration for the bishop of Geneva who had died in September 1622. Louise had welcomed him into her house and read his books: *Introduction to the Devout Life* and his *Treatise on the Love of God*. Francis de Sales had entrusted the Visitation Sisters in Paris to the care of Vincent de Paul and both Louise and Vincent refer to Francis de Sales in their writings as the *Blessed Bishop of Geneva*.

Freed from her doubts, Louise realized that she should remain at the side of her husband. For two years she remained at his side and lovingly cared for him. Then on December 21, 1625 Antoine La Gras died. As a widow her financial situation changed and she could no longer remain at her home on the rue Courteau-Villain. She searched for less expensive lodgings and with her son Michel, now twelve years old, took up residence on the rue Saint-Victor, not far from the Collège des Bons-Enfants where Vincent was superior.
In search of her vocation

Alone once again and overwhelmed by what she called the justice of God, Louise sought support. She wrote her cousin, Hilarion Rebours, Bishop Camus and her uncle, Michel. Their responses upset Louise and so she continued to experience a lack of peace in her life. She spoke with her new spiritual director and clung to him like a life-preserver. She wanted to have him remain in Paris and thus available to respond to her concerns. Vincent accepted this disoriented woman. Patiently and kindly he helped her to overcome her self-centeredness and also showed her how to simplify her prayer life and open herself to others. He asked her to prepare clothing for the poor. Slowly the depression that had oppressed her vanished and she became more relaxed.

At the same time, Vincent began to view Louise as a gifted and talented woman who was just waiting to be revealed and opened to others. He did not hesitate to call upon her in order to utilize her intelligence, her broad culture and her sense of organization. Beginning in 1617, in the cities and towns where Vincent preached mission, he gathered together compassionate women who would visit, assist and console the sick poor. These groups of women were called Confraternities of Charity and they quickly began to multiply; some were very dynamic while others had to confront various difficulties. Vincent became aware of the fact that these groups had to be visited on a regular basis in order to help the members maintain their fervor. Vincent found Louise to be the person whom he needed. In May, 1629 he asked her to visit the Confraternity in Montmirail. Aware of the importance of this first trip, Vincent sent Louise a mission letter that was inspired by the liturgical text for traveling clerics: *Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works* (CCD:1:64-65).

As a missionary of charity Louise traveled the roads of Paris: Saint-Cloud, Pontoise, Montreuil, Villepreux, Linacourt, Loisy-en-Brie, Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, Gournay-sur-Aronde, Asnières, Beauvais and many other towns welcomed her. She traveled by coach and spent the night at different inns where she witness promiscuity, bold conversation of rude men and the poverty of many places where the only bed was straw spread across the dirt floor. If she had to travel a short distance, she would do so by horse. When she arrived at the town or village, she was usually received by the members of the Confraternity. During her stay Louise met with the members of the Association. She encouraged them in their work and helped them sustain their fervor. If it was necessary, she adjusted their rule. She personally visited the infirm, gathered together the young girls in order to instruct them and looked for a teacher to continue this work. Her enthusiasm was contagious: *Once Louise went to a town where all the women felt so consoled when listening to her that they recounted all of this to their husbands who also wanted to listen to her. The men were told, however, that they could not go. Nonetheless they went and hid under the beds and in other areas of the house. They asked if Louise became aware of all of this* (Translator’s Note: I was unable to find this reference which is cited: document 923).
When a confraternity had to be established or restored, or when rules had to be written for one or another group, Vincent sent Louise because he trusted her ability and tact and missionary experience. Vincent left it to Louise to decide the means and methods that were to be utilized in the different situations. On a regular basis Louise shared with Vincent her experiences, the difficulties she encountered, her joys and her fears. Vincent calmed and encouraged this new collaborator: *Be at peace. When you are honored and esteemed, unite your spirit to the mockeries, contempt, and ill-treatment that the Son of God suffered. Surely Mademoiselle, a truly humble spirit humbles itself as much amid honors as amid insults, acting like the honeybee which makes its honey equally well from the dew that falls on the wormwood as from that which falls on the rose* (CCD:1:94)

The charitable activity that was initiated by Vincent spread to many parishes in Paris. Countesses, Duchesses and even Princesses wanted to enter the ranks of the Ladies of Charity. They discovered poverty and the people who suffered and endured in these situations of misery. They were generous women who shared their financial resources. As they brought soup pots to the homes of these poor women and men they began to experience many difficulties: they found it difficult to breathe because of the odors in these dwellings and as a result began to send their servants who took their places. Vincent and Louise began to wonder if the Confraternities could be maintained. The servants of these women carried out the orders they were given but on many occasions did not show proper love and respect to the poor.

During a mission that Vincent preached in 1630 he met a young peasant woman, Marguerite Naseau, who wanted to serve the poor. Vincent saw providence intervening in this encounter. Marguerite, thirty-eight years old, learned to read when she was watching over the flocks and she also asked individuals who passed her by to help her in this endeavor. Later she taught other young girls to read. Marguerite was willing to go to Paris if this was the will of God. Vincent sent her to serve the poor who were also cared for by the Confraternity of Charity in the parish of Saint-Sauver. Louise and Marguerite shared their faith and their desire to serve the sick poor in their homes. Louise admired Marguerite’s fervor.

Very soon other young women from the countryside presented themselves to help the Ladies of the different Confraternities in Paris. Louise accepted them and explained to them the work that they had to do. Then she sent them out to the different parishes. She accompanied them on their spiritual journey and taught them to imitate Jesus Christ as they extended love and respect to the poor.

Louise reflected on all of these events and began to ask questions: should these women consecrate themselves to God? Should they be given more formation? Should they be brought together and supported? Was this the community she had envisioned during her Pentecost experience? Was this not the community of women who would consecrate themselves to God and to the poor?

As a woman who lived in the seventeenth century, Louise could not undertake this endeavor by herself. She shared her thoughts with Vincent who did not see the need for such a community. Would this community endanger the continuation of the Confraternities of Charity, especially those that had been established in Paris? With a tenacity which was also deferential Louise insisted on this matter several times. Annoyed at this insistence Vincent responded with a certain
coldness: *You belong to Our Lord and his holy Mother. Cling to them and to the state in which they placed you until they make it clear that they wish something else of you* (CCD:I:71).

Louise was patient; she reflected and prayed about this. The death of Marguerite Naseau during the month of February 1633 had raised questions in Louise’s mind as well as Vincent’s. Marguerite had died of the plague when she decided to share her bed with a poor woman who was afflicted with this contagious disease. Nevertheless, Vincent continued to waver in this matter. At a time when religious life was seen as a vocation for women of the noble class was it possible to put forth the idea that peasant women could consecrate themselves to God and form a religious community?

Louise de Marillac, who was well acquainted with the values of these young women from the countryside, insisted. Was it not possible for God to call them to a life in which they would dedicate themselves to the service of God and the poor?

During his annual retreat, August 1633, Vincent prayed for a long time. On the last day of the retreat he wrote to Saint Louise: *I think your good angel did what you told me in the letter you wrote me. Four or five days ago, he communicated with mine concerning the Charity of your young women. It is true; he prompted me to recall it often and I gave that good work serious thought. We shall talk about it, God willing, on Friday or Saturday, if you do not write to me sooner* (CCD:I:216).

Several weeks were necessary in order to make the final preparations. On November 29th 1633 Louise received several young women who took up residence in her house and who would live together with one another as a community. Because these women worked with the Confraternities of Charity they were called the Daughters of the Charities or Daughters of Charity. At times they were designated with the title Servants of the Poor and also Daughters of Madame Le Gras. It would be much later, sometime during the eighteenth or the nineteenth century that would be called the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul. The Church has given them the official title of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. The role of their Founder, Louise de Marillac, is passed over in silence.

The group had no specific structures. They were a type of Confraternity. In the seventeenth century this term designated a group of lay people who gathered together in order to promote some work of devotion or charity. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac designated this new foundation with that term but used it in a broader sense: that of a company, which indicated a coming together of people for a common purpose and that of a community, which indicated that the people lived together. The official texts of the seventeenth century, which recognize the existence of this group, refer to the members as a society, a confraternity and an institute. This community, which is something completely new, was difficult to define in legal terms. It was not a religious order of women who lived in a monastery with well-defined structures. Vincent de Paul explained this to the Sisters and said that this occurred imperceptibly, gradually. In the nineteenth century as the result of a desire to rebuild the community after the time of the Revolution it was seen that the community had to be restructured. The Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul became one of the most important religious congregations. The Second Vatican Council invited all religious communities to return to their original spirit. Today, the Church recognizes
the proper vocation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity which is now defined as a Society of Apostolic Life.

In November 1633, when Louise gathered together the young women in her house, her son, Michel, was living in a Jesuit house. During his time of vacation he could not live in his mother’s house. Vincent provided for him and gave him a room at Saint-Lazare.
A new community

The small group that gathered around Louise rapidly grew: five or six in November, 1633; a dozen in July, 1634; twenty by the end of 1635. The arrival of all these young women led to the search for a larger house. In May, 1636, the young community was established in the town of La Chapelle, to the north of Paris. The community continued to grow. In 1641 between seventy to eighty young women had joined together with those first young women who were admitted into the Company. Again there was need to search for a larger house. After several months, a house was purchased in the area of Saint-Denis. The sale was formalized on September 6, 1641. Since the Company of the Daughters of Charity did not possess any material goods, the Congregation of the Mission paid the money that was needed for the purchase of the house. This small property contained a two story building and a garden and was located in front of Saint-Lazare, the house where Vincent and the Missionaries lived. It became the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity and would remain as such until the time of the Revolution.

When the Missionaries were preaching missions in the countryside they also spoke about this new community of women. The Ladies of Charity, filled with fervor, invited the peasant women who work on their lands to join the Daughters. This new form of religious life in which the young women dedicated themselves to the service of the poor was received with much enthusiasm in certain families. Two, three and four sisters would travel to Paris to request acceptance as Daughters of Charity and they would be followed by brothers and cousins who would arrive at the doors of Saint-Lazare requesting permission to become brothers or priests.

What was it that attracted and animated these young women from the countryside and other young women from the families of artisans? Did they, like Marguerite Naseau, have a true desire to consecrate their lives to God and the poor? In some cases there was no doubt about their intention. In most cases, however, the motives were not as clear. If these women wanted to be accepted into Louise’s group, no dowry was necessary (which was not the case with other religious congregations of that era); in fact, the only requisite was good will. Was not this a way for the young women to obtain food and work and housing knowing that if they stayed on their family farms their life could be very difficult? Louise discovered that some of the young women came to the Company wanting to experience the life of Paris which had many attractions. Some young women who arrived from Normandy were more concerned about enjoying themselves and finding young men than they were about serving the sick poor.

Vincent and Louise understood the need for a discernment process before accepting new candidates for the Daughters of Charity. Louise would consider whether the health of a young woman would allow her to carry out the humble and lowly tasks that would be required of her when serving the poor. Thus a young woman who had a lung disease or some physical handicap was not accepted. Some of these young women had strong personalities and Vincent commented on this when he told Louise: I think you will have to work with her a little as her passions are rather strong. So what! When these young women have the strength to overcome themselves, they work wonders afterward. Accept her therefore, please (CCD:1:239)
These young women were called to live together. Community life is not easy; it demands selflessness, a joy and happiness in living life and a willingness to be attentive to others. Individuals who are unstable or depressed run the risk of becoming a burden to others and therefore, as a general rule, they should not be allowed to remain with the community: As for that good young woman from Argenteuil who is melancholy, I think you are right in raising objections to taking her, for it is a strange disposition, that of melancholy (CCD:1:239).

Accustomed to life in the countryside some of the young women had adopted customs that were somewhat rude. Jeanne did not hesitate to slap her companions when she was upset with them. When this behavior continued Jeanne was asked to return to her house. We see the impact of Louise’s education and training in all of these matters. Her humility and clarity of mind and patience allowed her to go beyond the exterior characteristics and thus she was able to come to know the heart of these young women, hearts that were burning with a love of God and neighbor.

In order to help these candidates, Louise prepared a rule of life. They would rise at 5:30am and beginning at 6:00am they would dedicate an hour to prayer. With much tact Louise introduced these women to this encounter with God. Each evening was a time of preparation for prayer the following morning: the text for the morning meditation was explained at this time. After the hour of prayer, the Sisters would share in a simple manner how they had spoken with God. Louise would conclude this time together by guiding the Sisters in making some practical resolution as a result of their prayer.

Then the Sisters would go to the different parishes. First they would go to the home of one of the Ladies of Charity who would ask them to cook in the manner and style of those who are poor. Then they would comfort the infirm and those who were dying, providing them with nourishment and counsel. Louise taught them how to prepare herbal teas and ointments, how to give purges and cleansings and how to let blood in a way that they avoid the dangers involved with the arteries, nerves and other areas (SWLM:303 [L.352]). Thanks to her gift of observation and her practical intelligence Louise was able to acquire the knowledge that was needed in order to provide for the education of these servants of the poor.

Each morning the Sisters went to their parish church for Mass. The demands of serving the sick poor could become a source of great tension. What are one’s duties and obligations? Vincent spoke regularly with the Sisters and he explained to them: Remember that when you leave meditation and Holy Mass to serve poor persons, you lose nothing, Sisters, because to serve those who are poor is to go to God, and you should see God in them (CCD:IX:5)

Louise was careful about the way in which Vincent’s words were interpreted. She taught the Sisters to discern between the many urgent demands. When they returned to the house she encouraged them to dedicate some time to their personal formation: the study of the catechism and reading the Scriptures. Furthermore, like the majority of the women of that era, these young women were illiterate and so Louise took the time to teach them how to read and write. Louise did this and expected the Sisters to then teach others. She also expected the Sisters to be able to read the notes that were given to them and thus they were able to serve in a better way. Some of the Sisters rebelled against learning to read and write. In 1655 when the Sisters signed the official Act of the Establishment of the Daughters of Charity, several Sisters signed with the mark of a cross or by simply writing the first letter of their name. According to Saint Vincent, if
the Sisters had some free time then they were to engage in some form of manual labor. These young women had preserved the custom of baking and sewing as they did in their homes where they engaged in different forms of housework: _They will remember that they were born poor, that they must live as poor persons for the love of the Poorest of the poor, Jesus Christ Our Lord_ (CCD:XIIIb:109)

At 9:00pm the Sisters will gather together for common prayer and will also prepare for their morning meditation. Thus the day concludes in the same way that it began: with an act of adoration of God.

In light of the different problems that were encountered this first rule was modified and changed with the passing of time. The arrival of young women from the nobility as well as the fact that the Sisters had begun to live outside Paris in small communities of two or three demanded that some changes be made with regard to their way of life.

Thus it was stated that _they shall also take care to observe uniformity with regard to food, clothing, their manner of walking and speaking, the service of those who are poor and especially in the way their arrange their headdress_ (CCD:XIIIb:125). All of the Sisters, regardless of their social or regional origin were viewed as equals. Therefore nothing should distinguish them from one another. The dress of the peasant women in France, a dress which was worn by the first young women who came together to serve the poor, should be the dress of all the Daughters of Charity.

The rule further stated: _If they save any money, they will put it in the common purse, which will be used to provide them with their clothing and other necessities, when the time comes for this_ (CCD:XIIIb:126). Some of the young women, who were not accustomed to having money, were tempted to use the money for themselves or to give the money to their families. Experience also revealed the dangers that these women would be exposed to as they traveled through the streets and lived in the midst of the people. There was a need for great prudence which had to be accompanied with the virtue of simplicity: They will make no visits, except to the sick, and will not allow anyone, particularly men, to visit them at their house, without the consent of the same superior. And when they walk through the streets, they shall walk in a modest manner with their eyes lowered, not stopping to speak to anyone, especially men, without great necessity. Even then, they must keep the conversation brief and conclude the matter promptly (CCD:XIIIb:126)

The service that the Sisters render to the infirm, the children and the galley slaves was quickly recognized, appreciated and admired. Vincent and Louise often heard words of praise spoken about the ministry of the Daughters. The rule was intended to help the Sisters put such praise in a broader perspective: _They will consider that people call them Servants of the Poor, which is, according to the world, one of the most insignificant of conditions. They will promptly reject the slightest thought of vainglory that might pass through their minds because of having heard some good about what they are doing, convince that all the honor for this is due to God, since God alone is the author_ (CCD:XIIIb:127)

The rule was revised and in 1655, together with a petition for official recognition of the Company by the State and the Church, was submitted to the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal de Retz and the King, Louis XIV for their approval.
In 1640, during a meeting with the Daughters of Charity, Vincent spoke enthusiastically about a group of brothers who ministered in a hospital in Italy and who in addition to the three vows added a vow of service to the poor. The reaction of the Sisters was immediate: would it be possible for them to take such a vow?

Vincent was surprised by the question and reflects with them. The Daughters of Charity are not religious, that is, religious in the canonical sense of being cloistered. Rather they are “laywomen”, that is, women who are able to walk the streets in order to minister in the hospitals and serve the poor and the infirm. They do not pronounce solemn, public vows that oblige them to be cloistered. Rather they show their attachment to God through simple, private vows (vows that could be made by any Christian man or woman). Vincent stated that if a Sister desired to commit herself to God through the taking of a vow, then this should be done only after talking with her superior.

This reflection continued for several months. On March 25, 1642 Louise de Marillac and four Daughters pronounce the first vows of the Daughters of Charity during the celebration of the Eucharist: vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and service of the poor. At the same time some other Daughters reaffirm their commitment in the Company. These vows were private and temporal. Louise explained the beauty of the annual vows: *Do you not think my dear Sisters, that this will be very pleasing to Our Lord since, having your freedom again at the end of the year, you can sacrifice it to him anew* (SWLM:346 [L.300]).

The vows were renewed every year on the feast of the Annunciation because Mary shows us the way to God. With her openness and her willingness to follow the plans of God, Mary made it possible for the Son of God to become man and in this way opened the path of redemption. Like Mary, every Daughter of Charity is invited to enter fully into her vocation which is a gift that is received from God and is also invited to discover and recognize Christ in all those persons whom they encounter.
Servants of the poor

The groups that had gathered around Louise were quickly divided into small communities. Two or three Sisters went to live in different parishes (Saint-Sauveur, Saint-Paul, Saint-Benoit, Saint-Etienne-du-Mont, Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois, etc.) in order to be closer to the poor whom they were serving. The Ladies of the Confraternities of Charity took charge of finding housing for the Sisters. Thanks to the generous donation of the Duchess of Aiguillon Louise was able to provide the Sisters with some very simple furniture. The manual work that the Sisters did after they finished caring for those who were infirm provided them with the resources they needed to support themselves. Some of the Sisters wove wool, others baked and some washed clothes. One of the Sisters who had recently arrived and was unaccustomed to the Parisian manner of washing clothes fell into the Siene and for three hours was numb, unable to feel anything.

Louise regularly visited these small communities. Thus she was able to see the service that the Sisters were involved in and also able to experience the difficulties that they encountered. She was concerned at the various outbreaks of the plague, something that frequently occurred during the seventeenth century. Hygiene and preventative measures were very rudimentary. It was suggested that the Sisters, before visiting the sick, should rub vinegar on their noses and foreheads and take a special drug that was prepared with the horns of deer, the dust of a snake, antimony and some plants. Despite these precautions, several of the Sisters, peasant women who were unaccustomed to breathing the contaminated air of the crowded homes of the poor sick in Paris, became ill and died rather quickly. Louise was deeply pained by these events but Vincent supported her and comforted her when he referred to the beauty and greatness of the vocation of these servants of the poor: So here at last is the first victim Our Lord has chosen to take from your Daughters of Charity. May he be forever blessed! I trust, Mademoiselle, that she is very happy, seeing that she died in the practice of a virtue with which she could not be lost; for she died in the exercise of divine love since she died in that of charity (CCD:I:241).

The Sisters who ministered in the various parishes remained under the authority of Louise and Vincent. In those matters there were concerned with their daily work, the Sisters collaborated with the Ladies of Charity. Some of these women wanted to have full authority over the Sisters whom they often viewed as their own personal servants. Madame Chavenas, from the parish of Saint-Gervais, wanted to hire the Sisters. The Sisters, however, after consulting with Louise, rejected this offer. Indeed, the Sisters wanted to preserve their freedom in dealing with the Confraternities. This option also summed up and expressed the meaning of their commitment to the poor: they, [the Sisters], give themselves to God and poor; they consecrate their life to God and the poor and do not seek other means of providing for themselves.

When the Sisters arrived at the various parishes, they visited the pastor and asked for his blessing. In general, the priests in these parishes were appreciative of the Sisters’ presence and the service that they provided to the poor. Nonetheless, some of the priests found it difficult to accept Vincent and Louise’s authority over these new members of their parish. Also when the Sisters were missioned to another place this often became a source of tension, especially in the parish of Saint-Jean where the pastor engaged in a process to have the Sisters returned to his
The pastor of Saint-Roch became so upset over the lack of consideration of one of the Sisters that he ordered the Sisters to leave the parish. In other areas, some people admired the deep spiritual life that animated these young women and they attempted to change them into religious women. Louise did not hesitate to express her surprise to the Benedictine superior at Argenteuil who wanted to accept into the monastery one of the Daughters who had been serving the Confraternities for eight years: *I did not want to believe, Madame, that it was you who ordered her to be turned away from her vocation. I could not imagine that those who know the importance of a vocation would want to set up obstacles to the designs of God … by withdrawing help from the abandoned poor who are in great need and who can only find relief in the service of these good girls, who are detached from all self-interest and who give themselves to God for the spiritual and corporal service of these poor creatures that his goodness wills to look upon as his members* (SWLM: 17-18 [L.9]).

Louise, desiring to fulfill the will of God, was careful to preserve the originality of this new form of consecrated life and she did all of this despite the hesitancy of some families and some members of the Church as well as some influential people in the society of seventeenth century France. She was also careful to see to it that the Sisters lived in accord with the commitment they accepted when they became Daughters of Charity.

At the end of 1637, at the request of Cardinal Richelieu, the Prime Minister, priests from the Congregation took up residence in the newly established city of Turenne. There they found many sick and poor individuals who received no care. Thus, M. Lambert, the superior of the Missionaries in Richelieu, requested that two Daughters be sent there. Louise was hesitant to send the Sisters so far from Paris. How would they be able to remain faithful to their vocation if they were isolated in this manner? Who would sustain them in their spiritual growth and who would counsel them in moments of difficulty? Even though Vincent was also concerned about responding to the request of M. Lambert, he delayed making a decision. Some months later he was insistent when he wrote Louise: *M. Lambert, who is in Richelieu, told Madame de Combalet that a Charity must be established there: two poor women had died there that week without assistance. What do you think, Mademoiselle, of sending Barbe and some other young women? Oh! how much good there is to be done in that region!* (CCD:I:402).

Louise could not long remain deaf to the call of the poor. On October 1st she organized the trip of the two Sisters. They would first travel to Tours where they would look for a ship to take them to the small port of Ablevois. There they would rent a coach to travel the last forty kilometers to Richelieu. Louise made some suggestions to the Sisters about their travel: Let them share in conversation pertaining to God, but by no means in those concerning the world, and still less, in indecent talk. Let them be rocks against any familiarity that men might wish to take with them (CCD:I:504).

In Richelieu, M. Lambert received the two Sisters and introduced them to the small city and the poor who awaited them. During the first months Barbe Angiboust and Louise Ganset accomplished wonders as they cared for the infirm and instructed the young girls. Moved at the sight of the poor who were abandoned and who received no care, Louise wrote the two Sisters and invited them to reflect on their behavior. Barbe was too authoritarian and she was encouraged to contemplate the tenderness and the charity of Jesus Christ. On the other hand,
Louise was too independent and so she was encouraged to reflect on the fact that she had made a decision to become a Daughter of Charity and as such, decided to imitate the humble and obedient life of the Son of God. Vincent visited Richelieu a few months later and this visit also helped the Sisters move forward in their process of reflection and change. Louise’s letter, dated February 1, 1640, expresses her joy at being told that the Sisters had become reconciled with one another and Louise also expressed her desire that they would have the courage to continue to be faithful to their vocation as servants of Christ and of the poor.

This first missioning of the Daughters outside of Paris would be followed by many more: Sedan and Nanteuil (1641), Fontenay-aux-Roses (1642), Serqueux, Maule and Crespières (1645), Fontainebleau (1646), Chantilly, Chars and Montmirail (1647), Valpuiseaux and Dourdan (1648), Brienne et Varize (1652), Bernay y La Roche-Guyon (654), Sainte-Marie-du-Mont (1655), Arras (1656), Saint-Fargeau (1657), Ussel (1658), Vaux-le-Vicomte (1659), Belle-Ile-en-Mer (1660) … each of these places would be served by the Daughters of Charity. Regular communication, through correspondence, was established between the motherhouse in Paris and these distant communities. The many letters that have been preserved reveal the attention that Louise de Marillac gave to each Daughter, an attention that touched every dimension of the Daughters, that is, as a woman and as a woman who consecrated her life to God.

In the towns and villages, in all those places where the Daughters ministered, they not only cared for the infirm but were also engaged in the educational process of the children who lived in those areas, children who at a very early age worked in the fields or watched over the herds of animals.

As educators, the Sisters responded to the call of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) that viewed education as a way to confront the inroads of Protestantism. Luther, who viewed Sacred Scripture as the only source of faith, placed great importance on education. In 1524 he outlined an educational program that had social and religious objectives: *schools for boys and girls are needed in every area so that men are able to engage in a profession and women are able to care for their homes and provide their children with a Christian education.* The Council Fathers, after referring to some doctrinal points, placed themselves in the midst of the Protestant conflict. They asked the bishops to proclaim the Word of God in the churches and to do this themselves and not through the mediation of others. They formulated the following decree during the twenty-fourth session which was held in November, 1553: *In every parish children will be instructed in the principles of their faith and their obligations as Christian. This will be done at the very least on Sundays and feast days.* Schools were multiplied in order to provide for the education of children and young men and women. The schools of the Jesuits and Ursulines were enlarged and new Congregations were established whose objective was the education of young people: Pierre Fourier and Alix Le Clerc in the eastern part of France and the Congregation of Jeanne de Lestonnac in Bordeaux. In some towns teachers were prepared in order to educate boys and young men. This task was often quite difficult because it was seen as dangerous. Richelieu, in his political testament warned about the dangers that would result from providing everyone with an education: agriculture would be ruined, the army would be unmanageable, France would be filled with swindlers and public tranquility would cease to be a reality.

Louise and Vincent were aware of the ways in which ignorance aggravated the situation of the poor. When they visited the Confraternities of Charity their focus was centered on those children
who received no instruction. They spent time instructing the children and before they left any
town or village they looked for a teacher who would continue the work that they had begun.

In the different parishes where the Daughters of Charity were sent, they took charge of the girls
who were neglected. These poor girls were unable to go to the Ursuline schools because they
could not pay the fees and the schools in the town or cities would not accept them because both
the State and the Church prohibited coeducation.

The instruction that was provided by the Daughters of Charity responded to the concerns of the
era. Their primary objective was Christian education. Louise wrote a catechism to help the
Sisters: it was composed of simple questions and answers that were adapted for children. This
catechism also revealed the spirituality of Louise, a spirituality rooted in the Incarnation.

- What is the sign of a Christian?
- The sign of the cross.
- What does the sign of the cross represent?
- The sign of the cross represents the reality that there is one God in three persons. It also
  represents the mystery of the Incarnation and the death of the Son of God.
- What is the mystery of the Incarnation?
- The mystery of the Incarnation involves the second person of the Blessed Trinity who
  took on human flesh in the womb of the blessed Virgin.

As the children prayed the *Our Father*, Louise, who knew the children well, would question
them:

- How must we pray?
- We must pray slowly, without turning our heads from one side to another, thinking only
  of God.

In addition to the catechism the girls learned to read, to sew and to make lace. It seems that they
did not learn how to write and this simply followed the custom of the era: *I do not think it
advisable for the girls to learn to write* (SWLM:217 [L.192]).

Louise realized that in order to teach others one must first take the time to form oneself. The
second article of the particular rules for the Sisters who teach school stated: *She will be sure to
learn well herself what she has to teach others, particularly all that concerns faith and morals*
(CCD:XIIIb:177)

Some Daughters of Charity spent time with the Ursuline community in order to acquire more
knowledge about pedagogy, a knowledge that they were able to share with the other Sisters.

Louise continued to give advice to the Sisters who were working in schools. She felt it was more
important for the Sisters to understand the students than to have much knowledge of different
subjects. Montaigne said that it was better to have a well formed mind than a mind filled with
information. Thus, in the particular rules for the Sisters who teach school we read: *she will teach
them the catechism, making sure they understand thoroughly what they are reciting. She will ask
them informal questions for this purpose, among the six main ones indicated in the catechism lesson, and in terms other than those used in the book (CCD:XIIIb:180).

In the seventeenth century corporeal punishment was frequent. This also occurred in the schools of the Daughters. Nevertheless, these punishments had to be done in a way that respected the children: She will be careful to punish them for their usual shortcomings but give them a whipping only rarely and for serious faults, and never more than five or six strokes, taking them aside for this purpose to a place in the school out of sight of the others (CCD:XIIIb:179).

In Chars, when one of the parish priests asked the Sisters to whip a girl in public, they refused to do this. The pastor was so angered by the Sisters failure to adhere to his request that he refused to give them Communion. Later he ordered them to leave the parish.

Louise exhorted the Sisters to be attentive to any child who approached them but she also encouraged them to reach out those children who no one else wanted. Article five of the rules for school teachers stated: They will be as careful, and even more so, to instruct those who are almost never able to go to school, such as shepherdesses, girls who mind cattle, and others who tend animals, taking them individually whenever and wherever they meet them, not only in the villages but also in the country, along the way (CCD:XIIIb:183).

Every child has the right to an education. Therefore, as teachers, the Daughters have to go to those places where children will be found. Louise encouraged the Sisters to establish a relationship of compassion and simplicity and kindness with the children: This must be done kindly and gently, without causing them to be ashamed of their ignorance (SWLM:632 [L.611]).
The foundlings

The welfare and education of the foundlings was as important as the education of the young girls in the countryside. Abandoned by their mothers, despised by a society that viewed them as children of sin, each year three to four hundred infants were left at the doors of the churches or abandoned on the city streets of Paris. These infants were picked up by government officials who brought them to houses known as La Couche where they were nourished and raised. But as Vincent explained to the Ladies of Charity: these poor little children were receiving very little assistance … in fifty years not one of them has lived (CCD:XIIIb:421). There were not enough wet-nurses to take care of these children: one woman for four or five infants. At night, in order to prevent the infants from crying they were given pills made from opium. Some of the children were sold to “beggars” who would break the arms or legs of the children in the hope of moving passers-by to greater compassion. Other children were entrusted to women who had a need to be recognized as mother. This trafficking of children meant that there were inadequate resources at the Couche.

It is difficult to know who took the initiative with regard to the foundlings. Vincent and Louise and the Ladies of Charity reflected together on the misery of these children. During the course of several meetings they looked for solutions. Should we take charge of the Couche or should we support this institution financially so that more women could be hired? On January 1, 1638 Vincent communicated the decision that had been made at the time of their last meeting, a meeting which Louise had been unable to attend: At the last meeting, it was the general opinion that you be asked to experiment with the foundlings to see if there is a way of feeding them with cow’s milk, and to get two or three of them for that purpose. I am consoled that Providence is turning to you for this work (CCD:1:407)

This was the beginning of what would later become known as public assistance in Paris. Soon after this letter was written some of the foundlings were brought to the house of the Daughters of Charity in the town of La Chapelle. Since this first experiment was so successful, other children were accepted. In 1640 an extraordinary Assembly of the Ladies of Charity made the decision to expand this work to include all the foundlings in the city of Paris. The large number of children led Louise to establish a place in the countryside where wet-nurses were trained to provide for these children. Parents who wanted to adopt these children had to be selected carefully and should be individuals who are known. On March 30, 1640 Louise began to compile a registry of the children who were entrusted to the care of others to be raised: On March 30, 1640, a girl named Simonée put out to nurse at Villers, otherwise called Saint-Sépulcre, with Mary Parsin, wife of James Prévault; … a girl named Madeline Lebon … put out to nurse with Thomasina Patrue, wife of Denis Boucher, residing at Denville, close to Montfort-Lamaury … the others were sent to Châtre-sous-Montlhéry, Rocourt-lez-Meulan, Villers-Saint-Sépulcre, Bourdonnet, Doublinville and Méru. A child named John is simply said to have been handed over to Michelle Damiette known as Madame de Souscarrière, a Lady of Charity, but the name of the place is not given (Coste, Volume II, p.261-262 [the English edition of the three volume work on the life of Saint Vincent de Paul]).
The wet-nurses received a monetary payment in order to help provide for the care of these children. They were regularly visited to check on their health and the progress of their education. The Ladies or the Daughters made these visits. During the turbulent period of the Fronde Vincent sent a brother of the Congregation to make these visits because the roads were dangerous and it was unsafe for the women to be traveling.

During the first seven years the Daughters of Charity received 1,200 children. Thanks to their motherly care and their ability to provide the children with good nutrition, half of these children survived. The Ladies of Charity looked for a larger space and made arrangements to obtain the use of the Bicêtre Castle, a large building erected by Louis XIII to care for soldiers who were invalids but now this building had become a place where beggars and prostitutes lived. In the beginning, because of its reputation and its distance from the motherhouse, Louise was hesitant to acquire this property. The Ladies of Charity, however, insisted on this plan and in July, 1647 the foundlings and twelve Sisters took possession of this building. Louise realized immediately that no arrangements had been made for the education of these children: *Our Ladies have not thought about arranging for a location for the school. We saw one place which would be good for the boys, who must be separated from the girls; it is downstairs and it only appear to need a door hung and the windows closed up. The girls' classroom would be upstairs. I would really like to have those alphabet cards which we would put upon the walls. The Ursulines use this method in some places* (SWLM:217 [L.192]).

These children, who were abandoned, had the same right as any other child to receive an education. In fact, it was this education that enabled these individuals to confront the adult world which was not inclined to receive them.

This work with the foundlings had to confront several difficulties. The first difficulty came from the Daughters of Charity themselves who shared the prevalent attitude of that era. One of the Sisters explained to Vincent: *These children are conceived in sin and represent a very thorny plant.*

Later a rumor was spread among the Sisters that if one of them was sent to minister with the foundlings it was because they were being punished. It was also said that Sisters who were seen as disagreeable or incompetent were sent to Bicêtre as “prisoners”. Vincent and Louise intervened on numerous occasions to correct such prejudices and to speak about the beauty of the ministry among the foundlings who, because they have no earthly mother or father, belong to God in a very special way.

During the time of the civil way of the Fronde other difficulties arose in 1649. Resources were diminished and for the most part these resources were provided by the Ladies of Charity. Providing supplies and maintaining the building became very difficult during this turbulent time: it was impossible to plant crops and the soldiers plundered everything that they saw. In 1649 Louise became alarmed: there was no money for the children, no white clothing, wheat was so expensive that it was impossible to buy, some parents were returning the children they had accepted because they had not been paid for several months and were unable to continue to provide for the children. Louise begged Vincent to intervene with the Ladies of Charity whom she judged harshly: *It is pitiful that the Ladies go to so little trouble. Either they must believe that*
we have enough to support the children, or they want to force us to abandon everything (SWLM: 301 [L.263]).

It was difficult for Louise to see the children suffer and so she proposed visiting some influential people: the Princess of Conde, the First President … she wrote a heart-rending letter to the chancellor, Seguir, and begged him to give the children food for the Christmas celebration. Vincent, moved by the sad situation of the children, convoked an Assembly of the Ladies of Charity. Louise immediately prepared a report on the current situation of this ministry. It is possible that Vincent used this report as guide in his famous intervention in this matter.

Vincent’s emotional presentation opened the hearts and purses of the Ladies and the work continued. During her whole life Louise shared the pain of these children who would never know their mother, a pain that she herself had experienced and a pain that had deeply influenced her.
In the hospitals

At the end of November 1639, Louise undertook a long trip. She would not return to Paris until February 1640. She brought three Daughters of Charity to Angers ... she had been requested to send some Sisters to minister in the hospital there. This form of ministry in a hospital setting is new for the young community that up until then had visited the infirm in their homes. Mlle. De Goussault, the president of the Ladies of the Charity in Paris, wanted the Daughters to go to Angers because she had seen the disorders that existed in the hospital and because she also had some property in Bourgneuf, a few kilometers from the city. A request that had been sent at the beginning of the year to the King by the councilors of Angers pointed out that the infirm are deprived of every form of care. These abandoned infirm men and women who were receiving no care (their food had to be brought in from outside) including no spiritual care during their illness or at the time of their death ... these individuals were viewed by Vincent and Louise as their lords and so it was necessary to go and serve them. The poor were the people who inspired their ministry of service.

Louise arrived at Angers on December 5. The lengthy trip and the inclement weather aggravated her bronchitis which had afflicted her even before she began this journey. The pastor at Vaux, the vicar-general, received her and graciously welcomed her into his house. They established a respectful and friendly relationship and this priest became the counselor and spiritual director of the Sisters in Angers. The three Sisters immediately began their ministry. In the large room in the hospital the Sisters placed one hundred beds in six rows. A plague epidemic meant that two or three people had to occupy the same bed. Louise, who witnessed the incredible amount of work that needed the attention of the Sisters, asked Vincent to send three more Sisters. Marguerite François, DC, overcome by fatigue and the plague, died a few weeks after her arrival.

It was extremely difficult for Louise to meet with the Fathers of the Poor (the name that was given to the administrators of the hospital) who wanted a written record of the arrival of the Sisters at the hospital. All interested parties signed this document on February 1, 1640. The administrators also asked that the role of the superiors in Paris, the role of the administrators at the hospital and the ministry of the Sisters should be specified and written down. This involved the different individuals in a lengthy discussion that was continued by correspondence even after Louise had returned to Paris. The contract was not signed until March 1641 and the formal registration of this document with government officials made it an official document. The administrators accepted the spiritual direction of the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission and granted the Sisters the freedom to live according to their Rule. In those areas that concerned their work with the infirm and the administration of the hospital the Sisters had to answer to the administrators. This contract would become the basis for future contracts that would be established with hospitals in Saint-Denis, Nantes, Hennebont, Châteaudun. An article of this contract, which might cause surprise, stated: The Sisters alone will be responsible for the poor persons, and no one may associate any wives or unmarried women with them, so that, through the union and relationship existing among themselves, those who are poor may be served better (CCD:XIIIb:115). In the hospitals there were women who dedicated their lives to the service of the infirm and in most cases these individuals lived and ate at the hospital. Some
paid a specified amount of money in order to remain at the hospital until their death. Since these women had no financial concerns, they gradually became careless about their work. Therefore in stating that only the Sisters would care for the infirm, Vincent and Louise wanted to avoid confusion between the services of these women who were paid and the services of the Daughters whose way of life and vocation were not widely known. It was also a way of assuring fidelity to the mission that had been entrusted to them and was intended to create unity among the members of this small hospital community. This article, however, would become a source of difficulties since these former servants were asked to leave the hospital. In Angers, Louise was watchful over this situation and she wanted to make sure that these women found a decent living situation in another place. On the other hand, in Mans when the women there became aware of the proximate arrival of the Daughters, they rejected any change in their function at the hospital. Despite the efforts that were made by the Missionaries and the spiritual directors at the hospital, the Daughters were unable to enter the hospital there. After waiting for three weeks the Daughters rejected the ministry there and returned to Paris. In Mantreuil-sur-Mer, the women servants remained there and collaboration between them and the Daughters became so difficult that after three years Vincent called them back to Paris.

Before departing for Angers, the Sisters received from Vincent’s hands regulations that specified the meaning that they should give to their work in the hospital and the means that should be used in order to accomplish this: *The first thing Our Lord asks of them is to love Him supremely and to perform all their actions for love of Him. The second is to cherish one another as sisters whom He has bound together by the bond of His love, and to love the sick poor as their lords, since Our Lord is in them and they are in the Lord* (CCD:XIIIb:108-109).

The relationship between the Daughters of Charity and the poor and those who are infirm is one of servant/master. In the seventeenth century, the peasants, young people and women from the poor class generally had an attitude of respect and obedience toward the owner of the estate on whom they depended for their food. Vincent and Louise took on these attitudes but reversed them. The Sisters should respect and serve those individuals who usually are ignored, those whom Jesus Christ recognized as his sisters and brothers. Thus the poor become for the Daughters of Charity their lords and masters. The hospitals of the seventeenth century took in beggars and vagabonds who had no lodging and no one to care for them during their illness. These women and men were often rude, dirty and loud. The Daughters of Charity were invited to see behind these rough characteristics the greatness of the human person. In her letters, Louise de Marillac constantly reminded them about the importance of this attitude because it is only through respect for the dignity of the poor that it becomes possible for these outcasts of society to recover a sense of meaning in life: *My dear Sister, be very gentle and courteous toward your poor. You know that they are our masters and that we must love them tenderly and respect them deeply. It is not enough for these maxims to be in our minds; we must bear witness to them by our gentle and charitable care* (SWLM:320-321 [L.284B]).

Louise de Marillac taught the Sisters simple gestures that revealed their respect toward *their lords and masters*. In the twentieth century those ways of caring for people might be seen as providing elementary hygienic care but in the seventeenth century those gestures were unusual among the poor: *I would ask you to be sure to wash the feet of the sick as they enter, to wash their linens and to treat them with gentleness and charity. Your obligations are to provide the sick...*
them medications and food at the correct times (SWLM:291 [L251]); I do not know if you regularly wash the hands of the poor. If you do not, I would ask you to begin this practice (SWLM:330 [L290B]). Louise reminded the Daughters at the Nantes Hospital to keep them [those who are infirm] as neat and clean as possible (CCD:XIIIb:144) and to give to each one their own personal napkin.

Respect cannot be limited to the physical and material dimension but the spiritual dimension of the individual must also be taken into consideration. This is what Louise and Vincent referred to as the spiritual care of those who are poor. The Daughters of Charity, through their actions and their words, reveal the presence of Jesus Christ. For them to work in the midst of the world of the poor is to evangelize and it is there in the midst of the world that they discover the sublimity of their vocation and the meaning of their life.
A time of crisis

Under the impetus and the direction of Louise de Marillac the Company of the Daughters of Charity was constituted and developed. In 1647 there were between one hundred twenty and one hundred fifty Sisters in some fifty different houses (half of which were outside of Paris). These numbers are approximations since there is no record from these years. Did any such record exist? It seems that the first such records were kept after the death of Louise, that is, when Mathurine Guerin was named Mother General in 1667.

In 1646-1647 the Company moved through a difficult period that disconcerted many of the Sisters and upset Louise. Was this a crisis of growing as a Company thus a time of purification and becoming aware of the uniqueness of this Company and its demands?

The crisis did not come as a surprise. Near the end of 1645 there were some telling signs that the call that animated the first Sisters had become weakened. Some of the Sisters refused to leave the parishes where they were ministering when they were asked to do so; other spoke against the sister servant, the local superior. There was murmuring and criticisms such as: why do we have to live so poorly? Can’t we live just a little more comfortably? The poor were not served with the same love. Concerned to help the Sisters overcome these daily difficulties Louise asked Vincent to intervene. His conference on February 13, 1646 helped a good number of the Sisters to reflect on their vocation and led them to confront that which could have prejudiced their fidelity to God and the poor. But still problems continued in the houses that were distant from Paris. Some Sisters left the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Mathurine Guerin, who was Louise’s secretary for six years noted in 1661:

It seemed that God wanted to empty the house when so many Sisters left.

In eighteen months the Company would lose a sixth of its members, some of whom had spent five, eight or ten years in the community. Louise was concerned and also felt guilty about all of this, asking herself if she was not to blame for all that was happening: Our Sister Marie finally departed and left the Company. The tall Anne from Richelieu likewise fled when she discovered that we wanted to remove her. That happened yesterday and we do not know where she went. You see, Monsieur, that we need the help of your holy prayers. I, in particular, need them because of all the evil I cause, and I beg you to ask God’s forgiveness for me (SWLM: 141 [L.132B]).

Aware of the dissatisfaction of the Sisters, Louise attempted to encourage and support them. Her letters invited them to engage in personal and community reflection. Louise, however, was also gripped by deep pain and unintentionally reproached the Sisters: and what have we given him, barren earth that we are? Nothing but discontent, barren earth that we are, through our infidelities to God … at one time, some member of the Company leaves or commits great faults against her vocation; at another, the entire body has degenerated. How stupid we all are! It seems that all the warning God has had given to us have had no other effect than beating the air (SWLM:197 [L.174]).

In a letter to the Sisters ministering in Nantes who were in the midst of serious community conflicts, Louise stated that she felt responsible for the situation, that is, that her bad example
caused this situation to develop. Is Louise going to become depressed as she did at the time of her husband’s death? Concerns, anxieties and guilt once again told hold of her soul: *God alone knows the state of my poor mind in all these disorders. It seems that our good God wants to destroy us completely. I deserve it, and I am surprised that he has delayed so long in carrying out his justice. Provided his mercy saves my soul, I am satisfied* (SWLM:204 [L.181]).

Louise was profoundly upset by the behavior of her son. She had wanted him to become a priest. For several years Michel had taken theology courses in one of the Jesuit schools. Then one day, in a fit of anger, Michel told his mother that he preferred to commit suicide than to become a priest. Louise was stunned by his words. In December, 1644, Michel ran away. Several months later Louise discovered that her son had gone off with the daughter of a wine merchant. When she found them the two young people were brought back to Paris: Michel to Saint-Lazare and the young woman to the Monastery of Magdalena, a place for penitent women. The relationship between Michel and his mother was filled with tension. Again a love affair led Michel far from Paris. Louise’s pain was heightened and certainly was more acute as a result of the pain of her infancy. Was it possible that she saw in her son, thirty-two years old, the image of her father who at the same age entered a relationship that led to her conception. Was it possible that she feared, in the very depths of her being, that her son would bring a child into the world who would be exposed to the same pain and suffering that she had experienced?

All of this seemed to overwhelm Louise but Vincent was at her side. Calmly and prudently he showed her that everything that occurred in the Company of the Daughters of Charity was normal; something that occurs in every community; something that also happened to Jesus Christ: *Let us bless God, Mademoiselle, for purging the Company of subjects like that, and let us honor the disposition of Our Lord when His disciples were abandoning Him. He said to those who remained: Do you not wish to go after them?*” (CCD:III:215).

In an attempt to stabilize Michel, Vincent created the position of sheriff at Saint-Lazare and entrusted this position to him. Some friends of Louise, Madame de Romelly and the Duchess of Aiguillon, were looking for a wife for Michel. They put him in contact with the Portier family who rejected him because they dreamed of their daughters marrying someone rich and Michel had no personal wealth. In November, 1649 M. Chennevieres accepted Michel’s offer to marry his daughter, Gabrielle Le Clerc. This marriage was celebrated on January 18th, 1650.

Blessed, sustained and encouraged by her deep faith, Louise understood and calmly accepted all the trials of growth. The survival of the Company, after so many starts, was proof that God was watching over her. The birth of her grandchild, Louise Renee, brought her great joy. The long months of darkness and suffering had affected her spirit but Louise was strengthened by these trials and convinced that God loved her and the Company. On April 14, 1650, on the eve of her patron feast, she told Vincent de Paul that peace had once again returned to take possession of her soul: *My heart is still overflowing with you on account of the understanding which I believe our good God has given me of the words, “God is my God”* (SWLM:341 [L.369]). Louise was ecstatic over the words: God is my God and recognized the steps that God had taken on her behalf. She knew that God loved her with an unconditional love. She was filled with joy as she contemplated God’s gift to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ, this Jesus who was served
The Life of Louise de Marillac: A Time of Crisis

every day in the person of the poor, this Jesus who was shared in communion during the Eucharist.

Despite her long and frequent illnesses, Louise continued her ministry as formator of the Sisters and as one who supported their commitment in new forms of service.
In 1638 Louise was hesitant to send some of the Sisters, who had not completed their period of formation, to Richelieu but in 1650 she raised no questions about sending some Sisters to the areas that were devastated by the war, to the battlefields themselves and to Poland. After the Treaty of Westphalia was signed (1648), a treaty that weakened Austria in a permanent manner, Mazarin decided to proceed with the war against Spain. For nine years the war created havoc in the area of Marne and the Ardennes and this same suffering was experienced in places as far away as Dunkirk. The year 1650 was disastrous for the inhabitants of Rethel and the surrounding area which had fallen into the hands of the Spanish and then on December 15th of the same year was retaken by the French army. The authorities of Rethel, in a petition that they sent to Vincent, described the horrible situation of this region. More than 1,500 people had died and their bodies had still not been buried. The survivors were in such a state that no pen, regardless of how prolific it may be, could portray adequately the pitiful state to which the cruelty and the unbridled disorder of the soldiers have reduced this unfortunate region (CCD:IV:200). Hunger was so prevalent that the poor eat grass like animals and devour dead dogs and horses (CCD:IV:200, note #3).

At the beginning of 1651 Vincent sent Missionaries to this area. The work there was incredible; the Sisters spread themselves out to assist people in different villages and often they found themselves separated from one another and ministering in places that were also distant from one another. Louise wanted to have frequent news from the Sisters but they did not have much time to write. Letters from Paris arrived on a regular basis and were very solicitous: All our Sisters praise God for the courage his goodness gives you to serve these poor afflicted people. Oh what a grace, my dear Sister, to have been chosen for this holy employment! It is true that it is extremely difficult but it is because of this that the grace of God acting in you is more evident (SWLM:354 [L.347]).

In September, 1653, Anne of Austria and the fifteen year old king were in Chalons-sur-Marne at the time when the royal army initiated the siege of Saint-Menehould. The battle was fierce and many were wounded. The Queen, who saw the deplorable situation of the people (people who very often received no assistance or comfort), appealed to Vincent. It was decided to send four Sisters whom Louise had chosen very carefully: Anne Hardemont and Barbe Angiboust, both 40 years old, prudent and very capable women who were able to deal with unexpected situations; Perrette Chefdeville and Marie Poulet who had spent several years in the Company. How did these sisters deal with all those men who had been hardened by the harsh realities of life? Louise invited them to not become discouraged when listening to the various conversations of people of that class (Translator’s Note: unable to find the reference that is cited as: E.431). Like everyone else who cared for these people the Sisters were to treat the soldiers with tenderness and compassion, imitating our Lord who acted in this way toward those who had experienced some difficulty (Translators Note: unable to find the reference that is cited as: E.433). Two of the Sisters went to the battlefield where Anne was wounded as she assisted a dying soldier.
The soldiers wounded at Saint-Menehould were greatly appreciative of the care that they received from the Daughters of Charity. The Queen requested the Sisters to serve the soldiers as they engaged in different battles. Thus, in July 1654, four Sisters went to Sedan during the siege of Stenay; in 1656 two other Sisters went to the hospital in Le Fère where many wounded were being admitted (the French army had just been defeated at Valenciennes and was in retreat). In 1657 the Daughters were sent to the area of Montmédy and in 1658 to Calais where the soldiers were engaged in battle at Dunes near Dunkirk. The four Sisters were very soon infected with the plague that was creating havoc among the many soldiers who were wounded. Within a few days two of the Sisters died and the other two Sisters were transferred to the hospital in the city where they prepared for death. When Louise received this news she announced this to the Sisters, who admired the courage of their companions: *I do not know if you heard of the deaths of Sister Françoise Manceau and Sister Marguerite Ménage. They died arms in hand, because God called them while they were serving the poor sick and wounded at Calais* (SWLM:609 [L.590]).

In Paris several sisters, enthused by the glorious death of their companions, volunteered to relieve them. Four Sisters left immediately for this mission. During the journey one of them wrote: *We are anxious to arrive in order to the help the remaining Sisters. Today we are 24 leagues from Calais. There are many people who have been abandoned, cast aside and sitting on straw … it is sad to see people in this condition* (Translator’s Note: Unable to find the reference which is cited as: document 832).

When the Sisters arrived there they immediately began their ministry. Fatigue overcame them and they were unable to resist infection. Three of these sisters became ill and it was considered to be in their best interest to have them return to Paris. The trip was made on stretchers, in very uncomfortable conditions. These events in Calais were the last ones to take place on the battlefields since on November 7, 1659 the Treaty of the Pyrenees was signed, bringing to a conclusion the war between France and Spain.

**The Life of Louise de Marillac: On the Battlefields**
A personalized pedagogy

Louise de Marillac, whose personality was shaped by her profound faith and the various experiences of her life, placed herself, as a woman and a Christian, at the service of Christian education. Her pedagogy was simple: she personalized the formation that she offered; she began with the reality and then communicated the dynamism hidden within said reality.

Reading her approximate three hundred fifty letters to the Daughters of Charity one begins to see how the style and tone varied according to the Sister who was being addressed. Louise was mindful of the individual’s culture, character and personality. She was very direct with those Sisters who had a strong character, in fact, she could give the impression of being rude. On the other hand, when addressing Sisters who were timid or more withdrawn, Louise revealed her tenderness and gentleness. Louise adapted herself to the individual who was being addressed and she viewed this adaptation as proof of her respect for the other.

Louise never reproached anyone without highlighting some positive characteristic: an individual’s ability to share, a talent for baking or a Sister’s fidelity to God. Louise realized that her observations ought to help an individual progress and move forward and not crush an individual or cause one to become rebellious.

Louise’s sensitivity was revealed especially in her dealings with the infirm or dying Sisters. The majority of the time she was unable to travel to the distant places where the Sisters ministered, but she often sent another Sister to visit. Thus she sent Elisabeth Jeanne Dalmagne a very moving letter from her superior: God knows how much I regret not being able to assist you in this final act of love which I am confident you will make by willingly offering your soul to the Eternal Father, desiring thereby to imitate the moment of death of his Son (SWLM:108 [L.97]).

In the seventeenth century death was not some hidden reality but one that was lived out as a family. For the Daughters of Charity, death was the ultimate act of one’s love for God.

Louise was not only attentive to the Sisters but was equally attentive to their families. It was often impossible for the parents and their daughter to correspond with one another, especially when as a Sister, their daughter had been missioned in some distant place. Many did not know how to read or write. Louise served as an intermediary, receiving or communicating news through means of the sisters and then transmitting the news to their families. The letters of Louise allow us to follow the life of the Angiboust family in Chartes, the Menage family in Serqueux and the Carcireux family from Beauvais. We are made aware of the numerous family deaths, the difficulties that family members encountered as they looked for work and the multiple concerns of daily life.

In this way each Sister was known and recognized by Louise. When this did not occur, Louise was made aware of the situation and often made aware with some very strong words. Charlotte Royer referred to nasty Louise (SWLM:254 [L.254]) who sent her to the distant mission of Richelieu. Anne Hardemont, who was persuaded to leave Paris, wrote to Louise from Ussel
about her suffering using words that were not in any way friendly. In her response Louise made
every effort to calm their anxiety. If it was possible for Louise to establish a relationship with the
Sisters despite all their differences, it was because she respected each Sister. The mutual trust
enabled her to share with them and to do this with true humility and simplicity.

Louise possessed a profound knowledge of the realities which the Sisters encountered. She was
informed about all of this through the letters that the Sisters wrote, through conversations with
the Sisters when they returned to the motherhouse and through her own visits to the different
houses. Louise also received letters from the Ladies of Charity, from the administrators of the
different hospitals, from the pastors and from the Missionaries who visited the Daughters. This
knowledge allowed Louise to lead the Sisters in a deeper reflection on the specific events that
they had experienced.

In Richelieu the two Sisters complained that they were unable to do all the things they were
expected to do. Louise invited them to examine their lives and the way they spent their time and
then outline a method of procedure. The Sisters pointed out the manner in which they lived their
lives from the time they woke up to the time they went to sleep and noted that they did not waste
time in useless conversation or visits. Was it necessary to take meals outside the community?
Louise invited them to reflect again on the spirit that motivated them as they moved through the
day: what place did prayer and obedience have? what motivated their activity among the poor?
Louise asked them to share with her the results of their community reflection.

In Angers the community life was less fraternal. The Sisters were invited to reflect on how they
interacted with one another. In a very simple way Louise introduced some psychological ideas: if
our sister is depressed or forlorn, if she is too quick or too slow, what in the world do you expect
her to do about it? This is part of her character. Although she often tries to overcome herself,
nevertheless, she cannot prevent these inclinations from frequently appearing. And should her
sister, who is supposed to love her as herself, become annoyed with her, be rude to her or frown
upon her? O my dear Sisters, be on your guard against acting like this. Instead, pretend that you
do not notice it and do not criticize her, bearing in mind that it will soon be your turn and you
will want her to act this way toward you (SWLM:114 [L104B]).

In certain communities difficulties arose as a result of wrongful interpretations of
recommendations that were made. Hygiene and cleanliness are indispensable in community life.
Using that reality as a pretext some Sisters pursued their well-being in a manner that was not
compatible with their vocations as Daughters of Charity. In many parishes the Sisters taught
catechism to the poor children. To do this well they needed to spend time preparing the lessons.
But some Sisters found personal satisfaction in studying the catechism and became careless
about their other obligations: the humble daily chores and the services that were demanded of
them in their ministry with the infirm. To adapt the habits of the Ladies of Charity and to present
oneself as a wise person in order to be recognized by others is to be lacking in one's commitment
and as such one runs the risk of provoking the disappearance of the Company as it departs from
its objective.

In all of her teaching Louise communicated energy to the Sisters, energy that gave them life: the
love of their sisters and brothers that flows from the love of the incarnate Christ. In the numerous
meditations that Louise wrote she directed her attention to the human person that God had
created, that God had so loved that he himself desired to share in this humanity in order to make it more pleasing, in order to make it divine in some way. Louise pointed out in a powerful way how the incarnation of the Son of God restored greatness to men and women. In the Son of God, made man, Louise recognized the greatness of every person and she believed in their possibilities, whether they were orphans or abandoned children, galley salves or mentally ill, forgotten and cast aside by society. She made every effort to share this conviction with the Sisters, insisting that they love, respect and hold in esteem each and every person: *Our vocation of servants of the poor calls us to practice the gentleness, humility and forbearance that we owe to others. We must respect and honor everyone; the poor because they are members of Jesus Christ and our masters; the rich so that they will provide us with the means to do good for the poor* (SWLM:468 [L.424]).

Louise invited the Sisters to contemplate the earthly life of Jesus in order to clothe themselves in his attitudes of sensitivity and love of those who are poor. She taught the Sisters to contemplate the humanity of the suffering Christ whom they would encounter in so many different people as they exercised their ministry. Indeed, through their service, the Daughters of Charity prolong the work of redemption as they help those who are humiliated and rejected to find new life, the dignified life of a man or woman, the dignified life of a child of God.

Respect for every person, providing for the whole person and service of love … these are the characteristics that Louise focused on as a result of her reflections and profound faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and Mary, the Mother of God. This is also the dynamism that she communicated to the Daughters of Charity.
Service on behalf of the poor

The Daughters of Charity, who lived far from Paris, experienced with the passing of the years their own identity being questioned. Who are they? Why are they together? What do they do? On whom do they depend? Louise de Marillac was very attentive to these questions and guided each one of the Sisters in their reflection and in their attempts to respond to these different questions.

In 1645, Louise Marie de Gonzaga, the daughter of the Duke of Nevers, converted as a result of her marriage to Vladislao VI Vasa of Poland. She was well aware of the charitable activity of Vincent de Paul. Before her marriage she had been a member of the Ladies of Charity in Paris. As she discovered the needs of the poor in this new territory, she requested that Missionaries and the Daughters of Charity be sent there. Months passed before she received a response because time was necessary to weigh this call to see if it came from God (SWLM:792 [A.89B]).

In 1651 four priests of the Mission and one brother went to Poland and, at the end of 1652, they were joined by three Daughters of Charity. The Sisters were received with much joy by the Queen who was happy to receive news about France. The Sisters remained in the castle for several weeks because of an outbreak of the plague which caused havoc in Warsaw. After a period of acculturation and learning the language the Sisters began their ministry among the poor in the capital. The Queen was solicitous for their welfare and helped to organize their work and life. Mlle. Villers, one of the Queen’s ladies in waiting, was given to the Sisters as a director. This woman, aware of their great distance from Paris and of the difficulties in maintaining correspondence, attempted to replace Louise and wanted to take on complete responsibility for the Daughter of Charity in Poland.

The Sisters communicated their surprise and their concern to Louise who did not hesitate to outline the function of Mlle. Villers: as a member of the Ladies of Charity it is only right that she should point out the work that has to be done with regard to the distribution of alms but she has no right to interfere in the spiritual and community life of the Sisters. The Missionaries who were in Poland would provide for the spiritual life of the Sisters in the distant community.

When Mlle. Villers died in 1658 the Queen of Poland attempted to oblige one of the Sisters to live with her at the castle and to take charge of distributing her alms and gifts to the poor. She proposed Marguerite Moreau who rejected this offer. She wrote to Louise and expressed her concern: I am very concerned and afraid that if I change my way of dressing and reside at the court, I will lose my vocation. How do I know that God, who once gave me the grace to overcome all the difficulties I had in leaving the world, will do the same now? If it were up to me, I’d much prefer that God might permit that I become seriously ill rather than to put me in such danger (CCD:XIIIb:368-369). After deliberating together, Vincent and Louise communicated to the Queen a respectful rejection of her plan: the Daughters of Charity have been chosen to live in community a consecrated life of service to the poor.

The bishop of Nantes, Beauvau de Rivarennes gave his consent in 1646 and thus the Daughters of Charity began to minister at the hospital in Nantes. The bishop, however, did not understand
the way of life of these servants. He asked to see the Rule and he visited their house. He did not allow them to leave their house and rejected the authority of the Missionaries in their regard. He also forbade M. Berthe to visit the Sisters. The bishop wanted the Daughters to be like the Augustinian Sisters in the Hospital of Vannes who were cloistered and under his authority. Respectfully but energetically Vincent and Louise insisted on the fact that the Daughters were not religious but rather their *convents are the houses of the sick. Their cells are the sickrooms of the poor, and even these are often rented. Their chapel is the parish church. Their cloister is the streets of the town. Their enclosure is holy obedience. Their grille is the fear of God and their veil, holy modesty* (Louise Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, edited by John E. Rybolt, CM, [New City Press:New Rochelle, New York, 1993], Volume II, p. 293). The demands of the bishop and the on-going conflicts with the administrators of the hospital forced the Sisters to leave Nantes in 1664.

In 1659 three Sisters left for Narbonne where the bishop, François Fouquet, a brother of Nicolas Fouquet, the Finance Minister under Louis XIV, had requested their presence. Louise told Françoise Carcireux, the Sister responsible for the community in that area, that she should not be afraid to inform the bishop about the objectives of their ministry: to serve those who are most abandoned and forgotten. At that time these individuals lived throughout the countryside and they were unable to and did not wish to go to the hospital. Thus, the Daughters had to reach out to these individuals, to encounter them in their humble houses. Françoise was invited to submit a report to the Bishop about the lifestyle of the Daughters: *Since those people are not familiar with your poor way of life and your humble dwelling, do not desire to be treated differently, even in small matters. Do not argue but explain your opinion, give it only to explain how the poor are served* (SWLM:647 [L.628B]).

Louise encouraged the Sisters to be transparent with regard to their decision to live in said state of life, to be unafraid about talking about this with others and to be faithful to their commitment. To choose to live the life of the poverty is to desire to remain close to those whom they are called to serve on a daily basis.

At the end of 1657 and the beginning of 1658 Louise became aware of the fact that in the midst of her community in Paris tensions were increasing. She made every effort to analyze the situation. She noticed that most of the Sisters came from small villages and before their entrance into the community they were not accustomed to speak with people of rank. Because of their work the Sisters were regularly in contact with the Ladies of Charity; they spoke with them about the work that had to be done and shared with them their reflections. Some of the Sisters felt good about being respected as equals of the Ladies. They majority of these peasant women were illiterate but had learned to read and write. Some of them liked to study and read and they became so attached to these endeavors that they began to neglect their simple services, services that would make them appear to be less noble. These young women from the different villages had learned to manage money on behalf of the sick poor. Some of them discovered the joy that money brings and at times helped their families financially.

A small group of these women had discovered a life completely distinct from the life they had lived at home and as a result a new path, new hopes and aspirations were opened before them: why remain as servants? It is not possible to live a consecrated life in a different way, a little like
other religious women? Some considered forming a group that would spend more time in prayer and meditation. Louise was aware of the great danger of a division in the midst of the Company of the Daughters of Charity: on the one side the Sisters who wanted to live cloistered life and on the other side, those who wanted to continue to serve the poor, a service that was viewed with contempt by the first group. Louise was aware that the first group wanted to become the dominant group and also wanted to lord it over those employed in visiting the sick (SWLM:832 [A.100]). To view the Company in this manner would quickly lead to its destruction.

Despite her weariness and her frequent illnesses, Louise attempted to lead the Sisters in reflection. On January 10, 16660 she wrote to Marguerite Chétif, who at the request of Vincent was chosen to succeed Louise as the one responsible for the company of the Daughters of Charity. Louise reaffirmed the meaning of their vocation as servants of the poor: a Christian life lived in union with Jesus Christ in order to deepen the grace of baptism; a life shared with those who suffered and are pained; a life of humble, simple service that seeks nothing. In other words, even though the Sisters will be employed in exterior works which appear lowly and despicable in the eyes of the world they are always glorious in the sight of God and his angels (SWLM:674 [L. 651]).

The death of Louise two months later and the death of Vincent on September 27th of the same year made the Sisters aware of their responsibility for the Company and led them to a new awareness of their identity.
Toward a relationship of communion

Thirty-five years of working together, thirty-five years of intense activity. For Vincent and Louise was this simply a manner of collaboration that was imposed on them by circumstances or was this collaboration more than mutual assistance that involved them in the multiple works that had been begun? Did their common journey lead to a true friendship? Their first encounter was initiated by Louise who had the need to find a spiritual director in Paris. Vincent was not very enthusiastic about accepting this role for this restless woman. In lengthy letters Louise explained her scruples and torments as well as her concerns for the education of her son. Vincent responded and attempted to calm her and appease her. Vincent used the language of the seventeenth century, a certain circumlocution that provided him with an elaborate way of expressing his feelings: Well now, I have said enough to my daughter. I must conclude by telling her that my heart will have a very fond remembrance of hers in that of Our Lord and solely for that of Our Lord, in whose love and in that of His holy Mother I am her most humble servant (CCD:I:56).

Vincent attempted to separate himself from Louise who seemed to want to possess him and always wanted him to be at her side. It seemed to be difficult for Louise to move forward without the presence of her director: I hope that you will excuse the liberty I am talking in telling you how impatient I have become because of your long absence, troubled as I am about the future and by not knowing where you are or where you are going (SWLM:5 [L.1]).

If this relationship of director-directed had not been accepted by one or both of these individuals as obedience to God’s providence which is revealed in events, then this relationship would never have existed. On a human level there were many differences to keep Vincent and Louise apart.

Gradually, through the exchange of letters and face to face meetings, they came to know one another and discovered their similarities and differences. Love for the poor and a on-going search for the will of God were two realities that united them. Vincent began to discover how some of the harsh realities of life had marked Louise. He was thus able to understand her anxious reactions, her torments and her extreme sensitivity. He discovered the depth of her spiritual life and her union with God. For her part, Louise came to know Vincent as a very level-headed priest, one who was close to God and the poor, totally committed to the work that had been entrusted to him.

In May, 1629, Vincent sent Louise on a mission and this event changed her life and also altered her relationship with Vincent. In his letters Vincent no long used the expression, my dear daughter, which indicated a certain dependence of Louise on her director, but rather began to refer to her as Mlle. which affirmed her full participation in a common mission. Louise’s personality developed and she was fearless and unafraid and began to organize and guide and rectify. With total simplicity and clarity she communicated her observations to Vincent. He relied
on her to establish new Confraternities and to give new life to those that were languishing. They established an intense and effective collaboration in the midst of incredible activity. Both acted with great maturity: Louise was forty and Vincent was fifty. The letters from this period reveals Vincent’s admiration for Louise and her tactfulness in dealing with the Ladies of Charity: *I am satisfied with everything you told me about the Charity. Please propose to the sisters whatever you find appropriate in that regard, and draw it up, as much according to what you have written me as to what you will consider best* (CCD:I:101). Vincent recognized and utilized Louise’s competence in drawing up rules for the different Confraternities: *You are a skillful woman to have adapted the rule of the charity in this way; I think it is fine* (CCD:I:114).

Louise appreciated Vincent’s sure counsel and prudence and the fact that he was not afraid to tell her that she had to mature. She was also grateful for the way that Vincent provided for her son’s education who in reality was not in the least interested in studies. The many letters that were exchanged between both of them naturally touched on the missionary work that was being carried out in the midst of the confraternities. They also exchanged news about daily events, their health, and their reflections on different matters.

The arrival of Marguerite Naseau, who ministered with the Confraternities of Charity in Paris, was followed by the arrival of other young women from different villages. This led Louise to consider something different: the need to bring these young women together as a group that would be distinct from the Confraternities. Louise’s insistence and the speed with which she organized and prepared all that was needed for this new group to come into existence startled and surprised Vincent. She had to wait for Vincent’s consent but since she was convinced that this was God’s will, she moved forward with humility but also was quite firm in her conviction and insistence. After the establishment of the Company, Vincent and Louise provided for the formation the Sisters and together they reflected on the different problems that they had to confront: vocational discernment with the young women who were seeking admittance into the Company, the demands of the Ladies of Charity, the illnesses of the Sisters, difficulties that arose as a result of living together in community, etc. Their complimentarity was obvious, recognized and appreciated. The prudent pace of Vincent was compensated by Louise’s insistence. The differences between them became the source of mutual enrichment and balance.

Between 1640-1442, the relationship between Vincent and Louise, a relationship of trust and simplicity, entered a difficult phase, one filled with many tensions. At that time the differences between them seemed to create greater distance between them rather than unite them. During her trip to Angers, Louise was forced to sign a contract with the administrators of the hospital. She was hesitant to sign this contract as director of the Daughters of Charity which was not legally approved or recognized and Vincent was in no hurry to move forward with the procedures that would lead to ecclesial and state recognition. Louise was uncomfortable with this situation and she expressed her feelings about this matter to Vincent, who responded in the same manner to her concerns. In his third letter, dated January 22, 1640, Vincent wrote: *Here is the answer to the principal matters about which you wrote to me … with regard to the stipulations [of] the Directors of the hospital, it seems to me that you would do well to sign them in your own name, as Directress of the poor Daughters of Charity, under the authority of the Superior General of the Company of the Priest of the Mission, Director of the above-mentioned women* (CCD:II:11).
In 1640-1641 the selection of the new motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity reveals the different points of view that Vincent and Louise held. Louise wants to the two houses, the motherhouse of the Daughters and the Missionaries, to be close to one another. Vincent did not want this because he feared that people would begin to talk if they saw one of the Missionaries enter the house of the Daughters or one of the Daughters enter the house of the Missionaries. Vincent finally gave in to Louise and looked for a house close to Saint-Lazare, but according to Louise, his collaborator, Vincent was not moving on this matter as quickly as she had hoped. During the month of February 1641, Vincent responds with some harsh words to Louise’s impatience:

*I still see a little of the human in your feelings as soon as you see me ill. You think all is lost, for want of a house. O woman of little faith and acceptance of the guidance and example of Jesus Christ … for a handful of young women whom His Providence has manifestly raised up and brought together, you think He will fail us!* (CCD:II:177).

Other letters in the same tone reveal a certain tension in the relationship between Vincent and Louise. Vincent reproached Louise for her seriousness and her demands on the young women who enter the Company. Louise, on the other hand, could not understand Vincent’s attitude, that is, his carelessness with regard to conferences and meetings that he committed himself to in order to offer spiritual formation to the Sisters. Twenty-eight letters between March 1640 and June 1642 refer to this commitment: *if I can, I will be there tomorrow;* these letters also contain many excuses as to why Vincent was unable to fulfill this responsibility (or simply that he forgot about the commitment). Louise kept count of the few conferences that Vincent gave during this period and commented on his reflections and words. Louise began by noting Vincent’s excuses: *I was nearly unable to come at all today because I had to go far into the city; therefore I won’t have much time to talk to you* (CCD:IX:30).

On August 16th, one year later, Louise again highlights Vincent’s excuses: *I should have brought you together long ago but was prevented mainly by my own wretchedness and my business affairs. Well, Sisters, I hope that God’s goodness itself has made up for what I should have done for you* (CCD:IX:35). With greater severity Louise highlights Vincent de Paul’s excuses with regard to his commitment for the March 9, 1642 conference: *Because of urgent business, M. Vincent was unable to be present at the beginning of the conference … M. Portail began the conference … M. Vincent arrived around five o’clock* (CCD:IX:49-50). Usually the conferences began at 2:00pm. On March 16th Louise noted with some sarcastic humor: *M. Vicente did us the honor of being present from the beginning* (CCD:IX:51).

Only the conferences that were given between August 1640 and March 1642 have such notations. Louise de Marillac was aware of the fact that Vincent gave priority to the Ladies of Charity, the Archbishop of Paris, the ordinands, the Queen … the Daughters of Charity seemed to be an afterthought. Was it Vincent’s education that led him to consider the Daughters in this way? Louise found it difficult to accept this form of reasoning. With the freedom that arose from her trust and confidence in Vincent she wrote to Vincent on September 11th, 1641: *I very humbly supplicate you to do us the charity which your goodness leads us to expect and which we greatly need. The occasions which have prevented you from doing so will continue to arise as always unless you do us the honor of postponing them. Pardon me for taking this liberty* (SWLM:59 [L. 107B]). In Louise’s mind the Daughters of Charity had to be treated with the same respect as the Ladies of Charity or the Queen.
An unexpected event put an end to this difficult period. On Saturday, June 7, 1642, the vigil of Pentecost, the floor of the meeting room in the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity collapsed. No one was injured. A conference had been scheduled but Vincent was unable to be present.

The spirituality of Vincent and Louise was marked by this event, a sign from God. The collapse of the floor made them react and they were transformed. Vincent immediately sent Louise a very tender letter. Louise indicated that during her meditation that day her interior was transformed. Vincent and Louise became aware of the fact that God was calling them to move beyond the crisis that they were living … God invited them to change. This was a sign that revealed that they should continue to pursue the work that they had begun on behalf of the poor and for the glory of God.

A difficult period was now behind them. Now began a long period of profound and deep friendship. The friendship that united Vincent and Louise was one that was based on a profound respect for the uniqueness of the other. They both felt free to express themselves, assured that what was said would be accepted by the other. This confidence did not in any way eliminate their different points of view in many matters.

They both understood that the confrontation of ideas was the source of personal progress and enabled one to come to a better understanding of the problem. Louise highlighted this reality in a letter that she wrote to Vincent: I beg you very humbly, Monsieur, not to let the delicate sensibilities which I have revealed to you lead your Charity, in a spirit of condescension, to think that I want you to defer to my ideas. That is very far from my desire. I am never happier than when I am reasonably contradicted. God almost always gives me the grace to acknowledge and appreciate the opinions of others even when they are completely contrary to my own. This applies particularly to the advice of your charity in which I am certain to see the truth clearly even in matters which are hidden from me for a while (SWLM:340 [L.118B]).

As in every institution, the Company of the Daughters of Charity held council meetings which provided a time to study and guide the life and the activities of the Sisters. On October 30, 1647, a specific problem was discussed: Could the Sisters in the different towns and villages admit boys into the schools and thus educate them together with the girls? Vincent and Louise viewed the matter differently. Louise was closer to the Sisters and knew the situation of the families in those areas as well as the needs of the boys who had no one who was willing to instruct them. Vincent maintained his position that there had to be distance between the boys and the Daughters. He also reminded those present of the orders of the King and the bishops who prohibited coeducation. Louise had no fear in being insistent and spoke about the difficulties that the Sisters encountered: At times a little girl could not attend school unless she brought her younger brother with her, since their mother was not at home to look after him (CCD:XIIIb:287).

Vincent, who presided over the council, listened to all the reasons that were presented and closed the debate. He refused to accept the boys.

Friendship that respects the other is powerful. Vincent and Louise knew that they could count on one another at all times, but especially during difficult times. In 1657 Louise, in accord with a style that was very common at that time, wrote to Vincent and called him my most honored
father: The needs of the Company are pressing us somewhat to meet and to speak to you. It seems to me that my mind is completely preoccupied; it is so weak. Its only strength and peace, after that which comes from God, is to by his love, my Most Honored Father, your very humble and most obedient servant (SWLM: 553 [L528]).

The death of faithful companions is one of those times when friendship reveals all its tenderness and provides strength to overcome the deep pain that results from the loss of a loved one. In 1653 Vincent was overwhelmed by the death of one of his first followers, M. Lambert who died in Poland. Louise wrote to Vincent and expressed her sharing in his pain and sorrow: Am I not truly bold, my Most Honored Father, to dare to mix my tears with your usual submission to the guidance of Divine Providence, my weaknesses with the strength God has given you in order to bear the general share in his sufferings that Our Lord so often gives you? (SWLM:415: [L.516]).

In 1658 it was Vincent’s turn to express his support to Louise at the time of the death of Barbe Angiboust, DC, who had entered the Company of the Daughters of Charity in July, 1634. He invited Louise to take on the attitude of Mary who witnessed the death of her Son.

With a deep faith in Christ and aware of their common mission Vincent and Louise made themselves available to one another. This sharing became a source of mutual enrichment because it was based on a respect for the journey of the other. Vincent was repeatedly a witness to the changing moods and impulsiveness of Louise as well as her harsh judgments. In a conference to the Sisters after the death of Louise, Vincent spoke about her virtues and noted: Little acts of hastiness were sometimes seen in Mlle. Le Gras. That was nothing, and I’m far from thinking that there was any sin in it. She was always firm (CCD:XIIIb:574).

Slowly and patiently Vincent encouraged Louise to live calmly and serenely, to modify her way of seeing things and to conform her life to that of Jesus who was meek and humble of heart. Gradually Louise came to understand her impatience and her exaggerated anxiety as well as her tendency to dramatize little things. Goodness, meekness and forbearance (virtues that were so characteristic of Vincent) began to take hold of Louise … they transformed her and enriched her. In 1655 she was able to write: It is a good thing to suffer and to await patiently the hour of God in very difficult circumstances which is so contrary to my overly impulsive nature (SWLM:495 [L.463]).

Louise shared with Vincent her ideas and her vision of the future for the Company of the Daughters of Charity. During the course of many years she explained to Vincent the importance of placing the company under the direction of the superior-general of the Congregation of the Mission and not under the direction of the diocesan bishops. Louise was very aware of the powers of the bishops in their own diocese. She knew that the Bishop of Lyon did not allow the Visitation Sisters (founded by Saint Francis de Sales) to visit the infirm in their homes and that he obliged these religious women to remain within the confines of their monastery. In Bordeaux the Bishop imposed the cloister on the Congregation of women that had been established by Jeanne de Lestonnac. If the Daughters of Charity were to minister in various dioceses and at the same time they were under the authority of the local bishop, then their service of the poor ran the risk of being compromised in many places since many bishops did not understand or accept this form of women living in community and ministering in the world. Vincent did not agree with Louise on this matter. He did not want the Congregation of the Mission to separate itself from its
twofold objective: the evangelization of the poor country people and the ministry in seminaries. Should the Congregation of the Mission accept the spiritual direction of the Daughters of Charity? … besides Vincent was always respectful toward the bishops and the Daughters of Charity would be able to remove themselves from the authority of the local bishop … they are not religious but simply Christians consecrated to God.

Louise de Marillac acted patiently and firmly. With all her feminine refinement she exchanged ideas with Vincent while highlighting at the same time two ideas that she knew were fundamental for Vincent (and also for herself): fidelity to the will of God and continuing service of the poor: In the name of God, Monsieur, do not permit anything to take place which even slightly draws the Company away from the direction which God has given to it. You can be sure that immediately it would no longer be what it is. The sick poor would no longer be helped, and thus I believe that the will of God would no longer be accomplished among us (SWLM:187 [L.130D]).

During the course of nine years Louise developed her thoughts and continually attempted to obtain Vincent’s consent. Finally in January, 1655, the Cardinal de Retz approved the Company of the Daughters of Charity and placed it under the authority of the Vincent de Paul and his successors as superior general of the Congregation of the Mission. Louise was happy not because of her personal success but because she felt that now the Company of the Daughters of Charity would be able to continue serving the poor in all places and in accordance with the charism that they had received from God.

During the last years of their life, several events reveal to us the closeness of their relationship. Beginning in 1655 Vincent and Louise are referred to as elders or people of advanced age. Their age (Vincent 75 and Louise 65) was quite advanced for that period of time. In the seventeenth century the expected life span was 37 years. Their respective state of health was a source of concern for one another. Louise, like a good nurse, proposed remedies and different teas for Vincent. She herself pointed out different ways of bandaging Vincent’s ulcerous legs. Vincent was consistently good natured and would try the different treatments that were proposed to him: Her charity will judge from that what she thinks advisable for me to take tomorrow, and at what time. I will do so, God willing. I was feverish last night and this morning. I have just taken the tea (CCD:VII:427).

With complete simplicity Vincent and Louise will help one another prepare to depart from this world in order to be born again in a new world. Louise addressed herself to Vincent: It is for this reason that I turn to your Charity so that I will not be shipwrecked as I arrive at port, because of my own navigation, but will be guided solely by your directives and the orders of divine providence (SWLM:489 [L.457]).

The vows that were formulated in 1659 reflect their mutual awareness and desire to follow the will of God. They accept serenely the reality that they are not going to see one another again. Their friendship moved beyond physical contact with one another and their relationship had become so open and transparent that there was no need for human support. When Louise was dying Vincent sent her this short message: You are going before me; if God forgives me my sins I hope to be with you soon in heaven.
The friendship between Louise and Vincent was based on authenticity, that is, on the profound acceptance of the identity of the other and in the acceptance and respect for the differences of the other. Their relationship began as one of obedience, the result of a voluntary relationship of spiritual direction that then moved to a complimentary relationship of collaboration and in the calmness of later years became a relationship of communion. This friendship became a journey of holiness and a journey that revitalized their humanness.
Louise’s health was always a source of concern for Vincent. On December 13th, 1647, he wrote to M. Blatiron, the superior of the house in Geneva: *in this you are almost like Mademoiselle Le Gras, whom I consider as dead, according to nature, for ten years now. To see her, one would say that she has just stepped out of the tomb because her body is so frail and her face so pale. However, God knows the strength of spirit she possesses* (CCD:III:257).

Frequent fevers obliged Louise to have recourse to physicians who prescribed purges and blood-lettings according to the custom of that era. Her energy always provided her with the strength to recuperate. Vincent saw in this a special grace of God who was aware of the needs of the poor, aware that they needed someone to assist them. Beginning in 1658 the relapses became more frequent.

In May, 1656, a serious illness put Louise’s life in danger. She calmly prepared to die, convinced that God had given her *the key that will soon release me from this world* (SWLM:489 [L.457]). To everyone’s surprise she gradually recuperated her strength and by the end of the year she was able to take up her usual activities.

On February 4th, 1660, Louise’s left arms swelled and her temperature rose rapidly. Her state of health deteriorated despite the two incisions that were made on her arm. Surrounded by her family and the Sisters who resided at the Motherhouse, Louise received with great peace the sacrament of the sick. During that celebration she blessed her son and his family: *I pray the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, by the power God has given fathers and mothers to bless their children, to bless you, to detach you from all earthly things and to unite you to Himself … to live like good Christians.*

Then, as Louise saw the Sisters who surrounded her, she exhorted them to love their vocation and to remain faithful to their service of the poor. On several occasions the Sisters prayed for Louise’s recovery. They placed the relics of Saint Charles and Saint Francis de Sales on her arm. She seemed to get better. The swelling was reduced and she no long had a fever. This progress continued for three weeks until March 9th when the gangrene appeared on her arm. Louise understood the seriousness of her condition and asked to receive Viaticum. She prepared to receive God by speaking with the Sisters about the greatness of the Eucharist. On the morning of March 13th the pastor of Saint-Laurent brought the Eucharist. After a lengthy period of thanksgiving Louise addressed the Sisters once again: *My dear Sisters, I continue to ask God for His blessings for you and pray that He will grant you the grace to persevere in your vocation in order to serve Him in the manner He asks of you. Take good care of the service of the poor. Above all, live together in great union and cordiality, loving one another in imitation of the union and life of Our Lord. Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only Mother* (SWLM:835 [Spiritual Testament]).

With these words that the Sisters received as a spiritual testament, Louise reaffirmed that which is essential for the Company of the Daughters of Charity. The Company was established and
founded to serve the poor which should be preferred to all other forms of ministry. The common life sustains and guarantees this service, a service which reveals God’s love to the Church and to the world. In the life of the Daughters of Charity Louise gave a central place to Christ. She recalled how Mary had been called to guide each and every individual to Christ and to the poor. During the night of March 13th Louise’s strength declined. Advised about these events, many Ladies of Charity visited her. The Duchess Ventadour asked to remain by Louise’s side until the end. Even though Louise was weak, she was very attentive to each person, comforting some and encouraging others. Vincent de Paul, who was also ill, was unable to be present. He sent a priest of the Mission to tell her that he hoped to meet her in heaven.

On March 15th, at 6:00am, Louise told the Sisters who were watching over her to get some rest and promised to tell them when the time came for her to appear before God. At 11:00am she called all the Sisters. Louise entered her final agony. The Duchess Ventadour was at her side holding a lighted candle. All the Sisters were on their knees reciting the prayers for those who are dying. One of the Missionaries bestowed the Apostolic Blessing on Louise and soon after, Louise died. It was 11:30am, Monday of Holy Week, March 15th, 1660.

On Wednesday Louise’s body was brought to the chapel of the Visitation, the church of Saint-Laurent, the parish of the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity. Gobillon, the first biographer who published his work sixteen years after Louise’s death, recounted an incident that was recalled by many people who visited her tomb: At different times a fine mist filled the air with the odor of violets and lilies. What is even more surprising is that the Daughters of Charity who went there to recite prayers at Louise’s tomb would return to their house with this strong odor on their person. They in turn would share this fragrance with the Sisters in the infirmary where the Sisters inhaled it with joy. It could also be said here that I myself have experienced this and I also tried to find some natural cause for all of this but no such explanation could be found.

Is not this perfume a reflection of Louise’s holiness and her profound humility? Is not this perfume an invitation to continue the work that has been begun on behalf of those persons who are poor?

For centuries countless Daughters of Charity have desired to live like Louise and as a result have consecrated their lives to God in order to serve Him in the least of their brothers and sisters. They have traveled innumerable highways and byways in order to be present to those who are most forgotten and despised. At the present time more than thirty thousand Daughters of Charity, in seventy-three countries, have heard the call of the poor: At the school of the Son of God, Daughters of Charity learn that no type of distress should be foreign to them. Christ appeals constantly to their Company through their suffering brothers and sisters, through the signs of the times, and through the Church. Multiple are the forms of poverty and multiple the forms of service, but one is the love bestowed on those whom God has “called and assembled” (Constitutions, #11). In Europe, as well as in Africa, Asia, the Americas and Australia, the Daughters of Charity exert great effort in order to live out the great insights of Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul and in order to respond with renewed fidelity to the needs of the present era.

Translated by Charles T. Plock, CM