

# *E*choes of the Company

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Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

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## Letter of May 9, 2020

Dear Sisters,

*The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ  
be with us forever!*

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*Spiritual  
Life*

Seven weeks have passed since Sister Kathleen went home to the Lord whom she loved and served so much. Many of you have subsequently sent messages or letters. I want to thank you for these signs of gratitude and sisterly affection for Sister Kathleen as well as for the support of your prayer for the members of the General Council and myself. We were very aware of it and felt just how close we were to each other. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

During our Council meeting on April 29, after studying the results of the consultation and following prayer, reflection and discussion, we appointed **Sister Luisa FARRI** General Councillor until the 2021 General Assembly. Sister Luisa belongs to the Quasi-Province; she is the Sister Servant of the Casa Maria Immacolata local community in Rome and in the past was the Visitatrix of one of the Provinces of Italy. She accepted this office with great availability and generosity despite the sacrifice asked of her. She will have particular responsibility for the Quasi-Province, the Provinces of Graz-Central Europe, Cologne-Netherlands, Belgium-France-Swit-

zerland, Near East, San Vincenzo-Italia and Sardinia. She will take part in preparations for the General Assembly and will be able to accompany in a special way the process for the unification of the two Provinces of Italy. Please hold her in prayer.

For several weeks now, the world has been in a state of shock in the face of a pandemic that no one ever imagined would happen. Globalization has never been so concretely and violently evident. Humanity thought that it was almighty, both in terms of its knowledge and of its ability to act, and yet its fragility has come out for all to see.

We have to think about what to do today even while acknowledging that the rebuilding of the future must take place in a climate consisting of questions, doubts and fears in which one uncertainty succeeds another.

And we, Daughters of Charity, live in this turmoil and must take up this two-fold challenge: the necessity of protecting ourselves, for *“The only thing I recommend most earnestly and ardently to you is to take all reasonable precautions to preserve your health”* (December 1, 1656 - CCD VI, 156) and responding to the call to serve all those who suffer the most from this pandemic: *“Quoi! To be a Christian and to see our brother suffering without weeping with him, without being sick with him! That’s to be lacking in charity; it’s being a caricature of a Christian; it’s inhuman”* (May 30, 1659 - CCD XII, 222).

At this point, all the Provinces are affected. We pray in particular for those of Spain and San Vincenzo-Italia, which have suffered the most in terms of the Sisters’ health, with a significant number of deaths.

Moreover, we know that numerous Sisters have tested positive across all the Provinces. Unfortunately, some are still hospitalized, especially in the Province of Chelmno-Poznan in Poland,

and we are aware of some deaths directly or indirectly linked to Covid-19 that sometimes aggravated already weak and worrisome health.

Several Sisters are kept outside of their Province due to the sudden imposition of travel restrictions. At the Motherhouse, five Sisters from Latin America and one Sister from Congo were not able to return home after the March session. Elsewhere, there are missionaries visiting family or Sisters in formation in another country than their own and who are also obliged to wait for the end of measures limiting movement. Sisters of the Interprovincial Seminary of Latin America who were on their apostolic experience in several countries have not been able to return to the Seminary.

Uncertainty also lies in how the Provincial Assemblies can take place. Provincial Councils are currently working to adapt the dates, locations and methods to their situation. It means organizing things differently than usual while maintaining the quality of these Assemblies, which are so important for the future of the Company. With flexibility and careful study, this is possible, and we trust each Province and each Sister will assume responsibility in this regard. The priority is to keep what is essential: relying on the Lord, let us focus on what makes us become ever more fully Daughters of Charity and strengthen communion within Provinces and the Company as a whole. The four major challenges put forward to us are more relevant than ever but obviously will be considered in the light of the current experience of the world and what the future hold for it.

“Ephata...” Let us dare to open ourselves to each other’s thinking and the new realities of the world, sure that the Spirit is guiding us in this difficult period. The context of the crisis brings inequalities and growing poverty out into the open and will oblige us to rethink, perhaps differently, our services, missionary priorities and, of course, our way of life.

*“Let us confidently continue our commitments along familiar roads and enthusiastically and generously take new paths”*  
(IAD, page 15).

Visitatrixes and local communities are observing immediate consequences for people who are poor but also for the middle class with a rise in unemployment. Hunger is beginning to emerge on every continent, with a real risk of famine. Anxiety and violence are worsening among the people most at risk and families struggling the most. Migrants and those without documentation find their situation becoming increasingly inhumane...

Daughters of Charity everywhere are rapidly getting organized and joining with others in food distribution, delivery of aid packages, visits or telephone calls to support those who no longer can go out or who are condemned to the margins of the margins. In the health care field, Sisters continue their service and often fill in for absent staff; in other cases, they reach out to people living on the streets, especially children.

During an epidemic, Saint Louise advised the Sisters, *“I beg you not to go to visit the sick without rubbing your nose with vinegar and putting some on your temples”* (May 13, 1659 – *Spiritual Writings*, p. 640). Today, she would surely say to use hand sanitizer diligently!

Initiatives are coming to life with youth from schools that are currently closed to make masks or prepare meals for people experiencing homelessness. Sisters also contribute to distance learning, whether with educational staff or in the framework of associations.

More than usual, the Miraculous Medal is being used to support prayer and sustain trust. It is welcomed as a sign of God’s presence and benevolence. The Sisters at the Motherhouse are receiving many requests and sending medals throughout the

world. Some Provinces are also indicating this. Let us intensify our prayer to Mary and dare to suggest it more.

All these are familiar roads but ones that have once again become priorities. As for new paths, now we must take them, and, in a way, the Assemblies come at the right time, even if everything is more complicated!

What if these Assemblies, however they take place, became an opportunity to make simple, common-sense decisions fearlessly and enthusiastically? The future will prove if we are able, as the Company has always done, to change together in order to encounter our poorest brothers and sisters more fully.

Some events throughout the Company for your prayer in hope and confidence...

In Vietnam, during the night of April 26, the house of the Anê Thành – Tà Ghênh local community burnt to the ground. The four Sisters were able to escape, almost miraculously, two of them by jumping from an upper floor. The Province wants to quickly resume this mission opened at the end of 2018 because it is located in a rural, isolated and poor area. We assure the Sisters of our prayer.

In Huaquillas, on the border between Ecuador and Peru, an international local community with three Sisters from different Latin American Provinces was opened on March 14, 2020, in order to reach out to the hundreds of Venezuelan migrants who congregated in this location. Given the epidemic, they had to leave, as well as the Sisters. The plan is to reopen as soon as possible.

In several African Provinces, the Sisters had the joy of welcoming Postulants to the Seminary in February and March: 8 in Congo, 8 in Madagascar, 7 in Central Africa/Cameroon and 6 in Mozambique.

The world and the Company have already gone through periods of crisis. Saint Louise, as we celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her beatification (May 9, 1920), can inspire us. Let us reread what she wrote to Jeanne Lepintre, the Sister Servant in Nantes, during the great hardships of the Fronde: *“During these times of affliction... our sisters... never stopped serving the sick poor. In Paris you would not believe the amount of alms given to the poor who had no bread. I believe that this has drawn down God’s mercy upon us so that we might have peace”* (April 6, 1649 – *Spiritual Writings*, p. 280).

I conclude by wishing you a wonderful feast of Saint Louise. She accompanies us on these unfamiliar paths. She encourages us not to lose heart and to go forward without fear, attentive to what the Lord will inspire in us. Let us remain joyful in service, joyful in love and joyful in prayer.

*“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”* (Spiritual Testament, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 835).

Be assured of my prayer and that of the members of the General Council.

Sister Françoise PETIT  
*Daughter of Charity*



## Letter of July 1, 2020

Dear Sisters,

*The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us forever!*

Two months ago, I gave you some information about the Provinces, in particular concerning the Covid-19 pandemic. Since that time, many of you have asked for more recent news. It thus seems appropriate for me to share some with you, knowing that the world is far from having finished with the virus and that circumstances change rapidly.

What has happened in the Company over these past weeks? The General Councillors made inquiries of some Provinces. Here is an overview of the current situation.

### **In Asia**

In general, the Sisters are healthy.

In India, infections and deaths tied to Covid continue to increase. Millions of displaced people in cities are unemployed and return to their villages, bringing the virus there. Churches, other places of worship, schools, etc. remain closed. In collaboration with associations, the Daughters of Charity take part in distributing food to people who are homeless. The highly vulnerable people whom they house in residences are receiving good care. Our hospitals are taking in people under quarantine as well as new cases as they arrive. Our Sisters and other nurses are very much present there and provide excellent service.

Cambodia and Laos have few cases, and both countries have selectively opened their borders with very strict visa requirements.

In the Philippines, the Church is particularly active in efforts to counter the consequences of the pandemic. The Sisters keep up their services, whether in hospitals, schools or social service centers, and financially support projects for food and health safety. Travel restrictions within the country have delayed Sisters' arrival in their new mission assignments. Similarly, the Seminary Sisters and postulants in local communities for their apostolic experience were not able to return, so the Provincial Council decided to postpone entrance to the Seminary and sending on mission.

Vietnam has had no new cases since the beginning of May 2020. People have returned to work, services have reopened and students are back at school. Our Sisters are serving those who are poor as usual, and none of them is infected.

## **In Europe**

In the countries where the Company is present, the lockdown and medical treatment have proven beneficial and caused the epidemic to diminish considerably though not to disappear completely.

The Sisters who were hospitalized, particularly in Poland, have been able to return home, tired but cured. The Sisters who are able continue to contribute to assistance operations, especially for people who are homeless and elderly people living alone.

The situation is improving in all the Provinces of Spain, but the period was painful. Local communities dealt with this, and the Sisters participate in food distribution programs. Journalists are speaking of "hunger lines".

## Letter of July 1, 2020

Italy, which was also significantly affected, finds its conditions improving. Some Sisters are still somewhat ill, and some are having difficulty regaining strength after their illness. The Sisters strive to join forces with others because poverty is growing overwhelmingly.

In France, the number of deaths of people living on the streets doubled in comparison with the same period last year. Sisters already typically present to them have resumed working with them as part of associations.

In Portugal, the pandemic is mostly under control. In one parish, the Sisters assist in providing food. At night during the lockdown, they would drive through the streets of the city with loudspeakers to pray the rosary. People would open their windows or go out on their balcony to pray in communion with the victims of the pandemic.

### **In the United States**

After a three-month lockdown, doors reopened with ultimately peaceful protests and gatherings in support of the “Black Lives Matter” movement. The majority of participants wore masks because the context of Covid remains worrisome.

One Sister died from this virus. The Sisters are gradually returning to their ministries. Throughout the lockdown period, they used available means of communication (telephone, internet, Zoom) to remain in contact with people served and among local communities.

### **In Latin America and the Caribbean**

The crisis is still intensifying in almost all countries.

Some Sisters have died from the virus. All know priests or members of other congregations who have also fallen victim to the virus, notably young priests. The Sisters help distribute food, especially to migrants and people who are homeless. Border regions are the most affected with thousands of families blocked without any resources, sanitary measures or means of protection. The Sisters also hand out masks and hygiene materials. Preventative measures are being taken for the most vulnerable people.

The three Sisters on mission in Huaquillas (on the Ecuador-Peruvian border), whom I mentioned in my May 9 letter, were able to return there. They recognize that the most urgent need is to obtain food, water and at least one mask per person. Venezuelan refugees there no longer have the right to return to their country, nor do they have legal status in this border region. What future is possible? What role might the Company play?

In Brazil, a number of Sisters have died or were hospitalized. However, the Daughters of Charity are aware that they cannot remain unresponsive to the difficulties encountered by those who are most poor. Each Province is trying to take action given hunger, deaths, unemployment...

Here are some examples. A center for people living on the streets reopened in order to offer them the possibility to bathe and eat. The Sisters have sometimes welcomed up to 200 people in a single day. With the Vincentian Family and other associations, one Province took the initiative of helping migrant families, primarily through food assistance.

## **In Africa**

The number of Covid cases is gradually increasing with differences depending on the country, but the specter of hunger and

### Letter of July 1, 2020

delinquency looms large everywhere. It is difficult to find food, and people cannot move about freely. Schools are closed.

In Madagascar, health emergencies are becoming worse, and it should be noted that there is a new outbreak of malaria. The social situation is deteriorating.

The Sisters continue their mission in Mozambique. Despite working in hospitals, none of them has been touched by the virus up to now. The preventative measures set by the government are not respected, so the number of cases tends to increase. The Sisters found isolated elderly people without food and water, whom they invited to come into residences.

In Congo, the extent of the Covid epidemic is relatively low. In contrast, that of Ebola has taken off again and is much more dangerous. There are cases of infection in the area around Mbandaka, where the Provincial House is located. The Sisters are naturally very worried and must deal with a lack of fuel, protective equipment, etc. Part of the city of Kinshasa is on lockdown.

In Nigeria, the Sisters pursue their activities. They shared information on the website of the Company. I invite you to consult it as it is very interesting.

In Kenya, the majority of cases of infection are being recorded in Nairobi and on the border with Uganda. The number is increasing. Transportation has become impossible. The local community in Kiiio is totally isolated. However, the DREAM Program can carry on, and the program against hunger in Chanzo continues.

I conclude with the Motherhouse! All the Sisters are in good health. On June 2, the Chapel reopened its doors with all the necessary precautions, and Eucharistic celebrations for pilgrims resumed June 23.

This letter does not mention all the Provinces, but you can imagine that all are affected and courageously confront urgent problems while wondering about the future and local communities' presence and activities after these troubled months.

Is it premature to venture to say that this time might be that of "more" revisions of different services? What are Saint Vincent and Saint Louise whispering in our ears?

All these events strengthen our communion and prompt us to intensify our prayer for each other. May the Company, in all the places where it is present, successfully maintain the essence of the reason for which it was born: "*for charity, for God, for the poor*" (Saint Vincent, November 24, 1658 - CCD VII, 396).

I am taking advantage of this letter to share with you some news concerning Provincial Assemblies. To date, four Provinces have concluded theirs. They were able to hold them as planned and in a single location. Otherwise, the vast majority of Provinces had to postpone their Assemblies and sometimes arrange to have them in several locations. About half of the Provinces have scheduled them for July and August. The others have moved them to September, October or November, and one Province will finish on the special date of December 8. We will then be able to give thanks for all this reflection carried out with creativity, passion and trust! Thank you to the Provincial Councils who are doing everything possible and to all of you who are open to experiencing these Assemblies differently. Let us count on the Lord seeing this and sending His Spirit on each Sister.

Let us listen to the voice of those who are poor, accept changes and, as we have been doing for more than three months, welcome the unexpected! Unexpected events, God's surprises...

Letter of July 1, 2020

Have you had the opportunity to read Pope Francis' message for the 2020 World Day of the Poor, "*Stretch forth your hand to the poor*" (Sir 7:32)? This text resonates so much with the theme of our Assemblies, specifically with the outstretched hand in the logo, that we are even more encouraged to *break through the gate and go towards in order to encounter!*

*"May...prayer enable outstretched hands to become an embrace of shared and rediscovered fraternity"* (Pope Francis, June 13, 2020); yes, for *"God... asks first for the heart and, after that, for the work"* (Saint Vincent, October 18, 1655 - CCD X, 108).

With the assurance of my prayer and my sisterly affection.

Sister Françoise PETIT  
*Daughter of Charity*

Louise de Marillac,  
“*a model and a mirror in which  
to look at ourselves*”  
Her process of personal growth

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## INTRODUCTION

Living! I believe that this is what it is about, living and savoring the pleasure of boundless joy, happiness or the fullness of life. This constant desire in people of all times cuts through all cultures' history. The *thirst for living* drives us to set off down the path toward the fountain of life. This underlying restlessness, sometimes gentle and other times intense, leads to seeking and trying paths until we find the hearth from which we had strayed, a welcoming serenity. All people have this thirst; it can be hidden or barely contained but never leaves us and serves as a call to go further and overcome limitations.

*Session  
for Sisters  
25-40 years  
vocation*

Existing! It involves an awareness of our own life in the fullest sense of the word. It suggests realities like going forth, emerging, being born, appearing, blossoming and being. Etymologically, *ex* indicates the outward direction; *sistere*, taking position, being fixed. Existing is the perception of people who are rooted in the heart of life and feel impelled to go forth, be reborn, grow... How can we harness this energy, “*a spring of water welling up to eternal*



Louise de Marillac, her process of personal growth

life,”<sup>1</sup> and savor this human experience resulting from God’s action?

Over the course of this day, we will connect this longing or thirst with the process of growth for personal formation. The growth process responds to the urgent need *to come to be* contained in the nucleus of life that we are, the *image of God*. Formative work supports, solidifies and strengthens the growth and development of who we are. The Company considers it the endeavor of helping someone “*to live her vocation as a progressive modeling of herself on Christ*,”<sup>2</sup> Christ, “*the image of the invisible God*.”<sup>3</sup>

Louise de Marillac experienced this thirst. She set off and succeeded in finding the primal spring. The call to life, joy and love powerfully resonated in her. She did not settle for a life with a limited horizon, a low intensity joy or a love with little influence. She let life touch her and enjoyed fullness. If we evoke her today, it is because persuasive voices continue to resound in the Company, like the voice of an anonymous Sister who said to her companions, “*The life of Mademoiselle Le Gras is a mirror in which we have only to look at ourselves*,”<sup>4</sup> or that of Vincent de Paul, who would tell the Sisters a few days later, “*It remains for us to pattern ourselves on it, but to do so we must know her well*.”<sup>5</sup>

## 1 – THE BEGINNING OF A PATH TOWARD FULLNESS

We will approach Louise de Marillac from before her first heartbeats to discover the foundations of her holistic development as a person. Today, we are aware of the importance of conception and birth in human development because it holds keys to under-

1. John 4:14

2. C. 49

3. Colossians 1:15

4. Conference 118, CCD X, 577

5. Conference 119, CCD X, 582

standing and changing behaviors, attitudes, emotions, etc.

## 1.1 – A NEBULOUS BEGINNING

There is a mystery in the origin of human life. The thinkers who forged our Christian tradition expressed it this way: “*God created mankind in His image; in the image of God He created them.*”<sup>6</sup> “*The Lord God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*”<sup>7</sup> God directly creates human life while men and women participate in its reproduction. God creates human beings “*in His image*” out of love, and although they are weak, limited and beset by temptation, they enjoy His constant and loving presence and protection. Every human life contains *a plan intended to bring this image of God to fullness.*<sup>8</sup> Louise de Marillac, the adult woman, held this conviction.

Louise was born on August 12, 1591,<sup>9</sup> into a family belonging to the nobility, the Marillacs. One member of this family, Louis de Marillac, showed great interest in asserting that he was her biological father and, following the customs of this social class and this era, acted as such. He took care of her and provided for a good upbringing and an excellent education. He called her his daughter, and she remembered and honored him as her father throughout her life. Louis declared in his will that “*she had been his greatest consolation in the world, and that he thought she had been given him by God for his peace of mind in the afflictions of life.*”<sup>10</sup> However, recent studies have brought out evidence that he was sexually impotent, casting doubt that Louise was really his daughter. When the child was born, Louis

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6. Genesis 1:27

7. Genesis 2:7

8. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n° 355-368

9. Gobillon, Nicolas. *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras, Foundress and First Superior of the Company of the Sisters of Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor*, London, 1984, p. 3

10. Gobillon, Nicolas. *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, p. 3

### Louise de Marillac, her process of personal growth

was a widower and remained one until his second marriage with Antoinette Le Camus.<sup>11</sup> This woman, who led a scandalous life, gave birth on December 28, 1601, to a girl, Innocente, to whom Louis gave his name and left all his inheritance at his death.<sup>12</sup>

We do not know who Louise's mother was either. Although her first biographer called her "Marguerite Le Camus" without giving any more details about her identity, there is serious doubt that this woman existed. It is suspected that the woman who bore Louise in her womb was a servant or an unknown woman connected in some way to a man in the Marillac family. The silence around her is heavy, to the point that Louise de Marillac never once in her life expressed any memory of the woman who gave birth to her. It is highly probable that she never knew her.

During the time that Louise spent in the womb of her unknown mother, France was at war, and the city of Paris was besieged from July 1590 to November 1591. The silence surrounding her conception and birth does not make it possible for us to know any details nor to assume how this particular situation in pregnancy affected the expectant mother and the newborn. However, given the rampant skirmishes and attacks over the entire territory of France but especially in the capital and surrounding area, we can imagine the fear, insecurity and hunger that reigned all throughout the pregnancy and Louise's first days of life.

As a newborn, Louise obviously depended on others for everything. The fact that her biological mother disappeared rather quickly deprived Louise of her motherly warmth. Based on modern knowledge of psychology, we can assume that her emotional security was affected, becoming weak and fragile. She

11. Louis was first married in 1584 to Marie de la Rozière, who died around 1588 without any descendants, and a second time on January 15, 1595, to Antoinette Le Camus.

12. Martínez, Benito. *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres* [*Determined to create a paradise for the poor*], Editorial CEME, Salamanca, 1995. p. 13-

needed contact, caresses, attention, smiles, security and protection as well as listening. All this influenced the child's personality but did not determine it. The opportunities offered her were very helpful, allowing her to forge the foundations of her character and personality because her father, "*realizing that he alone was responsible for her, took special care over her education. He placed her as a boarder in the monastery of the religious of Poissy, where he had some relatives, so that in that house she would be given the principles of Christian piety.*"<sup>13</sup>

## 1.2 – WITHIN THE MARILLAC FAMILY

Society considered Louise a Marillac during her childhood, adolescence, young adulthood and adulthood. All her life, she herself thought of herself as belonging to this lineage from which she received qualities and abilities as well as shortcomings and weaknesses. When she was born, the most important members of the clan were her father, Louis, Lord of Ferrières-en-Brie and Farainvilliers; Michel, who would become Chancellor and Guard of the Seals; Louis, Count of Beaumont, the future Marshall, married to Catherine de Medici, an aunt of the Queen; and Valence, married to Octavien Doni d'Attichy. It would seem that she inherited from the Marillac family a brilliant intelligence, an unostentatious and simple elegance, a deep sense of honor, remarkable leadership ability, fidelity and obedience to authority, a sense of responsibility in her work, ease in social relationships, perseverance to reach her goals and even the health that allowed her to reach 69 years of age, very old for the times. The Marillacs were influential and prestigious in Parisian society, front and center in politics, culture and the reform of Christian life in the capital.

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13. Gobillon, Nicolas. *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, p. 3

### 1.3 – THE EXPERIENCE OF GROWTH IN THE ROYAL CONVENT OF POISSY

Louise was sent to board at the royal convent of Saint Louis of Poissy. She had a nurse who breastfed her, and she was taught to walk and talk. She interacted with smiling and attentive people. Jean Calvet believes that “*the period spent at Poissy was entirely happy.*”<sup>14</sup> Everything leads us to believe that she received healthy food and good hygiene care. She grew normally and developed her mind. With the other children her age, she was immersed in an atmosphere of wisdom, art, classic culture and beautiful liturgy. As part of the convent’s academic program, Louise was introduced to philosophy, began to develop a taste for painting and music, learned Latin and maybe Greek, did needlework and participated in very solemn liturgical celebrations. Her intelligence, put to work in the study of classical languages and philosophy, became sharp, precise and logical; her character strengthened as she learned to dominate her passions and mitigate her weaknesses. Her will turned to the truth, beauty and good, and she discovered the sense of the transcendent. Sister Elisabeth Charpy tells us that she received a “*thorough religious formation. She learned to know Jesus Christ, to love him, to pray to him, and to serve him by serving the poor.*”<sup>15</sup> The convent was richly decorated to support learning. Frescos, stained glass windows, statues, books and manuscripts depicted scenes from sacred history, French history and the lives of the saints, especially King Saint Louis. He was shown visiting those who are poor, bringing assistance to them, feeding them, washing their feet and even kissing their wounds. Marie-Dominique Poinsetet demonstrates that Louise learned charity in Poissy.<sup>16</sup>

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14. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait* [trans. G. F. Pullen], Ditchling Press: London, 1959, p. 20

15. Charpy, Elisabeth. *Louise de Marillac: Come Winds or High Waters* [trans. Clara Orban and Sr. Mary Jo Stein], Vincentian Studies Institute: Chicago, 2018, p. 9

16. Poinsetet, Dominique. *De la angustia a la santidad* [From anxiety to holiness], Editorial Studium: Madrid, 1963, p. 24-25

When her father visited her, he enjoyed speaking with her about her studies, especially philosophy, seeing how she was coming to know the faith and admiring her drawings, paintings and needlework.<sup>17</sup>

We can safely say that the Royal Convent of Poissy contributed to effectively compensating for what may have lacked during Louise's early life, had a positive influence on her personality and endowed her with a rich cultural and religious grounding.

## **2 – A FORMATION THAT HELPED HER TO CONTINUE GROWING**

The dynamics of growth inherently has the capacity to contribute to a harmonious and holistic development of a person. It can be strengthened or weakened by external challenges, by the cultivation of or inattention to personal abilities, by the type of choices made, by the way of facing work on oneself, by a positive attitude and by listening to the desire to live and be happy. The entire person emerges at the pace of the individual's holistic physical, psychological and spiritual evolution. The formation accompanying this evolution is crucial in the process.

### **2.1 – IN THE HOUSE OF A PIOUS WOMAN**

Soon before turning thirteen, Louise de Marillac had to leave the royal convent and move to Paris. Jean Calvet states that “*her heart was wounded.*”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it was her father who decided on the change so that she would receive “*suitable training in household skills,*”<sup>19</sup> “*housekeeping, cooking and dressmaking.*”<sup>20</sup> However, it would seem that the change had a financial motive since the pension at the convent was rather high, and a time came

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17. Cf. Gobillon, Nicolas. *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, p. 3

18. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 22

19. Gobillon, Nicolas. *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, p. 3

20. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 21

### Louise de Marillac, her process of personal growth

when Louise's father could not pay it because of the many expenses he faced. Benito Martínez thinks, "*Surely, she left Poissy in July 1604 when her father died as no one took responsibility for paying the high pension in this convent for noble girls.*"<sup>21</sup> This shows the Marillac family's attitude of rejection and exclusion. In fact, we do not know of any Marillac who took charge of her or who was granted any sort of guardianship. Moreover, this change in residence has been considered a step down the social ladder.

The house where Louise went to live as an adolescent was administered by a good and pious single woman who wanted to do good by finishing the education of young women from classes less than the nobility. As an adult, Louise would describe her as a "*good pious woman,*"<sup>22</sup> and Gobillon called her "*a capable and virtuous woman*"<sup>23</sup> who wanted to create a welcoming, family atmosphere in her house.

Biographers have projected a complex emotional state on the adolescent Louise during her stay in this house. Benito Martínez asserts, "*She must have felt alone; solitude very naturally indicated, already from her adolescence, that she was illegitimate and belonged to no one.*"<sup>24</sup> Jean Calvet states, "*Her heart was wounded. Her vocation to suffering was being made plain to her.*"<sup>25</sup> She was an orphan and understood that her family was abandoning her: there was no place for her, neither in her father's house nor in that of her other relatives. It must have been a painful break with her past, leaving people whom she loved, a refined and orderly lifestyle and the atmosphere in which she had been immersed with its values, objectives, behavioral norms,

21. Martínez, Benito. *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres*, p. 21

22. Documents – *La Compagnie des Filles de la Charité aux origines* [Documents – *The beginnings of the Company of Daughters of Charity*], D. 803, Testimony on the Virtues of Louise de Marillac by Barbe Bailly, p. 923

23. Gobillon, Nicolas. *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, p. 3

24. Martínez, Benito. *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres*, p. 23

25. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 22

ways of establishing relationships and even social status.

Despite all this, Louise quickly fit in and adapted to her new way of life and work. Adolescence is the time to forge an identity, seek private spaces and build relationships with friends. Louise lived many experiences from a certain depth during this period. In this difficult situation, she came to enrich her personality. “*She became strong, determined and sharp in business matters.*”<sup>26</sup>

Gobillon says that “*her mind [was] capable of all kinds of instruction*” (p. 6). In the house of this pious woman, Louise cultivated theoretical knowledge through reading, studying concepts and commentaries, and achieved an impressive depth of general knowledge for a woman of her time. She also developed her practical knowledge by learning from and collaborating with her companions in the work of organization, housekeeping, supervision and administration of the household. Barbe Bailly recounted that she had heard her say that she “*did the lowly chores of the household like cutting wood and other tiresome tasks.*”<sup>27</sup> Louise continued improving her manual dexterity through needlework, sewing, drawing and painting. She was fond of learning. We are told that she applied herself to painting with “*such a leaning*” and continued reading philosophy texts “*to form her reasoning and to give her entry into the higher reaches of knowledge.*”<sup>28</sup> She also enjoyed an environment that fostered virtue, reflecting on Christian principles and aligning her behavior with her faith and religious education. In short, in the house of this “good woman,” Louise developed and expanded the knowledge that she had acquired in Poissy, complementing it with learning “*how to successfully raise a family and run the domestic aspects of a home or business: raising a family, household work, account-*

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26. Martínez, Benito. *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres*, p. 23

27. *Documents*, D. 803, Testimony on the virtues of Louise de Marillac by Barbe Bailly, p. 923

28. Gobillon, Nicolas. *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, p. 3



## Louise de Marillac, her process of personal growth

ing, etc.”<sup>29</sup> A creative, prudent, intelligent and inventive attitude emerged as part of her psychological structure. She possessed “a proud intelligence which begins to feel the driving force of its own gifts [and] will find the elements of culture in all things,”<sup>30</sup> laying down the foundations of a personality that would allow her to be happy.

## **2.2 – HER CHOICES**

The life force deep within her opened up a path amid difficulties. Imbued with a great innate sense of prudence, supported by the formation that she had already received and accompanied by the pious woman, Louise made choices that would set her in a good direction given the circumstances that were hers to live. Her rich, bold and creative personality held the necessary resources to overcome difficulties.

### **Choice of specific reading material**

Leaving Poissy for Paris allowed her to have more exposure to the ambiance of Paris. Her psychological maturation gave her greater freedom to act according to her tastes and preferences.

Reform was in the air in the French capital. After the Wars of Religion and beneficial policies of Henri IV, the people experienced a great awakening to their spiritual dimension thanks to the publication of the best literature of Flemish, German and Spanish mystics. Groups of people gathered in private homes to help each other live an active and renewed faith. Convents had a significant revitalizing influence on society. Francis de Sales was in Paris in 1602, awakening the people’s desire for holiness and what he called the “devout life.” Jesuits, Carmelites and Capuchins appeared in this context of spiritual renewal.

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29. Martínez, Benito. *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres*, p. 23

30. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 24

Soon after coming to Paris, Louise enthusiastically connected with this environment. In contrast to the idea we may have of a withdrawn, timid young woman with very limited contact with her contemporary society, we can dare to think of her as a modern young woman for her time, open to her surrounding environment. The readings to which it would seem she had access in this stage of her life and the people who were references for her were very in vogue at the time. She eagerly read *The Sinner's Guide* by Brother Louis de Granada, which was very helpful for developing her practice of introspection and self-reflection. She learned to observe her inner experience and to make practical resolutions. She also read *Introduction to the Devout Life*, which communicated gentleness, peace and optimism at the same time as strength and a clear, demanding doctrine; her almost natural tendency for devotion and holiness made her identify easily with it. For the rest of her days, this book would be part of her life. She read other popular books such as *The Pearl of the Gospels*, *Sacred Philosophy*, *Brief Discourse* and *The Imitation of Christ*.<sup>31</sup>

Her passion for reading shaped her personality and influenced her life. She became a highly educated person thanks to the pleasure she found in reading. This experience caused her to adopt values that gave her the strength to overcome crises. Louise resolutely advanced toward a spiritual horizon that gave meaning to her life.

### **The decision to dedicate time to meditation**

Much later, Louise de Marillac would tell the Sisters that she had begun to make mental prayer as early as 15 or 16 years of age.<sup>32</sup> She thus already had a deep experience of prayer at that time. According to this testimony, Louise began around 1606

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31. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 25

32. *Documents*, D. 822, On the Virtues of Louise de Marillac by Mathurine Guérin, p. 947

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or 1607 to make silent personal prayer part of her life in order to unite more fully with God. More than a vague memory of isolated acts, Louise treasured this experience of prayer in her heart, which would lead her to always tend to her personal relationship with God.

It is said that “*from her childhood she had had the attraction to meditation, and that it came to her easily.*”<sup>33</sup> At that critical time in her life, from the depths of her being, she gave free rein to the impulses of her heart and felt the necessity to raise her eyes to heaven for assistance. In silence, she got in touch with her personal reality, her emotional world and the thoughts stemming from her experience of abandonment and solitude. She managed to find the living source that could quench her thirst for love, recognition and security. Attention to the presence of God in a reflective atmosphere gave her the assurance of being loved, invited her to trust and fostered her interior movement of openness to the transcendent and gift of self. Surrounded by this presence, she would get her emotions in order, heal her wounds, grow in maturity and understand everything that happened to her as in agreement with the will of God. This experience, although with the inconsistency of all those who are just beginning, soon took on the character of inspiration and gave her a sense of security in her choices.

Regularity in the practice of meditation created her prayerful way of being. Little by little, this spiritual experience influenced what she felt, desired, did and said. The two watercolors that we carefully conserve date from this period. The first, on which we can read, “*The name of the one I love,*” represents a girl seated among trees and flowers and writing the name of Jesus. The other depicts the Good Shepherd surrounded by sheep who drink from His wounds; one of them, propped up on His knees, drinks

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33. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 25. We accept the accuracy of the testimony the author takes from Marguerite Chétif although we do not know its source.

from the wound in His side. Did Louise intend to depict herself?

### **An ingenious suggestion to help**

Sister Elisabeth Charpy writes that it was in the house of the pious woman that “*Louise had her first experience of real poverty.*”<sup>34</sup> She would tell the first Sisters that the woman was poor. We do not know if this was a passing situation or if the pension really did not have enough money because the boarders did not pay enough to cover expenses fully.

It would seem that Louise was “*a girl of warm feeling, with already plenty of decision and a practical mind.*”<sup>35</sup> Although accustomed to another lifestyle, she suggested an activity that would contribute to relieving their tight financial situation. “*She persuaded Mademoiselle to allow into the house the materials for all sorts of domestic work. She rallied the other girls to her help.*”<sup>36</sup> Already at this young age, Louise listened and observed her surroundings, offered to take action and invited the other young women to collaborate. She placed what she had learned at the service of the lady of the house and offered to intervene with others in a domestic situation in order to transform it. We can see a seed of the creativity characteristic of her personality. Rather than focusing on herself and complaining, Louise developed a practical intuition for seeking solutions in situations of poverty.

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34. Charpy, Elisabeth. *Louise de Marillac: Come Winds or High Waters*, p. 9

35. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 22

36. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 22

## **The ardent desire to consecrate herself to God**

While living in this house, she participated in an event on July 23, 1606, that made an impression on all of Paris. The experience touched her deeply, leaving her emotional for a long time<sup>37</sup> and awakening in her the desire to join the new Capuchin nuns who processed from the Vendôme mansion, where they had stayed upon their arrival in Paris, to their new convent built by the Duchess of Mercoeur on Saint-Honoré Street. This new convent was across the street from that of the Capuchin monks.

Twelve nuns, almost all of them young, paraded barefoot through the streets, wearing a crown of thorns. A princess walked beside each one of them. Eighty Capuchin monks led the procession, accompanied by the archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Pierre de Gondi, and his auxiliary bishop, Henri de Gondi. The people in the crowd said that they had never seen any other order or congregation as austere as these Capuchins whom they called the “Daughters of the Passion.”

The Capuchin nuns were welcomed to their new convent by the Provincial of the Capuchin monks, Henry de Joyeuse, called Father Ange. He preached the homily. At that very time and place, Louise’s uncle, Michel de Marillac, and Pierre de Bérulle took the habit of the Third Order of Saint Francis. Her cousin Octavien, the second son of the Guardian of the Seals, would also be a Capuchin priest in the monastery,<sup>38</sup> which was one of the spiritual centers of Paris. It housed Laurent de Paris, Benoît de Canfield and Honoré de Champigny, figures on the front lines of the burgeoning spiritual renewal.

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37. She had also attended the solemn entry of the Carmelite nuns from Spain in 1605, which caused great enthusiasm among the people. Her uncle Michel played an important role in this. Nonetheless, the impact that that event produced in her was fleeting, without leaving a mark in the days to come.

38. Dirvin, Joseph. *Louise de Marillac*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux: New York, 1970, p. 20

Louise was not yet 15 years old but felt a strong attraction to the lifestyle of these nuns, to the point of deciding to establish a relationship with them that would allow her to know them better. They invited her to make a short retreat, sharing in the convent garden, the church and the refectory. She would later tell the first Daughters of Charity that “*when she went there, she was filled with joy merely at seeing the walls*” of the convent and that “*she often ate roots there.*”<sup>39</sup> Sister Marguerite Chétif heard her say that when she was young, “*she spent much of her time in religious houses, which were then attracting the faithful by the renewed vigor of their observance and by their fervor.*”<sup>40</sup>

Time went by, and the attraction this community held for her did not fade. It is not surprising that she made an inner promise to consecrate her life to God as a Capuchin. No matter the penances nor the great poverty these nuns practiced. In her times of prayer, Louise meditated and asked for insight to discern her vocation. She understood that the attraction she felt was a call from God, and when she was about 20 years old, she felt the time had come to make her decision. She spoke with Honoré de Champigny, Provincial of the Capuchins and a well-known director of conscience. After several conversations to become familiar with Louise’s situation, Father Honoré concluded, “*God had some other design on her.*”<sup>41</sup>

Used to taking life as it came, Louise reluctantly accepted this refusal for her to join the Capuchin community in Paris. However, her “*ardent desire to consecrate herself to God*” remained in her soul forever.

Louise, who probably felt uncertainty and fear, faced up to the suffering and, through what today we would call *ongoing*

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39. *Documents*, D. 803, Testimony on the Virtues of Louise de Marillac by Barbe Bailly, p. 923

40. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 25

41. Gobillon, Nicolas. *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, p. 4

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formation, continued developing the important dimensions of her identity. She was an educated, refined, beautiful, social, capable, creative and pious young woman. Monsignor Calvet states, “*We may well believe her own eyes to have been beautiful, clear, luminous, the mirror of an impassioned soul. Yes, we may say that she was beautiful.*”<sup>42</sup>

## **3 – MOVING TOWARD THE LIGHT DURING HER MARRIAGE**

At age 22, Louise de Marillac showed herself open and available to her only remaining possibility: marriage. A new stage, very different from the previous one, would thus open before her.

### **3.1 – AN INITIAL TRANQUIL AND CALM PERIOD**

It was a marriage of convenience arranged by the Marillac family. It is said that the family “*intervened so that she would be rejected by the Capuchins, gave her a good dowry and in a few months arranged the marriage.*”<sup>43</sup> Antoine Le Gras, as the “*Secretary to the Household to the Queen,*” made broad decisions, wrote important letters and served the interests of the Marillac family, which already held strategic positions at the court in finances, military, foreign affairs and domestic affairs but did not yet have a hold in the secretariat. Gobillon writes that Louise “*entered into marriage,*” adding, “*only through the necessity of having a home.*”<sup>44</sup> The marriage took place on February 5, 1613, in Saint Gervais Church, Antoine Le Gras’ parish. Through this marriage, Louise was linked to the household of the Queen Mother.

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42. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 29

43. Martínez, Benito. *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres*, p. 27-28; Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 30

44. Gobillon, Nicolas. *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, p. 4

On February 4, 1613, Louise had gone to the Attichy mansion, where her uncles and other relatives met with the notary. Louise publically heard, perhaps for the first time, her origin and social status proclaimed. She was a “child out of wedlock,” residing in the Attichy home, but all those whom she considered her relatives signed as “mutual friends” of the engaged couple. Her husband, Antoine Le Gras, a simple squire and not a gentleman, did not belong to the nobility, so Louise could never be called *Madame* like her aunts and cousins, a title reserved for the nobility. She would be called *Mademoiselle* like all other women of the bourgeoisie. The conflictual relationship with the great Marillac family was resolved because from then on, she was called Mademoiselle Le Gras. Calvet writes, “*Even if we assume that Louise was already advanced in humility, she was too much a woman not to regard this brilliant gathering as some compensation for the bitterness of her years as a poor pensioner.*”<sup>45</sup>

Mademoiselle Le Gras successfully overcame this humiliating experience. Although she did not know Antoine, she came to love him, and they brought a son into the world in October 1613. They baptized him in the parish of Saint Merri and named him Michel Antoine. Louise experienced the joy of motherhood and offered her maternal tenderness and care.

The newlyweds lived in the Marais, a neighborhood inhabited by members of the upper nobility. Antoine and Louise participated in the social life of the court.<sup>46</sup> Louise had a good relationship with her family. Her uncle Michel, at least in his letters, expressed interest in her health and the state of her soul

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45. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 31-32

46. They participated in receptions, audiences, parties, balls, recitals and other activities where the elite of Paris gathered. Differences between noble and bourgeois social classes were evident and respected. The couple was invited to palaces of important people when there were special family events, and they hosted others, of their level, in their house. Under the protection of the Marillac family, they were easily recognized as their protégées. They socialized with them in a welcoming and close way.



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and signed with a caring tone, wishing her a “*long and happy life.*”<sup>47</sup> Her aunt Catherine de Medici told her, “*How dear you are to me; do give me news of yourself from time to time.*”<sup>48</sup> The young couple related more particularly with those joining in the so-called modern spiritual renewal spreading throughout Paris. Louise shared her favorite readings with Antoine and steadily expanded the number of her preferred authors.<sup>49</sup> When the right moment came, they requested and received permission to read the Bible in French. They regularly attended liturgical celebrations that gave solemnity to holy days in their parish and in other churches and listened to sermons of renowned preachers who supported the reform movement that was gaining strength. They set up an oratory in their home and were faithful to their prayer life. They continued the charitable tradition of the husband’s family that, biographers say, had founded a hospital in Puy to care for those who are poor. A household servant, Madame La Cour, said of Louise, “*In her youth she had a great piety and devotion to serving those who were poor; she took them sweets and jams, cookies and other sweets; she combed them, she cleaned them of mange and vermin, she buried them.*” She added, “*She would leave his [her husband’s] company to go up a mountain to relieve a poor person who was trembling of cold – she went even though it was raining and hailing...*”<sup>50</sup>

From 1613 to 1617, Louise lived through a calm, tranquil period with a simple life style that kept her connected with contemporary society, in continuity with the personal growth process that she had begun, enjoying family life and court life without extinguishing her thirst for the inner life.

47. *Documents*, D. 827, p. 977

48. *Documents*, D. 835, p. 983

49. In 1616, Francis de Sales sent to the printer his *Treatise on the Love of God*, a book that Louise surely read as soon as it came out. She must have also read the *Rule of Perfection* by Benoit de Canfield and a translation of *Spiritual Nuptials* by Ruysbroeck, which was published around the same time, given their influence among devout people in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

50. *Documents*, D. 809, p. 930

## 3.2 – HER STEPS IN THE DARKNESS TOWARD THE LIGHT

At age 26, Louise had thus passed through important stages in her process of maturation. We could think that her life was a success. Nonetheless, she felt in her heart a desire for the infinite, an invitation to greater fullness and a call to spiritual growth that involves going beyond mere religious practice.

### **Amid adverse events**

She gradually found the prevailing climate insipid and gave the impression of living out of obligation. A series of adverse events occurred that affected her and her family. Up to that time, she had managed to overcome the difficult situations that arose; now, apparently, she did not have the energy.

The political situation in which the couple was involved lost stability. In April 1617, Queen Marie de Medici was exiled. Her most loyal servants, Michel de Marillac and a few others, accompanied her, but Antoine remained in Paris. His position was suspended, and household income declined. When the political situation stabilized and the Queen returned to Paris two years later, Antoine was ill and could not resume the work at the court.

Octavien d'Attichy died on January 10, 1614, and three years later, his wife, Valence de Marillac, died on January 15, 1617. The seven Attichy children became orphans. Michel de Marillac was appointed the children's legal guardian. The household and house needed someone to manage them, and the family thought the best choice was for the Le Gras family to move into the mansion. Antoine and Louise accepted and threw themselves into this duty, but Antoine did so to the detriment of his personal goods and business. *“Despite her sacrificial labor on behalf of her nieces and nephews, Louise must have felt humiliated more than*

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*once in this borrowed mansion, feeling like an insulted guest.”*<sup>51</sup>

The Attichy children did not appreciate the service given them and even treated them insolently. Michel de Marillac had to intervene as their guardian, assuring Antoine and Louise, “*All the work he has done will not remain ungratified.*”<sup>52</sup>

In addition, their son Michel was sickly and showed unusual psychological traits for a boy of his age. Antoine’s health also declined, and as the illness advanced, Louise’s husband’s temperament became “*tiresome and fretful*” (Gobillon, p. 8).

Louise again experienced insecurity. This feeling reopened wounds from the past. As time passed, her dissatisfaction grew along with the sense that all this was a punishment from God, perhaps for not having fulfilled her initial desire to give herself to Him as a Capuchin nun. We think that Louise’s director during this time was Honoré de Champigny,<sup>53</sup> who shared the thinking of Benoît de Canfield. The latter spoke of a “*passive purification*” that consisted in accepting events to imitate Jesus Christ.<sup>54</sup> Louise thus persevered in this acceptance. Around 1621, her uncle Michel encouraged her to follow this advice: “*The soul’s exercise is with God that it seeks and Jesus Christ that it loves, to whom it unites and whose life it honors.*”<sup>55</sup>

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51. Martínez, Benito. *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres*, p. 29

52. *Documents*, D. 827, p. 976-977. Benito Martínez believes that this nephew may have thrown her shadowy origins in her face.

53. Martínez, Benito. *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres*, p. 41

54. Ibañez, J.M. *Vicente de Paúl. Realismo y Encarnación [Vincent de Paul, realism and the Incarnation]*, Editorial Sígueme: Salamanca, 1982, p. 148. According to Canfield, “*Imitating the life and passion of Jesus meant suffering and enduring the persecutions, sufferings and trials of life, those of Our Lord. In this way, man renews the sufferings of Jesus, and Jesus suffers in His members.*”

55. *Documents*, D. 829, p. 979

## An ascetic life in order to grow

Thanks to the testimony of one of her servants, we know that during this time Mademoiselle Le Gras practiced mortification and other ascetic practices. “*When at table, she often pretended to eat, but she did not eat; she would get up at night to close herself in her office as soon as her husband fell asleep; she had hair shirts and disciplines.*”<sup>56</sup> We also know that “*before Lent and other times of the year, her retreats in the convent of the Capuchins on rue Saint Honoré added to the exercises of her interior life.*”<sup>57</sup> Her first biographer indicates that when Francis de Sales visited her house during his stay in Paris in 1619, he “*advised she take the discipline to awaken devotion, and she wore a hair shirt under her clothing that was modest in style and color.*”<sup>58</sup> Spiritual directors of the time recommended what they called “*active purification,*” which, in Canfield’s reasoning, basically meant, “*imitate the life and passion of Jesus Christ through mortification of one’s own will, root and origin of all evil in man.*”<sup>59</sup> The Bishop of Geneva, whom Louise had admired since her youth, stressed that this type of penitence practiced in moderation (three times a week) was surpassed by higher values like charity, which Louise also practiced.<sup>60</sup>

This ascetic life was her response to the “*new calls to perfection*”<sup>61</sup> that she received from God; according to Gobillon, it was a “*personal, conscious, willing, free and loving commitment on the path of perfection in the spiritual life.*”<sup>62</sup> Louise united exterior asceticism to inner asceticism in order to work on virtues like humility, self-denial, indifference, interior poverty,

56. *Documents*, D. 809, p. 930

57. Richemont, Comtesse de. *Histoire de Mademoiselle Le Gras* [*History of Mademoiselle Le Gras*], Poussielgue: Paris. 1883, p. 24

58. Richemont, Comtesse de. *Histoire de Mademoiselle Le Gras*, p. 25

59. Ibañez, J.M. *Vicente de Paúl. Realismo y Encarnación*, p.148

60. Sales, Francis. *Introduction to the Devout Life*

61. Richemont, Comtesse de. *Histoire de Mademoiselle Le Gras*, p. 25

62. Ancilli, E. *Diccionario de Espiritualidad* [*Dictionary of Spirituality*], Vol. I, Editorial Herder: Barcelona, 1983, p. 172

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purity and self-knowledge. Louise had chosen to make her life a workshop to allow her spiritual dimension to emerge.

**Going deep into the night**

Given the difficulty of this inner path, Mademoiselle Le Gras sought assistance for pursuing it with a spiritual director, first Michel de Marillac and then Jean-Pierre Camus. In the letters that they exchanged, we catch some glimpses of the Louise's situation. She had the sensation that her life was capsizing. The recurring theme was her relationship with God, which impacted her on a human and psychological level. She did her utmost to please God but could not find peace. When she did not receive what she sought, she despaired because God did not seem to respond to her efforts. Heavily focused on herself, she minutely observed her soul and detected what she called 'faults' in order to eradicate them, believing that in that way she would cleanse her soul and become humble. All of her activity was centered on her personal effort, so willful with regard to herself that she was exhausted and demanding with God. Her spiritual "greed" grew.<sup>63</sup> Her directors advised her "*to remain a beggar before God, who alone can do all things for her.*"<sup>64</sup>

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63. *Documents*, D. 830, p. 979

64. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 37

Mademoiselle Le Gras was on the point of crossing an important threshold to something different from her previous experience of God. She was passing through what Saint John of the Cross called the “*active night of the senses*,” the profound experience of crossing the boundary separating the immanent from the transcendent. She was penetrating into the mystical world where God was guiding her down the path of detachment to the experience of union with Him as mystical nuptials.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, she appeared depressed, suffering from emotional instability. Her married life felt like a failure. Falling into an identity crisis, she nonetheless remained with “*loving patience and peaceful acceptance*”<sup>66</sup> in imitation of Jesus Christ.

### **God would work on her soul**

Louise transitioned from the “*active night of the senses*” to the “*passive night*” with an awareness of God’s action, which is a painful process of spiritual growth. While she continued her spiritual and ascetic practices, signs of God working in her soul

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65. John of the Cross alluded to these same symptoms. He stated that people who are entering into the mystical night renounce, out of mortification, any enjoyment of the senses out of love of Jesus Christ, conforming their lives to His. He even said that those who begin to walk in this night “*find their delight in spending long periods of time in prayer; perchance entire nights; penances are their pleasures and fasts their joys*.” He said that they are sad with their faults and get angry with themselves, longing for God to remove their imperfections from them. “*They find no pleasure or consolation in the things of God in anything created; for, as God sets the soul in this dark night to the end that He may quench and purge its sensual desire, He allows it not to find attraction or sweetness in anything whatsoever*.” They think that everything consists in “*finding pleasure and sensory devotion*,” and when this is not given, “*they are terribly distressed*.” “*The cause of dryness is that the sensual part of a man has no capacity for that which is pure spirit*.” Many beginners are “*spiritually greedy. They will be found to be discontented with the spirituality that God gives them; and they are very disconsolate and querulous because they find not in spiritual things the consolation that they would desire. Many can never have enough of listening to counsels and learning spiritual precepts, and of possessing and reading many books which treat of this matter*.”

66. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, L. 546, p. 575

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appeared. Louise felt in her body and spirit the pain involved in the passage from darkness to light, from death to life. She “*fell into a state of depression,*” had “*great interior trials,*” and “*the pain was so great*” at “*the sight of [her] own abjection.*” She experienced “*desertion by God which [she] had merited because of [her] infidelities,*” “*discouragement*” and “*annihilation.*” She felt like a “*mass of pride and self-love.*” These feelings had physical symptoms: her “*heart was so depressed that the force of [her] emotions sometimes resulted in physical pain.*” She believed that she was “*unworthy to have the holy will of God accomplished in*” her because she had not followed her vocation.

This situation lasted several days, interspersed with brief moments of contemplation that calmed her. Thus, one day, she “*felt somewhat at peace. [She] took as the subject of [her] meditation: the peace of God which surpasses all understanding.*”<sup>67</sup> The experience corresponds perfectly with what Saint John called the “*passive night of the soul.*” Several experiences of spiritual passivity occurred. “*I felt a strong desire to give myself to God to fulfill His holy will for the remainder of my life. I offered to Him the inspiration which He had given me... For the rest of the day, I meditated on the mercy of God to His creatures.*” Her prayer became increasingly intense and penetrating, realizing that she existed “*only through Him and in Him.*”

In March 1623, Louise suffered great confusion, typical of the experience of the dark night through which she was passing, “*the pain that the soul feels from not finding within anything other than uncertainty about God.*”<sup>68</sup> Her director, Jean-Pierre Camus, gently told her his great desire: “*I am still waiting, my dear daughter, for serenity to return to you after these clouds which prevent you from seeing the beautiful light of joy which there is in the service of God.*”<sup>69</sup>

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67. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 13, p. 691-692; A. 15b, p. 692

68. *Documents*, D. 832, p. 980

69. *Documents*, D. 833, p. 981; quoted in Gobillon, p. 6

On the feast of Saint Monica, May 4, 1623, in the midst of her troubles, she made a vow of widowhood if God were to take her husband from her. Nearly one month later, May 25, 1623, on the feast of the Ascension, she “*was very disturbed because of the doubt [she] had as to whether [she] should leave [her] husband.*” She thought that this would be a way to make good on her vow to become a Capuchin nun and to “*have greater liberty to serve God and [her] neighbor.*” Since her director was far from Paris and it would not be easy to receive his help in the worst times of difficulty, Louise considered looking for another spiritual director who would be closer and could listen to her and advise her. However, she “*doubted [her] capacity to break the attachment [she] had for [her] director, which might prevent [her] from accepting another.*” Perhaps the worst was that she “*suffered greatly because of the doubt [she] experienced concerning the immortality of the soul.*” From Ascension until Pentecost, Louise was in incredible anguish with excruciating thoughts that awakened extremely painful feelings.

On the morning of June 4, 1623, Pentecost Sunday, in the church of Saint Nicolas des Champs, very close to her home, during Mass or while she was praying, Louise “*instantly*” had a profound spiritual experience. Some years later, she wrote it down on a piece of paper and called it her *lumière* (light) because her “*mind was freed of all doubt.*” Her words reveal that Someone acted and that she welcomed this action. “*I was advised,*” “*I was also assured,*” “*I then understood,*” “*I would be,*” “*He seemed to show me.*” The beneficiary “*did not understand how this would be possible,*” but could freely say, “*I acquiesced.*” She concluded by stating, “*...the inner assurance I felt that it was God who was teaching me these things and that, believing there is a God, I should not doubt the rest.*” The account, in its simple eloquence, directness and precision, mirrors the pattern of other mystical experiences. Louise was afraid yet calm, peaceful and filled with wonder. Her doubts had dissipated. She should remain with her husband, yet a future was approaching



### Louise de Marillac, her process of personal growth

when she would make vows in a small community, in a place where she could help her neighbor and with much coming and going. Another director would be given her.<sup>70</sup> It was a promise because it seemed that none of her circumstances was going to change in the immediate future; it was also a certainty, for God dwelt in the deepest part of her being as a living, life-giving presence. Saint John of the Cross said, “*God will enlighten the soul, giving it knowledge, not only of its lowliness and wretchedness... but likewise of the greatness and excellence of God.*”<sup>71</sup>

## **4 – FILLED WITH A LAW OF LOVE**

The experience of Pentecost 1623 would remain forever engraved on Louise de Marillac’s heart. Years later, before 1650, for the Feast of Pentecost, she would say that on such a day in the past, “*God in His goodness placed in [her] heart a law which has never left it.*”<sup>72</sup> Accustomed to theological language, she referred to the new way of experiencing the life inaugurated by Jesus, the “new law” that “*is called a law of love because it makes us act out of the love infused by the Holy Spirit, rather than from fear; a law of grace, because it confers the strength of grace to act, by means of faith and the sacraments; a law of freedom, because it sets us free from the ritual and juridical observances of the Old Law, inclines us to act spontaneously by the prompting of charity and, finally, lets us pass from the condition of a servant who ‘does not know what his master is doing’ to that of a friend of Christ – ‘For all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you’ (Jn 15:15) – or even to the status of son and heir (cf. Gal 4:1-7, 21-31; Rom 8:15).*”<sup>73</sup> This expression helps us grasp the effect of the *lumière* experience in her and indicates a change in perspective. Up to this time, God’s plan for Louise was expressed in her spiritual reading and her

70. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 2, p. 1-2

71. Saint John of the Cross, *Dark Night*, Ch. 12, 4

72. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, L. 118b, p. 339; see also L. 120, p. 128

73. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1972

directors' advice. Pentecost 1623 shifted the place of discernment from external theoretical formulas to the voice that rises from the depths of her soul. Louise reduced the central role of her willpower in order to allow the Spirit to set the direction, the pace and the choices to make. It was the starting point for a new path of discernment.

In God's time, the promise came true. We do not know how, when or where Mademoiselle Le Gras and her new director, Vincent de Paul, first met. Perhaps it was soon after Pentecost 1623, rather than early 1625.<sup>74</sup>

Concerning Antoine, her husband, it was clear that she should remain with him. Over three or four years, he had fallen ill and recovered several times. Louise cared for him with love and kindness, trying to understand him to relieve his suffering. "*She gained her husband's heart.*"<sup>75</sup> He died during the night of December 20-21, 1625.

*"God has broken your bonds... You are no longer divided. You now belong wholly to the celestial Bridegroom... You resolved with all your mind to desire nothing other than Him,"*<sup>76</sup> Camus told her. She thought, "*Is it not reasonable that I should be all for God, after being so long for the world? ... I want this with all my heart, and in the way that it pleases Him.*"<sup>77</sup>

#### **4.1 – SIMPLY INFUSING ALL THAT SHE DID WITH LIFE**

A new era dawned and a new path toward fullness opened before Louise. The future revealed by the *lumière* was drawing near yet remained in suspense. Louise reorganized her way of life.

74. Cf. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 2, p. 1-2; *Documents*, D. 837, p. 984-985

75. Gobillon, Nicolas. *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, p. 8

76. Calvet, Jean. *Louise de Marillac, a portrait*, p. 45

77. Gobillon, Nicolas. *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, p. 10 (Letter of Louise to Hilarion Rebour)

### Louise de Marillac, her process of personal growth

Her first decision was to change residence, moving from the Marais to the Saint Victor neighborhood. Louise thus left behind her social environment with its worldly and frivolous interests and chose a humbler house and a neighborhood whose residents were simpler, even poor workers, which was more in accordance with the evangelical poverty that greatly attracted her. Vincent de Paul and his first companions lived nearby for some time at the Collège des Bons Enfants.

Her second decision was to write her *Rule for life in the world*, a support for pursuing her process of personal growth. Today we might call it a “life plan.” It is most likely that Louise wrote it in 1626. The text, inspired by the Gospel and consistent with the context of French spirituality of the time, has come down to us.<sup>78</sup>

Louise began by stating two objectives: “*follow Jesus Christ and serve my neighbor with great humility and gentleness*” and “*the accomplishment of His [God’s] will in me.*” She explained that these objectives came from a lively “*desire*” in her heart where she found the energy, courage and motivation to reach her goals: to grow from within and by attraction. The wording of her first objective, “*follow Jesus Christ and serve my neighbor,*” evokes the greatest of the commandments, “*love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself.*”<sup>79</sup> Having discovered the beauty of evangelical poverty, Louise chose it because it would “*free*” her for discipleship and service. Her second objective, “*the accomplishment of [God’s] will in me,*” anchored her in the Gospel and placed her squarely in the most fervent and engaged modern movement inspiring spiritual figures of Paris. In the short introduction to her Rule, Louise stated that the virtues underlying traditional vows – “*living under obedience and in chastity*” and “*honoring the poverty that Jesus Christ practiced*” – would support reaching these objectives. From the beginning to the end, the *Rule* proves that Mademoiselle Le Gras wished to live

78. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 1, p. 689-691

79. Matthew 22:36-40

centered on Jesus Christ, the absolute in her life.

She wanted to fully live the little details of each day. Following the custom of the time, she would dedicate time to:

- manual work that she would do “*cheerfully*.” This included artistic creation, embroidery and other needlework that would allow her to remain mindful, contributing to the *Church, the poor or her household*.

- household tasks,

- “*charitable work*,” “*social obligations*,” etc.

- prayer in order to nurture interior attitudes of “*adoration*,” “*thanksgiving*,” “*abandonment of my will*,” “*confidence*” and “*recollection*” through meditation on the Gospel, readings from the lives of the saints, prayers to Mary and the practice of the presence of God. Louise wanted to tend to her emotional dimension, centered in the “*heart*,” which enabled her to discover the “*desire*” that yearned for satiation, to “*preserve the inspirations she received during prayer*,” to “*continue to ponder the great love*” experienced in the celebration of the Eucharist each day and to “*excite within her the desire for His love by means of frequent ejaculatory prayers*.”

- commitments, including visits, with persons who are poor and sick and charitable and friendly relationships.

The end of each day was characterized by “*trusting always in [God’s] goodness and mercy*” and with a review of life or “*examination of conscience*,” in which she would call to mind “*the graces which [she] may have received from God during the day*” and ask pardon for “*the faults which [she] may have committed*.” All this occurred in an attitude of silence, recollection and interiority.

The calendar offered her possibilities to keep alive her desire to “belong totally to God.” She therefore chose “*every first Saturday of the month*” to recall and renew the “*vows*” and “*resolutions*” that she had made in past years and that she would make in those years. The seasons of *Advent* and the days leading up to *Pentecost*

### Louise de Marillac, her process of personal growth

seemed best for retreat. Following the plan outlined by Francis de Sales in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, she would spend “eight to ten days” in a convent dedicating her time to meditation, penance and reflection. In union with the entire Church, she would “fast during Advent and Lent, the vigils of the feasts of Our Lord, the Blessed Virgin and the Apostles and all Fridays of the year.” She generally ate just “two meals” a day.

In order to advance spiritually, Louise paid attention to her weaknesses in order to transform them and to her strengths in order to develop them. She stated in her *Rule* that her dominant “passions” were “vanity and precipitousness” and that she should work to overcome them. As she was already accustomed to doing, she took the discipline and wore a hair shirt.

Focal points of her devotion were the mystery of the *Incarnation* and the coming of the *Holy Spirit*. To meditate on these great mysteries, she chose the 25<sup>th</sup> of each month and the day on which Feast of Pentecost fell that year. She chose the “*Virgin Mary as her protectress*” and honored her “*guardian angel and the Apostles.*” She desired to “*imitate their lives...since they are imitators of Our Lord.*”

The centrality of Jesus and the priority of charity for her neighbor over any obligation to perform any of the acts put forward in the *Rule* meant she would live out a Gospel-based spirituality. It was characterized by devotion driven by love, beautifully expressed by Francis de Sales in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*. True devotion is “*a true love of God; yet not any kind of love; for, in so far as divine love beautifies our souls, and makes us pleasing to his divine Majesty, it is called grace; in so far as it give us strength to do good, it is called charity; but when it reaches such a degree of perfection, that make us not only do good, but do so carefully, frequently and readily, then it is called devotion.*”<sup>80</sup> Louise left

80. Sales, Francis, *Introduction to the Devout Life* [trans. Allan Ross], Dover Publications: New York, p. 38

evidence of this, writing, “*I can only desire to serve God if His love draws me.*”<sup>81</sup>

## **4.2 – VINCENT DE PAUL “DIRECTED HER WITHOUT PRESSURING HER.”<sup>82</sup>**

Meeting Vincent de Paul, of whom she would say, “*I have no one in the world to help me in this matter and I scarcely ever have except your Charity*”<sup>83</sup> and “*who is the dearest in the world to us,*”<sup>84</sup> was of utmost importance for completing her personal growth. Mathurine Guérin would recall in 1660 that after many years of knowing and helping each other, Louise familiarly told her Sisters, “*To direct souls, few people have found the method of our Most Honored Father, who received a special gift from God to know the paths down which He wishes to lead souls and to direct them by these paths, in contrast with other directors who, rather than striving to know what Our Lord asks of each person, give their own direction and not that of God. Their direction, although good, is not always appropriate for all.*”<sup>85</sup>

The relationship between Vincent and Louise began as one of assistance, guidance and spiritual accompaniment and evolved into a beautiful friendship and a priceless complementarity for an authentic evangelical collaboration. They were in harmony with each other. At this time, they were both seeking to base their life on the accomplishment of the Will of God in order to bring the seed of the “image of God” they had received at their birth to fulfillment to the greatest extent possible. Both were trying to heighten their awareness of the mysterious presence of God in

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81. John 15:9-17: “*It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you;*” 1 John 4:10: “*In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us.*”

82. Martínez, Benito. *San Vicente de Paul, la inspiración permanente* [Saint Vincent de Paul, constant inspiration], Editorial CEME : Salamanca, 1982, p. 327

83. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, L. 113, p. 123

84. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, L. 148, p. 163

85. *Documents*, D. 822, p. 955

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their life. The events of Folleville and Châtillon in 1617 made Vincent say, “*God was powerfully at work.*” Pentecost 1623 revealed to Louise the truth that “*it was God who was teaching me these things.*”<sup>86</sup> Both also felt their “thirst for God” and wanted to let Jesus Christ pilot their lives.

Louise got over her initial reticence toward Vincent.<sup>87</sup> Unstable and indecisive, she needed attention, understanding, listening and advice. They came to establish a relationship that would be very fruitful for both of them. This relationship helped them to grow, make present the Kingdom of God among their contemporaries, place persons who are poor at the center of society and leave a mark that would stand the test of time.

### **4.3 – “LIVE PEACEFULLY IN THIS ASSURANCE”**

God’s action in Louise de Marillac’s heart did not exempt her from the effort of loyal collaboration. The crisis through which she had passed and that was resolved with the *lumière* experience led her to a new birth. She who had been so anxious became a “new woman” who was “*born of water*” through a purification that encompassed her entire person “*and of the Spirit*” because God was and henceforth would be the driving force in her life.

In order to live from love, it was necessary to restore her confidence. When the basic needs of a newborn are not adequately met, emotional insecurity takes hold, leading to excessive attachment or indifference and impeding the unconditional gift of self. Louise, hurt throughout her childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, experienced emotional insecurity and feelings of distrust, unworthiness, inadequacy, anxiety, guilt and fear. These wounds required healing for the “new woman” to live in full free-

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86. Conference 24, *CCD IX*, 193; Saint Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 2, p. 2

87. *Documents*, D. 837, p. 984. The letter is dated July 26, probably 1625, when Louise had likely begun to meet with Vincent.

dom. Vincent de Paul repeated in his letters to her, “Be...full of confidence;”<sup>88</sup> he ordered her to “put aside the misgivings,”<sup>89</sup> “be fully confident,”<sup>90</sup> “Put your trust in Him.”<sup>91</sup> “Put your trust in Him,” he wrote, “and your heart’s desire will be fulfilled.”<sup>92</sup> “You must leave that worry to Him and remain in peace.” “Please live peacefully in this assurance.”<sup>93</sup>

In order to do this, he suggested that Louise deepen her sense of being a “beloved daughter” of God. “Be then His dear daughter.”<sup>94</sup> This involved feeling God’s love based on the experience of Jesus of Nazareth and hearing in the secret of the heart, “You are my beloved Son/ my beloved daughter.”<sup>95</sup> It is the experience of feeling connected with the source from which life springs, an experience of a new energy, “the interior habit of the soul.”<sup>96</sup> In order to feel valued, appreciated, supported and loved and to live life passionately to the fullest of her potential, Louise had to build this sense on a solid rock in “complete trust.”<sup>97</sup> Her daily prayer provided her with the atmosphere necessary for growing in this trust, a loving trust. “Why would your soul not be full of confidence, since you are, by His mercy, the dear daughter of Our Lord?”<sup>98</sup> “The love of God, in which love alone I desire yours to be immersed.”<sup>99</sup>

#### 4.4 – CHOOSING JOY

Louise’s long affliction of suffering left a trace of sadness in her heart. Vincent found himself before a woman who frequently felt

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88. CCD I, L. 12, p. 24

89. CCD I, L. 96, p. 145; cf. CCD I, L. 53, p. 84

90. CCD I, L. 41, p. 69

91. CCD I, L. 53, p. 84

92. CCD I, L. 53, p. 84

93. CCD I, L. 151, p. 216; CCD I, L. 41, p. 69

94. CCD I, L. 12, p. 24

95. Cf. Mark 1:11; CCD I, L. 96, p. 145

96. Conference of June 24, 1654, CCD IX, 552

97. Cf. CCD I, L. 131, p. 186

98. CCD I, L. 53, p. 84; cf. CCD I, L. 41, p. 69

99. CCD I, L. 27, p. 46



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assailed by negative thoughts that unleashed feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Knowing that joy brings out the best in a person, Vincent held the conviction that God wants our joy.<sup>100</sup> Because joy is a passion full of life and energy, it was important for Louise to work on it in order for it to take root in her.

Vincent wrote to her with expressions such as “*remain in good spirits,*” “*be quite cheerful,*” “*do what you have to do in a cheerful way,*” “*live peacefully... in the joy.*” She applied herself to the practice of choosing joy and committed to “*work cheerfully,*” to keep in mind “*the joy which I now feel*” and to “*preserve the joy I experience.*”<sup>101</sup>

Louise made a real effort, and peace and tranquility gradually took hold of her heart. She found the appropriate means for this, “*recalling, as far as possible, the thoughts [and feelings] we received*” (M. 73, p. 825) in her heart at critical moments. Even more important were the motivations for seeking joy that Vincent presented her: the certainty of imitating Jesus Christ<sup>102</sup> and that He would take the initiative in all things that she had to do.<sup>103</sup> Since the work was arduous and she was busy about many things, her director advised her “*to procure for [herself] the holy joy of [her] heart by all the relaxation [she] can possibly take.*”<sup>104</sup> “*Keep your spirits up and do what you have to do in a cheerful way.*”<sup>105</sup>

Louise came to enjoy the joy that springs from the beauty found in “things of God.” “*I... [resolved] to follow Him wholeheartedly, without any reservation. Filled with consolation and happiness at the thought of being accepted by Him to live my entire life as His follower...*” One August 24 around 1650, Louise hastily found

100. Cf. CCD I, L. 23 and 48

101. CCD I, L. 97, L. 23, L. 36, L. 98, L. 41; *Spiritual Writings*, A. 1, p. 690; A. 7, p. 699; A. 5, p. 715

102. Cf. CCD I, L. 41 and L. 67

103. Cf. CCD I, L. 61, L. 132 and L. 138

104. CCD I, L. 96, p. 145

105. CCD I, L. 98, p. 147

some paper to write this to Vincent: “*My heart is still overflowing with joy on account of the understanding which, I believe, our good God has given me of the words, ‘God is my God,’ and the awareness I had of the glory which the blessed render to Him as a consequence of this truth. Therefore, I cannot help communicating with you this evening to ask you to assist me to profit from this excess of joy and to suggest some practice for me.*”<sup>106</sup>

## 4.5 – IMITATION OF JESUS CHRIST

The imitation of Jesus Christ motivated Louise’s behavior, action, attitudes and way of conducting herself in her activities. “*It is only reasonable that we should follow Him and imitate His holy, human life... I resolved that in everything... I would consider what Jesus would have done.*”<sup>107</sup>

The verb “do” does not just refer to actions; it also includes attitudes, tastes, inclinations, preferences, activities and relationships, all that Jesus has modeled for us in the Gospels. Louise wanted “*to imitate Jesus as a spouse tries to resemble her husband.*”<sup>108</sup> She imitated Him in the “*inaction*” of His hidden life (L. 575), in the active life of evangelization as the “*Visitatrix of the Confraternities of Charity*” in varied ways: unknown situations, the fatigue and contradictions that she suffered, mockeries, snubs, abuse, a good reception, praise, compliments, withdrawal from some cities like Châlons at the order of the Bishop. Did not Christ have to leave Nazareth and other places?<sup>109</sup> The imitation of Jesus Christ provided her model and strength<sup>110</sup> in the events touching her family life, for example, when her uncles fell out of grace with

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106. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 5, p. 715; L. 369, p. 341

107. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 5, p. 715

108. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 5, p. 716

109. Cf. *CCD* I, L. 29, L. 39, L. 50, L. 58 and L. 88; *Spiritual Writings*, A. 8

110. Cf. *Spiritual Writings*, A. 7, A. 5 and A. 8; *CCD* I, L. 61, L. 69, L. 71, L. 106 and L. 109

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Richelieu,<sup>111</sup> and in her personal life<sup>112</sup> to grow in the virtues of humility and poverty, in the fight against sin, to persevere in joy and remain at peace, etc. For Louise, the imitation of Jesus Christ should spring from the depths of herself in order to act “*in the manner of His Son while He was on earth... Better yet... that the same Spirit that acted in Him should act through [her].*”<sup>113</sup> This imitation had come to occupy such an intimate place in her that she exclaimed, “*At the hour of my death [may I] have, at that moment, the image of Jesus Christ imprinted upon my soul.*”<sup>114</sup> Vincent said four months after Louise’s death, “*She did what Saint Paul said, ‘It is no longer I who live, but Jesus who lives in me.’ In this way she strove to make herself like her Master.*”<sup>115</sup>

## **5 – A SUCCESSFUL LIFE**

I could say much more about Louise de Marillac’s growth process and her approach to ongoing formation, but I have to conclude.

In this process, which she lived consciously and freely in a constant daily effort, various factors came together to drive her to fullness. It originated with the love of a God who created her in His image and called her to fidelity. She received gifts, skills, qualities and God’s constant presence, protection and inspiration. It was influenced by the family into which she was born, the environment in which she was raised and grew up, her era and the people who accompanied her throughout her life. Driven by thirst for God that never disappeared from her heart, Louise pursued a path of ongoing growth through serious work of formation, acceptance of the realities that appeared along the way, responsible choices and openness to “grace” and to guidance from God, who offered

111. Cf. CCD I, L. 84 and L. 105

112. Cf. CCD I, L. 92

113. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 85, p. 773

114. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 8, p. 717; cf. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book VIII, Chapter I

115. Conference 119, CCD X, 585

her limitless love. She had received “what she was” from God as a gift. “What she would come to be” would be the gift that she would offer to her God at the end of her life.

Her journey of growth followed a linear evolution that anyone who knew her could judge optimal. Through her own effort and the help of those closest to her, she tried to change for the better, perfect her abilities, capacities and qualities and minimize the effect of her faults. What she did was necessary but would not be sufficient for enjoying fullness. Something fundamentally different had to happen. God asked for her consent to take initiative in her life. Once she accepted, she managed to surrender completely to Him to be transformed like a “*a living soil*”<sup>116</sup> in the hands of God the potter. Pure grace, she never could have achieved this herself. This is why she could say, “*It seemed to me that all that I am is but grace.*”<sup>117</sup> Nearly twenty years before her death, Vincent de Paul considered her “*as dead, according to nature, for ten years now... because her body is so frail and her face so pale;*” this was “*the strength of spirit she possesses.*”<sup>118</sup>

Born in weakness, Louise became “*a totally fulfilled woman.*”<sup>119</sup> She would allow joy to enlighten her and be satisfied and fulfilled while developing all her abilities; her generosity was contagious. Open to life, friendship, forgiveness, grace and the transcendent, she spread gentleness, cordiality, tenderness and kindness in her relationships. She was a great woman in a little body, a woman in fullness: A SAINT!

Sister Carmen URRIZBURU  
Daughter of Charity

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116. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 17, p. 698

117. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A. 9, p. 702-703

118. CCD III, L. 1002, p. 257

119. Vincentian Animation Team, *Vincentian Study Sheets*, issue 51

## Community life, an attractive and radiant witness

### Introduction

Good morning, everyone! It is my pleasure to be with you today to share on the topic asked of me, “Community life, an attractive and radiant witness.” It is an essential call that Pope Francis has put forth to all communities and that the preparatory committee selected to reiterate with you during this session.

For us today, this topic will allow us to refocus on the most important points of our spirituality, for the more we live in accordance with our vocation, the happier we will be, the more God will become visible through our entire being and the more positive influence we will have. The Pope challenges us to an authentic community life that shows the joy of believing in the God of Jesus Christ, community life modeled on the Trinity that demonstrates unity of hearts, community life at the service of the least fortunate that reveals loving attention and community life constantly renewed in the spirit of the Beatitudes.

My reflection this morning will take the form of four selected challenges that will provide you with a rapid overview the foundations of our vocation from the perspective of community life. These four challenges could serve as an opportunity to look at your personal experience and development and, I hope, bring forth a renewed desire for fidelity in order to offer “*a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion,*” as the Pope invites us (*Evangelii gaudium*, 99).

Four challenges to meet in order to “*become what we claim to be*,” as Mother Guillemin said. Four challenges to nourish and sustain our desire for fidelity, in other words, to enter ever deeper into a growth process.

**1. The challenge of a community rooted in God, a mystery of faith**

Community life rooted in God, the God of Jesus Christ, which always seeks His will, shines forth the joy of believing.

**2. The challenge of a community modeled on the Trinity, a mystery of communion**

Community life modeled on the Trinity, which cultivates relationships of mutuality, shines forth communion.

**3. The challenge of a community engaged in the service of the most vulnerable, a mystery of solidarity**

Community life where persons who are poor are at the center, which calls for a faith perspective and authentic close relationships, shines forth respect for the dignity of the lowliest.

**4. The challenge of a community driven by the spirit of the Beatitudes, a mystery of holiness**

Community life driven by the spirit of the Beatitudes, which gives rise to availability, generosity and boldness, shines forth boundless charity.

**I. A COMMUNITY ROOTED IN GOD, A MYSTERY OF FAITH**

1<sup>st</sup> challenge: in order for our community life to be attractive and radiant, it must be rooted in God, the God of Jesus Christ. Such a community has its foundation in God’s free and unconditional initiative, a mystery of faith.

**Community life is part of God’s plan.**

### Community life, an attractive and radiant witness

To begin, let us recall the initial statement found in the document Fraternal Life in Community, articles 7a and 1. “...before being a human project, fraternal life in common is part of God’s plan, and he wishes to share his life of communion... The love of Christ has gathered a great number of disciples to become one, so that, like him and thanks to him, in the Spirit, they might, throughout the centuries, be able to respond to the love of the Father, loving him ‘with all their hearts, with all their soul, with all their might’ (cf. Deut 6:5) and loving their neighbors ‘as themselves’ (cf. Mt 22:39).” In other words, “It is not you who chose me, but I who chose you.”

Moreover, it is appropriate to point out that community life is an element of our vocation as Daughters of Charity desired by God; it is not an end in itself but a mystery of faith and communion, totally directed towards the service of those who are poor. Our first Rules express this so clearly. “The principal end for which God has called and established the Daughters of Charity is to honor our Lord Jesus Christ as source and model of all charity, serving Him corporally and spiritual in the person of the poor...” (Common Rules, I, 1).

### **Believing in the God of Jesus Christ shapes our community life.**

The highest expression of God’s love is the gift that Jesus makes of His own life. Does our community life go as far as the gift of ourselves for the good of others? Does our community life witness to a God who allows Himself to be moved by humankind, is passionate about it and wants to save it? His love is revealed in the pierced heart of Jesus, the source of new life. Does our community life draw renewed strength from this heart of Jesus? He communicates Himself to all by the gift of the Spirit. Is our community life strengthened by this gift of the Spirit? Jesus is received at each Eucharist. Is our community life nourished by His life? Love of God and love of people are intimately united.

Communing with Christ means communing with all the people whom God loves. With Him, this implies becoming the neighbor of every person and revealing by our lives God's tender care for humanity.

### **Believing in the God of Jesus Christ in a world of many faiths**

In our multicultural society where religious pluralism is part of our everyday lives and where we hear people speaking of "God in the plural," different beliefs oblige us to deepen our own Christian faith, nourish it, share it with other Christians, apply it to our ordinary behaviors and commitments and account for it clearly in order to have, for example, a constructive interfaith dialogue. During the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis put it this way. *"I trust that this Jubilee year celebrating the mercy of God will foster an encounter with these religions [Judaism and Islam] and with other noble religious traditions; may it open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better; may it eliminate every form of closedmindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination"* (*The Face of Mercy*, 23).

### **Believing in the God of Jesus Christ in a confused society**

On the other hand, we have to recognize that we are immersed in a confused society, a consumer environment, even one of doubt, where God is often blatantly absent and where varied philosophical and ideological trends threaten our convictions and even call them into question. This context requires ongoing spiritual discernment to remain attentive to new issues and not slip into confusion, amalgams or a hardened attitude. Discernment is not just a good capacity for reasoning or common sense but also a gift to ask confidently of the Holy Spirit while striving to develop it through prayer, reflection, reading and good advice as our current Pope invites us (cf. *Gaudete et exsultate*, 166 and 170).



### Community life, an attractive and radiant witness

Does the witness of our community life make those around us want to discover this God of love in whom we believe, who gives meaning to our lives, who gives us life, fulfills us and wants happiness for all His children without exception? Our faith in God who is a Father and Love shapes our entire life. Our community life will be a real witness offered to all if, like Saint Louise, we are increasingly convinced that *“the love of God for mankind willed that the Son should take human flesh because His delight is to be among His creatures. By becoming like them, He could bear witness to the fact that God has loved them from all eternity. This He did throughout His human life upon earth”* (Saint Louise, A. 27, On the pure love we have vowed to God, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 828-829).

Yes, we are *“called to radiate the word of truth that the Lord Jesus has left us,”* as Benedict XVI said in *Porta fidei* (Benedict XVI, *Porta fidei*, 6).

### **Believing in the God of Jesus Christ means walking with Him.**

We know from experience that following one path rather than another always involves a choice. The choice of following Jesus Christ is also a risk. If God were an obvious fact, we would almost be forced to walk behind Him. The opposite is the case: God unobtrusively beckons us and leaves us free to recognize His presence and humbly walk with Him day after day. Following Jesus does not just mean walking beside Him on the road. It is walking through Him, with Him and in Him. Jesus Himself said, *“I am the way.”* Following Him involves being one with Him and His will. This was Saint Louise’s experience during a retreat in 1632 when she wrote, *“Our Lord desired to unite Himself so intimately to us by His love... I have great trust in God and believe that His grace will be sufficient to enable me to fulfill His holy will, however difficult it may appear to be. I have a lively and trusting faith that the will of God for me will*

*be accomplished, provided I allow myself to be led by Him... so that God may be glorified”* (cf. Saint Louise, A. 5, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 714-716).

We also observe that *“faith grows when it is lived as an experience of love received and when it is communicated as an experience of grace and joy. It makes us fruitful, because it expands our hearts in hope and enables us to bear life-giving witness,”* Benedict XVI further said (*Porta fidei*, 7).

Our community life will be a radiant and attractive witness to the extent that we become increasingly consistent with the spirit of our Constitutions. *“Daughters of Charity... aspire to live in constant dialogue with God, remaining in God’s hands with filial confidence in Providence. They contemplate Christ in the self-emptying of His Redemptive Incarnation and they marvel ‘that a God should somehow be unable or unwilling to be separated from man.’ They learn from Him how to reveal to their brothers and sisters God’s love for the world, especially for persons who are poor. They endeavor to respond to the inspirations of the Spirit, convinced that they will be the instruments of God’s work insofar as they are faithful”* (C. 17).

Thus, living in faith in Christ involves constantly renewing our desire to be with Him in order to live with Him. A living faith really is a constant act of our freedom that engages our responsibility at all levels. Therefore, we need the gift of the Holy Spirit. According to our charism, *“To depend on the Holy Spirit is to allow oneself to be molded into a resemblance to Christ, gentle and humble of heart”* (C. 18). Our Foundress was well aware of this. *“I must practice great humility and mistrust of myself; abandon myself continuously to the Providence of God; imitate, insofar as I am able, the life of Our Lord who came on earth to accomplish the holy will of God His Father”* (Saint Louise, M. 40b, Abandonment to Divine Providence, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 784).

**Believing in the God of Jesus Christ is a struggle.**

It is essential to nourish our faith because, as we have all experienced, convictions alone are not enough. The Christian life and our life as Daughters of Charity more specifically is a permanent struggle. We need strength and courage to resist the temptations of the devil and proclaim the Gospel. We have many means available to us for this, and our Constitutions serve to engage us in this. The fact that there are so many methods takes into account personal, community and missionary circumstances and needs. Entering into this struggle to win the prize of God's love is a daily affair that concerns our fidelity to "appointments" with the Lord. Saint Vincent energetically invited the first Sisters, "*Dear Sisters, you and I must take the resolution never to omit making our prayer every day. I say every day, Sisters, but if it were possible, I'd say let's never leave it and spend no time without being in prayer*" (Saint Vincent, May 31, 1648, Mental Prayer, CCD IX, 332; C. 20).

Today, it is good to hear Pope Francis encourage us with similar energy. "*Our desire for God will surely find expression in our daily lives: 'Try to be continuous in prayer, and in the midst of bodily exercises do not leave it.'*" He adds, "*For this to happen, however, some moments spent alone with God are also necessary*" (*Gaudete et exsultate*, 148 and 149).

We will meet this first challenge by being a community that shines forth the joy of the faith. Joy and faith are two intimately connected realities. Faith fills the heart with joy and leads to thanksgiving and praise. Joy occurs when someone realizes that she is loved by God. A person of faith radiates joy even in the midst of pain and contradictions; she maintains her joy in adversity and gives thanks to God. Faith allows us to overcome difficulties calmly and to transform suffering into an offering, into joy. Faith leads us to live in constant thanksgiving, to admire what is good and beautiful, to recognize the positive and

bless God in all things and for all things. Joy in faith is a great missionary strength and peaks interest.

Some questions:

- How do we shine forth our joy in faith? Is it radiant for those who seek, or is it lost in the midst of the darkness of our times?
- Do we take the time to nourish our faith, deepen it and renew our convictions?
- Are we capable of real dialogue with others and of recognizing the seeds of the Word present in their lives?

## **II. A COMMUNITY MODELED ON THE TRINITY, A MYSTERY OF COMMUNION**

2<sup>nd</sup> challenge: in order for our community life to join in God's plan and to be attractive and radiant, it must be rooted in the life of the Trinity. Community life modeled on the Trinity, which cultivates relationships of mutuality, shines forth this mystery of communion (see *Evangelii gaudium* no. 117, 121, 87 – *Vita consecrata* no. 51, 41, 42, 21, 19, 46; C. 17c).

### **Created for communion**

To address this second challenge, it is important to hear again this essential, fundamental conviction that we are created for communion: communion with God and communion with our brothers and sisters. Fraternal Life in Community puts it this way: *“In creating man and woman in his own image and likeness, God created them for communion. God...who revealed himself as Love, as Trinity, as communion, called them to enter into intimate relationship with himself and into interpersonal communion, in the universal fraternity of all men and women”* (Fraternal Life in Community, 9).

However, we also know that this communion to which we have been called was unfortunately compromised by sin, which

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ruptured all relationships: between the human race and God, between man and woman, between brothers and sisters, between nations, between humanity and creation. However, because of God's boundless love, Saint Paul tells us, the Father sent His Son in order to restore all of creation and bring it to its perfect unity. The coming of the Holy Spirit, the first gift made to the disciples gathered in the Upper Room with Mary, produces the unity desired by Christ as they are "*of one heart and mind*" (Acts 4:32). From then on, a path of brotherhood and communion opened with the apostles, and they came to understand, "*I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another*" (Jn 13:34).

### **Community life, a call from God**

We heard this call as baptized Christians, but even more radically at the heart of our vocation. Indeed, we are "called and assembled" to be "experts in communion," witnesses and artisans of this project for communion that is found at the summit of human history within God's plan. This communion is a gift, a gift of the Holy Spirit, that is received and is part of the mystery of communion that we call the Church. Thus, as we read in *Vita consecrata*, "*The fraternal life seeks to reflect the depth and richness of this mystery, taking shape as a human community in which the Trinity dwells, in order to extend in history the gifts of communion proper to the three divine Persons*" (*Vita consecrata*, 41).

Taking on this second challenge, it is encouraging to hear Saint Vincent tell us, "*[God] is the one who willed this Company of Sisters from different regions and wanted all of them to be of one heart*" (Saint Vincent, Conference of February 13, 1646, Love of Vocation and Assistance to the Poor, CCD IX, 195). "*I think union is the image of the Blessed Trinity. The three Persons are only one same God, united by love from all eternity. We, therefore, should be only one body in several persons, united with the same*

*end in view for the love of God”* (a Sister, Conference of April 26, 1643, Union within the Community, CCD IX, 81).

## **Community life, a gift of the Spirit**

We cannot understand community without starting from the truth that it is a gift from God, a mystery and rooted in the very heart of the Blessed Trinity. This is why, as the most recent Inter-Assemblies Document states, *“We are convinced of the necessity to draw constantly from the Gospel; a close relationship with Christ transforms us day after day”* (IAD, p. 9).

The mystical roots of the community make it a theological reality in itself. If we forget this mystical and theological dimension, inevitably we will come to forget as well the profound reasons for living in community and for patiently building it up. If we forget that it is Christ Himself who calls us and invites us each day in order to speak to us, unite us to Him and unite us in the Eucharist, then building community life would be beyond our human capacities. We would not be able to be His living and visible Body, animated by the Spirit and on pilgrimage towards the Father and towards others. *“The Spirit is also the energy which transforms the heart of the ecclesial community so that it becomes a witness before the world to the love of the Father, who wishes to make humanity a single family in his Son,”* Benedict XVI reminded us (*Deus caritas est*, 19).

Therefore, in order to enter into the mystery of communion and community, we must humbly call upon the Holy Spirit so that He might accomplish what He alone can do. *“I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh... you will be my people, and I will be your God”* (Ez 36:26-28).

Pope Francis insists on this point. *“The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, transforms our hearts and enables us to*

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*enter into the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity, where all things find their unity. He builds up the communion and harmony of the people of God. The same Spirit is that harmony, just as he is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. It is he who brings forth a rich variety of gifts, while at the same time creating a unity which is never uniformity but a multifaceted and inviting harmony” (Evangelii gaudium, 117).*

### **Community life, a witness of communion**

Perhaps we are not always sufficiently aware of the prophetic force that comes from community life. Indeed, community life, if it is really sisterly, bears witness to a God who is communion and who creates communion among people. It is the “*See how they love one another*” from the Gospel.

The Company was born, yes, for the service of Christ in the person of the poor, but it first evangelizes by its “being.” Our witness of sisterly communion is essential to our mission. The communion of hearts is missionary in itself. “*If you see charity, you see the Trinity,*” Saint Augustine wrote. The bonds are those of communion of hearts, trust, acceptance and support. Saint Louise expressed it in these terms: “*They shall remember that true Daughters of Charity must be united in order to fulfill God’s expectations. Because our corrupted nature has deprived us of this perfection, and since sin separates us from our unity which is God, following the example of the Blessed Trinity, we must have but one heart and act with one mind as do the three divine Persons. We must do this in such a way that, when the sister in charge of the sick requests the help of her sister, the sister who instructs the children shall readily comply. And, if the sister in charge of the children requests assistance from the sister in charge of the poor, she shall do likewise since both tasks are equally the business of God. Considering themselves both chosen by Divine Providence in order to act in unison, we hope never to hear the words, ‘That is your business, not mine’*”

(Saint Louise, A. 85, Instructions to the Sisters who were sent to Montreuil (1647), *Spiritual Writings*, p. 771).

This is precisely why the spiritual life should have priority in our lives as Daughters of Charity “*if we wish to be faithful to God’s plan and respond to the world’s deepest yearnings*” (*Novo millenio ineunte*, 43). Christ in His Paschal mystery remains the model on which unity in community is built. The commandment of mutual love finds in Him its source, model and standard: we should love as He has loved us. Selfless love is for us a veritable process of conversion lived out day after day.

Knowing human nature well, Saint Louise gave some advice to encourage the Sisters to practice the esteem that leads to sisterly communion and the edification of neighbor. “*If we acquire the practice of esteeming and of speaking well of our sisters, a spirit of union, gentleness and true charity will grow in the Company in keeping with the plan of God when He formed it. One of the means to attain this virtue is to strive to have a clear understanding of ourselves by awareness of our usual faults. Another is always to separate the little faults which may appear in our sister from the person committing them. We should always suspend our judgment and excuse her hasty reactions as we would want others to excuse ours. Thereby, we support one another for the love of God*” (Saint Louise, A. 74, Thoughts on the high esteem which we should have for our Sisters, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 787).

### **Community life, an acceptance of differences**

We are convinced that communion is a gift offered us, but it requires a response, patient learning and a struggle in order to overcome what could be too instinctive and capricious in our desires. We do not choose with whom we live in community and find ourselves with people with different characters, ages, formations, sensibilities and cultures, yet we strive to



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live as Sisters. The ideal of community necessarily involves a conversion of any attitude that could be an obstacle to communion. Saint Vincent thus urged the Sisters to “*see God in our Sisters...*” He also called them to perseverance. “*You see... the obligation you have to strive all your life to acquire and practice those two virtues [respect and gentleness] in order to be true Daughters of Charity*” (Saint Vincent, August 19, 1646, *The Practice of Mutual Respect and Gentleness*, CCD IX, 209 and 213). For her part, Saint Louise exhorted them to maintain cordial relationships. “*Be sure to thank Him for it through the practice of the virtues He asks of you, especially great cordiality and mutual understanding among you. Am I not wrong in recommending this virtue to you, my dear Sisters, because without it you would be unable to be not only good Daughters of Charity, but even good Christians?*” (Saint Louise, L. 276, *To my very dear Sisters Claude Brigide and Geneviève Doinel in Chantilly, Spiritual Writings*, p. 314).

Today, our Constitutions are our road map (C. 19-23), a concrete path inviting us to develop quality community life. Where are we in this? In practical terms, do I love in God and with God the Sister whom I like the least? This can only happen thanks to an intimate encounter with the Lord that becomes communion of will, encompassing even my feelings. There, I learn to look at my Sister not just with my eyes and feelings, but with Christ’s perspective. His friend and my friend! Beyond the other person’s external appearances, there is her inner desire for a sisterly and caring gesture extended out of more than mere polite reflexes. I see with Christ’s eyes, and I can give the other person much more than the things that she might need; I can give her the loving look that she needs.

- From this perspective, you could revisit prayer in common and personal prayer understood as a time of encounter with the Lord so that He can act in you, fill your life and guide you so that your entire self belongs to Him.

- How are we faithful to the Eucharist, as “source and summit” of our lives and mission, indispensable for building communion of hearts and contributing to growth in fraternity?
- How do we practice *lectio divina* for feeding, strengthening and renewing our minds and lives and building community on the Word of God?
- How do we do with community discussions of all types, necessary moments of truth for developing quality relationships?
- Reconciliation is a source of personal and communal conversion to contribute to restoring the unity of the community. Do we readily ask forgiveness? “*Mercy is the force that reawakens us to new life and instills in us the courage to look to the future with hope*” (*The Face of Mercy*, 10).

Community life, a mystery of communion, thus above all consists in looking with the heart at the mystery of the Trinity that dwells in us and should also be seen on the faces of the Sisters alongside us. Community life is thus a constant call to adaptation, to conversion. It is part of a process of growth, which remains fluid because communion is never achieved once and for all; it evolves over time. Love grows through love. Love, as we have seen, is divine because it comes from God and unites us to God. Through this unifying process, He transforms us into an “us” that goes beyond our divisions and should make us become one until, at the end, God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

To encourage us to meet this second challenge, let us welcome and make our own the prayer of our Founder. “*May the Divine Goodness, Source of true union, grant you the grace to avoid all the evils that may be caused by disunion. May God keep you always in perfect union with himself and with your neighbor by true charity, and with yourselves by mortification of your senses and your bad habits, all for His glory. May God bless*

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you!” (Saint Vincent, Conference of April 26, 1643, Union within the Community, CCD IX, 92)

Some questions:

- How convinced are we that community life is a gift from God?
- Is our community life really rooted in the Trinitarian life?
- Is our community life animated by a spirituality of communion?
- Do we communicate the mystique of “living together”?

### **III. A COMMUNITY ENGAGED IN THE SERVICE OF THE MOST VULNERABLE, A MYSTERY OF SOLIDARITY**

3<sup>rd</sup> challenge: in order for our community life to make manifest God’s mercy and be attractive and radiant, it needs to offer free, unconditional love for the most vulnerable and authentic closeness. This is the vision of faith and concrete expression of love described in C. 16b.

#### **Missionary community life**

We begin this third challenge with a central affirmation from a document on consecrated life, touching the very core of God’s plan. *“In the image of Jesus, the beloved Son ‘whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world’ (Jn 10:36), those whom God calls to follow him are also consecrated and sent into the world to imitate his example and to continue his mission” (Vita consecrata, 72).*

Given the vital need evoked above for union and deep communion with God, we are called to make known the love of God in order for quality community life modeled on the Trinity to be missionary. In His name, we are sent to be His tender love and His presence for those who suffer, following the example of Christ the Servant and Evangelizer.

Saint Vincent spoke to the first Sisters about this dynamic unity. *“A good soul who really loves Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin, and thinks of nothing else in what she does but to please Jesus Christ, is a flame of love that enters the heart of those to whom she speaks... For you see, dear Sisters, it’s one thing to assist physically those who are poor; in truth, however, it was never Our Lord’s intention in founding your Company that you should care only for the body, because there will always be someone to do that; but Our Lord’s intention is that you assist the sick poor spiritually; and to do that you have to reflect interiorly...”* (Saint Vincent, November 11, 1657, Service of the Sick and Care of one’s own Health, CCD X, 269).

### **Community life configured to Christ the Servant**

From the beginning, corporal and spiritual service were connected; humanization and evangelization worked together. We are all the more aware of this as the world is changing, Christian values are often stifled and the dignity of the most vulnerable is constantly disregarded, calling us to greater responsibility. More than in external works, mission consists in making Christ Himself present to the world through our service. Here is the challenge. The more we come to resemble Christ the Servant, the more we will make Him present and active in the world for the salvation of those who are poor. Our life will be all the more missionary and attractive because our gift of self to God will be more interior and our community life more sisterly.

*“You’ve left your villages, your parents, and your possessions. And why? To love Our Lord and His maxims. You are His daughters and He is your Father. He begot you and gave you His Spirit; for whoever sees the life of Jesus Christ would see far and away the similarity in the life of a Daughter of Charity”* (Saint Vincent, February 9, 1653, The Spirit of the Company, CCD IX, 465-466).

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This obviously requires openness and acceptance. We must open our hearts to the inner promptings of the Spirit, who invites us to better recognize the plans of Divine Providence. Yes, the Holy Spirit summons us to develop new responses to the new problems of the world today. “What would Jesus do?” We are called to seek God’s will in all things in order to courageously and boldly convey missionary commitments and priorities in line with our charism and the needs of specific situations.

*“At the school of the Son of God, the 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’” (C. 11a).*

### **Community life open to all**

A sisterly community will be evident by welcome, accompaniment of those who are lowly and left behind and a mobile availability. An open and welcoming sisterly community will shine forth the joy of faith because hospitality is one of the signs of a living community. This implies having an open heart to be available and genuinely support our suffering brothers and sisters in their situations of poverty in order to give them hope again.

A community with an open heart and open doors is attentive to all types of poverty. It is in this sense that Pope Francis urges us to reach out to the existential peripheries where there is suffering, solitude and human misery. Jesus awaits us in the hearts of so many people broken and wounded by life. We could say that the urging is a ‘booster shot’ after the manner of Saint Vincent who powerfully encouraged his daughters to “*seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned*” (Saint Vincent, January 1657,

Love for the poor, CCD XI, 349), and of Saint Louise who, for her part, encouraged them, “*Oh, what a happiness, if, without offending God, the Company could be employed only in the service of those who are destitute in all things!*” (Saint Louise, A. 100, Problems for the Company, 1660, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 833; C. 11b)

### **Community life, an expression of the tenderness of God**

It is clear that we are called to constantly discover Jesus in the face of those who are poor and to be the tenderness of God for each person. “*The Son of God... summoned us to the revolution of tenderness,*” Pope Francis reminds us (*Evangelii gaudium*, 88) in a perfect echo of our Foundress. “*It is only reasonable that those whom God has called to follow His Son should strive to become holy as He is holy and to make their lives a continuation of His*” (Saint Louise, L. 328, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 372).

We are thus continually invited to develop this faith perspective in order to find Jesus in people who are poor – “*We serve Our Lord in the person of the poor*” (Saint Louise, L. 276, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 314) – and in order to imitate Jesus: “*in imitation of Our Lord... have great compassion for the sick poor who suffer so much without... help*” (Saint Louise, A. 92, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 809). A double movement, but a single love!

Our mission is indeed the continuation of Jesus’ mission, a manifestation of love, of charity. The fundamental attitudes that flow from this are many and well-known: tenderness, cordiality, gentleness, kindness, affection, devotion... Saint Louise summarized them in a short expression, “*love them tenderly and respect them deeply*” (Saint Louise, L. 284b, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 320). People could indeed experience our service as crushing and disdainful if it lacked respect; however, charity is unconditional care for those who are most poor.

We could add today with the Pope, “*What the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an unruly activism, but above all an attentiveness which considers the other in a certain sense as one with ourselves... Only on the basis of this real and sincere closeness can we properly accompany the poor on their path of liberation*” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 199).

To meet this third challenge, our community life thus needs relationships imbued with a living faith since love for each person is the sign of God’s love for humanity in Christ. It concerns corporal and spiritual service. Indeed, what is at stake in authentic service of charity is a vision of the human person in which service cannot be reduced to a single aspect because it impacts the entire person as a child of God created in His image. “*In serving persons who are poor, we serve Jesus Christ*” (Saint Vincent, *CCD IX*, 199). We are convinced that persons who are poor are, first and foremost, persons and that their faces conceal the face of Christ. They are “His flesh,” signs of His crucified body, Pope Francis says. This is really the heart of our charism.

How radiant and attractive would be community life where loving service of the most vulnerable is at the center, where the concern for their holistic promotion is unconditional, where genuine closeness is a synonym of solidarity and where respect for the dignity of the lowliest shines forth.

### Some questions

- Where are we with our attitude of servant and authentic solidarity with the most vulnerable? Does our community life produce this closeness with all?
- Does the quality of our community life reveal a God who loves every person and allows not one of them to be lost?
- Is our community life a place of revitalization, challenge and renewed sending forth in joy toward those whom God entrusts to us?

## IV. A COMMUNITY DRIVEN BY THE SPIRIT OF THE BEATITUDES, A MYSTERY OF HOLINESS

4<sup>th</sup> challenge: in order for our community life to bear witness to the transforming power of the Good News and be attractive and radiant, it needs to be animated, driven by the spirit of the Beatitudes.

As for the previous challenges, it is helpful to refer to a foundational text to undergird our reflection. I quote *Vita consecrata*. “*Consecrated men and women are sent forth to proclaim, by the witness of their lives, the value of Christian fraternity and the transforming power of the Good News, which makes it possible to see all people as sons and daughters of God, and inspires a self-giving love towards everyone, especially the least of our brothers and sisters. Such communities are places of hope and of the discovery of the Beatitudes, where love, drawing strength from prayer, the wellspring of communion, is called to become a pattern of life and source of joy*” (*Vita consecrata*, 51).

This fourth challenge will be the test of the authenticity of our community life because we are called to be these places of hope and of the discovery of the Beatitudes according to our charism, living the fraternity that already shines forth a little of this happiness of which the Beatitudes speak, the happiness of the Gospel. Community life is the way of happiness promised by Jesus, “*Blessed, happy are those who...*”

### **Community life, the way of happiness**

By proclaiming the Beatitudes, Jesus invites us to walk the paths of love with Him, as we have already said. He promises us His grace if we open our hearts. He allows us to experience a peace and joy that only God, infinite Love, can give us.



### Community life, an attractive and radiant witness

Saint Vincent said this to the first Sisters as early as 1634. *“Our Lord promised us... when several of you have the same intention of serving God, ‘my Father and I will come and dwell among them,’ if they love us... So, dear Sisters, let’s see how you should spend the twenty-four hours that make up the day, as the days make up the months, and the months the years that will lead you to eternity”* (Saint Vincent, July 31, 1634, Explanation of the Regulations, CCD IX, 2).

Eternity is precisely the happiness that Jesus promises us in the Beatitudes. As we just heard, this happiness sets us in motion: *“let’s see how you should spend the twenty-four hours that make up the days... that will lead you to eternity.”* Isn’t this a way of indicating to the first Sisters their way of holiness?

- So, let us ask ourselves, does our community life enter into this movement towards holiness?

- Since the Beatitudes paint the face of Jesus that we are called to reveal through our everyday lives, how do we implement what Jesus says in the sermon of the Beatitudes?

### **Community life, the way of holiness**

Community life is for us a way of holiness. Pope Francis gives us some reference points. *“Let the grace of your baptism bear fruit in a path of holiness”* (Gaudete et exsultate, 15). *“Being poor of heart: that is holiness”* (70). *“Reacting with meekness and humility: that is holiness”* (74). *“Knowing how to mourn with others; that is holiness”* (76). *“Hungering and thirsting for righteousness: that is holiness”* (82). *“Keeping a heart free of all that tarnishes love: that is holiness”* (86). *“Sowing peace all around us: that is holiness”* (89). *“Accepting daily the path of the Gospel, even though it may cause us problems: that is holiness”* (94). *“We need a spirit of holiness capable of filling both our solitude and our service... so that every moment can be*

*an expression of self-sacrificing love in the Lord's eyes. In this way, every minute of our lives can be a step along the path to growth in holiness" (31). You would almost say Saint Vincent were speaking!*

The Beatitudes thus set us in motion, individually but also as community, toward this true happiness that Jesus promises us. They trace out an unusual and paradoxical "on-ramp" to happiness. As the Protestant pastor Leïla Hamrat said so clearly, *"They oppose our appetite for riches with poverty, our aggression with gentleness, our thirst for pleasure with patience and love of justice, our harshness with mercy and our tendency to evil with purity of heart. Because we have placed our lives in God's hands, happiness stops being the absence of misfortune to become a transfiguration of misfortune. Happiness stops being what is conquered to become what is received. Happiness no longer lies only in the fact of being happy in the world but in the act of making the world happy. Happiness is not found in the accumulation of the pleasures of life but in a pleasure of living. Finally, the happiness of the Beatitudes is fed by promises of happiness. Blessed, then, are those whose life follows these lines: 'Rejoice and be glad, for your recompense will be great in heaven.'"*

The Beatitudes set us in motion, but through them we also discover the face of Jesus that we are called to reveal in our everyday lives. *"The word 'happy' or 'blessed' thus becomes a synonym for 'holy,'" Pope Francis says. "It expresses the fact that those faithful to God and his word, by their self-giving, gain true happiness" (Gaudete et exultate, 64). He adds, "The Beatitudes are in no way trite or undemanding, quite the opposite. We can only practice them if the Holy Spirit fills us with his power and frees us from our weakness, our selfishness, our complacency and our pride" (65).*

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This radical response to which we are called personally but also together cuts through our entire life and touches the depths of our total gift of self to God. If our community life is driven by the spirit of the Beatitudes, we will encourage each other to give the best of ourselves, boldly go against the tide of prevailing ideologies, resist superficiality, assume our responsibilities and face the major challenges of life. *“Pray... that Our Lord Jesus Christ may bestow His Spirit upon us on this holy feast so that we may be so filled with His Spirit that we may do nothing or say nothing except for His glory and His holy love”* (Saint Louise, L. 345, May 19, 1651, To my very dear Sister Jeanne Lepintre, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 351).

### **Community life that goes against the tide**

Community life driven by the spirit of Christ, that of the Beatitudes, gives rise to humility, gentleness, generosity, availability and boldness and shines forth a transformed, transfigured community life. This implies going against the tide of what the modern individualistic mentality promotes. The communal dimension is a grace, the Pope says, which can go as far as the gift of one’s own life. We could think of our martyred Sisters in the Company... Community is far from being a place for reassurance or merely a means to be more effective in ministry, as some may think; as the Holy Father stresses, it is the place of sacrifice of one’s life and the place of Christ’s presence. *“Each community is called to create a God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord. Sharing the word and celebrating the Eucharist together fosters fraternity and makes us a holy and missionary community”* (*Gaudete et exsultate*, 142).

Community life measured against the Beatitudes thus presupposes vigilance, a fight, a struggle not only against our own weaknesses and limitations, a society of consumption, etc. but also against the Evil One, as Jesus called him, who constantly

strives to discourage us, to make us throw up our hands and to sow trouble, confusion, rejection... I will not expand upon this spiritual struggle that I already brought out in the previous challenges. Nonetheless, today more than ever, we have an urgent need for discernment so that we do not lose our way in all sorts of new dead-ends.

### **Community life and our teachers, those who are poor**

Community life should follow the example of those who are poor. *“If we are humble and attentive,”* as Mother Guillemin said in her February 2, 1968, circular letter, *“Without words [the poor] teach us the beauty of simplicity, true poverty, solidarity, the sharing of necessities, and so many other indications of the work of God in them. So, let us hearken to what they teach us by their lives, so closely resembling the Gospel. This is one of the greatest graces of our vocation.”*

Pope Francis recently drew young people’s attention to the same point. *“The poor are not just people to whom we can give something. They have much to offer us and to teach us. How much we have to learn from the wisdom of the poor!”* (Message for World Youth Day 2014)

### **Community life and missionary collaboration**

Fraternal collaboration within the community as well as outside it is a way of holiness. God called us to collaborate with Him first and constantly encourages us in this missionary approach. Collaboration cuts across all the dimensions of our lives; it leads to a mutual complementarity and unity in the diversity of the gifts that the Holy Spirit sows in our hearts. *“The challenges of evangelization are such that they cannot be effectively faced without the cooperation, both in discernment and action, of all the Church’s members”* (Vita consecrata, 74). This collaboration implies ongoing mutual commitment in which *“each one gives*

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*and receives, and where each Sister places all that she is and all that she has at the service of the others” (C. 32b) but also a collaboration with all those who work in favor of the defense and reintegration of the weakest among us. “We are invited to learn the difficult art of relating with the different and of cordial collaboration to build together” (CIVCSVA, Proclaim, 73 – June 29, 2016).*

Community life driven by the Beatitudes naturally falls into this process of collaboration where everyone has a place, including the humblest people. This is already a beginning of the promised happiness! Internal as well as external collaboration is a synonym of mutual assistance for which interpersonal trust is the key word. *“May all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me” (Jn 17:21).* We know that collaboration is totally in keeping with our origins; the year of Vincentian collaboration was an opportunity to reengage ourselves in this approach inherent to our spiritual family. How are we doing with this? Recalling our origins can reactivate our trust in the power of the Spirit. *“I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, rise and walk” (Acts 3:6).*

We will meet this fourth challenge through community life that bears witness to this transforming power of the Good News and to charity without borders; it will shine forth a happiness that comes not from this world. *“Blessed are you if you do it” (Jn 13:17).* The Beatitudes will be our “new wineskins” constantly guiding our relationships with God, material goods, others and especially those who are poor. At the heart of this community life, the imitation of Christ and the love of those who are poor are inseparable, like the two sides of a coin. How could such a community life not be an attractive and radiant witness?

### Some questions

- Does our community life match the spirit of the Beatitudes?
- What connections are there between community life and our vows?
- Are our local communities “Cenacles of community” where young people can discover and explore their vocation?

### **By way of conclusion**

I would like to say with our Foundress, *“Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only mother.”* Community life where the Virgin Mary is recognized as mother is a blessing. As a mother, she educates us in faith, hope and love, and together we shine forth God’s tenderness. Let us not be afraid to ask her to make our local communities little “Cenacles of community” so that our witness will be attractive and radiant. Yes, let us turn to her with confidence. She is there to accompany us and help us on this demanding yet radiant path of community. She is close to us, close because in constant communion with God’s will. *“Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled”* (Lk 1:45). She is close to us because she is concerned for others. *“They have no wine.” “Do whatever he tells you”* (Jn 2:3, 5). She is close to us because she lived the Beatitudes. *“Blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it”* (Lk 11:28). She is so close to us that we can ask her, with Pope Francis (Saint Peter’s Square, May 31, 2013):

*Mary, woman of listening, open our ears;  
grant us to know how to listen to the word of your Son Jesus  
among the thousands of words of this world;  
grant that we may listen to the reality in which we live, to every  
person we encounter, especially those who are poor, in need,  
in hardship.*

*Mary, woman of decision,  
illuminate our mind and our heart so that we may obey,*

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*unhesitating, the word of your Son Jesus;  
give us the courage to decide, not to let ourselves be dragged  
along, letting others direct our life.*

*Mary, woman of action,  
obtain that our hands and feet move “with haste” toward others  
to bring them the charity and love of your Son Jesus, to bring the  
light of the Gospel to the world, as you did.*

*Amen.*

Sister Antoinette-Marie HANCE  
*Daughter of Charity*

## Province of Amazonia (Brazil)

### Helping those who are poor in Amazonia during the 2020 pandemic

The twenty local communities of Sisters of the Province of Amazonia are located in three states in northern Brazil: Amazonas, Pará and Roraima. The indigenous people in Amazonia are defenseless before the destructive force of the Covid-19 virus. Those who can go to the hospitals in the state capitals of Manaus, Belém and Boa Vista to seek medical care.

The primary impact of Covid-19 on the population is hunger. Since the virus arrived, the poorest people, who are generally day laborers, found themselves without income and thus could not buy food. Another tragic effect is the despair of many families who see their loved ones die with almost no assistance.

Within the possibilities of the recommendation of Brazilian health officials concerning social distancing, the Sisters help those who are poor wherever they are. The Sisters try to meet their most basic needs for food, medical care and medications and pay the rent, gas, electricity and water bills for families without any income. Despite fear of infection, “guardian angels” always appear to help them make deliveries to places where they cannot go. Thanks be to God!



*News from  
the Provinces*



### *Sister's Testimony*

In Cametá, a city in the state of Pará located 236 kilometers from the state capital Belém, we have a hospital and maternity ward. In partnership with the city government, this health care facility serves the rural population living far from the capital and can provide moderately complicated care. The Sisters dedicate themselves to the sick and new mothers. Unfortunately, like in the rest of the country, we are witnessing the collapse of the health care system. Health care in Amazonia has always been precarious because a succession of different epidemics must be faced each year. The coronavirus pandemic added to a very structurally weak health care system. In these conditions, the health care system has become virtually nonexistent, and it is impossible to meet the challenge of this type of pandemic. As for us, we feel totally helpless. Coronavirus patients receive urgent care from the medical staff at the hospital and then return home with medications and advice to follow during their illness. However, deaths are numerous, and we sense families' sadness and anger at this pandemic.

Another activity is the support offered to the elderly in Saint Vincent de Paul House, in collaboration with the Vincentian Family in Belém. This long-standing institution is administered by the AIC of Belém. Its residents are very poor and cannot afford to cover their care, but during this medical and economic crisis, donations are increasingly scarce, creating a terrible situation.

We also contributed to the service of people experiencing homelessness and drug addiction. Two religious congregations run an association called "Children of Belém" that assists people living on the streets and those without resources or housing and in need of care. The number of people living in the streets is growing steadily in Belém due to the pandemic. This is why we helped repair two of the association's vehicles so they could be used to collect donations of supplies and food. We also renovated an old home to house people experiencing homelessness and expanded the association's space by adding a small storeroom of food and medicine.

Since the beginning of the mandatory lockdown, stores have run out of masks that allow people to protect themselves. The Sisters thus took the initiative of making masks themselves to give away free of charge to persons who are poor, starting with those who are homeless and then all those who needed them.

We pray every day for those sick with this virus as well as for their families, the medical staff in hospitals and all those who have lost a loved one during this cruel pandemic. May the good Lord protect us!

Sister Anagilsa SAMPAIO BENTES  
*Daughter of Charity*



**The boldness  
of holiness  
for a new  
missionary  
momentum**

**My God, I offer myself to you.  
I wish to belong to you, o my God.  
Do with me what you will.  
O Mary, give me your love.  
Without you, I perish; save me.  
Obtain for me all the graces  
that I need.**

**Saint Catherine Labouré  
Autograph 448**