

**Celebrating the grace of God
in the life and ministry
of
St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac**

1660 was a year of great loss for the Vincentian Family. Antoine Portail, Vincent de Paul's first confrere and the first Director of the Daughters of Charity, died in February. His collaborator and friend, Louise de Marillac died in March and Vincent himself died in September. So, this year, on the weekend of September 25/26, we celebrate here in the Parish, St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac, thanking God for the spirit they have left us.

SPIRIT OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC

In May 1629, Vincent de Paul sent the young widow he had met a few years earlier to visit the Confraternities of Charity (ladies of substance and nobility who wished to serve the poor) which had begun so well but were, in more recent times, losing their initial zeal. They needed to revive the enthusiasm that had characterized their beginnings. In Vincent's eyes, no one was better suited to undertake this task than Louise de Marillac, known after her marriage to Antoine Le Gras as Mademoiselle Le Gras since her husband was not of the nobility. She succeeded remarkably well and Vincent rejoiced in her success.

When Vincent and Louise met at the end of 1625 or in early 1626, she had just lost her husband after a long, painful illness. She found herself alone with a difficult 12-year-old son and in financial distress. She was a fragile woman seeking her way. Vincent accompanied her.

Little by little he discerned, behind the outward appearance of doubt, hesitancy, and anxiety, a strong woman, endowed with exceptional gifts, capable of transforming herself into a leader he was looking for to collaborate with him in his charitable endeavors.

The “sending out on Mission” of May 1629 was but the beginning of a friendship and collaboration that would change the Church and the world. In the midst of all this radical change stands the figure of Louise de Marillac. It was she who saw early on the necessity of bringing together into a community the “good village girls” she was forming, at Vincent’s request, to assist the Ladies of Charity in serving the sick poor in their homes. At one and the same time, she founded the Daughters of Charity and built a bridge over the chasm separating the rich and powerful from the peasants and the poor as well as men from women. With Vincent de Paul and the first Daughters of Charity, she created a vast network of charity which excluded no one.

Vincent de Paul had a grand vision of responding to the needs of those who were poor. Louise de Marillac had the organizational ability, the attention to detail, the daring, and the creativity to concretize the vision. One needs only to look at her work with the Foundlings, for which she was so impassioned, undoubtedly because of her own birth as a “natural daughter,” that is, born of an unknown mother but recognized by her father, or her establishment of the Hospice of the Holy Name of Jesus for the elderly to recognize the truth of this affirmation.

WHAT DOES LOUISE CONVEY TO TODAY’S WORLD?

Much has changed since the epoch of Louise de Marillac, but over the centuries, she brings universal and lasting values and the warmth of human relationships to a world dominated by technology. Three hundred and fifty years after her death, some of these values take on particular importance for the Vincentian Family namely:

ROLE OF WOMEN

Peasant Women: Well before organized efforts to do so, Louise sought to improve the status of peasant women by: opening the opportunity to them to enter a new form of consecrated life; by human, spiritual, and professional formation; by preparation for responsibility as educators for the Foundlings, school mistresses

for poor little girls, and nurses for persons who were sick and abandoned. She told these first sisters:

“...you should be very grateful for the graces God has given you by placing you in a position to render Him such great service. ...Do not be fearful...”

Middle Class and Noble Women: Louise de Marillac was well placed to be the link between the peasant women who were the first Daughters of Charity and the Ladies of Charity who were from the upper and middle class. As a de Marillac, she had her place in this milieu but she had chosen to live in community with peasant women. While she formed the early Daughters of Charity, often in collaboration with the Ladies of Charity, her role with the Ladies was largely as an animator. By her words and especially by her comportment, she tried to help them: to discover under outward appearances, the dignity of persons who were poor; to respect and to work as equals with the Daughters of Charity. She wrote:

“... the Ladies of Charity\ recognized the needs of those who were poor and...God gave them the grace to assist them so charitably and so magnificently. ... Were not the means these charitable Ladies used for their distribution plan their holy Assemblies...which provided faithful and charitable subjects to recognize true needs and to provide for them prudently, not only corporally but also spiritually...?”

Network of Charity

Louise de Marillac never considered the service of those who are poor as reserved to a particular group. For her, the diversity and extent of needs required a vast network of collaboration: men and women, Ladies of Charity, Priests and Brothers of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, and Fathers of the Poor (Municipal Administrators.) To insure efficacious service, this collaboration had its requirements:-

- i) A work of Vincentian collaboration asks of everyone involved the will to recognize and accept the personality of the other with its qualities and faults. Louise told her sisters:

“Renew yourselves in the spirit of unity and cordiality...the practice of charity...leads us never to see the faults of another with bitterness but rather always to excuse them while humbling ourselves.”

ii) Such collaboration demands of all: mutual respect, openness to the ideas of others while knowing how to express one's own. Louise wrote:

“Present your reasons, humbly, forcefully, gently, and briefly.”

iii) Finally, the service of those who are poor is never truly Vincentian unless it is characterized by human warmth, by the feminine qualities Louise spoke of so often modeled her life on;: compassion, tenderness, gentleness, in a word **LOVE**.

REFLECTION:

1. How does reflection on Louise de Marillac touch me?
2. How can her influence move me to action for the poor, the needy, the abandoned of our time?

Adapted from a reflection written by Sr Elizabeth Charpy DC and Sr Louise Sullivan DC