

FIVE FACES OF ST LOUISE

(Robert P. Maloney, CM)

I would be very embarrassed if you were to discover the things that I say confidentially to my spiritual director, especially when I tell him about my fears, my anxieties, my weaknesses. In fact, I would regard it as unjust that you came to know my secret thoughts.

Yet this is precisely what has happened to Louise de Marillac. We know her, in great part, through her correspondence with her spiritual director, Vincent de Paul. Surely, this gives us considerable insight into her inner struggles. But it also gives us, I suspect, a very distorted picture of Louise. When we rely heavily on her letters to Vincent, we easily think of her as a very anxious woman, and might even describe her as a woman of little faith, as in fact Vincent did, in a moment of frustration, in June of 1642 (1). But that was not at all the way the first Daughters of Charity saw her. Rather, they attest that the “whole person” Louise de Marillac was much more serene than we might gather from her secret conversations with her spiritual director and that she was much firmer in everyday life than the confidential doubts that she expressed to Vincent would suggest. In fact, she was a remarkable many-faceted woman. In a conference he gave after her death, St Vincent reveals his great admiration for Louise:

What a beautiful picture, O my God, this humility, faith, prudence, sound judgement, and constant concern to conform all her actions to those of Our Lord! O Sisters, it is for you to conform your actions to hers and to imitate her in all things (2).

Today I offer you five faces of Louise de Marillac.

1. Formator

I am struck by two aspects of this face of St Louise

First, important though the role of Vincent de Paul was in the formation of the first Daughters of Charity, it was Louise de Marillac who was their day-in-day-out formator. She accompanied the sisters in the details of their daily life from the time of their entrance until their going out on mission. Calvet states, in his eloquent biography of St Louise: “To educate, to form, to maintain the drive of her Daughters – that was her primary role, and to assure for today and tomorrow the stability of their Company.” (3) Many of the first sisters who came to Louise were largely uneducated, knowing neither how to read nor to write. They came from a simple rural background to Paris, where they would eventually have to mix with rather cultivated Ladies of Charity. Their formation was surely a challenging task for Louise.

For more than 25 years she was the rock upon which their formation was founded. The directives that she gave to the sisters living with her, the rules that she suggested to St Vincent, and the instructions that she wrote for the sisters being sent on mission are clear, detailed, and often eloquent. Let me cite just a few words from the long instruction that she wrote for the sisters being sent to Montreuil in 1647:

Our Sisters Anne Hardemont and Marie Lullen are going to Montreuil in order to discover what Divine Providence wishes them to do there.

First and foremost, they must remember to keep in mind God and his glory. Then they must consider the welfare of the people with whom they will be associated in order to serve them better according to their aptitudes.

Thirdly, they shall remember that none of their actions among themselves or with externs should be prejudicial to the Company of the Daughters of Charity because we must honour God in the interest of the Company...

As for your conduct toward the sick, may you never take the attitude of merely getting the task done. you must show them affection; serving them from the heart; inquiring of them what they might need; speaking to them gently and compassionately; procuring necessary help for them without being too bothersome or too eager. Above all, you must have great care for them salvation, never leaving a poor person or a patient without having uttered some good word. (4)

Because her role as formator of the Daughters of Charity is so prominent, it is easy to forget a second aspect of the face of Louise de Marillac the formator: she was herself deeply committed to the formation of poor young people. For that reason, she founded the “petite ecoles” and made the instruction of poor young people one of the principal works of the first Daughters of Charity. She wrote to Monsieur des Roches, rector of Notre-Dame de Paris, in May 1641:

Louise de Marillac... very humbly supplicates Monsieur des Roches, Rector of Notre-Dame de Paris, informing him that the sight of the great number of poor in the Saint-Denis district leads her to desire to take charge of their instruction. Should these poor little girls remain steeped in ignorance, it is to be feared that this same ignorance will be harmful for their salvation. Should you agree, for the glory of God, Monsieur, to give the above-mentioned suppliant the permission required in such cases, thereby allowing the poor the liberty of sending their children free of charge to schools where they would be unhindered by the rich, who do not want those who teach their children to accept and keep poor children so freely, these souls, redeemed by the blood of the Son of God, would be obliged to pray for you, Monsieur, in time and in eternity.(5)

Louise herself often worked personally in the instruction of children. She insisted that the instruction given to them would be simple and practical, especially that they would learn to read and write.

II CONTEMPLATIVE

On the third day of her retreat in 1657m writing about her prayer, Louise states: “My prayer has been more one of contemplation than of reasoning, with a strong attraction toward the holy humanity of Our Lord and the desire to honour him and imitate him as much as possible in the person of the poor and of all my neighbours.” (6)

Let me suggest to you two prominent aspects of the contemplative life of St Louise.

First, she was deeply immersed in Christ crucified and she has handed on this heritage to the Company. From 1643 on, Louise consistently concludes her letters with a reference to the love of the crucified Lord: “I am, in the love of Jesus Crucified, your humble servant...” (7)

She speaks eloquently about the dying love of the crucified Lord;

At the foot of this holy, sacred and adored Cross, I sacrifice everything that might prevent me from loving, with all the purity that You expect of me, without ever aspiring to any joy other than submission to Your good pleasure and to the laws of Your pure love. (8)

The seal of the Company expresses graphically this first aspect of Louise's contemplative face: "The love of Christ crucified urges us on" (2Cor 5:14). It is interesting to note that while the seal of the Congregation of the Mission depicts Christ the Evangeliser of the Poor, the seal of the Company of the Daughters of Charity depicts the sacrificial love of the crucified Lord. This symbol speaks eloquently about the vocation of the Daughters of Charity.

A second aspect of the contemplative face of Louise de Marillac is her focus on the Spirit. In fact, her spirituality is much more explicit in this regard than St Vincent's. Her writings place a remarkable emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Her Pentecost experience in 1623 was a turning point in her life and is part of the spiritual heritage that she has passed on to the Company:

On the Feast of Pentecost, during holy Mass or while I was praying the church, my mind was instantly freed of all doubt.

I was assured... that a time would come when I would be in a position to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and that I would be part of a small community where others would do the same. I then understood that I would be in a place where I could help my neighbour but I did not understand how this would be possible since there was to be much coming and going.

I was also assured that I should remain at peace concerning my director; that God would give me one whom he seemed to show me. (9)

Early in their relationship, St Vincent wrote to her on two occasions: "The Kingdom of God is peace in the Holy Spirit. He will reign in you if your heart is in peace." (10) He later added: "The Spirit of the Lord will be your rule and your guide." (11) Louise took this very much to heart.

So striking is Louise's focus on the Holy Spirit that Calvet, while protesting his dislike for grand theological words, writes: "I dare to risk the word 'pneumo-centrism' to characterize the spirituality of Louise de Marillac. She is completely given over to the Spirit. She is a mystic of the Spirit. I merely cite for the reader – Calvet adds – these words: "The Spirit fills us with the pure love of God – the Spirit makes us docile to God and places us in the state of living the divine life." (12)

III ORGANISER

I suggest to you two aspects of this face of Louise de Marillac: 1) master of details, and 2) writer of rules.

First master of details. Vincent and Louise had a wonderfully cooperative relationship. They sometimes disagreed even in significant matters, like her insistence on the role of Vincent's successors in the government of the Daughters of Charity, but Louise very often won Vincent over to her own point of view. She was tenacious. She had a firm grasp of the concrete, a gift for detail. She often had to give instructions to the sisters or mediate disputes among them, so she writes about matters as diverse as participation in the daily Eucharist, preparation of soup for the poor, keeping the account books in order, treating the poor humanly, and offering religious instruction. She sends notes to St Vincent about how to take better care of his health and, as you recall, suggests medicines and many practical remedies for recuperating his strength in his old age. Sometimes her detailed instructions are quite touching because they manifest her deep, practical love.

Secondly, writer of rules. In her contemporary spirituality, rules hold a much more modest place than they did in the time of Vincent and Louise, but it is very important to note that both Louise and Vincent were utterly convinced that the rules they wrote (today we would call them constitutions) were essential both for the foundation and the future of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. I share this conviction. While Louise and Vincent knew quite well that the Spirit was more important than the rule (the point which our contemporary ethos emphasizes), they foresaw that the constitutions (or what they called rules) would transmit to future generations the essential truths upon which their lives should be based. Analogous to the way in which the scriptures communicate the revelation of the Lord, or a creed expresses the faith of the Christian community, the Rules they composed transmit what is at the heart of the charism, the spirit, the mission, the community life, the spirituality of the Company. Louise and Vincent, wrote rules not just for the Daughters but for other groups too. You will find many of them in the index of the *Ecrits Spirituels*. (13)

But most significant for us is her cooperation with Vincent in the writing of the rule of the Daughters of Charity. Its final version was published only after the death of both founders, but the substance was their creation and is a vital part of the patrimony of the Company.

IV AN ACCOMPLISHED WOMAN

Louise had a remarkably varied life. She was wife, mother, painter, widow, educator, servant of the poor, founder, formator, vowed woman, warm friend. She was well educated, having studied both French and Latin, wrote very clearly (even eloquently at times), and had a subtle grasp of the theology of her era.

On her father's side she came from an aristocratic family. Her uncles were involved in politics on the highest level. One was executed in 1632 and the other died in prison that same year because of their opposition to the politics of Cardinal Richelieu. Yet Louise herself had the discretion and suppleness need to work in close collaboration with the Duchess of Aiguillon, the niece of Richelieu, and with the wife of the Marchel de Schomberg, whose husband had imprisoned her uncle Louis.

Her husband, Antoine, was loving, but died after they had been married only 12 years. Her son, Michel, though a source of great joy for her, was also the cause of much anxiety in her life.

She was a woman of considerable culture. We know that, besides having read the bible (something rare for women in her day), she also read the *Imitation of Christ*, St Francis de Sales' books (*The Introduction to a Devout Life* and *The Treatise on the Love of God*), and also books by Berulle, Gerson, Lorenzo de Scupoli, and Luis of Granada's *Sinners Guide*. She probably also read. She probably also read Benedict of Canfield's *Rule of Perfection*, Du Vair's *Holy Philosophy* and many other spiritual books popular at that time.

She herself wrote a catechism which would help her sisters in teaching poor young girls. We still have the text today. (14)

In a rather remarkable document (one that could have been composed in the 12st century!), Louise writes: "It is very evident, in this century, that Divine Providence willed to make use of women to show that it was His goodness alone which desired to aid afflicted people and to bring them powerful helps for their salvation." (15)

V SERVANT OF THE POOR: HUMBLE, GENTLE, TRUSTING IN PROVIDENCE

I have always loved a little passage in Calvet's life of Louise. He states that, for Louise: "The poor person is first in the Church. He is the prince, the master, being a sort of incarnation of the poor Christ. We must therefore serve him with respect whatever his character may be like, whatever his defects. We must love him. The sick person is a suffering member of Christ, whom we must touch only with reverence. He may be like a child often, because of his psychological state has become fragile and sensitive and is bruised by the smallest brusque gesture, but he is also put at ease by a little smile." (16)

After the death of her husband, the service of Christ in the poor became the center of Louise's life. The sick poor became the focus of the Company that she and Vincent founded. Poor children became the focus of the missions to which she sent the first sisters and where she herself sometimes labored. Louise's contribution to the Church was so remarkable, original, and well-organised that Pope John XXIII proclaimed her the patroness of all those engaged in Christian social works.

In the conferences after Louise's death, Vincent and the sisters who gathered together spoke eloquently of her virtues. "She had a great love for the poor and took great pleasure in serving them," one of the sisters stated. (17) Another added, "Father, she had such great charity for me that sometimes, when she say that my mind was troubled, she treated me with the greatest gentleness." (18) Another added, "Father, I remarked great humility in the late Mademoiselle." (19)

Many noted Louise's humility, her quickness to acknowledge her faults, her great sense of her dependence on God. Humility is very evident in Louise's writings. In an undated letter, written probably to a Lady of Charity who was about to go on retreat, Louise recommends: "Always have great esteem, my dear Lady, for humility and gentle cordiality. While reflecting on the divine gentleness during your periods of meditation, speak to Our Lord with great simplicity and innocent familiarity. Do not be concerned whether or not you experience any consolation; God wants only our hearts." (20)

She returned again and again to the theme of providence: "Promising...to the will of God in all things, her prayerfulness, her modesty, her prudence in decision-making, and her love for the Virgin Mary. In fact, there are many other faces of Louise de Marillac, but these five are sufficient for today.

Let me leave the last words today to St Vincent and St Louise. Vincent said to the Daughters of Charity shortly after Louise's death and shortly before his own:

Should we not turn our eyes toward her who was your Mother, because she has borne you! you did not make yourselves, Sisters, it was she who made you and give birth to you in Our Lord.
(22)

Louise herself on her deathbed spoke this final spiritual testament to the sisters gathered around her:

My dear Sisters, I continue to ask God for His blessings for you and pray that He will grant you the grace to persevere in your vocation in order to serve Him in the manner He asks of you. Take good care of the service of the poor. Above all, live together in great union and cordiality, loving one another in imitation of the union and life of our Lord.
Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only Mother. (20)

1. SV II, 259-262.
2. SV X, 730
3. Jean Calvet, *Sainte Louise de Marillac par elle-meme* (Paris: Aubier, 1958) 157.
4. *Ecrits Spirituels*, 763-764 (A.85)
5. *Ecrits Spirituels*, 51-52 (L.41)
6. *Ecrits Spirituels*, 809 (A.26)
7. Cf., *Ecrits Spirituels*, 109ff.
8. *Ecrits Spirituels*, 816 (A.27)
9. *Ecrits Spirituels*, 3 (A.2)
10. SV I, 114.
11. SV I, 120
12. Calvet, *op. cit.* 204-205.
13. Cr., for example, 687 (A.1), 731 (A.80), 747 (A.91bis), 758 (L.134), etc.
14. *La Campagne des Filles de la Charite aux, Documents* (Paris, 1989) 958-970 (Document 824).
15. *Ecrits Spirituels*, 781 (A.56)
16. Calvet, *op. cit.*, 75.
17. SV X, 710.
18. SV X, 719.
19. SV X, 727.
20. *Ecrits Spirituels*, 674 (L.40).
21. *Ecrits Spirituels*, 692 (A.3).
22. SV X, 726.
23. *Ecrits Spirituels*, 823.