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Vincent de Paul and the Empowerment of Women

Louise Sullivan, D.C.

The year 2017, marking the 400th Anniversary of the birth of the Vincentian Charism, has proven to be one of celebration for the entire Vincentian Family. It has been a time for looking back with gratitude, and perhaps more importantly, for looking forward with hope and daring. While thousands of women are taking part in these celebrations around the world, the role women played in the birth and development of the charism is often overlooked. To do so however, is to miss a singularly significant aspect of Vincent de Paul's genius, namely, the mission of charity he confided to the laity and particularly to women.

Indeed, it is incontestable that there were many women in Vincent de Paul's life including some of the most influential figures of the time: Madame de Gondi, the Duchess d'Aiguillon, Madame Goussault, Jane Frances de Chantal, to name but a few. A painting by the eighteenth-century artist, Jean André, OP, is a visual reminder of this. Housed in the Museum of Public Assistance in Paris which, unfortunately, has been closed to the public since 4 July 2010, it depicts Vincent de Paul surrounded by obviously wealthy women of the nobility and bourgeoisie. Among them is a young widow recognizable by her solemn black attire as Louise de Marillac. In the foreground is a Daughter of Charity with three foundlings wrapped in swaddling clothes. No attempt is made here to discuss the intrinsic artistic value of the work. It is significant for our purposes as an illustration of the key players in the development of the Vincentian Charism born in Châtillon: Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, the Ladies of Charity, and the Daughters of Charity.

As early as his arrival in Paris in 1608, Vincent had begun to frequent the society of wealthy,

influential women. He would later number them among his closest friends and collaborators upon whom he could count in his charitable endeavors and even in his work to reform the clergy. During an era when, for many, the desired feminine virtues were "naiveté, childishness and servitude" (Six & Loose, 1980, p. 40), Vincent de Paul saw in women a wellspring of untapped potential. He had witnessed this in the women who had been part of Madame Acarie's circle. In them he perceived not only generosity in the service of the poor that marked the early seventeenth century and the Catholic renewal but also a thirst for the spiritual and the capacity to enter, on an equal footing with men, into the way of mystical union with God. Vincent de Paul's work, however, was not simply a large-scale evolution of Madame Acarie's circle. It would lead not to the Carmel of France but to the Ladies of Charity and the Daughters of Charity who seek to combine contemplation and action and in so doing continue Vincent de Paul's work into the twenty-first century. Let us now examine more closely the collaboration between Vincent de Paul and women in the service of persons who were poor.

GANNES—Folleville: Madame De Gondi

It is generally accepted that the year 1617 marks a turning point in Vincent de Paul's existence. We learn from Vincent himself that twice between January and late August of that year, God intervened directly and perceptibly in his life. On both occasions, an event caused him to stop, to reflect before God, and to undertake a course of action which would alter his future. Women would play a significant role in the outcome of each.

To understand these events and their far-reaching effects, it is essential to recall the context in which they occurred. At the time of the episode at Gannes-Folleville in January 1617, Vincent was thirty-six years old. Since 1613 he had been in the household of Phillipe-Emmanuel de Gondi, General of the Galleys of the king, as tutor for the children and spiritual director for Madame de Gondi. It was an enviable position for an ambitious man, one in which he found the security and the “honorable retirement” (Vincent de Paul, 1610, February 17, 1:17), he had longed for since his youth. But having attained it, he was dissatisfied. The soil of his soul was ready for conversion in the truest sense of the word.

The incident that took place when Vincent accompanied the Gondi family to their estates in Folleville is, at first glance, quite ordinary, even banal in the life of a parish priest: he was called to the bedside of a dying man to hear his confession. Moreover, Vincent had little experience as a parish priest—sixteenth months in sixteen years—so it is quite possible that it would never have led to the first “sermon of the mission” (Vincent de Paul, n.d., 11:4) had it not been for the intervention of Madame de Gondi. It was she who first reacted after the old man’s confession; she who pushed Vincent to preach the following day; she who chose the subject of the sermon; and she who asked Vincent to continue the work begun at Gannes in the other villages on her lands. Vincent tells of the providential role she played. Scrupulous by nature, with a tendency to dramatize, Madame de Gondi drew a generalization from the old man’s revelation and feared that the peasants on her estates were in danger of damnation. Thus she challenged her spiritual director saying:

Ah, Sir, what is he saying. What is it that we have just heard. The same no doubt holds true of those poor people. Ah, if this man who was looked upon as a good man was in a state of damnation, what is the state of others who live badly. Ah, Monsieur Vincent, how many souls are perishing. What is the remedy for that? (Vincent de Paul, n.d., 11:5).

Thanks to Madame de Gondi, Vincent responded to the challenge and preached at Folleville, and according to his own testimony:

God had such regard for the confidence and good faith of this lady...that He blessed my discourse and all those good people were so touched by God that all came to make a General Confession... We then went to the other villages belonging to Madame... and God bestowed His blessing everywhere. (Vincent de Paul, n.d.,11:4).

CHATILLON: The Ladies Of Charity

It is certain that, after the experience of Folleville, Vincent de Paul was a changed man. Exactly how changed we do not know. What we do know is that suddenly, in July 1617, he abandoned the easy life of the chateau to become a parish priest in a little town in southeastern France, near Lyons. There, on 21 August, the second transforming event of 1617 took place. The story is well known. Vincent himself recounts it. There was a family in the parish in great misery because they were all sick and had no one to care for them (Vincent de Paul, 1645, January, 22, 9: 206). This time, however, Madame de Gondi was not there to challenge Vincent. This time he had to act on his own. He had, however, matured and grown spiritually since Folleville. He was capable of acting independently and quickly. Three days later, 24 August, the first Confraternity of Charity, composed entirely of women, was established in Châtillon.

Like Folleville, Châtillon was a sign of the direct intervention of God in Vincent’s life. Just as he will always refer to Folleville and Madame de Gondi when speaking of the founding of the Congregation of the Mission, so he will refer to Châtillon and the women parishioners of the little church of Saint André when speaking of the origins of the Ladies of Charity and the Daughters of Charity.

For the first time, at Châtillon, Vincent was faced by a social problem – material poverty.

At Folleville, he had become aware of the full extent of the spiritual abandonment of those who were poor by the Church and especially the clergy. At Châtillon, he is confronted by society's abandonment of poor persons. The women of the parish rushed to the aid of the family. The happy pastor tells us, "I spoke... so strongly that all the ladies were greatly moved. More than fifty of them went from the city and I acted like the rest" (Vincent de Paul, 1645, January 22, 9:206). Vincent's first biographer, Louis Abelly, tells us of Vincent's initial reflections on the experience. Shortly after returning home, he had concluded:

Here is an example of great charity but it is not well organized. The sick poor will have too many provisions all at once, some of which will spoil and be lost and then, afterwards, they will fall back into their misery. (Abelly, 1664, p. 46)

That very evening, the notoriously slow to act Vincent had laid the foundation for the confraternity. He says, "I proposed to all these good ladies, who had been animated by charity to visit these people, to group together to make soup, each on her own day, and not only for them but for all those who might come afterwards" (Vincent de Paul, 1645, January 22, 9:209).

Châtillon is the second panel of the diptych of Vincentian charity. Henceforth, Vincent will unite the double experience of 1617. The adverbs "corporally and spiritually," found first in the Rule of the Confraternity of Charity of Châtillon (Vincent de Paul, 1617, November-December, 13b: 8), will appear like a leitmotif in his correspondence and conferences. While this is a change of focus for a parish priest, it is a revolutionary concept for the lay women of the Confraternity of Charity and, later, for the Ladies of Charity and the Daughters of Charity, and Vincent is fully conscious of this. Lay and religious women had certainly taken care of the bodily needs of poor persons prior to 1617 but, for them, evangelization and spiritual ministry were the prerogative of the clergy. In 1657, Vincent points this out to the Ladies of Charity of Paris, the group which evolved from the first confraternity.

He states:

It has been 800 years or so since women have had public roles in the Church. Previously, there had been some, called Deaconesses, who were charged with grouping women together in the churches and instructing them on the ceremonies which were then in use. However, about the time of Charlemagne, by the secret plan of Divine Providence, this practice ceased and your sex was deprived of any role and has not had one since. Now the same Providence has called upon some of you, in our day, to supply for the needs of the sick poor of the Hôtel-Dieu. They responded to this design and shortly afterwards God asked others who had joined their number to be mothers to abandoned children, directresses of the Foundling Hospital and dispensers of alms collected in Paris for the provinces, particularly the most devastated ones (Vincent de Paul, 1657, July 11, 13b: 432).

Elsewhere he said to the Ladies of Charity of the Hôtel-Dieu:

You are undertaking the work of the widows of the early Church, which is to take care of the corporal needs of those who are poor and also of [their] spiritual needs. In this way you are lifting the prohibition imposed upon you by Saint Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 14: 'Let women keep silence in the churches. They are not allowed to speak there. (Vincent de Paul, 1657, July 11, 13b:432)

Subsequent to the events at Châtillon, Vincent de Paul could have remained a country priest, combining in his life evangelization and service of the poor. Providentially, it was a woman, once again Madame de Gondi, who would draw him away from Châtillon and assist him on the next step of his journey toward the total gift of himself to God in the service of those who were poor. To convince him to return to Paris and to her household, she would speak not of security and position but of "...the six or eight thousand souls that were living on her lands" (Abelly, 1664, p. 40).

Vincent does return and this time he has a clearly defined goal. He will preach missions as he had in Folleville and he will establish, in each place, a Confraternity of Charity modeled on that of Châtillon.

Extensive as were the Gondi lands—they covered several dioceses—they were not the vast terrain on which the future Apostle of Charity would labor. That work would be called forth by another woman whom, in 1617, he had not yet met. A young mother, the wife of Antoine Le Gras, secretary to the Queen Regent, Marie de Medici, she is better known by her maiden name, Louise de Marillac. She was to become his friend and collaborator for thirty-six years. Together with her and the women surrounding her, both Ladies of Charity and Daughters of Charity. Vincent would transform the social order of the France of his day and bring the healing hands of Providence to all categories of persons in need.

Louise de Marillac—The Daughters of Charity

On 6 May 1629, Vincent de Paul sent out on mission the woman who was to be the first and arguably the most successful Vincentian leader formed at his school—Louise de Marillac. On that day, he sent her to Montmirail to visit, on his behalf, one of the early Confraternities of Charity. These confraternities, which had flourished and expanded since their foundation, had fallen on hard times in many areas. The spirit of their origins was threatened. Someone had to visit them, study their activities, and revive in the members the zeal that had characterized the beginnings. In Vincent’s eyes, no one seemed better suited to undertake this delicate and demanding task than Louise de Marillac or Mademoiselle Le Gras as he would always call her. The joy in his heart is apparent but he also offers some advice and a warning that the role of servant leader that she was undertaking brings with it joy and suffering, success and failure, as it had in the life of Christ, their model. He wrote:

Go to Communion the day of your
departure to honor the Charity of Our

Lord, the journeys He undertook for and by this same Charity, and the difficulties, contradictions, weariness, and labors He endured on them. May He be pleased to bless your journey, giving you His spirit and the grace to act in this same spirit, and to bear your troubles in the way he bore His. (Vincent de Paul, 1629, May 6, 1:65)

On that May day, neither Vincent nor Louise was aware of just how far that journey of service leadership would take her nor of its ramifications for the Church and for the service of generations of persons in need. What they surely realized, however, was that Louise de Marillac was now ready to begin the work to which God had called her and for which He had formed her through the dramatic often traumatic events of her life. She was thirty-eight.

Looking back to their first encounter some five years earlier, in late 1624 or early 1625, Vincent must have reflected, as he so often did concerning the successes of his lifetime, “I never thought of it...it was God” (Vincent de Paul, 1645, January 22, 9:165). Indeed, who would have believed that the frail, scrupulous woman whom he had first met was to become a Vincentian leader in her own right and that Vincentian works would, as Louise’s biographer, Jean Calvet, put it “...become what they were because Louise de Marillac put her hand to them” (Calvet, 1959, 46).

Their first contacts were tentative. The Confraternities of Charity were expanding and on 17 April 1625 the Congregation of the Mission had been founded. Madame de Gondi had played a vital role in this and Vincent is conscious of the debt he owed her. She had, however, also placed considerable demands on his time and energy which he now wanted to devote to evangelization and the service of those in need. Thus, one can legitimately suppose that he did not welcome the prospect of assuming responsibility for the spiritual direction of another woman of similar character.

Louise’s initial reluctance, though, is clear. She tells us, in her account of her Pentecost experience of June 1623, of her “repugnance” to accept any

change of spiritual director (Sullivan, 1991, A2, 1). Denied entrance into the cloister, Louise had found herself obliged to accept an arranged marriage to Antoine Le Gras, secretary to the Regent, on 4 February, 1613. Nonetheless, it appears to have been a happy one especially after the birth of their son, Michel. The happiness proved to be short-lived. Her son began to show signs of the problems that would make him a permanent source of anxiety for her. Then in 1621-1622, Antoine Le Gras became chronically and eventually terminally ill. He died on 21 December 1625. Louise had nursed him personally throughout his long agony yet, despite her exhaustion, the worst of her “dark night of the soul” had passed. Her Pentecost experience of 1623 (Sullivan, 1991, A2, 1) had brought her a measure of peace. Moreover, the spiritual director she had foreseen at the time, Vincent de Paul, had become a part of her life.

Little by little, as their relationship grew, Vincent began to involve Louise in his charitable endeavors. Her contributions at first were modest. He then began sending young peasant women, led by Marguerite Naseau, to her for a brief period of training prior to placing them in the confraternities to assist with the work which had become too broad in scope, too demanding, and too time consuming to be left exclusively to volunteers however generous they might be. This became increasingly more apparent as the confraternities were established in Paris. In the capital the situation was radically different from the provinces. The members of the Ladies of Charity, as they were now called, came from the highest levels of the nobility and from the very wealthy bourgeoisie. The demands of their social life, particularly when Court was in session, were far greater than in rural areas. Moreover, caring for the sick in their homes in an urban setting could also be dangerous. A solution had to be found. It would come first in these peasant girls who offered themselves to Vincent for the service of the sick poor.

Louise, however, had seen early on how difficult and lonely such a life could be. Marguerite Naseau’s death in this service reinforced Louise’s

conviction that there needed to be a support system, organized training, and spiritual formation if these young peasant women were to continue on the arduous path on which they had embarked with such generosity. Moreover, it had become apparent that the Confraternities of Charity could no longer function effectively in most places without them. This practical but urgent awareness led to the foundation of the Daughters of Charity on 29 November 1633. On that day, five or six of these young women gathered in Louise de Marillac’s home. Formed by her and by Vincent de Paul, they would transcend the strict class barriers of the day to collaborate with the Ladies of Charity in the service of the sick poor. Moreover, these mostly peasant women, excluded by lack of wealth and education from traditional religious orders, would enter into a new form of consecrated life, called forth by the need to serve the sick poor, uniting contemplation and action.

Both the formation of the Daughters of Charity and the Rule of the Confraternity of Charity of Châtillon stress the characteristic virtues of the “servants of the poor. In every situation, persons who are poor have the right to the highest quality of care possible but in every instance, the servant of the poor must “carefully practice humility, simplicity, and charity” (Vincent de Paul, 1617, November-December, 13b, 19). Thus, in two small villages, in two seemingly ordinary events, the Vincentian charism was born. Women played an essential role in both its birth and its development. There were, indeed, many women in Vincent de Paul’s life and his works would become what they were and what they continue to be because they put their hands to them. The women of the Vincentian Family continue to bring the giftedness that Vincent discerned in them early on to the “suffering members of Jesus Christ” throughout the world. As a result, now as then, persons who are poor are better served.

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Notes

1. All Vincent de Paul citations are taken from these volumes. This is the completed English translation of the original: Coste, Pierre *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondances, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 Vols, Paris, France, 1920-1925.