



## **Our Story, Our Mission**

### **St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac**

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Storytelling is a necessary element in the refounding of institutions within the context of Catholic identity today. The process of refounding in this respect is necessary if we are to keep our mission alive and relevant in a society and culture where change is a constant factor, and where Christianity is predominantly seen to be irrelevant. Gerard Arbuckle makes this point in a recent publication. Refounding implies that, in order to keep alive our Christian/ Gospel values, beliefs and mission in today's society, we need to take radical and courageous steps to imagine a different Church; a Church which is able to relate to and serve a predominantly non-Christian society. "We require radically different and as yet unimagined ways to relate the Good News to the pastoral challenges of the world." (Arbuckle , 2013)

In order to do this, we need first to visit our origins and draw from the Gospel and our founding stories the values, beliefs and mission that led Jesus, his disciples and our founders to dissent from many of the values and beliefs of their times and to engage in radical, transformative action. Reflecting on these values and beliefs is a "spring-board", if you like, to inspire refounding in our own Vincentian mission.

Arbuckle proposes that we can make use of two kinds of story; Myths and



Narratives. Myths are the stories which give meaning to our past and articulate the values and beliefs of our founders. Narratives are stories about people and events which bring alive those values and beliefs in the present time.

This presentation of the life of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac and their significant relationship is meant to open up one of the great foundational myths of the Vincentian Family, and to inspire meaning and challenge in our lives of service today. A significant outcome, of course will be shared narratives of events and experiences in our times which express the mission and values of our founders; an everlasting heritage in the tradition of the Christian Gospel. Today, I invite you to engage in sharing your own narratives as they relate to our shared Vincentian heritage and spirit. You may like to think about this as you listen to our foundational myths.

Thomas McKenna CM says in the introduction to his book “Praying with St. Vincent.” ***“To love another person is to see the face of God”***; a quote from the musical version of ***Les Miserables***. He goes on to say that these words express very well the spirituality by which Vincent lived.

He was an extremely gifted man who took on the roles of Spiritual Director to priests, negotiator with members of the aristocracy and reformer of the clergy. He willingly assumed, with others, the huge project of church renewal, organized social welfare on a national scale in France, and above all, dedicated his life to serving poor, sick and disadvantaged people, seeing in them the face of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Vincent was born in 1581; the son of a farmer in the village of Pouy, in the South Eastern corner of France. The village is now named “St. Vincent de



Paul”.

His parents, Jean and Bertrande struggled to give their children a good family life and basic education. Vincent was the second son, and early in life, showed a great aptitude for learning. His father made personal sacrifices to obtain the necessary resources to have Vincent educated, firstly at the Capuchin College in Dax, and then at University. Later in his life Vincent publicly confessed that, as a young man he had gradually distanced himself from the rural family of his birth. In his school at Dax, he felt the need to appear to be equal in social status to those students who were more advantaged and wealthy than he was: “In the school where I was studying, they told me that my father; who was a poor peasant had called to see me. I refused to go out and talk to him, and so I committed a grave sin.” (Coste Vol 1: p. 30) This shame he bore all of his adult life and his attitudes and behaviour in his youth are among the reasons he later claimed simplicity and honesty as his most valued virtues; he claimed them as his “Gospel”.

Vincent studied at the University of Toulouse, and in 1600, was ordained a priest at the very early age of 19 years. In 1604 he was awarded a Bachelor of Theology from this University.

The early years following Vincent’s ordination are something of a mystery. However, it is known that he had difficulty in securing appointment to a parish.

Finally, in 1607, Vincent was appointed alms distributor to the former French Queen, Marguerite de Valois. We also know from his own writings and



biography that his ambition as a priest in the Church was to obtain a comfortable life and financial security for himself and his family.

In 1612 Vincent was appointed Parish Priest of Clichy, a small village near Paris. He was happy in Clichy and was blessed in his relationship with his parishioners. He enjoyed their unqualified support, and was evidently very effective in ministering to them. In later life he often referred to his months in Clichy as among the happiest of his life.

Vincent's next appointment in 1613 came as something of a disappointment and a surprise. He was appointed chaplain and tutor to the aristocratic De Gondi family; an event which was to have a significant effect on his future life and mission. The de Gondi family was one of the richest and most powerful in Paris, with strong political, social, military and religious influence in the society of their times. During his years with the de Gondis, Vincent was persuaded by Madame Marguerite de Gondi to visit the tenants on the hundreds of estates, or villages, owned by the family.

During these visits, Vincent discovered the depth of ignorance and spiritual deprivation of the poor people living on the estates. In January, 1617, he was called to the bedside of a dying man in the village of Gannes whose conscience was deeply troubled. It seemed that he had led a kind of "double life", and after hearing his story, Vincent invited him to make a general confession. Such was the power of God's forgiveness that the man died very peacefully. Vincent was deeply moved by the experience, and from then on he began personally to address the spiritual and pastoral needs of the poor people on the De Gondi estates. On 25<sup>th</sup> January 1617, whilst he was preaching a sermon in the Church



of Folleville near Gannes, Vincent became convinced that the poor peasants to whom he was preaching and ministering were to play a central role in his life. He was called to a lifelong mission to “...bring the Good News to the poor.”

Later, in 1617 Vincent found himself in a similar situation when he was temporarily serving in a parish at Chatillon-les-Dombes. The people there had literally been abandoned by the Church, and were the victims of ignorant and corrupt priests who were living off generous benefices. One Sunday morning whilst vesting for Mass, Vincent had word from a parishioner that all the members of one family a few miles out of town lay sick and helpless at home. He appealed in his sermon for assistance to this family, and later discovered that many of the villagers visited them with more food and support than they needed on that one Sunday. This event inspired Vincent to establish a group of people in the village to care for sick and destitute people. It became a permanent foundation for the assistance of poor people there and was the inspiration for the later establishment of the Confraternities of Charity which spread rapidly throughout France. These Confraternities live on today in similar spirit in the form of such establishments as the Ladies of Charity, and the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

Philip Emmanuel de Gondi was the General of the Galleys, and as commander of the fleet, he felt a sense of responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the prisoners who were condemned to row the warships of France; the galleys. Their treatment and conditions were shocking. In February, 1619 Vincent was appointed Chaplain-General to the Galleys. Within a year he had begun a series of missions among the galley slaves, lobbied for more humane conditions for them, and set up a relief organization for the prisoners and their families.



Vincent was also spiritual director to a growing number of men and women. Louise de Marillac was one woman he directed. He first met her in 1623.

Louise de Marillac was born in Paris on 12<sup>th</sup> August, 1591, the daughter of Louis de Marillac, a 35 year old widower and a distinguished and scholarly lawyer.

There is no record of the identity of Louise's mother. She was said to be the "love child" of Louis, and therefore "illegitimate"; a stigma which Louise carried all her life.

At the time of Louise's birth, France had survived thirty years of religious wars, corruption in the royal family, conflicts among religious factions and the nobility, and the impoverishment of merchants and peasants. The country was bankrupt and Paris was under siege.

When Louise was a small child she was placed by her father in the care of the Dominican nuns at the royal Abbey of St. Louis-de-Poissy. In this magnificent convent school Louise received a thorough education in philosophy, theology, Latin, Greek, literature and art. This arrangement was expedient for Louis de Marillac and his brother Michel; both men being figures of influence in French society and politics. In Dirvin's words: *"...such a solution to the father's embarrassment would be eminently satisfactory to the Marillac family, not least to his brother Michel, whose political star was beginning to rise."* (p.9)

Louis married a widow, Antoinette Thiboust in 1595, a temperamental woman who resented Louise and refused to have anything to do with her. The marriage ended unhappily five years later. In her childhood Louise never



experienced the love and sense of belonging typical of a warm and nurturing family and was unbearably lonely at times, a loneliness which was relieved only by her father's occasional visits. On July 25<sup>th</sup> 1604 when Louise was twelve years old her father died. In his own way Louis de Marillac loved his daughter and his will testifies that Louise was: *"his greatest consolation in the world, and that God had given her to him for his peace of soul in the afflictions of his life."* (Dirvin p. 12) Before his death, Louis arranged for her uncle Michel to become Louise's guardian.

At some time between the death of her father and her marriage in 1613, Louise lived in a Parisian *"pension"* with other young girls, in the care and under the supervision of a "good, devout spinster". It was here that she learned cooking, sewing and a variety of domestic and practical skills which would prove invaluable in her later life.

When she was nineteen years old Louise felt a strong desire to become a Capuchine nun. She was advised by her director, Père de Champigny not to follow this path because of his concern that her health may not withstand the life of austerity typical of the Capuchine Order.

***"I believe", he said, "that God has other plans for you"*** (Dirvin p. 22)

Disappointed as she was at the outcome of Père de Champigny's advice, Louise prepared to take her place in society as the daughter of one of the most powerful families in France.

Her Uncle Michel arranged a marriage between herself and Antoine le Gras,



secretary to the Queen Mother, Marie de Medici. The marriage took place on 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1613 at the fashionable church of Saint Gervais. The stigma of her birth surfaced once more at the time of her marriage. Louise was not able to be known as “Madame Le Gras”, but by the lesser title of “Mademoiselle Le Gras”. Although this was an arranged marriage, it would be wrong to think that Louise had no say in the arrangements. Louise was an outgoing young woman, warm-hearted, loving and interested in people. She found with Antoine true friendship and warm love, and they shared a compassion for people who were living in poverty, giving their resources and time to relieve the suffering of others.

They had one son, Michel Antoine who was sickly at birth and had a rather petulant temperament. As an adult, however, Michel le Gras settled down, happily married and fathered at least one child a daughter, Renée Louise.

Seven years after they were married, Antoine’s health began to deteriorate, probably due to tuberculosis, and Louise nursed him with deep affection and compassion until his death on 21<sup>st</sup> December, 1625. During her husband’s illness, Louise began to have doubts about her chosen way of life, and felt that in marrying Antoine, she had turned her back on what she thought was her original vocation; to become a Capuchine nun. Before Antoine’s death, Louise began to realise that God, indeed had “other designs“ for her! This realisation came in the form of what was really a mystical experience.

On the Feast of Pentecost 1623, Louise experienced what she called her “lumière” in the church of Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs. During this time of prayer she became reassured and free from doubt. She also understood that there



would come a time when she would be free to commit herself to God in a vowed life, and at the same time be free to help other people. Louise kept the manuscript describing her “lumière”, often carrying it with her in the years to come. She was a mystic in the truest sense. She had a passion/ a dream which gave impetus to her whole life from 1625 to her death in 1660. Her Pentecost experience inspired her to follow her dream after the death of her husband. (Honner, 2010)

After Antoine’s death, Vincent de Paul became Louise’s spiritual director. Initially neither she nor Vincent had much time for each other. He reluctantly accepted to guide the young widow in her spiritual life, and she reluctantly accepted his simple and direct approach to her spiritual guidance. Later, as they came to know each other, Vincent began to understand how rejections and grief in her early life had affected Louise and her perceptions of faith and things spiritual. He recognized her talents and gifts, and in his own wisdom, he taught her to trust God and to trust and love herself.

Her constant contact with him led her to collaborate with Vincent in organizing Confraternities of Charity in Paris and the Provinces, bringing relief to people living in extreme poverty. Dirvan states: *“..as if completely caught up in the memorableness of the moment. Vincent encouraged her: ‘Go forth, Mademoiselle’ ....she is now his partner -‘go forth in the name of the Lord.’”* (Dirvin p. 79) She was 34 years old and ready for the mission that was to define her future life.

In 1625, having had first hand and extensive experience of the widespread effects of neglect and corruption within the Church, Vincent formally



established the Congregation of the Mission (Vincentian Priests). Their ministries were twofold; the service and evangelisation of poor and disadvantaged people in rural Parishes, and the education and reformation of the clergy. At the time of Vincent's death, the Congregation of the Mission had spread throughout the world.

Vincent formally established the Ladies of Charity in 1634. They were a group of noblewomen who supported and funded the work of the Hôtel Dieu (the general hospital in Paris), and the Confraternities. He was their “**inspired animator**”. (McCormack J. CM) Louise was at home with this group of women, able to match them in organizational management, and to persuade them to dedicate time and money to the service of the sick poor.

Initially, the Ladies of Charity visited sick people in the Hôtel Dieu, feeding them when necessary and bringing material relief. Because of increasing demands on their time and resources, the Ladies began sending their servants to do the physical tasks involved in their work. The servants had no real commitment in charity and the arrangement did not last. However, the Ladies of Charity evolved into a very significant support group, in terms of finance, advice and dedication to the work of health and social reform throughout France.

The inspiration for a new foundation of “servants of the poor” came from a peasant girl, Marguerite Naseau, from the country area of Suresnes who had taught herself to read and write, and then began teaching young country girls. She offered her services in support of the work of the Confraternities, and Vincent was inspired to enlist her in the Confraternity of Charity in the parish of St. Saviour. From there she worked with Louise as a partner in action, and



Louise enabled her to work with the Ladies of Charity. Under Louise's leadership, then, an extraordinary collaboration took place between the Ladies and the first Daughters of Charity, bridging a social gap and connecting very wealthy women, (many of whom were Louise's friends) and the peasant girls who worked with them side by side. (Sullivan p. 170: 1998 )

Under Louise's direction, more young women from Paris and the countryside who wished to commit their lives to the service of poor people came together in small communities, and in 1633, she welcomed the first twelve Daughters of Charity into her own home to formally begin their training.

The Daughters of Charity from the beginning have been a congregation of secular women. Their primary "reason for being" was the service of the poor, and they needed to be readily available for this; not constrained by the rules and enclosure of a cloistered life as were nuns. They worked in close collaboration with the Confraternities and the Ladies of Charity and dedicated their lives to visiting the sick in their homes, ministering in hospitals and caring for prisoners, orphans, mentally ill and homeless people on the streets of Paris. They taught little children in the city and the countryside. Vincent welcomed them as co-workers in the service of the poor, inspiring them with Christian beliefs and values and assuring them that ***"their chief concern (was) to serve the sick poor, treating them with compassion, gentleness, cordiality, respect and devotion."*** (St. Vincent Vol.10 p.267)

At this point in our story we might do well to consider the evolution of a relationship which was spiritual, deeply personal and completely committed to the reform and revolution of Church and Gospel-centred Charity.



On a personal level, one of Louise's constant anxieties when she was away from Paris visiting the Confraternities was the health and welfare of her son, Michel. There are no less than 26 letters written to her by Vincent concerning Michel at these times! He had befriended the young lad and taken an interest in his education and wellbeing, and he constantly reassured Louise: "Be at peace. When you come back we will talk about him, and I shall do what is necessary." ( Letter 63: SVP 1:101. Sept. 1631); again, Vincent wrote with a bit of mischief: "Oh! Our good Lord most certainly did well not to choose you for His mother." (Sept. 13: Letter 61 1:121) It is only among close friends that such high levels of trust and good humour are shared and appreciated. Their letters give intimate expression to these values over and over again. There is not room enough in this paper to give examples of the progress in what we might call their shared mission; the evangelisation and service of the poor. However, the depth of understanding between Vincent and Louise is clearly expressed many times as she progressed and he encouraged. There is joy and tenderness in his words: "Please take care of your health. It is no longer yours since you destine it for God, and my heart is no longer my heart, but yours, in that of Our Lord, Whom I desire to be the object of our one love." (Letter 119. 1: p. 172 before 1634)

In 1639, the area of Lorraine, and then Picardy and Champagne were savaged by the Thirty Years war. The land was stripped bare and people died from starvation in thousands . Vincent sent his priests and the Daughters of Charity to minister to people devastated by war and disease, and to distribute material and financial aid. Finally, the war known as the "Fronde" broke out in the city and surrounding rural areas. Its effects were particularly brutal, and Vincent set up assistance programs and collected alms wherever and whenever he could. He went to the Queen's chief minister, Cardinal Mazarin who was one of



the main architects of the war, and asked him to step down. When Mazarin refused, things became a lot more difficult for Vincent. He persevered, however, over nine difficult years, organizing relief and agricultural rehabilitation programs, finally restoring hope to ravaged communities in Paris and the Provinces.

Vincent worked tirelessly into his seventies, and as he became increasingly physically frail, had to accept the apparent “luxury” of travelling in a carriage, as an alternative to horse-back, continuing to supervise his numerous established works. He wrote thirty thousand letters during his lifetime, and even at the end of his life attended to a constant stream of visitors coming to St. Lazare to seek his advice.

Louise needed to work in collaboration with civil and government authorities as the works of charity developed and spread in order to firmly establish and maintain the services. She was a “hard-nosed” negotiator as is evidenced by her letters. However, her clarity of purpose and “gentle persuasion” achieved effective and lasting outcomes. For example, in 1629 when the sisters went to work in the hospital at Angers which had fallen into serious disorder, there was no contract and no concern for the need of one. Louise persevered and persuaded the hospital authorities that a contract was essential for good order and right relationships. She eventually negotiated a contract for the sisters to staff the hospital. This became the model for all subsequent hospital contracts until the suppression of the Company in 1792.

Besides their natural gifts or personal affinity, Vincent and Louise lived for a common purpose which they chose and desired together; the liberation of the



poor at both the human and spiritual levels. They were committed to this task by conviction and by choice. (Robert Maloney CM).

Collaboration is at the very heart of our origins, as it is ever-present in the ministry of Jesus, and in the mission of Vincent and Louise

#### Vincent found in Louise

- An intuitive, quick, lively woman always ready to go to the fore without being held back by her health; a missionary
- A woman with a skill for organization in the service of poor people
- A lady at ease among the Ladies of Charity, since she was, after all, a 'de Marillac'

#### Louise found in Vincent

- A priest and a sure counsellor who she trusted
- A man who was a solid support.
- A countryman, a peasant, who knew the necessity of patience and who followed Providence without ever hindering it.
- A gifted and fearless organizer who knew how to inspire others to use their gifts and skills.
- A man who trusted enough to delegate and was committed in justice to accountability.

They discovered, in their deepest selves, and in their reciprocal experience, the urgency and imperative of freeing those whom hunger or 'bad-faith' held captive in extreme distress. Their bond was not self-interest, or seeking



advancement or promotion but simply the cause of God which is indissoluble from the cause of the poor. This then was their reason for communing and resonating together, day by day. They were bound by the same vocation and the same goal. (Renouard CM 2007) We can be sure that their collaboration developed very effectively over time, living as they did in a complementary way for their mission. This was the very nature of their work together, and it certainly transformed the outcomes and quality of that work.

On 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1660, Louise de Marillac died. During her illness, Louise was visited by her family, and cared for by her Sisters. Vincent, disabled and confined to his room, was unable to visit Louise during her last illness; a cause of deep suffering and grief for both of them. His only message to her was a verbal one through a brother priest:

***“You are going on ahead of me. I hope to see you soon in heaven.”***

In the months that followed, Vincent’s own health deteriorated rapidly, but he continued to see people, and to attend to his enormous volume of correspondence. He gave conferences to his brother priests and the Daughters of Charity until within a few weeks of his death. Vincent died peacefully in the early morning hours of 27<sup>th</sup> September, 1660. He was 80 years old.

All of France mourned Vincent’s passing, and at his funeral his eulogist declared that ***in his lifetime he had transformed the face of the French Church.*** It is also true that under his leadership and inspiration, the whole of France experienced a transformation in its approach to health and social services. This was a collaborative effort; one which was based on the work of all the



organizations and groups which he and Louise had founded. It was a model of “organized love”; real charity inseparable from justice.

***“The truth is that he was adept at involving others in what he saw needed to be done. He found his strength in accepting his limitations.” (R. Moloney)***

Vincent lived the great Gospel imperative, that the Good News be announced to poor people in faith and in action.

Louise’s empathy for people who suffer, and her sensitive and practical approach to the effective alleviation of suffering are ever-present in her writings, testifying to her boundless enthusiasm and hope. Her outstanding insights and organizational ability complemented Vincent’s gifts and together they realised a shared vision. Louise operated from a profound understanding of organized love, best expressed in her own words to the Sisters who were sent to Montreuil in 1647:

“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 take great care for their salvation, never leaving a poor person or a patient without having uttered some good word.” (Writings pp.773-774)

Finally, in the words of the great historian, Sr. Elizabeth Charpy dc:

“The friendship which Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac lived out was founded on authenticity, that is to say on the profound acceptance of the



identity of the other, the recognition and respect for their diversity. Starting from obedience in the freely chosen relationship of spiritual direction, it moved through learning from the other in a complementary relationship of collaboration, and, reaching the serenity of old age in a relationship of communion, this friendship is an astonishing journey of sanctity, filled with humanity". (p.114)

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