



How St. Louise exemplifies  
the Vincentian concept of  
leadership

from the writings of  
Sr. Louise Sullivan, DC

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# Talents and genius ran in the family

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After her father's death, Michel de Marillac, Louise's uncle, became her guardian and later her spiritual director. Political intrigue would lead to his death in exile. Nonetheless, this man, who had played a vital role in the reestablishment in France of the major religious orders during the period of the Catholic Counter Reformation, succeeded in blending profound personal spirituality with immense organizational skill.



# Family talents and genius (continued)

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Much of Michel can be found in his niece as she:

- formed the first Daughters of Charity
- refined details of hospital contracts with civil, church authorities
- obtained authorization to establish a free school for poor little girls from the Canons of Notre-Dame de Paris
- negotiated with the Ladies of Charity to have a building remodeled for orphans
- explained the Daughters' "secular" nature to a skeptical Vicar General

Louise had the ability to deal with all involved justly and firmly, but also with sensitivity, humility, and charity.



## How Louise's childhood prepared her for her vocation

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Louise never knew who her mother was and was placed, possibly as an infant, but certainly by the age of three, at the Royal Monastery of Saint Louis at Poissy where her aunt was a Dominican nun. This setting was hardly an ideal atmosphere for a growing girl. On the other hand, Poissy provided her with a rich spiritual and intellectual environment in which her gifts of nature and grace could flourish, preparing her, when the time came, to educate and form peasant girls to serve the sick, to teach children, and to heal a vast array of society's wounds.



## A solid foundation for dealing with both rich and poor

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Under the direction of the Dominican nuns, Louise and other little girls of her social class encountered the arts and the humanities, as well as liturgical prayer, spiritual reading, and the responsibility of the rich to the poor. This experience later enabled her to deal with equal ease with the rich and with the poor country girls who were to become the first Daughters of Charity. It also instilled in her what was to be an essential attribute of all Vincentian service--the awareness of what Bossuet referred to as "the eminent dignity of the poor."



# Skilled motivator

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In the organization of health care which would be a major part of her life's work, she motivated other women of her social class to collaborate with her to alleviate the misery of the sick poor.

Through some four long years she had devoted herself to caring for her sick husband personally. This was her apprenticeship as a health care provider. She learned the importance of holistic care that sought to relieve the physical, spiritual, and emotional distress of the patient, and the need to support the family.

LES ŒUVRES DE MISERICORDE  
«J'étais malade et vous m'avez visité»

(S<sup>t</sup> MAT. XVI, 36)



E. BOUASSE J<sup>r</sup> 1870

3413

RUE MARILLON, 8, PARIS

Louise de Marillac, Damoiselle Le Gras, commença  
la visite des malades à l'Hôtel Dieu, où M<sup>lle</sup> la Duchesse  
d'Aiguillon, la Présidente, Coussault et autres grandes  
Dames suivirent son exemple.

# Louise modeled collaboration

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In her hospitals, Louise instituted collaboration among the doctors, nurses and others to form a comprehensive team. This model was highly successful and is still in use today by the Daughters of Charity.

Under Louise's guidance, the Daughters soon expanded their scope of service to include orphanages, institutions for the elderly and mentally ill, prisons, and the battlefield.



# Skilled at Spiritual Formation

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When Louise was forming the Daughters of Charity for the service of the poor, she would instill in them the necessity for gentle compassion, no matter how trying the situation might be. And, Louise's reports to Vincent of her visits to the confraternities show her ability to renew their zeal and to correct abuses.

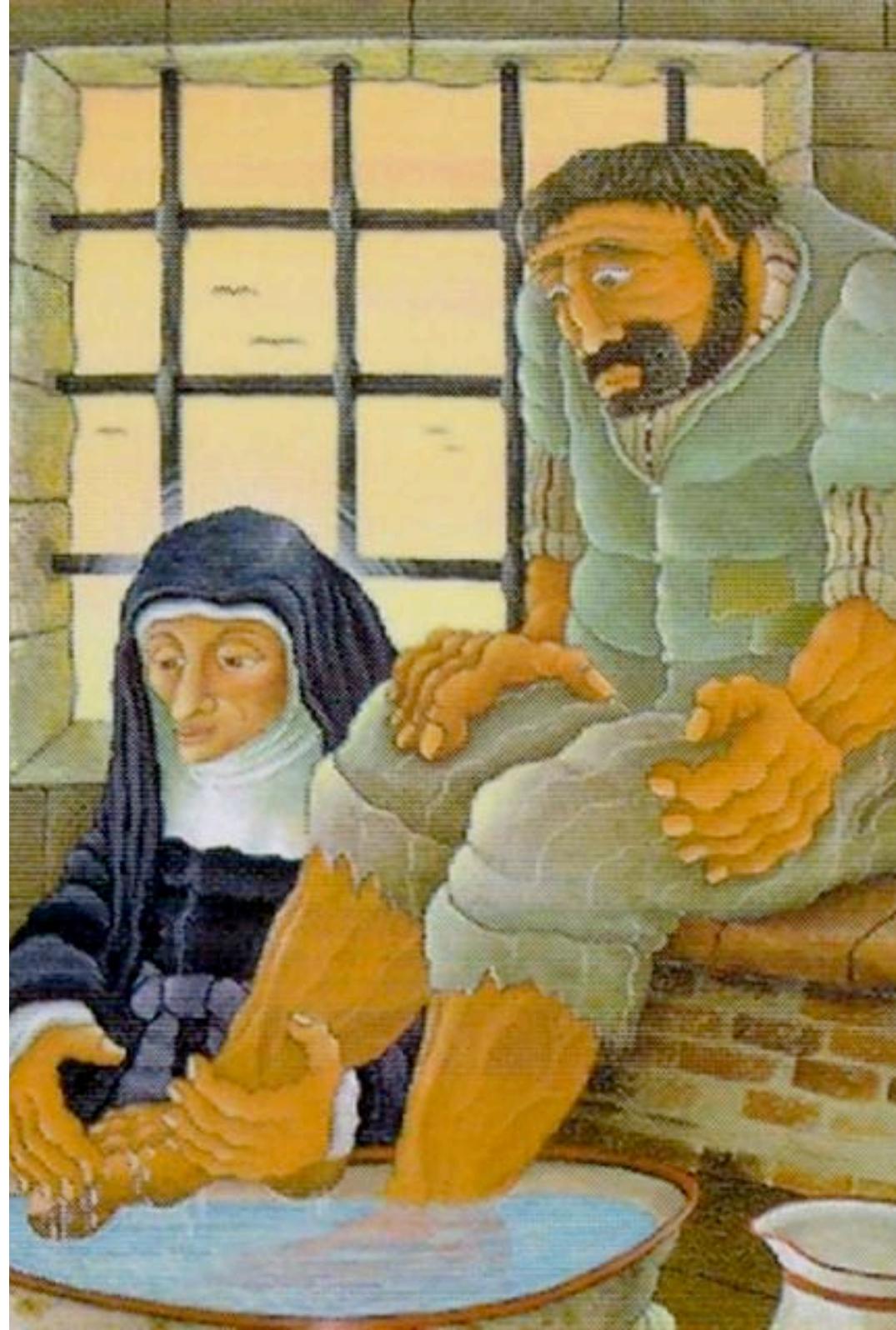
Based on her own life, from which pain was never totally absent, Louise taught her followers that in suffering with as well as serving those in need, they were uniting themselves to their Redeemer on the Cross. This union with the suffering Savior would fuel a vast network of services for those in distress.



Louise turned her own problems into positive energy

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Louise's later ability to devote herself to the care of the sick, to be compassionate with them, and to encourage them, where possible, to overcome their physical limitations and to go on to lead productive lives had its roots in her own constant battle with recurring illness. And for those who did not fully recover, she gave the example of a woman who, through courage and deep faith, turned adversity into positive energy.



# Louise turned rejection into positive action

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When Louise was young she had the desire to enter the cloister. Her uncle Michel was closely associated with the Daughters of the Passion in Paris, and this seemed to Louise to be the ideal setting. How devastated she must have been, when Father Honore de Champigny refused her request for admission. His reasons are not clear, but his words proved prophetic. He told Louise that "God had other designs on her." Indeed, events, Providence, and Vincent de Paul would alter Louise's plans. Her heart was ready, when the time came, for her to learn to become a spiritual and servant leader in the new form of consecrated life that would come into existence in 17th century France in which women would be called to serve outside the cloister, in a life that balanced contemplation and action.



## Louise undertook a process of personal renewal

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Over a period of four years, Louise, under the guidance of Vincent, took slow, tiny steps to bring balance, measure, a degree of spontaneity, and even quiet joy into her life that already had deep spiritual roots. It was a time to involve her gradually in Vincentian works and to help her to grow in the confidence necessary to reach her full potential. Intense activity was working a cure in the heart, mind, and even the body of Louise de Marillac. She had found work in which her human and spiritual gifts flourished. Even the tragic events affecting the Marillac family did not distract her from her task. She had, at last, broken the fetters in her mind that bound her. She could function as a free woman, confident in herself and in God's love for her and desirous of bringing that love to those in need.



## Feminine tenderness, plus leadership and organization: a winning combination

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It is to be noted that Louise brought to those in distress love in its particularly feminine form, that is in tenderness and devotedness. It is a form of love that was nurtured in the cloister at Poissy and in the Le Gras household. It is the love of the contemplative, the wife, the mother, and the widow. Combined with the Marillac traits of leadership and organization, the heart of Louise de Marillac had been well fashioned by the Providence of God.



# Observing and then taking action

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Louise's reports to Vincent of her visits to the confraternities also reveal her powers of observation and her practical creativity. The confraternities were for the care of the sick in their homes. During Louise's visits to them she noticed another urgent need, education for poor children. And she responded by finding and even training a schoolmistress for them.



# Louise's Understanding of Leadership

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For Louise, leadership is service. It never seeks its own advancement or that of the institution itself. It is gratuitous. It has nothing to do with power, a word that Louise used only when speaking of God. As such, it becomes what the hospital historian, Collin Jones, describes as "non-threatening." Such leadership bridges gaps between groups and, focused always on the well-being of those to be served, through "gentle persuasion" leads to collaboration.



# Louise's Collaborative Leadership Style

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For Louise, leadership is collaborative. She developed the collaborative leadership style as she visited the confraternities in the French provinces. Louise's role was essentially to mentor her collaborators, particularly the Ladies of Charity and the Daughters of Charity, helping them to grow spiritually, personally, and professionally. Above all, she sought to enable all those who shared the Vincentian mission to maintain their focus, to keep ever before their eyes the 'why' and the 'who' of their service.



# Louise as bridge between social classes

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After forming the Ladies of Charity, Vincent and Louise began to realize that the direct service of poor persons was not easy for the ladies of nobility. It was difficult to overcome the barriers of social class. They visited the slums to distribute meals and clothing, dressed in beautiful dresses next to people they considered to be peasants. The tension between the ideal of service and social constraints was real. The families of the ladies were not always favorable to these works.



## Bridge between social classes (continued)

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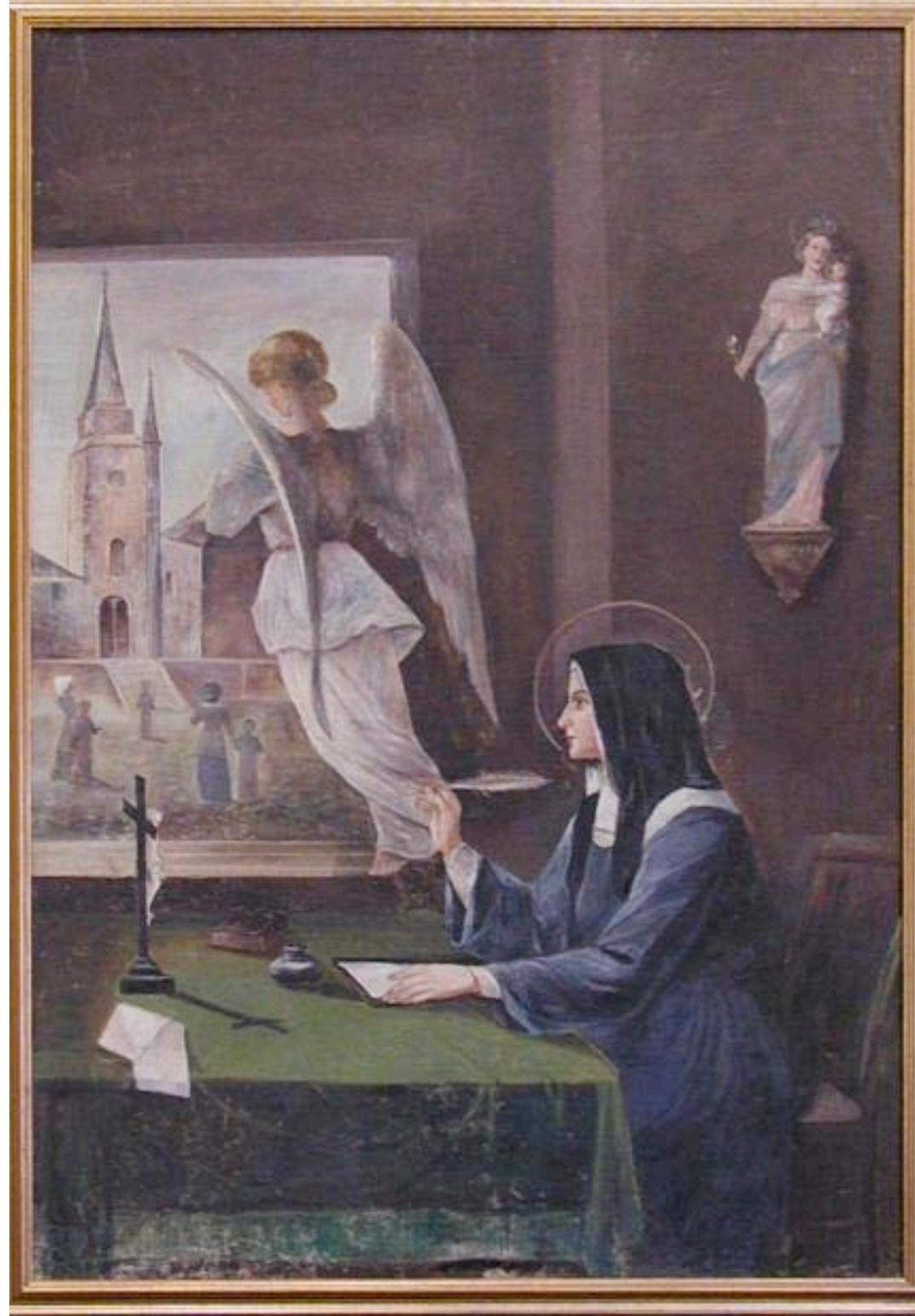
It soon became clear that many of the ladies were unfit to cope with the actual conditions. The practical work of nursing the poor in their own homes, caring for neglected children and dealing with often rough husbands and fathers, was best accomplished by women of similar social status to the principal sufferers. Louise found the help she needed in young, humble, country women who had the energy and the proper attitude to deal with people weighed down by destitution and suffering. These young girls formed the nucleus of the Daughters of Charity.



# Mixture of spiritual and human leadership

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Louise's organizations, and Vincentian institutions today, are to be places where each individual feels respected and valued; where every task, big or small, is important. She created a climate favorable to personal fulfillment, while, at the same time, forging common bonds and ensuring integrated, quality service. Through her correspondence, we can see that she cared about her sisters personally-- who they were, how they were. She got to know their families & wrote them to let them know how the sisters were doing.



# Trusting others, not micro-managing

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Even though Louise lived in a society where all power was vested at the top, and despite the fact that she was a leader with a strong personality, her correspondence reveals an approach of subsidiarity (the principle that a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level). In Louise's era this concept was virtually unknown. But without such trust in others and a willingness to allow other strong personalities to develop their potential, the works in distant places could never have flourished. Subsidiarity requires people prepared to assume responsibility which, in turn, demands mentoring. Indeed in her letters, we see examples of Louise's encouragement of her sisters as she challenges them to fulfill their potential.



# Creativity and risk-taking

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Vincentian works for the service of those in need began in an era when there was little church or governmental support. To maintain them, and to put them on some kind of a stable financial footing, required creativity and risk taking. For example, she led the effort to turn a dilapidated former prison into a house for abandoned children and developed the first organized foster care program. It was risk taking, but it was accompanied by detailed organization involving collaboration and negotiation with all parties involved: ecclesiastical, civil, lay, and religious.



# Louise's method of conflict resolution

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A letter of 26 October 1639, addressed to Sisters Barbe Angiboust and Louise Ganset, illustrates this method. First of all, Louise writes to both sisters in the same letter, rather than just to the superior as might have been expected. She begins by telling them of the good that she knows they are accomplishing. Then, in her usual direct style, she addresses the problem head on. She then speaks to them individually, pointing out the failings and suggesting possible remedies. After this, she looks at herself, and the responsibility that may be hers for what has happened. Following this, Louise expresses her confidence that, together, they will work things out.



# Louise's challenge to US

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It has been said that the great test of leadership is the capacity for the works to continue and flourish when the leader is no longer there. By that litmus test, Louise de Marillac, by the force of her example, remains a challenge and an encouragement for all of us who, in one way or another, follow in her footsteps in giving to God first our hearts and then our works. And when things get difficult for all of us, as they inevitably do, she says to us as she did to her collaborators of yore, "...arise each morning with new courage to serve God and the poor well."



# Source

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- 'God Wants First The Heart And Then The Work:' Louise De Marillac And Leadership In The Vincentian Tradition by Louise Sullivan D.C.  
<http://via.library.depaul.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1203&context=vhj>
- St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive at <http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu>