

FIVE FACES
of Saint Louise

by Robert P. Maloney, C.M.

“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.” (SV X, 730)

- St. Vincent de Paul, speaking of St. Louise de Marillac





Today I offer you five faces of
Louise de Marillac.

1. Formator

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



1. Formator

First, Louise was the day-in-day-out formator of the first Daughters of Charity. Among her challenges:

- Teach uneducated Sisters to read and write
- Help Sisters transition from simple rural backgrounds to the world of the upper-class Ladies of Charity in Paris
- Give directives to the Sisters living with her
- Suggest rules to St. Vincent
- Instruct Sisters being sent on mission



1. Formator

For more than 25 years Louise did all these things in a clear, detailed, and often eloquent way.

She was the rock upon which the Sisters' formation was founded.



1. Formator

The second aspect: Louise was deeply committed to the formation of poor young people.

For that reason, she founded the “petites écoles” (little schools), one of the principal works of the first Daughters of Charity.



1. Formator

Louise wrote to Monsieur des Roches, rector of Notre-Dame de Paris, in May 1641:

“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 [me] 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.” *Ecrits Spirituels*, 51-52 (L.41)



2. Contemplative

Let me suggest two main aspects of the contemplative life of St. Louise...



2. Contemplative

First, she was deeply immersed in Christ crucified and she has handed on this heritage to the Company. Louise often concluded her letters: “I am, in the love of Jesus Crucified, your humble servant...”

Cf., Ecris Spirituels, 109ff.



2. Contemplative

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.”

Ecrits Spirituels, 816 (A.27)



2. Contemplative

In fact, the seal of the Company of the Daughters of Charity:

“The love of Christ crucified urges us on,”
(2Cor 5:14),

speaks eloquently about the vocation of the Daughters of Charity.



2. Contemplative

A second aspect: Louise's focus on the Holy Spirit. Her writings place a remarkable emphasis on the Holy Spirit.

The author Jean Calvet writes: "I dare to pick 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."

Sainte Louise de Marillac par elle-meme (Paris: Aubier, 1958) 204-205.

Her Pentecost experience in 1623 was a turning point in her life and is part of the spiritual heritage passed on to the Daughters of Charity.



2. Contemplative



“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 neighbor 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.” *Ecrits Spirituels*, 3 (A.2)

3. Organizer

A close-up portrait of Louise de Marillac, a French nun and founder of the Sisters of Charity. She is depicted with a serene expression, wearing a white head covering and a dark garment. The background is dark, making her face the central focus.

I suggest to you two aspects of this face of Louise de Marillac...

3. Organizer

First, Louise was a master of details. She gave written instructions to the Sisters on many matters, as diverse as: how to cook soup for the poor, how to keep the account books in order, how to treat the poor humanly, and how to do religious instruction.

She sent notes to St. Vincent about: how to take better care of his health, medicines, and practical remedies for recuperating his strength in his old age. Sometimes her detailed instructions are quite touching because they manifest her deep, practical love.



3. Organizer

Secondly, Louise was a writer of rules.

Rules may hold a much more modest place in our contemporary spirituality than they did in the time of Vincent and Louise.

But both Louise and Vincent were 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.





3. Organizer

- Louise and Vincent knew that the Spirit was more important than the rule
- Yet they foresaw that the rules would transmit essential truths to future generations
- Most significant for us: Louise's cooperation with Vincent in the writing of the rule of the Daughters of Charity
- Louise and Vincent also wrote rules for other groups, besides the Daughters

4. 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 (eloquently at times), and had a subtle grasp of the theology of her era.



4. An Accomplished Woman

She was a woman of considerable culture.

We know that she 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 the Devout Life and The Treatise on the Love of God), Luis of Granada's Sinners Guide, books by Berulle, Gerson, and Lorenzo de Scupoli...

...and probably many other books of her time.



4. An Accomplished Woman

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

In a rather remarkable document (one that could have been composed in the 21st 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.” *Ecrits Spirituels*, 781 (A.56)



5. 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." Calvet, *op. cit.*, 75.



5. Servant of the Poor

Humble, Gentle, Trusting in Providence

After the death of her husband, the service of Christ in the poor became the center of Louise's life-- especially the sick poor, and poor children.

Louise's contribution to the Church was so remarkable, original, and well-organized that Pope John XXIII proclaimed her the patroness of all those engaged in Christian social works.



5. Servant of the Poor

Humble, Gentle, Trusting in Providence

Many noted Louise's humility, her quickness to acknowledge her faults, and her great sense of her dependence on God. Humility is very evident in Louise's writings.

She also returned again and again to the theme of Providence.



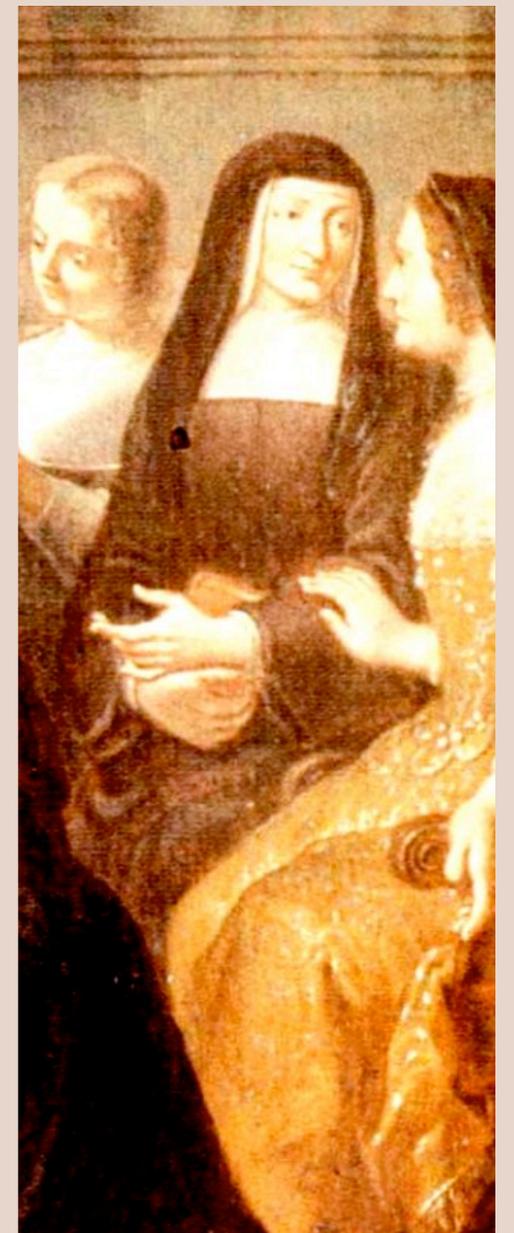
5. Servant of the Poor

Humble, Gentle, Trusting in Providence

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.”

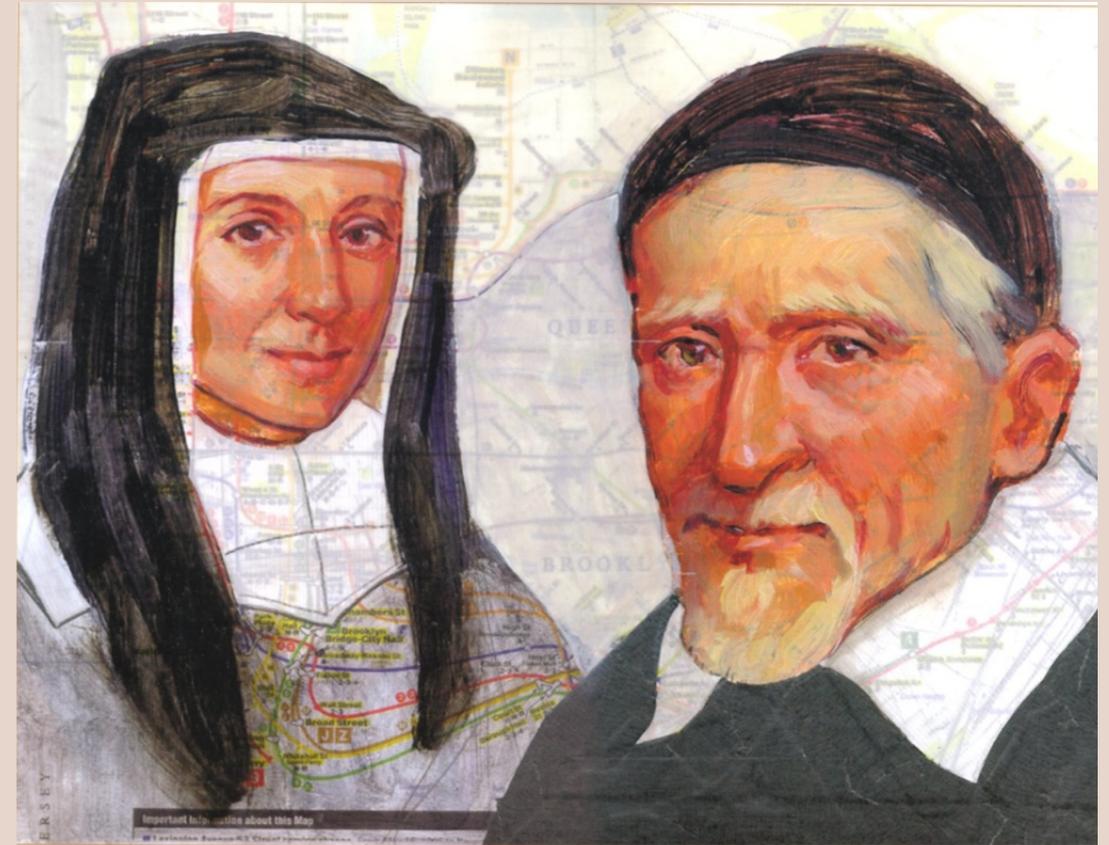
Ecrits Spirituels, 674 (L.40).



Final words

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.”

(SV X, 726.)

Final words

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.” *Ecrits Spirituels*, 823.



1. Formator

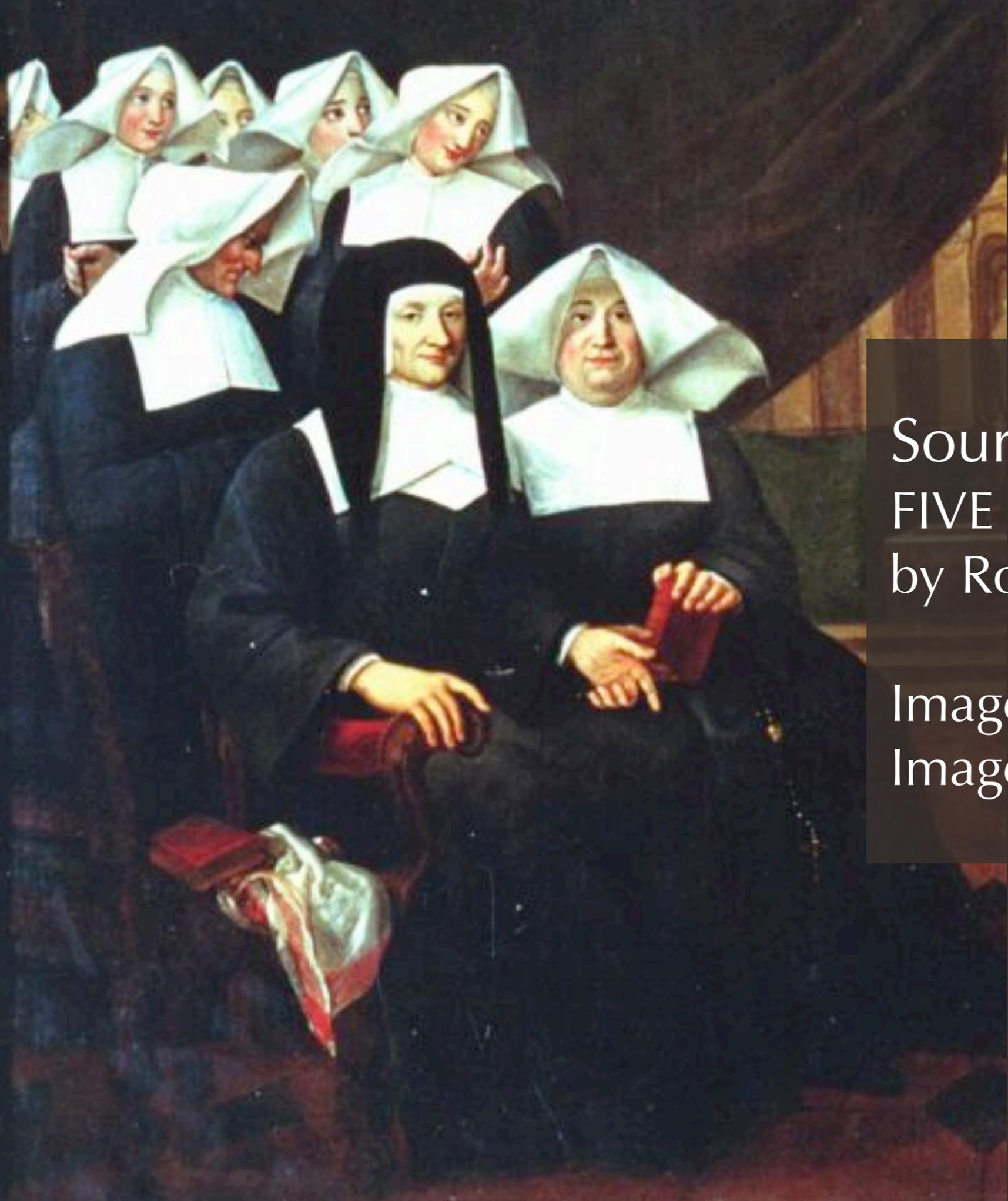
2. Contemplative

3. Organizer

4. Accomplished Woman

5. Servant of the Poor





Source:
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Images: St. Vincent de Paul
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