

Sr. M. Veronika Häusler

A portrait of a woman, likely a nun, wearing a black veil and a white collar. The background is dark and textured. The text 'THE STRENGTH OF MERCY' is overlaid in white, serif, all-caps font.

THE STRENGTH OF MERCY

Four Weeks
with Louise de Marillac

The Strength of Mercy

Series Preface

The volumes in NCP's "7 x 4" series offer a meditation a day for four weeks, a bite of food for thought, a reflection that lets a reader ponder the spiritual significance of each and every day. Small enough to slip into a purse or coat pocket, these books fit easily into everyday routines.

The Strength of Mercy

Four weeks with Louise de Marillac

Sr. M Veronika Häusler



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Louise de Marillac - An Eventful Life

The beginning of Louise's life story holds some question marks - the place of her birth is uncertain, and nothing is known of her mother. Instead, we do know something of her father: Louis is part of the influential de Marillac family. Better known than him are her two uncles: Michel de Marillac (1553-1632), her father's brother, was keeper of the empire's seals; and his half-brother Jean Louis de Marillac, Count of Beaumont (1573-1632), held the post of Marshal of France.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, France went through a phase of armed conflicts, which mostly began as civil war but then turned broader as foreign powers got involved. Torn by civil war and famine, the country lost 30 to 40 percent of its population in those years; the infant mortality rate was at 50 percent, and the average life expectancy for the country folk was 25 years.

Because of her family's ties to the royal court, Louise's life had always been closely linked to the political developments in France.

Her father held the position of captain of the royal bodyguards. His first marriage remained childless, and in 1589 he became a widower. He

married again in 1595. Louise had been born out of wedlock in 1591. A few days after her birth, her father claimed her as his daughter and in a notarized document established an annual pension for her. In those days this was uncommon, of course, and suggests that Louis de Marillac was devoted to his daughter with true love. Until his new marriage, she probably grew up with him, but in 1595 she was sent to be educated in the Dominican convent of Poissy. There was no room for her in the new family, even though her father continued to be in close contact with her.

In the convent in Poissy lived her aunt, Catherine Louise de Marillac, a nun; she is believed to be Louise's godmother. The child learned with great talent, and received an education well beyond most of her peers. Literature, Latin and the seven liberal arts all were part of the curriculum, and she also learned to paint. Her childhood ran a rather regular course.

Her father was less fortunate. His second wife brought him into serious financial difficulties, so 12-year-old Louise, apparently for lack of money, had to move into a modest boarding school to live with a spinster. There she acquired new skills such as maintaining a household and doing needlecrafts.

She was not quite 13 years old when her father died in 1604, which was a very painful cut in her life. Now she was in a sense alone in the world,

facing an uncertain future. When the very strict religious community of the Daughters of the Passion came to Paris, she decided to join them, with a private vow. However, the provincial refused to accept her - he did not trust that she would be able to lead the hard life of these sisters, because of her weak health. This was another bitter experience of rejection.

Finally, the relatives intervened, and arranged a marriage; the family's background permitted her to look for a decent suitor in the social circles of the Royal Court. The choice fell on Antoine Le Gras, secretary to the Queen. What Louise thought of the marriage and her future husband is not known. The wedding took place on February 5, 1613, at St. Gervais in Paris, and the marriage took on quite well. They moved into an exclusive neighborhood and had their house renovated. On October 18, 1613, their son Michel-Antoine was born.

Soon, however, difficulties started to amount. Their son Michel's development was slow and revealed that the child had special needs - which remained a permanent concern for Louise throughout the coming decades. In the course of political entanglements, the future of the young family was uncertain. Furthermore, in 1617 Louise and her husband also took on the care of seven orphans, the children of an uncle, overstretching their financial capacity significantly. Antoine, her husband, fell ill in 1621; he never did quite recover.

A child with special needs, a sick and difficult husband, financial strains, the care of seven orphans, and Antoine's professional survival threatened by unstable political conditions - these were the hardships Louise found herself in. She became convinced that she was the cause of such disastrous developments, and wrestled with herself whether or not she should leave the family. Yet she could not decide to take that step, as her husband and child depended on her. Despite all her attempts to find help, Louise was ultimately on her own. She came to doubt even the existence of God and for years was trapped in deep despair.

When all hope of overcoming the crisis through well-intended advice, especially from her uncle Michel, led to nothing, God intervened. At least that's how Louise experienced it. On Pentecost 1623 he led her to clearly see the answer to her questions - and he gave her a glimpse into the future. In a community of like-minded people, she would be there for others. This experience, which she calls "light," changed everything for Louise. Outwardly, everything remained as before, but God's direct encouragement pulled her out of the inner night and gave her the strength to consciously accept her circumstances and give shape to her life.

In 1624 or 1625, probably through the intervention of Francis de Sales, Louise came to meet Vincent de Paul, a priest who in 1617 had found-

ed the Confraternities of Charity in the French countryside as well as the Association of Caritas ladies in Paris. Vincent became Louise's spiritual director. At first both had felt great reluctance, but then they embarked on a common spiritual journey - another decisive turn in Louise's life. First, however, Antoine's illness worsened, and Louise cared for him and accompanied him until his death on December 21, 1625.

Now she wanted to hasten the fulfillment of the promise; she was impatient. Vincent asked her to live through a time of inner preparation before he accepted her collaboration in 1629. First, she visited the Caritas associations in the countryside, took care of things on site, encouraged the members, gave practical advice, and uncovered shortcomings and developed solutions. Through her extensive training and her practical skills, she was a great help to these associations.

For her as well as for Vincent it was important that both material and spiritual needs were taken care of. So, in their visits they brought supplies of food and clothes and distributed medicines. She taught catechism, especially to the local girls, and trained teachers if there were none at the village. Louise's catechism lessons for women were so popular that the men would hide behind the curtains to listen to her. She even compiled her own catechism.

Now, only one promise of Pentecost remained to be redeemed, the small community of like-

mindful people, where there would be a coming and going.

Things developed in Louise's favor. In Paris there were problems. The ladies of society who had initially made themselves available for service to the poor in the houses and the Hôtel Dieu, the hospital of the city, could not continue in their task because of family constraints. So they entrusted it to their servants - who showed little enthusiasm for the task at hand.

Providence sent Marguerite Naseau, a young woman who offered herself for service to the poor and motivated other young women to do so. From these beginnings Louise formed the Company of the Daughters of Charity, taking off on November 29, 1633, when four or five young women moved into her house. A year after the foundation Vincent held a conference about the rule Louise had compiled. At that time, there were already twelve sisters.

The needs were great and almost endless. Vincent and Louise had built up a network, and their helpers could be found at all the focal points: in the houses of the poor, as nurses in the hospitals of different cities, in the care for the wounded of the civil wars. Besides that, there was also the care for foundlings and galley slaves. At the request of the Queen of Poland, a former Caritas lady herself, Louise even sent sisters to Warsaw.

As the first superior of the community, she took on the major part of the responsibility for the training of nurses, accompanied them to their assignments, and stayed in touch with them by keeping an extensive correspondence.

On March 25, 1642, Louise and four sisters took the vows of poverty, obedience, chastity, and service to the poor. In the vow formula set down by Louise they promised, "to serve the sick poor, our true Masters" (A. 44b). Thus the promise of Pentecost 1623 finally and fully came true.

Louise's concerns for her son were also alleviated around this time. After Michel had half-heartedly prepared for a clerical career, and ultimately decided against it, he went through some rather wild years. Finally, he found both a suitable position at the royal mint and a good wife. At Louise's deathbed the couple was at her side, together with her granddaughter, Louise Renée.

On March 15, 1660, Louise gave her full life back into the hands of God.

For a long time, March 15 was her feast day.

Since 2016 it has been celebrated on May 9, the day of her beatification in 1920.

Notes on the Translation of the Original Texts

Louise has left extensive writings. Already during her lifetime her secretary, Sr. Marguerite Chetif, recognized the value of her letters, and today we can fall back on the copies kept by Sr. Marguerite, for some of the writings no longer in exist in their original. The Daughters of Charity have tried in ever new attempts to arrange these writings in chronological order, even if no date was specified, and to make them available in French. The first complete edition was published in 1960, followed by a major revision, *Ecrits Spirituels*, in 1983. In it there is a classification of documents. All texts with an "L." before the number are letters. The edition includes 758 of them. An "A." before the number indicates the "thoughts", different writings such as retreat notes, rules, prayers or meditations. In this category there are 88 texts. "M." with a serial number indicates that it is a text from the transcripts of Marguerite Chetif. These include eleven texts.

Louise wrote in the 17th century - and in a sophisticated French. In 1991, *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, a complete translation of the French edition of 1983, was published in English by Sr. Louise Sullivan. The English version strives to achieve a careful and faithful translation, while at the same time respecting the concern of

using language that is understandable today. The quotations of the original texts in this book draw from this edition.

The respective sources are specified according to common use in *Ecrits Spirituels / Spiritual Writings* as L./A./M. and number specified. Two citations are taken from the “Conferences”¹, conversation logs that were kept at the meetings of the first sisters with Vincent de Paul. Very often these transcripts originate from Louise herself. In the early years, it was common after the death of a sister to speak about her in such a meeting.

1. *Pierre Coste (ed.), Saint Vincent De Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents, Volume I / 1; Volume I / 2*, (New City Press, Hyde Park, NY 1985).