

St. Louise de Marillac – March 15



Saint Louise de Marillac's Story

Born near Meux, France, Louise lost her mother when she was still a child, her beloved father when she was but 15. Her desire to become a nun was discouraged by her confessor, and a marriage was arranged. One son was born of this union. But Louise soon found herself nursing her beloved husband through a long illness that finally led to his death.

Louise was fortunate to have a wise and sympathetic counselor, Francis de Sales, and then his friend, the bishop of Belley, France. Both of these men were available to her only periodically. But from an interior illumination she understood that she was to undertake a great work under the guidance of another person she had not yet met. This was the holy priest Monsieur Vincent, later to be known as Saint Vincent de Paul.

At first, he was reluctant to be her confessor, busy as he was with his "Confraternities of Charity." Members were aristocratic ladies of charity who were helping him nurse the poor and look after neglected children, a real need of the day. But the ladies were busy with many of their own concerns and duties. His work needed many more helpers, especially ones who were

peasants themselves and therefore, close to the poor and able to win their hearts. He also needed someone who could teach them and organize them.

Only over a long period of time, as Vincent de Paul became more acquainted with Louise, did he come to realize that she was the answer to his prayers. She was intelligent, self-effacing, and had physical strength and endurance that belied her continuing feeble health. The missions he sent her on eventually led to four simple young women joining her. Her rented home in Paris became the training center for those accepted for the service of the sick and poor. Growth was rapid and soon there was the need for a so-called "rule of life," which Louise herself, under the guidance of Vincent, drew up for the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul.

Monsieur Vincent had always been slow and prudent in his dealings with Louise and the new group. He said that he had never had any idea of starting a new community, that it was God who did everything. "Your convent," he said, "will be the house of the sick; your cell, a hired room; your chapel, the parish church; your cloister, the streets of the city or the wards of the hospital." Their dress was to be that of the peasant women. It was not until years later that Vincent de Paul would finally permit four of the women to take annual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. It was still more years before the company would be formally approved by Rome and placed under the direction of Vincent's own congregation of priests.

Many of the young women were illiterate. Still it was with reluctance that the new community undertook the care of neglected children. Louise was busy helping wherever needed despite her poor health. She traveled throughout France, establishing her community members in hospitals, orphanages and other institutions. At her death on March 15, 1660, the congregation had more than 40 houses in France. Six months later Vincent de Paul followed her in death.

Louise de Marillac was canonized in 1934 and declared patroness of social workers in 1960.

Reflection

In Louise's day, serving the needs of the poor was usually a luxury only fine ladies could afford. Her mentor, Saint Vincent de Paul, wisely realized that women of peasant stock could reach poor people more effectively, and the Daughters of Charity were born under her leadership. Today, that order—along with the Sisters of Charity—continues to nurse the sick and aging and provide refuge for orphans. Many of its members are social workers toiling under Louise's patronage. The rest of us must share her concern for the disadvantaged.

Saint Louise de Marillac is the Patron Saint of:

Social workers

Doubt, Certainty, and Louise's Lumière

On June 4, 1623, Pentecost Sunday, Louise de Marillac experienced a transformation in her life. She would later write, “On the Feast of Pentecost, during holy Mass or while I was praying in the church, my mind was instantly freed of all doubt.” (i) Louise’s doubt disappeared in a powerful mystical experience that she would call her lumière, or light. She had a vision of her future, in which she lived the life she had always wanted, serving the poor as a member of a religious community. Her current hardships would not last forever, and her newfound certainty would give her the strength to persevere.

When I read stories of saints and holy people, I envy the turning points that are often part of this genre. Imagine: All at once, you know what you are meant to do with your life! You are gripped with conviction, freed from insecurity and uncertainty, and fortified by a singular, powerful purpose. Vincent de Paul experienced such a moment when he realized his calling to serve the French peasants. Oscar Romero did too, when the assassination of his friend Rutilio Grande called him to criticize the oppressive Salvadoran government. Perhaps most famously, Saint Paul experienced such a moment on the road to Damascus, when a light from the heavens knocked him to the ground. In the Christian tradition, these can be called moments of conversion.

Maybe you’ve experienced a sudden certainty or conviction that changed your life. Personally, I haven’t. Unlike Louise, I’ve never seen my future in a flash of light. My life changes gradually, more like a cycle of sunrises and sunsets. The sun doesn’t just appear at its high-noon zenith. First, the sky fades from black to gray, and then the sun peeks over the horizon. It climbs slowly, serenely, and the day unfolds. If I’m lucky, each day illuminates some small truth for me, helping me understand myself and the world just a bit better. And then the sun sets.

While I long for Louise’s certainty, she also put up with a lot of unhappiness along the way. Her lumière vision told her that she needed to stay put for the time being. Despite the “spiritual anguish” she felt over her husband’s deteriorating health and difficulties with her son, she continued to accept her spiritual director’s calming advice, and bore with her marriage even though she longed for something more and suffered through depression.(ii) Her lumière showed her the way, but it didn’t eliminate the sorrows, the headaches, the day-to-day drudgery that we all experience. When I think about her lumière that way, it becomes a lot more relatable. She had a vision, but her life still had to unfold, and that took time.

The Feast of Pentecost is commemorated fifty days after Easter. According to scripture, the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus’s apostles and Mary, his mother. We often see them depicted with tongues of fire floating above their heads, representing the spirit within them. You have to remember that this community was heartbroken; just fifty days earlier, their beloved friend and community-member had been tortured and killed on the cross. This traumatic event surely took

a toll on their bodies and spirits. It was in the midst of this mourning that God appeared to them in another form, coming down upon them in flame. This fire fueled them to continue Jesus's mission, to spread his teachings, and to keep building their community.

This is the story that Louise would've been reflecting on when she had her vision. Her lumière was a Pentecost moment, a moment of God's sudden, surprising presence in a time of sorrow. Like the apostles, she found the strength to continue. And like the apostles, she still had to deal with pain and suffering as she worked to realize her vision. Her transformation was both sudden and slow.

As we remember Louise's lumière over 400 years later, let us open ourselves to the presence of a higher power within and among us—in all of God's many forms. Let us experience the slowness of daybreak and a fire that emerges from within each one of us. Let us be patient with ourselves—and let us be agents of our own transformation.

Reflection Questions:

Have you ever experienced a sudden turning point like Louise's lumière?
How have you experienced God's presence in the ordinary moments of your life?

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