



NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE US SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

Contemplation: The Saint Within

St. Louise de Marillac is often presented as a woman who is very anxious and unsure, is easily upset and indecisive, and who needs constant guidance from St. Vincent de Paul. Yet Louise was a natural leader, a gift that Vincent recognized very early in their relationship. She was well-educated in theology, had a deep and mystical spirituality, wrote beautifully about the faith, and acted as a spiritual guide for many, especially the Daughters of Charity. Under Canon Law, it was Vincent who formally founded the Daughters, but we know from their correspondence that the company was Louise, the co-founder's original vision. So why do we keep hearing that misleading characterization?

The answer, as with so many misjudgments we make about people we encounter, lies in the context. Louise and Vincent exchanged many letters during their 35-year relationship. They were truly friends, with deep mutual respect. Their correspondence often discussed the “business” of their many works of charity, but the letters that touch us most deeply, and seem to reveal more of both personalities, are the ones not between two leaders of religious communities, but between Louise and her Spiritual Director.

In a relationship with a Spiritual Director, we reveal our deepest anxieties, our uncertainties, and our weaknesses. We seek the guidance of that director, sometimes referred to as a “confessor” in order to grow. The letters are both personal and true, giving us wonderful insights into these saints whom we love. Imagine, though, if a stranger seeking to learn more about you were to read all that you have revealed in the confessional, or in intimate conversations with very close friends and family members.

In a similar way, we encounter neighbors who are, at the time they call us, often in a desperate bind, sometimes facing consequences of their own decisions, and struggling with both financial and emotional burdens. If that were all we knew about them, if our encounter ended with a phone call, or a mailed-in application, how much of their full stories would we miss? How quickly might we leap to judgment, unintentionally betraying the trust they've shown by confiding to us their personal crisis?

It is for this reason that we visit the neighbor, person-to-person, forming “*relationships based on trust and friendship*”. We try to “*understand them as we would a brother or sister*”, like the family members who confide in us, cry on our shoulders, and whom we love and appreciate. [Rule, Part I, 1.9] Like Louise, they are much more than the sum of their weaknesses. They trust us with what Frédéric called the “*secret of [their] lonely heart and troubled mind.*” [Baunard, 279]

There are other saints who ensured that their personal writings were not preserved after their death. Saint Louise, by revealing to us both her weakness and her holiness, reminds us to seek the holiness within all of our neighbors – and ourselves.

Contemplate

How can I better see past the crisis on the surface to find the saint within?

Recommended Reading

Get to know Louise through some of her [Spiritual Writings](#).