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M. Vincent, Father of the Poor, Apostle of Charity

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M. Vincent

- *Father of the Poor*
- *Aspect of Charity*

NOV 7 AUBUCHON

My sisters, we are each a block of stone that is to be transformed into a statue. . . . The sculptor strikes the stone so violently that if you were watching him you would say he intended to break it in pieces. Then, when he has removed the rougher parts, he takes a smaller hammer, and with a chisel to begin the face with all its features. When that has been done, he uses other and finer tools to bring it to the perfect form he has intended for his statue. You see, my daughters, God works like that.

St. Vincent de Paul

GOD WAS the sculptor who carved, with violent blows, the exquisite perfection that was to become two great saints - Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac.

Who was this Vincent de Paul? He was born of peasant stock, so he understood the hardships of the poor. A few years after his ordination as a priest, he was captured at sea by the Corsairs and sold as a slave in Africa. Because of this period of slavery, Vincent understood the suffering of the slave. He lived in France at a time when the galley slaves manned the huge ships, and once he freed a young man from the chains, exchanged clothing with him and set him free, putting the chains on his own legs and taking the boy's place on the galleys. The wounds from those chains were to trouble him for 40 years. Vincent de Paul learned human suffering by sharing in it.

Therefore, when he opened a hospital for galley slaves, he understood their pain because once it had been his own suffering. When he fed the poor he understood the hunger of the poor.

Louise had known the sorrow of widowhood, the helpless anguish of being mother to a wayward son, and felt great repugnance toward the life of the court of France in the 17th century, with its pomp and its foulness. She was refined by the fire of zeal for the spiritual life while forced to accept the material world.

Both of these people had a love for the poor and the sick that was destined to bring them together to work for suffering mankind.

Louise was a born nurse. As a rich woman who did not find court life absorbing, she began to visit the poor and the sick regularly. The Hotel Dieu, the only hospital in Paris, was always so full that numbers were turned away from

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it each day. For the rejected there was no help of any nature. It was to them that Louise would go and no service was too menial for her to perform for their care. In the dark, unventilated hovels of the sick she washed foul bodies, combed the hair of diseased and evil-smelling people, watched with them until they were well or death claimed them.

After the death of her husband, Louise sought the advice of Vincent de Paul who had become her spiritual adviser. Her thought was to enter religious life; he discouraged the notion, recommending instead that she maintain her home in Paris and continue doing good among the sick and poor.

By this time, Vincent had begun his mission work. He and the priests of the mission congregation went about preaching and teaching in those parts of France where conditions were especially bad. Wherever they went, Vincent established Congregations of Charity, societies composed of women who banded together to tend the sick and the poor of the neighborhood. They called themselves the Servants of the Poor. But Vincent found that it was hard to keep enthusiasm high, once the mission had left the area. He therefore decided to ask Louise de Marillac to help. He sent her to all the places where his priests had labored in the rural districts, to establish conferences of charity. Louise traveled as his representative, counseled with the members, supplied them with money, and did all she could to promote the work of Christian

love of neighbor. For three years she journeyed through France amid all the misery of the times and the perils of war. Then Louise began her School of Charity in Paris. She took in peasant girls, trained them in the service of the sick and the instruction of poor children. She taught them to read, cook, sew, and how to care for the sick.

In 1630 the cholera broke out in Paris, one of the worst sieges the city had known. Louise and her little group remained in the city visiting the severe cases and most infected districts.

Vincent's little group of missionaries grew. To all who came to him, Vincent offered nothing but the hardest of lives. His followers must never think of themselves. They must suffer great physical hardship, but more and more men came to join. Louise watched the rapid growth of this work with great interest and then, at long last, Vincent agreed to unite Louise and her peasant girls into a community under the guidance of a superior. Louise founded the community on November 29, 1633. In March, 1634, Vincent gave her the threefold vow.

Louise's girls did not wear a religious habit, but all dressed alike in dark blue dresses with white collars, a white handkerchief around their heads. They arose at four every morning, went to bed at nine, and spent their days in prayer and work.

The hospital of Paris, Hotel Dieu, was a building that admitted more than 20,000 patients each

year. Its management was in the hands of a few nuns, priests, and visiting doctors — all of whom had no more than an elementary knowledge of hygiene. Sometimes the hospital beds held several occupants. The bedclothing was filthy, the food inadequate. No one received spiritual care unless one thought that death was imminent.

Louise's friend, Madame de Mazarin, went to the Archbishop of Paris, demanding that reforms be instituted in the hospital. The Archbishop spoke to Vincent de Paul and he in turn directed Louise to send her daughters to help. Soon the Daughters became familiar figures in the hospital. Then Vincent alerted Louise to the problem of the foundlings of Paris. Another great venture was begun. Several hundred children were being abandoned each year and being placed in a dismal dwelling called "La Couche." It was a habitat of horror rather than a foundling home, for the owner sold children to beggars who would mutilate them to make them objects of compassion, for the rich to give more alms. Other children died of hunger and neglect.

A gradual removal of the children was begun and Louise and her Daughters took charge of the little ones. Foster homes were found for some; they cared for others who were left in their charge, and took in the steady stream of deserted babies, poured out on the Paris streets.

Vincent's next project was help for galley slaves. He and his priests had done much for these

convicts; tending prisoners was to be a new work for women. However, when Vincent told Louise of the problem, she did not hesitate. She and her Daughters went bravely into prisons and the ships to tend the sick, to bring food and messages from the outside world.

And so it was, that the lives of these two saints merged. Today, in the French national hall of fame, the Pantheon, there is a statue of "M. Vincent" giving mute testimony to the love even a secular world gives St. Vincent de Paul. Sociologists, social workers, nursing corps, organizers of philanthropy, all have acclaimed him. There is scarcely a modern work of charity he did not organize or reform.

Louise de Marillac's Daughters of Charity still carry on the great work of this man who has aptly been called the "Father of the Poor."

On September 27 of this year, the Vincentian Fathers and the Daughters of Charity began the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the death of St. Vincent de Paul which occurred on that day in 1660. The commemoration will extend through September, 1960. For Louise de Marillac's Daughters of Charity, serving in hospitals all over the world, the chief part of the celebration will be in continuing to carry out the wishes of St. Vincent as their beloved foundress would have commanded them.

They recall his words to those first Daughters of Charity, "When you serve those little children,

when you nurse the sick poor . . . you are honoring the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who so often did the same things you do. And when you serve the convicts, you are honoring the sufferings and calumnies endured by our Lord on the Cross. . . . It can truly be said of you, as of the Apostles, that you go from one place to another, and that just as they were sent by our Lord, so you are also in His name by order of your superiors."

Since St. Vincent de Paul belongs not alone, to his religious communities, but to the entire world, it is the wish of the Tercentenary Observance Committee that all the faithful join with them in honoring the anniversary of his death. There is still a great need for the charity of "M. Vincent" in the world. Perhaps in remembering his love for his fellowmen all men will find a new charity in their own hearts.

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