

DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY AT RISK !

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Daughters of Charity at Santa Marta

The photo above shows Daughters of Charity with Pope Benedict XVI at the Casa Santa Marta, Vatican City, Rome. Following the resignation of Benedict XVI, the Casa Santa Marta housed the 115 cardinal electors who attended the 2013 Papal Conclave. Currently, the Daughters of Charity administer the building, which contains some 106 suites and 22 single rooms on five floors. It was reconstructed in the late 20th century to house some of those working at the Vatican and to provide appropriate accommodation for the conclave electors. At the end of the 19th century, the Daughters of Charity were called to the Casa Santa Marta by Pope Leo XIII for various services which have evolved over the years (care of the sick, welcoming pilgrims, a canteen for personnel, dispensary...). Since that time the Sisters have always been there.



While the Daughters of Charity are still at the Vatican, it is not the first time in their history that, because of their reputation for dedicated service, they have found themselves in august company! Even in the time of Louise and Vincent, there was the case of the Queen of Poland wanting Daughters of Charity in her household. The Duchess d'Aiguillon, who was a great supporter of the Ladies of Charity, Louise, Vincent and other groups in the Church, was able to obtain, for a short period, a Daughter of Charity to assist her in her own household.

There is another precedent of course for the giving of service at high levels. Martha of the Gospels (after whom the Casa Santa Marta is named) is well known for being conscientiously involved in the role of service-preparation for a meal with the Lord while her sister Mary provided a service of hospitality by washing and anointing his feet !

But the Church does not only exist at the Vatican !

Louise and the Church

As we approach the feast of Pentecost, we remember that it is 390 years since Louise de Marillac's "Lumiere" (Light) experience on Pentecost Sunday, 1623¹. For Louise, her "Lumiere" was a defining moment for herself, and her understanding of the work that she would be called to do. In a recent address titled *Called to Holy Madness, Religious Life in the Post-Modern World*, Anthony Gittins CSSp described such defining moments in the life of a holy person as an "initiation crisis (trauma or enlightenment)" related to the social sciences category of "Holy Madness". For Louise, the experience was one of enlightenment. Such defining moments lead to deep conviction in the holy person, and generate a compulsion to perform a task on behalf of the wider community – at personal cost to oneself.²

At Pentecost, it may be beneficial to reflect on Louise's enlightened ideas about the Church and the ministry of women in the Church. Louise did not see the Church as some distinct entity or a hierarchical institution to which she had to submit herself. She considered all Christians as members of the mystical body of Jesus Christ, and each individual has a concrete function to perform in order to accomplish a common mission, that is, a mission to reveal God's love to the poor and thus return to the poor their proper place in the Church.³ On June 21, 1647, Louise wrote to Monsieur Portail⁴ in Rome and pointed out to him the obligation that Daughters of Charity have to live and minister as Daughters of the Church. She explained that the Sisters are Daughters of the Church in a twofold manner: through their baptism and through their vocation of service of the poor.⁵

Louise believed that it was the Spirit that inspired and guided the Church, that called people to service of the poor as a reflection of Jesus Christ, and so she invited all to be part of this Church in the service of the poor, thus giving witness to the Risen Lord after Pentecost. She told the Ladies of Charity that she especially believed that God had called women to this role in their

¹ O'Sullivan DC, Louise, Ed. & Trans., *Spiritual Writing of Louise de Marillac, Correspondence and Thoughts*, "Light", A 2, p 1 Full Text accessed April 14, 2013 in Via Sapientiae (DePaul University Libraries) at <http://via.library.depaul.edu/lm/11>

² Gittins CSSp, Anthony J, *Called to Holy Madness: Religious Life in the Post-Modern World*; Annual Conference, CLRI(NSW), March 5-7, 2013, p.1

³ Collected authors, *Louise de Marillac, a woman of the Church*, trans. from the Spanish (and previously French), *En tiempos de San Vicente de Paúl ... y hoy*, Editorial CEME, Santa Marta de Tormes, Salamanca, Spain, 1999, p245-246. Accessed April 14, 2013, in Vincentian Online Library, New York, *Louise de Marillac, a woman of the Church*, p. 2 at http://www.famvin.org/wiki/Louise_de_Marillac,_a_woman_of_the_Church .

⁴ O'Sullivan DC, *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, Letter to M. Portail at Rome, June 21, 1647, L 179, p 202.

Note: Monsieur Portail, or Fr Antoine Portail, assisted Vincent de Paul in regard to the Daughters of Charity. In 1642 he was officially appointed as (the first) Director of the Daughters of Charity after Vincent de Paul.

⁵ Collected authors, *Louise de Marillac, a woman of the Church*, p. 2

own century.⁶ Louise had great confidence in the women who became Ladies of Charity and Daughters of Charity.

“Holy Madness” – Risk and Accident

In the article referred to above by Anthony Gittins in which he spoke of “Holy Madness”, he focused on both Charism and Charisma as a way forward for Religious Congregations⁷. We are all familiar with the Charism of Louise de Marillac, but like many good leaders, Louise also possessed a Charisma that allowed her to inspire many women in the service of the poor. This is evidenced by the way she encouraged and supported those Sisters who went off to distant places, sometimes sponsored by Ladies of Charity or some person of means, sometimes as a small group relying on their own devices to do their work after minimal training. Clearly both Louise and these Sisters took many risks by being women who moved freely around towns and villages without the protection of being seen as “religious”.

These days, risk taking is not always encouraged. From the commercial, industrial and organisational point of view, procedures for “risk management” have become almost a profession in themselves. Administrative compliance and insurance occupy large amounts of time, energy and expense. The underlying message is – be wary of risk.

In the institutional Church, there is often a similar message of wariness - the insistence on doctrinal orthodoxy, rules of behaviour and refusal to discuss certain unwelcome issues has meant a narrowness of approach that can be stifling to the real purpose of the church – to preach the Gospel, especially to the marginalised.

But, In a recent Editorial of National Catholic Reporter (*Vatican, LCWR approaching critical crossroads*⁸) we read:

“A church that does not go out of itself, sooner or later, sickens from the stale air of closed rooms,” Pope Francis has written in a letter released Thursday (April 19, 2013 ?) to his fellow Argentine bishops. This is a similar message to the one he delivered to his fellow cardinals before the conclave, impressing them enough to elect him bishop of Rome.

In his new note he went on to say in the process of “going out” the church always risks running into “accidents,” [adding](#),⁹ I prefer a thousand times over a church of accidents than a sick church.”

⁶ O’Sullivan DC, Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac, *Notes on the Meetings of the Ladies of Charity*, A. 56, p 789

⁷ Gittins CSSp, Anthony J, p 7.

⁸ Editorial Staff, *Vatican, LCWR approaching critical crossroads*, National Catholic Reporter, April 19, 2013, accessed on April 23, 2013 at: <http://ncronline.org/news/editorial-vatican-lcwr-approaching-critical-crossroads>

The Editorial adds “A church of accidents ... a church willing to take risks on the edges ... a church dedicated to service of the most needy ... a church working on behalf of mercy, peace and justice...”¹⁰

There seems little doubt from the above that at the Vatican, Pope Francis is pushing the Church towards the marginalised, which is most certainly going to involve some risk taking !

Back at the Vatican

So, we are back at the Vatican, now with Pope Francis – and the Daughters of Charity are still there. Pope Francis, having stayed at the Casa Santa Marta during the Conclave that elected him Pope, has decided to take the risk of living there away from the seclusion of the Apostolic Palace. He is also making it clear that he thinks of the Church as a church for the poor - a further link with the Daughters of Charity.



And the Daughters of Charity – Daughters of the Church that they are - are they still the risk takers they were in the time of Louise and the early Sisters ?

⁹ Allen, John Jr, *A less political Vatican, a less self-reverential Church*, National Catholic Reporter, April 18, 2013, accessed April 23 at: <http://ncronline.org/node/49971>

¹⁰ Editorial Staff, *Vatican, LCWR approaching critical crossroads*, National Catholic Reporter, April 19, 2013, accessed April 23, 2013, at: <http://ncronline.org/news/editorial-vatican-lcwr-approaching-critical-crossroads>

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How are the Daughters of Charity serving at Santa Marta also serving the marginalized ?
2. Louise de Marillac emphasised the Mystical Body in her consideration of the Church. What other models or ideas of the Church might we focus on now ?
3. Has there been any “Holy Madness” in **our** lives !!! ?
4. In our own lives and work, do we take risks in our ministry, or do we feel constrained to avoid risk and always take the safest paths ?
5. Does some of our fear of risk come from our desire to control outcomes ?