

Saint Louise de Marillac Society Mass and Dinner

**St. Agnes Parish
Springfield, Illinois
June 20, 2011**

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We are gathered this evening to give thanks to Almighty God for the many blessings he has bestowed upon the members of the Saint Louise de Marillac Society and to beg him to pour out his grace into our hearts and upon our efforts to care for the least of his brethren (cf. Matthew 25:40).

Saint John the Beloved poses to us a poignant question, one we would do well to meditate upon frequently: “If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him” (I John 3:17)?

The answer to this question lies in what Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his encyclical letter *Deus caritas est*:

My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings others becomes a sharing of my very self with them: if my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift.¹

¹ Pope Benedict XVI *Deus caritas est*, 34.

In your patroness we see one in whom the love of the Father was indeed present and one who could rightly say, with Saint John, “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers” (I John 3:14). In the life of Saint Louise de Marillac, we see one who, in the end, gave her very self.

The life of Saint Louise de Marillac is one marked with both great struggles and great joys; in this, her life is much like our own lives. From a young age, she wanted to be a nun, but her poor health prevented her from entering the consecrated life. When her father died in 1604 she was sent to live with a poor spinster to learn what was then considered proper for a woman to know. In 1613, she married the secretary of the household of the queen, Antoine Le Gras, who held a position that seemed to her family neither too low nor too high. Her marriage brought her some happiness and also a son, who showed himself to be unstable. Her husband lost his position and his status when the queen was banished and found work managing the estate of the d’Attichy children, whose parents had recently died. Eventually, he forfeited his own estate to the d’Attichy’s and fell terminally ill.

At this point, Louise struggled greatly in the interior life. She was tempted to leave her husband, could not believe in the immortality of her soul and even doubted the existence of God.

She found no consolation in the advice of her spiritual director and entrusted herself to the prayers of Saint Francis de Sales, who died the previous year. In 1623, on the Solemnity of Pentecost, she found herself freed of her spiritual struggle and knew that she would take vows in the future, as she long desired to do, but first she needed to attend to her husband, for whom she cared for the next two years. She also knew that a spiritual director would be sent to her who would help her grow in faith, hope and love.

When her husband died, Louise vowed to remain a widow and also took the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. She then waited two more years for Saint Vincent de Paul to become her spiritual director, who told her in these interim years, “Go patiently, go prudently and be as happy as you can.”² Her many struggles seem to have given her a heavy heart.

² This and subsequent quotations from Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac are taken from *Butler's Lives of the Saints: New Full Edition: March*, Teresa Rodriguez *et al*, eds. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 150-155.

When Louise asked to assist in the work of Vincent's Mission Priests, he placed her in charge of the Ladies of Charity he established in various parishes, whose zeal was faltering in his absence. As her first task, she was to investigate the quality of the work of the Ladies of Charity, a task which took her four years and which changed her greatly. Her melancholy lifted, despite her continuous interaction in tragic and deplorable situations; she retook her maiden name; and she became a woman filled with joy. Vincent said to her, "God alone knows, Mademoiselle, what he has done for me in giving you to me; in heaven you will know!"

Together, Louise and Vincent realized that a new form of life was needed to assist the poor and alleviate their needs. The custom of many of the Ladies of Charity to send their maids to wash the sick, mend their wounds and give them food was unacceptable; the Ladies must themselves perform these works of charity.

These women were not to be known as Religious, living in a convent and cloistered from the world, but were to live among the poor, making their home with them. As Vincent said, "The objective of the Sister of Charity is the comfort and salvation of her neighbor."

Toward the end of her life it was clear Louise had advanced well in the spiritual life because of her work with the Company of Sisters. She said,

When we are set free from all attachment to this world and to the senses, from all attachment to our own self-love and our own free will and even from attachment to our delight in Christ and in his presence, when we have created a complete void within ourselves, the Holy Spirit will come into it and make us live with a divine life.

She learned to entrust herself entirely to the Lord and desired to be one with Christ crucified. Her only desire was “to be completely extinguished through the annihilation of my whole inner life,” and on her deathbed she said, “No desires, no resolutions. The grace of my God will accomplish in me whatever he wills.” She passed from death to life because she loved her brothers and sisters in poverty and in need.

She could only say this because in her works of charity she gave away her very self; she imitated the love of Jesus Christ. She could say, “No desires, no resolutions,” because she came to realize that

There are times when the burden of need and our own limitations might tempt us to become discouraged. But precisely then we are helped by the knowledge that, in the end, we are only instruments in the Lord’s hands; and this

knowledge frees us from the presumption of thinking that we alone are personally responsible for building a better world. In all humility we will do what can, and in all humility we will entrust the rest to the Lord. It is God who governs the world, not we. We offer him our service only to the extent that we can, and for as long as he grants us the strength. To do all we can with what strength we have, however, is the task which keeps the good servant of Jesus Christ always at work: “The love of Christ urges us on” (II Corinthians 5:14).³

The example of her life shows us the beauty and the happiness of abandoning ourselves into the loving hands of Jesus Christ and allowing him to use us as he sees fit. Her life reminds us that only in heaven will see what good the Lord will work through us.

My dear friends, through your involvement in the Saint Louise de Marillac Society, you show that you understand and believe that the “love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful.”⁴ Indeed, “for the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.”⁵

For your generous and loving assistance in this vital aspect of the Church’s mission, I am deeply grateful. Your deep concern for

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25a.

children who need foster homes or who have been placed for adoption manifests your genuine love of Jesus Christ who made himself small at Bethlehem.

Through the example and intercession of Saint Louise de Marillac, may your efforts bear great fruit in the lives of the poor and help them to realize the great love God has for them. Strive daily to give your very selves in your charity that you may hear Jesus say to you, "Come, you who are blessed my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34).

May God give us this grace. Amen.