

# March 15: St Louise de Marillac

Older Catholics might number among the most striking habits once worn by Religious Sisters the head dress of the Daughters of Charity. It was a cornette of starched linen, like a butterfly over the wearer's head wings stretched out and ready to fly. They were affectionately known as the Aeroplane sisters.

To later observers the dress seemed extraordinary. In its beginnings, however, it was designed to be ordinary. St Vincent de Paul, who with Louise de Marillac founded the Daughters of Charity, chose it because it was the dress of peasant women. He had earlier founded the Ladies of Charity, a confraternity of wealthy women, to provide help for the rural poor. But both their refinement and their wealthy dress left them ill equipped to work with impoverished women in the filth of the city. The Daughters of Charity were dressed to be at home there.

Louise de Marillac was also an outsider called in from the cold. Illegitimate, she was acknowledged and supported by her noble father, but excluded from the family and brought up in a monastic school. She failed in her attempt to join a convent, pined, but eventually married a wealthy man and had a son. Her husband fell ill, and after nursing him until his death, she met Vincent de Paul, who asked her to help his work with the urban poor, and eventually to join and lead the Congregation he wanted to form. They shared a deep friendship. With her gifts of upbringing, education and organising skills to join her passion for accompanying people who were poor, she helped mold the spirit of the Congregation. It was built on love for the poor and on a habit of contemplation.

Among her other heavenly assignments, Louise de Marillac has also been named the Patron Saint of social workers. The title is deserved. The Paris of her time lacked any kind of health system, and the poor depended on individual kindness or chance to survive. Louise brought together doctors, nurses charitable volunteers, and established institutions where they were formed in respectful and compassionate relationships with the poor whom they served and in the disciplines of practical care. The Sisters brought with to their work competence and compassion. She and Vincent de Paul both died in 1660.

What goes around comes around. Louise de Marillac's uncles were imprisoned for their high principles, and one was executed. Over a century later after the French Revolution two prominent members of the Daughters of Charity were arrested for continuing to work with the poor without taking the anti-religious oath. They, too, were executed. Then, as now, friendship with the poor often makes sows enmity among the powerful. The Daughters of Charity have been steadfast both in their love for the poor and for their contemplative following of Jesus and of Louise de Marillac.

By Fr Andrew Hamilton