

Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée

The Streets as a Cloister

History of the
Daughters of Charity
17th–18th Centuries

Preface by
Dominique Julia

The logo consists of a stylized, bold, black 'N' on the left and a stylized, bold, black 'C' on the right. The 'C' is formed by a thick vertical bar on the left and a thick horizontal bar on the top, with a small gap at the bottom right.
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Vincent de Paul, a Tridentine Parish Priest

Everything began with a look ... a completely new
look at an ancient misery.¹

Jean Rodhain (1960)

Strange as it may seem, the origins of the Daughters of Charity should be sought other than with their foundress Louise de Marillac, or with Marguerite Naseau, the first “Servant of the Poor,” as well as far from Paris, where they began. These origins are found in a different place, in a humble parish in Bresse (France). Without realizing it, the priest Vincent de Paul was laying the first stone of a future edifice. He himself firmly believed that God alone was at work, as he tells the story much later:

I, though unworthy, was the pastor of a small parish. As I was about to give the sermon, someone came to tell me there was an indigent man who was sick and very badly lodged in a poor barn. I was informed of his illness and poverty in such terms that, moved by compassion, I made a strong plea, speaking with such feeling that all the ladies were touched by it. More than fifty of them set out from the town, and I did the same. When I visited him, I found him in such a state that I judged it wise to hear his confession. As I was taking the Blessed Sacrament to him, I met the ladies returning in droves, and God gave me this thought: “Could not these good ladies be brought together and

encouraged to give themselves to God to serve the sick poor?" As a follow-up, I pointed out to them that these great needs could very easily be alleviated. They immediately resolved to see to it. Afterward, the Charity was established in Paris to do here what all of you can see. And all the good began with that. I hadn't given it a thought. God is the one who willed it, sisters, and Saint Augustine asserts that, when things happen in that way, God is their author. In this city of Paris, a few ladies had a similar desire to help the poor in their own parishes, but when it came to carrying out the project, they were greatly hindered in rendering them the lowly, difficult services. During the missions, I met a good country woman, who had given herself to God to teach girls here and there. God inspired her with the thought of coming to see me, and I suggested the service of the poor to her. Immediately she gladly accepted, and I sent her to Saint-Sauveur, the first parish in Paris in which the Charity was established. A Charity was next set up in Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, then at Saint-Benoît, where there were some good country women. God blessed them so much that, from that time on, they began to meet and come together almost imperceptibly.²

In 1617, Vincent, who was the parish priest of Châtillon-les-Dombes,³ founded the first confraternity of charity there. Other Charities were to follow during his missions on the estates of the Gondis, whose chaplain he was, and even to the tower of Paris. The Ladies of Charity, put off by the more lowly tasks, had to seek the help of "good village girls" like their servants. In 1633, Louise de Marillac gathered these young women together in her own home, and the Company of Daughters of Charity was born.

Between those two dates, 1617 and 1633, however, more than fifteen years elapsed, which this account, nearly thirty years after the facts (1645), condenses in a few lines. It is necessary to pick up the thread of the events, while trying to articulate this providential representation of history with the story of the origins, as far as the sources allow us to establish it.

Châtillon, a Parish in Need of Reform?

A FAIRLY RECENT FRENCH TOWN

When Vincent de Paul arrived in Châtillon-les-Dombes in 1617, it had been French for only a short while. Situated in the county of Bresse, this little village had been part of the duchy of Savoy until the province was conquered by Henry IV, finalized by the Treaty of Lyons in 1601.⁴ The *casus belli* was the 1588 invasion of the marquisate of Saluces, which France had been occupying since the Piedmontese defeat of the Alps in the wars with Italy. Consequently, in 1594, the king of France was preparing an invasion of the states of Savoy to force the duke to return Saluces to him. Bresse and Bugey were ravaged by opposing armies—the duke of Biron against the marquess of Treffort. Châtillon closed its gates and organized its defense and, by surrendering to the French (1595), was spared along with a few localities in the environs. Although by the treaty of Vervins (1598) Savoy promised to return Saluces, the procrastination of Charles-Emmanuel drove Henry IV to resume hostilities. In 1600, reinforced by the bases maintained in Bresse, Henry occupied Savoy. The peace of Lyons ended with relinquishing Saluces to Savoy in exchange for more important territories—Bresse, Bugey and Le Pays de Gex—on the right bank of the Rhône.

This war of conquest, preceded by the wars of the League, bled the region dry. Châtillon, in particular, was an important market for grain and fish (caught in the ponds of Dombes), but especially for wine, from Beaujolais to Revermont, and benefited from its location between Lyons and Mâcon. The occupation of the town by the troops cost it dearly. Accommodation had to be found for the soldiers and their horses, and food and heating had to be provided. Protests were registered with the king—not everyone appreciated the presence of the French. One of the two trustees resigned. François Collet succeeded him but died in 1595. According to custom, he was supposed to be replaced by one of his children or a close relative. His wife, Gasparde Puget, filled in for two months and was able to hold her own against the other trustee, Antoine Rolin.⁵ We meet this strong woman again in the confraternity of charity in 1617.

In addition, as everywhere, there were many poor people in Châtillon, but even more so in these catastrophic times. A small,

eight-bed hospital had been there since the middle of the XVth century. War, but also negligence, had almost destroyed the *Hôtel-Dieu*, which the archbishop of Lyons found very poor and almost in ruins during his pastoral visit of May 5-6, 1614.⁶ There was a rector, Ennemond Prost, and a hospital worker, Genoud Vert, but the latter was sick and even occupied one of the beds. Six poor children and three sick people were being fed and maintained at the expense of the town. That was not much for Châtillon, which then numbered 900 communicants in a population of about 2,000 inhabitants.⁷ The chapel of Our Lady was in a deplorable condition; the leaky roof was in danger of caving in and was letting rainwater in everywhere. The walls were crumbling, the stained glass was missing from the windows, and the stones on the floor were loose. Services were no longer held there because its canon, Jean Benonyer, one of the six *Sociétaire* priests of Châtillon, was involved in a lawsuit to obtain the unpaid revenues attached to the chapel. The town also had its beggars, the inevitable victims of the wars that brought their share of mutilations and ruins. One of the deliberations of the town assembly, shortly after Vincent's departure, prohibited them from begging in the church during services (December 26, 1617). With a very Tridentine concern of reestablishing the dignity of worship, Vincent had probably forbidden this. In the regulations for their confraternity of charity, the first Servants of the Poor committed themselves to helping poor persons "...who sometimes have suffered greatly, more because of a lack of organization in coming to their assistance than a lack of charitable persons."⁸ This was an acknowledgement of that misery. In 1605, an epidemic, which at that time was quickly labeled plague, had raged in Châtillon.

The parish in which Vincent de Paul arrived in the summer of 1617 did not, however, present the state of desolation that historiography has described. In 1667, Louis Abelly, relying too heavily on the reports of the investigation of Charles Démia,⁹ corrected the first edition of his 1664 biography of Vincent. He exaggerated in order to highlight better the merits of the founder of the Congregation of the Mission, whom people were already thinking of canonizing. Following Abelly, Pierre Collet (1748), Ulysse Maynard (1860), Pierre Coste (1931), and even José María Román (1981)—to mention only the major biographers of the holy priest—relied on the reports of Démia's visits of 1664-65 and the sometimes capricious stories embroidered after them. A certain number of con-