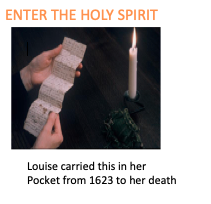
**ST. LOUISE - Co-Foundress of The Daughters of Charity (1591-1660)**

Born in France in 1591, Louise de Marillac was raised and educated by her widowed father, who passed away when she was 15.  She was left in desperate social straits and felt the need to marry a gentleman named Antony Le Gras.  It was a happy marriage, though regrets secretly plagued her that she had suppressed a religious vocation.

Her husband passed away while Louise was still young, and at that point, she looked for a sign of a vocation.  It came as an introduction to Father Vincent de Paul, who became her spiritual director and guided her throughout the remainder of her life.

Father Vincent had organized an extraordinary range of charitable projects by the time they met.  One included a circle of aristocratic ladies who worked together in the Parisian slums among the sick and destitute.  Louise committed herself to this work but, over time, realized that the needs of the poor completely overwhelmed the part-time efforts of these well-intentioned women.  She and Vincent formed the idea of a community of women wholly committed to service to the poor, and thus the Daughters of Charity was born.



The Daughters were not at first intended to be a religious congregation but a group that would work on the streets and in the hospitals and homes of the poor.  Louise drew girls and widows from the lower classes and trained them in Paris.  Their dress was the garb of peasant women.  Their mantra was that the poor were their masters and that they would encounter the face of Christ in them.  Whenever summoned by those in need, they would drop everything and serve.

The numbers and works of the Daughters of Charity expanded quickly, and soon their communities spread throughout France and other parts of Europe.  They could be found administering hospitals, orphanages, and schools for the poor, as well as ministering to prisoners and galley enslaved people, visiting the poor in their squalid hovels, and caring for the victims of the plague.

The Daughters of Charity eventually was recognized by the Vatican as a religious congregation, with their members annually renewing vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.  Such recognition of a community of women living outside an enclosed convent and engaged in apostolic work in the world was a novel and remarkable achievement.  Still, in her later years, Louise worried about her group's future, afraid that the Sisters would lose touch with the radical spirit of service in the world and become "institutionalized" like so many other religious communities.  So she would forever remind her Sisters to be "diligent in serving the poor....to love the poor, honor them.....as you would honor Christ Himself."

Louise died on March 15, 1660, at the age of 69.  She was canonized in 1934 when the Sisters of Charity numbered more than 50,000 worldwide.