

Unwrapping the Gifts: Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal and the Salesian Vision of Women

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I address my remarks to women and to the men who love and care for the women in their lives—mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, friends, women to whom they minister and associate with in their lives and work. I want to encourage you, by reviewing some of ways Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal approached the women in their lives, to empower yourself and the women you know to unwrap and use their gifts. This is even more critical today than it was in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries because women have so many more doors open to them, so many more opportunities to be mined. As Francis and Jeanne knew—one must be realistic about who one is, yet at the same time recall a phrase that Jane used often: “I can do all things in God who strengthens me.”¹ This approach to life is a challenge for us all, man or woman, but, I think, sometimes women still need to be encouraged to be bold in making use of their talents, their abilities for relationships, for autonomy, and for contributions and leadership in realms of the intellect, economy, society, government and religion. God is, I believe, masculine and feminine, and God’s vision for humanity, which is made in God’s image, will not be complete until all the gifts of all the people are unwrapped and used for the benefit of all.

Historical perspective

As we approach the new millennium, much has changed for women since the era of Francis and Jane, yet much has not in the way women are sometimes viewed, socialized and encouraged. Where are we as a species? We still use militarism, competition and the oppression of others as the means towards staying on the top of the heap. Dominance of others—as a way of advancing oneself and protecting oneself has been a paradigm for individuals and societies for millennia. As we stand on the brink of a new one, a millennium I see as the millennium of women, it is time to renounce the paradigm of dominance. Dominance is contrary to the welfare of all human beings, contrary to the values of the Gospel and contrary to the spiritual ideals presented to us by Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal. It is time to follow their lead in unwrapping and using the gifts of women—gifts for life and leadership, which will enrich us all—men, women and children. The third millennium demands the unwrap-

¹Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot de Chantal, *Saint Jane Frances Frémyot de Chantal: Her Exhortations, Confernces and Instructions*, translated from the French edition printed in Paris, 1875 and introduced by Catherine Brégy (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Bookshop, 1947), xiii.

ping of gifts and the unleashing of potential through the encouragement of liberty of spirit, friendship and collaboration. Francis and Jeanne have provided us with a model of male/female partnership—a model which offers enrichment, wholeness and holiness, for individuals, for the church and the world.

François de Sales and Women

François de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal grew to maturity and formed their perspectives on women in a culture which placed women, intellectually, morally, legally and socially, in an inferior position. The ferment of the Renaissance and its emphasis on education and the realization of human potential had not altered the negative assessment of women's capabilities or the belief that women should be subject to the authority of men. In fact many historians view the period of the Renaissance and Reformation as one of constricting spheres for women—socially, economically and intellectually. The changing political and economic needs of nobles vis-à-vis the ascendancy of absolute monarchs and wealthy bourgeois may have contributed to aristocrats' need to control the lives, roles and fortunes of women. In spite of the debate on the merits of educating women and the arguments on their abilities that had been going on in elite literary circles since the fourteenth century, and which challenged misogynist descriptions of women put forward by learned men, traditional premises about the inferiority of females and about the need to subordinate them stood firm.²

As a man of his age, Francis appears to reflect the belief of his era that women should be subject to authority. A letter from his early career as a director indicates this. In this case his remarks were also stimulated by the character of the particular woman whom he addressed, Madame de Beauvilliers, Abbess of Montmartre. This "abbess of abbesses," who has been characterized as "imperious, stiff and inhuman,"³ had undertaken the reform of her abbey but proceeded in a way that was high-handed and insensitive to the women she was supposed to be helping. In January 1603, in response to her request for counsel, Francis de Sales told her frankly that she must not be her own spiritual director. He wrote:

²Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert, "Overview, 1500-1750," in *Connecting Spheres: Women in the Western World, 1500 to the Present*, ed. Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 23; Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelles des Femmes*, 1400-1789," *Signs* 8 (Autumn 1982): 4-28 and "Did Women have a Renaissance?" in *Becoming Visible in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Palo Alto, Calif.: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

³François Charnot, S. J., *Ignatius Loyola and Francis de Sales: Two Masters—One Spirituality*, translated from the French by Sr. M. Renelle, SSND (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1966), 110-111.

Pardon the plainness and confidence which I employ... Above all, I beseech you, avail yourself of the help of some spiritual persons, among whom you will have a very easy choice in Paris, since it is a very large city; because I will say to you, with the freedom of spirit I must use everywhere, but particularly in your case: your sex needs to be guided, and never, in any enterprise, will it succeed except by submission; not that it does not often have as much light as the other, but because God has so ordained [Genesis 3:16]. I say too much in this, Madame, since I do not doubt your charity and humility; but I do not say it sufficiently according to the great desire which I have for your happiness, about which, if it pleases you, you will only attribute this manner of writing.⁴

Two dynamics can be observed in this communication. Francis was clear in his belief that it is part of the order of God's creation that women submit to guidance. At the same time his candor was tempered with deference and affection for this woman in authority. In his desire to see Madame de Beauvilliers use her position in the best way possible and succeed in her reforms, he suggested that she not proceed alone.

In this case Francis demonstrates the tension between his culturally induced views on women and his own demeanor in dealing with individual women. If he felt it necessary to dampen the imperiousness of a Marie de Beauvilliers, there were others whom he encouraged to be less self-effacing. Many of these women had potential but were without the experience or confidence to permit that potential to be actualized. De Sales worked with them, gradually helping them to release and demonstrate their various abilities. As their guide he strove to empower them in their capacity for self-surrender as well as to instill in them a firm sense of their own self-direction and a capacity for independent thought and action.⁵ In a letter to a nun at the Abbey of Baume-les-Dames, the bishop wrote, on October 10, 1605, these words of encouragement:

I shall tell you quite simply that God has given me so much inclination to wish you his graces and blessings, so much confidence in your virtue, that I could never cease imploring his Divine Majesty to bring this holy love to complete perfection in you; ... And now will you please allow me, Madame, to rejoice with you in the affection you brought to bear on the few little words I was able to say to you for the good of your soul. Yes, Madame, you are on the

⁴*Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales, Evêque de Genève et Docteur de l'Eglise, Edition complète*, d'après les autographes et les éditions originales. Publiée par les soins des Religieuses de la Visitation du Premier Monastère d'Annecy, Tomes XII (*Lettres II*) (Annecy: J. Niérat, 1984), 173-174. Hereafter cited as *Oeuvres*.

⁵Wendy M. Wright, *Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 62, 135. Hereafter cited as *Bond of Perfection*.

right road... Go on kindling the spirit of joy and sweetness in your heart, and believe firmly that this is the true spirit of devotion...⁶

The chief characteristic which explains François de Sales' attitude towards women seems to be "guidance," the term he used in his letter to Madame de Beauvilliers. It is this stance, not dominance, which is indicative of the bishop's ideal of male authority over women. In a letter to Madame de Chantal, dated October 14, 1604, he made his views of himself in this regard quite explicit: "We must act on the minds of others as far as possible,... graciously and without coercion...: my ideas are summed up in the words of gentle encouragement."⁷ As we all know very well friendship was the model for the relationships which François de Sales developed with the women he worked with. As a true friend, he had the ability to affirm yet challenge his directees to unwrap their gifts and to grow. He challenged them to be and do their best but with unbounded acceptance and affection.

From the perspective of the late twentieth century, Francis de Sales was conservative in his ideas about women's roles, but he made it a point to elevate the functions they did have in society and the church, pointing out the dignity and importance of being a wife, mother or religious. Whatever one did it could bestow meaning because it was motivated by love and was a call to partnership with God in God's work in the world. No matter what their roles, these women had a reason for being which was related to the purposes of God.

The bishop's goal was to empower women to fulfill what he considered to be their most important role in—loving and serving God. This role superseded any others, but did not cancel the obligations imposed by social circumstances. De Sales worked with women, in the situations in which they found themselves, to assist them in living a life of wider spiritual horizons, to live lives of peace, love and tranquillity for themselves and for those whose lives they touched. His own gentle love and serenity he passed on to them in order to spur them on to spiritual greatness. Francis dealt with women, not as inferiors, but as equals, as souls with the capacity to fulfill their humanity in the love of God. In regard to authority and women, it is also quite evident in his letters and his devotional works that Francis' own genuine humility and holiness made him receptive to women and their gifts. He shared with them his knowledge of things spiritual and learned from them too. As a prelate, François de Sales held a high position of authority, but he chose not to invoke that status when he directed women and preferred, instead, to relate to them as father, brother, servant and friend. He may have been conditioned by his culture to think of women as inferior, but he did not relate to the women in his life as though they were.

⁶St. Francis de Sales: *Selected Letters*, translated with an introduction by Elisabeth Stopp (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 102-103. Hereafter cited as Stopp, *Selected Letters*.

⁷Stopp, *Selected Letters*, 68-69.

Francis had a heart so large that he embraces every age—the late 16th and early 17th centuries as well as the late 20th century, his contemporaries and people of the new millennium. Here was a man who, contrary to the social and cultural models of his day, befriended and appreciated women. He saw their potential, especially spiritual potential, and sought to release it, free it to be used. How was this possible? How did he break through the cultural paradigm of his own age so that he responded so well to the people of his day and has something essential to say to all of us now. I believe it is because Francis de Sales loved and saw people with God's eyes and God's heart. He saw the women he related to and ministered to with the vision of God, not as the world viewed them or even as they viewed themselves.

Francis seems to have preferred women as his literary and directional subjects. They appeared to him, more than men, to embody the spiritual qualities he valued most. He especially loved the hiddenness of women's lives and the examples of sanctity that he found there.⁸ For him the lowly status of women was the very condition which opened them to spiritual greatness. This was not an argument justifying that inferior status, but an accentuation of potential in persons not usually considered by society to be viable subjects for human actualization. De Sales believed that women's social abjection and the hiddenness of their lives created spaces where they could meet God.⁹ Men's superior power and status could be handicaps in the spiritual life because they contribute to a false self-reliance that keeps a person at a distance from God and other people.

The bishop had a talent for the direction of women at a period when the general welfare of females was not seriously regarded by society and religious institutions.¹⁰ As Wendy Wright has observed in *Bond of Perfection*:

It was not merely his graceful language, amiable to the sensibilities of French aristocratic women that made this so. He understood women and possessed insight into their perceptions of things. In all his writing he made abundant use of metaphors drawn from feminine experience... And his usage suggests not an abstract comprehension of these female experiences, but an intimate familiarity and sympathy with them. After all, he was the eldest of a large family. His mother, with whom he was very close, had until he was an adult a baby at breast or a toddler at her knee. There is a great tenderness in the way he takes the ordinary events of a woman's life and speaks to her of the spiritual dimensions which they can reveal.¹¹

⁸Wright, *Bond of Perfection*, 135.

⁹*Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction*, selected and introduced by Wendy M. Wright and Joseph L. Power; translated by Péronne Marie Thibert, VHM (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 66-68. Hereafter cited as *Letters of Spiritual Direction*.

¹⁰Olga Rasmussen-Rodriguez, "Everyday Living of Salesian Spirituality," *Salesian Living Heritage II* (Spring 1987): 3.

¹¹Wright, *Bond of Perfection*, 134.

Francis was often criticized for his work with women. While in Paris in 1619 he was rebuked by a Monsieur Bourdoise who found the bishop all too friendly towards women. He remarked: "You are a bishop ... and you spend your whole time with women! ... One has to repeat the same thing about a hundred times to women." Francis responded to this upbraiding by defending women, reminding the cleric that the disciples abandoned Christ at Gethsemane while the holy women followed him to the Cross.¹² Francis de Sales was convinced of the dignity and value of women. In 1614, in a small pamphlet, he wrote:

Woman ... no less than man, enjoys the favor of having been made in the image of God; equal honor in both the sexes; their virtues are equal; to each of them is offered an equal reward, and if they sin, a similar damnation. I would not want woman to say: I am frail and my condition is weak. This weakness is of the flesh, but strong and powerful virtue has established its seat in the soul.¹³

Francis employed the text of the *Canticle of Canticles* endlessly. The role of woman is prominent in this poem which affirms the mutuality of the sexes. Neither dominates the other. Woman is viewed as an equal partner with man, someone valuable in herself. De Sales valued women and the ways in which their lives imaged the God of love, mercy and service.¹⁴ He did not reflect a specifically male viewpoint in his writings. On the contrary, he approached God in terms of human fulfillment in a way which is inclusive of the experiences of both genders.

There are two areas in particular where Francis's astuteness in working with women can be observed and which provide lessons for us still. He considered these propensities as problematic for women, and he tried to help women overcome them in order to free themselves spiritually. The first involves the issue of self-worth and the second that of vanity. In De Sales' view a lack of self-esteem presents a serious impediment to spiritual growth. A self which is realistically known and accepted as worthy of love, from God and others, and one which feels itself to have a purpose in life, has to be in place before it can be surrendered freely in union with God and others. Francis worked diligently to instill these two senses of self in his directees. In a general cultural and religious milieu where so much was negative in regard to women, Salesian spirituality emphasized a realistic, yet positive, view of persons in order to facilitate growth. False self-negation was to be avoided in order to make self-transcendence possible. Terms such as self-denial or self-renunciation were used by Francis in the sense of removing what was self-centered. Because, just as lack of self-esteem is an obstacle to growth, so too is self-centeredness. Francis instructed his spiritual daughters in the principles of self-renunciation, but at

¹²Maurice Henry-Couannier, *Saint Francis de Sales and His Friends*, translated by Veronica Morrow (New York: Alba House, 1964), 352-353.

¹³*Oeuvres*, XXV (*Opuscles* IV), 291-292.

¹⁴Wright, *Bond of Perfection*, 134.

the same time he attempted to shore up their flagging self-esteem. He encouraged a true valuation of self by transforming scrupulous fear about doubts and imperfections into a courageous liberty of spirit which promoted the development of which these women were capable, and which could realistically be achieved within their social circumstances. Francis was also aware that a lack of self-esteem sometimes masquerades as selflessness. He sought to correct this so that genuine selflessness—the kind that arises out of love and gratitude, not out of fear or servitude, could emerge.¹⁵ De Sales understood well that if a person does not have self-respect, integrity and genuine self-surrender are impossible. Since low self-esteem was often accompanied by immature dependence, Francis made an effort to help women with this too. He spent much time, initially, affirming his directees and building up their confidence. He then encouraged these women to move toward a spiritual self-direction which relies on God alone.

Francis also saw vanity as a grave obstacle to a woman's personal and spiritual growth. The subject of female vanity has provided abundant material for spiritual writers and preachers for centuries, but Francis de Sales approached it in a way which showed his insights into women's experiences. He was acquainted with many women who moved within high social and court circles. For many aristocrats vanity was a way of life because they lived in an arena where attention to the details of personal presentation was essential.¹⁶ Francis observed first hand the manipulative effects of vanity, which he considered to be a danger for both men and women. When he wrote about vanity, he did not single out women. He addressed himself to both sexes, but, as he perceived vanity's destructive power, women appeared to be more susceptible because they were more dependent than men on exterior considerations (fashion, beauty, charm) to establish themselves in society. Instead of approaching this problem by accusing women of indulging their vanities and of being temptresses, he drew on his Renaissance Neo-Platonist appreciation of beauty. This philosophy's idea of the harmony and correspondence of outer beauty and inner goodness and divine beauty was a commonplace in sixteenth and seventeenth-century France and Italy.¹⁷ Francis experienced beauty as a gift from God, given in order to draw human beings to God and to one another. He developed an aesthetic that aimed at making the individual beautiful through the cultivation of wisdom, one in which the perfection of human beings lay in the creation of a beautiful whole: interior, exterior, thought and action. The bishop sought to stimulate a desire in women and men to grow into the beauty and holiness of

¹⁵Wright, *Bond of Perfection*, 68.

¹⁶Théophile Schueller, *La Femme et le saint: la femme et ses problèmes d'après saint François de Sales* (Paris: Les Editions Ouvrières, 1970), 93.

¹⁷Joseph F. Chorpensing, OSFS, "Renaissance Neoplatonism, Theological Tradition, and Outer and Inner Beauty in St. Francis de Sales," *The American Benedictine Review* 43 (September 1992): 287.

God by the attractiveness of the beauty of virtue, harmony and the truths of faith.¹⁸

Inner beauty, which mirrors the divine image, is revealed by a person's gentleness, grace-fullness and graciousness.¹⁹ In her study of Francis de Sales and the issue of vanity Wendy Wright maintains that he was also aware that women have a tendency to see themselves through the eyes of others; their own self-perception can be colored or even determined by the cues given by those around them. A woman in these circumstances ceases to see herself as anything but a reflection, and becomes an object to those others and to herself. To remedy this, Francis de Sales proposed to his women directees that they cease looking at themselves as either physical or spiritual objects. They were not to judge themselves through other's eyes—not even God's eyes. Interiorly and exteriorly a woman was advised to avoid consciousness of herself as seen.²⁰ The bishop promoted simplicity as the key virtue which would assist women in moving away from the vanity, which impeded their development by keeping them focused on their artificially arranged selves, and which kept them from the discernment of their true selves before God.²¹ Consonant with seventeenth-century views of authentic and graceful womanhood, using the situations women found themselves in, Salesian directees were challenged to respond to live the devout life in the fullness of psychological and spiritual maturity.

Liberty of spirit has been mentioned several times. This is an essential element in the content of Salesian spirituality and its ability to lead to spiritual and personal maturity explains why Francis was so effective as a spiritual guide. He was a friend, not really a director, who chose to be an instrument, preferring to let God act in the soul. Francis had a profound respect for persons and the mysterious workings of grace within them and feared harming people by imperious directives. Caution, patient waiting and self-effacement were standards to which he held himself. He was willing to offer solutions to the difficulties women consulted him about and to encourage them in their process of growth, but Francis declined to use his authority as a man, as a bishop or as a director to hold people to his ideas. With trust in the good will of his directees, he did not command with, "You must," but instead asked, "Could you not?" Francis asked and was certain that what he suggested would be done because he relied on the consciences of those under his direction and on the love of God which he believed graced their hearts.²²

¹⁸Wright and Power, *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 22; Chorpenning, "Renaissance Neoplatonism...: 289).

¹⁹Schueller, *La Femme et le saint...*, 70-85; Joseph F. Chorpenning, OSFS, "Salesian Spirituality," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 852.

²⁰Wright, *The Bond of Perfection*, 135-137.

²¹Wright and Power, *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 68.

²²Michael Müller, *St. Francis de Sales* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1937; reprint, Vishakhapatnam, Bangalore, India: S. F. S. Publications, 1992), 175-177.

With this philosophy inspiring his actions, Francis promoted self-direction rather than dependency. He was convinced that the devout person is one who acts, loves and becomes one with God and neighbor, fervently, promptly, and diligently in the situations of her/his life. This was his criteria for maturity and such activities demand personal choice: the decision to do what is recognized as God's will here and now. Growth calls for intelligent and decisive responses to advice and counsel. Francis respected this as a necessary component of spiritual direction. This is why he was so emphatic about liberty of spirit as the basis for his directional relationships.²³

This intent to encourage autonomy in his directees is evident in his letters. In April 1606 François de Sales wrote to Jeanne de Chantal urging her independence by stating:

And see, my dear daughter, in those things which are not necessary, or at least about which I am not well able to discern the necessity, do not take my words too rigorously; because I do not want them to tie you down, but that you have the freedom to do what you think is best.²⁴

As Wendy and Joe have brought to our attention in *Letters of Spiritual Direction* Jane had "the mature integrity to value and trust her own experience..."²⁵ Francis encouraged her to do this.

We know that relationships are central to Salesian spirituality, but we also see here and throughout Francis' career as a director that he encouraged autonomy. There is an abundance of literature on women's psychological and spiritual development to support the assertion that to gain maturity a human being must balance relatedness and autonomy. Many times a pitfall for men is that they become embedded in autonomy and require the development of relatedness to reach wholeness and maturity. For women it is the opposite case. We often become so embedded in relationships that the mature self cannot emerge. The task for most women is to cultivate an autonomy that is balanced with relatedness. Francis and Jane, because they directed people in freedom to move toward liberty of spirit, that is a free heart, encouraged the balance of both qualities—autonomy and relatedness. Salesian spiritual direction aims to free souls from fears, scruples, self-absorption, over-eagerness and perfectionism in order to free them for joy, peace, serenity, liberty and love. Some directors ruled by fear, asking exact obedience and the performance of a multiplicity of practices. Francis de Sales made more challenging demands because he directed by love. In terms of personal and spiritual growth the bishop knew well that the asceticism of love, the ability to be mature in relationships and difficult situations, was more exacting than any exterior ascetical devotions.²⁶

²³William J. Gallagher, OSFS, "Christian Maturity and the Religious Life," in *Salesian Studies* 3 (Autumn 1966): 81-83.

²⁴*Oeuvres*, XII (*Lettres* III), 163.

²⁵Wright and Power, *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 77.

²⁶M. V. Woodgate, *Saint Francis de Sales* (Westminster, MD: The Newman

Jeanne de Chantal as Model

Now, let us focus on Jeanne de Chantal and her contribution to the potential inherent in Salesian spirituality for unwrapping women's gifts. It is significant, it is enormously important, that Jane, over the span of her life, imaged a multiplicity of female roles, and, thus, enhanced the capacity of this spirituality to be effective for a variety of women. In her introduction to Jeanne's *Conferences*, Katherine Brégy states:

It is good to remember that Jeanne-Françoise de Chantal was a woman of the world, a successful wife and mother and administrator, before she entered the cloister; that, in fact, it was the wise and loving woman who developed gradually into the loving and wise saint. Her life was one of rich experiences, on the natural as well as the supernatural side.²⁷

Such richness of experience helped her develop a deeply textured personality; one which imprinted itself on Salesian spirituality as Francis' had done. It also formed Jane as a powerful model for women. In all the accounts of her life there are a number of traits which are mentioned repeatedly: her ardor, strength, candor, courage and love; in sum, as André Ravier states she was a woman with a "strong, loving heart and powerful will."²⁸ In describing Jeanne's style Elisabeth Stopp states: "Without any deliberate maneuver on her part, the life she herself had so abundantly, communicated itself to all she wrote and said. This was the most characteristic quality of her writing—a kindling power."²⁹

This ability to inspire others—to bring forth new life—marked Jeanne de Chantal as a spiritual director and administrator. Many who have studied her remark on the profound effect that Jeanne's experiences as wife, mother and widow had on her interior life and on her counseling. The solicitude and care she gave her own children continued after she became a Visitandine and contributed to this new role concerns and skills which few women religious have known first hand. She became the spiritual mother of a large religious family which had phenomenal growth within her own lifetime. As a consequence, Jeanne was in daily contact with a multitude of women of diverse ranks and education, each with her own disposition and rate of progress on the journey to personal and spiritual maturity. As foundress and superior Jeanne's relational skills were constantly challenged, but, herself enabled by Salesian spirituality,

Press, 1961), 121.

²⁷Katherine Brégy, "Introduction," in S. Jane Frances Frémyot de Chantal, *Exhortations, Conferences and Instructions*, xiv.

²⁸André Ravier, SJ, *Saint Jeanne de Chantal: Noble Lady, Holy Woman*, translated by Mary Emily Hamilton (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 216.

²⁹Elisabeth Stopp, *Madame de Chantal: Portrait of a Saint* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1963), 217.

she was more than equal to this task.³⁰ Jeanne dispensed the Salesian spirit with the great-heartedness she learned from her experiences as a woman and as a soul in quest of opening herself up to the fullness of God's love. François de Sales remarked on this in a letter to her written on November 2, 1607: "I seem to see you before me, my dear daughter, with your vigorous heart which loves and wills so powerfully. I like it for that, for what is the use of these half-dead hearts?"³¹

This woman who loved so strongly, loved also with tenderness. She had an ardent and energetic character, but she learned restraint from her gentle Savoyard director. This lesson benefited her as well as those who came under her authority and spiritual care.³² The style of direction she employed and the mode of counseling souls she sought to develop in the women of the Visitation were affectionate and thoughtful, but above all, motherly. Having raised her own children by the time she became a religious at thirty-eight (1610), and continuing afterwards to be involved in their lives, she brought all her maternal insights to guiding women. Her writings, especially the letters to the superiors of the Visitation, reveal a considerable sensitivity to varied personalities struggling to live a communal vocation of love. Jeanne de Chantal knew how to help women use their strengths of zeal, loyalty, compassion and strong feelings. She also encouraged each woman to conquer her weaknesses, especially the deficiencies of the devout: anxiety, perfectionism, impatience and self-absorption. In her letters and conferences she discoursed on how to overcome subtle self-regard, lack of simplicity, jealousy, insincerity and emotionalism. She sometimes admonished women on the propensity of constantly asking for advice or confirmation, of fussing over inconsequential things and encouraged them to have an expansive attitude towards life and especially their own spiritual concerns.³³ Jane's letters make it clear that the Salesian method of direction is one that challenges persons to stretch beyond present capacities, but gently, gradually, transcending a false self and expanding the heart to prepare for union with God and others. An example of this spirit is found in a letter to Jacqueline Favre, Superior at Lyons, dated 1620, in which Jane advised: "By unbounded devotion and motherly tenderness make your daughters stretch forward to the holy love of our sweet Master..."³⁴

While affirming the individual, Jeanne suggested remedies for correcting faults, overcoming difficulties or continuing the ways the person was using to advance spiritually. After this, like her director before her, she left the rest up

³⁰Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot de Chantal, *The Spirit of Saint Jane Frances de Chantal as Shown in Her Letters*, translated with an introduction by the Sisters of the Visitation, Harrow-on-the-Hill (New York: Longman's Green and Co., 1922), v-vi. Hereafter cited as *The Spirit of St. Jane*.

³¹Stopp, *Selected Letters*, 142.

³²Chantal, *Exhortations, Conferences and Instructions*, 7.

³³Stopp, *Madame de Chantal*, 224-225.

³⁴*The Spirit of St. Jane*, 45.

to the workings of God's Spirit and the response of the individual.³⁵ Jeanne's firm but loving style can be seen in a letter to Sister Anne-Marie de Lage de Puylaurens, Assistant and Novice Mistress at Bourges, written from Annecy in 1626:

Your timidity stems from self-love. Try, for the love of God, to overcome your inclinations and live ... according to reason and the will of God. If you don't decide to do this yourself, no one can help you; others may tell you what to do, but nobody can do it for you. Courage then, darling, God asks this of you and calls you to a higher perfection... Do all this with the holy fervor of a most humble, gentle and simple spirit. I am pleased to know that you are cutting back on all your self-scrutiny and that you are more peaceful about your desire to make progress. Such eagerness comes from self-love. Always be on your guard against this, I beg you, and in order to unite yourself to God, get into the habit of seeking His will in all things... As for you whom my heart loves with a special, warm affection, I encourage you to be kind and generous.³⁶

Jane was ever concerned to guide the women she worked with to maturity. This was to be accomplished, not through fear or servile duty, but through love and freedom.³⁷ A directive that occurs frequently in her letters to superiors is that they must draw the sisters forward on the path of love by winning their hearts. "You must take great care," she wrote, "to win the hearts of your sisters by your kindness; be frank, cordial and confident with them."³⁸ Just as Jane was mother-foundress of the new order, Visitation superiors were challenged to be spiritual mothers: affectionately attentive to nurturing the women under their religious authority or spiritual direction, tolerant of their weaknesses, encouraging small steps, but never overly ambitious that their daughters advance until they themselves grew into the maturity of spiritual wisdom.³⁹ Loving by nature, Jane de Chantal understood that her nuns and the other women who touched her life and theirs needed to feel affection. Like François de Sales affection is palpable in her letters. Also like her friend she offered herself to be used as a channel for the love of God and was not afraid to do so. Elisabeth Stopp remarks that: "Her motherliness was the essence of her being."⁴⁰

It is evident from Jane's letters that the relational element in her style of direction loomed large. The letters also reveal the challenge to be autonomous. To Mère Marie Hélène de Chastelleux, Superior at Moulins, Jane wrote in 1623:

³⁵Stopp, *Madame de Chantal*, 225.

³⁶Wright and Power, *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 251.

³⁷Wright, *Bond of Perfection*, 144-146.

³⁸Marie Patricia Burns, "Tenderness in Jeanne de Chantal," *Salesian Living Heritage* V (Spring 1990), 6.

³⁹Wright and Power, *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 32.

⁴⁰Stopp, *Madame de Chantal*, 225.

Do not, I beseech you, be constrained and narrow of soul, but act as you judge wisest, with a fine and holy liberty of spirit... God will give it to you my daughter. Possess your soul in freedom and contentment in every eventual-ity.⁴¹

Advice about self-direction and trusting one's own experience is also found in a 1620 letter from Paris addressed to Mère Péronne-Marie de Châtel at Grenoble: "Advance in your own path; for it is a good one, and fear nothing."⁴² Sœur Marie Thérèse de Labeau at Arles received a letter from Mère de Chantal, dated February 5, 1632, with these words of encouragement: "Keep then to your resolve, whatever you may hear of the marvels of other ways. Let others follow the path by which God leads them, and do keep always to your own."⁴³

The Vision of the Visitation

Leaving Francis and Jane and their work as spiritual directors—their efforts to encourage women to reach their potential—if they had done nothing else, except found the religious order of the Visitation, they could be credited with having gifted the world and the women of the world with something extraordinary. What perception, what inspiration Francis had in dreaming of and creating a religious congregation that would be a home for women who would otherwise have been excluded from religious life because they were ill suited to the ways of the established orders. Thanks to the vision of Francis and the courage of Jane de Chantal, Jacqueline Favre, Charlotte de Brécharde and Jacqueline Coste a place was created for women whose devotion, love and willingness to be surrendered to God found a match in a community that departed from the austerities of the mainstream religious orders and offered a new way for women who were widowed, beyond the acceptable canonical age or of frail health—women who were considered, in the seventeenth century, unfit for religious life. Because he included these women Francis was criticized, but he acted from his belief that it is to those overlooked by the world that the kingdom of God is made known. Because of the humbleness which often accompanies the experiences of infirmity, age, widowhood or unfulfilled desires for a deeper religious life, he saw potential in these women.⁴⁴

The Visitation and its enlivening spirit, rather soon after its inception, became known and admired by many. There were constant calls for the establishment of new houses. As soon as the foundation at Lyons (1615) became known, requests for other foundations poured in to Annecy. Because the Visitation answered the needs of women who wanted another option for religious life

⁴¹*The Spirit of St. Jane*, 110.

⁴²*The Spirit of St. Jane*, 52.

⁴³*The Spirit of St. Jane*, 207.

⁴⁴Wright and Power, *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 67 and Wright, *Bond of Perfection*, 234.

besides the existing orders so well, its monasteries mushroomed all over France.

This growth facilitated the ability of Visitandine women to spread the ideals of Salesian spirituality and thereby assist many others in personal growth and holiness of life. Francis de Sales saw more in this than the growth of the order. He perceived it as part of the apostolic mission of the Visitation in bringing life to others. Though they were enclosed, the Visitandines had much to offer as a result of their prayer life and the spiritual instructions they received. In one of his conferences with the sisters the bishop declared that the spirit of the Visitation houses should be communicated to others, that the sisters should not deprive people of the fruit of the holy teachings which they received. Obedience and charity required that they impart them to the public. This was to be done in their contacts with visitors, in the spiritual counseling they offered to people and by inviting women to join them in religious life.⁴⁵

These sentiments come through quite strongly in the "Conference on Hope" that Francis preached to his Visitandine daughters:

For what is it that God desires of you? Is it not just what He commanded His Apostles, sending them for that purpose out through the world? that work which Our Lord Himself came on earth to do, namely to give *life* to men, and not only that, He says, but that they might have it *more abundantly* [John 10:10], that they might have life and a better life; ... So you, too, my dear daughters, are now commanded to go here and there into various places, that souls may have life and that they may have a better life; for what else are you going to do but to try to make known the perfection of your Institute, and by means of this knowledge to draw many souls to embrace all the observances contained and included in it? For, without preaching, or giving the Sacraments or remitting sins, are you not still going to give *life* to men, or to speak more exactly give life to the female sex? ... And is it not through your means that life will be given to them, and that they will have life *more abundantly*, that is to say a life more perfect and more pleasing to God, a life which will render them capable of uniting themselves more closely to the divine Goodness, for they will receive from you the instructions necessary for acquiring the true and pure love of God, which is that *more abundant life*...⁴⁶

Francis de Sales set down a challenge for his daughters—that is coming to understand that the love which enlivens the devout heart is meant to be connected with other people through the practice of virtue, good works and counseling.⁴⁷ Enclosure did not mean cutting oneself off from charity to one's

⁴⁵St. Francis de Sales, *The Spiritual Conferences*, translated from the Annecy Text of 1895 under the supervision of Abbot Gasquet, with an introduction by Canon Mackey, OSB (Westminster, MD: The Newman Bookshop, 1943), viii.

⁴⁶*The Spiritual Conferences*, 90-91.

⁴⁷John A. Abruzzese, *The Theology of Hearts in the Writings of St. Francis de Sales* (Rome: Institute of Spirituality, Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, 1985), 191-192.

neighbor, whether within the house or without. Visitandines were encouraged to become life-givers, empowerers, for personal and spiritual growth, especially for other women. The women of the Visitation had enormous potential in their gifts of leadership and spiritual wisdom and Francis and Jane made good use of those gifts.

The community had not existed very long in Savoy when its reputation for holiness of life began to attract attention. There is evidence from studies on religious women that holiness, when recognized and accepted as genuine by friends, neighbors and the Church, is a source of wholeness, meaning, power and authority. In societies where religion is a vital and pervasive element of life, acknowledged sanctity has the power to override the otherwise inferior status of women. Early seventeenth-century France was a period of heightened religious concerns and mystical piety. Women were prominent in the circles of leaders who interested themselves in personal and institutional renewal and active charity. So too, Visitation superiors were educated and inspired in order to enable their own sisters to grow toward personal and spiritual maturity and to assist many women beyond their monasteries to grow in wholeness and holiness.

In their own lifetimes François de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal were regarded as living saints and because of this accrued enormous status and authority. Their spiritual daughters in the Visitation, because of the holiness of their lives, became a recognized and increasingly valued part of French religious and civic life. By their example and by their direction of souls they continued the Salesian ministry of putting the devout life within reach of many. The community was reputed to be gracious and reasonable, and its spirit represented a middle way. Just as François de Sales had tempered Jeanne de Chantal's over-eagerness while supporting her even greater ardor for complete self-surrender, and had in this way instructed her in a way of joy and liberty, so their Visitation order opened up new religious possibilities for many others: the contemplative life in a fresh and vitally new framework. Elisabeth Stopp states that: "By its very essence this order released untapped spiritual resources in France."⁴⁸

Visitandines trained in the spirit of Annecy who went out to make new foundations demonstrated to society what this new order was about. The best personification of this influence was Jeanne de Chantal herself. She modeled the Visitation way for those sisters who followed after her. People who met her knew little of her hidden life of prayer, but they sensed in her and were attracted to the effects of this—her holiness. People called at the monastery to talk of their spiritual trials, families came to have disputes settled, nuns of other orders consulted her on problems, and would-be postulants discussed their vocations. Mère de Chantal never felt compelled to impose her views on these counselees because they found themselves calmly accepting them as a matter of course. She had the true courtesy that emanates from love. Like her friend,

⁴⁸Stopp, *Madame de Chantal*, 208-209.

Francis de Sales, Jeanne de Chantal exuded the quality of universal love. As the legacy of both founders, through their spiritual daughters, one particular form of God-centered love, "*la courtoisie Visitandine*," became a proverbial expression in France.⁴⁹ Because of their recognized sanctity and the talents they were free to develop, Visitandines were sought out as religious superiors, spiritual directors, advisors and reformers. The gifts of these women were unwrapped and used fully for the benefit of the community and for the benefit of those others who sought them out.

Conclusion

Think of the power of this—and the powerful results: Think of the potency of Salesianism with its blend of and celebration of the masculine and feminine—think of Francis, Jane and the coming into being of the Visitation because of their friendship and collaborative efforts. This religious community was the first organization charged with the duty and honor of carrying Salesian spirituality forward in time and space. It opened up the path of religious life to women who would otherwise have been excluded or taken on a mode of religious life unsuited to their gifts. The fruitfulness of this spirituality and its congregational expression led in the 19th century to other expressions such as the Daughters of Francis de Sales, the Oblates and John Bosco's Salesians. Based on the friendship and collaboration of a man and a woman, wholly in love with God and dedicated to serving God, all others and each other—enormous potential was released. It bears fruit today and will, I believe, bear fruit into the next millennium. So that is what is possible for us, in following the example of Francis and Jane—in their freedom of heart, friendship and collaboration—has tremendous consequences for individuals and for marriages, ministries, our lives and work. Our challenge is to make Salesian spirituality, with its gentle encouragement, known and to emulate Francis and Jane for as many as possible as we enter a new millennium and unwrap the gifts and release the potential of women, the gifts and potential of all for the benefit of all. As Francis wrote to Madame Brûlart on June 10, 1605: "Let us be what we are and be that well, in order to bring honor to the Master Craftsmen whose handiwork we are."⁵⁰

⁴⁹Stopp, *Madame de Chantal*, 209-210.

⁵⁰Wright and Power, *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 111.