A Confessor and His Spiritual Child: François de Sales, Jeanne de Chantal, and the Foundation of the Order of the Visitation

Ruth Manning

> I have never understood that there was any bond between us which carried any obligation except that of charity and true Christian friendship, which St Paul calls *the bond of perfection*, and that is truly what it is, for it is indissoluble and never weakens. All other bonds are temporal . . . broken through death or other circumstances; but the bond of love grows and strengthens over time. It is exempt from the scythe of death . . . So there, dear sister (and permit me to call you by this name, which is the one by which the Apostles and the first Christians expressed the intimate love they had for one another), this is our bond, these are our chains, the more they are tightened and press against us, the more they bring us comfort and freedom. Their strength is sweetness; their violence is gentleness; nothing is more pliable; nothing is stronger.[1]

This was one of the earliest letters written by François de Sales to Jeanne de Chantal following their first meeting in 1604. After just a short period of acquaintance, a deeply emotional friendship had formed between them. De Sales's love and admiration for his spiritual daughter were unstinting, and these sentiments were reciprocated. Such a relationship between a director and his directed was not unique in the history of the Catholic Church. Confessional relationships were a common feature of the Catholic Reformation when the post-Tridentine Church placed greater emphasis on the sacrament of penance and launched a newly trained profession of directors of conscience and personal confessors.[2] As Olwen Hufton pointed out, this is also

[1] François de Sales [FdS] to Jeanne de Chantal [JdC], 24 June 1604. *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales, édition complète*, 27 vols. (Annecy, 1892–1964) [henceforth referred to as *FdS*], xii. 285. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

[2] J. Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1985), 127–8.

 © The Past and Present Society

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

a story about women: women, elite widows in particular, demonstrated an enthusiasm for the confessional experience that far outstripped that of their male counterparts.[3] Thus a woman like Louise de Marillac sought the direction of Vincent de Paul after the death of her husband, while the baroness Jeanne de Lestonnac chose the guidance of the Jesuit Father Bordes. The confessional relationship between François de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal proved especially fruitful: together, they made the first major attempt to establish an active female apostolate on French soil: the Order of the Visitation. This chapter seeks to explore the unique dynamics of this relationship and the ways in which this historical collaboration contributed to the beginnings of a new type of social Catholicism, 'le catholicisme au féminin'.[4]

In 1640, eighteen years after François de Sales's death, his friend Jean-Pierre Camus, the bishop of Belley, published a biographical tribute to him.[5] He portrayed the life of the saint through the medium of re-created conversations, and devoted several chapters to what Camus recognized as de Sales's distinctive relationship with female parishioners.

> Once someone said rather unkindly to the bishop that he was continuously surrounded by women.
>
> 'It is not that I wish to make a presumptuous comparison,' François answered, 'but it was similar with our Lord . . .'
>
> His friend continued the matter by saying: 'Well, I certainly don't know why they gather around you so much, for it seems to me that you say very little to them.'
>
> 'Is it little to let them talk as much as they will to me?' asked François. '. . . Don't they talk enough for us both? I really think they come to me because I am a good listener . . .'
>
> But his friend, rather than drop the subject, pressed on to say that he always notices that the bishop's confessional was surrounded by many more women than men.

[3] O. Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, 1500–1800* (London, 1995; 1997), 365.

[4] This phrase comes from C. Langlois, *Le Catholicisme au féminin: les congrégations françaises à supérieure générale au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1984); O. Hufton and F. Tallett, 'Communities of Women, the Religious Life and Public Service in Eighteenth Century France', in M. J. Boxer and H. J. Quataert (eds.), *Connecting Spheres: Women in the Western World, 1500 to the Present* (New York, 1987), 77.

[5] J.-P. Camus, *L'Esprit du Bienheureux François de Sales*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1640). An accessible and readable edition of this biography is C. F. Kelly (ed.), *The Spirit of St François de Sales* (London, 1953).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

> 'What would you have?' he replied. 'Are not women more devout than men? How I wish men were as much interested in penitence!'[6]

Whether or not this conversation ever took place, the author's point is clear; de Sales was noted for his direction of women. Camus went on to contrast de Sales's practices with those of other prelates of their time.

> I have been told of a certain prelate who was so determined that no women, regardless of class, should be admitted to his house that he built a little parlour with a grating adjacent to the chapel, where he saw them . . . since he was quite young, he thought he might be led astray . . . [François] laughed pleasantly over this.[7]

Contemporary attitudes towards women in seventeenth-century France have been the subject of many studies.[8] As Robin Briggs has astutely argued, although it is too simplistic to characterize this era as misogynist, one can certainly detect a sense of hostility towards women. Believed to be inferior to men, women were assumed to have little or no grasp of reason or control over their passions; they were thought to be ruled by the lower part of their nature and subject to fits of hysteria governed by the womb. This rendered them dangerous to society. Much theological, legal, social, and medical reasoning posited women as the progeny of Eve; frivolous, inconstant, and carnal. They were held to be primarily responsible for original sin, believed to be naturally disposed towards evil and corruption, and to be susceptible to the powers of the devil. The note of panic in some clerics' voices is unmistakable; and more than one warned from the pulpit that 'Women have been the door through which the Devil entered the world'.[9]

Camus pointedly positions de Sales as an exception to this rule, recounting times when contemporaries challenged him for lending an ear so readily to women. The most vicious attack came when he founded the Order of the Visitation.

[6] Kelly (ed.), *Spirit*, 225.

[7] Ibid., 226.

[8] The most recent is M. Bernos, *Femmes et gens d'église dans la France classique XVII^e^–XVIII^e^ siècle* (Paris, 2003). See also R. Briggs, *Communities of Belief: Cultural and Social Tensions in Early Modern France* (Oxford, 1989), esp. ch. 6; E. Rapley, *Dévotes: Women and the Church in Seventeenth Century France* (Montreal, 1990); N. Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975); G. Fagniez, *La Femme et la société française dans la première moitié du XVII siècle* (Paris, 1929).

[9] Étienne Bertal, quoted in H. Mills, 'Negotiating the Divide', in F. Tallett and N. Atkin (eds.), *Religion, Society and Politics in France Since 1789* (London, 1991), 33.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

> One day someone said to the bishop concerning the Order: 'What do you plan to do with all these women? Of what use will they be to God's Church? . . . Would it not be better if you founded some college for the education of priests rather than spend your time with these women who have to be told a thing a hundred times before they can retain it?'[10]

The author is clearly making a hagiographic point here, but it is evident that de Sales's attitude to women was a subject of debate amongst contemporaries.

François de Sales was a Savoyard and a Gallican graduate. This distinct combination of Savoy experience and French education manifested itself throughout his life's work to reunify the Catholic Church, a mission forged in the struggle against the Calvinist threat; his episcopal seat was Geneva. Like the Jesuits, he envisaged a programme of preaching and persuading through the means of a better-taught body of clergy who could combat the spread of heresy. These were the means and methods being proposed and experimented with in France at this time, means that de Sales wished to introduce in Savoy.

But de Sales added something of his own personal vision to this programme of conversion. The policy of reform within the ranks of the clergy would be complemented by the participation of a community of 'devout souls' who would exemplify and live out the life of Christian perfection in a variety of states and vocations, a programme he codified in his publication *L'Introduction à la vie dévote*.[11] While recognizing that 'the practice of devotion must differ for the gentleman and the artisan, the servant and the prince, for widow, young girl, or wife',[12] he celebrated every member of society's ability to attain holiness without the necessity of entering a monastery.[13] The message of this publication gave it mass appeal: both men and women had scope to participate in the religious life. De Sales's *Introduction* was one of the most successful good-conduct books for women ever written.

Central to the thesis of the *Introduction* was, of course, the overarching role of spiritual direction. As Hufton has noted, understanding the role of

[10] Kelly (ed.), *Spirit*, 266.

[11] FdS, *L'Introduction à la vie dévote* (Lyon, 1609). The saint added to this work and republished it in 1619. For an examination of the evolution of different editions see R. Devos and A. Ravier (eds.), *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales* (Paris, 1969), 16–18. This volume also contains a faithful reproduction of *L'Introduction*, 19–317.

[12] Devos and Ravier (eds.), *Oeuvres*, 36.

[13] H. Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours*, 12 vols. (Paris, 1967–71), i. 387.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

the father confessor is 'critical to understanding how the Catholic Church sought to control the minds and behaviour of women, perhaps in particular women of some education and wealth whose energies and resources could be used by the Church'.[14] And who better to target than the upper-class widow? She had time, she had refinement, she had money.

De Sales displayed a special concern for widows, dedicating a section of his *Introduction* to advising them. He recommended that the best course of action, after the death of a husband, was to remain a widow rather than to remarry, 'in order to centre all her affections on God'.[15] Remarriage was a contentious theological issue. Taking a second spouse after the death of the first had always been permitted by the Papal See; however, Pope Alexander III (1159–81) began a movement preventing second marriages from being solemnized with the nuptial blessing, arguing that it could not be a sacrament twice over.[16] In the seventeenth-century ecclesiastical elites preached this preference from the pulpit in the context of a wider negative view of the marital state that many ecclesiastics held in stark contrast to the elevation of the state of celibacy.[17] There was also a more practical side to the argument for abstinence from remarriage. Some secular authorities preferred widows to remain as such, because it prevented the complications of dowries and inheritance incurred in a second marriage. In addition, some clerics were interested in keeping the widow's dotal resources free for Church use. For women themselves, the freedom that widowhood presented was often welcome, as Nicolas Causin wrote in his *Instructions pour les veuves*: 'Oh, how many times while you were tied down by marriage have you said that if God would only take away your husband, you would give yourself completely to Him.'[18] Many devout women vowed their widowhood to God, *even before they were widowed*, as de Sales commented: 'Origen . . . [advises] wives to vow themselves to a chaste widowhood in the event of their husband's death so that even while they enjoy the pleasures of marriage they may anticipate the merit of such widowhood.'[19] Thus the death of a husband was often taken as a divine prompt to reorder their lives.

In 1604, four years prior to the first draft of the *Introduction*, de Sales travelled to Dijon to preach a series of Lenten sermons. It was here that he met the

[14] Hufton, *Prospect*, 375.

[15] FdS, *L'Introduction*, in Devos and Ravier (eds.), *Oeuvres*, 244–6.

[16] J. A. Brundage, *Sex, Law and Marriage in the Middle Ages* (Aldershot, 1993), 68.

[17] FdS, *L'Introduction*, in Devos and Ravier (eds.), *Oeuvres*, 17–19.

[18] Dechene, 'La Veuve', in W. Leiner (ed.), *Onze études sur l'image de la femme dans la littérature française* (Tubingen, 1978), 165, quoted in Rapley, *Dévotes*, 18.

[19] FdS, *L'Introduction*, in Devos and Ravier (eds.), *Oeuvres*, 244–6.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

widow who was to play the most significant role in his career, the baroness Jeanne Françoise Frémyot de Chantal.[20] Daughter of a Dijonese lawyer, she was the widow of Baron Christophe de Rautin-Chantal and the mother of four children. She was the model widow that de Sales would write about in his chapter on 'Advice to Widows' four years later. She had no intention of remarrying, sought spiritual direction for the course of her widowhood, wished to dedicate herself to God, and yet was committed to her children as long as they were dependent upon her. This was exactly the kind of spiritual charge de Sales relished. He became Jeanne's director officially on 21 August 1604.

It is hagiographic strategy to portray women as subservient to their confessors, and Jeanne de Chantal often emerges in secondary literature as the subordinate figure in her relationship with François.[21] Wendy Wright and Joseph Power's work on the letters of spiritual direction from François to Jeanne examined her traditional role as the subsidiary partner in the relationship, and only accorded her respect for her organizational and spiritual independence in the day-to-day running of the Order. They positioned her as a figure who came into her own from 1610 onwards, once the Order was founded.[22] However, the question of Jeanne's participation in the conception of the Order has yet to be fully explored.

Historians of the Order of the Visitation see its conception as the work of de Sales. They view it as a natural development of the saint's thoughts and theology, the culmination of his concern with achieving Christian perfection and with the service of the poor.[23] They also point out that he personally knew of many women who had led active religious lives, such as St Francesca da Romana in fifteenth-century Rome. Francesca, born into the Roman nobility, combined her duties as wife and mother with the provision of services to the poor, and went on to found a society of devout ladies under the rule of St Benedict, without religious vows.[24] In a letter to Jeanne in 1608 François recounted meeting André Valladier, who wrote the first *vie édifiante* of

[20] Unsurprisingly, there are fewer works of biographical scholarship for Jeanne de Chantal than for de Sales. The most accessible (although now outdated) works are H. Bremond, *Sainte Chantal* (Paris, 1912) and E. Stopp, *Madame de Chantal: Portrait of a Saint* (London, 1962).

[21] See M. Georges-Thomas, *Sainte Jeanne de Chantal et la spiritualité salésienne* (Paris, 1963).

[22] W. M. Wright and J. F. Power (eds.), *Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction* (New York, 1988).

[23] ET.-J. Lajeunie, *Saint François de Sales. L'Homme, la pensée, l'action*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1966), 240–63; R. Devos, *Les Visitandines*, 26.

[24] For a good introduction to this saint see G. Boanas and L. Roper, 'Feminine Piety in Fifteenth Century Rome: Santa Francesca Romana', in J. Obelkevich and L. Roper (eds.), *Disciplines of Faith: Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy* (London, 1987).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

St Francesca da Romana: 'he told me that . . . he himself had written her Life in Latin . . . she had been married for forty years, and . . . in her lifetime she erected a Congregation of widows who lived together in a house, in which they observed a religious life and no one entered therein except those with great cause; they, nevertheless, went out to serve the poor and the sick.'[25] This was certainly a powerful example, especially as da Romana had just been recently added to the catalogue of saints, on 29 May 1608 by Pope Paul V, the only female saint that he created. The fact that de Sales chose to discuss this in a letter to Jeanne was not insignificant. François was certainly the 'push factor' in this partnership when it came to proposing the Order, but the idea may also have owed much to the dynamics of his relationship with Jeanne.

The friendship between the two saints was frequently played out over great distances, with François based in Annecy and often travelling on business, while Jeanne resided in Dijon. This meant that letter-writing was their main form of communication for long periods. This was not unusual. The most prominent men of the Church were sought as directors by women from far and wide, not just by locals, and these men were often stretched between their parish or diocese and other locations where they would be invited to preach or work in some capacity. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac conducted their relationship through the medium of the letter for these very reasons.[26] Even when letters were not necessary because of distance, they still served a purpose in the business of spiritual direction. Throughout the history of the Catholic Church confessors had encouraged their spiritual charges to commit to paper material such as their prayers, meditations, religious experiences, and retreat notes. Such written exercises were a part of the confessional process which offered women a way to understand themselves, or to undergo a cathartic experience.[27] This written

[25] A. Valladier, *Speculum sapientia matronalis, ex vita Sancta Francisa Romana, fundatricis Sororum Turris Speculorum, panegyricus* (Paris, 1609). The same year an edition in French appeared under the title *Miroir de la sagesse matronale*. Letter from FdS to JdC, 29 Sept. 1608, *FdS* xiv. 69.

[26] This correspondence is found in P. Coste (ed.), *Saint Vincent de Paul, correspondance, entretiens, documents*, 14 vols. (Paris, 1920–5).

[27] Italian scholars have explored this facet of the feminine confessional experience: W. Boer, 'Notte sull'introduzionale, sopratutto in Italia', *Quaderni Storici*, 77: 91, 543–72; R. Guarnieri, ' "Nec domina nec ancilla, sed socia". Tre casi di direzione spirituale tra Cinque e Seicento', in E. Schulte van Kessel (ed.), *Women and Men in Spiritual Culture XIV–XVII Centuries* (The Hague, 1986), 111–32; G. Paolin, 'Confessione e confessori al femminile: monache e direttore spirituali in ambito veneto tra '600 e '700', in G. Zarri (ed.), *Finzione e santita tra medioevo ed eta moderna* (Turin, 1991), 366–411.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

material also served another purpose in the construction of a *vie édifiante*. Confessors worked with their spiritual charges to develop this significant literary genre: the story of an individual man or woman's spiritual development. Such publications would serve as inspirational reading-matter for women in both lay and religious society, while also serving to enhance the confessors' own reputations as spiritual directors.

François de Sales invited Jeanne de Chantal to use letter-writing as a means to explore herself and her relationship with God. He instructed her to 'Write to me, I beg you, as often as you can and with total trust'.[28] However, their letter-based relationship also allowed the saints to develop and explore their own relationship. The style of their interaction ranged from the professional to the personal. Discussions of confessions, meditations, and spiritual development were interspersed with reflections of a private nature. They expressed sentiments of care and concern for one another and their immediate families. They reflected on the growth and development of their friendship and their mutual love, admiration, and respect. The distance between François and Jeanne certainly did not seem to impede their relationship. If anything, their reliance on the medium of the letter allowed them a greater freedom of personal expression. François often remarked that 'The further away I am from you, the closer I feel is our interior bond',[29] and it was through their letters that they forged this tie.

A close reading of both sides of the correspondence between François and Jeanne suggests that their relationship rapidly developed, from that of director and directed to one of friendship and intimacy.[30] Their first letters testify to the significance of the connection. On the very day that François left Dijon, after first meeting Jeanne in 1604, he sent a short note to her to express his feelings: 'God, it seems, has given me to you; I made increasingly sure of this as the hours go by.'[31] This was the first of many deeply introspective reflections on the bond that had formed between them so quickly. Just months later François wrote again to Jeanne to explain his earlier words: 'from the very beginning when you conferred with me about your

[28] FdS to JdC, 3 May 1604. *FdS* xii. 266.

[29] Ibid., 263.

[30] The best analysis of this relationship, although dated, is M. Muller, *Die Freundschaft des hl. Franz von Sales mit der hl. Johanna Franziska von Chantal* (Munich, 1924). A more recent and spiritually focused study is W. M. Wright, *Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales* (New Jersey, 1985). Although not many of Jeanne de Chantal's letters have survived, what little there are are contained in M. P. Burns (ed.), *Correspondance de Jeanne-Françoise Fréymot de Chantal*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1986–90).

[31] FdS to JdC, 26 Apr. 1604. *FdS* xii. 262.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

interior, God gave me a great love for your spirit. As you become increasingly open with me, a tremendous obligation arose for my soul to cherish yours more and more, that is what made me write to tell you that God has given me to you.'[32]

This was a relationship that quickly became based on mutual love, trust, and frankness. François was not only Jeanne's confessor but also became her best friend and partner in the dealings of day-to-day life, to whom she confided all her spiritual and personal trials. His letters constantly offered her advice, comfort, and support. But François too came to rely on Jeanne, a form of reciprocal dependency unusual in a confessional relationship. He never hesitated to express his most inner thoughts, fear, and anxieties and was never concerned to maintain the front of authority or spiritual superiority that the role of confessor conferred. As he himself admitted: 'I allow you to see my heart such as it is and its various moods so that, as the Apostle said, you do not think more of me than what I am.'[33]

The bond between Jeanne and François was undoubtedly deeper than that which normally existed between a confessor and his spiritual child. We need only read François's words written when Jeanne's letters had been delayed in order to gauge the strength of his feelings for this woman and his dependence upon her:

> I have spent ten whole weeks without receiving a single word of your news, my dear, my very dear daughter . . . in my heart my good patience had almost given up, and I believe that it would have given up entirely, if I had not reminded myself that I must preserve it in order to be at liberty to preach it to others. But at last, my very dear daughter, yesterday a packet arrived for me . . . Oh how welcome it was and how I loved it![34]

This mutual spiritual passion quickly matured into a spiritual marriage. Jeanne emerges in their letters as a wife-like figure, expressing concern for François's well-being and concerning herself with his most intimate daily routines, constantly urging him to take care of himself; to which François responded: 'do you know what I am going to promise you? To take more care of my health . . . having absolutely cut out the late nights and the writing that I do at this hour and eating more sensibly too. But believe me, your wishes have their part in this resolution, these decisions are down to your wishes;

[32] FdS to JdC, 14 Oct. 1604. *FdS* xii. 354.
[33] FdS to JdC, 11 Feb. 1607. *FdS* xiii. 266.
[34] FdS to JdC, 11 Feb. 1607. *FdS* xiii. 260–1.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

because I deeply care about what makes you happy.'[35] This form of human love was nurtured alongside their spiritual love. It enriched their lives, as François wrote: 'Each affection has its own particular difference . . . that which I have for you has a certain particularity which infinitely consoles me and, when all is said, is extremely good for me.'[36]

Not only did the saints enter each others' lives, but they were also accepted into their respective immediate families. François reported that 'my brother is most grateful for your remembrance . . . remembering you continually at his altar',[37] while 'my mother could not have been more taken with you'.[38] In return, François became a regular correspondent of both Jeanne's father and her brother, the archbishop of Bourges. He also assumed a more intimately husband-like role, watching over her finances and household budgets and involving himself in the raising of Jeanne's children. His correspondence on these subjects resembles that of an absent father sending paternal advice back to his wife: 'As for Celse-Bénigne [Jeanne's son] you will have to inspire him . . . as he grows up, with God's help, we shall think of specific ways of doing this . . . If Françoise wants to be a nun of her own accord, fine; otherwise I do not approve of her being influenced by any recommendations.'[39]

The correspondence is littered with evidence of an awareness that their relationship was not only unique, but might also have bordered on the improper. François's lengthy expressions of love and admiration for Jeanne frequently conclude with comments such as: 'That is too much said on a subject that I was not going to mention',[40] or 'I did not intend to say so much',[41] as if he was consciously stopping himself from expanding upon sentiments that should not really be mentioned. Jeanne, on the other hand, showed more prescience, which is remarkable considering that he was meant to be 'directing' their relationship. When she came to edit the first volume of François's letters following his death, she cut out (as was revealed when the letters were compared with the surviving manuscripts for the Annecy edition) sentiments that she thought might be judged too personal. She wrote: 'The world cannot grasp the incomparable purity of this saint's love . . . this kind of thing has to be taken very carefully.'[42] She was aware that they had

[35] FdS to JdC, 8 June 1606. *FdS* xiii. 182.
[36] FdS to JdC, 14 Oct. 1604. *FdS* xii. 354.
[37] François' brother was Canon Jean-François de Sales. FdS to JdC, 24 June 1604. *FdS* xii. 288.
[38] FdS to JdC, 14 Oct. 1604. *FdS* xii. 369.
[39] Ibid., 360–1.
[40] FdS to JdC, 8 June 1606. *FdS* xiii. 183.
[41] FdS to JdC, 14 Oct. 1604. *FdS* xii. 354.
[42] E. Stopp, 'Saint Francis de Sales: Attitudes to Friendship', *Downside Review*, 392 (July), 177.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

shared a deeply emotional and intimate partnership, something that would not be judged typical of a confessional relationship, and she chose not to release the details of this to the public.

It was this intensity of emotion and the depth of their affection for one another that singled out their relationship as unique. De Sales did not lavish this degree of affection on all his spiritual charges.[43] For example, Madame Madeleine de la Fléchère was another of his 'spiritual widows' whom he held in high esteem. He had become familiar with the de la Fléchère family in 1608 when preaching the Lenten sermons in Rumilly, not far from Annecy. The correspondence between himself and Madeleine is the only one, certainly in terms of volume, comparable to that which passed between himself and Jeanne. He wrote of her: 'After Madam de Chantal, I do not know if I have ever encountered in a woman a stronger soul, a more reasonable mind, or a more sincere humility.'[44] Yet their relationship never approached the degree of intimacy that existed between him and Jeanne. In contrast, he described his first meeting with Madeleine as 'a good beginning', and always maintained a level of cool composure and authority in his letters to her.[45]

Jacques-Benigne Bossuet was also a self-styled confessor, and a follower of François de Sales.[46] Amongst his numerous spiritual charges he could count many prominent women of the day, including Mademoiselle Alix Clerginet,[47] Madame Cornuau,[48] and Madame d'Albert de Luynes.[49] While employing the standard salutation of 'my dear daughter', as used by other contemporary directors such as de Sales and Vincent de Paul, Bossuet never forged any relationship with a comparable degree of intensity or intimacy. He used the medium of letter-writing as any confessor might do, yet his correspondence

[43] A handy volume for the study of François de Sales' spiritual friendships is A. Ravier (ed.), *François de Sales. Correspondance: les lettres d'amitié spirituelle* (Paris, 1980).

[44] *FdS* xvii. 143. Quoted in Wright and Power (eds.), *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 157.

[45] For the correspondence between FdS and Madeleine de la Fléchère, see *FdS* xiv. There is also a brief discussion and a few translated letters to be found in Wright and Power (eds.), *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 157–62.

[46] A good edition of Bossuet's letters of spiritual direction is G. Webb and A. Walker (trans.), *Jacques-Benigne Bossuet: Letters of Spiritual Direction* (London, 2001).

[47] Foundress of the Maison de la Propagande de la Foi, for which Bossuet helped draw up the constitutions.

[48] A widow who first went into retirement with the 'Filles Charitables' and later with the Benedictines at Jouarre. She was the first to edit Bossuet's correspondence with herself and Madame d'Albert de Luynes.

[49] Madame Henriette-Thérèse d'Albert de Luynes. She was educated at Port-Royal under Angélique Arnauld. In her widowhood she became a nun at Jouarre.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

clearly remained within the boundaries of acceptable confessional relations. The language of the letter never approached the degree of affection used so freely between François and Jeanne, and he always maintained his position as director.

The bond between François and Jeanne was one of substantial force, and its passion released tremendous energy, allowing them to talk freely, discussing topics with a frankness that encouraged comment and critique. It was with Jeanne that François could debate issues that preoccupied him such as devotion, charity, prayer, virtue, humility, friendship, and resisting temptation: themes which eventually formed the backbone of his *Introduction*.[50] As Ravier and Stopp have both remarked, the letters that flowed between François and Jeanne adopted an interactive style which was closer to the rhythm of speech.[51] De Sales developed the ideas that are expressed in the *Introduction* through these dialogues with Jeanne. While it is well known that the *Introduction* was based on the letters of spiritual direction written to his cousin, Madame de Charmoisy, it is not commonly known that it also derived from this correspondence with Jeanne de Chantal. So we find, in a letter that he wrote to Jeanne in 1609, a request that her letters be returned to him for the second edition of the book,[52] and it is also evident that he consulted her more than once in the process of writing.[53] In turn, much of what de Sales committed to paper for the *Introduction* ultimately found its way into the rules and constitutions of the Order of the Visitation. It was no coincidence that François met Jeanne de Chantal, conceived of the Visitation, and published his *Introduction* all within five years, and it is striking that whenever he discussed the Visitation in correspondence with her, he referred to it as 'ours'.

The first plans were made for the Order of the Visitation in June 1607. Jeanne had proved to be instrumental in focusing de Sales' vision of how 'good widows' could be utilized in his 'community of devout souls', and the energy of their relationship fired their mutual desire to found an active female apostolate. This was to be the first serious attempt at establishing such an apostolate on French soil, living in community, without the constraints of cloister or excessive physical mortification. It was inspired by and

[50] For examples of these discussions see *FdS* xii. 263–6, 352–70; xiii. 4–11, 74–7, 80–6, 161–4, 146–8, 199–201, 201–12, 305–9, 355–7, 392–4; xvi. 107–9.

[51] Ravier, *Un sage*, 127–9; E. Stopp, *St. Francis de Sales: Selected Letters* (New York, 1960) 35–9.

[52] FdS to JdC, mid-Feb. 1609. *FdS* xiv. 131. See also the comment in Stopp, 'Attitudes to Friendship', 175–92.

[53] FdS to JdC, 4 July 1608. *FdS* xiv. 44.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

created for Jeanne de Chantal and others like her; widows with family commitments or frail health which prevented them from entering into existing religious orders, but who wished to dedicate themselves to God nonetheless.

Reducing physical mortification as a feature of the female devotional life was an idea that had also been explored by Angela Merici. In an age of reformed convents there were fewer options for women who wished to embrace a religious life but whose bodies could not withstand it. The practice of mortification was scrutinized by de Sales, who criticized it as unnecessary: mortification was best left as an activity of the heart. Only once an individual had reformed their 'interior' and achieved conformity with Jesus could the physical signs be seen. De Sales used the imagery of the almond tree to illustrate this argument:

> Men engaged in horticulture tell us that if a word is written on a sound almond seed and it is placed again in its shell, carefully wrapped up, and planted, whatever fruit the tree bears will have that same written word stamped on it . . . I cannot approve the methods of those who try to reform a person by beginning with external things, such as bearing, dress, or hair. On the contrary, it seems to me that we should begin inside.[54]

The 'open' structure of the Visitation Order allowed the sisters to dedicate themselves to a social mission: visiting the local poor and needy and providing education for girls. Here, de Sales was in line with a wider movement within the post-Tridentine Church, concentrated on education and social Catholicism. The poor and sick were in need of help, the vulnerable needed protection. Catholic reformers stressed that heresy could only be combatted if the ordinary Catholic worshipper was as well versed in Catholic spirit as the Protestants were in heresy. Young children needed to be educated in the Catholic manner if the next generation of believers was to be secured. But who would attend to this? And, in an age with little female education and low literacy rates, who would teach the girls? In short, elements in the Catholic Church were reluctantly coming round to the conclusion that they needed women to provide these critical social services for the female sex. However, this made it necessary to encourage qualities of activism in women, otherwise enjoined to domestic passivity.

Attempts to meet this social need had already been made in Italy in the sixteenth century. In 1535 Angela Merici formed a group of women intent

[54] Quoted in Wright and Power (eds.), *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 54–5. For a discussion of this facet of Salesian spirituality see 54–61.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

on dedicating themselves to the care of the sick and needy, and to the education of girls. They arrived in France in 1610, expecting to attract French women who would not seek enclosure, only to find that their new recruits had actually been hoping to join the newly reformed Carmelite mission to France. Demand from within met with pressure from without to enclose, and they opted for claustration in 1612. In Italy and Spain the Catholic Reformation exercised a powerful grip on the country through its male ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the lives and behaviour of women were heavily regulated. Yet, because of its Gallican tradition of independence from Rome, it was not until 1615 that the French Assembly of the Clergy actually accepted the authority of the Council of Trent, delaying implementing many of its principles. Challenged by the Protestant threat, France was in something of a religious vacuum, open to individual initiative. It was in this context that de Sales and de Chantal introduced the Order of the Visitation.

The process of founding such an order, committed to an external social mission, was no mean feat. De Sales himself, well versed in canon law, envisaged problems from the outset.[55] He therefore embarked upon a shrewd campaign of spreading the word about his order, and the right word at that. Seeking to ensure that the order would be well received and that those of consequence were fully informed as to its existence and purpose, he targeted those who were likely to be supportive, sympathetic, and helpful, in particular the Savoyard Jesuit Father Nicolas Polliens, and Monsieur Jean-François Ranzo, a *Gentilhomme* and *Conseiller* of His Highness, Charles-Emmanuel I of Savoy,[56] in a deliberate ploy to establish favour with the ruling house of Savoy.

On behalf of the Visitation, de Sales also built networks of women upon whom he called to support the order financially and socially. In 1608 he wrote to Jeanne: 'God wants to help our plans, he is preparing the souls of élites for us. Mademoiselle de Blonay[57] . . . has declared to me her desire to be a Religious. God has marked her for our congregation.'[58]. This is just one of the many women whom de Sales's letters mention as volunteering to staff and support the order. In 1609 he wrote to report his meeting with two widows, Jeanne de Requeleyne[59] and Marie de Mouxy,[60] and he even remarked

[55] FdS to JdC, 6 July 1608. *FdS* xiv. 44.

[56] FdS to M. Ranzo, 6 May 1610. *FdS* xiv. 299.

[57] Marie-Aimée de Blonay. The young girl had been known to the saint since childhood, during his missionary work in Chablais.

[58] FdS to JdC, late Dec. 1608. *FdS* xiv. 101–2.

[59] The widow of the noble Claude David, lawyer to the *parlement* of Bourgogne and *conseiller des états particuliers* of the Comté d'Auxonne.

[60] The widow of Louis de la Touvière, Seigneur d'Escrilles (or 'Crilles').

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

that in the end 'we will have too many people, that is to say more than we can receive'.[61]

He did not stop there. In late 1613, after the first official foundation had been opened at Annecy and the constitutions had been formulated and committed to paper,[62] de Sales turned his attention to ingratiating the order with the ruling house of Savoy fully. He did not address Charles Emmanuel I but turned to his daughter Marguerite de Savoy, the duchess of Mantua,[63] requesting that she become the Order's protectoress, 'to accept and receive this Congregation under her special protection . . . in the favour of her charity'.[64] As de Sales had anticipated, Marguerite was flattered to accept,[65] and with her power and position she secured favours for the new Order from her father and the senate of Savoy, which declared that the Order was always to be favoured and protected in their lands, and in accordance with practice, 'lettres patentes' were issued.

The love and support that Jeanne conferred on François underpinned the energy of this apostolate. She taught him the value of relationships in the business of survival in seventeenth-century French society, and she gave him the means by which to negotiate the necessary political, financial, and moral support needed for the Order. Under Jeanne's guiding influence, de Sales in turn ensured that the Visitation was an Order created by women, for women, in every possible sense of the word.

However, not everyone was in favour of such an experimental form of female religious life taking root in French soil. In 1616, when the Order expanded from Savoy to Lyon, the Visitandines crossed the path of the archbishop cardinal Denis-Simon de Marquemont, a representative of a Gallican Church deeply shaken by the religious wars. Marquemont's response to the Order reflects the underlying tensions of the Catholic Reformation:

> those who see a nun in the world . . . will be scandalized . . . the Monasteries which we are trying to enclose in obedience to the Council will

[61] FdS to JdC, 11 Dec. 1609. *FdS* xiv. 227.

[62] There are three manuscripts that survive today that show the evolution of the Visitation's constitutions. The first (*Manuscrit de Thonon, G*) dates from June–July 1610 and the second (*Manuscrit d'Annecy, H*) dates from July 1610. These are both incomplete writings, in the hand of François de Sales, which were ultimately written up into the final manuscript of 1613 (*Manuscript de Guingamp, K*). For a short discussion of these manuscripts see the note in *FdS* xxv. 203–10.

[63] Marguerite de Savoy was the daughter of Charles-Emmanuel and Catherine-Michelle d'Autriche. In 1608 she married François de Gonzague, the elder brother of Vincent, duke of Mantua.

[64] FdS to Duchess of Mantua, late Nov. 1613. *FdS* xvi. 104–9.

[65] Duchess of Mantua to JdC, 22 Dec. 1613. *FdS* xvi. 402.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

> have something to say . . . furthermore, Protestants and libertines will be able to criticise clausura in our Monasteries.[66]

And there was also the issue of the Visitandines' simple vows. The Papal Bull of 1566, *Circa Pastoralis*, had decreed that the only way for women to enter the Religious life was to take the three solemn vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity and submit to enclosure. Instead, the Visitandines proposed to live under simple vows, without enclosure, which did not bind them to the 'civil death' regulations of the religious state, under which they would have renounced their claims to worldly rights and worldly goods. As Marquemont saw it, the sisters could easily leave the Congregation, marry, and dishonour their families, and this would also place a question-mark over their inheritance. The parents:

> do not know if they are Religious or seculars . . . if they will share with their brothers and sisters or if they will remain content with the dowry that they will have been given . . . parents [in Lyon] are not well disposed towards consecrating their daughters to the service of God, but when they do there are a lot of temporal considerations.[67]

Marquemont was more concerned with potential criticism than with rejection of the good work that the Visitation could do. He gave them a choice: to remain as they were and be suppressed, or to accept enclosure under the rule of St Augustine. This was the obvious candidate since it was the least demanding rule, and it would allow the Congregation to continue to accept widows and girls of poor health. After much consideration and consultation between Jeanne and François, they agreed.[68] The circumstances under which the Visitation came to be enclosed demonstrated one vital lesson. The establishment of such an initiative relied on the support of two powers: the state, as embodied in a ruler, and the bishop or archbishop. In Savoy both forms of authority were obtained, but this was not to be the case in Lyon.

The historian of the active female apostolate might be tempted to leave the history of the Visitation at this juncture. Yet, despite having fallen foul of

[66] Marquemont to FdS. *FdS* xxv. 327.

[67] Ibid., 324.

[68] The scope of this article does not allow for a full discussion of the reasons behind Jeanne's and François' agreement, which are complex. For a summary of the debate surrounding this issue see Rapley, *Dévotes*, 39–40 and M. P. Burns, 'Aux origines de la Visitation. La Vraie Pensée de Saint François de Sales', in *Les Religieuses dans le Cloître et dans le Monde. Actes du Deuxième Colloque International du CERCOR* (Saint-Étienne, 1994).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020

the Cardinal, the Visitandines had still managed to dedicate six years to the demonstration of a new ideal of feminine piety at large in society. It was in France that the development of Counter-Reformation confessional culture was open to a degree of individual initiative, allowing directors such as François de Sales to experiment and innovate with the potential for collaboration with his female charges. In Jeanne de Chantal, de Sales found a unique match with a woman of intelligence, drive, and importantly, means. She showed great character, breaching gender norms, often challenging and guiding de Sales, and formulating an active apostolic role for herself, forbidden to women. Together Jeanne and François worked in practical terms towards the same end, inspired by the same drive, with mutual trust and affection, and giving shape to one of the most innovative works of charity in seventeenth-century France.

Although the Visitandines were ultimately suppressed in their apostolic form, the first six years of their establishment, 1610–16, set in motion a movement which, as Olwen Hufton described, eventually 'drove a coach and horses through the principle of enclosure'.[69] It was during these first experimental years that the dynamism between François de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal demonstrated what was possible with the help of networks of both male and female supporters that they forged strategically. These same networks crop up repeatedly in the record of their history, supporting later female apostolic initiatives, such as the Daughters of the Cross, until finally, in 1633, the active female apostolate was safely secured in France in the form of the Daughters of Charity.[70] At the root of this achievement lay the inspirational example of the Order of the Visitation, which constituted the horsepower of this 'coach and horses'.

[69] Hufton, *Prospect*, 381.

[70] My doctoral thesis, 'Breaking the Rules: The Emergence of the Active Female Apostolate in Seventeenth-century France', Oxford University (2006), is concerned with these wider issues of connection between the Order of the Visitation, the Daughters of the Cross, and the Daughters of Charity, and the ways in which they benefited from mutual networks of supporters first created by the Order of the Visitation.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/past/article/1/suppl_1/101/2948735 by University of Arizona Library user on 12 August 2020