



## STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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*“Hearts have a secret language”*

### *The Spiritual Friendship of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal*

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originally published in *Vincentian Heritage* 2/1 (1990): 45-58

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Between the years 1604 and 1622 Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal shared in a spiritual friendship of intense and mutual creativity. Their relationship began in the context of spiritual direction when Jane, a young widow, sought out the charismatic bishop from Savoy who was gaining a reputation as a preacher and guide of souls. By the time he died eighteen years later, they had co-founded the Visitation of Holy Mary, a community for women unique in the history of religious life; created a vision of the Christian life that remains fresh and life-giving some three hundred years later; and cultivated a unique friendship that brought them both to the fullness of their human potential and closer to the dearest longing of their hearts—the radical and self-giving love of God.

#### **The Context**

The Counter Reformation of which Francis and Jane were a part was an era of intense religious vitality. In Savoy and France, their native lands, interest in the spiritual life was keen. New translations of the classic treatments of prayer and devotion were circulating, and original works were in progress. People in all walks of life were energized by the militant vigor of a renewed Roman Catholicism and inspired by the exploits of missionaries carrying the faith to the new world. There was a sense that the spirit was moving, raising up a generation of Christians who would truly fulfill the promise of the gospels.

Francis and Jane's friendship was born in this world. The overarching vision that sustained them and defined the perimeters of their relationship was their vision of a Christian society transformed by the love of God.

The theological matrix of this vision was outlined by de Sales in his most ambitious and synthetic work, *Treatise on the Love of God*. In this exploration of "the history of the birth, progress, decay, operations, properties, advantages and excellencies of divine love," he describes his view of a loving God whose graciously inclining heart reaches down into the fallen human condition and gently but insistently urges each person back into loving relationship. It is through the human heart - through the capacity to love - that this restored relationship is realized. Love is seen as the divinely instilled dynamic that directs and gathers up all human energies into the source of love which is God. In Francis's mind there are not two separate loves, one of God and the other of neighbor, which might be in conflict with each other, but one capacity to love - one heart - that has ultimately one desire and goal.

Love, in the theological vision outlined in the *Treatise on the Love of God*, is the central dynamic of the universe which returns ultimately to its source. Human love in all forms, love of parent and child, of husband and wife, and of friends, is part of the divinely orchestrated dance of the return of all things to God. Human love expands the heart and kindles desire. One goes to God *through* the experience and cultivation of rightly ordered loving relationships. Friendship, as a unique form of love, is thus a medium through which love and knowledge of the loving God is cultivated. In a letter in 1604 Francis wrote to his new friend Jane describing their friendship as

'the bond of perfection' [which is] indissoluble and will not slacken. All other bonds are temporary...but the bond of love grows in time and takes on new power by enduring. It is exempt from the severance of death whose scythe cuts down everything except love: 'Love is as strong as death and more powerful than hell' Solomon says. ...This is our bond, these are our chains which, the more they restrain and press upon us, the more they give us ease and liberty. Their power is only sweetness, their force only gentleness; nothing is so pliable, nothing so solid as they.

The love of friendship was not, for these two, an end in itself or simply a matrix for achieving individual salvation. Their vision was more expansive. They saw their friendship and all friendships as the means by which a community of "devout souls" was to be raised up within the church. These souls would form the nucleus of a world recreated in the image of the loving God. They would be the seeds of the kingdom begun on earth and realized in the fullness of God's time. The devout were to come from all walks of life - the aristocracy and peasantry, the cloister and the marketplace, the seminary and the household. They would revitalize and transform society.

While this Salesian vision is profoundly communal in nature, it is in fact the individual human heart that is the first focus of this transformed world. Each devout person would become such by conforming her or his heart to the heart of the gentle, humble Jesus of the gospels. Indeed, Francis de Sales' favorite image of Jesus was that of Matthew in which the Lord is depicted as inviting all to "come to me and learn of me...for I am gentle and humble of heart." It was interiorly, within the core or heart of the person, that this conformity was to take place. The human heart, refashioned through prayer, loving relationships, and loving actions, became fashioned into the heart of the gentle, loving Savior. Jesus would live in such a heart. Jesus was

enfleshed in such a person's life. Through the "devout" Christian, Jesus lived and society was transformed.

The constructive work of this reformed society was to take place within and between persons. By reflecting on the nature and history of Jane and Francis's own intimate friendship it will perhaps be possible to envision once again the shape and texture of such a reformed world and to begin to imagine for ourselves, in our own historical context, how such a world might be born.

## **Their Friendship: Prehistory**

The history of Jane and Francis's friendship falls into three distinct phases, each characterized by a different quality. The entirety of the friendship is seen by examining the sweep of the three phases as well as by exploring the two distinct ways in which the friendship was experienced by each of them.

When the young widow and the rising young bishop met in 1604 at a series of Lenten sermons in Dijon, they were each in their own way prepared for the encounter. Both of them had an expectation that they felt was soon to be met. For Jane, it was the expectation of finding a director of souls, someone who could lead her out of the inner chaos she had been experiencing since the death of her much beloved husband several years before. She had had a vision of such a man "into whose hands you are to entrust your soul." Francis, for his part, had been nourishing a dream of founding an innovative women's community and anticipated finding someone with whom to bring this dream to birth.

At the time of their first meeting he was a bishop, a writer of some repute, a noted preacher, and a spiritual director. She was a widowed baroness left with the care of four small children and struggling with an emerging call to give herself wholly into God's service. She especially felt drawn to the contemplative life which she saw burgeoning around her in the new and reformed communities of cloistered women.

While the two thus found themselves "primed" for their journey, neither wanted to embark without forethought. Jane had been bound to a tedious and unprincipled priest who had saddled her with a regimen of sterile prayers and a vow never to consult anyone else. It was with some trepidation and a good deal of counsel that she freed herself from her previous director and asked Francis to undertake her guidance. He did not enter into the relationship lightly but, after several meetings and due reflections, spent a sleepless night in prayer from which he emerged with an assured sense that "God has given me to you." They formalized their relationship on paper: he promised to undertake her direction with as much care and fidelity as possible and as far as his capacities and prior responsibilities would allow; she, calling as her witnesses the Virgin Mary and the choirs of angels, vowed obedience to him. Thus they began.

## **The First Years**

Francis at first acted primarily as her director guiding her, forming in her a place for the spirit to move freely. His style of direction was unique and renowned. Never authoritarian or arbitrary, the Savoyard bishop saw himself as a director who helped the directee learn to identify the

promptings of the spirit within, to “lean toward” the center of the self where the movements of the heart that seem to come from God and those which seem to be aligned with other sources (self, evil spirit, etc.) might be distinguished, and to propose possible practices that might encourage the free expression of the God-born promptings.

This is certainly the way he directed Jane. Yet even in the beginning he felt a special quality emerge in their relationship. He wrote to her of this affection whose effect was “a great interior warmth that I have to wish for you a perfect love of God and other spiritual blessings.... This feeling is different from others; the feeling I have for you has a certain particularity that consoles me no end and, to tell the truth, is extremely profitable to me.”

In Jane, Francis discerned a woman of depth and capacity with a burning love of God that equaled his own. While the formal direction aspect of their relationship served primarily to nurture her emerging vocation and freedom in the Spirit, there was simultaneously the development of another aspect of their bond in which mutuality began to assert itself. He began to disclose himself to her as well. Because they met in many contexts besides that of formal direction, even in this early phase, this was a natural occurrence. Moreover, de Sales never envisioned spiritual direction as a professional or “clinical” undertaking but rather as a form of friendship in which fellow Christians walked together and grew in the love of God. He described the quality of this growing feeling to her: “I can’t say how full my heart is for you but I will say it is full beyond compare. My affection is whiter than snow and purer than the sun. That is why I’ve given it free reign since you left me, letting it have its way. Oh! How speechless I am, my Lord and God! How wonderful it will be to love each other in heaven in this sea full of charity when even these little brooklets of love give us so much.”

At the same time it is probably safe to say that during the first few years of their relationship Jane was more intensely and emotionally involved in the relationship than Francis. Besides being an ardent and deeply feeling woman, she had a significant investment in the relationship with this man she entrusted with her impassioned but unformed desire for the religious life. Unfortunately, the written evidence of Jane’s feelings in this beginning phase comes only in what we can discern from Francis’s replies to her, from what is recorded by her secretary, and from notes of her own reminiscences. Nonetheless, we do know that during the dawn of their friendship her native gifts were being shaped and honed through their contact. Although much gifted and finely tuned to the voice of God within, she did not trust her own capacities. Much of Francis’s direction involved empowering her in this manner, weaning her away from excessive dependence on him, and helping her to be free from self-doubt. She was being refashioned in the image of the Christian God through her prayerful attention to the words and images of scripture and tradition. Always, the gentle humble Jesus of Salesian preference was at the forefront of that attention. For this she was deeply grateful to her director whom she held a bit in awe and in whom she admired great holiness and integrity.

## **The Middle Years**

The first phase of their relationship gave way around 1610 to a new phase of greater maturity. It was at this time that the foundation of the Visitation took place. The way to greater mutuality had been prepared for them in the early years. What generally characterized this middle era was

an ardor and intensity of feeling and a flowering of the love between them as they assumed their co-creative rolls as father and mother of the fledging community.

It was especially in Francis's voice that the language of love, traditionally the language used by Christian contemplatives to express their relationship to God, became articulate. De Sales expanded the mystic's language to describe the love felt between people whose ardor takes them together to God. He spoke to his friend Jane in just this way. On the occasion of their mutual commitment to institute the new women's congregation he confided: "You would not believe how much my heart was strengthened by our resolution and by everything that contributed to their establishment. I feel an extraordinary sweetness about them as likewise I feel for the love I bear you. Because I love that love incomparably. It is strong, resilient, measureless and unreserved yet gentle, pliant, completely pure and tranquil. In short, if I am not deceived, it is completely in God."

The language of love that passed between them was not always so pacific. In another, slightly earlier missive the bishop expressed his consternation when

I had gone ten whole weeks without receiving a single scrap of news, about you, my dear, I should say my dearest daughter. Your last letters were from the beginning of the past November. But the good of it is that my heart's patience almost ran out and I believe that it would have been completely lost if I had not forced myself to remember that I must conserve it in order to be genuinely able to preach it to others. Now, finally, my dearest daughter, yesterday, there was a packet which came for me, like a ship from India, rich with letters and spiritual songs. Oh, how welcome they were and how I caressed them!

As has been suggested, in the Salesian vision of union with God, human love is central. Love, all love, is believed to be part of a continuum that leads ultimately back to the source of love. The experience of desire, if appropriately directed, kindles the heart to expand, to grow and to seek the deeper source of love discovered in and through human affection. The erotic language of mysticism (drawn in great part from the Song of Songs) is thus also an appropriate medium through which the experience of spiritual friendship might be articulated.

The richness of exchange represented in these letters both drew these two friends out of themselves and enflamed their growing vision of a transformed world. Through love their hearts were being conformed to the heart of Jesus and re-made to image the heart of God. Their hearts were "one" and experienced unity in their shared aspiration. As such, they felt that their hearts "knew" one another in a special way. Speaking of prayer, Francis exclaimed, "I don't know how to express what my heart spoke, because, as you know, hearts have a secret language which only they themselves understand." The unity that the bishop and the widow felt was a unity of vision. They were, however, quite different personalities and this difference was a significant factor in their growing relationship. They challenged each other to experience a reality, both outer and inner, that was distinctive from their own.

Francis was a man of extraordinary balance, both in temperament and in the exercise of head and heart. He spoke frequently of the wisdom of keeping to the "middle way" and his spirituality did keep a remarkable balance between over-zealousness and laxity. He was a man who possessed "inspired common-sense" and "optimism." Jane was a woman of great ardor and some impetuosity. While she was loyal, deeply feeling, and utterly abandoned in her self-giving, her

spiritual journey was pocketed with dark valleys of interior dryness and doubt. He provided ballast for her deep waters; she provided depth and passion for him. This was true not simply on the personal level of friendship but in prayer as well. We know of many occasions on which Francis's calm counsel of the distraught baroness restored perspective. Gradually she began to incorporate his wisdom and make it her own.

On the eve of her profession she was wakened by a dreadful dream in which the vengeance of her relatives and children was called down upon her for entering religious life. The attack, which shook her to the root, lasted three hours. Because it was the middle of the night, she could not call upon her friend to strengthen her. Instead, she recalled the advice he had often given her not to argue with the powers of reason against such panic but exercise the will and make "an act of perfect abandonment of herself and all else into the hands of God." Her words of surrender dispelled the tempest and invigorated her with a buoyant sense of joy.

The Savoyard found himself likewise enriched by their relationship. He had always been a man of prayer but after his meeting with Jane he became intimate to a new depth of contemplation. As he interacted with her and the first sisters of the Visitation, the lived process of interior prayer became more a part of his own experience. It has often been said that the central chapters of *The Treatise on the Love of God* were written out of the experience of the early Visitandines. One famous passage in book 9 especially reflects the mother superior's own inner drama. The metaphor of the soul as a deaf musician developed there was first coined by the bishop in a letter he wrote to his friend.

I am working on book number nine of *The Love of God* and today, praying before my crucifix, God showed me your soul and your [inner] state by the metaphor of an accomplished musician, born subject to a prince who loved him perfectly and who had expressed to him how wonderfully pleasing the sweet melody of his life and voice were. The unfortunate singer, like you, became deaf and could no longer hear his own music. His master was often absent but he did not cease to sing because he knew that his master retained him to sing.

Not only did he record Jane's unique experience of prayer, but it became part of his own prayer as well.

Another distinctive aspect of this second phase of the spiritual friendship shared by these two lovers of God was its creativity. The multi-leveled experience of love that they shared found fruition in the creation of the community of the Visitation. It shared both of their features.

As has been indicated, Francis had long harbored a dream of founding a new women's community expressive of the "two arms of love" - of God and of neighbor. But he did not en flesh the dream until he had met the woman whom he believed God had called for this work. She was not simply to be a woman who could put into practice his personal dream but a woman whose own vision and sense of the design of God could help him co-create a community whose particularity was as yet unrevealed.

The bishop's contributions strike one right away. The idea of a community composed of the widowed, young, frail, elderly, or infirm who felt called to a life of great interior intimacy with God but not to great physical austerity, was his. He was the architect of the new foundation. He

arranged for the group to be accountable to the bishop of the diocese rather than to any male order so that their distinctive charism might be retained. Community members were to give themselves without reservation to the cultivation of the “little virtues” and the unheroic mortifications that come from living peaceably in community in order that their hearts might gradually be transformed into the heart of the loving, gentle Jesus, so that he might live in them and their hearts might gradually be transformed into the heart of the Father through the heart of the Son. The methods of this transformation were to be interior rather than exterior. The practice of the presence of God was to take the place of long prayers practiced in some contemplative communities, detachment from things supplanted absolute poverty, mortification of spirit and will replaced bodily penance, charity modified radical solitude, and obedience to small observances stood in place of obvious austerity. All this was the bishop’s doing.

Jane, however, was responsible for creating the Visitation into a community that existed in reality and not simply as an idea. For she was the one who was present day in and day out, living the charism, struggling to impart its spirit to others, and mindful of the ways in which that spirit might or might not become actual among the women. Interestingly, the congregation’s inner core, its prayer, was distinctively hers. The prayer that she herself felt compelled to practice from her early years - a non-discursive quiet waiting which she termed “simple attentiveness” or “simple surrender” - became the characteristic prayer of the Visitation to which many in the community found themselves drawn. “I should have recognized,” observed Jane, “that the most universal attraction of the daughters of the Visitation is to a very simple practice of the presence of God effected by a total abandonment of themselves to Holy Providence. ... So it seems as though God avails Himself of this one means to cause us to achieve our end, and the perfect union of our soul with Him.”

It was Jane’s presence that sowed the seeds of contemplation that were to flower so exquisitely in the years to come. It was, moreover, her particular maternal gifts, hard earned during her years as wife and mother, that made sisterly love a reality in the little congregation. One finds in her writings a remarkable sensitivity for dealing with the various personalities struggling to live a communal vocation of love. Attentiveness to the uniqueness of each person, a knack for drawing forth each one’s gift (“winning their hearts,” she called it), yet making great allowances for the maturity and innate potential of each sister, all were hers. Her motherly concern, gentle yet always asking the best of the women, was to characterize not only her directorial style but the style of generations of Visitandine mother superiors.

So their friendship found issue in a new community that bore their features. It was a community that enfolded their shared and deepest hope for a world in which the gentle Jesus lived. “*Vive Jésus!*” was, in fact, the motto of the Visitation of Holy Mary. Together its members were to become a kingdom of charity - a tiny world where love reigned and was expressed with which relationships were cultivated. It was in the “in-between - in the love created between people—that Jesus was brought to birth. The Visitation was to be a microcosm of the revitalized society envisioned by the co-founders in which God-directed love would motivate and inform all relationships.

## The Final Years

The third phase of this remarkable friendship dawned in 1616 on the occasion of a retreat taken by the mother superior in which the dynamics of prayer led to both a deepening and a change in the bond that united her with Francis.

Under her friend's direction Jane was to make her annual retreat with detachment for the topic. As their love for each other had burned brighter during the years, it paradoxically sought to focus itself upon the greater love toward which they both yearned. This meant, in their minds, that they must assist each other in a subtle but fundamental way to strip themselves of their dependence on each other.

During the course of their formal relationship Francis had sometimes had occasion to steer his companion away from an excessive reliance upon his opinion that could keep her from experiencing God as ultimate source and guide. It was not, however, his impetus that was behind the 1616 retreat. She herself longed to surrender herself "perfectly" to God. The tradition of holiness in which she was steeped oriented her in just such a direction. To go to God, at the height of perfection, was to go even without the aid of human ties.

So when she went on retreat to reflect upon detachment and found herself unable to do so because she was absorbed with concern for her ailing director, the moment was ripe for the two of them, through the medium of letters, to begin to divest themselves of each other's affection on the slippery summits of abandonment. At the climax of the retreat de Sales wrote to his friend:

Furthermore, my very dear Mother, you must not take any kind of wet nurse but you must leave the one who nevertheless still remains and become like a poor little pitiful creature completely naked before the throne of divine mercy, without ever asking for any act or feeling whatsoever for this creature. At the same time you must become indifferent to everything that it please God to give you, without considering if it is I who serve as your wet nurse. Otherwise, if you took a wet nurse to your own liking you would not be going out of yourself but you would still have your own way, which is, however, that you wish to avoid at all cost.

This retreat marked the culmination of the gradual weaning away of the directorial aspect of their relationship that had been going on for some time. Bishop and mother superior continued to work intensely together on the concerns of the Visitation, and the language of love still flavored their correspondence. Their hearts were still "one," but their unity was now constellated around absolute dependence of the will on God alone.

It is not clear that this change in the inner structure of the friendship meant the same thing for the two parties. For Jane, a woman formed in the relational network of marriage and motherhood, the new distance was most painful. Yet she herself had initiated the process, striving forward in her own quest for perfection as she understood it. It is not clear from the sources available to us what this detachment meant for Francis. How much was this shift reflective of his wisdom as a director, who freed his directee to belong utterly to God? How much was it a sign of some growing weariness, a sense of not being able to "carry" her anymore? How much was this a move in the direction of a classic Christian spirituality that highlights the values of separation



and autonomy over against interrelationship and intimacy? How much was this a spirit-led motivation that was bringing the partners home to God?

One thing we do know for certain: the tradition of Christian spirituality provides a symbolic framework of love that structures the experience around the transformation that occurs when love and death in their fullest human expressions intersect and explode into new life. This transformative pattern of love and death informed the life-giving, spiritual friendship that Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal shared.

The final phase of their friendship lasted until Francis' death in 1622. Throughout the last years they were both on the road and much absorbed with the business of bringing into being that which revitalized the world: he with preaching, writing, and his Episcopal duties; she with overseeing the foundations of numerous new Visitation communities. During this time they each greatly expanded their circles of friends. The affectionate language of friendship flavored the letters of this period as well. We find in both their correspondences, and especially in Francis' letter to the abbess of Port-Royal, Angélique Arnauld, reminiscences of the fervor that characterized his friendship with Jane.

Their last meeting was in Lyons late in 1622. They had not seen each other for several years. She had for some time been nourishing a desire to unburden her soul to him. They also had the business of their community to discuss. At the meeting the urgent business of the congregation took precedence. Francis pressed home the point that it should concern them most. Jane could speak to him at length later when they met again in Annecy, at the motherhouse.

They never met again. He died of a stroke just after Christmas of that year. They "spoke" together again in Annecy as he had predicted. But the conversation took place between Jane and Francis's spirit which she felt hovered somewhere over his body now lying in state in the rotunda of the Visitation. But in that conversation Jane felt "answered." Perhaps she had finally owned and integrated into herself all that until now had seemed to belong to him. Perhaps now his answers and her answers were not separate but indeed one. Perhaps their friendship was now complete.

Certainly Jane was left alone to propagate the spirit of Salesian living as expressed in the community of their co-creation. She was to be the major interpreter of his life and thought, the one to ensure that the vision they had shared remained vigorous and clear. This she did with amazing fidelity, meeting the challenges of the institute as they emerged, pressing on in the often trying journey of loving abandonment to God, letting the spiritual vision they had created continue to shape and transform her into the gentle Jesus that they both adored.

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