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FRANCIS DE SALES, JANE DE CHANTAL
AND THE MINISTRY OF LOVE
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Last week at a cocktail party, I was challenged with an arresting question. "What claims your love?" my conversation partner asked. My immediate response was, unsurprisingly, "My children and my husband, of course." But the question stayed with me beyond the evening gathering. "What claims my love?" What pulls and tugs at me from the core of my being? Where do my deepest desires lie? What captures my restless imagination, feeds my hope, shapes my dreams? The answer, beyond the obvious, began to take form. The answer was, in fact, the church. That strange, wonderful, living entity that proclaims itself to be the body of Christ. That perplexing, maddening, magnificent, polychromed, multi-textured, many voiced reality. The church claims my love.

In bed later that night I continued to ponder my specific place, my small contribution to that body, a body made whole through the unique contributions that each of us bring. Lay, religious, priest, woman, man, child, adult, celibate, married, single. Each of us has a role to play, a ministry within that body which no one else can provide.

This evening I would like to reflect with you upon ministry in the church, a calling that is not the prerogative of the "professionals" among us but a calling that belongs to us all. And I would like to undertake this reflection through the lens of the lives of the two Salesian saints, Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal, under whose aegis this college is situated, two extraordinary people whose
love was claimed by the church and who had the courage and audacity to live out that love in innovative, even prophetic ways.

Their vision of the Christian life and especially their vision of ministry within the community of the church, despite the fact that it originated in seventeenth century France and Savoy, is a rich resource upon which we can draw in twentieth century America. I would even venture to say that, if we were to set ourselves the task of reflecting upon church ministry in the context of the whole historical sweep of the church's life, we would be hard pressed to find two figures who are more attractive, whose styles and philosophies of ministry are more thought-provoking, and who challenge us more firmly yet gently to make our church affiliation more than half-hearted membership or well-intentioned exercises in institutional maintenance. Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal persuade us that our efforts in the church on behalf of one another and the world are in fact dynamic, spirit-prompted, life-transforming ministries that can rightfully claim our deepest loves.

So this evening I would like to invoke the memories of Francis and Jane in three specific contexts. After a brief biographical introduction I would like to consider first, the young Francis de Sales and his mission to the Protestants in the Chablais; second, Francis' differences from and attitudes toward one of his contemporaries, Pierre de Bérulle; and third, Jane de Chantal as foundress of the order of the Visitation of Holy Mary. In so doing I will have drawn portraits of, first, a man who practiced the biblical command to love one's enemies; second, a man who gave the name friend to another whose ideas differed greatly from his own; and third, a women who gave her life to the lived realization of the community of love. I can think of no other portrait I would rather draw and present to men and women at this moment in the church's history.

First, the biographical introduction. We discover Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal's in the first decades of the seventeenth century in France and the duchy of Savoy. They met in 1604 when he, at the age of thirty seven, was the bishop of Geneva and she a young widow of thirty two with four small children, struggling to make sense of a growing call to give herself completely to God. They lived in an era of the Christian past which in retrospect appears to us both as a wonderful, energizing period and as a sad one. Everywhere there was spiritual hunger. The hunger took form in new intentional communities of religious and laity, in prayer and discussion groups, in the publication of new books on the spiritual life, in new translations of classic books on prayer, in the organization of seminaries and the revitalization of religious education, in the promotion of pilgrimages and the widespread practice of spiritual direction. Everywhere, as well, was the sad evidence of the great split in the Western Church which we now refer to as the Reformation and Counter-Reformation: we see the division in invective polemics, in family and regional hatreds, in the devastating signs of violence to persons and property that accompanied the reforms and the ensuing Wars of Religion.

The widow and the bishop met at a series of lenten sermons he was giving in Dijon where she was staying with her father not long after her husband's tragic death. The story of their nineteen year friendship merits more attention than I can give it here but suffice it to say that in the course of their relationship they moved from being spiritual director and directee, to becoming deeply committed spiritual friends, then co-founders of an innovative religious community for women, and finally, to becoming recognized leaders in the church of their day.
The two of them shared a distinctive vision, a spirituality we would call it today, which shaped their personal relationship to God and others and which profoundly influenced the way in which they exercised their leadership. The spiritual tradition which is their legacy to us is known as "Salesian." Its particular hallmarks are these: Jane and Francis believed the world to be the creation of a God whose most telling name is Love. This loving God and creation itself was best imaged for our two saints as a world of hearts. God's heart, overflowing in creative abundance gives birth to a world whose deepest impulse is to return to God in love. Thus human hearts, made in the divine image and likeness, are designed to know and love God. In fact, in the dense imagery of Salesian metaphor, God's heart "breathes," in and out, and our hearts' desires breathe in concert, in inspiration and aspiration, with the heartbeat of God.

But the Salesian world of hearts is not confined to this divine-human reciprocity. Human hearts, too, breath-beat in concert with one another, quickening each other's deepest longings, leading each other home to their loving source. In Salesian spirituality, all genuine love is seen to proceed from and return back to God. Thus the cultivation of intentional loves, especially the love of spiritual friends, is characteristic of Salesian spirituality. Characteristic as well is the affirmation that love of God is not the profession or prerogative of any one particular group: cleric or lay, rich or poor, man or woman, educated or uneducated, celibate or married or single. The call to love, to be loved, to be called into loving service, knows no restrictions or boundaries in the Salesian world of hearts.

All are called to love. But the way one loves is essential. Our two saints turned for their model to Jesus who, in Matthew, chapter 11, reveals his own heart. "Come to me and learn from me Y for I am gentle and humble of heart." The gentle, humble heart of Jesus takes on life within each heart. In the cultivation of what Jane and Francis called "the little virtues" -- patience, simplicity, gentleness, humility, and the like -- one begins to "live Jesus," to allow the love of God, hidden in the heart, to become manifest in the quality of one's relationships and in the interactions with one's world. This lived realization of the divine heart is neither sentimental nor simplistic. Anyone who has aspired to a great and generous love of neighbor and has found that it is a lot easier and loftier to love one's neighbor generically than particularly no doubt will agree.

Living the heart of the gentle, humble Jesus, exercising ministry through the cultivation of the little virtues, living into a genuine community of reconciled love, and then really practicing the disciplines of such a community: this is an inviting proposition but, deeply considered, a daunting one. However, I think it is worthy of more than consideration. I think it is a vision that can sustain and compel a heart not only in moments of the heart's expansion but when one is disheartened, hard-hearted, or doesn't have the heart anymore.

The Salesian spiritual vision -- this living world of interconnected hearts -- was not simply an ideal that Francis and Jane preached. They tried to live it, in all the challenge of particularity. They tried to exercise leadership to facilitate the emergence of a genuine community of relational love, a church that enfleshed the very life of the God it proclaimed.
The Mission in the Chablais

Early in his career, Francis de Sales went to the Chablais, a region northeast of Annecy, in Savoy, where he was in residence. This was, as I said, a time of terrible polarization in Christendom. Geneva was officially a Protestant city -- it was John Calvin's great experiment in theocracy -- and practicing the Roman Catholic faith there was illegal. Although Francis was co-adjutor to the bishop of Geneva, he and his bishop were in exile in the Savoyard hilltown of Annecy. Francis embarked on a risky mission to the Protestant-held region to evangelize and persuade people to return to the faith of Rome. Let me pause a moment and emphasize that Francis lived in an era very different from our own. Today, in our post-Vatican II church we look with hope to the ecumenical dialogue going on among separated Christian denominations, we recognize the validity of baptism in all Christian denominations, we (thank God) no longer hurl invectives, seek to harass, torture or condemn to death those on opposite sides of Protestant-Catholic confessional barriers. They did just that in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, although some of the terrible bloodshed of the sixteenth century had given way to vicious polemics and political maneuvering for power by the beginning of the seventeenth.

I cannot anachronistically claim that Francis de Sales was not in many ways a product of his own time or that he possessed an ecumenical mind-set worthy of late twentieth century America. He was a loyal adherent to the Church of Rome and in his day the church of Rome could not admit that Protestants were anything but the enemy, the unsaved. Nonetheless, how de Sales approached the evangelization of the Chablais is strikingly out of keeping for his time. In a very real sense he is -- as Pope Paul VI said in 1967 -- a "precursor of Vatican II." He approached his mission in a genuine spirit of love. "Do everything through love, nothing through force," he was later fond of saying to those under his spiritual guidance. He practiced what he preached. He came to the Chablais not out of hatred, not out of fear, not zealous to condemn or even correct those who were believed to be in error. He came filled with the love of that magnificent God-heart that aches and longs so poignantly for human response. "Geneva must have its walls shaken by charity, be invaded by charity, be retaken by charity," he was quoted as saying.

His methods were the methods of loving persuasion. He engaged in genuinely respectful face to face conversation with Calvin's successor and Geneva's foremost reformed theologian, Theodore Beza (and this in an age when polemicists were prone to blacken their opponents' reputation, accuse them of hideous crimes against God and humankind, and smear them through vicious cartooning). He published persuasive tracts (which we now refer to as The Controversies) that focused not on attacking the Protestant position but upon artfully drawing a carefully rendered portrait of the Roman Catholic position, thus inviting readers into a world which could "win their hearts." His preaching (when it was possible), likewise focused on the fulsome articulation of the Catholic faith in all its rich symmetry rather than upon negative characterizations or even disputed doctrinal questions. "Heart speaks to heart," de Sales taught, even at this early point in his career. The heart grounded in the heart of God calls forth that love from other hearts.

But the arts of respectful conversation, constructive apologetics and persuasive preaching were not for the young minister simply means to an end. His respectful methods were based on a real affirmation of the intrinsic dignity and worth of each individual person, who is to be reverenced as such, even when (perhaps most when) the ideas they hold or the affiliations that claim them make...
them an official "enemy." The scriptural challenge "love your enemies" was for Francis de Sales neither naive sentimentality nor arrogant condescension. It was in fact a risky, almost existentially free, trust in the power of God to act through a narrow vulnerable human instrument, an alignment less with a particular program than with the source of that program - love itself. Free to fail, free to be used in a life giving way if that is to be.

A fair amount has been written about the young Francis de Sales as proto-ecumenist, and always it is his method, his approach that is held up as exemplary. He is credited with "transforming the style of controversy, making it more objective, more serious and more courteous." During the first flush of enthusiasm in the decade of Vatican II's renewal, Yves Congar applauded Francis for the "genius of his evangelical charity" which raised him above the limitations of his moment in history. What might the saint say in the Geneva of the twentieth century, Congar conjectured: "What statement might he bring to the Council of John XXIII? We can be sure of one thing: They would be thoughts and words dictated by his charity and his sole desire of following the indications of the will of God."

We see Salesian inspired charity in action in the way the Savoyard advocated that the Roman Church's perspective on scripture be presented to Protestant apologists. You will note that his approach is not at all a shrewd maneuvering, a calculated appraisal of "what will work" nor is it an aggressive assertion of the correctness of his own position. Rather, he is able to speak directly and intelligently to the charges of the "opponents" in a language they well understand as well as to "translate" the official position he represents in terms comprehensible to his listeners.

It seems to me above all that we must be very attentive to the manner in which we propose Catholic doctrine, so that just as reason is on our side, so too appearances, brilliance and beauty may not be lacking to us. For example: regarding what you wrote me about showing the insufficiency of Scripture alone for the complete governing of the Church, at this expression "insufficiency of Scripture" they would all cry out blasphemy. So I would prefer to avow that Scripture is very sufficient to instruct us about everything, and to say that the insufficiency is in us who, without Tradition and the magisterium of the Church, would not be able to determine the sense it should have, nor the consequences that can be drawn from it or the direction and government of the Christian people; because in this way -- the reality remaining the same -- the explanation is more appealing and plausible to those whose ears hear nothing but the cry that we scorn the Holy Letter.

In other words, Francis de Sales was a man of genuine reconciliation, a man for whom love and its realization was not simply the goal but the means. So accessible was his thought, grounded though it was in the thought world of the Counter-Reform, that he was described as early as 1673 as "a man to heal the differences" by an Anglican professor at Oxford who was the English translator of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, de Sales' famous book on devotion for the laity.
The Relationship with Pierre de Bérulle

So Francis de Sales was a man about whom it could be said that he practiced love of enemies. It might also be accurate to say that the deep and God-centered love that situated him so lovingly in relation to his enemies situated him in the same way to his friends. What do I mean? I mean that Francis' love of others was not based primarily on mutual interests or shared points of view, although he would be the first to say that those with whom he converged in these ways were especially dear to him. But it was possible for him to have respectful and profoundly gracious friendships with persons whose perspectives were quite different from his own. In this regard I will look briefly at his relationship with Pierre de Bérulle, founder of what we in later days know as the "French School" of Spirituality. I choose this example of friendship not because it was especially intimate but because it is exemplary of de Sales' ministry as a man of the Church.

As I have suggested, the Savoyard made much of friendships in the spiritual life. The mutual and equal love that friends shared, especially as it was grounded in God, was, in his view, a divine gift given. But, genuine friendships did not have their origins simply in shared interests or complementary views. Their origins were in God and God's love. Thus, all who engaged in works of love on behalf of God could be considered as part of the circle of friends in Christ. Francis de Sales and Pierre (later Cardinal) de Bérulle not only knew and corresponded with one another, they were originally nurtured in similar spiritual nurseries. Both men were products of Jesuit education. Both had Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* firmly imprinted on their hearts. Both had been intimates at the famous Parisian spiritual Salon of Madame Acarie; in fact Bérulle had introduced de Sales to that illustrious circle where they shared in ongoing dialogues about issues spiritual and ecclesial with other notables favoring a mystical renaissance in France. Although as they matured they found themselves widely separated by their activities, we have extant in fragmented and incomplete form a correspondence that binds the two men from 1605 to 1622, only a few months before de Sales' death. The letters show the admiration Monseigneur de Sales had for Bérulle's reforming work, especially for the establishment of the French Oratory designed for the spiritual renewal of the French clergy. These letters reveal to us the mutual regard of these two men who saw themselves as engaged in the shared mission of the church: to renew, reform, and revitalize, especially from within, through prayer and surrender to the will of God.

Yet in hindsight (and these nuances were not entirely lost on contemporary sensibilities) the Bérullian and Salesian spiritual traditions emerge as two very distinctive currents of thought and practice whose basic theological premises, while firmly rooted in Roman Catholicism, became quite divergent -- so much so that by the end of the century, in an era when Bérulle's perspective dominated, de Sales' works could in contrast be suspected, possibly even deemed unacceptable.

I won't belabor the point but briefly suggest how the two men's perspectives gradually began to diverge. First, as I suggested, both men were originally schooled in the Christian humanist optimism that so thoroughly permeated the Jesuit schools. The Christian humanist agenda set great store in human capacity and emphasized human efforts to know and love a God who is revealed in the particulars of common daily life. "Finding God in all things" is a leitmotif of the Ignatian spirit. But Bérulle consciously broke with his humanist training, and came to develop a view of the human-divine relationship which was more guarded, more aware of the profound limitations of human nature, more steeped in an Augustinian sense of the acute need for God's
grace, more attentive to God's otherness and ontological distance than nearness. Similarly, where Salesian spirituality stressed the horizontal and relational dimension of love of God (i.e., in friendship and community), Berullian spirituality tended to emphasize the vertical and individual nature of human-divine love. If one could characterize this difference in an nutshell one might say that when one reads Francis de Sales on love of God, one experiences the feel of a gentle yet radical conformity, the sense of a lover surrendering to a beloved. When one reads Bérulle, one is aware of a servant dwarfed in nothingness at the feet of a king.

I could go on, but suffice it to say that the two men developed two schools of spiritual teaching which rested on fundamentally distinct ways of imaging God. Yet the point I want to make here is that, despite real differences, these two experienced their shared work and shared life as one. Their unity was not uniformity. It was unity founded on their mutual love of God and God's people; they commended each other's work, were advocates for one another, spoke respectfully of each other's persons and ministry within the Body of Christ. Their friendship went deeper than shared perspectives. It was grounded in love.

Jane de Chantal and the Visitation

Unity not uniformity. This too was Jane de Chantal's goal in the administration of the congregation of the Visitation that she and Bishop de Sales founded. In many ways the Visitation of Holy Mary was a unique religious community. First, it was a community founded solely for women, rather that a women's branch of a men's community. Second, it was founded for women who at the time would have been considered unsuitable candidates for religious life. The Visitation was designed for women who felt a deep, drawing to a life of contemplative prayer yet whose circumstances in life would bar them from entry into the religious orders of the day -- the familial responsibilities of widowhood, poor health, physical handicaps, advanced age, a delicate constitution or sensibility not attracted to the severe asceticism so in vogue at the time. The Visitation was to be a special niche in the Church for these women, a place for them to dispense their love of God and express it among themselves and in limited ministry to the poor and sick in the neighborhood. It was also to provide a restful retreat haven for married women who needed to periodically refresh themselves from their household responsibilities, a ministry virtually unheard of in that day. The community was originally designed as a simple congregation, not a formal religious order. So, instead of strict enclosure and lifelong vows, the Visitandines were subject to yearly renewable "simple" vows and available to move in and out of the confines of community as the need of neighbor or family necessitated. Through the accidents of history, the Visitation eventually modified its form and transformed into a formal, canonical order, but that need not concern us here.

What should concern us is the deep vision that guided its creation - the hope that Jane and Francis had that they could structure a Christian community based not primarily upon formal structures, rules and external legislation but upon the bonds of love. The Visitation was intended to be the living expression of that Salesian world of hearts I spoke of earlier: women, drawn together in shared love of God, living into the gentleness, humility, patience, and relational graciousness that was the hallmark of a heart in which Jesus lived, creating a unity that sprang from regard for one
another as children of the same loving God, attentive and solicitous to the least among them, nothing forced, nothing harsh, nothing hard except the hard, hard work of genuine love.

"Nothing is so strong as real gentleness, nothing so gentle as real strength," Francis was quoted as saying. That was to be both the mode of community life and the leadership style of the Visitation of Holy Mary. We have extant hundreds of letters penned by Jane de Chantal when she was superior addressed to other superiors and novice mistresses. These letters teach the methods of guidance particular to the Visitation.

Believe me, (she wrote to one), an affectionate and motherly love along with a gentle and thoughtful firmness win over hearts. Continue to make this spirit your own in just such ways and you and all the sisters will profit from it.  

To another she exhorted:

I beg you my dear sister, govern your community with a great expansiveness of heart: give the sisters a holy liberty of spirit, and banish from your mind and theirs a servile spirit of constraint. If a sister seems to lack confidence in you, don't for that reason show her the least coldness, but gain her trust through love and kindness. Y The more solicitous, open, and supportive you are with them, the more you will win their hearts. This is the best way of helping them advance toward the perfection of their vocation.

To win hearts was the goal of guidance. To go to love by way of love. It was a radical vision, one not adequately tested in the long history of Christian religious life. And love was to be not only the dynamic that sustained community relationship, not only the style in which leadership was exercised, it was to be the very bond that held the network of Visitation houses together. Unlike many other religious groups which, having grown beyond the confines of one house, create a network of houses organized in complex systems of hierarchy dependency and limited local autonomy, the Visitation network was differently structured. The institutional bonds that held the network together were relational, not legal in nature, for the organization of the Visitation allowed for the autonomy of each house. The "Holy Source" or Mother House at Annecy retained only the authority of respect and tradition. There was no legal structure provided for the conformity of the individual houses. While there were custom books, constitutions, and other documents that were followed in order to maintain a unity of spirit, the binding force that ensured that unity was simple love.

What I have hoped to suggest to you by way of these brief descriptions of Francis de Sales' mission of evangelization in the Chablais, his cordial friendship with Pierre de Bérulle, a man of divergent theological perspective, and Jane de Chantal's guidance and vision of the Visitation of Holy Mary - that "little kingdom of charity" -- is that as you leave this campus that bears de Sales' name and as you consider your own contributions to the church, you will be mindful of this man and this woman who lived so long ago. Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal were rooted so firmly in a trust in the goodness and graciousness of the God of love that they were willing to let the reality of that love shape everything they did, everything they hoped to be. They allowed their hearts to be invaded, scoured, filled with the heart of the gentle, humble Jesus. They chose to win and gain in
friendship the hearts of those whom others would seek to vanquish as enemies. They were able to see beyond theological divergences into the common care of shared work in the church. They affirmed that the church was a kingdom of charity where all, whatever their profession or employment, whatever their educational attainment, whatever their status as clergy or lay, whether woman or man, handicapped or able-bodied, wealthy or poor, were equally - radically equally - engaged in the primary, really the only truly necessary ministry, the ministry of knowing and of doing and of being God's love.

NOTES

1. I have used the English versions of Sts. François de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal's names because of their familiarity. However, Pierre de Bérulle is never known by an English equivalent. [Back to the text]


6. Devos, 247. [Back to the text]

7. Congar, 9. [Back to the text]


11. Jeanne de Chantal, Sa Vie et ses oeuvres, 557. [Back to the text]