CENTER VALLEY – Mel Gibson has worked wonders in terms of promoting discussion about *The Passion of the Christ*. Viewpoints differ, as they do with every work of art, but the fact remains that this movie has become a source of newfound appreciation for what passion is, in both its painful and redemptive dimensions.

While the film may be new, the lived appreciation of passion is an ongoing part of the history of Christianity. On this day, four hundred years ago, one shining example of sacred love began when two friends first met.

It was the Friday after Ash Wednesday. The bishop of Geneva – Francis de Sales – traveled to Dijon to deliver the annual Lenten sermons. The bishop of Dijon made sure that his recently widowed sister – Jane Frances Fremyot de Chantal – was present, not only to hear the lessons of sacred eloquence, but to meet the acclaimed orator. And that meeting would be the start of a life-long relationship that continues to bear fruits of holiness even to this day.

Both Francis and Jane believed that their meeting was providential. In moments of prayer, each had “seen” the other even before they met in person. They understood that God had something in mind for them (“God had given me to you,” he later said), though they knew not what.

Jane’s life, to this point, had grown exceedingly difficulty. Widowed after only six years of marriage, with three young children to raise, she lived at the estate of her father-in-law, where she was treated almost like an indentured servant. She longed to live for God and submitted to the whims of an excessively strict spiritual director ... until she met Francis.

With his characteristic humility and gentleness, Francis led Jane’s spiritual life along the path of freedom, the true freedom of the Spirit. Each of them ceaselessly aspiring to live in abandonment to God’s will, they corresponded at length; living at some distance from each
other, they could meet in person only on a few occasions. That would change when Jane moved to Annecy, where bishop de Sales resided, and where they would chart a new course in the history of religious life in the Church.

Together they founded the order of the Visitation of Holy Mary. Unlike monasteries of strict observance and exterior discipline, the Visitation was founded on the single vow of charity (“We have no bond but the bond of love”), and accepted into its ranks elderly and infirm sisters who could not otherwise endure the customary rigors of religious life. The Visitation sisters were also unique in that they would regularly “visit” townsfolk who were sick or otherwise in need. (Not long after, St. Vincent de Paul followed this inspiration in his founding of the Daughters of Charity, who would bring this apostolic approach to the forefront of the consecrated life.)

The Visitation would later gain prominence through the mystical experience of one of their sisters – St. Margaret Mary Alacoque – who was instrumental in spreading the Sacred Heart devotion throughout the Church. Today, Visitation monasteries exist throughout the world, and holiness remains at the forefront of their lives, as witnessed by the martyrdom of seven Sisters in Spain early last century and the saintly life of one of the Visitation pupils, Leonie de Sales Aviat (canonized in 2001).

The passion for holiness that marks the life of the Visitation began with the friendship of their founders. That a bishop and a widow would develop so close a relationship might be, for some, a cause of concern. Yet their friendship modeled a union of hearts embraced in and by the one divine heart. As Francis described it in one of his letters of Jane, theirs was a “bond of perfection … [which] grows in time and takes on new power by enduring.” When human hearts are fashioned not from realizing self-centered desires but by cultivating God-centered union, true passion reaches its peak and interpersonal friendship finds its fulfillment.

Writing about this passion, Prof. Wendy Wright notes that “The Salesian heart, of Jesus and of humankind, is a crucified heart, willing to be broken and pierced for its beloved, a heart opened so wide that nothing can fail to enter whether it be delight or sorrow.” Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal knew and lived by that sacred heart. Mel Gibson provides us with a cinematic meditation that makes the depth of that heart viscerally real. That same heart transforms our lives when, in and through our love of God, we, too, find a best friend.

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