Thank you, sisters, for the opportunity to celebrate this great feast with you. We, Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, remain indebted to the Visitation of Holy Mary, and so this day I pray not only with you but in gratitude for you.

When Mother Antoinette invited me to speak with you, she indicated that I could choose as a topic something that I've been working on. Well, one thing I've been working on this summer is my golf game ... but you really don't want to hear about that! The other, and much more important, thing that I've been involved with is the transformation of Allentown College into DeSales University, which will happen on January 1st of next year. As part of this change, I spent all of last year working on the creation of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture. It's a new venture, a research and development institute of sorts, that I now have to get up and running.

As much as that sounds like a sales pitch, it is not the subject of my talk this afternoon ... at least not completely. But I would like to speak on a related subject, what I've entitled "St. Jane de Chantal and the 'Culture' of Sanctity." What I'd like to suggest is how, I think, your Holy Mother engendered a certain "culture" in the religious life of the Church and how, today, you are in a position to bring the values of that culture to our contemporary world.

Notions of Culture

First, it would probably help if we had a sense of what this oft-used word "culture" is all about. Commonly speaking, culture has a two-sided meaning. On the one hand, it is a human activity, that which creates a certain style or way of life. Usually when we speak of different "cultures" we think of different language groups or ethnic foods. But there's more to it. Think, for instance, of the worlds of art and music. In these and similar realms, we human beings create culture from our ideas and values. When ideas become expressed in creative ways that then become accepted as valuable by society, a culture is formed. In
people are shaped to think and act in a way that is guided by these cultural ideas and values.

Let's consider one nearby example ... life on the Main Line of Philadelphia. Here you have what may very well be the most powerful and pervasive instrument of modern culture ... television stations! Beaming their views far and wide, TV creates an image and shapes the way people today think and act. And the craze these days is "reality TV" ... sadly, the violence it perpetuates is all too real.

Along with this creative notion, there's another side to culture, a more reflective notion. In this sense, culture is how we appear to others, how we comport ourselves, the way we reflect or show forth something about who we are. We speak, for instance, of "cultured" people and usually have in mind those who show a certain refinement in word and deed, who display that they are well-bred, well-educated, well-off. Or, conversely, we say of those who have limited social skills that they "have no class" or "have no culture."

Again, the Main Line gives us a good example: just mention the name of this locale to anyone familiar with the city, and it is readily associated with wealth and prestige and status. On the other hand, at our university we have a program called "dress for success" -- we actually have to teach young people how to dress and how to eat dinner so that they can fit in with today's business culture.

So this is the common sense understanding of culture: the idea that culture is both a creative activity and an identifiable way of life. But what, you may ask, does the Visitation of Holy Mary have to do with this notion of culture, especially here on the Main Line? The answer is ... nothing! You are not engaged in any of the activity that creates this culture, and by your vowed life you have given up all expressions of that culture. If anything, your contemplative life as Visitandine nuns points to a culture seemingly far removed from here. The habits that you wear, the schedule you keep, the cloister in which you live ... most folks would consider these things to be signs of a world of long ago and far away, a religious "culture" that is rather antiquated and irrelevant to today's society.

Forgive me if this sounds dismal ... especially on a feast day! Let us, instead, feast on another, deeper and more fundamental notion of culture which shows just how mistaken the "common" view is.

In keeping with the Christian Humanism of our Salesian spirituality, culture is not simply the product or by-product of human activity. Rather, culture actually precedes activity and, rightly understood, becomes the fulfillment of that activity. Let me explain this idea with reference to our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II. In my estimation, the notion of culture, properly understood, is the overarching and underlying thread to all that he says and writes.
Recall that the Pope is a world-class philosopher. In his consideration of the phenomenon of human being and living, "culture" is something truly personal; in other words, it is not a sociological concept but a human reality. In fact, culture is humanity. "There is only one culture," John Paul claims, "that of man, by man and for man" (Ex corde Ecclesiae, no. 3). So, culture is something to be found within us; it encompasses, our human nature with its thoughts and images and concepts. This is why he says that "the first and most important task" with regard to culture is accomplished within our hearts and depends on our understanding of ourselves and of our own destiny" (Centesimus annus, no. 51).

So, culture is first and foremost an interior reality. Nevertheless it becomes evident in our exterior actions. It appears in how we look "out" at and live our lives in the world. It is reflected in how we deal with fundamental human events, like birth and love and work and even death. (And all around us are signs of the accuracy of Holy Father's description that we dwell in a culture of death more so than a culture of life.)

In this deeper, visionary notion, the Holy Father cuts to the core when he names the central feature of any and every culture. "At the heart of every culture," he writes, "lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God." The religious life, then, is not one feature among many in culture. It is its essence and lifeblood, even if a majority of folks fail to recognize it as such. The pope continues: "Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence. When this question is eliminated, the culture and moral life of nations are corrupted" (Centesimus annus, no. 24). In his most recent encyclical, he states this religious idea in more positive terms: "Lying deep in every culture, there appears this impulse toward a fulfillment. We may say, then, that culture itself has an intrinsic capacity to receive divine Revelation" (Fides et Ratio, no. 71).

The mystery of God ... this, ultimately, is what culture is all about. A transcendent dimension and eternal truth ... this is what the common sense view of culture lacks, what the Main Line and every other part of the world so desperately needs in its quest for human fulfillment and happiness. This is why your life and that of your Holy Mother are so important today. This is why we should, indeed, celebrate today's feast ... because St. Jane de Chantal offers us an exemplar of Christian culture, and your contemplative life provides the world with a vision, however blurred it sometimes seems, a window onto the soul of all culture.

The Culture of Sanctity

Here let me pause to express a small apology and to confront a big paradox. The apology is my admission of knowing precious little of the marvelous life of St. Jane. For this, I rely on the wisdom of others, especially Elisabeth Stopp and Wendy Wright. And both of these writers have named the paradox that endangers my thesis when they speak about "hiddenness." According to both of them, the life of St. Jane and of the Visitation is
characterized by growth in humility, by progress in self-effacement, by the perfection of abandonment to the will of God. If this "hiddenness" is the dominant aspect of your lives, can anyone speak of a visible, creative impact that contemplative life can have on culture? Well, on the occasion of this feast day, let me try!

What I do know about St. Jane leads me confidently to say that she is truly a woman of culture. And, as I hope to show by way of a quick biographical review, she is also a woman for culture.

St. Jane's life before the founding of the Visitation demonstrates the common sense notion of culture as a distinguished way of life. Her social rank as a noble woman clearly affected how she lived. As Wendy Wright notes, her place in life as wife and mother "entailed being an educated, cultivated individual who was capable of managing the affairs of large estates and multiple households, attending to the education of children and the needs of the local population, and fulfilling the social obligations that accompany such a position" ("Two Faces of Christ: Jeanne de Chantal," p. 354). Later, St. Jane would bring this very same cultured life to the cloister of the Visitation. There she managed the affairs of numerous monasteries, attended to the formative education of the sisters, and fulfilled the social obligation of caring for the sick and needy.

Beyond this socialization, St. Jane's contribution to life within the cloister reveals a creative activity that engendered a new "culture" of religious life. And this cultural innovation comes in two ways: in form and in spirit. The new form is the way of life upon which the Visitation monasteries were founded. As Elisabeth Stopp explains: “An unclerestary community, doing a small amount of active work outside, open to older women and widows as well as to the ordinary young postulant, receiving those who longed for the contemplative state of life although their health might not be sufficiently robust to stand the hardship of a more austere rule, substituting the simpler Little Office of Our Lady for the full office - all this meant real innovation at the beginning of the seventeenth century” (Hidden in God, p. 17).

The other, and more lasting, innovation appears in the distinctively Salesian spirit that enlivens the life of these monasteries even now in the twenty-first century. The aim of this religious order, according to its founding father, "is to give God daughters of prayer and souls so interior that they will be found worthy to serve His infinite Majesty and adore Him in spirit and truth." St. Francis de Sales then notes the distinctiveness of this ideal:

Let the great established orders of the Church honor Our Lord with heroic practices and striking virtues. I would like my daughters to have no other intention than to glorify Him with their lowness, and this little Institute of the Visitation to be like a humble dovecote of innocent doves whose concern and energy is directed to meditating on the law of the Lord without being
Today, on this feast, we celebrate the fact that, on the one hand, this inspired vision for religious life has been fulfilled, particularly in the person of St. Jane de Chantal. On the other hand, we acknowledge that, in a sense, the expressed intention of St. Francis de Sales has also failed ... but in a way that turns out to be a blessing for our world.

In the person of Jane de Chantal, we see the heroic virtue of a saint. Noted for the strength and resolution with which she responded to God's inspirations in diverse states of life, St. Jane remains a model for people today. As wife and mother, as spiritual daughter and friend, as religious sister and mother - St. Jane has managed to integrate true devotion in every aspect of her life. And what is central in all of this - what Elisabeth Stopp calls here "particular model of sanctity" - is St. Jane's attitude toward the mystery of God: "She doesn't solve our problems; she points to a mystery and invites us to share in it" (*Hidden in God*, p. 109). And since this mystery of God is "at the heart of every culture," according to the pope, then St. Jane de Chantal is rightly held up to every generation as a model, an example, an ideal of one who has embraced and lived and shared the culture of sanctity.

And this is why I would like to suggest, strange as it may sound, that the founding intention for the Visitation has also failed and that in this failure our contemporary culture can find a true blessing.

Recall that St. Francis de Sales wished that "this little Institute of the Visitation" be focused on the interior life of prayer "without being seen nor understood by the world." Well, I'm happy to say that the Visitation of Holy Mary, in keeping with the saintly life of her whose feast we celebrate, has been seen by the world ... and we thank God for it. Its life of hidden, little virtues has been fulfilled in monasteries throughout the world ... and we cannot do without it. If true culture is the way in which we face the question of human existence, then you give us an answer. If deep within every culture is an impulse toward human fulfillment, then your life realizes it. If culture has the capacity to receive divine Revelation, then the very existence of Visitation monasteries in our midst offers us a unique and irreplaceable presence.

Your way of life, modeled on that of St. Jane de Chantal, makes a radical statement to our world. It is, as Wendy Wright claims, a statement about the belovedness of the "lowly" ones who inhabit a Visitation monastery, a statement about God's favour ... resting especially on these [sisters], not when they "cross over" to imitate the strength and power that is culturally recognizable, but when they claim the giftedness that society overlooks (*The Visitation of Holy Mary as Ideal Women's Community,* p. 299).
Perhaps our world does not fully understand this; but there is no doubt that our culture desperately needs it. In a society motivated by pragmatism, captivated by hedonism, and dominated by materialism, your life of simple tasks frequently interrupted by prayer represents "a spirit of detachment and a continual mortification of the will" (Stopp, Hidden in God, p. 21). And in this way your presence reminds us all that true culture is built not on human achievement but on God's presence and grace in our lives. In keeping with what we just heard in the Office reading from the Song of Songs: you are the garden-dwellers, welcomed in God's eyes, and we - the whole world - are listening for your voice.

And this is why, as the director of a Salesian Center for Faith and Culture, I will conclude this talk with a request and an offer. The request is simple: please pray for us! To establish a new university and a research center that will bring Salesian spirituality to the world is a formidable task, and one that requires significant financial investment. So please pray that we find worthy benefactors to support our efforts.

The offer I have for you is more unusual. I do not yet know all the details to make it happen, but, at the suggestion of our president (Fr. Bernie O'Connor), we would like to have DeSales University "adopt" this monastery of the Visitation here in Philadelphia! Through our students, we will provide you with labor, we will offer you assistance, we will give you support. In turn, our students will pray with you, will learn from you, will be inspired by you. And through what we hope will become a mutually beneficial relationship, we might be able to bring to a new generation the culture of sanctity that St. Jane de Chantal embodied and that you perpetuate.

Happy Feast Day ... and may God be blessed!