This inquiry into spiritual friendship and direction in Salesian spirituality begins with a cluster of questions about spiritual friendship that have come to interest to me in the interval of time since I wrote my book, Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales, a story of a nineteen-year spiritual friendship that blossomed in the early years of the seventeenth century in France. These questions have been raised by a number of my insightful readers. Negatively stated, they run something like this: Can a director and directee relationship really be a true “friendship” if one conceives of friendship in terms of mutuality and equality? And: In a male/female relationship, do not patterns of dominance and subordination that can only undermine mutuality emerge when the man of the couple serves as director and the woman as directee? And: How could Jane and Francis be friends when she took a vow of obedience to him and he did not do the same with her? The raisers of these provocative questions have often been involved in the present-day practice of spiritual direction and have been concerned with the issue of eliminating from that practice any lingering trace of patriarchal patterns of domination. I too have asked these questions of the data.

But then I have, in turn, discovered myself asking the same questions in a somewhat different way. Positively stated, my questions are: What is it in the relationship of Jane de Chantal and Francis de Sales that continues to me to seem so life-giving? Why is it that I see mutuality in a relationship in which the dominant roles of priesthood and confessor can be exercised fully by only one of the party? How, in fact, did these two people practice the art of spiritual direction which was at the core of their union? What did they understand that relationship to be as they spoke of each other as “friend?”
What has occurred after all this questioning is that I have ended up asking a third round of reflexive questions. These revolve mostly around the issue of the way in which we practice spiritual direction today in mainstream Christian circles. This third tier of questions runs something like this: First, what do we assume about the art of spiritual direction? Second, what assumptions do we make about the motivations that undergird friendships between men and women?

I would like very briefly (and inadequately) to respond to this third set of queries first. It appears to me that we often practice spiritual direction today in mainstream Christianity in much the way we think of other helping arts that are ultimately modeled on the therapeutic discipline of psychotherapy. In its most bald form the therapeutic model is clinical: patient or client comes to the professional for help with a problem. Symptoms related lead to a diagnosis. Treatment follows. The client/professional relationship is essentially client-oriented. It focuses on the individual and his/her relationship with God. Experiences of “transference” and “projection” in relation to the helping professional do occur in the process of treatment, but the client must “work through” these to get to the root of his or her own problem. Meetings between the two take place in an environment and time frame designated by the professional, and they do not share a relationship beyond the therapeutic one. When treatment ends, the relationship ceases. Within the framework of treatment feelings of affection and desire are often assumed to have origins that are biological, instinctual, or psychically self-aggrandizing. Human love is seen, in this generalized context, as a need that requires fulfillment.

This is certainly too clinical a picture to correspond to any real spiritual direction as it goes on today. Nonetheless this model does subtly underlie much of mainstream practice.

In terms of the incipient “friendships” between men and women that blossom (especially in directorial situations) today, those involved ask of themselves heart searching questions that belie the dominant assumptions of the therapeutic model. One quote from a mailing from a major contemporary center for spiritual formation will suffice.

A woman and a man who are psychologically well adjusted and committed to their own marriages or celibate covenants, happen to meet at a retreat or at some other spiritual gathering—or perhaps one may be the spiritual director for the other….They find in one another a real “soul friend,” a person who seems to understand and resonate with their deepest spiritual heart in a way that their spouses or friends in the community cannot. They are thus drawn together into deeper intimacy;…They begin to wonder about the power of their affection and involvement with each other. The relationship seems to be especially graced and extremely important in their life of prayer, but they question how much of it is attachment or romantic infatuation. To what extent is this “truly spiritual” or “just sexual,” and where does one draw the lines between these dimensions of relationship when love and intimacy have grown to such powerful levels? Is this relationship truly of God or is it a delusion, a self-centered and dangerous misplacement of passion?
My impression is that what this harshly unnuanced description of the therapeutic mode and the current assumptions made about the origins of human love and the “problem” of male/female friendships are very much with us when we look at spiritual friendships in the past and we search for answers to the first set of questions that my insightful readers asked. Namely: Can there be mutuality and friendship in a man/woman, director/directee relationship?

This brings me to Jane de Chantal and Francis de Sales and my second set of inquiries. Why do I feel something life-giving in their union? How could this director and directee really be friends? Let me return to the historical context and recount for you the barest essentials of the story.

Their Story

Jane de Chantal and Francis de Sales lived in the France and Savoy of the early seventeenth century. The religious climate of the Catholic Reformation that enveloped them was warm and full of creative possibility. When they met in 1604 at a series of Lenten sermons, she was a young widow with four small children and an intense desire to make sense of her shattered life and the insistent feeling that God was calling her to a life of continual prayer and vowed celibacy. He was a charismatic preacher, a writer, and an ecclesiastical leader swiftly gaining a reputation throughout the country. The nucleus of their story is contained in these facts: she became his directee, over the years she discerned the call to a vowed life of interior prayer, together they founded an innovative community for women—the Visitation of Holy Mary—which was designed to offer an alternative vocation for women who had a desire to embrace a committed life of prayer yet who had no inclination toward the ascetic rigors of the popular monastic communities of the day or who were widowed, older, or in less than robust health, facts that would make entrance into such foundations impossible. For nineteen years Jane and Francis worked closely together, wrote long letters, or spent many hours in conversation either alone or with their “daughters” in the fledgling Visitation. The great, shared work that occupied them was the birth, nurturing, and raising of that community. He died in 1622. She lived for nearly another two decades, governing their burgeoning community, continuing to assimilate, disseminate, expand, and create the spiritual perspective they shared.

Over the many years of their relationship’s life Jane and Francis’ friendship went through several phases. At first they were primarily director and directee. While the depth of her inner life compelled him, and he warmed to her confidence (and in fact consciously began the process of self-revelation to her), he was involved chiefly in helping her to discern her emerging vocation. To that end he initiated her into the process of “formation”—directing her varied impulses and desires into a state of free responsiveness and to the spirit of God that moved within. He was teaching her to LIVE JESUS.

The second major phase of their partnership was characterized by a growing ardor and intensity of feeling. The language of love which was quite understood by both of them to be God-given and God-directed, was the dominant language of their union. They participated in a spiritual friendship whose contours Francis eloquently described in this way:
I have never intended for there to be any connection between us that carries any obligation except that of love and true Christian friendship, whose binding force Saint Paul calls “the bond of perfection.” And truly it is just that, for it is indissoluble and will not slacken. All other bonds are temporary, even that of vows of obedience which are broken by death and other occurrences. 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 are. Therefore, consider me intimately linked with you and do not be anxious to understand more about it except that this bond is not contrary to any other bond, whether it be of a vow or of marriage.

It was during this second phase of their relationship that they founded the Visitation, which they felt, was the fulfillment of both of their God inspired dreams.

The third era of Francis and Jane’s friendship can be characterized by their growing concern for a perfection defined as utter reliance upon God alone. While the language of union retained its primacy in their exchanges, the language of self-emptying and “letting go,” even of some aspects of their relationship, was in evidence as well. During a retreat taken in 1616, Jane with Francis as companions by correspondence, explored this self-emptying in terms of their friendship. Francis wrote to her describing himself as the wet nurse from whom Jane must be weaned in order to be nourished by God alone.

Furthermore, my dear Mother, you must not take any kind of wet nurse but you must leave the one who nonetheless 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 pleases 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, what you wish to avoid at all costs. These renunciations are admirable: of self-esteem, and even of the esteem of the world (which in truth is nothing except in comparison with really miserable persons), of self-will, of pleasure in all creatures and natural love, in sum, of all of your self which must be buried in an eternal abandonment so that it is never seen or known any more as we have seen and known it. But it should be seen and known only when and in the manner that God asks it of us. Write and tell me how you find this lesson. God wants to possess me forever. Amen. For I am his here and also where I am in you, most perfectly, as you know; for we are indivisible except in the exercise and practice of renunciation of our whole selves to God.

I have suggested in my book that friendships such as those enjoyed by these seventeenth century figures are profoundly re-creative of the friends involved. They draw upon the dynamics of
human love, which at root are part of the larger movement of love in the created world which
draws all things into the love of God. The traditional language of this divine loving spoke of the
transformation and language that provide the life-giving parameters of the spiritual friendship of
Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal.

This, in barest outline, is their story. What I would like to address now is the cluster of
questions, which I first raised, in both positive and negative forms. Can a director and directee
such as Francis and Jane really have a friendship if friendship implies mutuality and equality?
Does not the lopsidedness of who they are in direction preclude such a possibility?

I should add that friendship in the seventeenth century was defined as a mutual and equal love.
Francis, in his Introduction to the Devout Life, speaks of friendship in this manner.

All love is not friendship. First, because one can love without again being loved.
Then there is love, but not friendship, for friendship is a mutual love. Therefore,
where love is not mutual, there can be no friendship. Secondly, it is not enough
that it be mutual, but the persons who love each other must know their reciprocal
affection. If they did not know that they have this love, it is not friendship.
Thirdly, there must also be some kind of communication between them, which is
the ground of friendship.

Let us look at the data and ask the question in positive form: How did these two people who
called themselves friends engage in spiritual direction? What did they understand that process
and its practices to be? Could it be called a mutual and equal partnership?

Spiritual Direction in the Salesian World

Jane and Francis lived in a world in which spiritual direction was a valued and sought-after
commodity. But it was only recently available to lay people, a phenomenon associated with the
rise of religious enthusiasm during the Counter-Reformation.

We know that Jane and Francis’ was a formal relationship with clear-cut expectations spelled out
on both sides. Several months after their first series of meetings, while they were both on
pilgrimage at the alpine village of St. Claude, they met. After a period of serious discernment
about whether or not it was God’s will that they become director and directee, they both wrote
out formal agreements outlining their intentions in each other’s regard. She vowed obedience to
him; 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. Their relationship was thus formalized.
Yet it was not exclusive. Jane was encouraged at all times to consult others if the need arose or
if she wished. The two were often to be separated by distance in the next years, so she was free
to seek others for confession as well as for direction on specific matters. She often did so. Yet
Francis remained her primary source of guidance.
A dual emphasis on the seriousness of the directorial relationship and the insistence on spiritual freedom as its goal is seen in these vows which did not limit or define the spiritual influence on a directee. Thus the directorial process was not completely closed in on itself.

It was also not the only medium through which the two people involved were related. Jane and Francis were director and directee, yes. But they were also tied in numerous other ways. They belonged to the same social world. They were first formally introduced, during the period of the Lenten sermons which she attended and at which he noticed her (she sat in the front, riveted to his every word), by her brother, the Archbishop of Bourges, who had arranged the program. They met informally after that in the context of their many social engagements.

The network of social relationships increased in complexity as the years passed. On the pilgrimage to St. Claude he was accompanied by his mother with whom Jane was later to become close. Jane was accompanied by two girlhood friends, who also sought advice from the popular young bishop. Later, Francis’ youngest and favorite sister lived with Jane and her children for several years. In 1609 Jane’s eldest daughter married Francis’ brother Bernard. Thus when Jane moved from Dijon to Annecy to found her community she came not simply to be near Francis but to be near her newly married daughter and the tight web of domestic relations that existed in that town. One of Jane’s first novices in the Visitation, Jacqueline Favre, was the daughter of Francis’ dear friend and associate, Antoine Favre, whom Francis had watched grow to adulthood.

Francis also played a decisive role in the lives of Jane’s own children. He was confidant and informed director to all of them. Beyond this, Jane and Francis were co-founders of a religious order and spiritual parents together to the “Visitandine daughters that they shepherded.” In short, Jane and Francis were director and directee, but this constituted only one facet of their multi-faceted relationship.

In all of these other ways in which they were tied, Francis and Jane shared equally and mutually. Even though there was a strong cultural current of misogyny expressed in legal and customary ways, Francis consciously went against the tide. He was aware of the centuries-old literary debate about the capabilities and nature of women and sided with those who championed woman’s cause. The Geneva bishop’s positive appraisal of women was grounded ultimately in his sense shared by the best and most authentically Christian tradition, of the shared dignity of men and women, who are created together - male and female - in the image of God.

So “director-directee” did not totally define who these two were to each other. It was only one aspect of a richly textured partnership. Yet the depth of their love flowed not from their social ties but from what they referred to as the “union of their hearts.” Certainly in their mutual creative struggle to envision and institutionalize the spiritual perspective they shared in the Visitation community, they experienced this union. Theirs was a joint effort, she presiding as spiritual mother and he as spiritual father for their offspring. This was an undertaking they conceived to be part of a larger, spirit-filled revitalization of Christian society taking place in their time, in which men and women, lay and religious, ordained and non-ordained, were all seen as participating.
“Obedience” in the Direction Process

But what of that directorial bond and its one-sided vow of obedience? This could be, I think, a real hindrance to the development of a genuine friendship if its intrinsic pattern of domination and subordination was not balanced by any other pattern of interaction. Fortunately, it was. In the first place, the entire thrust of the Salesian directorial process was toward freedom - the freedom of the directee and the freedom of the spirit whose animating life was perceived to be acting within that directee. In this regard Francis wrote,

Certainly it is a great abuse to so bind oneself to a confessor that if he happens to be unaccommodating, one is troubled and upset. This is to attach oneself to the instrument of well-being and not the source, who is God, and consequently to lose true liberty.

Jane de Chantal brought to her relationship with Francis the habits of a woman who for almost thirty years had been (while exercising her many talents in her responsibilities as household manager, parent, and financial steward of her baronial estates) legally and socially dependent on the men in her life. She mistrusted or needed outside validation for virtually every step she felt compelled to take in her life that did not conform to the societally expected standard. Over the course of the years as her director Francis continually weaned her away from such dependence. He encouraged her to follow the unique movement of the spirit within, and he often bolstered her flagging courage but only to the point at which he found that it freed her to rest confidently in her own capacities. When she was not able to do this, he often made the choice to step back.

One example of this recounted in the widow de Chantal’s own words must suffice:

One time, after having thoroughly explained to him what was causing me pain, I was not consoled as I generally was. God did not allow this so that I might learn to look to God for what I thought to find in the…[saint] who, just this once, seeing that he was unable to help me, although he had spoken to me at length, go up without a word and went out, leaving me in my pain. Not knowing what to do and seeing that the Saint had not healed me, I could do nothing else but go before the Holy Sacrament to be healed by Our Lord. And there I learned what I had never before truly understood, that one must not seek all one’s consolation in creatures, but in God and that the true means of being healed consists in relying upon and abandoning oneself to the divine mercy without any reservation.

The goal of Salesian direction of which obedience to the director was one dimension was a deep obedience to the movement of God within. The point of obedience, if directorial authority was exercised responsibly, was to create an environment in which the directee could be redirected away from existing modes of self-perception and action to new modes of being in harmony with the freedom of the children of God. Obviously, for the director, this task required great sensitivity and the ability to relinquish power. For the most part, my evaluation is that Francis de Sales did just this. While there are recorded moments of interaction between him and Jane
which smack of his using his position to dominate rather than to free, the examples are rare. The basic thrust in the directorial process was toward the achievement of a mutuality which would, in the end, make the directorial relationship cede its primacy of place to the other facets of their multilayered union. The previously quoted letter in which Francis invites his friend to wean herself of him as spiritual “wetnurse” is sufficient evidence in this regard.

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**Mutuality in the Direction Process**

In the other question to be asked of the directorial bond is: is it not a breach of mutuality if he knows her heart and she does not know his? It is true that she was not the Savoyard bishop’s director. Nor could she ever act in the formal capacity of confessor for him. But in the course of their long association he had many opportunities to open to her. He, in fact, initiated the process of self-disclosure himself. As early as a year and a half into their relationship he announced his longing that he be known by her in a letter of startling intimacy, in which he reveals his desire to receive her advice.

I am going to tell you something about myself very briefly. I wish you could see me as I am interiorly, provided that my imperfections do not scandalize you. Since you left I have not ceased meeting with both big and little setbacks, but neither my heart nor spirit have been at all upset, thank God. I have never had more inner sweetness and happiness. Last night my heart was covered with clouds. Now I’m back from Mass and everything is bright and serene. I’ve done in part what you’ve asked me to do, that is, I’ve been putting aside some time for relaxation of body and mind. I’ll do better every day, if God helps. At least I’m willing.

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 full sea of charity when even these little booklets of love give us so much.

A letter dated two years later gives evidence of the growing maturity of a partnership that involved the intimate disclosure of both man and woman:

Since my heart is urging me to tell you every bit of consolation it receives (and that is something I can do with practically no one else), then I will tell you that the past three days I have had unequaled pleasure in thinking of the great honor it is that a heart can speak one on one of its God, to the immense and infinite being.

That she knew him intimately as no one else did is clear. We have only to glance at the pages of the deposition that she prepared for the inquiry into his canonization years after his death to see not only the insight of this remarkable woman into the heart of a man who had been her director,
but also to view the complex tapestry of confidences, shared stories, and personal vulnerability that he had entrusted to her over the years.

Thus the process of spiritual direction in which Jane and Francis participated did not exclude influence from other sources nor was it the sole medium through which their friendship flowed. And by its very intent it moved the two participants away from relations of subordination and domination to the experience of mutuality and freedom while the rich texture of the other parts of their shared life afforded him the opportunity to develop with her an intimacy that had been afforded to her by spiritual direction.

The Faith Context in which Direction Takes Place

All that had been said stands in the foreground of a more diffuse but essential factor in the spiritual friendship that Jane and Francis shared. That is their sense of the communal context in which any friendship that is genuinely Christian must grow. The bishop and this widow-turned-mother superior felt that they were part of a created world that had as its motive force love. Love was of God, all love. Human desire and affection was something to be accepted as a gift from God that is designed to lead the lover through the exercises of love to love’s source, the divine. One need not mistrust love. One must be cautious, yes, but only of the self-serving uses made of love’s power, not of love’s ultimate source. Love was, in fact, the vital substance of the church, Christ’s living mystical body active in the world. To love was to be of God.

To be part of a friendship, one of love’s most perfect forms, was to participate in the activity of the mystical body itself. It was to LIVE JESUS. Each person, potentially a friend of each other person, was seen as another lover who wished also to go home to his or her loving fullness of love that God’s own nature longed to initiate. Spiritual direction was one special way in which this mutual walking might take place. It is not an anomaly that Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal referred to all their directees using the language of friendship, for in their minds the essential work of the Christian was the building up of a community of love through direction or any other means that would revitalize all of Christian society. This, in their minds, was a profoundly creative process, exercised in cooperation with the urgent longings of divine love itself. The raising of a community of “devout” souls - be they from the aristocracy, the peasantry, the cloister, the seminary, the marketplace, or the domestic sphere - was part of the mysterious and graced life of the mystical body of Christ - the Church - that was active in the world.

There is something profoundly challenging about this notion of friendship and the process of spiritual direction for us today, especially if we are concerned that it subordinates some members to others. Direction was not, in the Salesian vision, concerned with individual self-actualization. Nor was it something that happened primarily between God and the soul, the director simply helping the directee. Both director and directee were known to be part of a larger social and metaphysical reality, a coming–to-be of God’s living presence in the world. They were commanded to love one another. Human affection was not mistrusted nor its origins thought to be antithetical to God’s own activity. In the Salesian view, this activity was conceived as a
movement of love believed to be shaping the hearts of the friends, and through their hearts, the hearts of the world, to the contours of God’s own heart. The exercise of this love required discipline and clarity on the part of the partners, but they need not mistrust the experience of love itself.

This is a profoundly different vision that undergirds direction and friendship than normally seems to exist in contemporary mainstream American practice. The richness of what our heritage, through the persons of Jane de Chantal and Francis de Sales, has deemed to us, needs, I think, to be rediscovered. We need to recover from their friendship what is life-giving and claim it for our own so that what we bring to birth in the body of Christ today is fully vital and frees us to the full liberty of the children of God.