“God has given me to you”:
Divine Action in the Friendship of St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal

Introduction

The initial encounter on 5 March 1604 between Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal during the Lenten sermons held in Dijon is described by their biographers as being providentially predestined. Each friend had prophetic spiritual visions about their relationship prior to setting eyes on each other; hence, when they saw each other at the Sainte Chapelle, the saints “recognized each other from the first.” Accepting the foresights as divine revelation, the saints are encouraged in their pursuit and cultivation of a friendship that would be the root of an immense legacy to the Christian spiritual tradition.
From a four-hundred-year-long hindsight with a broader perspective, the numerous and varied ways by which the lives of these two individuals intersected can be appreciated, reflecting the small-world problem: “any one person in the world can be reached through a network of friends in only a few steps.” As the historical accounts show, the networks connecting these friends stretched far beyond them. The degree to which these connections, like the visions, are divinely guided may be questioned. How were their paths intended to cross: by accident or by providence? It is appropriate that in his biography of Francis de Sales, André Ravier asks, “By what chance was Jeanne Frémyot de Chantal attending the Lenten series in Dijon?”

Francis de Sales answers this question in his brief note to Jane de Chantal: “It seems to me that that God has given me to you; I am assured of this more keenly as each hour passes.” This is the result conclusion he has drawn when departing Dijon on 26 April 1604; and, using the same phrase two months later, the bishop reaffirms this conviction in his letter to Jane de Chantal dated 24 June 1604. The divine influence on their relationship is evident to both the bishop and the young widow, and as this paper will investigate, a contemporary vantage point supports this answer.

Foundational Moments of the Spiritual Friendship

Having missed the series Lenten sermons the previous year, Jane de Chantal left her dwelling in Monthelon, where she resided with her difficult father-in-law, Baron Guy de Rabutin-Chantal, and traveled with her children to her Dijon family home in 1604. The Lenten sermons in the city of her birth usually featured a prominent preacher, and the magistrates (including her father, the President of Parliament) had secured “a young bishop whose name was
already well known in court circles.” Her brother, André Frémyot, Archbishop of Bourges, hosted the visiting Bishop of Geneva while in Dijon to give his sermons.

Francis’ own motivations for accepting the invitation to give the Lenten sermons were guided by more than the opportunity to preach. A lawsuit was pending over certain ecclesiastical revenues given to the Archbishop of Bourges by King Henry IV which were already conceded to the diocese of Geneva. De Sales wished to settle the affair with the young archbishop in a more personal, peaceful fashion; at the time, Francis did not personally know André Frémyot. The duke of Savoy disliked the idea of his bishop traveling to Dijon to undertake such a mission without his first granting approval, however, de Sales soon remedied that concern. A devotee of the spiritual writings of Teresa of Ávila, the bishop was interested in a proposal for a Carmelite foundation in the Burgundy capital; hence, an additional reason for accepting the invitation to preach in Dijon.

As the varied ecclesiastical, familial, and political relationships that the above sampling shows, the web of association between Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal was spun before seeing each other in the cathedral of Dijon. This weaving of the trajectories of their lives is both a natural and supernatural work of art. The divine intention to their friendship was indicated by the prayerful visions each experienced prior to that March day.

In the months following the death of her husband, Jane’s revelation occurred while riding home horseback to her estate at Bourbilly. The widow vowed never to remarry and sought union with God, though she became restless in sorting out her interior desires while discerning God’s will for her. Longing for a spiritual mentor to guide her through this inner turmoil, she received a sign of hope while riding along the river in Bourbilly:

As she crossed the high road at the bottom of the meadow in the midst of a large and beautiful plain, she suddenly saw, at the foot of a little hill not far away from
her, a man who looked exactly like our blessed Father François de Sales, the Bishop of Geneva, dressed in a black cassock, wearing a rochet and biretta, just as he would be when she met him for the first time two years later in Dijon.¹¹

When the man turned to face Jane, she was filled with a sense of joy and certitude that God had heard her prayer.¹² Her final comfort came before the prelate vanished from her sight, when a voice spoke within her: “Behold the man beloved of God and men, in whose hands you must entrust your conscience.”¹³ After this event, she devised a strict regiment for herself, being attentive to her children, serving the poor, and devoting spare moments to prayer. Soon after, Jane would receive direction from a friar at Notre Dame d’Étang; however, with his guidance, “she was not at peace.”¹⁴

Likewise, Francis de Sales was given a vision that revealed the person of Jane de Chantal to him prior to their initial encounter. Occurring “at the same time” as Jane’s experience at Bourbilly, the bishop saw her while kneeling in prayer at the chapel in his home at Sales:

François de Sales, who was praying in his family’s château, also felt a “flash of light”: he saw a young woman, dressed in widow’s weeds, whose name he did not know and whose face he had never seen before…. It was then revealed to him that this widow would be “the foundation stone” for the religious community he himself was to inspire.¹⁵

These visions would be fulfilled two years later during the Lenten series in Dijon, where the two saints would feel “in some mysterious way the presence of God and their interior lives converge.”¹⁶ In the accounts given above, it is apparent that these two individuals were given a special revelation from God as an apparent answer to their prayers. Thus, when they mutually recognize each other at the Sainte Chapelle, Francis and Jane sought the acquaintance of each other through André Frémyot, the relational link between the two saints.

In order to become acquainted with the people in Dijon, the bishop dined at various houses, including that of President Frémyot. Jane was often in the preacher’s company at these
dinners; in particular, she was hostess at her father’s house. Her biographers recount how the widow was eager to join Francis at the dinner table, and wanted so much to discuss the spiritual matters that troubled her with the embodiment of her vision.

Even though she was at first too afraid to tell the Bishop in so many words what was on her mind, she did everything in her power to let him know by her actions and eagerness to do things for him at every opportunity. Had Francois de Sales known about this little game of hide-and-seek, he would have laughed, “Oh, what a tangled web we weave.”

Indeed, the two saints were the center of a vast web of interconnections that led to a formal introduction. With the help of her brother, Madame de Chantal approached the bishop with her troubles on the Wednesday of Holy Week, and he, in turn, agreed to hear her confession the week after Easter. Although still bound by her vows to her director at Notre Dame d’Étang, Jane was drawn to a spiritual relationship with this ‘angel’ to whose preaching she was most attentive at the cathedral. As the brief note he sent Jane demonstrates, Francis was equally drawn to know this woman who struggled to share her interior life with him.

The opportunity soon presented itself for when they could meet again and likewise allow time for the two to settle the certainty of this unfolding relationship. Shortly before leaving Dijon, Francis overheard Jane speaking about her intention to make a pilgrimage to Saint Claude, a shrine located in the Jura Mountains between Dijon and Annecy. His mother, Madame de Boisy, had vowed to do the same; therefore, the bishop suggested that Jane inform him of her pilgrimage plans so that a rendezvous could be arranged. This joint pilgrimage took place in late August 1604; their five days at Saint Claude officially begin what would become a unique spiritual friendship.

Their reunion at Saint Claude fulfilled another premonition that Saint Jane experienced in a dream long before she encountered the Bishop of Geneva. This time, she saw herself with
others in a carriage that passed a church where people were joyously praising God. She recounts her experience in the dream:

I wanted to fling myself out of the carriage to join this happy throng and enter by the great door of the church which stood open and ready to receive me; but I was thrust back and I distinctly heard a voice which said to me: “You must press on and go further; you will never find the peace of a child of God unless you enter by the gate of Saint Claude.”

Jane did not know of the popular devotion to this saint, a seventh century abbot, nor of the pilgrimage shrine whose relics had legendary healing powers. Despite this, she felt the prophetic words spoken in her dream held a solution when faced with inner temptations. In addition to the prophetic nature of the dream, Elisabeth Stopp notes how well this dream portrays the spiritual state of the widow at this juncture in her life, and how its fulfillment marks a turning point in the life of Jane de Chantal. Recognizing the dream as an authentic spiritual experience, de Sales would later ask in his letter of 14 October 1604 that she write about “the story of the gate of Saint-Claude.”

Taken together, these divine revelations and the “small-world network” that brought them together in Dijon transform a serendipitous occurrence at the Sainte Chapelle into a unique interaction between the divine and humanity. The dramatic crossed-paths of these young souls demonstrate an active God at work within the routine activity of individual persons. Such communication with God is a topic for consideration by contemporary theologians and scientists.

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**Divine Communication with Humanity**

The authenticity and divine origin of the visions seen by Jane and Francis can be explored in light of theological study. Karl Rahner examines the possibility of divine revelation in the form of such private visions in his study “Visions and Prophecies.” From the start, the
German theologian upholds that divine communication in the form of visions or auditory experiences is an evident principle for the Christian who believes in the Incarnation, for such private revelations are contextualized

in such a way that this communication is bound up with a particular place and time, with a concrete word or command, with a finite reality or truth, and so that it occurs with, or is connected with, the “apparition” of an object presented to the internal or external senses, which object represents and manifests God, his will, or the like.  

Christianity is an historical and supernaturally revealed religion, as exemplified by numerous apparitions found in Scripture. Therefore, any attempt to explain away by natural means such visions would “deny that any historical activity of the personal God revealing himself in the Word was possible at all.” Recognizing that human nature and culture are “the very locus and focus” of God’s action, Rahner’s “incarnationist” approach to private revelatory religious experience continues by considering three traditional categories of visions: corporeal, imaginative, and purely spiritual.

Rahner notes that imaginative visions are considered by the mystical doctors to be “the more valuable and exalted” and so argues that they will normally be the authentic ones. The imaginative visions can be characterized by two qualities:

on the one hand by the nature of the case such a vision must largely conform to the psychic laws determined by the intrinsic structure of the seer’s spiritual faculties; and on the other hand, in order to beheld authentic, the vision must be caused by God.

With regard to the latter quality, everything but sin is the work of God; therefore, even if the vision can be explained by natural causes, it should be considered an act of God. The former quality, in short, preserves the natural order of creation and in general, no miracle occurs. To insist that natural laws are suspended, Rahner argues, would contradict God’s omnipotence since they too are his creation and will. But, more importantly, a vision must be “a true act of the
person, not only an act produced in him by God” and hence “the seer’s psychical structure and the laws of his nature will remain intact and operative to the fullest extent.” In line with this, Christopher Knight, in his discussion of Rahner’s imaginative visions, prefers to use the term “psychological visions,” but warns against reductionism whereby everything is explained away by principles of psychology.

This first quality of authentic visions discussed above allows critical consideration of Jane’s and Francis’ premonitions of one another. “A central aspect of Rahner’s framework is the belief that God’s action on human beings is primarily at a contemplative level, which is deeper than that of either sensation or rational thought.” Thus, contemplation is where the human person’s participation in the vision begins. Drawing on the classic Spanish mystics, Rahner provides excellent imagery for this: “the vision is a kind of overflow and echo of a much more intimate and spiritual process … the radiation and reflex of contemplation in the sphere of the senses, the incarnation of the mystical process of the spirit.”

Given the previously considered accounts of the two saints, this participation through contemplation comes as no surprise. For Jane, months of intense soul-searching and prayers of petition preceded her vision. Her equestrian ride was peaceful, quiet time for prayer which may have unknowingly reflected de Sales’ later articulation of contemplation: “the mind’s loving, unmixed, permanent attention to the things of God” done without labor in “a completely simple, unified view of the object it loves.” It also provides perhaps an early, fledgling account of Jane’s unique prayer of “simple attentiveness” or “simple entrustment to God.” The grace received by Jane in this contemplative episode was the vision of the soon-to-be-encountered Francis de Sales. For the bishop, whose prayer of abandonment to God’s will at an early age resulted in consolation, it would seem consistent that his attentiveness to the divine would result
in the contemplation he writes about in his *Treatise on the Love of God*. Thus, his prayerful contemplation in the chapel at the château de Sales is reflected in the “flash” of Madame de Chantal before his sight.

Such cooperation of the human person with the divine in a creative act, in this case a vision, concurs with much contemporary analysis of divine action in the created universe, specifically with humanity. As new scientific evidence is found, scientists and theologians wrestle with these issues. For example, the dynamics of chaos theory necessitate a new imaging of how God acts and reveals. Two theologian-scientists whose writings engage this type of interaction between the human and the divine are John Polkinghorne and Arthur Peacocke.

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**Divine Action in Chaos Theory**

The interplay of determinism and indeterminism (law and chance) present in the natural world is well encapsulated in contemporary chaos theory, “a mathematical theory about nonlinear dynamical systems that exhibit exquisite sensitivity to initial conditions, eventual unpredictability, and other intriguing features despite the inevitably deterministic character of mathematical equations.”\(^{39}\) Sensitive dependence on initial conditions (SDIC) is a direct result of the system’s nonlinearity, whereby “the additivity of causes does not lead to the additivity of effects”\(^{40}\); hence, states that differ only infinitesimally in initial conditions will display highly dissimilar outcomes as future possibilities are explored. Challenging a scientific reductionism, whereby the behavior of the whole system is explained by the causal principles affecting its components, chaos theory studies the “large-scale patterns,” the “holistic geometrical relationships and systemic properties rather than seeking reduction to causal mechanisms.”\(^{41}\)

Although highly unpredictable and exhibiting SDIC, the initial states of these systems are
erratically attracted toward a final state, or pattern, called a “strange attractor.” Geometric representations of such strange attractors are fractals, self-similar images (like a fern or a head of cauliflower) whose smallest piece when magnified resembles the pattern of the whole.

In contrast to “bottom-up” causation ascribed by reductionism, chaos theory suggests a “top-down” causality, “the influence of the whole bringing about coherent activity of the parts.” In light of SDIC apparent in chaotic systems, John Polkinghorne, a physicist and Anglican priest, considers the presence of holistic pattern-forming agencies thought of as “active information.” The infinitesimal differences between initial conditions that determine the final outcome are “akin to ‘informational input,’ selecting a particular pattern of exploration of a strange attractor.” For example, the relationship between consciousness and the body demonstrates an interplay of top-down and bottom-up causalities: “the way in which my mental intention to raise my arm (active information) results in the act of raising (an energetic operation).” This analogy can be extended to divine action: God interacts with, or in theological language, “guides” or “draws on,” creation through this active information. In so doing, divine influence through information input is “consonant with theology’s insistence that God is pure spirit” and distinguishes God from other causes.

Arthur Peacocke, in concert with Polkinghorne, agrees that a top-down causality is a necessary addition to the reductionist, bottom-up explanation of agency, specifically when considering that of the divine. However, this biochemist and theologian prefers, in place of the term top-down causation, to use “whole-part constraint” or “whole-part influence,” which “represents the net effect of all those ways in which the system-as-a-whole, operating from its ‘higher’ level, is a causal factor in what happens to its constituent parts, the ‘lower’ level.” To extend this notion to the effect of God on the world-as-a-whole (i.e. all that is not God),
Peacocke suggests a panentheistic perspective, a major difference from Polkinghorne’s position. Thus, God’s influence on the patterns of the universe is consistent with a flow of information from the whole to its parts. Peacocke feels this theologically supports the “Logos, the Word, of God…taken to emphasize God’s creative patterning of the world and God’s self-expression in the world.”

**Divine Influence on the Encounter of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal**

Unlike isolated, theoretical equations that approximate the real-world dynamical systems in chaos theory, the holistic agencies discussed by Polkinghorne depend upon their context and “total situation.” Hence, the whole is more than the sum of its parts because it exerts an influence on the parts. Within such a contextualism, Polkinghorne believes that the concept of divine action through information input offers scientific integrity to prayers of petition, like those of Jane de Chantal prior to her vision. He formally describes petitionary prayer:

> we are offering our room for maneuver with respect to the open future to be taken by God and used to the greatest effect in collaboration with that room for maneuver which is reserved to the divine providential interaction. In more traditional language, we offer our wills to be aligned with the divine will.

This resonates with Jane’s spiritual life prior to meeting Francis de Sales: “a passionate longing to know God’s will for her… filled her mind and heart.” As their friendship deepened, however, their lives and their later foundation of the Visitation would demonstrate how “the spiritual life rests upon the assumption that one must be utterly emptied of self-will in order for the will of God to become manifest in one’s life.”

In his formulation of downward causation, Peacocke affirms that God does personally communicate with humanity through the constituents of the world. Hence, divine communication to humanity (revelation) is a flow of information through the mediation of the
physical and/or sensory aspects of the world (such as natural forces or human sight). The unmediated information could be considered as the influence of “those patterns of events in human brains which constitute human thoughts, including thoughts of God and a sense of personal interaction with God.” However, in this sense, the “unmediated” involve the constituents of the world, and patterns of events in them, just as much as the “mediated” religious experiences.

Whether called top-down causality or whole-part influence, the holistic approach, as the science of chaos theory suggests, provides a rich understanding of how God interacts with creation, particularly with humanity. The influence from the whole onto its parts suggests that God works with creation. Thus, the meeting of Francis and Jane is more than a particular moment, or piece of their entire reality. Rather, their 1604 encounter was perhaps the final piece of the puzzle of their initial encounter, a puzzle that was being put together long before each of them traveled to Dijon that March. The connectedness of their worlds was inevitable, and recent research in social network analysis shows that the randomness of relational connections is more ordered than it appears. The six degrees of separation in relational networks that has become popularized in entertainment circles ("the Kevin Bacon Game") is rooted in mathematical graph theory and statistical modeling. Given the familial, ecclesiastical, and devotional circles to which Francis and Jane belonged, and the people within those circles mutually connected to both of them, chances were rather high that they would meet (i.e., a link would connect the two). However, such probabilistic conjecturing, expressed by deterministic equations, could not guarantee the spiritual quality of their friendship. The “quality-control” was influenced by the information flow that began in the years preceding the Bishop of Geneva’s climb up the stairs to the pulpit in Saint Chapelle.
Francis and Jane were the constituent parts influenced by the whole system, the divine in communication with the world. Part of this influence occurred in the cooperative participation of the contemplatives with their God; their visions are essential components in the unfolding of God’s will in their lives. The locus of God’s communication was within the contexts of their individual lives: the relationships, spiritual experiences (visions/dreams), travels, and Lenten practices. So, in conclusion, the scientific developments over the past four hundred years strengthen the convergence of the two saints in their initial human encounter. The reasons for such an outcome was not due to mere chance, but the active personal communication of their God, vividly stamped in their spiritual premonitions.

NOTES


4 Ravier, Francis de Sales, 136.


6 “Dieu m’a donné a vous.”


8 Stopp, Madame de Chantal, 52.

9 Ibid, 52; Ravier, Francis de Sales, 135.

10 Elisabeth Stopp, “Spanish Links: St. Francis de Sales and St. Teresa of Ávila,” in her A Man to Heal Differences: Essays and Talks on St. Francis de Sales (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 1997), 176. I am grateful to my confrere Joseph F. Chorpenning, O.S.F.S., for leading me to this additional reason for Francis de Sales’ presence in Dijon in 1604.

VEO, 1:40.

Wright, *Bond of Perfection*, 51.


VEO, 1:41, as translated in Stopp, *Madame de Chantal*, 64.

Wright, *Bond of Perfection*, 53.

Stopp, Madame de Chantal, 64-65.

*OEA* 12:369, as translated in *LSD*, 143.


Ibid., 95-96.

Ibid., p. 97.


Rahner, 114.

Ibid., 123. Emphasis added.

Miracle understood “in the sense of a divine intervention suspending natural physical or psychological laws,” in Ibid., 125.

Ibid., 123, 124.

Knight, 35. In order to expand the discussion of revelation beyond Christianity and move toward an interfaith dialogue, Knight argues for “a two-component, psychological-referential theory of revelation,” at 109.

Ibid., 31. Knight draws upon the “penetrating study” of Christopher F. Schiavone, *Rationality and Revelation in Rahner* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).


*TLG*, 1:280 (Bk. 6, ch. 5).

38 In 1586-87, while a youth in Paris, Francis de Sales experienced a great spiritual crisis which he resolved through his abandonment to God; see Wright and Power, “Introduction” to LSD, 19-20.


43 Polkinghorne clarifies his term “active information” by stating it is “‘active,’ because the holistic principle brings about actual future behavior; ‘information,’ because its action relates to structure rather than to energetic properties,” in his Scientists as Theologians: A Comparison of the Writings of Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke and John Polkinghorne (London: Center for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 36.


46 Ibid.


48 Peacocke’s terminology evolves from using whole-part constraint to avoid the misleading connotations of downward/top-down causation since “it is actually meant to denote an effect of the state of the system as a whole on its constituent parts,” in his “God’s Interaction with the World,” in CAC, 272, to using whole-part influence for discussion in particular of mind-brain-body as analogy for God’s communication with humanity, in his “The Sound of Sheer Silence,” in Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action, ed. Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, Theo C. Meyering, and Michael A. Arbib (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory; Berkeley: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1999), 215.


50 “Panentheism maintains that the world is in God, included in the divine life, but that God’s reality is not reducible to nor exhausted by the reality of the individuals or the structures of the universe or of the universe as a whole,” in David H. Nikkel, “Panentheism,” in Encyclopedia of Science and Religion, 2:641. Espousing panentheism in his position, Peacocke states, “The world-as-a-whole, the total world system, may be regarded as ‘in God,’ though ontologically distinct from God,” in his “God’s Interaction with the World,” 282.


53 Polkinghorne, Scientists as Theologians, 36.


55 Stopp, Madame de Chantal, 44.

56 Wright, Bond of Perfection, 85.

57 Peacocke, “The Sound of Sheer Silence,” 244.


60 Watts, 92-100.